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At-Risk High School Graduates: Succeeding Despite the Odds

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

AT-RISK HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES:
SUCCEEDING DESPITE THE ODDS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

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Department of Leadership, Policy, and Development:
Higher Ed and P-12 Education
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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This Dissertation by: Suzette Michele Luster

Entitled: *At-Risk High School Graduates: Succeeding Despite the Odds*

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College of Education and Behavioral Studies in School of Educational Research,
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ABSTRACT

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The high school dropout rate and the low skill set of high school graduates are of significant concern to stakeholders across the country. Based on a report released by the Education Research Center (2011), approximately 7,000 students drop out of school every day and of those students, a large percentage of them have only the basic skill sets that prevent them from accessing competitive vocational opportunities or successful entry into post-secondary education. Understanding the educational journey of students identified at risk could provide stakeholders with critical information with regard to educational reforms based on an early warning system and dropout prevention programming.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of participants who were identified in sixth grade as being at risk for dropping out of high school and who obtained their high school diploma on time despite barriers they had to overcome. Guided by the principles of constructivism, this study investigated the experience of five participants through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and their educational journeys from elementary through high school as at-risk students. Through analysis of the interview transcripts, six core themes emerged: personal regrets, disengagement, grade level transitions, lack of institutional supports

systems, critical relationships, and self-determination. Implications for practice include recommendations for educational stakeholders regarding dropout prevention that extends from pre-kindergarten through high school and requires the use of an early warning system that aligns with district and community interventions.

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CHAPTER I

FRAMING THE INQUIRY

In reviewing the nation's education report, a plethora of statistical information is available through various government and non-governmental agencies on the performance of American schools. One educational statistic commonly referred to is the high school graduation rate, which signifies the number of students meeting minimal requirements for succeeding in postsecondary education and the workforce based on today's economy (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007). "The graduation rate is a barometer of the health of American society and the skill level of its future workforce" (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007, p. 2). Graduation rates are a major component of educational accountability and a strong indicator of school performance for students, parents, policymakers, business owners, and the community as a whole (Rumberger, 2011). In addition to analyzing the graduation rates of educational organizations across the country, another indicator in measuring the performance of schools is the high school dropout rate. Upon completing his "Listening and Learning" tour across the country, Arne Duncan (2013), the U.S. Secretary of Education, stated, "The consensus among policymakers is the number of students not graduating from high school is too high and has an overall negative effect on the country, despite the upward trend in the graduation rate" (p. 1).

In reviewing the literature on graduation data, it was difficult to obtain exact calculations regarding the nation's official graduation and dropout rates (National

Academy of Education, 2011). A variety of government and private agencies utilize different graduation calculation methods for publication, creating a range of percentages that cannot be compared from one organization to another. According to Duncan (2013), a high school dropout epidemic is cycling through the United States with a persistent graduation gap between majority and minority groups as well as between low socioeconomic and middle to upper socioeconomic classes.

Statement of the Problem

The high school dropout rate is of significant concern to stakeholders across the country as only 80% of American students graduated from high school in the 2011-2012 school year (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014). The Education Research Center (Education Week, 2011) reported approximately 7,000 students drop out of school every day. It is important to understand the magnitude of this problem and factors associated with dropping out in order to develop effective preventative strategies. Students who fail to obtain a high school diploma face several unintended consequences that negatively impact their quality of life, not to mention the consequences for society (Rumberger, 2011).

In addition to educational concerns pertaining to the high school dropout rate, too many students are graduating from high school without the necessary skill set to be successful in a post-secondary or vocational setting (Kline & Williams, 2007). “Far too many students are not receiving an education that adequately prepares them for life following high school, especially at-risk, special education, and minority students” (Kline & Williams, 2007, p. 1). In a report presented by Bottoms (as cited in Rutenberg, 2009), approximately 15 million students who have graduated from high school are not

proficient in basic literacy and math skills. In order for young people to achieve economic well-being, they need to graduate from high school with an academic skill set that adequately prepares them for college or work. A growing number of high school graduates fail to meet entrance requirements for college or that of a skilled work setting as a result of low academic skills, which has a direct impact on the national economy (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2008). Graduating from high school is not enough--young people must demonstrate a level of proficiency in math, literacy, complex problem solving, and higher order critical thinking to successfully transition from high school to the adult world of the 21st century (Rutenberg, 2009).

In an effort to combat low achievement and high school retention, many school districts across the country have implemented early warning systems to identify students who exhibit behaviors identified by research that place them at risk for dropping out of high school. These early warning systems have the capacity to track a student's academic and behavioral performance as well as school attendance and retention information as early as elementary school to assist educators in effectively identifying students who exhibit as off-track toward graduation (Balfanz & Fox, 2011). Despite the available research on predictive indicators, the problem continues to persist (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002). Kennelly and Monrad (2007) stated additional research is needed to better understand the variables associated with dropping out so appropriate, individualized intervention programs can be designed that specifically target those variables. Intervention strategies must be comprehensive to include the individual, the family, the school, and the community (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002). Necessary resources must be made available to develop, implement, and sustain a strategic plan that targets

student retention and high academic achievement (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2012).

Conventional dropout prevention programs focus on individual and organizational factors related to dropping out; however, these programs are disjointed and include multiple entities (Rumberger, 2011). The Colorado Department of Education (2014) stated it is not feasible to survey every student who drops out of school; rather, a more effective approach is to identify students who are academically at-risk prior to dropping out and implement interventions to support those students. Gaining access to at-risk students before they make the decision to drop out is critical; however, it is often hard to accomplish in a complex educational system (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002).

Purpose of the Study

Despite the challenges at-risk students face on their educational journeys, there are those students who overcome the odds and complete high school. Learning more about their years of schooling and what supports they accessed along the way is valuable in understanding the climate and culture of a school district. Localized research could assist in the development of intervention strategies that support those students who struggle early on in their years of education. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of students identified as highly likely to drop out of high school in sixth grade but succeeded in graduating despite the odds. The participants for this study were chosen from a school district that currently does not have a comprehensive dropout prevention program. Administrative leaders of this school district have implemented an early warning system to assist in identifying at-risk students early in their academic journey; however, limited support systems are in

place to assist students toward positive outcomes. The participants were selected from a data pool populated in 2007 through the district's early warning system. During this time period, the early warning system was just being implemented and support networks were not linked to student needs. Students who were identified early on as at-risk, but later graduated, were targeted. The perspective and sense-making of these individuals was important as it might provide some insight into the process of high school completion for at-risk students.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was to capture the shared experiences of a group of participants in a Colorado school district who were identified as being at-risk at the end of their sixth grade year but completed high school on time with their ninth grade cohort. Understanding the experiences of this vulnerable group of students could assist in analyzing current systems embedded in the school district that were effective and work to develop programs and instructional practices that support the whole student. Students who move through the educational system who are identified during their years of schooling as being off-track for graduation require unique supports not often found in a traditional educational model (Balfanz & Fox, 2011). Schools need to be aware of off-track indicators that at-risk students' exhibit in order to provide appropriate interventions early in their academic experience that are directly related to student need. These early and appropriate interventions increase the likelihood for at-risk students in completing high school (Balfanz & Fox, 2011; Rutenberg, 2009).

School districts across the country have differing climates and culture. By gathering additional information on the lived experiences of at-risk students in a select

school district, educators can incorporate new systems of support that work in tandem with programs currently in place. To establish appropriate interventions, the voices of at-risk students who experienced the phenomena during their years of schooling are critical. Their insight regarding their shared experiences is important in working toward change and improving the quality of education of other at-risk youth.

Research Question

Studies such as the one outlined in this dissertation have the potential to influence policy, practices, and research aimed at dropout prevention. More importantly, this study honors the voices of those individuals who overcame the odds associated with at-risk students and obtained a high school diploma. The research question this study sought to answer could have an impact on the way school districts approach at-risk students in the future:

- Q1 What can educational stakeholders learn from former students who successfully graduated from high school who had previously been identified as “at-risk” for dropping out?

Definition of Terms

To create consistency for the reader, the following terms are defined relative to the context of this study.

Adjusted cohort graduation rate. An estimate of the percentage of students who graduated within four years using adjusted percentages that take into account those students who transferred, died, were retained, or dropped out (NCES, 2011b).

At-risk students. Those individuals who face home or environmental factors that put them at risk for not graduating from high school. These factors might include

socioeconomic status, neglect, or other circumstances that could hinder academic success (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).

Average freshman graduation rate. An estimate of the percentage of students who graduated within four years of entering ninth grade (NCES, 2011a).

Credit recovery program. This type of program, available for students who have fallen behind on high school credits, provides an opportunity to recover credits through a blended learning approach that includes both online and personal instruction (Center for Public Education, 2012).

Early warning system. A data-driven analysis system that identifies students who are exhibiting at-risk indicators for dropping out of school so appropriate interventions can be implemented (Heppen & Therriault, 2008).

General educational development. A high school equivalency diploma or certificate that measures proficiency in social studies, math, science, reading, and writing. In passing the general educational development (GED) exam, those individuals who were unable to achieve a high school diploma are given the opportunity to earn a high school equivalency credential (GED Testing Service, 2014).

High school diploma. An award given to students that signifies successful completion of the standards and requirements from an accredited organization set forth by the department of education in a given state. It is considered the minimal educational qualification mandated by state and federal governments and signifies that a student has successfully completed all required coursework, passed all mandatory exams, and met all other graduation requirements (U.S. Department of Education, 2008b).

High school dropout. A student who is currently not enrolled in school and has not achieved a high school diploma (Rumberger, 2011).

Off-track indicators. Behaviors that occur over time that potentially impede academic success for students include low attendance, increase in behavioral referrals, and multiple academic failures in math and language arts (Balfanz & Fox, 2011).

On-track indicators. Similar properties as off-track indicators but have a greater chance of achieving the desired outcome such as graduation (Balfanz & Fox, 2011).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I identified the problem and outlined the purpose and significance of this study. The high school dropout and completion rate is of significant concern to educational stakeholders across the country. In addition to the graduation rate, stakeholders have raised concern regarding the academic proficiency level of students who receive a diploma as many demonstrate below basic skills in literacy and math. Understanding the various reasons students are identified as at-risk during their years of schooling could lead to the appropriate development of intervention programs for high completion and successful transition to a post-secondary setting or the workforce. The impact both dropouts and academically deficient young people have on the nation's economy and social structures is significant and stakeholders must have a vested interest in developing necessary support systems for increasing the high school graduation rate as well as the academic proficiency level of at-risk students prior to receiving a high school diploma (Pinkus, 2008).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of education in the United States has evolved significantly from the time of the earliest settlers to the current organizational structures seen today. In the mid-19th century, educational programming focused on teaching children rudimentary literacy and math skills with an emphasis on apprenticeships for learning a specific trade (Aldridge & Goldman, 2007). As the educational structures evolved, educating American students was grounded in safeguarding democratic ideals, citizenship, economic prosperity, and the preservation of society (Aldridge & Goldman, 2007). These educational ideologies persist today in public schools around the country; however, the economic and social structures in the United States are more complex in the 21st century as a result of advanced technological workforces and a greater need for innovation. With the vast changes in social structures, demands for a highly skilled workforce, and an increase in student diversity, traditional educational models were failing to meet the demands of the nation (Friedman, 2007). With American educational organizations failing to keep pace with economic and social evolution, federal education policy has played an increasingly critical role in employing accountability measures to meet the educational needs of all students.

Legislation

Elementary and Secondary Education Act

As educational structures and regulatory policies progressed throughout the 20th century, the federal government gradually became more involved in enacting legislation to promote academic achievement, educational excellence, and equal access for all students (Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA], 1965). The federal government's definitive entry into public education occurred when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the ESEA of 1965, which governed federal policy for K-12 education. The ESEA legislation, which was referred to as the War on Poverty Initiative, followed the precedents set forth by the Civil Rights movement, emphasizing the importance of educational equality for all students regardless of race and socioeconomic status. In an effort to bridge the achievement gap between low and high income students, the federal government was committed to providing additional funding for education to include professional development, instructional materials and resources, support of parental involvement, and Title I programs. The ESEA stressed the importance of improving educational opportunities and achievement outcomes for disadvantaged students through fiscal support of high poverty schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

A Nation at Risk

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) released the *A Nation at Risk* report, which emphasized the need for educational reform in the United States as a necessary and immediate concern. "Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being

overtaken by competitors throughout the world” (NCEE, 1983, p. 1). According to the commission, the supreme power of the United States was threatened by poor educational performance:

We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people. (NCEE, 1983, p. 2)

In this influential report, the commission provided statistical information regarding the perceived inadequacies of the American education system and a call to stakeholders for a commitment toward educational reform focusing on academic excellence among all students (NCEE, 1983).

The NCEE (1983) reported 23 million people living in the United States were functionally illiterate in reading, writing, and comprehension. In reviewing a variety of assessment data, 13% of 17-year-olds across the country were illiterate with a majority being minorities. Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores were declining; mathematic scores were down 40 points and downward trends in English, writing, and science were also noted. The report also stated that 40% of the SAT testing population consistently demonstrated immature higher order reasoning and problem solving skills. When comparing the performance level among the United States and other countries on 19 different academic tests, American students fell into last place in seven of the tests and failed to score competitively on the remaining 12 subtests (NCEE, 1983).

Lack of student achievement generated from the public school system impacts the performance levels of students in post-secondary educational organizations. The NCEE (1983) identified that colleges across the United States had a significant increase in

students needing remedial courses in reading, writing, mathematics, and spelling when transitioning from high school to college. Students were graduating from high school without the necessary educational skills to academically compete at the collegiate level or as military recruits for the U.S. armed forces. The NCEE warned stakeholders that if student achievement continued to decline, a shortage of highly skilled employees in the areas of computer technology, robotics, and science was inevitable and would hinder the competitive edge the United States needed as a world power.

The content and findings of the *A Nation at Risk* report (NCEE, 1983) were organized around four major recommendations for educational reform. The NCEE (1983) recommended that nationwide graduation requirements include “four years of English, three years of math, science, and social studies, and two credits of a foreign language for college bound students” (p. 4). If students failed to meet these prerequisites, they would be denied a high school diploma. The NCEE encouraged primary to post-secondary educational organizations to raise achievement expectations using rigorous and measurable achievement standards. Higher education was also called upon to increase admission requirements for entry in an attempt to push reform efforts in lower educational structures. Policymakers were encouraged to increase the amount of basic skills instruction by increasing the number of hours spent at school from 200 days to 220 days (NCEE, 1983).

In addition to raising achievement standards through curriculum development and instructional resources, the NCEE (1983) recommended improvement in the quality of teachers by requiring higher standards in teacher preparation programs, competitive salaries and performance pay, a salary ladder based on experience and skill, an increase

in teacher contract time to 11 months, additional professional development opportunities, programs to address the teacher shortage, a comprehensive plan to attract highly qualified applicants into the profession, and a teacher mentor program designed to support newly hired teachers to the profession. If stakeholders adhered to these recommendations, the NCEE believed educational inadequacies would be addressed and educational reformation would align with the economic needs of the nation. The NCEE stressed if academic achievement did not improve, a knowledge-driven economy would decrease with significant ramifications for the country.

No Child Left Behind

Twenty years after the release of *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983), little progress toward changing the educational outcomes of student achievement has been made (U.S. Department of Education, 2008a). American students, when compared to their international counterparts on a variety of assessments, continued to perform significantly below grade-level. The Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS; NCES, 2011a) found American students in fourth grade performed competitively with international students in mathematics and science but significant gaps were noted among students between 8th and 12th grades. Empirical evidence derived from TIMSS and the Program for Student Assessment (PISA; NCES, 2012) indicated the longer students remained in school, their progress diminished in mathematics, science, and reading. Students were not learning the essential academic skills to lead a prosperous and successful adult life (Kimmelman, 2006). Some caution should be exercised when using statistical comparisons provided by TIMSS and PISA due to statistical inconsistencies (Koretz, 2009). Despite the controversy surrounding the interpretation of international

comparisons, news media and other reporting agencies emphasized the academic discrepancies between American students and students from other countries, which further fueled the widespread dissatisfaction in the American educational system (Koretz, 2009).

As a result of these findings, the federal government developed comprehensive legislation for educational reform. In the reauthorization of ESEA on January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law an Act commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2002). This comprehensive initiative expanded the role of the federal government in public education and forced schools that received federal funding to become more accountable for student achievement with an emphasis in addressing disparities among minority and impoverished students (NCLB, 2002). This legislation not only required states to increase their efforts in improving student achievement but also established set criteria explicitly mandating states and schools to comply with rigorous performance standards that measured student performance through standardized assessments (Yell, 2006).

No Child Left Behind (2002) instructed state and school officials to develop clearly defined goals and objectives for students to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in meeting academic standards. As an academic indicator for high schools, NCLB implemented new requirements for calculating the high school graduation rate as a component of their AYP. In addressing the graduation rate, NCLB mandated that schools provide a four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate that was disaggregated by subgroups including students with limited English proficiency, students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students, and students from major and minority ethnic

groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2008b). This regulation required school districts to provide written confirmation of students who had dropped out so these individuals could not be counted as transfer students. This mandate tightened the graduation accountability and provided disaggregated data to the state and federal government to determine the success of select subgroups.

In addition to graduation mandates, schools were required to adopt research-based teaching methods to meet the needs of all students. Policymakers wanted to limit the influence of classroom practices based on fads, trends, popularity, and personal preference (Yell, 2006). With NCLB (2002), federal provisions targeted those programs supported by research and with a positive track record (Whitehurst, 2004). No Child Left Behind required schools to shift the focus from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered performance by changing instructional methods and promoting rigorous curricula development. With a rapidly growing, diverse learning community, best-practice instruction grounded in scientific inquiry was essential to accommodate the academic needs of all students (Johnson, Dupuis, Gollnick, Hall, & Musial, 2008). In addition to classroom practices, NCLB addressed the need to strengthen professional credentials teachers must have to teach core academic subjects such as language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science.

Teachers employed in a core content area are required to be highly qualified, meaning they must be proficient and certified in that specific subject area (NCLB, 2002). This legislation required school districts to hire competent instructors for core academic subjects in an effort to foster student achievement (Rosenberg, Westling, & McLeskey, 2008). Research pertaining to teacher effectiveness revealed students with highly

qualified instructors outperformed those students who had unqualified teachers in the classroom (Rosenberg et al., 2008). State policymakers were allowed to interpret the highly qualified status required by NCLB; however, a common link between the state and federal statutes was that all teachers must demonstrate proficiency in the core academic areas to which they were assigned, have full certification, and have a bachelor's degree (Rosenberg et al., 2008).

In spite of these legislative efforts, students continued to be left behind in the educational system (Johnson et al., 2008). The National Assessment of Educational Progress reported to the NCES (2001) that assessment scores for higher performing students showed significant improvement over time but lower performing students continued to decline. The statistics pertaining to student achievement continued to document a consistent achievement gap between Black, Hispanic, Asians, and Caucasian students as well as between the economically disadvantaged and those from middle to upper income classes. Not only were marginalized students not growing academically at the same pace but longitudinal research of these subgroups also reported these students were more likely to drop out of school when compared to students of majority subgroups (Ensminger & Slusacick, 1992; Klerman & Karoly, 1994; Rumberger & Lamb, 1998). The rigorous goals of educational policy did not give enough consideration to subpopulations that do not benefit from traditional instructional pedagogy in the classroom (NCES, 2007). For those who were always planning to graduate from high school, the changes might have increased their college readiness and overall educational experience; however, for those marginalized students, academic performance remains an area of concern (Aldridge & Goldman, 2007).

Despite legislative efforts to increase school and student performance, many believe NCLB (2002) sets an educational foundation that increases the achievement gap and encourages at-risk students to drop out of school (McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, & Heilig, 2008; Shirvani, 2009). No Child Left Behind's pattern of success heavily weights student performance on standardized tests, shifting the focus in the classroom regarding curricular instruction (McNeil et al., 2008). Critics of this legislation believe this shift encourages teachers to embed instructional practices that teach to the test in an effort to raise student achievement scores rather than teach students higher level critical thinking (Shirvani, 2009). These high stakes tests have severe penalties for all involved; the unintended consequence of this legislation has pushed students to drop out of school, specifically minority and low socioeconomic students (Klima, 2007).

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA; U.S. Department of Education, 2009) was signed into law on February 17, 2009 by President Barack Obama. This piece of legislation was specifically designed “to stimulate the economy, support job creation, and invest in critical sectors including education” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009, p. 3). The ARRA allocated \$4.35 billion for the *Race to the Top* (RTTT) fund, which was a competitive grant program designed to reward states “that created the conditions for educational innovation and reform” (p. 2) and was specifically designed to improve student achievement. States were encouraged to develop policies that addressed the achievement gap, improved high school graduation rates, and implemented curriculum and assessments that ensured students would be prepared to enter college or the workforce with the necessary skills. The U.S. Department of

Education (2009) stated that in order to be considered for RTTT monies, states had to meet four core educational reform requirements:

- Adopt standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in a global economy;
- Build data systems that measured student growth and success and informed teachers and principals about how they could improve instruction;
- Recruit, develop, reward, and retain effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most; and
- Develop programs and policies that specifically support the lowest-achieving school (p. 2).

States that developed the greatest levels of innovation and reform legislation were awarded significant amounts of money to fund the proposed programs. Of the 16 states that applied for the RTTT grant, two states were awarded first-round funding. State recipients of the grant money focused on projects that would improve teacher effectiveness, promote rigorous academic standards, and provide effective leadership development (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

The RTTT was not without criticism; some believed this initiative presented by the Obama administration would further marginalize minority and low socioeconomic students considered to be the most at-risk populations (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, [NAACP], 2010). In viewing the components of RTTT through the civil rights lens, it is believed the federal initiative has disregarded issues school districts face in low socioeconomic and minority communities; school districts would be forced to adopt curricular instruction based on standardized assessments that

are not equitable for all students. The RTTT relies heavily on competitive funding, which sends the message that high-quality education is designed for the “winning” states. Critics of RTTT believe this educational reform jeopardizes the principles of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), which was designed to create equitable educational opportunities for all students, specifically those students who are most at risk for dropping out of high school (NAACP, 2010).

Conclusion

With the vast changes in social structures, demands for a highly skilled workforce, and an increase in student diversity, traditional educational structures have failed to meet the demands of the nation. The federal government has become increasingly more involved in educational accountability in the past century in an effort to raise student performance and increase high school graduation rates. With advancements in technology and the need for 21st century innovation, student achievement and high school completion have become a primary focus in addressing educational reform. To ensure a competitive workforce, highly skilled candidates must have a strong educational foundation coupled with a high school diploma in order to have a prosperous adult life (Rouse, 2005). These historic educational reform efforts have not been enacted without harsh criticism. Many believe tying student achievement to rigorous state assessments and high-stakes exit exams has actually forced more students to drop out of high school and further marginalized the at-risk student population (NAACP, 2010).

An Overview of the Graduation Rate Calculation

When reviewing the statistical trends reported by NCES and other agencies, the current graduation rate is judged to be between 66% and 88% with an estimated minority graduation rate between 50% and 85% (NCES, 2011c). These percentages vary as a direct result of the methodology used in data collection and calculation. The fluctuation of the graduation rate was significant between 1960 and 2010 as many reporting agencies did not differentiate between a diploma and an equivalency certificate. Rather, the results were calculated together, creating skewed percentages between recording agencies (Rumberger, 2011).

Heckman and LaFontaine (2007) stated, “When comparable measures are used on comparable samples, a consensus can be reached among all data sources” (p. 3). The researchers conducted a comprehensive statistical analysis of the U.S. graduation rate and concluded the rate peaked in 1960 at 80% and then gradually declined four to five percentage points over time. Approximately 65% of Blacks and Hispanics obtain a high school diploma; the minority graduation rate is substantially lower than that of White students. Heckman and LaFontaine reported that the minority-majority graduation rate gap has not improved in the past 35 years. The graduation rate among minority students continues to lag in spite of legislative efforts to improve educational equality (Gandara & Contreras, 2009).

For several years, the NCES (2014) utilized two different assessment tools in calculating the high school graduation rate and presented both findings to the public. When reviewing the statistical information reported by NCES, a specific distinction between a high school completer and a high school graduate is necessary. A high school

completer refers to a student who has either obtained a traditional high school diploma or received a certificate of completion through an equivalency program such as a General Education Development (GED) certificate. The high school completer calculation incorporates a range in age between 16- and 24-years-old and is considered to be the calculation tool in determining the official graduation rate in the United States. A high school graduate refers to a student who has met the criteria in an accredited high school program and received a traditional diploma, which was calculated using the 17-year-old graduation ratio. The high school completer method counts all the diplomas distributed by private and public schools in a given year and divides that number by the 17-year-old count of that year. The NCES utilized both of these measures beginning in 1968 continuing through 2002 (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007).

When NCLB (2002) was passed, states were required to raise their graduation rates as a component of their annual yearly progress. No Child Left Behind specifically stated students were to be counted as a graduate if they received a traditional high school diploma from an accredited organization aligned with the state's academic standards. General Educational Development certificates and certificates of completion were no longer allowed in state and local graduation calculations (NCLB, 2002). At this time the average freshman graduation rate (AFGR) was implemented:

The AFGR provides an estimate of the percentage of high school students who graduate within four years of starting ninth grade. The rate uses aggregate student enrollment data to estimate the size of an incoming freshman class and counts of the number of diplomas awarded four years later. The incoming freshman class size is estimated by summing the enrollment in eighth grade in one year, ninth grade for the next year, and 10th grade for the year after, and then dividing by three. (NCES, 2011b, p. 6)

This measurement tool was similar to the 17-year-old graduation ratio; however, the method of calculation was more valid as it established a graduation cohort that was tracked over a four-year period. The AFGR calculation system revealed the nation's graduation rate was much lower than previously reported and "many scholars claim that the U.S. has a dropout crisis...as the graduation rate from the 1960s to present has stagnated or fallen" (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007, p. 5). The AFGR calculation method brought more statistical clarity to the computation of the graduation rate; however, according to many policymakers, the calculation system needed additional refinement (Rumberger, 2011).

Calculating the Graduation Rate

In the past five years, the U.S. Department of Education (NCES, 2011c), in conjunction with state legislators, worked to align the systems to increase the reliability measures for calculating high school graduation rates as well as dropout rates beginning in the 2011-2012 academic year. Historically, states had autonomy in developing a system to measure graduation statistics; however, cross-state comparisons were limited due to variations. Currently, the U.S. Department of Education requires all states to use the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) in calculating graduation and dropout rates among high school students (NCES, 2011c).

To properly calculate the graduation rate, the number of on-track graduates is divided by the number of students in the adjusted cohort from the start of ninth grade. The adjusted cohort is created based on specific changes within the original group and accounts for students who transfer, are retained, drop out, re-enroll, or die (NCES, 2011c). Students are assigned to a cohort when they first enter ninth grade and remain in

that cohort for the next four years. At the close of the fourth year, students are categorized as an on-track graduate, other completer, dropout, or an off-track graduate. To determine the dropout percentage, the number of dropouts divided by the adjusted cohort numbers is computed. The ACGR method of calculation allows a breakdown in data to determine a trend regarding completion--previous methods did not. The ACGR measure was implemented in an effort to hold states and school districts more accountable for student achievement by encouraging program development to increase graduation completion (NCES, 2011c).

Calculating the High School Dropout Rate

In computing the high school graduation rate, a proportion of students fails to meet the necessary criteria, which generates a high school dropout percentage for a given calendar year. In understanding the statistics reported by NCES on high school dropouts, various definitions on dropout statistics are necessary. In 1994, NCES began categorizing high school dropouts as either an “event” or a “status.” An event dropout rate “measures the proportion of students who drop out in a single year without completing high school” (NCES, 1994, p. v). The ACGR calculation was important as it monitored the number of students leaving high school each year and how those rates compared to previous years.

Evaluating dropouts as an event reveals how many individuals, over a particular period of time or at a particular grade level, quit school before graduating and whether those events are more prevalent among some groups of individuals, types of schools, or geographic locations than others. (Rumberger, 2011, p. 48)

A status dropout rate “focuses on an overall age group as opposed to individuals in the U.S. school system, so it can be used to study general population issues (NCES, 2011c, p.

2). The status dropout rate “reveals how many individuals at some point are dropouts and whether that status is more prevalent in some groups....this status can change: dropouts can re-enroll in school and subsequently graduate” (Rumberger, 2011, p. 47). Through evaluation of historical trends pertaining to the high school dropout rate, it is important to understand the generated percentage is directly linked to the calculation methods for the graduation rate. Discrepancies in calculating the nation’s graduation rate impact the accurate calculation of the dropout rate.

Graduation and Dropout Rates

The high school graduation rate over the past 30 years has fluctuated significantly as a direct result of the discrepancies in calculation. Regardless of the controversy, the consensus among policymakers is the dropout rate is too high, which negatively impacts the country (Duncan, 2013). According to a variety of research studies, the national graduation rate in 2011 was between 68% and 78.2%--one-third of the nation’s high school students failed to obtain a diploma (Education Week, 2011; NCES, 2011b). In reviewing the literature on graduation data, it was difficult to obtain exact calculations regarding the nation’s dropout rates. A variety of government and private agencies utilized different graduation calculation methods for publication, creating a range of percentages that could not be compared from one organization to another. According to policymakers, a high school dropout epidemic is cycling through the United States with a persistent graduation gap between majority and minority groups as well as between low socioeconomic and middle to upper socioeconomic classes (Duncan, 2013; Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Rumberger, 2011). With over a million students dropping out of school every year, the consequences for the individual, and the nation as a whole, are significant.

Potential Barriers to Achieving a Higher Graduation Rate

To better understand the graduation completion rate, specific barriers within the educational system preventing students from obtaining a high school diploma must be determined. There is a plethora of research regarding reasons behind low graduation rates, but implementing viable and effective programming to remove those barriers is a significant challenge. As noted earlier, dropping out of high school is a process that typically occurs over time--the choice to officially quit school is simply the final stage of that process (Rumberger, 2011). Major performance indicators for high school dropouts are high absenteeism, low achievement in English and mathematics, and behavioral referrals. These symptoms can be quantitatively measured and will continue to persist until a root-cause analysis is utilized and appropriate interventions are created (Okes, 2009).

Educational Disparities

The first step in addressing educational barriers is identifying where the barriers exist within the educational system as well as in the external environment in order to develop effective programs of support (Okes, 2009). Barriers that impede educational achievement are most often seen in the minority status of families, in families with English language acquisition, families with low socioeconomic status, and opportunity gaps in accessing support systems and resources. In a review of the literature, these minority subgroups consistently underperformed academically when compared to their majority counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Minority status. “For the past few decades, states and school districts have devoted considerable attention and resources to closing gaps in student achievement

based on race, ethnicity, and income, but in spite of these efforts this achievement gap remains prevalent” (Center on Education Policy [CEP], 2010, p. 11). While research showed that Black and Hispanic students have made academic strides in reading and math, a gap continues to separate them from their White counterparts--White students outperform non-White students across all core academic areas (NCES, 2011b).

According to the CEP (2010), Black students perform 20 to 30 percentage points lower than White students on state proficiency tests in public education. Similarly, Hispanic students score 15 to 20 percentage points lower than White students on the same assessments. These educational disparities extend beyond the classroom and directly influence the graduation rate for these specific subgroups. The graduation rate for Hispanic and Black students has a range between 61% to 71% and 69% to 75%, respectively, which is significantly lower than the percentage of White students who graduate with a range of 80% to 83% (Mishel & Roy, 2006).

English language acquisition. In reviewing statistics and causative factors pertaining to the achievement gap, Hispanic students are the fastest growing subgroup in the United States; they are also the most linguistically diverse (International Center for Leadership in Education [ICLE], 2009). In the 1990s, 16 million Hispanic immigrants entered the United States; currently, there are more than five million non-English speaking Hispanics in public schools across the country (ICLE, 2009). One in nine students in the classrooms is an English language learner (ELL) with a 10% annual growth rate. By 2025, it is predicted that one in four students will be categorized as ELL (ICLE, 2009). Statistically, Hispanic students who are not proficient in English score significantly lower on standardized state assessments compared to their Hispanic peers

who are proficient in English (NCES, 2011a). These statistics are consistent with other ethnic groups in the United States who are not proficient in English (NCES, 2011a).

Socioeconomic status. NCES (2011a) reported that students considered “low income” performed 25 percentage points lower than students living above the poverty line. According to the NCES (2011a), a large percentage of students who qualify for the Free and Reduced Lunch program are non-White. These factors, combined with academic performance, categorize non-White students at higher academic risk than any other subgroup (Lacour & Tissington, 2011). According to the 2010 data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), 15.5 million children younger than 18 years of age live in poverty.

Low academic performance in primary and secondary grades is one of the indicators that can be a precursor to dropping out of school. If students from minority and low socioeconomic backgrounds are not performing at a proficient academic level at the end of their third grade year, they are at a higher risk for dropping out of school. A primary focus of school districts is to provide the necessary educational instruction and support networks to meet the needs of all learners. Failure to implement differentiated instruction and educational scaffolding creates educational barriers for diverse learners, which has unintended consequences for those students as they progress through the system (Balfanz & Stewart, 2012).

Opportunity gap. Some experts assert the achievement gap persists due to opportunity gaps in accessing resources between poor and wealthy students, leading to lower graduation rates (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Tucker, Higgins, & Salmonowicz, 2010). Children living in poverty, whose parents are unable to provide an

engaging and academic learning environment at home, enter school with academic readiness gaps that persist throughout their education (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Tucker et al., 2010). A longitudinal study of language development in three-year-olds revealed children in poverty have fewer vocabulary skills and lower language development than children from middle-income families, placing them at an academic disadvantage upon entering kindergarten (Hart & Risley, 1995). According to Balfanz and Stewart (2012),

A child who starts behind falls even farther behind long before the start of school. Disparities in child outcomes are evident by 9 months of age. Children who enter school without the fundamental knowledge, attributes, and skills necessary for success are more likely to struggle throughout their education if appropriate interventions are not put in place along the way. (p. 5)

An Arizona Department of Education (2014) research panel stated that in order to decrease the dropout rate and the number of at-risk students, school districts must work to develop a successful, strategic plan to close the achievement gap. All students must be afforded access to various educational opportunities and resources within a school district including several different pathways toward success. Such opportunity gaps are barriers that exist outside the educational system but have a major impact on students' educational success, placing them at a higher risk based on the quality of their home environment (Balfanz & Stewart, 2012).

Educational Perception

Understanding the factors contributing to low student achievement is pivotal in developing viable solutions in educating all students (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002). However, an area of contention among educators is agreeing on those factors that affect student growth. Uhlenberg and Brown (2002) conducted a study to explore the varying

perceptions among educators regarding the achievement gap. Based on their findings, educators have varying assumptions regarding the achievement gap and those assumptions stifle collaborative efforts in developing appropriate solutions. Tucker et al. (2010) stated that many educational professionals have a distorted perceptual awareness regarding diversity in the classroom. Many educators blame the students for poor achievement as a result of low motivation, a disability, a lack of parental involvement, poor student behavior, and poverty. These professional biases create a damaging climate and culture for schools (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002). Regardless of these conflicting viewpoints, one common thread exists--it is the responsibility of educators to provide viable solutions in addressing low achievement (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002). If instructors do not believe all students possess the skills to learn, they are nurturing an environment that is educationally inequitable (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002).

Educational Equity

As the percentage of minority students has increased in public schools over the past two decades, the number of teachers who identify themselves within these minority groups is significantly underrepresented (Nieto, 2003). Currently, 90% of the teaching force employed in public education comes from the White middle class with a majority of these teachers being White, monolingual, English-speaking women (Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Nieto, 2003; Swanson-Gehrke, 2005). Statistics indicate that a majority of these teachers have had limited opportunities for interacting with different social classes, racial groups, and religious affiliations since many are employed within 100 miles of where they were raised (Nieto, 2003). To incorporate educational equity in the classroom, teachers need to have insight into the varying academic needs of the students

they serve (Gay, 2000). Teachers need to experience the different cultures outside the classroom environment as “the individuality of students is deeply entwined with their ethnic identity and cultural socialization” (Gay, 2000, p. 23). The individuality of students is reflected in their values, cultural heritage, linguistic patterns, customs, and religious beliefs (Gay, 2000). When educators lack the experience and understanding regarding diversity, a “deficit syndrome” can occur and students are blamed for their academic failure (Gay, 2000).

Curriculum and Instructional Practice

Ineffective instructional practices and rigorous curriculum implementation are also considered to be factors influencing the graduation rate; this is evident in reviewing student achievement scores throughout the United States (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002). Standards-based education and the use of standardized assessments are appropriate when the standards and the curriculum align with the needs of all students and when the information derived from specific assessment data is used to implement appropriate interventions in the school setting (Balfanz & Stewart, 2012). When instructional methods are not aligned with the diversity in the classroom, teachers fail to implement effective teaching strategies to meet the needs of all students. Poor and ineffective instruction is a barrier for educational achievement and can lead students to become disengaged in school (Johnson et al., 2008).

Disengagement

Dropping out of high school is a slow process of academic and social disengagement based on a student’s experience in primary and secondary grades (Balfanz & Stewart, 2012). In the findings reported by Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006),

students demonstrated disengagement from school by refusing to wake up in the morning, skipping classes, taking extended lunches, being increasingly absent, being disinterested in school, and refusing to participate or attend extra-curricular school functions. Necessary interventions in dropout prevention are lacking in many schools so when students struggle, few support systems are in place to meet their needs. Lack of resources creates barriers for students who show signs of disengagement (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Educational Funding

Dropping out is a process that occurs throughout the educational continuum and requires additional funding and community networking (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Limiting monetary allocation for strategic interventions creates access barriers that inadvertently place students who are already at risk in a vulnerable position. To change the face of education and address the issues of academic growth, standardized assessments are necessary; however, the federal government must apportion adequate funds for true educational reform (Noguera, 2008). In times of recession, many schools experience significant deficits and budget cuts that directly affect school programming. Numerous schools are closing, experienced teachers are exiting the field, salary reductions and mandatory furloughs are being imposed, and students are still not achieving at the pace desired (Johnson et al., 2008).

Standards-based education is effective when there is an appropriation of funds to employ all essential programs to move student academic growth toward proficiency (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2008). Developing programs that meet the needs of struggling learners requires additional funding. When those funds are not

considered a priority for district and state budgets, at-risk students have fewer support networks to access and are more likely to drop out of school (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Students who face monumental barriers both inside and outside of the educational system require additional supports and resources to be successful in meeting the requirements for a high school diploma (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Why Students Drop Out

No isolated incident leads an individual to drop out of high school; rather, it is the “final stage in a dynamic and cumulative process of disengagement from school” (National Academy of Education, 2011, p. 61). The process may begin as early as elementary school when students fail to engage in the academic and social infrastructures of school, eventually leading to poor academic performance, an increase in behavioral incidents, minimal homework completion, lack of participation in extra-curricular activities, frequent absenteeism, and higher grade retention (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschley, 2006; Finn & Cox, 1992; Rumberger, 2011). Research also suggested social and family background, (e.g., poverty, single-parent families, decreased educational support, families with low educational attainment, and minority status) are contributing factors associated with student dropouts (Barro & Kolstad, 1987; NCES, 1994; Rumberger & Lamb, 1998). It is important to note that characteristics associated with dropping out do not necessarily cause a student to make the decision to quit school; rather, they are precursors in a long and complex process that places students in a high-risk cohort (Rumberger, 2011).

To better understand the high school dropout rate, researchers have conducted numerous studies to determine the variables associated with dropping out of school.

Early warning signs based on various longitudinal studies have identified precursors of dropping out prior to a student entering high school (Balfanz & Fox, 2011). Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, and Fox (2010) found a strong correlation exists between reading proficiency skills at the end of third grade and high school completion. Students who are not reading at grade level by the start of fourth grade are “four times more likely to drop out of school than students who are proficient” (Balfanz & Legters, 2004, p. 7).

Balfanz and Legters (2004) completed a longitudinal study of middle school students to determine if early warning signs were prevalent based on specific factors. In tracking the performance of eighth grade cohorts, the researchers determined those students who failed mathematics and English, had poor behaviors, and attended school less than 80% of the time were four times more likely to drop out of high school (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver (2007) conducted a longitudinal study of approximately 13,000 Philadelphia students from 1996 through 2004 and discovered that predictive variables for high school dropouts could be identified as early as sixth grade based on poor attendance, misbehavior, and course failures. Allensworth and Easton (2007) stated students who were on-track to graduate during their ninth grade year were 3.5 times more likely to graduate than those ninth graders who were off-track. Absenteeism was also an indicator that identified students at risk for dropping out of school (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). High absenteeism is a symptom of disengagement and impacts educational achievement as students miss so much school that their mathematics, literacy development, and higher level thinking skills are impacted (Appleton et al., 2006).

Quantitative research studies have addressed performance indicators that place a student at risk for not completing high school; however, the voices of those students who do not complete high school are rarely studied beyond a questionnaire or survey (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Bridgeland et al. (2006) conducted a series of focus groups and surveys with a sample of young high school dropouts in 25 different cities across the United States. The participants reported a variety of reasons for dropping out of high school including feeling unmotivated, disconnected to school, boredom, lack of academic challenges, lack of parental support, and life events that forced them to quit. A common theme reported by participants in this study was feelings of regret about dropping out of high school. As young adults reflecting on their decision to leave school, 60% reported that a high school diploma is very important for a successful life. Additionally, 76% of dropouts stated that if given the opportunity to re-enroll, they would go back and finish high school to improve their quality of life.

Consequences of Dropping Out

Reducing the number of dropouts is of national concern as it has a negative impact on the individual and the nation as a whole. Rumberger (2011) stated,

Students who drop out of high school suffer a range of consequences for the rest of their lives and the low human capital of high school dropouts rob the economy of skills needed to fuel economic growth and enhance U.S. competitiveness in the global economy. (p. 130)

Amos (2008) stated that high schools needed to improve their graduation rates or the 12 million students predicated to drop out in the next 10 years will result in a \$1.5 trillion deficit. The dropout rate influences the labor market, judicial system, family formation, overall health and healthcare, and civic engagement.

Labor Market

High school dropouts are the least educated in the labor market and are less likely to find jobs that meet their basic needs--if they find jobs at all. They are twice as likely to obtain employment wages at or below the minimum wage threshold and more likely to live in poverty (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007). In 2005, the median annual earned income of a high school dropout working fulltime was \$23,500 a year (Rouse, 2005). Rouse (2005), an economic researcher, reported the maximum earnings of a high school dropout over the course of a lifetime were \$260,000 less than those who obtained a high school diploma. The difference was significantly greater when comparing lifetime earnings with those students who graduated from college (Rouse, 2005).

The financial hardship not only impacts those individuals who have dropped out of high school but also the economic stability of the nation (Rouse, 2005). As a result of earning a lower annual income, dropouts do not contribute as much to public spending since they pay fewer taxes. Rouse (2005) conducted a study using the census data on 600,000 twenty- year-old high school dropouts to determine the amount of lost revenue to federal, state, and local governments. Rouse concluded that over the course of a lifetime, one dropout students pays less than \$97,000 in federal, state and Social Security taxes, while their graduate counterpart contributed over \$250,000. In addition, those 600,000 dropouts accounted for \$165 billion of lost income for the country and \$58 billion in lost tax revenue (Rouse, 2005). This loss of income affects local, state, and federal programming since students without a high school diploma are unable to successfully transition into a highly skilled workforce. In January of 2002, the unemployment rate for high school dropouts was 13.1%, which was significantly higher when compared to high

school graduates at 8.3% and college graduates at 4.2% (Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, 2009). In addition to paying fewer taxes, dropouts are more likely to qualify for government assistance that costs the nation billions of dollars every year (Rouse, 2005).

Judicial System

The high school dropout situation not only impacts the labor market but also has a significant impact on the judicial system. High school dropouts are less likely to pursue educational training for gainful employment and more likely to commit crimes that lead to arrest and incarceration (Sum, Khatiwada, & McLaughlin, 2009). “Research has consistently found that rates of crime, arrests, and incarceration are higher for dropouts than for high school graduates” (Rumberger, 2011, p. 95). In a study completed by Sum et al. (2009), dropouts between the ages of 16 to 24 were six times more likely to be institutionalized in a correctional facility with a vast majority being Black and Hispanic males.

The crime rate among dropouts has a greater impact on the nation than just those directly involved in the crime itself. A study completed by Harlow (2003) reported the government costs related to policy development, crime prevention, and incarceration of dropouts costs billions of dollars with a majority of those costs associated with juvenile cases. “High school dropouts are three and half times more likely to be arrested and eight times more likely to be incarcerated over the course of their lifetime” (Harlow, 2003, p. 1). Harlow found 68% of state prison inmates did not receive a high school diploma or a GED. Based on the results of this study, increasing the national graduation rate by 10%

would decrease the murder and assault rate by 20%, saving the nation \$15 billion annually in costs associated with those crimes.

Health

Empirical evidence has documented better health among individuals who have graduated from high school compared to those who have not. A survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2010) reported individuals who completed high school had a lower morbidity rate caused by diseases, fewer incidents of depression and anxiety, and fewer missed workdays related to illness. Recent studies showed that individuals with limited income were less likely to have affordable access to health care, experienced higher levels of psychological strain, and were more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, illegal drugs, and limited exercise (Rumberger, 2011). In a study completed by McLanahan (2009), it was found dropouts are more likely to live in poorer communities that do not offer social support networks, increasing their risk of developing chronic health problems.

Civic Engagement

As a benefit of living in a democratic society, citizens have an opportunity to participate in political and civic engagement at the local, state, and national levels. Students who do not graduate from high school are less likely to engage in civic and political activities directed toward a personal cause (Bartels, 2008). Some attribute their lack of involvement directly to their inability to follow the complex process within the political arena (Rumberger, 2011). Students who drop out of high school are less likely to vote and less likely to contact their political representatives to discuss challenging issues, which could lead to inequality within the legislative system (Bartels, 2008). Lack

of civic engagement of high school dropouts diminishes the voice of those from lower socioeconomic classes and lends favoritism to the wealthy and educated (Rumberger, 2011).

Addressing the Dropout Crisis

With the expansion into a global marketplace, education plays a significant role in affording young adults necessary opportunities when entering the workforce. Dropping out of school prior to completing secondary education has adverse social and economic consequences for the individual and society as a whole. Dropout prevention programs are necessary across all grade levels and are strongly recommended as a viable support system (National Dropout Prevention Center, [NDPC], 2007). Over the past few decades, federal, state, and local agencies have allocated large sums of money toward dropout prevention programs to increase the graduation rate and overall student achievement for at-risk youth (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2007). Unfortunately, districts establish dropout prevention programs without understanding all the factors associated with this phenomenon (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002).

Dropout Prevention Programs

In order to implement a successful dropout prevention program, a comprehensive understanding of the factors associated with dropping out is important (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Wilson, Tanner-Smith, Libsey, Steinka-Fry, and Morrison (2011) completed a meta-analysis of current dropout prevention programs and found those programs implementing effective strategies that address individual and institutional risk factors had the greatest success rates. The Institution of Education and Science (IES) published a practical user guide that presented specific recommendations pertaining to an

effective dropout prevention program (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2008). The IES works in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education and What Works Clearinghouse in reviewing numerous dropout prevention programs with the strongest evidence-based outcomes. From the numerous preventative programs reviewed, the panel from IES determined the most appropriate components for all programs must include the following:

- A data system that can track and monitor student dropout rate;
- an early warning system that identifies high risk students through low academic performance, poor school attendance, and increased negative behaviors;
- an assigned case manager and mentor;
- academic support designed to enrich and improve academic skills;
- classroom support for improved behavior and social skills development;
- personalized learning environment that includes small learning communities, team-teaching, extended classroom time in low skilled areas, and skill gap interventions;
- access to rigorous and relevant instruction;
- instruction that is engaging and appropriate for learning high school skills; and
- learning opportunities directly aligned with vocational development and college entrance requirements (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2008).

To develop a specific dropout prevention program that aligns with school climate and demographics of a school district, it is important to have a solid understanding of contributing risk factors associated with high school dropouts. In a meta-analysis completed by the NDPS (2007), researchers compiled a comprehensive review of the literature to determine risk factors associated with dropping out and determined no single risk factor could predict whether or not a student chose to quit school; rather, a combination of multiple risk factors across several domains increased the likelihood of dropping out. The more risk factors identified for a given student, the probability of not graduating from high school was greater (NDPC, 2007). In furthering their findings, the researchers of NDPC reviewed 21 specific studies pertaining to risk factors associated with dropping out of school. A list of these risk factors is provided in Table 1 and includes four major domains: individual, family, school, and community.

In addition to evaluating the research regarding risk factors for dropping out, the NDPC (2007) further developed a comprehensive resource list of those exemplary programs that provided basic and intensive interventions based on the needs of the student. An educator working to implement research based strategies is encouraged to review the current programs deemed effective through the NDPC prior to developing or implementing interventions as their effectiveness is research-based and considered to have an increased effect size. Regardless of the programs selected, NDPC stated that services and strategies of an exemplary dropout prevention program must include

- academic support,
- adult education,
- afterschool activities,

- behavioral interventions,
- career development,
- case management,
- conflict resolution,
- court advocacy,
- family engagement,
- family strengthening and family therapy,
- gang prevention,
- teen parent support, and
- truancy prevention (NDPC, 2007, p. 4).

This would appear to be an overwhelming list of criteria for any school district; therefore, it is strongly recommended that appropriate community partnerships be developed in addressing risk factors that fall outside the school domain (NDPC, 2007).

Table 1

Domain Risk Factors

Domain	Risk Factors
Individual	<p>Individual background characteristic--has a learning disability or emotional disturbance</p> <p>Early adult responsibilities—high number of work hours and parenthood</p> <p>Social attitudes, values, and behavior:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High-risk peer group • High-risk social behavior • Highly socially active outside of school <p>School Performance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low achievement • Retention/over-age for grade <p>Disengagement from school:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor attendance • Low educational expectations • Lack of effort • Low commitment to school • No extracurricular participation <p>School behavior:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Misbehavior • Early aggression
Family	<p>Family background characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low socioeconomic status • High family mobility-changing school multiple times • Low education level of parents • Large number of siblings • Not living with both natural parents • Family disruption • High levels of stress in household <p>Family engagement/commitment to education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low educational expectations • Sibling has dropped out • Low contact with school • Lack of conversations about school

Table 1 Continued

Domain	Risk Factors
School	<p>School structure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low performing schools • Public or private control schools • Large school enrollment <p>School resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High student-teacher ratio • Fewer high quality teachers • <p>Student body characteristics--High concentration of low socioeconomic student body</p> <p>School environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative school climate • Feeling unsafe at school <p>Academic policies and practices:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standard based reform • High stakes testing • Retention • Lack of relevant curriculum <p>Supervision and discipline policies--Zero tolerance discipline policies</p>
Community	<p>Location and type of school:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools in urban areas • Schools in western or southern states <p>Demographic characteristics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impoverished communities • Higher proportion of minorities • Higher single-parent households • Low unemployment rates <p>Environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High amount of instability • High mobility • Higher levels of violence • Overcrowding • Higher drug-related crimes

Early Warning Systems

As educators work toward monitoring the progress of students in school, compiling the necessary data to evaluate whether a not a student is at risk for dropping out of school can be extremely time consuming and data intensive. To manage the various entities of the data collection process and identify students who are not reaching educational milestones set before them, schools must adopt an early warning system that identifies students who demonstrate off-track behaviors (NDPC, 2007). This early warning system allows educators to identify students who are at risk by tracking attendance, behaviors, academic performance, and grade-level retention associated with dropout students. Those risk factors are high indicators of identifying students at risk for dropping out; schools need to build systems to monitor these indicators and use individualized data to implement both preventative and strategic interventions to support those students (Pinkus, 2008). School leaders are encouraged to focus on high school graduation for students as early as elementary school by implementing an early warning system to identify students at risk of failing school. With early detection, students who are exhibiting behaviors that place them at a higher risk can receive appropriate interventions and support early in their years of schooling. An early warning system should be embedded at both primary and secondary grade levels with specific interventions designed to remove barriers at-risk students face and provide necessary supports to move students forward. The earlier appropriate interventions can be established, the greater chance at-risk students have of completing high school (Balfanz & Stewart, 2012; Bridgeland et al., 2006).

Conclusion

The nation's graduation rate is a primary concern for educational stakeholders across the country. The most appropriate type of intervention regarding the high school dropout rate starts with the commitment of local educational leaders prioritizing the graduation rate through program development and resource allocation. National statistics on high school dropouts provide a snapshot of what is occurring across the country but until local educational leaders truly analyze the root-cause and develop a strategic plan based on that analysis, little is likely to change.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter focuses on the epistemology, theoretical framework, methodologies, and qualitative methods used to gain a deeper understanding about the experiences of students identified as highly likely to drop out of high school, yet succeeded in graduating in spite of the odds. Participation selection criteria, data collection, and analysis procedures, strategies pertaining to trustworthiness of the findings, and specific details pertaining to the setting are outlined in this chapter.

To address the research problem, the following research question was developed for this qualitative phenomenological study:

- Q1 What can educational stakeholders learn from former students who successfully graduated from high school who had previously been identified as “at-risk” for dropping out?

Purpose of the Study

In reviewing the literature, numerous methodologies were used in examining high school graduation and dropout rates. To address this multifaceted issue, researchers have used qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies to gain a deeper understanding of the various factors associated with the high school dropout status. The majority of dropout research studies analyzed test scores, course completion, grades, attendance, socioeconomic status, and family dynamics. Several studies cited financial and personal consequences of dropping out or obtaining a high school diploma with low academic

skills; yet this problem continues to be at the forefront of educational reform. As a member of the educational community for the past 16 years, I have worked closely with at-risk students and their families. In hearing their stories and watching their academic and personal struggles, I felt a moral obligation as an educator to find viable solutions that fostered support for these students. I founded a dropout prevention program at the high school where I was employed and have recently created a nonprofit organization whose primary mission is to assist area high schools in adopting a comprehensive dropout prevention program that meets the specific needs of their at-risk student population. In my experiences working with at-risk high school students, I learned the importance of listening to students as they described their failures, frustrations, accomplishments, and dreams. These students are often defined as lazy, unmotivated, and disengaged by educators but when given the opportunity to tell their story, it is evident they need a champion in their lives--one who will help them navigate a complicated educational path by providing appropriate supports and mentorship that lead to academic success. The focus of this study was to explore how at-risk youth perceived their years of schooling, starting with elementary school through their high school graduation. Their perceptions and rich description of their experiences provided a unique perspective for the educational community as it pertained to the high school dropout issue.

Qualitative Research

To explore this type of inquiry, the most appropriate research design to use was qualitative research. As defined by Creswell (2007), qualitative research is “an inquiry

process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem” (p. 15). According to Merriam (2009),

Qualitative researchers are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, what meaning they attribute to their experience. The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience. (p. 14)

By gaining a deeper understanding of a specific phenomenon, the researcher gathers information primarily through observations, open-ended questions, pictures, and artifacts. The primary role of the researcher is to build a complex and holistic picture of the phenomenon through a word analysis process based on the views of the informant in a natural setting (Creswell, 2007).

Based on the research question and the purpose of this study, I chose a qualitative approach as it provided the best fit in gaining a deeper understanding of the lived experience of students during their years of schooling. My rationale and assumptions are embedded in the following sections which detail the epistemology, theoretical perspectives, methodologies, and methods used to address the research problem.

Epistemology: Constructivism

Epistemology focuses on the nature of human knowledge and exemplifies how we know what we know in the world (Crotty, 2010). The epistemology most frequently associated with qualitative research is constructionism.

Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting. It is the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context. (Crotty, 2010, p. 42)

My epistemological stance pertaining to this study was grounded in the constructs associated with constructivism. I believe all reality is significant and meaningful. People engage and interpret their real world experiences differently by constructing different meanings pertaining to the same phenomenon (Crotty, 2010). The constructionism framework embodies the notion that individuals can construct meaning through their personal experiences. Crotty (2010) suggested, “Each one’s way of making sense of the world is just as valid and worthy of respect as any other” (p. 58). Constructivism is the subjective meanings individuals develop regarding their experiences in the world in which they live (Creswell, 2007). The focus of this study was to explore the lived experiences of high school students to gain a deeper understanding of their respective journeys through high school as at-risk students. Students identified as at risk of dropping out of school through an early warning system might construct meaning differently than students who did not experience the same type of journey. Crotty stated, “Different people may well inhabit quite different worlds. Their different worlds constitute for them diverse ways of knowing, distinguishable sets of meanings, separate realities” (p. 64).

Theoretical Framework: Interpretivism

Theoretical perspective is the “philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria” (Crotty, 2010, p. 3). The theoretical perspective has to do with “our view of the human world and social life within that world” (Crotty, 2010, p. 7). Factors associated with at-risk students in the educational system can be conceptualized using various theoretical frameworks. This study explored the lived experiences of high school students who were once

identified as being at risk for dropping out of school, which align with the theoretical constructs that define interpretivism. “The interpretive approach looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 2010, p. 67). The purpose of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of how students interpreted their own experiences as at-risk high school graduates.

Methodology: Phenomenological Research

There are several different methodologies to choose from in qualitative research. The methodology in a research study provides a description of how a specific investigation will be conducted. The methodology “is the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcome” (Crotty, 2010, p. 7). The methodology that aligned with the epistemology and theoretical stance for this inquiry was framed in the constructs of phenomenological research. This section provides an overview of phenomenological research and the rationale for using this methodology in the present study.

Phenomenological research is often associated with qualitative research; however, what truly defines phenomenology studies are the tools the researcher uses in obtaining the desired information (Merriam, 2009). This type of research is based on

the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experience. These essences are the core meaning mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon. The assumption of essence becomes the defining characteristic of a purely phenomenological study. (Patton, 2002, p. 106)

As a phenomenological researcher, the inquiry process explores the shared experiences of people and how they assign meaning to the phenomenon in question

(Patton, 2002). A key element in this methodological approach is that an essence or shared meaning might exist among the participants who have shared experiences (Patton, 2002); the primary role of the researcher is to describe this essence of the phenomenon being investigated (Merriam, 2009).

In capturing the essence of or the underlying meaning of a phenomenon, the primary mode of collecting data is through in-depth interviews with participants who directly experienced the phenomenon firsthand. These participants were asked to explore, describe, remember, and make sense of their educational experiences as an at-risk high school student who graduated with a traditional diploma. The participants had “lived experience” of the phenomenon for the study and provided a deeper understanding of their experiences (Patton, 2002), which was helpful in addressing the current graduation crisis.

The phenomenological approach is designed to study the essence of an experience by exploring the intense emotions and effect derived from that experience. Information reported through this type of inquiry process gives an emotional connection to the experience as it provides a rich and in-depth description of the participant’s perception and meaning of that specific experience (Merriam, 2009). The phenomenological methodology aligns with the epistemology and theoretical framework and guides the methods in selecting participants, collecting and analyzing data, formulating the findings, and making recommendations. In the following section, a description of the methods employed to address the research problem are explained.

Methods

Crotty (1998) stated, “The distinction between qualitative research and quantitative research occurs at the level of methods. It does not occur at the level of epistemology or theoretical perspective” (p. 14). As a component of qualitative research, the methods employed throughout the inquiry process are both personal and interpersonal (Patton, 2002). In the following section, a description and the justification of qualitative methods are presented.

Research Setting

This research study was conducted in a single public school district in the state of Colorado called Mountain Peaks School District (MPSD). The primary reason I chose to conduct this study in MPSD stemmed from the aggressive reform efforts this school district was taking to improve the overall graduation for all students. In the past eight years, the MPSD has made significant changes in graduation requirements and adopted educational initiatives designed to improve student achievement. In addition to aggressive academic reforms, the school district adopted a comprehensive professional development program to support innovative instructional approaches that extended from elementary school through high school. As a result of these changes, I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences at-risk students encountered as a result of these changes. As an educator, I have spent the past 16 years working with at-risk students and am passionate about understanding their educational journey as well as working toward positive change grounded in innovative and effective support networks. In completing a study involving participants who were at risk of not graduating from high school, I am

better able to understand the struggles these individuals experienced and possibly contribute to the district's program development based on the findings.

The MPSD serves approximately 20,000 students in 25 district-operated schools, five charter schools, and an online academy. The student body demographics of this district consist of 59% Hispanic, 35% Caucasian, 2% Asian, 2% Black, and less than 1% Native American. According to Points of Pride (2014), 64% of the student population qualified for free and reduced lunch, 23.6% of the population was English language learners, 9% participated in special education, 5% were categorized as homeless, and 20.1% participated in Title I. This school district is nestled within two suburban communities that have a combined population of approximately 116,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). The combined communities have a median household income of approximately \$44,260, with 23.5% of the population living at or below the poverty. Approximately 59% of the population is Caucasian, 36% is of Hispanic or Latino origin, 1.7% is Black, 1.2% is Native American, and 1.3% is Asian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

Sampling Procedure

Perhaps nothing captures the difference between quantitative and qualitative methods better than the sampling techniques employed in collecting data (Patton, 2002). The primary goal of phenomenological research is to understand the essence of a shared experience and the most common form of sampling is purposeful (Moustakas, 1994). In purposeful sampling, participants are selected because they are "information rich" regarding a specific phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002). The primary goal of this phenomenological research study was to capture the essence through in-depth interviews with participants identified as at risk for dropping out of high school but who successfully

obtained a traditional high school diploma. The sampling technique employed for this study was purposeful criterion sampling as it required all participants to meet a predetermined criterion that directly pertained to the research question (Patton, 2002). “Criterion sampling works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 128).

The predetermined criterion used in selecting potential participants that aligned with the research question for this study was based on early warning system indicators that identified students at the end of their sixth grade year at risk for dropping out. These performance indicators included course failure in a single trimester of math and language arts, less than 80% attendance, and one or more discipline referrals. In addition to the early warning system criterion, potential participants must have had consecutive enrollment in the district from kindergarten through 12th grade, graduated on time in May of 2014 with a traditional diploma from MPSD, and were at least 18 years of age.

Selection of Participants

Prior to gaining access to potential participants, a board approved research application was completed and approved by the Chief Academic Officer of MPSD on October 21, 2014. In December of 2014, the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) application was completed, approval was granted for the research study (see Appendix A), and the selection of participants was initiated. In January of 2015, the school district’s data technician was contacted and agreed to create an Infinite Campus (IC) ad hoc report using 2007-2008 data for all sixth graders enrolled in the district who were identified as at risk for dropping out. The IC data warehouse system had the capacity to track student enrollment; store academic transcripts, behavioral events, and

attendance records; house all demographic information; and provide the graduation status of each student.

The data technician used the predetermined early warning system variables to create a spreadsheet of all students identified as at risk at the end of their sixth grade year in 2007-2008. Once the early warning list was populated, the data technician manually looked up the graduation status of each student and his/her consecutive enrollment data. Once the ad hoc report was completed using the predetermined criteria for the study, the data technician sent the password protected spreadsheet through the district's email system. The spreadsheet included the students' first and last name, student identification number, birthdate, grade failure percentages in math and language arts, the number of behavioral referrals at the end of sixth grade, the attendance percentage for the 2007-2008 academic year, consecutive enrollment status in MPSD, and graduation status in May of 2014. Upon careful review of all 23 identified at-risk students, only six met all the predetermined criteria. The remaining 17 students did not graduate and were classified as high school dropouts on the 2014 state report.

Invitation to Participate

Once the potential participants were identified, the district's data technician was contacted and the student information face sheet from IC was sent via email. This face sheet provided all contact information recorded in the 2013-2014 academic year including telephone numbers, primary and secondary addresses, as well as electronic mail accounts. Each potential participant was contacted by telephone and asked to participate in the study. During the initial telephone conference, a comprehensive overview of the study was given and how the information obtained through the interviews would be used.

I explained my involvement in the MPSD and my long history in working with students identified at risk for dropping out of school. None of the participants was aware they were identified in sixth grade as being at risk for dropping out of high school. I informed each individual during the telephone conversation of the confidentiality clause and ensured that all participants would be identified in the research study through a pseudonym of their choice. All six potential participants contacted agreed to meet for a semi-structured interview at a location convenient and comfortable for them and a time and date were scheduled for one-on-one interviews. At the close of the telephone conversation, I thanked each individual for agreeing to participate and stated they could withdraw from the research study at any time if necessary. The participants in this study included five Hispanic males and one Caucasian female.

Pilot Study

Prior to initiating the data collection of five of the six participants, a pilot study was conducted using one of the predetermined participants. Polit, Beck, and Hungler (2001) encouraged researchers to conduct a small-scale pilot study to pre-test the interview questions and the actual semi-structured interview process prior to conducting a major study. Cone and Foster (2006) identified four specific reasons a pilot study should be conducted in a qualitative research study:

1. To gauge how long the participants will take to complete the required task
2. To ensure participants will respond in accordance with instructions
3. To uncover and resolve any unanticipated problems
4. To use and check the adequacy of the equipment being used.

During the initial telephone conversation, it was determined that Rodney, an 18-year-old Hispanic male, would be asked to participate in the pilot study portion of this research study. The decision to ask Rodney was based primarily on the fluidity of the conversation and his projected confidence in answering and asking questions. I explained the purpose of the pilot study and how Rodney's input could assist in developing an effective and efficient interview process with the remaining five participants. Rodney consented to being the pilot study participant during the initial telephone conversation and a time and place was scheduled that worked around Rodney's work schedule.

The pilot interview was scheduled in a conference room at one of the local schools in the MPSD. Upon arrival, Rodney was asked to read and sign the Consent to Participate form prior to initiating the interview (see Appendix B). Rodney was provided with a copy of the interview questions (see Appendix C) and the researcher explained the process of the semi-structured interview. Rodney was given about 10 minutes to review the questions in preparation for the interview. The audio-recorder was turned on and the interview was initiated. I began the interview by explaining the purpose of the study and what the term "at-risk" meant in the context of schooling. I asked each interview question in the order they were written on the interview form and allowed Rodney as much time as necessary in formulating his answers. Eight open-ended questions were on the original interview protocol and Rodney answered all questions within 28 minutes.

In reviewing the transcripts and consulting with Rodney regarding his perception of the interview process, the interview protocol was modified. It was determined by both the researcher and Rodney that the order and limited structure of the questions failed to

elicit information specific to the topic being studied. In reviewing the research questions, it was determined each question that referenced school experience needed additional structure in order to focus the interview and provide clarity for the participants. In the original set of interview questions, only three open-ended questions pertained to the participants' years of schooling. The questions were modified after the pilot study to include guided topics of discussion that would assist the participants in discussing the various aspects of their schooling experience.

Upon completion of the pilot study interview, I listened to the audio-recording and completed a full transcription using Microsoft Office. I read the transcript several times and consulted a graduate student familiar with the qualitative research interview process. This graduate student read through the interview transcript and provided additional feedback on structuring the questions to elicit topic-related information as it pertained to the research question. I narrowed the focus of my questions that outlined the transitions between elementary school to middle school and again from middle school to high school. I also reviewed several different scholarly articles that broadened my scope of understanding of the semi-structured interview process. The interview questions were further revised and procedural guidelines were created to streamline the interview process.

Data Collection

In qualitative research, the interview process is generally unstructured; however, the researcher may choose a range from completely unstructured to highly structured (Merriam, 2009). In a phenomenological study, the primary source of data collection is obtained through in-depth, open-ended interviews with the participants that allow them

the opportunity to make sense of the phenomenon they experienced (Creswell, 2007).

The purpose of the interview is “to allow us (researcher) to enter into the other person’s perspective. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit” (Patton, 2002, p. 341). To conduct an effective interview, the researcher must have a genuine interest in what the participants are saying and believe those experiences are worth knowing and have meaning (Patton, 2002).

Individual Interviews

In guiding the interview process with each participant, the central research question was used:

- Q1 What can educational stakeholders learn from former students who successfully graduated from high school who had previously been identified as at-risk” for dropping out?

To answer this question, the questions provided in Appendix C were used in each individual, semi-structured interview. The interview questions used for this research study were created using the literature on high school dropouts and were further refined through discussions with other professionals and the pilot study experience. Interviews are typically designed to last between 60 and 90 minutes based on the interview questions and participant responses (Creswell, 2012). For this study, five participants were interviewed individually over the course of one month in a quiet location of their choosing. Upon arrival to the initial interview, I discussed with each participant confidentiality, consent, audiotaping, transcription, the purpose of the study, and their role as participants. Each participant signed the consent form and selected a pseudonym (see Appendix B).

I was not familiar with any of the participants and spent the first 10 minutes of the interview having general conversation in order to establish rapport. During the semi-structured interview process, participants were given a copy of the interview questions at the start of the interview session and I explained the questions would be used as a guide for the interview process. The interview questions were not read word-for-word in order to create an interview setting that allowed for themes to naturally emerge through conversation. During the interview process, I avoided asking leading follow-up questions; rather, I rephrased what the participants stated and asked them to expand on that specific thought. Additional probing questions were generated through natural conversation in an effort to keep participants on topic as they pertained to the study. At the close of each interview, all participants agreed to additional follow-up interview sessions for the purpose of clarification and verification of accuracy regarding transcript interpretation. The one-on-one interviews ranged from 45 to 75 minutes in length. One follow-up interview was completed with all participants for interpretation and verification of the raw interview transcripts.

Sample Size

Upon receiving the initial spreadsheet from the district's data technician, I was concerned about the small sample size for this study. I turned to the literature to review sample size and saturation in qualitative research to determine if there was a flaw in my methods section. Saturation is defined in qualitative research as "the point when additional information fails to generate new information" (Braun & Clarke, 2014, p. 55). The sample size for a phenomenological study varies in qualitative research studies. There are no precise guidelines for determining adequate sample sizes; rather the

researcher employs professional judgment in determining when saturation occurs. According to Creswell (2007), the number of participants interviewed for a phenomenological study ranges from 1 to 325, while Dukes (1984) recommended that 3 to 10 participants is adequate in reaching a point of saturation. In reviewing the transcripts and listening to the audio-recordings several times, it was concluded the sample size of five participant interviews was adequate in reaching saturation as the additional information generated in the fourth and fifth interview did not present newly generated ideas or experiences.

Field Journal

A secondary source of data incorporated into the data collection and analysis process was information documented in my field journal. It is common practice for qualitative researchers to record their personal reflections following each interview or observational period as this documentation is fundamental for rigorous, qualitative research (Patton, 2002). It allows the researcher to document a description of the physical setting, the participant's appearance, key words and statements made during the interview, and the researcher's reaction to the interview process (Merriam, 2009). In utilizing a field journal, the researcher reflects on the research methodology by identifying his or her fears, thoughts, reactions, and mistakes (Merriam, 2009). This self-reflection process is important when conducting phenomenological research as it requires the researcher to reflect on emotions and beliefs that could potentially influence the data collection and analysis process. Field journaling allows the researcher to become conscious of his or her beliefs in order to collect and analyze the data with an open mind and a fresh perspective (Moustakas, 1994). Giorgi (2009) emphasized the importance of

reflecting on personal biases prior to collecting data and to continue this process throughout the data analysis sessions to remain open to new ideas.

Throughout the course of this study, I kept a field journal--the equivalent to a personal diary. The field journal served to support the epoche and bracketing process recommended by Moustakas (1994). The epoche process allows the researcher to approach the study with openness while bracketing requires the researcher to recognize and set aside biases and assumptions related to the research study. In an effort to recognize my own personal biases, assumptions, and preexisting ideas and thoughts, I used the field journal informally in an effort to consciously reflect on my own personal beliefs regarding the research topic. For example, at the beginning of one journal entry, I wrote a list of personal assumptions regarding at-risk student behaviors. I listed as many pre-existing ideas I could think of regarding the characteristics associated with high school dropouts and at-risk students.

Other topics included in the field journal were student-teacher relationships, student-school disengagement, student-behavior consequences, and student-parent relationships. I wrote in the field journal prior to each individual interview and again when the interview was finished. I also used the field journal to write down my beliefs during the interview transcription process and again during data analysis sessions. I created a peer review team consisting of two graduate students who were familiar with qualitative research to review the methodology and methods portions of the study. The peer review team provided recommendations to strengthen my methodology; their suggestions were included in my field journal prior to the first interview, specifically on

how to probe for additional information that allowed the interview to flow through conversation as opposed to leading questions that limited the participants' responses.

Data Analysis

Information obtained through the data collection process was prepared, organized, and reduced in order to make sense and interpret meaning as it aligned with the research question and the purpose of the study (Merriam, 2009). "Data analysis is a complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts...these meanings and or understandings or insights constitute the findings of the study" (Merriam, 2009, p. 176). The processing of analysis is initiated by coding the data collected from various data sources. Coding is "assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of data" (Merriam, 2009, p. 173). Coding data requires the researcher to identify words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs that are important and relevant to the study--a process known as open coding (Merriam, 2009).

Open Coding

Prior to initiating the open coding process, I organized the data into manageable parts. Using Word from Microsoft Office, three column notes were formatted and the interview transcripts were pasted into the middle column with an open column on either side. The interview transcript was separated into shorter stanzas or units based on topics or subtopics. The left hand column of the template was designated for preliminary coding while the far right column was used to identify major and minor themes. During the coding process, I broke the raw data down into meaningful units that included events, activities, strategies, emotions, relationships, conditions, consequences, and settings as

they pertained to the research study I used the tools in Office to bracket, highlight, and underline key words and phrases that directly pertained to the research question and the purpose of the study.

The coding process for each transcript was completed immediately following the first interview in an effort to manage the data analysis process with minimal stress. Once all the transcripts were initially coded, a list of code words was generated and systematically reduced based on overlapping and redundancy. This inductive process was repeated until the data text was reduced to 16 supporting categories that were combined to formulate six core themes. Through this inductive process, I was able to divide the text into segments, label those segments with codes, and reduce overlapping and redundant codes to efficiently collapse those codes into categories. The categories were studied and refined to create themes of shared experiences of former at-risk students who completed high school. In the data analysis process, themes shared by all participants were reported as well as those themes not collectively shared by the group but relevant in answering the research question. The purpose of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of former students who were identified as being at risk for dropping out of high school but graduated on time with their freshman cohort. The collective data regarding this phenomenon could provide insight for educational stakeholders in policy development and systems of support necessary in supporting at-risk students.

Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness in any type of research study is important in order to consider the results as worthy of attention (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is critical

throughout the data collection and analysis process that a researcher follows research-based protocols to ensure the findings and interpretations are accurate (Creswell, 2012). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability.

Credibility

Credibility was established utilizing the in-depth interview process suggested by Patton (2002) that included initial and follow-up interviews to clarify meaning and obtain a thorough description of the phenomenon. The criterion of credibility is where the results of the study are “believable from the perspective of the participants in the research” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In establishing credibility, I employed triangulation that included peer review, member checks, and multiple data sources found in the literature and through other professionals (Merriam, 2009). Information obtained through triangulation was reviewed and various components were included in the data analysis process and documented in the field journal.

Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined transferability as the “degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings” (p. 85). This component of trustworthiness is established through a thick description of the phenomenon. “By describing a phenomenon in sufficient detail one can begin to evaluate the extent to which the conclusions can be drawn and transferred to other times, settings, situations and people” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 85). Thick description is referred to as “a highly descriptive, detailed presentation of the setting and in particular the findings of the study” (Merriam, 2009, p. 227). To ensure transferability

of this research study, I developed a thick description of the research protocol and the paper trail of the description to outline the research process in the study for future replication. Detailing the research protocol allowed the study to be replicated for future inquires, thereby lending itself to transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability

Dependability throughout the research process was demonstrated by a detailed protocol that outlined how the findings and analysis process were conducted. This type of detailed description documented within the data collection and analysis section of this qualitative study demonstrated the consistency of findings and how this study could be replicated by other researchers within a similar context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A peer review is when researchers discuss their research with colleagues, peers, and mentors to gain external perspectives concerning the methodology, meanings, and interpretation of the data (Merriam, 2009). To ensure dependability, I completed the peer review process with two graduate students familiar with qualitative research to gain external perspectives regarding the methodology, meanings, and interpretation of the data. Four peer review meetings were conducted and the research process and findings were reviewed and modified based on professional input.

Confirmability

Confirmability is confirming the findings of the study by ensuring the presented data are clear, concise, and represent the experience of each participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability refers to the degree to which the results can be confirmed or corroborated by others. To ensure confirmability in this study, the data collection process was analyzed and reanalyzed to determine if alignment with the research question and the

methodology was employed. Two graduate students and a professor at the local university were consulted regarding the methods and interpretation of the data. Suggestions were incorporated and documented in the field journal as well as in the data collection and analysis portion of this chapter and Chapter IV.

Clarifying Researcher Biases

As an educator for the past 16 years, I have worked closely with at-risk high school students in developing support networks that allow them to navigate the many barriers they face to obtain a high school diploma. I started a dropout prevention nonprofit organization that works directly with Latino males currently at risk of dropping out of high school. As a result of this experience, I have explored the various aspects that place a student at risk and the necessary support networks required for them to graduate from high school. In working with at-risk youth, I have gained a deeper understanding of contributing factors and educational assumptions regarding this vulnerable population. I have an in-depth understanding of the lives of these young men who were members of the program but wanted to gain a deeper understanding of those students who did not have access to the preventive measures offered through an organized dropout prevention program.

Having worked in education for the past 16 years, my focus and passion have pertained to the barriers and hopelessness associated with at-risk students in their effort to graduate. I have experienced firsthand the implementation of policy development designed to increase the graduation rate within a given school and how those policies were created without the voice and input of the students they were intended to support. The voice of students experiencing the educational journey is one that needs considerable

attention and is often overlooked (Halx & Ortiz, 2011; Harper, 2014; Quiroz, 2001; Sands, Guzman, Stephens, & Boggs, 2007). Students identified as being at risk need a unique and individualized support system to get them through but their voices have not been included in the educational reform process.

Asking students for their views about what would increase their performance or inspire them to put forth more effort in school could reveal sage advice that has not been considered previously and reinform current educational reform discussions or advanced educational practices. (Sands et al., 2007, p. 324)

The purpose of this study was to capture the voices of those students who overcame specific barriers and demonstrated the perseverance needed to graduate from high school. Their experiences and sense making can contribute to the body of knowledge pertaining to high school graduation and possibly provide insight into the development of educational support systems for the Mountain Peaks School District.

As a result of my personal and professional experiences in the field of education, I initiated this study with several assumptions and biases. I assumed the participants had non-supportive families and were impoverished with high mobility. I also assumed the participants for this study would have experienced an exhaustive list of interventions offered by the school district in an effort to support their graduation efforts and that they each had established a relationship with an educator who guided them toward their diploma. In listening to the participants as they described their years of schooling and worked to make sense of their experiences, I better understood the purpose of controlling my own assumptions and biases.

I maintained a field journal throughout the entire research study. I documented my feelings, opinions, and emotions regarding the methods employed in conducting the study; the input provided by colleagues, graduate students, and the pilot participant; and

the impressions and connections I had before, during, and after each interview. I referred back to the field journal and re-read the contents to keep the information fresh and present as I moved through the research process. To foster trustworthiness, I worked closely with two advanced graduate students who had experience with the qualitative research process, specifically regarding the coding, analysis, and interpretation of each participant's responses. To further control the research bias and assumptions, I utilized a member checking process whereby participants were provided with a copy of raw data from the previous interview to determine if the data analysis and researcher interpretation were consistent with their experiences. I reviewed the process with each participant and asked clarifying questions during the member check to safeguard accuracy. All participants reviewed their raw data and verified their accuracy based on researcher interpretation. During this follow-up interview, participants were given an initial interpretative code that was later used for categorical and thematic development.

Summary

The primary purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of participants who were identified early in the years of schooling as being at risk for dropping out of high school but successfully graduated on time from the MPSD. The high school graduate rate across the country has been a focal topic among educators. As an educator working in MPSD, I wanted to gain additional insight into the lives of students who graduated from high school despite barriers they experienced during their years of schooling. Five participants were individually interviewed and their experiences were transcribed and analyzed using the analysis process recommended by Creswell (2012). The results from this study might contribute to the program development in

MPSD and the body of knowledge regarding the schooling experiences of at-risk students who successfully completed high school despite the odds.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH FINDINGS

All participants were identified through the early warning system from their sixth grade year as being at risk for dropping out of high school. They all completed school on time and achieved a traditional high school diploma. As mentioned in Chapter III, the participant pool was obtained through student information services of Mountain Peaks School District and only those participants who met predetermined criteria were contacted requesting participation. Of the 23 students identified from the early warning system, only six successfully graduated from high school. All six were contacted by telephone and all agreed to participate in the research study. Of the six, one was selected to participate in the pilot study portion of this research project while the transcripts of the remaining five were used in the official data collection and analysis process. Semi-structured interviews were held in a private and distraction-free location. As outlined in Chapter III, the participants signed consent forms that ensured confidentiality, the purpose of audio-recording, and their rights to withdraw from the study at any time. This chapter opens with an introduction to the findings identified from the raw data. In the sections that follow, the findings are presented in six major themes and 11 minor themes. Extensive quotes are used in presenting the findings to help the reader make sense of each theme and improve the trustworthiness of the study. The purpose of this study was to answer the following research question through phenomenological methodology:

- Q1 What can educational stakeholders learn from students who successfully graduated from high school who had previously been identified as “at risk” for dropping out?

Emergent Themes

The participants of this study were asked to describe and make sense of their years of schooling as at-risk student who successfully graduated from high school in the MPSD. Six core themes supported by 16 categories were identified across all participants as well as 11 minor themes not collectively shared by all participants. A breakdown of major and minor themes shared by all participants is outlined in Table 2.

Table 2

Emerging Themes Supported by Categorical Breakdown

Major Themes	Supporting Categories
Personal Regrets	Lack of effort Poor choices Attendance
Disengagement	Truancy Extra-curricular Academic
Grade Level Transitions	Grading practices Classroom schedule Changing expectations Increase school size
Institutional Support Systems	Lack of sufficient secondary level intervention Falling through the cracks Rescue interventions
Critical Relationships	Positive parent influence Lack of authentic teacher-student relationship Negative peer influence
Self-Determination	

Participants

Kathy

Kathy is a 19-year-old White female currently unemployed and living with her boyfriend. She is expecting her first child and plans to get married after the baby is born. Kathy attended several different schools in MPSD and graduated from high school in May of 2014. She plans to start looking for a job once her morning sickness has subsided. She has no plans to return to school but is excited about becoming a mother and getting married. When I spoke to Kathy on the initial telephone call to determine if she would be interested in the study, she stated, "I would do anything if it helps other students make it to their graduation." During the initial interview and follow-up sessions, Kathy presented herself in a positive and confident fashion. She was grateful to have graduated and was eager to tell her story.

Dan

Dan is an 18-year-old Latino male currently enrolled at the local community college and working at a telemarketing agency. He lives at home with his parents and aspires to become a police officer after he completes his degree in criminal justice. Dan completed all of his schooling in MPSD and graduated from high school in May of 2014. In talking with Dan, it was evident he had inner strength created through his schooling experience. He stated in the interview, "I knew that I needed help from others, but until I was ready to accept it I wasn't willing to change. When I decided that I had come to a place to receive help I took it."

Michael

Michael is a 19-year-old Latino male who currently lives with his mother and grandmother. He graduated from high school in the MPSD May of 2014 and is employed by a local restaurant as the head cook. Michael recently bought his first car and wants to remain employed at the restaurant to make his payments and care for his ailing mother and grandmother. Michael does not currently have any plans to return to school as he still is uncertain of a vocational direction. Michael was quiet and soft-spoken during the interview. In watching him describe his schooling experience, he did not make eye contact with me but rather gazed over my head as if he had transported himself to a place where he was re-living his experience. He stated, "Sometimes when I look back I see shame and other times when I look back I see joy and achievement."

Duke

Duke is a 19-year-old Latino male who graduated from MPSD in May of 2014. He currently lives with his mother and is unemployed. He has been looking for employment since he graduated but without success. He aspires to work at Wal-Mart as a stocker or in their distribution center; however, he has yet to be hired. He has no plans at this time to return to college and is uncertain of his career aspirations. During the initial interview, I observed Duke to be a shy, soft-spoken, and sensitive young man. When describing his disappointments and his triumphs, the interview session was paused as Dan became emotional and needed time to regain his composure. When emotionally describing his feelings on graduation day, he stated, "I remember looking up in the stands and seeing my mother and how happy she was and I knew that I had accomplished something great."

Billy

Billy is an 18-year-old Latino male who graduated from MPSD in May of 2014. He was identified as being an at-risk student at the end of his sixth grade year as a result of being expelled from school. He currently lives with his mother and step-father and was recently hired as an apprentice mechanic at a local car dealership. His desire is to return to school and pursue a degree to become a certified auto mechanic. His place of employment offers a scholarship program for continuing education and Billy plans to apply for that program in the fall of 2015. During his interview, Billy's voice and mannerisms exuded a self-confidence regarding his accomplishments and his future: "I am so blessed to have graduated. I will have a better future because I have a high school diploma. I have a new door opening in my life and I am excited."

Major Themes

Six major themes supported by 16 categories were constructed from the interview transcripts through the data analysis process and were experiences shared by all five participants: (a) Personal Regrets, (b) Disengagement, (c) Grade-Level Transitions, (d) Institutional Support Systems, (e) Critical Relationships, and (f) Self-Determination. Embedded within these core themes were several supporting categories. In addition to the six core themes, 11 minor themes were also identified in constructing meaning from the data. These minor themes, not collectively shared by all participants, are provided in Table 3. In presenting the raw data by the participants, the direct quotes were research condensed. Filler pauses such as "Well, uh, you know, like, sort of, and um" were removed from the presented excerpts to reduce grammatical distractions and increase fluency of information provided.

Table 3

Minor Themes Constructed from Raw Data

Minor Themes	Billy	Kathy	Michael	Duke	Dan
Struggled with Literacy	x	x			
Single Parent Home		x	x	x	
Substance Abuse		x			x
High Mobility of Schools	x	x	x		
Unplanned Pregnancy		x			x
Expelled in Middle School	x		x		
English Language Learner				x	x
Family Disruption	x	x			
Highly Socially Active		x			x
Probation		x			x
Low Education Level of Parents				x	x

Personal Regrets

Upon review of the initial interview transcripts, consultation with colleagues, clarifying notes, and transcripts of raw data, a major theme of personal regrets was identified with three supporting categories: lack of effort, poor choices, and attendance. All the participants discussed at various times throughout the semi-structured interviews their personal regrets upon reflection of their experiences while in school. In a study completed by Bridgeland et al. (2006), researchers completed various focus group discussions with participants who had dropped out of high school. Of all the participants

interviewed, 74% stated if given the opportunity, they would have relived their years of schooling and changed their behaviors in order to successfully complete high school.

Lack of effort. Lack of effort was discussed during the initial interview. While coding the interview transcripts and reflecting on the numerous notes written in my field journal, a distinct category that emerged and directly supported the major theme of personal regrets was the lack of effort each student discussed during the interviews. Dan stated, “When looking back on my years in school, I wish I would have tried harder to learn more. I kinda just took everything for granted and I really regret that. If I could go back, I would have tried harder.” In reviewing Kathy’s interview transcript, she was quoted as saying,

I wish that when I started having problems with math and my other classes that I would have put more effort into getting the help that I needed. When it got hard, I stopped trying and just gave up. In looking back, that is one thing I would have changed.

Michael reflected upon his personal regrets by saying,

I didn’t try as hard as I could have and I gradually just started letting things slip away. My effort was poor in school and when looking back, I am a little angry with myself. But looking back is easy. When I was in the middle of the battle, I couldn’t really see things for what they really were and now my eyes are open.

Billy’s comments as they pertained to his lack of effort were “Man when I look back on my effort in high school I feel ashamed. I had the opportunity to really learn, but I just pulled back and failed one class after another. I could have passed those classes if I just would have tried harder.” Toward the end of the interview, Duke stated,

I wish I would have tried harder in my classes. I was happy with getting Ds and those Ds turned to Fs as time went on. I don’t know if you call it lazy but I certainly didn’t give a lot of effort while I was in school. The classes were hard and that just affected me I guess.

Poor choices. Upon reflection, all participants discussed various poor choices they made throughout their years of school. Billy talked at length about his poor choices and how those choices had a negative effect on his schooling:

I made so many bad choices when I was in school and I wish I could go back and change them, but I guess they made me stronger. I wish I wouldn't have ditched classes so much and would have hung out with better people. I did such stupid things and made my life so much harder than it needed to be.

Kathy reflection of poor choices was captured in the following excerpt:

I know people say that mistakes make a person stronger, but I look back on all my mistakes and choices during school and I want to cry. I wish I wouldn't have done drugs and drank so much alcohol...the people I hung out with were really not good people and I did stupid things when I was with them. Things that made graduating from high school so much harder. Things I did to myself and I wish that could have been different.

Duke commented regarding his poor choices: "I think back on all the mistakes I made and I kinda cringe. Ditching class and hanging out with bad people was not a proud time in my life. If I could do things differently, I would go back change those choices to be ones that were positive." Michael's comments regarding poor choices were similar to those expressed by the other participants:

The choices I made while in middle school and high school are not ones I like to think about very much. I look back and I ask myself why. Why did I choose to do the things I did? I had good parents and they taught me the difference between wrong and right. I will never truly understand why I ditched and flunked so many classes.

Dan stated his poor choices manifested in middle school and extended through to high school:

I started really messing up in middle school. I talked back to the teachers and acted like I didn't care if I got into trouble. I had a reputation of being a trouble maker and at the time it seemed cool. But looking back, I know my poor choices of doing drugs, ditching, getting in trouble and failing school were things that brought me down in middle school and in high school. That is hard to live with even now.

Attendance. In coding the data, lack of attendance was expressed by all participants as a personal regret and an area that was elaborated on throughout the interview. Kathy stated her attendance became progressively worse as she moved through her years of schooling:

Oh I wish I wouldn't have missed so much. I was such a ditcher and it became easier and easier the more I did it. I wish I would have gone to school more and would have stayed in class and not left campus. I know that ditching put me so far behind and I truly should have been a better attender.

Duke expanded on attendance during the interview by stating,

I know my attendance was good in elementary school and middle school because my mom made me go. But when I got to high school, I got away with not going to class and never got into trouble. Ditching class was probably the one thing that made my situation in school so much harder. I did it to myself really and if I wouldn't have ditched, school would have probably been easier.

Dan discussed his attendance at various junctures during the interview but he verbalized his regrets for missing so many classes when he stated,

I really feel bad that I missed so much school. If I could relive that time in my life, I would go back and attend class. Missing just made me get further and further behind and that made finishing high school so much harder. It was like a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

Upon reflection, Michael discussed his lack of attendance by stating,

Oh man if I could go back and be a better attender, that would have made a huge difference for everything. Ditching class was just a terrible habit and it made trying to graduate so much harder. I would never have started ditching if I knew how hard things would be in my life my junior and senior years.

Billy commented on his attendance issues and by describing that experience:

Being a truant is something I regret the most. I put myself in class with other students who were just quitters. Ditching class was easy and it became a habit. Hey I wasn't getting in trouble, so why stop right? That type of thinking is what got me into trouble and it made my life harder than it needed to be.

Disengagement

Disengagement was a major theme that emerged when reviewing the transcripts of the initial interview. Participants discussed their lack of engagement during various grade levels. Disengaging from school is a slow and gradual process and often times leads to dropping out of school (Rumberger, 2011). All five participants gave in-depth descriptions of their experiences while in school and disengagement emerged as a major theme supported by truancy, academics, and extra-curricular activities. The participants' disengagement from school was initially mentioned upon entry into middle school and this pattern of disengagement extended into high school.

Truancy. Several comments were made throughout the interview regarding truancy and why each participant became disengaged through attendance. Kathy commented, "I just stopped going to school. Classes were boring and I didn't see the point in going anymore." Duke described his attendance behavior as an issue in high school: "Attendance was an issue in high school. I don't know I just didn't like my classes and wasn't really connected anymore so I stopped attending regularly." Michael recounted that missing class was easy: "Ditching class was so easy and I wasn't really into my classes or school so I just didn't go. I found other things to do that were more fun."

Upon reflection, Dan discussed his attendance by stating, "I wasn't really connected to anyone or anything, so I would find ways to ditch and leave with my friends. I didn't feel like I was learning so why go." During the interview, Billy stated when he stopped caring about school is when his truancy became a concern: "Oh man I was such a ditcher. I didn't care, so going to class was a waste of time."

Academics. Throughout the interviews, the participants talked about their academic failures and how they became disengaged in the classroom and in their overall learning. Michael stated, “I was such a good student in elementary school, but when I got to middle school and later to high school I just stopped trying to do my best. I would just sit in the classroom and daydream about being somewhere else.” Duke commented regarding his academics, “I used to try in class and then eventually I just didn’t do my homework so I would get really behind. My mind was not really following what was going on in class and I just started to fail and I guess I gave up.” Kathy stated her academic disengagement began in middle school:

When I was in elementary school, I was a good student. I don’t know what happened after that. It all really started in middle school. I thought the teachers were so boring and they didn’t make learning fun. I just didn’t feel like I was learning anything so I stopped even trying.

Dan discussed his frustrations with academics:

I would get so frustrated in middle school and the teachers would just get mad when I asked questions, so I gradually stopped asking questions and just started to let my grades go. When I didn’t understand things, I would just put my head down and hoped that I was invisible.

Billy remembered his academic disengagement began in middle school:

In middle school, I just didn’t have the same experience that I had in elementary school. I struggled with my schoolwork and so I just started hiding in class. You know, slink down in your chair and don’t look at the teacher. The classes in high school were either boring or too hard, so I just gave up trying to show interest.

Extra-curricular activities. All participants described how their involvement in after-school athletics or some type of sponsored club gradually diminished during their years of schooling. Kathy stopped participating in extra-curricular activities when she enrolled in high school: “I loved going out for basketball in middle school but when I was in high school, I just really didn’t get involved in anything. I guess I didn’t really care

about anything that was going on at the school anymore.” Duke stated he was involved in sports while in middle school but did not join while in high school: “I participated in football in middle school but when I got to high school, I didn’t know how all that stuff worked and I missed the deadlines, so I never really got involved after that. I guess I didn’t really care about school stuff like that.” Duke added the “stuff” he was referring to pertained to the paperwork, the physical, and football camps.

Michael was involved in basketball for a short period of time but did not continue his involvement: “When I got to high school, I went out for basketball my sophomore year and then the next year, I just didn’t get around to filling things out so I stopped playing after that.” Dan was active in wrestling in middle school and joined the wrestling team as a freshman but later quit: “I went out for wrestling my freshman year and then quit because of a lot of reasons. I think I could have been good if I would have stuck with it.” When asked to expand on his rationale for quitting wrestling, Dan stated he got into some trouble with drugs and alcohol that led to legal issues so he was forced to quit the team as a result. Billy enjoyed playing football but did not continue his participation: “I loved football and when I got to high school, I played my first year and then for some reason I just never signed up again.” When I asked Billy why he did not sign up again, he was unable to provide a reason and stated, “I don’t really know why.”

Grade Level Transitions

In talking to the participants about their grade level transitions, the focus of the interview pertained to the transitions from elementary to middle school and again from middle school to high school. In a study completed by Schwerdt and West (2011), the researchers completed a statewide longitudinal study by using data from the public

schools in Florida. Student longitudinal data were tracked from third grade through 10th grade that included academic performance, attendance, and overall behavior. Based on the findings, the researchers reported the transition from elementary school to middle school had the largest drop in student achievement and student attendance. Schwerdt and West suggested the decline in academic performance and attendance was due to structural changes in transitioning from elementary to middle school settings, specifically pertaining to the shift in educational practices. In discussing the transitional process from elementary school to middle school and again to high school, all participants discussed their frustrations regarding grading practices, class schedules, changing expectations, and school size.

Grading practices. Grading practices the participants referred to were in reference to the differing grading systems from elementary school to middle school. In the Mountain Peaks School District, elementary school grading practices are based on a number system from one to four and are based on a student's proficiency level using district and state assessments. Students are assigned a number that reflects their abilities in math, reading, writing, oral expression and listening, visual arts, music, motor skills, and grade level behavior. The following numbers are used to define performance level:

- 1--Limited progress toward grade level
- 2--Moderate progress approaching grade level expectations
- 3--Met grade level expectations
- 4--Exceeded grade level expectations

The grading practices implemented at middle school and high school in the MPSD are based on the grade range from an A to F. Students' letter grades represent their

performance of specific knowledge and skills on an assigned task and are often computed through assignments and unit assessments. The shift in grading practices was discussed by all participants. Kathy stated,

One thing that was hard about going to the next grade at a different school was the way teachers graded me. I was used to the number system and knew what that meant, but in middle school, I got letter grades and I didn't understand that. I was always getting threes in elementary school and now I was getting Ds and Fs. I felt really confused.

Duke recalled his frustrations pertaining to the grading system:

Grades weren't really a big thing in elementary school. I was getting smiley faces and thumbs up stickers. But when I went to sixth grade, I started to get letter grades and I was getting scored low on things and I didn't know what to do about that. I knew that an F was bad, but how could I get a higher grade? I wasn't sure and no one explained it very well.

Michael recounted his frustration with the grading transition from elementary to middle school:

In elementary school, you were graded on the number system and when I went to middle school, you got grades between an A and F. I heard about this in elementary school but that was hard cuz I really wanted As and I wasn't getting those. I had to work a lot harder to get a better grade and I wasn't prepared to have to work so hard and do so much work.

Dan described his experience with grades in middle school:

I was a good student in elementary school. I was always getting really good report cards. Got a lot of threes. That all changed in middle school. I don't think I really understood the letter grading when I got to sixth grade and when I started getting a low grade, I didn't get it. I had never gotten a one on my report card. It was confusing.

Billy commented on his frustrations with the grading practices between elementary and middle school:

In elementary school, I felt like they graded me on what I knew and in middle school, I think they just graded me on what I did. I just struggled with that in sixth grade. In elementary school, grades weren't really the focus but that

changed in middle school and I just wasn't prepared for that. I failed right off the bat.

Class schedule. All five participants made reference to the significant change in how their class schedule shifted from elementary school to a middle school model. They discussed their frustrations and fears with regard to this transition. Kathy stated,

When I went to middle school, I was so confused about all the different classes I had. It was scary and I missed my elementary schedule where I felt so safe. I didn't feel safe in middle school, especially those first few months. I was really scared.

Dan discussed this shift by stating,

The huge schedule change in middle school was nerve racking. I was used to being in a classroom with the same people and we would all go to specials together. That was not how it was in middle school. I was always changing classes and in sixth grade, that was frustrating and I felt so scared and small.

Michael commented,

Walking into middle school and getting a piece of paper that had the classes I had to go to in one day was like crazy scary. I wasn't prepared for that. I knew that was coming but when you actually do it, different fears come out. All these different teachers and different kids in my classes. I am going to be honest with you, I was scared of this and it set me back. I just wasn't used to that.

Duke recounted his feelings regarding the schedule changes:

I was in shock when I went to middle school. In elementary school, I had one teacher basically all the time and in middle school, I had eight. I didn't feel comfortable with this and it just seemed like we were all thrown into it and had to figure it out.

Billy talked about his feelings regarding the class schedule:

I loved elementary school so much because it was like one big family. I was with the same kids every day in my class and it was nice. In middle school, I had so many classes and it seemed like I was always having to change classes and teachers. It didn't feel like that family I was used to. Sixth grade was scary and I wasn't prepared for all the changes, especially the different classes.

Changing expectations. Changing expectations was discussed by all participants in reference to the policies and procedures teachers had in the classroom and how those varied between and among teachers from elementary school to the middle school setting.

Billy discussed changing expectations:

Ok so in elementary school, we had a pretty regular routine and I knew what my teacher wanted. In middle school, it seemed like every teacher had different routines and rules. I wasn't sure of them all from one class to the next. Pretty tough for a sixth grade kid.

Kathy recalled changing expectations:

It seemed like in elementary school I was comfortable in my class. I knew when reading time was and math and when to do my homework and where to turn it in. That was easy, but in middle school I never was able to figure out all of that. Every teacher had different things due on different days and I just was never able to organize myself to know all of that. In sixth grade, they should have helped us more in figuring that out. I think it was hard and I didn't do well with the change.

Dan talked about changing expectations:

I had a great time in elementary school. We all got a long like a happy little family. Middle school was different because I had a new family in every class period and it wasn't as comfortable. The teachers all had different rules and every class was run differently. That was a struggle to learn.

Duke described his experiences:

When I went to middle school, there were so many teachers on my schedule and they all were just different. I had a hard time keeping up with the classroom changes and all the homework that each teacher gave. It wasn't like that in elementary school. I would get in trouble for rules one teacher had in class but the teacher in the next class period didn't have that rule.

Michael recounted his experience with changing expectations:

Elementary school was easy as far as being in class and when I had to turn in my homework and what my teacher expected out of me. In middle school, the teachers were all so different and how they ran their classes was really different. I felt unorganized all the time and lost.

Increased school size. All participants discussed the overall physical size of the school and the number of students enrolled in their classes as a component of grade-level transitions that were difficult. Kathy commented,

One thing that blew me away when I went into middle school was that there were so many students. There were people everywhere and it was hard to adjust to that kind of stress. I felt that same stress when I went to high school too. The number of people and how huge the building was felt overwhelming and I had to start all over.

Upon reflection of the grade level transition, Michael stated,

When I was in elementary school, it didn't seem as if there were as many students. But when I went to middle school and definitely high school, there were so many students and they all seemed bigger and more mature than me. I felt intimidated when I first started but then it got better. It just threw me off and I couldn't find my comfort zone.

Duke's reflection of school size was expressed through the following comments:

I was a pretty shy person and so when I went to middle school, I was freaked out by how many students and people there were. I knew I was going to meet a lot of different students, but the size of the school and number of students in the hall was kinda scary and I kind of withdrew a little.

Dan recalled his feelings regarding school size:

Well in elementary school I felt like I knew everyone and the faces were all familiar. When I went into middle school, there were so many students and the classrooms were packed with faces I didn't recognize. I felt really small and nervous. High school was pretty similar but it seemed more magnified because there were even more students there than in middle school. This caused some problems for me. I wasn't really comfortable.

Billy commented,

I have to admit that going to middle school was scary just based on the size of the school and the number of students. I felt like I had to try and stand out so I acted tough so I could get a name for myself...high school was even bigger and it was hard to be recognized or I guess noticed. I was pretty nervous going into high school. The place was huge and there were so many people.

Institutional Support Systems

In reviewing the interview transcripts and assigning codes to the various statements, a major theme emerged pertaining to institutional supports within the school system. The participants described the lack of sufficient interventions, feelings of falling through the cracks, and rescue interventions that supported their efforts in graduating. The transition to middle school and to high school is a pivotal moment in the lives of students, specifically with regard to academic supports and interventions for math, reading, and behavior (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2009). Elementary schools have been working to establish appropriate intervention programs for their students through the use of screening tools that identify students who need additional supports in the regular classroom setting or specialized instruction through a pull-out model (Buffum et al., 2009). This type of intervention approach has not successfully been embedded at the secondary level across all grade-levels and has been identified by RTI action network as being a viable and necessary program for student achievement in middle school and high school (Buffum et al., 2009).

Lack of sufficient interventions. The lack of sufficient interventions was a supporting category of the major theme of institutional supports. Lack of academic support was mentioned several times during the interviews, specifically in reference to math. All of the participants expressed their frustration of falling behind in math and struggling academically with the conceptual understanding of mathematical standards. Kathy described her experiences in math by stating,

I always had trouble with math and I just never got the help I needed. I would sit in those classes and not learn anything because I was so lost. In elementary school, I got more help in math and was sometimes pulled out, but when I got into

middle school, I never got any kind of extra help. I would flunk math all the time and just kept getting passed on.

Dan recalled his math interventions by stating,

Well as you know, math was hard for me all the way through school. I remember sitting in math class and the teacher would be running around and she would be trying to help all of us and she just couldn't get all of our needs met. I took a credit recovery math as well and it was the same thing--too many students and everyone needed special help. I just didn't get the help I needed in math.

Michael discussed his frustration by stating,

I did good in math in elementary school and this teacher would take me out and work with me when I didn't understand stuff. I never got that help in middle school or even when I went to high school. I failed my math classes until my junior year when I finally went to a smaller school just for my math class.

Billy recalled his math experience:

Oh jeez I never got math. In elementary school, I did better because the teacher would do these small groups and work with the kids that were a little slower in understanding. That worked so great. But in middle school, the classes were so big and the teacher never did those small groups. I got Ds and Fs in math all the way through high school. I had to keep taking the same math class over and over without any extra help and so I would just keep failing it over and over.

Duke recalled his frustration:

Math was the hardest subject for me to get. I always got help in elementary school and a teacher would come and pull me out to work with me. In middle school, I don't think I passed any of my math classes. I would try to get it but I really didn't. I would get these grades just for trying, but I don't think the teacher really looked to see if I got it right.

Falling through the cracks. Comments were made throughout all of the participants' interviews regarding the sense of falling through the cracks. All of the participants discussed their frustration with school and how they did not feel supported on a holistic level. Kathy commented:

I just didn't get the help that I needed. When I was struggling and missing and failing classes, I don't remember a single time where someone at the school, like a

teacher or the principal, really reached out to me and tried to support me. I think no one really every saw me.

Duke described his experienced as “falling through the cracks”:

I wish someone would have come to me when I was missing or flunking all my classes and said “hey let me help you” or “Duke what is going on why are you missing so many classes.” I can’t think of anyone during my freshman or sophomore years really even noticing that I needed help.

Dan recounted his experience:

I really felt like I was unimportant at school. The schools were so big and so many students were ditching and failing that I was just another number. Teachers would make comments to me about failing their class but I don’t really recall anyone really trying to help me so I could become a better student. I don’t even think some of my teachers knew my name.

Billy stated,

I was obviously a struggling student and how many times do I have to fail math before someone was going to step in and help? I didn’t know how to help myself. I know my attendance got bad there for a while and who wants to reach out to a ditcher? High school is so huge and there are so many students that have needs, so I was probably just one more kid that needed help.

Michael recounted his experience:

I sorta felt like the school expected me to be more mature and all that, but I wasn’t. I was struggling and I always wondered how my junior and senior year would have turned out if someone would have stepped in to help me when I was really doing stupid things. I can’t remember a single teacher saying anything to me about how they could possibly help me in school. I kinda slipped through the cracks and went unnoticed.

Rescue interventions. This supporting category refers to the interventions the students received toward the end of their junior year. School officials completed their transcript audit of juniors to determine who was at risk of not completing high school on time the following year. Kathy described her experience with rescue interventions:

I never received any kind of help until the end of my junior year. I was told that I probably wasn’t going to graduate and that I needed credit recovery. Well credit recovery was at a different smaller school and I did really good there. I wish I

would have gone there sooner but I didn't know about it. I rocked my senior year doing credit recovery because I really got the help I needed. It was almost too late though.

Billy recalled his rescue plan:

Well I remember when this counselor came and took me out of class the end of my junior year and told me that I needed to take some credit recovery classes so that I had a chance to graduate. During my senior year, I had to take eight credits each semester, plus four math credit recovery classes. I got to take the credit recovery in a school across town and I went there after my regular day. I did good there because I got more attention from the teachers and they really tried to help me. The room was full of students who were all trying to graduate so there was a lot of pressure.

Michael talked about his course work during his senior year:

If I didn't have a car, I wouldn't have graduated. I had to go to a credit recovery school and also go to regular high school during my senior year. I was told that if I didn't take these credit recovery classes I wasn't going to graduate. I had a ton of credits my senior year and it was stressful. And of course a majority of my credit recovery classes were math, my hardest subject. There were teachers at the credit recovery school that did help me though. I got more one-on-one tutoring, which really helped.

Duke discussed his junior and senior year intervention plan:

At the start of my second semester my junior year, the counselor pulled me into his office and said that if I didn't take any credit recovery classes I wasn't going to have enough credits to graduate. I knew that I was short on credits so I took the classes. I remember going into this room where there were all these computers and there was a teacher in there who sat and worked with me. I really did well with all my credit recovery classes. I wish I would have had that help earlier in high school.

Dan commented about his full caseload during his senior year:

School had been so hard for me and I knew I wasn't getting the credits I needed to graduate. When I was ending my junior year, I was told by the assistant principal that I wasn't going to graduate on time. I was told the only hope I had was to take some credit recovery. So I did it but I had to take six of those online classes plus all of my regular classes. When I went to the credit recovery place, I loved it because it was small and there weren't a whole bunch of other students. The teacher could spend a lot of time with me.

Critical Relationships

In reviewing the interview transcripts and carefully coding the common themes, critical relationships was mentioned several times throughout. Critical relationships were referenced when the participants talked about parental support, authentic teacher-student relationships, and negative peer influences. Establishing positive relationships with peers, teachers, and parents fosters the emotional, developmental, and academic needs of all students and are necessary for those who have been identified as at risk (Cavell, DuBois, Karcher, Keller, & Rhodes, 2009; Patrikakou, 2008; Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos, 2015).

Positive parental support. All participants discussed the support they received from their parents throughout their schooling. Kathy stated her parents never gave up on her:

My mom and step dad never stopped believing in me, even when I was such a mess they kept telling me I could make it and graduate. I made so many terrible mistakes and I know my parents got really mad at me but they always let me know that I was a fighter and I could do it.

Billy commented on his mom's constant support:

My mom never once stopped pushing me. Even when she would get the reports from school on how bad I was doing, she just never stopped telling me that I was strong and tough and that I could graduate if I just kept trying. She never gave up on me.

Dan stated his mom and dad were very supportive: "My parents couldn't really help me with my school work and stuff but they always supported me no matter what I did. They would always tell me that I was smart and that graduating from high school would prove that." Michael commented that his mother was his rock: "My mom was my strength and my rock and she always knew that I could make it no matter what happened.

She would always tell me that she believed in me and that I had what it takes to get a diploma.” Duke recounted his mother’s continued support:

She wanted me to graduate so much and she always was telling me that I needed to push myself and never give up. I remember a time where she hugged me and she was crying and she said there was nothing more important than getting my diploma and she knew that I was flunking most of the time.

Lack of authentic teacher-student relationships. Participants made reference to the types of relationships they had with their teachers at various stages of schooling.

Kathy struggled in recalling any relationships she had with teachers:

When looking back on important relationships with teachers, I can’t honestly say that I had any. In elementary school, I felt like some of my teachers really cared and loved me, but after that I can’t say that I really connected with a teacher on a real level. They didn’t understand me and I think they thought I was lazy.

Billy talked about his relationships with his teachers:

I really don’t remember a teacher that reached out to me and tried to support me as just a person. They all said stuff about how I was doing in their class but there was never really anything personal. They really didn’t know all the stuff I was going through and I think they just thought I was one of those kids that wasn’t going to make it so it seemed like they pulled away. I remember the bad things that teachers said to me and there were more of those than the positive stuff...things like “you are lazy,” “you don’t care about school,” “you won’t graduate.”

Duke recalled his experience with teachers:

When I think about my relationships with teachers, I didn’t really have any. I am not sure that they knew my name if they saw me in the hallway. I was insignificant to them. So yeah, I wasn’t one of those kids who would write a teacher and thank them for everything they did for me. It wasn’t as if I hated them, it was just that we were not connected on a deeper level. I was just another kid in the hallway.

Michael described his relationship with teachers:

You know there are those students who do really remarkable things in school and are super successful and then there are those other students. I was one of those other students that really didn’t get the attention from teachers unless I acted stupid. I didn’t do anything that shined so I was basically unnoticed. So in

looking back on teacher relationships, I didn't have much of one after I left elementary school. That is kinda sad when you think about it.

Dan discussed his teacher relationships:

I loved my elementary school teachers. They made me feel special and I would get them gifts and stuff. In middle school and high school, I think that teachers liked kids when they were trying to do something better for the school or for themselves. I didn't really connect with teachers and they didn't connect with me. They would help me and stuff but only if I went to them...they never reached out to me first.

Negative peer influence. In reviewing the transcripts and coding for themes, negative peer influences was a supporting category regarding critical relationships. Kathy recounted peer influence with the following comments: "One of the things that really brought me down in school were my friends. I hung out with really bad people and I started doing really bad things. I just wanted a friend and I needed to fit in so I would do whatever to just feel included." Duke described peer influence:

I started hanging out with students in middle school and high school that were gang members. I don't know why but they would do stupid things and so I would follow along. I got into trouble and made bad decisions to be a part of the gang life.

Michael recounted peer influence in his life:

I really didn't fit into one social group so I would hang out with different people. In looking back, I think the relationships I had with the friends I chose really was toxic. I would do things with those friends that really steered me away from school and my goal to graduate. I made bad choices when I was with them.

Dan commented about his encounters:

I really got into a lot of trouble in school because of myself and the people I was hanging out with. I had friends that weren't school minded and I would go and do drugs and get drunk with them. This was not a positive thing and it didn't help me in school, that is for sure.

Billy recalled his choices:

I wish I would have hung out with kids that were good, but I didn't and that created problems for me. It seemed like I was accepted by people that were poor role models and at the time I did whatever they did so that I could feel included. I know the friends I had in high school were not good people to surround myself with and I did stupid things because of it.

Self-Determination

In describing their years of schooling, the participants made reference to the time when they understood the importance of graduating from high school. They all described that pivotal moment when they realized they were not going to graduate from high school with their freshman cohort and took action to change that outcome. Kathy stated,

I remember like it was yesterday when I knew that I wasn't going to graduate. I knew that I could do it and the only way I could was to really start going to school and getting my work done. I had made such a mess of myself and I knew I had to work hard from that point on so I could walk across that stage. So I just started to work hard and I really pushed myself and I did it. It wasn't easy but I did it.

Duke recalled his efforts to graduate:

It was when I was sitting in class and I was looking around at all the students and I said to myself I want to graduate with them. So I started working really hard and kept myself focused only on school my senior year and worked really hard. I was pretty motivated because I knew that if I didn't do it right this time, I wasn't going to make it. I spent hours and hours doing my work because I really wanted that diploma and it was such a great feeling to walk across the stage and get my picture taken with my graduating class. I don't know how I did it because I had a lot of stuff to make up for but I kept trying and it paid off.

Michael recounted his experience regarding the push to graduation:

I visualized myself not graduating and what everyone would say when they found out I didn't make it. I didn't want that at all because it was embarrassing. It was like I just decided in my mind that I was going to do whatever it took to graduate. I tried the hardest that I could and I stuck with it. I graduated on time and that was the best day of my life so far.

Dan stated,

When I decided that it was time to shape up, I knew that nothing could stop me. I was on fire and I kept working so hard to get my credits and my grades. This really happened my senior year and everything I had to do was hard but I didn't quit on myself and I kept pushing myself to pass and come to school.

Billy described his experience:

I had disappointed so many people along the way and no one but my parents really believed that I could finish high school. When I started school my senior year, I had a changed attitude because my ultimate goal was make amends for all the stuff I did hurt my chances to graduate. My attendance was good and I worked until the very last possible second to get all of my credits. I did it and it was hard but I graduated and that meant the world to me.

Minor Themes

Eleven minor themes were constructed from the raw data interview transcripts.

These minor themes were not shared by all the participants; however, including this information was important as it directly pertained to the research study. These minor themes provided a more comprehensive understanding of the various risk factors students experienced during their years of schooling with a majority of those risk factors occurring outside the school domain.

Kathy, Michael, and Duke identified family stressors attributed to their academic struggles. All three of these participants grew up in a single-parent home; as a result, they assumed greater responsibilities at home. Duke commented, "I needed to help my mom out a lot after school. It was just her and me." Kathy stated, "I was like the adult at home because it was just me and my mom. I had to do a lot of the cleaning and cooking." Billy and Kathy both mentioned during the interview the various disruptions to their family life. Billy commented, "My parents got separated and my dad moved out

and then he moved back in and then he moved out again.” Kathy added, “My dad and mom split up and I lived with my mom and my two sisters lived with my dad.”

Substance abuse was noted by both Kathy and Dan. Kathy discussed her substance abuse: “I started drinking and doing a lot of drugs. I would leave school to go get drunk with my friends. I was actually put in the hospital for overdosing.” Dan stated this substance abuse led to legal problems; as a result, he was charged with possession and received probation. Both Dan and Kathy indicated their highly active social life interfered with their school achievement. Kathy also stated that as a result of her social life, she was arrested for shoplifting with her friends. She was charged with theft in the courts and was placed on probation that required community service. Kathy stated during the interview that she got pregnant while she was in high school but later had a miscarriage. Dan reported he and his girlfriend experienced an unplanned pregnancy but she was not able to carry the baby to term.

Three of the participants talked about the number of times they had to switch schools for various reasons. Kathy stated, “I moved schools almost every year. I would have to move to a new house or my mom didn’t want me to go to the school I was supposed to be at.” Billy talked about switching schools during high school: “I didn’t want to go to (name of high school) and so I transferred to a (name of school) and then I transferred back because I didn’t like it.” Michael talked about his school transfers during middle school: “I had to leave (name of school) and I didn’t want to go. My mom really wanted me at (name of school) and I didn’t want to be there. I was there for two months and went to (name of school).”

Dan and Duke both discussed their frustration in having to take classes to improve their English skills. They were both identified as English language learners and referred during the interview to having to take special classes. Duke stated, “I had to take those classes to learn better English and I think that was one reason I had a hard time in my classes.” Dan commented his teacher who taught him to improve his English skills was not always available and his teachers in his regular classes were not as supportive. Dan and Duke also talked about their parents’ limited education experiences in Mexico and was one of the reasons their parents pushed them to do well in school. Dan stated, “My parents wanted me to graduate from high school a lot. They never had that chance in Mexico. They only finished third grade so they couldn’t help me very much with school work.” Duke commented his mother did not finish high school and she really wanted him to graduate.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of former students who had been identified in sixth grade as being at risk for dropping out of school. Educational stakeholders could learn from their experiences and gain a deeper understanding of contributing factors that increased students’ risk levels in successfully completing high school. Multiple factors place a student at risk for academic failure and some of those risk factors were identified by the participants in this study. Educational stakeholders need to understand the importance of student engagement as it pertains to academics, behavior, social development, and psychology. The participants of this study discussed at various intervals their gradual disengagement from school that began upon entry into middle school. This disengagement extended through high school and had a

significant impact on all the participants' academic achievement, school involvement, and attendance.

The participants identified the importance of relationships with parents, teachers, and other peers and how those relationships fostered both positive and negative outcomes. Educational stakeholders need to understand the power of authentic teacher-student relationships and how those relationships could positively support a student's academic experience. All the participants discussed the important role their parents played in supporting them; however, they were not able to identify beyond elementary school a teacher who valued and treated them with dignity and respect (Boynton & Boynton, 2005). In addition to parental and teacher support, the participants discussed negative experiences with their peers and how those experiences impacted their academic success. Educational stakeholders need to recognize the role peers play in social and emotional development of children and adolescents (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry [AACAP], 2012). Peers can play both positive and negative roles in a person's life and when peer groups encourage risky behaviors, a student can suffer negative consequences that might impede their academic success (AACAP, 2012). The participants involved in this qualitative study shared their experiences with peer pressure and negative peer relationships. They engaged in risky behaviors as a result of peer pressure and those poor choices furthered their disengagement in school and poor academic performance.

A core theme was constructed from participant interviews pertaining to grade level transitions and institutional support systems. The experiences the participants shared within these two core themes were school domain characteristics that included

academic policies and procedures as they pertained to the limited access of academic interventions in literacy and math. The participants described their frustration of repeating the same math class numerous times prior to being offered a credit recovery course. In reviewing the transition continuum, all participants defined their elementary school years as being positive and supportive. A few referred to their elementary years as being the best of their lives with a family-like atmosphere. Those experiences of elementary school did not transition to middle school or to high school. The participants of this study discussed their frustrations and fears upon entering middle school, specifically with regard to grading practices, school structure, and differing expectations. Schwerdt and West (2011) reported students transitioning from elementary school to middle school demonstrate a decline in academic achievement and student attendance. This transition trend was also noted to occur between eighth and ninth grades as students transitioned from middle school to high school.

The emergent core themes from this study could provide educational stakeholders with valuable information regarding the journey of students who are considered at risk. As the participants made sense of their experiences, they described their lives outside of the school setting. Educational stakeholders need to understand the various contributing factors that could place a student at risk for not graduating. The participants discussed their stressors in their family life and the struggles of living in a single-parent home. Some participants experienced substance abuse and legal problems, while others discussed the disruption in their family life as a result of high mobility and an unexpected pregnancy. Not only do at-risk students experience factors in school that place them at risk for dropping out, they are pulled by various situations in their personal life that

compete with their academic achievement. For the participants of this study, the additional risk factors included an increase in household stress and overall family dynamics.

The purpose of this study was to explore the shared experiences by former students who were identified as at risk during their years of schooling in order for educational stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding of the contributing factors that place students at a higher risk for academic failure. The five participants of this study were identified at the end of sixth grade as being at risk for dropping out of school due to the risk factors related to school structures, family stressors, and individual characteristics. The information presented from the findings is valuable for educators as they work toward developing support systems for students who exhibit risk factors that increase their likelihood of dropping out of school.

CHAPTER V

REFLECTIONS, VIEWS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Upon reflection of my experience in the doctoral program and in conducting this study, I have gained a deeper appreciation and understanding of the power of qualitative research. I was able to systematically research the experiences and struggles of a group of young people who were identified at the end of their sixth grade year as being at-risk for dropping out of school but were able to defy odds and graduate. In listening to their experiences and hearing the passion and frustration in their stories, I realized the importance of the dissertation process and the power of qualitative inquiry. As a novice researcher exploring the lived experiences of another human being, I gained a deeper appreciation of the qualitative research process and the morality and ethics involved that extend dignity to the voices of the participants in sharing their stories.

Framed in phenomenological methodology, the purpose of this study was to document the voices and stories of at-risk students who graduated from high school. Taking the rich and in-depth shared experiences of students who struggled during middle school and high school and presenting the findings to the educational community was powerful and necessary in order to nurture change. The purpose of this chapter is to reflect upon the findings, identify the limitations of the study, and provide

recommendations for educational stakeholders in evaluating and addressing the various needs of at-risk youth in order to develop a continuum of educational support.

An In-Depth Look Into the Findings

The triangulated data sources were used to interpret the following research question designed for this study:

- Q1 What can educational stakeholders learn from former students who successfully graduated from high school who had previously been identified as “at-risk” for dropping out?

From the experiences shared by the participants, personal regrets, disengagement, grade-level transitions, lack of institutional support systems, critical relationships, and self-determination emerged as major themes. Many of these themes were identified in the literature as contributing factors that pushed students toward dropping out of school--the exception was self-determination. All five participants interviewed were identified as at-risk students who were able to actuate self-determination to obtain their high school diploma despite the negative properties of the additional themes. This section of the paper expounds on the core themes from the perspective of drop-out prevention and my own professional experiences in working with at-risk youth in a traditional educational setting.

Disengagement

A strong core theme that emerged from the one-on-one interviews was student disengagement. This disengagement was identified through a decrease in extra-curricular participation over time, an increase in truant behavior, and continuous academic failure, specifically in middle and high school. Students who exhibit signs of social/emotional and academic disengagement from school have an increased probability of dropping out

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). A holistic observation identified from the stories presented by the participants was the gradual disengagement each interviewee experienced over the course of their secondary educational experiences. This gradual disengagement is considered a contributing factor associated with high school dropouts (Balfanz et al., 2010). In his research, Rumberger (2011) identified dropping out as the final act of a long embedded process students experienced throughout their years of schooling--leaving school was the final act. While longitudinally analyzing the interview transcripts of all participants, it was evident through their shared stories that they gradually disengaged from school beginning in middle school and extending through the first semester of their junior year in high school.

Some specific excerpts from the transcripts of the participants clearly articulated their gradual disengagement from school, ranging from classroom boredom and academic struggles to minimal participation in school sponsored functions. Kathy commented, "I just stopped going to school...classes were boring...didn't see the point in going." Duke remarked, "I never really got involved...didn't really care about stuff like that." Billy said, "I played my first year...never signed up again." They gradually withdrew from extra-curricular activities as they progressively became more disengaged from school. This was also manifested in school attendance as each participant discussed a gradual increase in truancy over time. Duke remarked, "I just didn't like my classes and wasn't really connected...stopped attending." Michael recounted, "I wasn't really into my classes or school...found other things to do that were more fun." In losing interest in their academics as a result of various contributing factors, the participants described their

apathy toward the educational process, which increased with their level of disengagement.

In reviewing the literature, disengaged students require immediate support, specifically pertaining to truancy as it is an early warning that these truant students are headed toward delinquent activity such as substance abuse, teen pregnancy, dropping out of school, and illegal activity (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001). I utilized an early warning system database to identify students in middle school who exhibited less than 80% attendance and multiple failing grades; the types of interventions often involve collaboration with outside agencies. Lack of attendance is difficult to address as the factors associated with their truancy are often beyond the school domain. In my experience, students who exhibit truant behavior in middle school continue this pattern of attendance in high school, which becomes difficult to overcome and combat even when additional supports are implemented (Baker et al., 2001). Studies have shown that early intervention for truant students is critical in determining the causes of truancy and implementing the appropriate supports (NDPC, 2007). Oftentimes, these interventions require the schools to work collaboratively with community support agencies in addressing variables associated with truant behavior (Baker et al., 2001).

Students are disengaged for a variety of reasons such as family factors, school factors, economic influence, and student variables (Baker et al., 2001). To determine the specific factors associated with disengaged students, schools need to determine the causative factors associated with disengagement. These factors include school culture and climate, family characteristics, individual student characteristics, and community variables (NDPC, 2007). Once the causative factors have been identified, the school

district and collaborative agencies can work to implement appropriate supports that address school engagement (John W. Gardner Center, 2012). Social/emotional and educational supports disengaged students need range from short-term to long-term models as the specific interventions are based on the number of variables influencing the disengagement (NDPC, 2007).

In addressing disengagement in the classroom, a cultural change must originate in the instructional delivery of the curriculum (Adelman & Taylor, 2011). Educators must be cognizant of research-based instruction that fosters engagement with all students including both academic and social/emotional supports (Smith, Sheppard, Johnson, & Johnson, 2005). Predominantly, the traditional educational system, which includes, a “sit and get” approach in the classroom, is not as effective for disengaged students just as the “one-size-fits-all” approach does not meet the diverse learning needs of all students. Academic settings need to move from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered learning that involves blended learning and collaboration that are project based. In making this shift, teachers are forced to develop instructional approaches that include student engagement activities (Schussler, 2009). In addition, students must also have access to appropriate academic interventions that address the weaknesses in their skill set in an effort to improve achievement and classroom participation (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Students who are below grade level and have failed to meet the academic milestones required for success at that grade level need to be provided with additional supports as they are at-risk of becoming disengaged with continued frustration and failure (McInerney & Elledge, 2013). As a middle school administrator, I see students who are continually frustrated with their achievement level and many of those students are

continually in my office for behavioral referrals as a result of off-task behaviors in the classroom. When students struggle academically without identifiable interventions and supports, they become increasingly disengaged in the classroom and are at risk for dropping out (Balfanz et al., 2010). Educators need to be aware of the importance of engagement, specifically with students who are exhibiting behaviors that place them at risk for academic failure. The participants of this study stated their disengaged behaviors several different times during the interview and those behaviors were easily observed by school personnel; yet little was done to support them.

Lack of Institutional Support Systems

The lack of institutional support systems was another core theme that emerged during the transcript coding process. The participants described the need for academic supports beginning in elementary school and extending through high school, specifically in the area of mathematics. They all stated they received specialized instruction in core academic areas at the primary level; however, upon entering middle and high school, those individualized supports diminished and their academic frustrations increased. Kathy stated, “I always had trouble with math...never got the help I needed.” Dan recalled, “Math was hard for me all the way through school...just didn’t get the help I needed.” Duke recounted, “Math was the hardest subject for me...would try to get it but I really didn’t...would get grades just for trying.” The necessary support systems students needed were not offered until the end of their junior year. As common practice in high school, a credit audit is conducted during the second semester of a student’s junior year to determine projected graduation rates for the following school year. The purpose of this audit was to identify students at risk of not graduating on time with their

cohort and to develop an intervention approach that would likely assist in diploma achievement. All participants from this study accessed a credit recovery program designed to meet their graduation requirements, which allowed them to gain the missed credits needed for graduation. Although this approach is a necessary step in recovering lost credits, it is a stop-gap measure that allows a student to be pushed through the curriculum without the skill sets necessary to successfully access 21st century vocational or post-secondary options (Jerald, 2009; Rutenberg, 2009).

Bolstering the graduation rate within a school district is an important measure as it is a data point directly linked to a school district's annual yearly progress; however, an increase in graduation rate does not equate to an adequate academic skill set required for success after high school. Achieving a high school diploma signifies a student has obtained board approved credits and has an academic skill set that will allow him or her to be a contributing member of society through vocational or post-secondary pursuits. When at-risk youth receive a high school diploma without the adequate skills in reading, writing, mathematics, higher level critical thinking, and effective problem solving, they are leaving school ill-prepared for post-secondary and vocational options (Rutenberg, 2009). In working with at-risk youth for several years, I have witnessed countless students achieve a high school diploma but lack the basic skills for passing a junior college placement exam. I was one of those instructors who provided support networks to get those students across the stage on the day of graduation. A pattern of dysfunction associated with rescue interventions and intense interventions for students late in their academic journey is the missed opportunities for vocational and post-secondary education. Many students in their junior and senior years who are diligently working to

make up for lost credits in order to graduate are overlooked for mentorship and career counseling as they are inundated with homework and credit recovery. They miss a vital educational opportunity: “What should I do with the rest of my life?” I made the same observation with the participants in my study. They, too, were required to recover so many credits during their senior year they did not participate in traditional career counseling that many of their peers received. This type of counseling should be offered through extension programs that meet with at-risk students outside of the regular school day as it is an important intervention in transitioning students to the adult world (NDPC, 2007).

To effectively provide the necessary academic supports for at-risk students, those supports should be offered early and on a continuum with ongoing progress monitoring (NDPC, 2007). There needs to be an effective transition between primary and secondary education with regard to academic interventions in literacy and math. Based on the participants’ responses regarding the lack of interventions and my experiences as a middle school administrator, the transition from primary to secondary education is an area of significant concern. Collaborative efforts need to occur regarding students’ need of ongoing supports. These collaborative efforts often occur with students who have been verified as having a disability; however, students in Tier II interventions are not afforded the same transitional support. Tier II interventions refer to specialized programming associated with the Response to Intervention (RtI) model used in education. Tier I instruction is defined as regular classroom instruction that is research based and available to all students (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2009). Tier II intervention is specialized using a pullout model that provides supports to students who are

demonstrating academic gaps in literacy and or math. These interventions are typically conducted in a small group setting and address specific deficit areas in an effort to move toward grade-level performance. Tier III instruction is offered to students who did not demonstrate academic growth through Tier II instruction and continue to demonstrate learning gaps. These students are often placed on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and provided with skilled intervention and support by special education (Buffum et al., 2009). Secondary education must provide effective and continuous intervention that specifically target areas of need and track student progress to avoid students “falling through the cracks.” This programming is difficult and expensive to embed but is essential for at-risk students.

Critical Relationships

In reviewing the interview transcripts, all participants continually referred to critical relationships through their years of schooling. They discussed their experiences with negative peer groups and how their decision-making was directly related to peer pressure and influence. Each participant identified negative peer relations and how those influenced individual decision making and overall academic achievement. Kathy recalled, “One of the things that really brought me down in school were my friends...I hung out with really bad people.” Dan stated, “I had friends that weren’t school minded...go and do drugs and get drunk.” In addition to poor peer relationships, the participants discussed their relationships with their teachers from elementary school through high school. Each participant stated his/her relationships with elementary school teachers had the greatest impact on his/her academic performance. Kathy stated, “In

elementary school, I felt like my teachers really cared and loved me.” Billy stated, “In elementary school it was like a family...My teachers really helped me learn.”

In supporting the core theme of critical relationships, the participants not only discussed the negative peer influences in their lives, they also referred to the different teacher-student relationships they encountered. All the participants discussed the strong relationships they garnered with their elementary school teachers; however, those authentic teacher-student relationships diminished in middle school and high school. Collectively, the participants stated they did not experience an authentic teacher-student relationship, which negatively contributed to their academic experiences. Duke noted, “When I think about my relationships with teachers, I didn’t really have any...I was insignificant to them.” Michael recalled, “Looking back on teacher relationships I didn’t have much of one after I left elementary school.” Dan said, “I didn’t really connect with teachers and they didn’t connect with me.” As an educator, I was surprised to learn the participants could not identify a single teacher in their secondary experience who came forward to be their champion in their time of need. This is one of the most powerful tools an educational organization can utilize in propelling students forward. Prior to initiating this research, I consulted with several colleagues regarding the purpose of this study and the feedback I received was consistent with my own biases regarding student-teacher relationships with these at-risk youth--that each participant had a teacher in their lives who supported them throughout his/her high school experience in order for these individuals to graduate with a high school diploma. However, this was not the case for my research participants. All the participants identified teachers who played an instrumental role in their education but that role did not extend beyond the classroom.

For these participants, the champions in their lives were their parents. Dan commented, “My parents couldn’t really help me with my school work but they supported me no matter what.” Michael commented, “My mom was my strength and my rock she knew that I could make it no matter what.” Duke added, “She [mom] wanted me to graduate so much always telling me I need to push myself.” In exploring this core theme, the participants stated their parents were unconditional in their support regardless if they could assist them academically. Being in education and advocating for at-risk students for so many years, I cannot begin to recount the numerous conversations I have had with teachers and other administrators who have stated that parents of at-risk youth do not value education and they are the reason their child is failing. These statements could not be further from the truth. In all of my experiences, I never met a parent who said their child’s education did not matter. I have worked closely with many parents of at-risk youth who were on the pathway to dropping out; during those collaborative opportunities, I witnessed parents assisting and advocating for their student in the best way they knew how.

There is a strong correlation between student success and positive relationships with peers, teachers, and parents (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Working with teachers in understanding the importance of authentic relationships with students is critical. Students are aware when they are not supported in the classroom and that negative culture transcends to other educational experiences. Students need authentic relationships at school regardless of their risk factors or they will become increasingly disengaged (Wang & Eccles, 2012). Educational leaders must continually provide staff with professional development opportunities that focus on student engagement to learn the fundamental

power engagement has in the school setting. Getting students actively involved in the classroom and in school sponsored events is critical and something that demands focus. In order to ensure cultural change, these professional development sessions need to be designed so learning leads to action and adoption within a school environment.

Grade Level Transitions

Another core theme that emerged throughout the interview transcripts was grade level transitions. The participants described their frustration in transitioning from primary school to secondary school with regard to the shift in the grading system. Their descriptions pertaining to the grading system shift from a number grade to a letter grade were an unexpected disclosure. In elementary school, the participants noted they received number grades on their report card and when transitioning to middle school, they received letter grades, which created confusion. They were uncertain what a “D” meant and how it equated to what they were accomplishing. Kathy stated, “I was always getting 3s in elementary school and now I was getting Ds and Fs...that was confusing.” Michael commented, “In elementary school you were graded on the number system...in middle school you got grades between an A and F...I wasn’t prepared.” As a middle school administrator, this is an area of concern as grade level transitions can be an area that increases student anxiety and could potentially lead to academic failure (Niesen & Wise, 2004).

In addition to the grading system, the participants were overwhelmed by the size of the schools at the secondary level, the changing expectations, multiple teachers, expanded classroom schedules, and a new diversity of students who changed the make-up of the classrooms. Dan remarked, “The huge schedule change in middle school was

nerve wracking.” Billy added, “Sixth grade was scary and I wasn’t prepared for all the changes.” Dan also shared, “The teachers all had different rules and every class was run differently.” Kathy noted, “When I went into middle school...there were so many students...there were people everywhere.” The middle schools in MPSD are aware of the transition issues that arise from a primary to a secondary setting and offer a transition day for incoming sixth graders; however, the format of this transition is more about comfort in learning their schedules and the layout of the school. Although this transition program is helpful, it needs to be ongoing and include attributes similar to elementary school--a homeroom teacher as well as explicit instruction in coursework organization, grading practices, progress monitoring of grades, and goal setting for academic success.

Schwerdt and West (2011) reported students transitioning into middle school had the sharpest drop in student achievement of all grade level transitions and found a significant increase in student absenteeism linked to an increase in the dropout rate in 10th grade. A qualitative study conducted by Schumacher (as cited in Niesen & Wise, 2004) surveyed several sixth graders transitioning to middle school. The participants reported their fears and anxiety regarding the middle school transition: getting to class on time, finding lockers, navigating the crowded hallways, remembering their class schedule and where to go, and keeping up with their materials. Weldy (1991) surveyed a group of middle school teachers regarding their observations and concerns of the fifth to sixth grade transition. They reported a reduction in parental involvement, a challenge for students with the new grading standards, overall social immaturity, an increase in peer pressure, increase in responsibility, and the lack of basic skills, all of which negatively impacted their students’ success.

Personal Regrets

Talking with the participants during their initial and follow-up interviews, a shared experience was one of personal regrets. Upon reflection, all participants discussed remorsefully their lack of effort, poor choices, and attendance issues. Dan stated during the interview, “When looking back on my years of school, I wish I would have tried harder to learn more.” Kathy noted, “I wish when I started having problems with math and my other classes I would have put more effort into getting the help that I needed.” It was apparent they took responsibility for their failures as they knew their lack of effort contributed to their struggles. Poor choices was another area where participants expressed regret. Billy noted, “I made so many bad choices when I was in school and I wish I could go back and change them.” Michael shared in Billy’s sentiment by stating, “The choices I made in high school are not ones I like to think about very much.” Upon reflection of a difficult period in a person’s life, personal regrets are often referred to; however, could the intensity of those regrets been minimized through adequate academic and social/emotional supports?

Once a student exhibits an increase in school absenteeism, an increase in academic failure, and/or signs of social/emotional concerns, school officials need to evaluate and implement systems of support that are specific to the needs of that student. These appropriate supports might include tutoring, counseling, parental guidance, mentorship, extended learning times, continuous progress monitoring, effective instruction, challenging and engaging curriculums, collaboration between home and school, and catch-up courses for struggling students (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). This might require collaboration with community agencies, parents, and school personnel.

Addressing these issues with immediacy and urgency might increase the likelihood of success when students who are exhibiting at-risk behaviors receive direct support. As an administrator, this is one of the most difficult areas to address as it requires continuous collaboration and networking that extends beyond the school domain. In addressing poor choices, lack of effort, and attendance, the school district needs to determine the root cause of the behavior in order to recommend appropriate and effective intervention approaches. Educational staff members need to be astute in their observations of at-risk students, be proactive in their approach, and avoid passing judgement that leads to an increase in punitive responses.

Self-Determination

In analyzing the transcript data and referring to the literature regarding at-risk youth and characteristics associated with high school dropouts, the participants exhibited behaviors associated with those of a high school dropout. They reported their gradual disengagement from school, continuous failure in core subjects, increased school absenteeism, and office referrals for behavioral issues--all characteristics associated with high school dropouts. Despite all of these negative behaviors, the participants of this study were able to avoid dropping out by utilizing self-determination that propelled them toward their end goal of completing high school. Upon reflection on the interview transcripts, it became apparent self-determination was accessed when participants felt a sense of urgency as their time in high school was coming to a close. Michael stated, "I visualized myself not graduating...I just decided in my mind I was going to do whatever it took and it was almost too late." Kathy added, "I remember like it was yesterday...I

knew that I could do it I just needed to try harder.” The urgency fueled action and was a catalyst for motivation.

The following question needs to be answered: How does an educational system foster self-determination in students? According to Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, and Wehmeyer (1998), self-determination is defined as follows:

A combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one’s strengths and limitations, together with the belief of one’s self as being capable and effective are essential to self-determination. (p. 2)

Self-determination is nurtured through the teaching of self-awareness, self-advocacy, and self-regulation (Field et al., 1998). In teaching students the constructs associated with self-determination, targeted instruction focuses on goal setting, problem solving, and decision making that allows students greater control and responsibility of their choices. In the educational system, there needs to be a standardized program that teaches students to set personal goals, identify barriers that impede the progress toward those goals, solve problems appropriately, advocate for themselves, and be able to regulate their actions through self-awareness and self-management.

In summary, the findings of this study offer a framework of future programming designed to meet the specific academic and social emotional needs of at risk students. This phenomenological study identified the shared experiences of a group of former students who were identified early on in their education as being at risk. The core themes associated with their stories and experiences warrant further investigation within the MPSD so appropriate interventions can be implemented. When designing support programming, it is imperative that the voice of students is at the forefront of the decision

making. This allows for an expedient analysis of the experiences students are encountering, which is helpful in making purposeful change.

Suggestions for Educational Leaders

Upon reflection of the information gathered through this phenomenological study and found in the literature regarding at-risk students and high school dropouts, a preventative program for retention needs to be addressed across the educational continuum. Some suggestions for preventative measures include but are not limited to the adoption of research-based instructional practices and implementation of an early warning system that not only identifies at-risk students but also is aligned to appropriate interventions embedded in middle school and extend through high school.

Research-Based Instructional Practices

There are several studies regarding research-based instructional practices (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Jensen, 2009; Lemov, 2015; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Schmoker, 2011). A simple Internet search of specific educational topics could be conducted and a multitude of resources made available. In reviewing the copious amounts of research-based instructional practices, one that needs to be consistent across the educational continuum is the importance of building authentic teacher-student relationships grounded in academic and social/emotional engagement strategies. Teachers need to gain an understanding of the power of their words and actions on the lives of their students. The participants of this study were able to recall both positive and negative teacher interactions throughout the span of their educational journey. Many factors outside of the school domain place a student academically at-risk and it is imperative that teachers understand those risk factors and work collaboratively to provide

opportunities for success. Educators must be astute in their observational skills and continually monitor student progress, especially those students who are exhibiting behaviors associated with disengagement--low attendance, minimal homework completion, multiple failing grades, minimal academic growth, or an increase in negative behaviors. It is important that students continually have at least one authentic relationship at each stage of educational transition

The National High School Center released a report by Kennelly and Monrad (2007) that outlined some best practice instructions. In their report, they stated school climate that addresses school engagement is essential in easing the transition from primary to secondary education. Kennelly and Monrad also stated school districts need to provide rigor and relevancy in their curriculum that is aligned with state standards from kindergarten through 12th grade with strong instructional teachers. Classroom instruction needs to be engaging and meaningful for students in order to avoid boredom that could lead to negative behaviors. In addition, educators working in the high school setting must provide supports that keep students on track for graduation. The academic schedule needs to offer extended learning opportunities that are challenging and engaging. Students need to be provided with catch-up courses when they fall behind and participate in curricula aligned with college standards and readiness. Students who are at risk need exposure to career counseling and transitional training early in their secondary experience as this could be a motivator for academic success.

Early Warning Systems Combined with Appropriate Interventions

Several academic software programs are available for school districts to utilize in tracking characteristics that place a student at risk for dropping out of school. These

early warning systems have the capacity to store behavioral referrals, attendance records, academic grades, enrollment status, and much more. Adoption of this type of software program needs to be aligned with effective interventions that are implemented with fidelity beginning in kindergarten and extending through high school. An early warning identification program is a method that assists in locating students at risk based on behavior and academic performance. A mistake often made by educational organizations is the utilization of early warning systems without implementing the appropriate interventions designed to reduce the risk factors leading to dropout (Heppen & Therriault, 2008). Research based interventions include social emotional curriculums such as Second Steps (Committee for Children, 2015) for elementary school and School Connect (2015) for secondary students. Each of these programs provides a series of supports that address the social/emotional growth of students and assist in school engagement opportunities.

Effective core content instructional practices followed by targeted instruction for academic skill gaps in literacy and math must be available to all grade levels, especially for those individuals who are in middle school and high school. Specialized interventions must extend beyond elementary school with a curriculum that is engaging and targets skill gaps. In talking with the participants of my study, they each expressed their frustration with the minimal intervention supports after leaving elementary school. This expressed concern has been validated through my own experiences as a middle school administrator and a high school instructor. Academic information and documentation that identifies specialized programming for students is often lost during the grade level transition phase from elementary to middle school and again from middle school to high

school. Students accessing interventions to support their skill gaps are placed at a higher risk when those services are not implemented at the next grade level.

Once a student is identified with at-risk behaviors, he or she needs to be assigned to a case manager who can implement a “check and connect” approach. This approach includes case management, mentorship, tutoring, on-going parental support, networking with community agencies, and continued progress monitoring through a wraparound intervention approach made available throughout a student’s years of schooling. The What Works Clearinghouse is an agency sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education at it provides a database system that reports various research-based programs available for educational organizations and includes the effect size as reported through statistical measures (Institute of Education Sciences, 2015). Based on their findings, the Check and Connect (2014) program has proven to be effective in keeping students in school and raising grade level performance.

Limitations of the Study

Creswell (2007) defined limitations as “potential weaknesses or problems with the study identified by the researcher” (p. 198). Disclosing the limitations of this study could assist others in determining if the findings from this specific study could be generalized to other educational organizations with comparable circumstances and to future research studies that might choose to replicate a similar process (Creswell, 2007).

The initial design of the study was to interview 8 to 10 participants in a semi-structured, one-on-one interview. Based on the selection criteria, six students met all aspects of the selection process, reduced the number of desired participants, which made a smaller sample size, and limited the scope of qualitative information for the study.

However, all participants who were identified based on the selection criteria agreed to participate in the study and extensive data were gathered through the interview process.

The purpose of this qualitative research project was to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of students identified as highly likely to drop out of high school in sixth grade but succeeded in graduating despite the odds. The perspective and sense-making of these individuals was important as it provided some insight into the process of high school completion for at-risk students. Although the sample size was smaller than desired, the information obtained through in-depth interviews could be helpful to educational stakeholders in understanding the educational journey at-risk youth experience and the need to challenge current policies and procedures in educational reform efforts.

As addressed in Chapter III, researcher bias was considered a limitation that needs acknowledgment. In an effort to reduce researcher bias, my years of experiences in working with at-risk youth and my own personal beliefs regarding educational reform might have influenced the final results and conclusions. However, the research findings and subsequent recommendations were based on the data obtained from the participants' statements and reinforced by additional educational research.

Recommendations for Future Educational Research

The findings from this study identified positive and negative shared experiences of participants who were identified at the end of sixth grade as being at risk for dropping out of school but graduated on time with their freshman cohort. Additional research

could support further understanding into the lived experiences of at-risk students in public education. Based on the limitations and final results, the following research recommendations are presented to support future inquiry into this issue:

1. Extend this study to determine teacher perception of students who have been identified as at risk for dropping out. Questions regarding the variables that place a student at risk and the interventions necessary in supporting this population should be explored.
2. Extend this study to determine the perceptions parents of at-risk youth have regarding the variables they believe are contributing factors that have placed their student at-risk. Questions regarding their perceptions of education and parental involvement should be addressed.
3. Extend this study to determine the lived experiences of former students who dropped out of school and had previously been identified as “at-risk” for dropping out. Questions regarding school, family, and personal factors during their years of school should be addressed.
4. Extend this study to determine the various risk factors current at-risk students are experiencing in middle school and high school. Questions should include information regarding personal, school, and family factors that could be attributed to school success and struggles.

Conclusion

This phenomenological qualitative study explored the lived experiences of former students who were identified as at risk at the end of sixth grade and graduated on time with their freshman cohort. Phenomenological methodology provided a framework of

inquiry that allowed me to explore the lived experiences of former students who were identified as being at risk in the sixth grade. Their stories describing their years of schooling are valuable to the educational community and should not be overshadowed by adult-driven directives in educational programming. In addressing the achievement and success of this country's students, educators must look to research to adopt appropriate and effective programs that truly meet the needs of students. Those programs need to be embedded throughout early childhood prevention and intervention and extend through to high school as the student progresses through his or her years of schooling. Continued support might be needed at various grade levels and the program must be designed to support students regardless of where they are on the educational continuum.

Despite the educational reform efforts designed to reduce the achievement gap and increase the number of students graduating from high school, at-risk students will continue to be at the center of the reform efforts. In my experiences as a middle school principal, I have struggled with finding balance between developing and implementing appropriate programs and managing the daily mundane tasks of supervising a school. In listening to the lived experiences of the participants of this study, I realized the importance of a laser-like-focus in developing, implementing, and monitoring programs designed to support at-risk youth. The participants of this study shared similar experiences in their educational journey as well as individualized factors outside the school domain that placed them at-risk. In supporting the various needs of at-risk youth, educational leaders need to understand the research associated with this vulnerable population and work collaboratively with the students, parents, school staff, and community agencies in developing an appropriate support network.

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



Institutional Review Board

DATE: December 22, 2014

TO: Suzette Luster, EDD

FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [682117-3] At-Risk High School Graduates: Succeeding Despite the Odds

SUBMISSION TYPE: Other

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: December 22, 2014

EXPIRATION DATE: December 22, 2015

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of Other materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB has APPROVED your submission. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of December 22, 2015.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or Sherry.May@unco.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

Thank you for the district approval documentation.

Best wishes with your research.

APPENDIX B

**CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE
IN HUMAN RESEARCH**



CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: At-Risk High School Graduates: Succeeding Despite the Odds
 Researcher: Suzette Luster, doctoral student in Educational Leadership
 Phone: 970-371-1966 E-mail: Lust3250@bears.unco.edu
 Research Advisor: Dr. Antony Armenta
 Phone: 970-351-2861 E-mail: Anthony.armenta@unco.edu

Purpose and Description: The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of former students who were identified as highly likely to drop out of high school in sixth grade, but succeeded in graduating despite the odds.

While attending (identity withheld for confidentiality), you were identified at the end of your sixth grade year through the districts early warning system as an at-risk student who could have potentially dropped out of high school. To be categorized as an at-risk student you had to have failed at least one trimester of math and language arts, as well as had less than 80% attendance and one or more behavioral referrals over the course of the year. Using this type of early warning system in middle school allows the school district to identify students who may need additional academic and socio-emotional supports in order to graduate from high school. In reviewing your academic records through the school district you meet the research criteria to be a participant for my phenomenological study. You are being asked to participate in an interview that will last approximately one-hour with the researcher in a location of your choice. You will be asked six general questions about your educational experiences from elementary school through graduation. In addition to the prescribed questions, there may be clarifying or follow-up questions asked based on your individual responses. The interview will be recorded using an audio digital recorder.

At the end of the study, I would be happy to share your data with you at your request. I will take every precaution in order to protect your confidentiality. I will assign a pseudonym to each participant and each school. Only the researcher will know the name connected with each pseudonym and when I report data, your name will not be used. Data collected and analyzed for this study will be locked cabinet in the researcher advisor's office for three years and will only be accessible to the researchers and research advisor.

Potential risks in this project are minimal and do not present any risks beyond a normal educational work activity. I will make sure that you are comfortable before we begin the interview. In addition, if you become too fatigued or uncomfortable, you may choose to stop the interview at any time. Upon completion, you will be given a brief summary of the general findings of the study upon request.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

Subject's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Protocol

Project Title: At-Risk High School Graduates: Succeeding Despite the Odds
 Researcher: Suzette Luster, doctoral student in Educational Leadership
 Phone: 970-371-1966 E-mail: Lust3250@bears.unco.edu

Qualitative/Phenomenological Study

Semi-structured Interview will be utilized to collect data

Structured Questions:

1. Were you aware that you were identified in sixth grade as being at-risk for not graduating from high school?
2. Tell me about your educational journey from elementary school through high school?
 - a. Elementary (Peers, teachers, subjects, behavior, extra-curricular)
 - i. What was easy
 - ii. What was hard
 - b. Transition to Middle School
 - c. Middle School (Peers, teachers, subjects, behavior, extra-curricular)
 - i. What was easy
 - ii. What was hard
 - d. Transition to high school
 - e. High School 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th
 - i. What was easy
 - ii. What was hard
3. While you were in school, what struggles did you have? Did those struggles affect your success in school? If yes how?
4. While you were in school what success did you have? What enabled that success?
5. When you think about why you went to school every day what reasons made you go?
6. If you had to choose three factors which helped you graduate what would they be?
7. Was there a moment during your educational journey that you can remember that was the turning point for you that led to graduation? If so please tell me about that.
8. What did graduating from high school mean to you?
9. What did graduating from high school mean to your family?
10. What are you doing now?
11. When you look back on your educational journey do you have any regrets?
12. If you could give advice to teachers and principals about education what type of advice would you give them?

*Note: This is semi-structured because the researcher may ask unique clarifying or follow-up questions based on each participant's responses.