

THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL EXPERIENCES  
OF AT-RISK STUDENTS IN AN  
ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL  
IN SOUTH CAROLINA

by

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Abstract

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The purpose of this study was to understand the phenomenon relating to the elementary school experience of at-risk high school students. Specifically, this study examined the elementary experiences of 10 African American students attending an alternative school focused on credit recovery in South Carolina. The study used the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide as a conceptual framework for identifying and classifying the academic, environmental, and psychological barriers experienced by the students. Findings reveal that many of the participants experienced academic, environmental, and psychological at-risk barriers during their elementary school years that contributed to the creation of a high school dropout trajectory. Findings suggest that although barriers were present during the elementary school years, they were more prevalent during middle and high school years.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Since the administration of the first Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000, the achievement scores of students in the United States have consistently declined in the world ranking. On the 2009 PISA assessment, the United States ranked 14<sup>th</sup> in reading, 25<sup>th</sup> in mathematics, and 17<sup>th</sup> in science literacy. PISA results also indicate that the United States performed at average levels compared to the 70 countries that participate in the assessment program and overall ranked 17<sup>th</sup> in the world (OECD, 2011). The outcomes of this international assessment reinforce the need to reform the American educational system and its practices. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated in an interview that American high school graduates are not prepared to compete in today's global economy (United States Department of Education, 2010a). The results of the PISA assessment clearly demonstrate that the American educational system is lacking significant components to ensure that high school students receive proper instruction and can graduate with the knowledge and skills needed to compete in the global higher education and job markets with their international peers. Concerned about the PISA performance of American students, Secretary Duncan called for a change in how the schools educate their students. Even President Obama has publically shared his concern for the future of the United States and has warned that a nation that "out-educates us today, will outcompete us tomorrow" (United States Department of Education, 2010a, para. 2).

The PISA results are not the only indicators that show the educational system in the United States is in crisis. Data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reveal a high school graduation rate of 77% in the United States, that places the country 22 points below Slovenia, which currently has the highest

graduation rate of 99% (OECD, 2013). Meanwhile countries such as Japan (96%), Norway (90%), Finland (96%), and the United Kingdom (93%) equaled or exceeded a high school graduation rate of 90% (OECD, 2013). In addition, the graduation rate in the United States is still much lower than the average OECD graduation rate (83%), placing it 22<sup>nd</sup> out of the 29 nations. The low high school graduation rates in the United States show that almost one quarter of American students are at-risk of not completing secondary level education. These statistics are not only worrisome when thinking about American youth competing internationally, but they also have direct implications on how the American education system is preparing students to respond to the needs of the American economy (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

For decades now, researchers and educators have studied at-risk students in order to find solutions and interventions to the high school dropout problem in the United States. For this study, dropouts are defined as individuals 16 to 24 years of age who are not enrolled in school and have not completed high school or a GED program (Child Trends, 2013). Students who do not obtain a high school diploma are at-risk for having less access to further education and work opportunities (Matthews, 2012). High school dropouts have a negative impact on the American economy because dropping out impacts future employment. High school dropouts were more likely to hold down a job only for a year or less and overall are less integrated in the labor market than those who completed high school education (Bureau of Labor Statistics & United States Department of Labor, 2013). The Bureau of Labor Statistics data also show that female dropouts were even less likely to hold down a job than male dropouts and that Black non-Hispanic dropouts have the lowest rate of employment compared to other racial/ethnic groups. The amount of tax revenue lost from unemployed high school dropouts inhibits the American economy, which is an issue of high concern to economists, politicians, and legislators

(Lewin, 2012; Moore, Gleib, Driscoll, Zaslow, & Redd, 2002). Specifically, dropouts experience low economic status that will cost the United States approximately \$158 billion in lost earnings and \$36 billion in lost state and federal income tax (Rouse, 2005). High school dropouts are also more prone to be unemployed, receive less skills training (Chen & Kaplan, 2003), and are more likely to live in poverty and rely on government assistance programs than those who have graduated from high school (Martin, Tobin, & Sugai, 2002). In fact, the median earnings of a high school dropout are \$22,900 compared to \$30,000 for a high school graduate (NCES, 2013a).

The economic implication of dropping out of school is just one aspect of concern for the nation. The average high school dropout requires an average of \$35,000 in health related services compared to only \$15,000 for a college graduate (Levin, Belfield, & Muennig, 2006). Not only was it found that high school dropouts spent an average of 10 days a year in bed due to illness, they also live on average nine years less than graduates who spent an average of three days a year in bed because of illness (Pleis, Luca, & Ward, 2010).

Another issue related to dropping out of school is the raise of crime levels within community. In examining states with school attendance laws, research found that raising the high school completion rate by just one percent for all men between the ages of 20 and 60 could save the United States \$1.4 billion a year in reduced costs of fighting crime (Lochner & Moretti, 2004). The findings also indicate that the one-point increase in high school completion rate would reduce the number of murders and assaults by 30%, grand theft auto by 20%, arson by 13%, and larceny and burglary by 6%. The criminal activities of dropouts exert tremendous strain on victims economically, physically, and emotionally. For them, the cost of a crime can range “from \$370 for larceny to \$2.9 million for murder, while the incarceration expense – borne by taxpayers – ranges from \$44 for larceny and

theft to \$845,455 for murder” (Rumberger, 2012, para.7). Clearly, the financial impact of not completing secondary education is so significant that it is essential to focus on finding solutions to this issue.

The American media has also raised questions in regards to how educators can better prepare students for completing a high school education and entering the labor market, as well as to decide what new school policies should be adopted to address the issue. In 2006, *Time Magazine* published a story entitled “Dropout Nation,” showcasing the issue of high school dropouts (Thornburgh, 2006). Although the story is primarily based on the experiences of people in a small town in Indiana, it raises national concerns about the high school dropout problem across the United States. Public figures, such as Bill and Melinda Gates, have used their resources to fund research in an effort to find solutions to this critical issue. Their foundation released a report called “The Silent Epidemic” in 2006, which highlighted the high school dropout problem in the United States. The report not only reinforced that dropping out of high school is a tragic cycle, but it also showed that graduation rates in the United States have not improved over time. It also argued that the general public is unaware of how serious the dropout problem really is due to inaccurate data (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). Although the report goes on to suggest reasons why students leave school and highlights barriers that students face when dropping out of school, there are still many questions to be answered about how to support these students before they become dropouts.

The concern over high school students and graduation rates is also an issue that all American presidents have attempted to address through federal legislation. President George H.W. Bush set a 90% graduation rate goal for 2000 in his 1990 State of the Union address. Six goals for improving education were established in the 1989 education summit (New York State Department of Education, 2006): improve school readiness

skills for students; increase graduation rate to at least 90%; establish a student competency measure by using grades four, eight, and twelve as benchmarks; ensure American students become first in math and science in the world; ensure all American adults are literate and have the skills to compete in the global market; ensure all schools become free of violence and drugs and create environments conducive to learning (New York State Department of Education, 2006).

Soon after taking office, President Bill Clinton reaffirmed the 90% graduation goal and passed seven educational acts, including the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), five more education acts, and the amendment of a bilingual education act. President Clinton's most impactful educational legislation was the passing of Goals 2000: The Educate America Act of 1993, focused on funding systematic reform efforts of local districts and schools to implement state standards (New York State Department of Education, 2006).

Following the term of President Clinton, President George W. Bush showed his support of education by implementing the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which contained a provision to help states reduce the number of high school dropouts. By creating the Title I federal program to tackle this problem, \$125 million of funding was provided for the 2002 fiscal year and the following five fiscal years (United States Department of Education, 2001). President Bush also increased education funding, which later set the stage for federal interventions for improving the condition of education.

Under President Barack Obama, the 90% graduation goal was once again reaffirmed and a blueprint for educational reform was created to address the demands of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. One of the blueprint's key priorities was for each of the fifty states to ensure that high school graduates were career and college ready, regardless of their ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status or

disability status (United States Department of Education, 2010b). Even with all the efforts of past administrations, the high school dropout rates are still far below 90% in most states across the country.

From 1990 to 2012, the percentage of students who received at least a high school diploma or its equivalent only increased from 73.7 to 78.2 % in the United States (NCES, 2013b). When looking at specific demographics, there was some positive movement for each subgroup. White students' graduation rates have increased from 90 to 95%; Black students have increased their graduation rates from 82 to 89%, and Hispanics from 58 to 75%. When looking at specific grade levels, one alarming statistic is that approximately 26% of all dropouts occurred during the ninth grade year; cumulatively, 54% of all dropouts had occurred by the end of the tenth grade year.

When comparing high school dropouts among the 50 states, data shows that only 15% of American high schools produced 50% of the country's dropouts and nearly 80% of those high schools are found in just 15 states: Arizona, California, Georgia, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Texas (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). A common characteristic connected to the low graduation rates is that these states have cities housing large numbers of minority students. This adds an additional layer of challenges as research has shown that there is still a significant disparity in academic achievement between minority students and White students (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Rothstein & Wilder, 2005). Of those fifteen states, five southern states (Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Florida, and Texas) lead the nation with the highest percentage of high school dropouts. Between those five states, South Carolina and Georgia have the highest percentage of high school dropouts. In South Carolina, a student is considered at risk of dropping out of school, if the student requires temporary or ongoing intervention in order

to graduate from high school with the skills necessary to successfully enter the workforce.

A report by the America's Promise Alliance in collaboration with Johns Hopkins University showed that South Carolina's graduation rate in 2010 was 68.2%, which was 10 percentage points behind the national average (78.2%) and 23.2% points behind the leading state, Vermont (91.4%). In 2011, the graduation rate rose to 74% but was still far below the 2020 goal of 90% set by the Obama administration (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce & Hornig Fox, 2013). In the 2012 school year, the graduation rate in South Carolina rose to 74.9%, and in the 2013 school year the rate increased again to 77.5%, which is the highest rate the state has had since 2008 (South Carolina Department of Education, 2012). Despite the positive trend, South Carolina is still ranked well below the national average in high school graduation rates (South Carolina Department of Education, 2011a). Based on these statistics, South Carolina ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> out of all of the 50 states in education (NCES, 2013c). Not only are these numbers alarming to educators in this state and across the nation, but economists estimate that each year's class of high school dropouts costs the state of South Carolina over \$207 million dollars in lost revenue and earnings over the students' lifetimes (Richardson, 2007).

Although South Carolina is making gradual progress in the state accountability system, it is lagging behind in federal accountability ratings. Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), all school districts and public schools must make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in raising the overall achievement of students, including all minority groups, both gender groups, and economically-disadvantaged students (Usher, 2011). Each state, school district, and public school receives a grade of A-F depending on the results of their state assessments through the federal government. South Carolina had the lowest percentage that did not make AYP among the bottom states (Florida, Missouri, D.C. and New Mexico (tied), and Massachusetts). More specifically, out of the



1,087 schools in the state, 831 of them did not make adequate yearly progress. That number translates to 76% of the school districts in South Carolina not making AYP in comparison to high achieving states such as Wisconsin (11%), Kansas (16%), Delaware (17%), and Rhode Island (20%) all whom had less than 20% of their schools fail to make AYP (Usher, 2011). Overall, when looking at the state report card, based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), South Carolina showed a slight decline over time. In 2011, 70% of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students scored proficient/advanced in the state's mathematics assessments while in 2013 only 69% of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students scored at the same level. In reading, results showed that in 2011 the same 8<sup>th</sup> grade students scored 72% at the proficient/advanced levels while only increasing one percentage point to 73% in 2013 (South Carolina Department of Education, 2013).

One strategy the South Carolina Department of Education implemented to address both the large number of high school dropouts and the lack of academic achievement across the state, was the adoption of Common Core standards in 2010. One reason for adopting the standards is to guide teachers in preparing students to be ready for success after high school (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014). Other efforts by the state have included trying to pass a bill in 2011 that would prohibit teens that do not graduate from high school or miss too many days of school from acquiring a driver's license until they turn 18. Although the bill died in the house due to missing a procedural deadline (Adcox, 2011), the legislature is showing that it recognizes the problem plaguing the state and that it is looking for different approaches to deter students from dropping out of high school.

#### Statement of the Problem

Although there has been a significant body of work that has focused on issues related to at-risk youth, it has been "very fragmented, being spread across a range of

sub-disciplinary areas including social, cultural and economic geography” (Valentine, 2010, p.39). Many of the studies that have looked at at-risk high school students have examined the impact of factors such as attendance, grades, and family dynamics on student outcomes. Most studies have been quantitative in nature and primarily focused on students who have already dropped out of school. The literature often focuses on failing academic careers in order to identify barriers to school persistence and graduation. Most research focuses on student experiences and circumstances that are close to the actual dropout event that usually occurs in high school, and only few studies examine how students attempt to recover from a dropout situation. I argue that the research literature lacks data on the elementary school experiences of high school students who were on a path to dropping out or dropped out of school but chose to enroll in alternative program that allowed them to recover academically and possibly graduate from high school.

Research also indicates that investing in early childhood education such as pre-school education for all and focusing on elementary school and middle school at-risk indicators may allow for the identification of potential dropouts before they even enter high school (Heppen & Bowles-Therriault, 2008). This is especially important because at-risk students may have experienced early barriers that caused them to journey onto a dropout trajectory (Elder, 1998). Cumulative at-risk indicators such as low socio-economic status, emotional and physical abuse, teen pregnancy, unstable home life, and one-parent households have all been found to hinder student success in school (Hickman & Garvey, 2006). When examining at-risk youth, it is therefore important to learn about their early elementary school experiences that may have influenced their academic trajectory, which could have possibly led them on an at-risk path towards not completing high school (Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, & Heinrich, 2008). Since at-risk students

encounter a variety of challenges, it is particularly helpful to examine their perceptions and interpretations of their own “lived experiences” (Henriksson, 2008, p. 663). I argue that understanding the experiences of at-risk students earlier in their academic careers may provide broader insights into the problem by identifying when it started, who was involved, and what was the outcome to the problem. Only by learning about the experiences of at-risk students at an early age can educators develop effective and timely strategies and programs to support students who are potential dropouts.

#### Purpose of the Study

The first goal of this study was to retrospectively examine the elementary school experiences of at-risk high school students who are currently enrolled in an alternative school program focused on dropout prevention and dropout recovery in South Carolina. By taking a retrospective look at their elementary school experiences, as narrated by students, this study aimed to identify events and barriers that may have contributed to their intention of dropping out of high school, because it is important to understand when the academic, environmental, and psychological risk factors first manifested. Additionally, the study aimed to understand which factors influenced (positively or negatively) students’ educational trajectory and decisions, how those decisions changed their academic trajectories as they progressed through school, and what influenced students to enroll in the alternative school program.

Adolescence, around the age of 16, is the age when students make significant decisions regarding schooling and futures careers (Richardson, 2007). Knowing these factors allows researchers to determine what interventions can be implemented during the elementary school level years to prevent students from developing dropout trajectories. Therefore, a second goal of this study is to learn from students’ experiences what supports they sought or received to assist them in persisting in school, as well as

what best practices and recommendations for interventions they feel could have helped them at earlier stages of their educational careers. In particular, the study will discuss the South Carolina's at-risk policy framework and its usefulness in understanding the experiences of at-risk students while in elementary school. For instance, whether the most important barriers identified in the framework are also recognized by students interviewed in the study, what is missing and should be added to the framework, or what other realities of elementary education impact at-risk youth.

#### Research Questions

The study will address the following research questions:

- 1) What were the elementary school experiences of at-risk youth attending currently an alternative high school in South Carolina?
  - a. What were their academic experiences in school?
  - b. What was their environment like while in elementary school?
  - c. What were their feelings towards school?
- 2) Based upon the perceptions of the participants, what could have helped these students do better while in elementary school?
  - a. What would have helped them academically?
  - b. What would have helped improve their environment?
  - c. What would have helped them psychologically?

#### Orienting Conceptual Framework

In an effort to address the problem of at-risk students through a comprehensive plan, South Carolina Department of Education created an *At-Risk Student Intervention and Implementation Guide* (Richardson, 2007) that highlights innovative approaches to prevent students from leaving school, recover dropouts, and raise the state graduation rate. This guide can also provide a conceptual framework for understanding the barriers

at-risk students face and identifies four main sets of barriers that are reasons frequently cited by students who drop out of school.

The Workforce Development Manager of this document, Valerie Richardson (2007), argued “dropping out of school is not the result of an abrupt, unconsidered decision but an overt response to the impact of circumstances related to one or more factors over a student’s lifetime” (p.2). This statement supports the notion that at-risk behaviors and indicators do not solely begin to manifest in middle school or high school like many research studies on this topic suggest. Instead, she argued that many events take place in all points of life, and some of the most critical events may start a dropout trajectory (Martin, Tobin, & Sugai, 2002; Richardson, 2007). To support this point of view, the South Carolina framework identifies several age-related checkpoints to address the needs of at-risk students. The first checkpoint is a focus on the developmental academic years, beginning as early as kindergarten and extending through the fourth grade. Schools and districts are encouraged to examine attendance, reading levels, and social skills in these lower grade levels. Another age-related checkpoint identifies fifth grade as the most important elementary school year because it is a readiness year indicator in which additional factors such as performance in math, basic academic readiness, and behavior should be added to the list of predictors of middle school success.

The resource document also contains a conceptual framework for understanding the factors that influence students’ decisions to drop out of school. For this study, I will use this framework, which identifies four major types of barriers that provide possible reasons why students become at-risk of dropping out of school. The framework encompasses all facets of student experiences. The four types of barriers are:

1. The Academic Barrier and Career and Technical Education
2. Environmental Barriers

### 3. Physical and Psychological Barriers

### 4. Work-Related Barriers

The academic, career and technical education barriers group describes academic factors such as being a grade level behind, having poor English language proficiency, low academic performance, and attendance problems. The second type of barriers focuses on environmental factors outside of school such as being raised in a single-parent household, having parents who lack their own high school education, experiencing teen pregnancy, or gang affiliation. The third type of barriers are the physical and psychological barriers such as being identified as special needs, having an apathetic outlook of school, experiencing a death in the family, and having a mental illness, etc. The last barrier focuses primarily on a student being identified as economically disadvantaged, lacking skills for employment, and in need of work experience as they get older. The first three types of barriers will be used as the framework for my study because they can be assumed to have an impact on the educational trajectory of at-risk students during their elementary school years. The South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide is in agreement with findings from educational research (as it will be shown in Chapter 2), and provides a comprehensive framework useful to my study. The South Carolina Department of Education recommends that districts use this framework when selecting programs to address the needs of at-risk students for their schools. Therefore, this guide will provide a framework that will represent the lens for designing my research, shaping the interview protocol (See Appendix A), and analyzing and interpreting the interview data.

#### The Researcher

As an elementary school teacher in Texas, I worked in low-income schools with many at-risk students. My experiences with at-risk students continued as I served as an

assistant principal in an immigrant newcomer language school where most of the students who came from abroad were over aged (18 years old or older) and did not have enough credits to qualify for an equivalent high school diploma. I observed the struggles of those students, many of who just wanted to learn enough English to get a decent job. This experience increased my awareness of the importance of graduating from high school. After serving two years at the international newcomer center, reductions in force (termination due to a loss of funding) led to me serving as an elementary assistant principal in a disciplinary alternative school.

My interest in the elementary school experiences of at-risk students began when I was an assistant principal working with many students who not only had academic deficiencies, but also manifested many behavior disorders such as Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD), or were Emotionally Disturbed (ED). The students lacked the basic social and academic skills to function in a regular elementary school. Many students spent their days in school yelling, kicking, and screaming. They showed extreme behaviors such as violence toward adults and self-destructive and mutilating behaviors. In this setting, I began to notice that the students showed common characteristics to that of students at-risk of dropping out of school. I became interested in how those characteristics, barriers, and events that occurred in their lives during the elementary school years not only affected their current academic achievement, but would also impede their future academic experience. Witnessing their experiences is what led me to focus on at-risk students during my doctoral coursework.

As an elementary school employee in the second largest school district in South Carolina, I continue to reflect on how risk factors hinder students' success in school. I also wondered about the impact these factors will have on high school completion and future adult lives. Because of these experiences, I have chosen to focus on interviewing

students in an alternative school setting that is designed to serve students at-risk of dropping out of school. My goal was to understand which events, barriers, and characteristics occurred during their elementary school years that placed them on a high school dropout trajectory.

#### Significance for Research and Practice

This is a qualitative study that focused primarily on understanding the elementary school experiences of students who dropped out of school or were on a trajectory towards dropping out and then engaged in an alternative high school program to complete their secondary education. The study contributes to existing research literature on at-risk students and study findings are relevant to practice.

The study is based on students' accounts revealing past experiences that led to their current academic situation and events and circumstances that placed them on an at-risk trajectory. By allowing students to share these experiences, I was able to better understand behaviors and circumstances that lead to at-risk situations. This research adds to a large body of at-risk literature by providing a new perspective of factors leading to at-risk behaviors and circumstances that occur during the early stage of elementary school (Finnan & Kombe, 2011). Therefore, further research could build on my study findings to uncover at risk factors not previously employed in analysis.

This research study does not use a traditional theory to interpret at-risk student experiences, but instead uses a state-adopted conceptual framework rooted in research and practices gathered by the South Carolina Department of Education. Because this framework identifies specific student characteristics, barriers, and indicators commonly found in the lived experiences of at-risk students, it provides a practical framework that is also in agreement with theoretical approaches. My research questions are aligned to this state framework; thus, the applicability of the framework to the elementary school context



is tested. Due to the uniqueness of the design, the narratives of the at-risk students can be used to discuss whether the indicators captured by the South Carolina framework are confirmed by the elementary school experiences of study participants.

The significance for practice is that the experiences of the at-risk students interviewed for the study will shed a light on possible interventions that can be implemented during the elementary school years to help these students. Due to the few effective interventions that have proven to produce positive long-term results for these students at the middle and high school levels (Jerald, 2006), the findings of this study can be used to improve programs aimed at deterring students from entering a dropout trajectory. Another possible outcome of this research is the creation of an elementary school early-warning system (Heppen & Bowles-Therriault, 2008) that could be implemented by schools and local districts to identify at-risk students and intervene sooner to prevent them from entering a dropout trajectory in middle and high school. My study also supports the perspective of other researchers who suggest that dropping out of school is a lifelong event and that it is often too late to intervene in middle school and/or high school to prevent it from happening (Bradshaw, Zmuda, Kellam, & Jalongo, 2009). By identifying the early characteristics of at risk students, this study informs practice at the elementary school level. Findings could also inform the training of teachers and administrators who work with the at-risk population by highlighting the need for ongoing vertical alignment of interventions and communication between elementary, middle, and high school educators (Martin, Toby, & Sugai, 2002). This work is important because schools, especially in South Carolina, are still struggling with graduating students from high school. By increasing the understanding of students' experiences and of factors that shaped them, the current study could inform legislation and educational

policy related to the allocation of resources for primary and elementary school grades with respect to the creation of interventions.

### Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have contextualized the high school dropout problem in South Carolina education by placing it into a comparative perspective with other states and countries. I have also articulated the gap in the research by highlighting that a vast majority of research studies have not thoroughly examined at-risk predictors of dropping out of school prior to the students reaching the 9<sup>th</sup> grade (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbot, Hill, Catalano, & Hawkins, 2000). This introduction allows me to state the problem and present the research objectives for the study. I also identified an at-risk conceptual framework that will be used as the lens for my study, which is grounded on an approved framework in the state of South Carolina. This conceptual framework helped organize the review of the at-risk literature and guided the design of my research.

### Overview of Chapters

The following chapters of this study focus on the literature review, research method, study findings, and conclude with a discussion and interpretation of results. Chapter Two will comprise a critical review of the at-risk literature focusing on the academic, environmental, and physical/psychological barriers that impact high school graduation, and introduces the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide that steers the research study. In Chapter Three, I will discuss methods for data collection and analysis, using a protocol built on the concepts of the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide that provides a framework of academic, environmental, and physical/psychological indicators. Chapter Four will reveal the study findings by sharing the experiences of the at-risk high school youth interviewed. Chapter Five will present a summary of key findings, implications, and

suggestions for future research. The final chapter will also include the lessons learned from the study as well as the limitations of the study and final thoughts.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Decades of research have shown that students suffer both academically and socially when denied access to high-quality early childhood education programs. These programs often teach the necessary social skills and academic readiness at an early age that students will need to be successful in school (Logue, 2007). Current early childhood and elementary education research indicates a significant positive correlation between being a high school dropout and experiencing early academic and social failure, sometimes as far back as the first year in school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Darney, Reinke, Herman, Stormont, & Jalongo, 2013; Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002). Factors such as school suspensions, grade retentions, and chronic behavior issues often result in the loss of instruction, academic failure, and expulsion from school (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). The research literature shows that successful elementary schooling is essential for future academic achievement because of the importance of social skills, academic success, and discipline for student to experience success in middle school, high school, and higher education (Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004).

Early childhood success becomes a K-16 issue as research continues to reveal that middle school and high school academic failures can be traced back to the first years of schooling. The research also shows that elementary and middle schools are not properly preparing high school students to graduate with appropriate academic skills (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997). In addition, research on college readiness shows that college freshmen lack sufficient skills to handle college coursework (Scott-Clayton, Crosta, & Belfield, 2012), which makes the cost of remedial courses for universities over seven billion dollars (Scott-Clayton, Crosta, & Belfield, 2012). Not only is this troublesome for colleges, but it is also worrisome for the future workforce and the economy.

The majority of literature on at-risk students adopts two approaches: humanistic intention and economic intention. The humanistic approach focuses on identifying students' characteristics and behaviors that place students in at-risk situations in order to provide them with intervention. The economic approach focuses primarily on the economic costs that at-risk teens have on the economy (Kelly, 2000). For the purpose of this study, I only examine the humanistic intention literature by presenting studies organized into three categories (academic, environmental, and physical/psychological) that encompass the frequently cited reasons students give for dropping out of school and the barriers that manifest in the early years of students' participation in school.

Specifically, I focus on the academic barriers of students' experiences related to:

- Attendance
- Grade Retention
- Mobility

When addressing the environmental indicators faced by elementary school students, I highlight barriers related to:

- Socio-economic status
- Social relationships on schooling
- Parental Involvement in Academic Success

Finally, I review the physical/psychological barriers at-risk students face while in school.

Examples of these barriers include:

- Social-emotional competence
- School disengagement
- Behavior problems in school

I also highlight the barriers that negatively impact the early educational experiences of students, which in turn shapes the educational trajectories of students as they progress through school.

In this chapter, I will first show that the research literature supports my argument that dropping out of school is a lifelong developmental process over the student's academic career (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Bowers, 2010; Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; Schoeneberger, 2012). Next, I will present theories that attempt to explain, predict, and inform the understanding of the phenomena of at-risk students with focus on reasons students drop out of school (Sutton & Staw, 1995). Finally, I will explain in detail the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide's framework to show how it clarifies the challenges experienced by at-risk students, starting when risk factors manifest.

#### Academic Barriers

The research literature shows that poor attendance, grade retention, and student mobility are some of the most prevalent factors that create academic barriers for at-risk students. These indicators are important because they show that early academic challenges impact future educational trajectories of students, and set the pathway for becoming a student at risk of dropping out of high school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997). Extensive amounts of research literature show that academic barriers are one of the main reasons why students drop out of school (Hickman & Garvey, 2006; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Richardson, 2007; Rush & Vitale, 1994). This means that researchers need to retrospectively examine how these students performed academically at the elementary school level and see how their readiness level impacted their academic careers and success in school (Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2008; Reid, 2008). Research also shows that elementary success is a predictor of dropping out of school,

and that early academic and social failure can often be traced as far back as the first year in school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

### *Attendance*

Attendance rates in the lower elementary school grade levels are connected to the achievement of high school students, and are inversely correlated with dropout rates (Christle, Jolivette & Nelson, 2007; Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig & Heinrich, 2008; Taylor, Gibbs, & Slate, 2000). Longitudinal patterns of absenteeism are predictive of high school students who dropped out of school due to low academic performance (Schoeneberger, 2012). Thus, poor attendance can be a symptom of low academic achievement, and possibly a sign of early school disengagement (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Many studies suggest that attendance and academic and behavioral problems in the twelfth grade can be traced back to the first year of school (Darney, Reinke, Herman, Stormont & Ialongo, 2013).

A report from the National Center of Children in Poverty revealed that one in 10 kindergarten and first grade students are chronically absent from school, which accumulates to an average of nearly a month or more of school absence over the course of a school year (Chang & Romero, 2008). This type of absenteeism can impact student academic achievement long before the student starts contemplating dropping out of school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997). Absenteeism has also been tied to student crime, teenage pregnancy, drug use, social isolation, school expulsion, and academic failure as well as dropping out of high school (Spencer, 2008).

Attending class during the elementary school years is important as at-risk students are less likely to have access to the outside resources necessary to catch up on the instruction they have missed (Chang & Romero, 2008). Attendance is especially critical for students living in poverty. Students with low socio-economic status are 25%

more likely to miss three or more days of school per month (Gottfried, 2009; Ready, 2010). Poor attendance is influenced by a wide range of issues that are often present in low socio-economic status families, such as access to child-care, being a single parent, unstable housing leading to high mobility, and limited access to health care. Furthermore, these factors can often lower school attendance, which also increases the likelihood of low academic achievement in reading and math. This is true starting as early as kindergarten and first grade, and can continue throughout students' academic careers (Chang & Romero, 2008; Lamdin, 1996; Ready, 2010).

### *Grade Retention*

A few studies have shown that grade retention can be a positive intervention strategy for struggling students (Gleason, Kwok, & Hughes, 2007) while the majority of research indicates that retention negatively impacts the long-term success of students (Holmes & Matthews, 1984). Retained students suffer from negative consequences such as difficulties with social adjustment, a negative attitude towards school, poor attendance, and behavior problems (Holmes, 1989; Knesting, 2008). Out of the four most identified predictors of dropping out of school (low academic achievement, absenteeism, grade retention and low family socio-economic status), grade retention has been found to be the highest predictor of dropping out of school (Bowers, 2010; Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; Laird, DeBell, & Chapman, 2006). The effects of grade retention are impactful on students' school trajectories since research reveals that promoting students with deficiencies is still more advantageous than grade retention. Specifically, 47% of the students who are promoted with deficiencies instead of being retained in their grade perform significantly better while 48% show no difference and only 5% of retained students show improvement in academic performance (Jimerson, 2001). Thus,



Jimerson's study shows that grade retention worsens academic outcomes for students or makes no positive academic difference (Jimerson, 2001).

Grade retention not only impacts graduation rate, it also influences student academic success. Studies have shown an achievement gap between retained and promoted students (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002). Griffith, Lloyd, Lane, and Tankersley (2010) found that the reading skills of retained students are lower than of those who have never been retained. Students that are retained due to academic failure continue to achieve at a lower level even three to five years after the retention in comparison to students who are promoted with deficiencies (Hong & Yu, 2007). In addition, findings show that negative effects of retention last even longer for students who have been retained in kindergarten compared to those promoted with deficiencies in any other grade level (Hong & Yu, 2007). Students who are retained in later grades (fourth through eighth grade) have better academic outcomes than students who are retained in lower grades (kindergarten through third grade) (Ou & Reynolds, 2010). Meanwhile, students promoted with deficiencies, in any grade level, demonstrate higher achievement than retained students (Hong & Raudenbush, 2006; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007).

Grade retention affects students academically, but it also affects their school socialization. Students who are retained are five to nine times more likely to show aggressive behavior in middle school and high school as well as in later adolescence (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007). Grade retention causes older students to have low self-esteem and a low academic self-concept (Stearns, Moller, Blau, & Potochnick, 2007). Similarly, grade retention causes students to view school negatively as a result of having experienced failure. Lastly, grade retention causes negative peer relations by separating students from their friends and hindering their ability to bond with teachers (Stearns, Moller, Blau, & Potochnick, 2007). Overall, research suggests that promoting students

with academic deficiencies is more beneficial to the academic success of the student than grade retention (Beebe-Frankenberger, Bocian, MacMillan & Gresham, 2004).

### *Mobility*

Equally important to attendance and grade retention is the impact of mobility on academic achievement. Mobility research is based on two major definitions and measures (Beatty, 2010). One common definition used is residential mobility, which is defined as a change in a living situation or location due to parental job loss, domestic violence, foreclosure, or eviction. A second definition is parental mobility, in which a parent chooses to move their child in the hopes of a better learning opportunity, to get away from a negative experience at the school, and/or family or personal reasons that have nothing to do with the living situation or the child (Beatty, 2010).

Only a few dated studies show that mobility does not affect academic achievement and that there is no correlation between mobility and academic success (Heywood, Thomas, & White, 1997). Current research shows that the negative effects of mobility are noticeable in student academic achievement, school behavior, and school adjustment and can be traced back as early as kindergarten (Nelson, Simoni, & Aldeman, 1996). The research also shows that the negative effects caused by mobility occurring primarily during the earlier academic years (1<sup>st</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade) of the student's academic career can progress throughout high school (Engec, 2006).

Rumberger (2003b) argues that most studies on mobility do not control for the background characteristics of students, thus, that field of research consistently finds that mobile students exhibit low levels of academic achievement compared to non-mobile students. Studies that control for background characteristics show that mobility is more of a symptom of poor school performance than a cause (Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy, 1999). Among other controlled research studies, there is also strong evidence

that mobility, especially during elementary school, lessens the probability that the student will graduate from high school. Several studies found that school mobility between first and eighth grade increased the likelihood of dropping out of school even after controlling for achievement and other at-risk factors (Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996).

At the national level, mobility statistics prior to entering high school show that 31% of elementary students change school once, 34% change schools twice, 18% change three times, and 13% change schools four or more times (Fiel, Haskins, & Lopez-Turley, 2013). Black children have the highest mobility rates among all the subgroups with only 45% of students enrolled in third grade at the same school they were enrolled in during kindergarten, compared to 54% for Hispanics and 60% for White and Asian children (Burkam, Lee, & Dwyer, 2009). Children from low socio-economic backgrounds are also more likely to move than their affluent peers, especially during their first two years of schooling (Burkam, Lee, & Dwyer, 2009). When looking at the impact of mobility on academic achievement, data shows that students who change school while in kindergarten end up behind their peers in literary skills (Burkam, Lee, & Dwyer, 2009). Other studies find that high mobility in the early grades, specifically in the first grade, predicts lackluster performance in the third grade up to the eighth grade (Herbers, Cutuli, Supkoff, Heistad, Chan, Hinz, & Masten, 2012). Moreover, mobility studies show that the approximately 13% of students who change school four or more times between kindergarten and eighth grade were behind their peers in reading (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1996; United States Government Accountability Office, 2010). Other studies find that residential mobility also reduces the chances that a student will graduate from high school (Haveman & Wolfe, 1994).

Residential mobility statistics show that indicators such as ethnicity, socio-economic status (indicated by free and reduced lunch), and the mother's level of education were also predictors of academic success. Studies also show that White and higher socio-economic minority children tend to move away from the city for better economic and educational opportunities while disadvantaged minority children, who are often the most impoverished, tend to move the most within the city, but remain in similar economic and educational settings (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1996). For students in the third grade or beyond, mobility has been found to impact reading and math scores especially when other at-risk indicators such as ethnicity and free and reduced lunch are examined (Voight, Shinn, & Nation, 2012). Mobility affects student performance in math more than in reading, especially during the third through the eighth grade testing years (Parke & Kanyongo, 2012; Voight, Shinn, & Nation, 2012). The research also shows that mobility, whether it manifests from year-to-year or several moves during a school year, negatively impacts students' overall learning, whether the reason of the move was academic, personal, or family related (Gasper, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2012).

Data at the federal level indicates that mobility is not always a result of changing residence (Rumberger, 2003b). Instead, 30-40% of mobility is caused by a school-related factor such as class size reduction, suspension and expulsion policies, and academic and social climate (Kerbow, 1996; Rumberger, 2003a). Forty-two percent of students cite school related reasons for their change of school. Factors such as not feeling safe in school and limited academic opportunities are often the most cited (Kerbow, Azcoitia, & Buell, 2003). Another reason cited is the lack of social network. Since mobile students tend to have smaller social networks to help them succeed in school, their network often consists of an association with students with similarly weak academic performance, which limits the mobile students' access to acquiring social capital. The limited network

translates into high levels of school disengagement and an increase in disciplinary issues (South, Haynie & Bose, 2007). Specifically, data also shows that suspensions are highest among students who enroll in four or more schools within one school year (Engec, 2006).

In summary, no matter the reason, students who experience high levels of mobility, especially during the foundational early academic years (elementary school), have lower math and reading scores, have an increased risk of behavioral problems, are more likely to be retained in their grade level, and have a higher tendency to drop out of school (Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Chen, Rouse, & Culhane, 2012).

#### Environmental Barriers

Academic indicators such as absenteeism, grade retention, and mobility are not the only barriers students experience as they progress through school (Finn, 2006). Students are also faced with environmental factors they often have little to no control over. When it comes to environmental factors that influence students' decision of dropping out of school, the most important indicators include socio-economic status, the effect of relationships on student decision making, and the level of parental involvement in schooling.

#### *Socio-economic Status*

Many of the at-risk factors found in the United States are often related to a student's socio-economic status (SES), which has historically been defined as "some combination of family income, parental educational attainment, and parental occupational status" (NCES, 2012, p.5). Other variables included as part of the SES definition include school, community, or neighborhood related factors (NCES, 2012). A report by the United Nations found that the United States has the second highest child poverty rate among all 24 OECD countries after Mexico (UNICEF, 2005). According to The Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, "while the official poverty rate has declined from 22 percent to 15

percent since 1959, most of this progress occurred before the early 1970s. Since then, the direct connection between poverty and economic growth has weakened” (Danziger & Wimer, 2014, p.15). Because the connection between economic growth and poverty has weakened, poverty has been much worse for specific subgroups. For instance, young adults and less educated Americans have seen an increase in their poverty rates (Danziger & Wimer, 2014). Poverty remains high when economic growth is not being shared by most of the workers. In the last few decades, it has been particularly difficult for the workforce with no more than a high school degree to earn enough money to keep their families out of poverty (Danziger & Wimer, 2014). In 2010, during the American economic crisis, those without high school diplomas had a 15% unemployment rate, while only 4.7% of college graduates remained unemployed (Danziger & Wimer, 2014). These rates are alarming because we know that children of poverty are more likely to complete fewer years of school and experience more years of unemployment (Wagmiller, Lennon, Kuang, Alberti, & Aber, 2006).

A review of the research literature on the education of children living in low socio-economic status families showed that the impoverished students come to school with significantly lower levels of literacy skills (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003). Those students demonstrated low math skills when entering school and tended to stay behind their non-impoverished peers. In 2010, one-quarter of kindergartners enrolling in school for the first time lived in households with incomes below the federal poverty level and had parents without a high school diploma. These students also had the lowest reading levels among all socio-economic status groups (NCES, 2010a). Poverty is also an indicator that a student is more likely to have cognitive, behavioral, and socio-emotional difficulties in life and in school (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). Research has also shown that poverty is related to negative outcomes for children at school in the areas of academic

achievement, school behavior, and high school completion (Ellen & Turner, 2003; Vernon-Feagans, & Cox, 2013).

Students from low-income homes are less likely to have academic success and graduate on time with their high school cohort. These students are also more likely to have behavioral problems compared to more affluent students (Finn, 2006). Across all grades, students living below the federal poverty level also miss more school than their more affluent classmates, and are at greater risk of experiencing barriers such as health issues, crime and violence, teenage pregnancy or parenthood, and educational failure (Romero & Lee, 2008). These types of environmental factors are more likely to produce children that are four times more likely to do poorly in school (Apple & Zenk, 1996). The evidence present in the research literature suggests that socio-economic status greatly affects academic achievement (Mistry, Benner, Biesanz, Clark, & Howes, 2010). Numerous investigations show significant gaps in math and reading achievement among students of high and low socio-economic status as early as kindergarten (Snyder & Dillow, 2011).

Students who have negative experiences such as neglect and abuse, racial isolation, a hostile home environment, lack of educational support, and conflict at home are found to respond to these circumstances differently than more affluent children (Aronson, 2001). Environmental risk barriers can lead to negative emotional reactions such as fear and anxiety, which has been found to impact academic performance. Other bi-products of an unstable situation found in the research are a resentful home environment, feelings of powerlessness to change their condition, early maturity and loss of childhood experiences, shame due to economic status and marginalization, and distrust of others as a form of self-protection (Aronson, 2001). Many of these factors, and the influence of the dynamic of the family, can contribute to whether or not a student is

able to achieve academic success in school (Casanova, Garcia-Linares, Torre, & Carpio, 2005).

Another factor that leads to lowering a student's socio-economic status is divorce. Initial income level of the parent, modification of income after the change in family dynamics, and the impact of the socio-economic status of the single parent all are important factors in predicting high school dropout (Pong & Ju, 2000; Teachman, Paasch, & Carver 1996). This change, especially if the single parent is the mother, is strongly associated with an income decrease that in turn heightens the chances of the children dropping out of school (Pong & Ju, 2000). Other environmental characteristics of low socio-economic status, such as being born to a young mother and having parents with negative attitudes toward school, all increase the risk of dropping out of school, especially among minority students (Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997; Aronson, 2001; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007). Similarly, studies found that demographical characteristics such as gender, level of parental education, and socio-economic status could hinder or facilitate parental involvement depending on the parent's belief regarding school (Gergoiou, 2007).

Low socio-economic status plays a role in hindering the academic success of minority students more than that of White students due to cultural traditions. Family responsibilities imposed by cultural traditions translate into students being forced into employment, dropping out of school to become a caretaker, or even taking a parental role (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). Similarly, impoverished Latino students are more likely to be influenced by family-related economic issues within the household. For them, family obligations often trump their own school decision-making (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). McNeal (2011) suggests that employment can also influence a student to drop out of school if the work requires more time and effort than the student can manage while still



attending school. The study also finds that intensive employment has a negative effect on minority students regardless of their socio-economic status (McNeal, 2011). For non-minority students, higher socio-economic standing means having access to greater levels of cultural and social capital that can serve as a safety net to offset the negative effects of employment (McNeal, 2011).

Hammond, Linton, Smink, and Drew (2007) suggest that family economic issues can also influence a student to drop out of school. Family obligations, caring for younger siblings, and becoming a teen parent can all negatively influence academic success and school completion. Other research has found that when the socio-economic status lowers, the lack of structure can influence the family to a point in which the children experience academic failure in school (Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004). Even students who once had middle class economic status, but fall into poverty because of a family-related situation, have more negative outcomes in school and later in life than children who were never poor (Moore, Gleib, Driscoll, Zaslow, & Redd, 2002).

A shift in the composition of the American family has decreased the number of children living with two married parents, while single-parent households have become more common (U.S. Census, 2012). In fact, there has been a steep increase in births to unmarried women. This change in family structure causes a decline in the economic security of children because the children of single mothers are more likely to live in poverty than the children of married mothers (Martin, Hamilton, Ventura, Osterman, Wilson, & Mathews, 2012). In 2007, nearly four in 10 births in the United States were to unmarried women (Ventura, 2009). Children of unmarried mothers are at higher risk of adverse birth outcomes, such as low birth weight and infant mortality, than children of married mothers. Such risk factors have been associated with developmental problems for the children (Martin, Hamilton, Ventura, Osterman, Wilson, & Mathews, 2012).

The inability to secure adequate housing can also have adverse effects on student achievement. The United States ranked 26<sup>th</sup> in the five dimensions of child well-being: material well-being, health and safety, education, behaviors and risks, housing, and environment in the world (UNICEF, 2013). Inadequate, crowded, or costly housing can pose serious problems to a child's well being as well (Breysse, Farr, Galke, Lanphear, Morley, & Bergofsky, 2004; Krieger, & Higgins, 2002). Students who suffer from rising housing costs are more likely to be exposed to homelessness, home overcrowding, poor nutrition, frequent moving, and lack of supervision due to working parents (Bridge, Flatau, Whelan, Wood, & Yates, 2003; Cutts et al., 2011). The high percentage of households with children that report living in a crowded or costly space provides insight into the impact real estate markets have on housing choices and children's well-being (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

Communities with high rates of poverty can influence students' academic achievement because of the lack of resources needed for school, such as access to libraries, parks, playgrounds, after school programs, and/or influences of positive peers (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). For example, students living in low-income communities are more likely to have social networks that include peers who are high school dropouts, which increase the chances of the student dropping out of school (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Similar research studies have found that school, family, and community factors can also impact student achievement in mathematics (Catsambis & Beveridge, 2001). Research has found that students with lower math achievement lived in neighborhoods with high concentrations of families living in poverty. This is also true in communities that have high concentrations of African-Americans, which are also found to have higher levels of unemployment, unstable family dynamics,

deteriorating health issues, and higher percentages of drug abuse, poverty, crime, and welfare enrollment (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002).

### *Social Relationships on Schooling*

Students from low socio-economic backgrounds often have a limited range of social networks. Whether it is the student's limited interaction with parents, school personnel, or peers, social relationships can be viewed as either detrimental or the supportive aspect in a student's academic success. In the research related to the success of at-risk youth, many students reveal that a supportive relationship with someone from an institution such as school, church, or the community was central to their success (Aronson, 2001). Typically, the themes that emerge from these types of studies show that at-risk students know how to build social capital within their social networks but often fail to use relationships effectively to assist them in persisting in school (Drewry, Burge, & Driscoll, 2010). The failure to use the school social networks appropriately often leaves students alone in school decision-making and in creating their own source of motivation for succeeding in school (Wentzel, 1998). According to Deci (1992), interpersonal relationships provide students with a sense of belonging that can work as a motivator for a student to have interest in school and to do well in school. Perceived support from parents, peers, and teachers can lead to intrinsic motivation and positive self-esteem in school (Wentzel, 1998).

When it comes to peers, researchers have been exploring the link between social interactions and academic achievement for over 40 years (Coleman, 1961a). The extensive literature shows that peer groups influence social and academic development that often begin at the inception of formal education (Pellegrini, 1992). Due to the amount of time children typically spend each day with their friends, the influence of a peer on a child can be substantial (Wentzel, 1998). The research that has been conducted is based

on the notion that children are socialized by the people with whom they associate over a long period of time. From this social network, students learn what are the acceptable social customs and norms within their environment.

Few current studies have explored the effect peer relationships have on academic outcomes (Johnson, 2000). The two major issues found in the literature are: “changes in the effect of peers over time and cultural patterns penalizing academic achievement” (Johnson, 2000, para. 6). First, some researchers argue that peer influence becomes more important the older the student is, and are strongest especially during adolescence (Walter, Vaughn & Cohall, 1993). At the same time, children must learn how to create positive peer relationships early on in order to become well-adjusted teens and adults (Ladd, 1990). Social relationships allow children to learn invaluable skills such as working in a group, conflict resolution, and building relationships. These skills are not only essential for creating positive peer interactions, but also because they are predictors of social and academic outcomes (Buhrmester, 1990; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997).

The second issue relating to the effect of social relationships on schooling is more complex because literature suggests that cultural patterns within African American and Latino communities negatively influence academic outcomes (Johnson, 2000; Kaplan, 1999; Noguera, 2003). These two communities often ostracize students who achieve academically by sending messages that they are “acting White” or that they have “sold out” (Kaplan, 1999, p. 185). In other words, the student’s own culture outcasts them for conforming to the educational system. The National Center for Policy Analysis found that 36% of African American students and 29% of Hispanics fourth grade students felt like their friends made fun of peers who tried to do well in school while only 17% of White students shared this feeling (Johnson, 2000). Similarly, when looking at older students,

30% of Hispanic and 23% of African American eighth grade students reported similar feelings.

The third issue related to the effect of social relationships on schooling is bullying, which is a topic that has been receiving national attention, due to the number of students committing peer-to-peer crimes, and the number of students committing suicide. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, bullying is “aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time” (United States Department of Health & Human Services, 2014, para 1). According to this definition, there are three types of bullying: verbal, social, and physical.

Verbal bullying includes name-calling, inappropriate sexual comments, taunting, and threatening to cause harm, while social bullying includes leaving someone out on purpose, telling other children not to be friends with someone, spreading rumors about someone, and embarrassing someone in public. The third type of bullying, physical bullying, includes: hitting, kicking, pinching, spitting, tripping, pushing, taking or breaking someone’s things, and making mean or rude hand gestures. All of these descriptors have been found by the Department of Health to foster a serious, lasting problem by both kids who are bullied and those who bully others (U.S Department of Health & Human Services, 2014).

The literature suggests that peer relationships and their influences become the strongest during early adolescence (Johnson, 2000). This is important to note because the research literature also states that school disengagement and the decision to drop out of school begins to formulate around this age (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001). The literature also indicates that peers can influence all aspects of a child’s life, including academic achievement; thus, it is equally important for students to understand that their

social network can contribute to or hinder their academic success (Chen, 2008). Another issue to consider is the parents' role in influencing academics.

### *Parental Involvement in Academic Success*

Parental involvement is a term that encompasses a wide range of activities that include visits to the school once a year, frequent parent-teacher communication, and active participation in school governing organizations (Gergoiou, 2007). It can refer to the way parents expect certain outcomes from school, to the way parents help students develop a positive attitude towards school, and to making sure their children do their homework (Gergoiou, 2007).

The influence of parental involvement in a child's education is also an essential aspect to examine when working with at-risk students. Information from the United States Census tells us that the dynamics of the American family are increasingly changing. In 2012, 24% of children lived with only their mothers, 4% lived with only their fathers, and 4% lived with neither of their parents (U.S. Census, 2012). These statistics are alarming because they indicate a possible reduction in the level of parental involvement in school, while research shows that parental involvement is a motivator for students' engagement in their own education, especially for at-risk students (Comer, 1984; Jeynes, 2007). Children depend on their parents to provide a variety of learning experiences long before they enter school. Students who have parents with limited financial reach often lack rich early childhood experiences, which further translates into low academic skill levels upon entering school (Crosnoe et al., 2010).

Research shows that parental involvement tends to be lower when students come from low-income households or single parent homes, especially when the maternal parent has a low level of education (Comer, 1984). In fact, national data shows that 19% of kindergarteners entering school live with a single mother, and 12% live with a mother

who has not completed high school (Romero & Lee, 2008). School age students, who come from single parent homes or split homes with stepparents, are found to be more likely to drop out of school (Jeynes, 2007; Rumberger, 1995). The research also states that single parents have a harder time fostering positive school progress due to limited time available to participate at the school to support their child's learning (Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, & Bloom, 1993).

Most of the research on parental involvement reveals that the parent's role in the education of their child is essential for the success of students in school (Kan & Tsai, 2007; Masud & Long, 2004). Specific behaviors related to a parent being involved include supporting and implementing discipline from school, showing love and affection, and having open lines of communication with teachers (Arnold, Zeljo, Doctoroff, & Ortiz, 2008). Their impacts often result in fewer conduct problems in school, especially as the student gets older (Patrick, Snyder, Schrepferman, & Snyder, 2005). Students with parents that are involved in school are also more likely to complete high school than those who are not involved (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Research has shown the positive effect of parental involvement both in elementary and secondary grade levels with a larger impact at the elementary school level (Jeynes, 2005; Jeynes, 2007; Stewart, 2008). In addition, studies have found that parental involvement can have more of a positive effect on schooling among low socio-economic status families compared to higher income families (Domina, 2005).

A plethora of research has also found that the negative attitudes, values, and beliefs of parents not only affect students' attitudes regarding school, they also increase the likelihood that students will drop out (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Rumberger, 1995; Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992). The negative attitudes compound if the parent or a family member of the student is also a high school dropout. If a student

leaves school prematurely, this doubles the chances that a sibling will also drop out of school (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Not only are the perspectives of parents important to students persisting in school, their actions are also equally important. Research shows that high school dropouts had parents who tended to have less and infrequent contact with school regarding their child's academic performance and behavior (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Rumberger, 1995).

In addition, research found parents are less likely to keep track of their child's academic and behavioral progress when they are not active participants in the school (Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996). When it came to parenting styles and techniques, studies have found a link connecting the mother-child relationship and high school graduation (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000). Students whose parents do not regularly monitor their activities and do not place rules such as curfews on school nights were found to be more likely to drop out of school than those who had parents that did (Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997). Evidence suggests that a lack of parenting can lead to an increase in behavioral problems inside and outside school, but can also hinder academic success. A study by Fan and Chen (2001) also supports that parental expectations as well as aspirations have the strongest relationship to student academic achievement. Meaning, high academic expectations from parents is a stronger success indicator than grade point average (GPA) (Fan & Chen, 2001).

When it comes to the school engaging the parents, research has found that educators who involve parents in school-related concerns, whether for behavior or academics problems experienced by students, see a decrease in disciplinary referrals from one year to the next and higher overall academic achievement (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Students have higher academic achievement, better attendance, and earn more credits when their parents are involved from their elementary school years (Catsambis,



2001; Simon, 2004). Studies show that when parents become engaged in academic concerns relating to absenteeism, there is an increase in the average daily attendance (ADA) of the student. They also see a decrease in chronic absenteeism from one year to the next (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Other studies show that involving parents in homework and asking for help with a particular content area resulted in higher grades and a higher rate of assigned homework completion (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Van Voorhis, 2003). Similarly, the work of Sheldon and Epstein (2005a) shows that students increase math proficiency from one year to the next when teachers assign homework that requires parental engagement. When looking at achievement in reading, the scores increase when interventions include parent participation (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005b).

Other research shows that parental involvement at home affected achievement more than parent involvement at school (Finn, 1998). Activities that made the most impact were monitoring students' time spent watching television, helping with homework, and discussing school issues with students (Finn, 1998). These types of parental involvement activities have also been linked to student resiliency and student success no matter the poverty level, minority status, or language deficiencies. Research has also focused on how parental involvement affects students as they progress through school. Parental involvement also tends to decline as students progress in school, especially in single parent and minority homes (Epstein, Croates, Salinas, Sanders & Simon, 1997). When controlling for background demographics, parental involvement was highly associated with lower rates of high school dropout and an increase in on-time graduation rates (Barnard, 2004). More importantly, findings from research have also shown that when parents do support the learning process at home, the academic achievement of students increases (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

### Physical/Psychological Barriers

Compared to academic and environmental barriers, physical and psychological barriers are harder to examine when studying at-risk students, primarily because so much of that data is dependent on those students sharing their experiences of home and school life (Lagana-Riordan, Aguilar, Franklin, Streeter, Kim, Tripodi, & Hopson, 2011). Educators and researchers are becoming increasingly aware of the impact physical and psychological barriers (social-emotional competence) play in supporting students' success in school, especially in elementary aged children (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Elias & Haynes, 2008). Between these two barriers, the indicators that stand out in the at-risk literature are the social-emotional competence of students, school disengagement, and behavioral problems in school.

#### *Social-Emotional Competence*

In exploring the relationship between social skills and academic achievement, the research highlights the relationship between poor social skills and low long-term academic achievement. Research has shown that in order to improve the academic achievement of students with at-risk backgrounds, educators must focus on the social-emotional competence of the student (Elias & Haynes, 2008). In addition, researchers have found that social and emotional competence affects the academic performance of students living in a high-risk community (Elias & Haynes, 2008). These at-risk students must learn school-related social skills (e.g. listening, following directions, asking for help, ignoring distractions, accepting consequences, apologizing) in order to be successful in school (Esposito, 1999). The use of social skills is also necessary in a school setting in order to create relationships with teachers and other students, adopt a positive attitude toward school, and experience a sense of belonging (Esposito, 1999).

Research has also focused on how social behavior and student's social interaction impact academic success (Benner, Beaudoin, Kinder, & Mooney, 2005). Studies show students who exhibited poor attention, aggression and delinquency not only disrupted the classroom environment but their behaviors also negatively affected their own reading proficiency since reading skills reduced by 15%. These behaviors were associated with the student's lack of social skills and lack of social adjustment (Benner, Beaudoin, Kinder, & Mooney, 2005). Furthermore, students with beginning reading skills deficits were found to also have social adjustment issues (Matthews, Kizzie, Rowley, & Cortina, 2010). Longitudinal data on social skills and academic success reveal that students identified as being high-risk in their third year in school had also been identified by their kindergarten teacher as being disruptive and aggressive (Wasik, Wasik, & Frank, 1993). In addition, the research literature shows that in order to succeed during their school years, students need to learn appropriate school-related social skills at an early age, even prior to entering school (Lane, Wehby, & Cooley, 2006).

When analyzing the adjustment of minority students, analysis showed that African American males who lacked social skills underperformed White males at every point from kindergarten to fifth grade (Matthews, Kizzie, Rowley & Cortina, 2010). The achievement gap was also apparent among African American boys and girls in which again, boys underperformed. There is also significant evidence that African American boys have more behavior problems and lower levels of social and emotional skills, especially when the students come from families with lower socio-economic status (Matthews, Kizzie, Rowley, & Cortina, 2010).

Studies also show that the relationship between a teacher and a student can impact children's externalizing and internalizing behavior in school (O'Connor, Dearing, & Collins, 2010). In fact, the relationship between the student and the teacher is often the

one relevant factor in the manifestation of school-related behavioral problems (O'Connor, Dearing, & Collins, 2010). This is especially true if the teachers have specific social skills expectations that the student is not able to demonstrate in the classroom setting (Lane, Givner, & Pierson, 2004). The research shows that teachers believe that social skills are critical for the success of students in the classroom. Specifically, skills such as following directions, attending to instructions, controlling temper with peers and adults, and responding appropriately when hit are seen as the basic social skills necessary for school success (Lane, Givner, & Pierson, 2004; Walker, Irvin, Noell, & Singer, 1992). These skills emphasize, "restraint, minimize disruption, encourage compliance, and, consequently, foster instruction" (Lane, Givner, & Pierson, 2004, p.108). Moreover, teachers from all grade levels starting in kindergarten to twelfth grade expect students to demonstrate social skills, self-control, and cooperation skills (Lane, Wehby, & Cooley, 2006). Students who lack basic academic skills and engage in negative classroom behaviors not only hurt themselves academically, but are at risk of creating strained relationships with peers and adults (Crosnoe, Morrison, Burchinal, Pianta, Keating, Friedman, & Clarke-Stewart, 2010; Lane, Wehby, & Cooley, 2006). A positive student-teacher relationship can also enhance school-related values and goals in a student (Wentzel, 2002), thus enhancing their experience in school. Research has also indicated that students who feel emotionally secure and supported by their teachers are more likely to be engaged in school (Furrer & Skinner, 2003), and are more likely to be motivated to do well in school (Hamre & Pianta, 2001), as well as experience better emotional adjustment (Chong, Huan, Quek, You, & Ang, 2010; Murray & Greenberg, 2000).

### *School Disengagement*

School disengagement is often seen as an early sign of academic failure. It is also seen as part of a long-term process that manifests itself in poor attendance and

eventually leads to dropout (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006; Schoneberger, 2012). Most of the research that focuses on school disengagement has only examined the at-risk indicators of students in high school, or after they have already dropped out of school (Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012). In terms of preventing school disengagement, intervening at an earlier stage of the student's educational career may be more beneficial (Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012). The monitoring of student engagement can help educators prevent the disengagement of students at an earlier stage of the educational process (Burger, Nadirova, & Keefer, 2012). This is important because some researchers argue that dropping out of high school is a culmination of disengagement over time that starts at an early age (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001). Researchers also support the notion that disengagement occurs because of the timing of events, experiences, and/or turning points in life (Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani, 2001). Hammond, Linton, Smink and Drew (2007) found that disengagement is displayed through both behavior and attitude and can be categorized into four groups: academic, social, behavioral, and psychological disengagement.

Academic disengagement is often signaled through absenteeism and grade retention (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). The second most reported reason for dropping out of school by actual dropouts is missing too many days and feeling like they would not be able to catch up (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006). A landmark study on disengagement began as a longitudinal study from 20 elementary schools in the Baltimore City Public School system. The researchers, Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey (1997), examined 790 first grade students from 1982 to 1994 who experienced academic failure in school at an early age. This study followed the 1<sup>st</sup> graders into their 12<sup>th</sup> year of school and found that students who were disengaged at an early stage of their academic careers were the ones who later struggled to progress

through schooling. Models of dropout status based on background characteristics, family context, personal resources, and schooling experiences reveal that such factors, if present at an early stage of their academic career, can plague students and can lead them to long-term academic disengagement and dropout situations. The researchers concluded that a long-term disengagement, starting at an early age, was a strong predictor of student dropout.

The social dimension of school disengagement consists in having a negative attitude towards school and having low expectations regarding academic performance with strong effects on dropping out of school (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Rumberger, 2001). Other factors, such as uncertainty about graduating from high school and uncertainty regarding post-graduation plans, were also cited as reasons for dropping out of school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997). All these uncertainties intensify school disengagement, which then also increases the likelihood that the student will drop out of school. Studies show that when students lack the basic school-related skills or are not engaged in the school environment because of lack of confidence or other similar factors, the impact is seen every year that the child is in school (Benner, Beaudoin, Kinder, & Mooney, 2005).

The research literature also mentions that behavioral problems are a symptom of disengagement and that they occur at school due to lack of interest (Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani, 2001; Rumberger, 2001). Repeated disruption of the classroom environment can often result in suspensions and even expulsions, which in turn increase the alienation of students from school. Misbehavior leading to dropping out of school, can be often traced back all the way to the first grade (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000). Findings show that 65% of students who enter elementary school with high levels of aggression experience behavior difficulties (Kim-Cohen, Arseneault, Caspi, Tomas,

Taylor, & Moffit, 2005). Further, students with these behaviors in elementary school are at an increased risk for academic failure, substance abuse, delinquency, and peer rejection (Schaeffer, Petras, Ialongo, Masyn, Hubbard, Poduska, & Kellam, 2006).

The final type of school disengagement is psychological in nature, which is often only apparent in a student's attitude towards school (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Survey data collected on dropouts reveal that students' attitudes came from feeling they did not belong in school, having trouble creating relationships with teachers, or having an overall dislike for school (Jordan, Lara, & McPartland, 1994).

#### *Behavior Problems in School*

According to Pelco and Reed (2007), there is a correlation between "long term poor academic and social outcomes" (p.37) and students' inability to self-regulate their behavior. In their review of the literature on self-regulation and social skills as it relates to school success, the authors found that there is a link between having a difficult temperament and experiencing long-term poor academic success and social outcomes. More specifically, behaviors such as high impulsivity and low task persistence are the most prominent to impact student outcomes later in life. This is important in early childhood education because so much of learning in kindergarten to second grade consists of the learning of social skills and social interaction. Self-regulation of behavior is also important when a child enters school because it helps set the level of achievement later on. Researchers Schoon and Bynner (2010) add that academic success at one point in life is a strong predictor of further academic success later on. Thus, if a student has a negative experience at an early age, he/she is more likely to experience academic failure later on. In other words, if a person is weakened academically at an early stage, it becomes more difficult to develop his/her own true potential. Schoon and Bynner concluded that this "negative chain undermines the positive adjustment of the young

person, and increases the likelihood of negative outcomes” (p. 23).

Studies have also shown that students who are not academically or socially successful during early childhood and elementary school years are prone to manifest disruptive school behavior, which can lead to dropping out of high school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001). These children are often the ones identified as having the highest risk of dropping out of school because their behavior hinders learning; thus, they experience failure in school. Based on the literature reviewed by Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani (2001), it is hypothesized that students who experience academic failure in school at an early age are less likely to become engaged later on as they progress through higher grade levels. The issue becomes of more importance as researchers also show that students who were identified as having behavior issues at an early age have a high propensity towards dropping out. A study by Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, and Heinrich (2008), found that behavioral problems in earlier grades could also translate to deficiencies in social and academic skills during the secondary school period. Not only did the results indicate that behavioral problems were observed as early as kindergarten, there were also academic deficiencies in reading, writing and mathematics. The study also found that these students had higher rates of absenteeism.

Behavior as an indicator for dropping out of school is also mentioned in Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson’s (2007) study that found that school failure was related to maladaptive and undesirable behaviors of students. These behaviors included criminal and code of conduct violations that warranted suspensions. This behavior only reinforced students’ exclusion from school that limited their opportunities to gain academic skills and learn appropriate social behaviors. Another study that found that behavior impacts high school graduation is that of Darney, Reinke, Herman, Stormont, and Jalongo (2013) who stated, “children with elevated levels of disruptive and aggressive behavior in elementary



school are at increased risk of academic failure, peer rejection, substance abuse and delinquency” (p.118).

A study by Bradshaw, Schaeffer, Petras and Jalongo (2010) found that high levels of antisocial behavior early in life could lead to disruption and negative outcomes further on. Findings show that both males and females who manifested aggressive-disruptive behavior at an earlier age also tended to show the same behavior and other negative/risky behaviors. As the students got older, males consistently showed higher aggression than females, especially African American males (Schaeffer, Petras, Jalongo, Poduska, & Kellam, 2003). In a study focused on the relationship between social behaviors and reading achievement of students at risk of academic failure and developing emotional and social behaviors, Wang and Algozzine (2011) used teacher ratings of behavior to correlate with student achievement tests. The study revealed that teachers, who rated students below average on social skills and behaviors, also rated them below average on academic competence. Ultimately, this showed that teachers rated higher academically well behaved than poor-behaved students. The findings suggest that students’ social skills and problem behavior have a strong correlation with academic achievement. This means that teachers sometimes associate negative behavior with poor academic achievement, although this study shows that this is not always true.

In a seminal report by Gilliam (2005), it is shown that students who benefit the most from sound early childhood education are those who have behavior problems. Using the findings of teachers from 40 states, Gilliam reports that students who received quality pre-kindergarten education are less likely to become teen parents and are also less likely to become involved in criminal activity. In his sample of 4,815 students who represented more than 40,000 classrooms throughout the nation, data was collected to

identify students expelled during the school year. Gilliam found that pre-kindergarten students were expelled three times as much as other students and that pre-kindergarten student expulsions were higher than the national rate for all students in grades K-12 in 37 of the 40 states. Findings showed that expulsion rates were lower in public school settings than in faith-based and child-care centers. One can speculate that the expulsion rates are lower in public education settings due to federal and state accountability, which requires school districts to report disaggregated suspension and expulsion data to the state and the federal government. Private and faith-based centers do not have the same level of accountability as public institutions thus they are able to exercise disciplinary consequences, such as expulsions, with more ease. However, these children are often the ones identified with having the highest risk of dropping out of school because their behavior hinders learning, and thus they experience failure in school.

All the research presented supports the main hypothesis of my study that understanding the experiences of at-risk students when they were in elementary school is critical. Their stories should assist educators in finding powerful interventions earlier in students' academic careers. Thus, it is important to gather data that document experiences of high-risk dropouts during these formative elementary years in order to understand how those events influenced their decisions to consider dropping out of high school.

#### Orienting the Conceptual Framework

In this section, I briefly review the conceptual framework that helped frame the study. First, I present the theories educators and researchers have used to understand the at-risk issue by using various lenses to explain this phenomenon. Then, I will present the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide as a possible framework for understanding the at-risk youth problem, and in relation to other theories

that are employed in educational research. I also rely on the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide as the framework for interpreting the findings of this study.

### *Theoretical Frameworks*

A popular perspective used in the at-risk literature is Coleman's (1988) social capital theory that suggests that individual action can be augmented or constrained by social relationships. Specifically, he defines social capital as "a variety of entities with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of actors" (p.23). This means that social capital facilitates an individual or a group action through the use of networks based on relationships, trust, an exchange of services, and social norms. Whether this network is comprised of family, friends, or community members, students have networks comprised of people who are not able to give them the capital experience and advice they need to make decisions related to their academic success (Raffo & Reeves, 2000). Educational researchers have primarily stayed true to Coleman's main indicators that focus on the social relationships and interactions as the main source of social capital in the lives of students (Calabrese, Hummel & San Martin, 2007; Dika & Singh, 2002; Jorgensen, 2005; Drewry, Burge, & Driscoll, 2010). I adopt the notion that social relationships play a critical role in the outcomes of at-risk students.

Another theory often found in the at-risk literature is cultural capital theory, which was first introduced in the 1970's by a French researcher, Pierre Bourdieu (1997), as a way to understand how the life outcomes of children were affected by their family socialization, and how knowledge and skills acquired within family led them achieve a higher social and economic status. Although cultural capital research has previously focused on what an individual possesses, educational researchers have been able to

utilize this theory to also investigate what makes a certain group successful. Bourdieu (1997) examined student success by defining cultural capital in three distinct ways: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized capital. The institutionalized cultural capital consists in a credential or qualification received from an institution. The ownership of the credential (high school diploma), or lack thereof, could impact economic status and determine the level of success (Campolieti, Fang, & Gunderson, 2010). As for educational research of at-risk students, cultural capital theory is often applied as a way to understand the effects of cultural capital being transferred from parents to their children, how skills and abilities are valued in a specific setting, and how the cultural capital possession of a marginalized group influences the success of an individual. Most of the studies that employ the cultural capital lens focus on older students primarily in the middle school and high school age range, thus leaving a gap for understanding how this form of capital or lack thereof is present at the elementary school level (Tramonte & Willms, 2009; Kalifa, 2010; van de Werfhorst & Hofstede, 2007; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Some academic and environmental barriers proposed by the SC Framework can be related to Bourdieu's notions of capital.

Attribution theory offers a lens that is often used in the at-risk literature because it allows the researcher to examine how individuals attribute cause to the events in their lives. Fritz Heider (1944) introduced this theory for the purpose of understanding why people have the need to explain the causes of events occurring in their lives as well as how these causes influenced their behavior (Hatzakis, 2009). Many other researchers expanded the work of Heider and examined inferences people make when observing behavior (Weiner, 2010). Others expanded upon the findings of Atkinson and focused studies on how attribution theory influenced motivation (Gedeon & Rubin, 1999). Heider's (1944) model is a very simple one that has evolved in the at-risk literature as the

theoretical framework for researchers who seek to explain the reasons behind events. Thus, the application serves as a lens for understanding the reason or cause behind at-risk students' life events and behaviors. Although researchers have studied at-risk behavior from the frame of attribution theory (Green, 1985; Serna & Lau-Smith, 1995; Banks & Woolfson, 2008), most of the research has focused on either special education students or college students with only a few dated studies examining elementary school populations. Some psychological barriers proposed by the SC Framework can be related to the attribution theory.

A theory similar to attribution theory is Alfred Bandura's self-efficacy theory, which is rooted in an individual's desire to manage control in their lives (Bandura, 1995; Bandura, 1997). His theory of self-efficacy is defined as the "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3). Thus, a decision is affected by varying beliefs of personal and social experiences. Bandura (1997) also suggests that individuals who face challenges but overcome them are the ones who develop a strong sense of agency. He also adds that when individuals learn vicariously through others, it provides them a safe way to learn a lesson. This vicariousness also allows the individuals to measure their personal success against another (Bandura, 1995). In addition, the persuasiveness of another person can give an individual the motivation and confidence they need to perform. Thus, if a person has high self-efficacy, they will perform well and, in turn, if they have low self-efficacy, they are more prone to fail. Researchers need to understand why some students persist in school even though they are faced with many challenges, while others do not. This theory has been mostly applied to the at-risk literature focusing on African-American students (Cunningham & Swanson, 2010; Honk & Ralson, 2013). Bandura's theory provides elements useful to discuss psychological barriers in the SC Framework.

### *South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide*

The Education and Economic Development Coordinating Council At-Risk Student Committee (EEDCC) was composed of six subcommittees tasked with identifying and creating action plans for addressing the needs of high school dropouts in the state in order to address passing of 2005's Education and Economic Development Act's (EEDA) Personal Pathways to Success. This act was passed as a mandate for schools to better prepare South Carolina's students for the workforce and post-high school education through early career planning and an individualized curriculum (South Carolina Department of Education, 2005). The committee was comprised of state superintendents, principals, educators, business and industry leaders, guidance counselors, the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) at Clemson University, the State's Department of Education Alternative Schools Office, the Department of Juvenile Justice, and the South Carolina Department of Commerce.

The At-Risk Student Committee was tasked with identifying research-based models, programs, and initiatives that were found to address the needs of students at risk of dropping out of school. The results of their research resulted into three products: a matrix identifying factors connected to research-based strategies that would assist students in earning a high school diploma; a two-tiered matrix comprised of exemplary and promising programs for educators in the state to use a starting point for selecting models that would best address the needs of their school districts and schools; and, descriptions of each of the programs selected for the matrix. The At-Risk Committee also created an At-Risk Student Regulation, which outlined the essential components adopted by the committee to address the legislative requirements of the Education and Economic Development Act's initiatives.

The SCF is structured into four distinct sections that address different aspects of high school dropouts. Section I identifies six critical checkpoints that schools and districts can use to assess the needs of at-risk students (see Table 2-1).

Table 2- 1 At-Risk Framework Critical Check Points

<b>Check Point</b>	<b>Grade Level</b>	<b>Readiness Factors</b>
School Readiness	K and First Grade	
Early Progress	Third Grade	Attendance, reading, and social skills
Basic Readiness	Fifth Grade	Attendance, reading, math, and behavioral
Transition Progress	Sixth Grade	School size, adolescence, social adjustment, and parental involvement
Transition Progress	Ninth Grade	Subject-oriented, self-directed, an overage school, and community for grade
Graduation Progress	Tenth and Eleventh Grades	

The first three checkpoints are identified in the elementary grade levels in which school readiness should be checked in kindergarten and first grade. Early progress in school (attendance, reading, and social skills) should be checked in third grade, and basic readiness (attendance, reading, math, and behavioral norms) should be checked in fifth grade. The fourth and fifth checkpoints should occur in the sixth and ninth grade and are considered transitional checkpoints in which school size, social adjustment, parental

involvement, subject-mastery, self-directedness, and over-age for their grade level should be checked. The last checkpoint consists of graduation progress in the tenth and eleventh grades. These checkpoints were created using research from the South Carolina's Council on Competitiveness whose work is based on The Epstein Model developed by Dr. Joyce Epstein in 2002 for the Center on Family, School, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University. The Epstein Model recognizes six types of parent involvement: parenting, learning at home, communicating, decision-making, volunteering, and community collaboration (Anderson, 2006).

Section II of the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide entails a detailed description of the at-risk student regulation and it defines the term at-risk as:

- A. A student at risk of dropping out of school is any student who, because of his or her individual needs, requires temporary or ongoing intervention in order to achieve in school and to graduate with meaningful options for his or her future.
- B. Students—depending on their degree of resiliency and connectedness to caring adults in the home, in the community, and/or at school—may respond differently to those things frequently cited as barriers, predictors, or indicators of being “at-risk.” Therefore, educators and other responsible adults working with students should consider the whole child, who might have both short-term and long-term needs requiring intervention. (Richardson, 2007, p. 4)

The regulation has four main categories of indicators, predictors, and barriers as that characterize a student as being at-risk of dropping out of school (See Table 2-2). These categories include a list of the most frequently cited reasons students drop out of school.



Table 2- 2 Categories of the Characteristics of At-Risk Students

<b>Academic Barriers</b>	<b>Environmental Barriers</b>	<b>Psychological Barriers</b>	<b>Work-Related Barriers</b>
1. Attendance 2. Grade 3. Retention 4. Mobility	1. Socio-economic status 2. Social relationships on 3. Parental Involvement in Academic Success	1. Social-emotional competence 2. School disengagement 3. Behavior problems in school	1. Working while attending school

Examples of academic barriers include situations such as students who are ill prepared from the next grade level, students who are over-aged due to retention, students with high number of absences, students with truancy issues, and having a history of disciplinary issues such as suspension, expulsion, and criminal probation. Examples of environmental indicators include characteristics such as coming from a low-income home, living in a household with only one parent, being a single parent, being homeless, or being a teen parent. The third category describes psychological indicators that include showing a lack of effort and interest in schoolwork, feelings of being disconnected from the school environment, having low self-esteem, showing evidence of physical and emotional abuse, or having experienced a death in the family. Lastly, there is a work-related category which includes situations such as students working over 20 hours a week, and being economically disadvantaged.

The regulation also lists a variety of assessments that are appropriate for diagnosing students' academic difficulties and selecting short-term and long-term interventions. The third section of the regulation includes a guideline for selecting an at-risk student model, initiative, and program selection as mandated in 2008 by the State Department of Education. The fourth section gives high schools guidance on how to select the appropriate population and appropriate model for intervention and program identification parameters as required by the State Department of Education. The fifth section includes building-level program evaluation criteria and desired outcomes. The sixth section gives directives on program evaluation and assessment reporting.

Section III of the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide outlines the student intervention implementation recommendations. It includes the Matrix of Risk Factors and Strategies, which assists schools and school districts in matching effective programs with identified student risk factors. The Matrix of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices assist individual schools and school districts in reviewing the effectiveness of the programs. This section is important because it entails Tier 2 programs that have varying degrees of research based evidence to support their effectiveness as well as the name of a district utilizing the program and their process for assessing the program and developing it as an effective dropout plan. The Effective Program Descriptions contains a one-page description of each program in order to provide additional information about the program for possible district selection and use. Section IV of the Framework is an appendix that lists legislation and mandates, characteristics of at-risk students, and a model administration and accountability guidance.

The South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide was created primarily by using the research of the National Dropout Prevention Center

(NDPC, 2014) housed at Clemson University in South Carolina. Local business owners and citizens concerned about the growing high school dropout rates established South Carolina's Esther Ferguson group. This organization was started by the NDPC in 1986 and for the last 25 years their goal has been to gather relevant information regarding what works in dropout prevention and how to disseminate this information to educators, policymakers, and community and business leaders all over the United States (NDPC, 2014). In 1991, the network released their recommendation of 15 effective prevention strategies with the Model Programs Database based on the research they had conducted. Eight years ago, the network launched its own Journal of At-Risk Issues. This journal has displayed a growing body of work in the dropout prevention including research-based approaches for addressing prevention. The At-Risk Committee adopted a similar framework when they created the Student Intervention Implementation guide. They also included the work of Hammond, Smink, and Drew (2007) in conjunction with the research from the National Dropout Prevention Center to identify and create the categories of risk factors that could increase the likelihood of students dropping out of school. The evidence from this research showed that dropping out of school is often the result of a process of disengagement that often begins before a child even enrolls in kindergarten. The report also provided the information on 50 programs that were found to be effective in addressing the at-risk factors of students. The second piece of research used for the Framework was the *Rural School Dropout Issues: Implications for Dropout Prevention—Strategies and Programs* by Smink and Reimer (2009), which was also sponsored by the National Dropout Prevention Center. The purpose of the report was to provide the Education and Economic Development Coordinating Council At-Risk Student Committee a brief overview of national dropout issues, show data related to the risk

factors of students especially in rural areas, and to recommend strategies and programs to address the issues discussed.

I used the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide, which identifies four major types of barriers experienced by students who drop out of school (Richardson, 2007). Other concepts and perspectives that have been previously used in the research literature and are in agreement with the SC Framework are briefly presented in the next section.

#### Chapter Summary

The purpose of this literature review was to identify the gaps in the research pertaining to the elementary school experiences of students at-risk of dropping out of school by presenting the studies that indicate there is a correlation between the elementary school experiences of students and dropping out of high school. The second purpose of the literature review was to highlight that the research literature suggests that academic factors such as poor attendance, grade retention, and student mobility could influence a student's decision to drop out of school.

Furthermore, studies also indicate that environmental factors such as low socio-economic status, social relationships on schooling, and parental involvement in academic success could also affect dropping out of school decisions. Physical/psychological factors such as a student's social-emotional competence, level of school disengagement, and behavior problems in school are also substantiated. The second part of this chapter focuses on the conceptual framework used for this study. I presented the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide and the most common theories used in the at-risk literature that support the use of the more practical South Carolina Framework.

## Chapter 3

### Methods

In this chapter, I present the research methods employed in this qualitative study. First, I will remind the research questions and the data sources that were used to answer the two questions pertaining to the elementary experiences of at-risk high school students. I reveal the data collection procedures by discussing the timeline, the site selected, and the overall student population of the school district selected. I also include details on how the participants were selected, as well as steps in the interview process. With respect to the study design, I elaborate on two phenomenological approaches often used in educational research that I have combined to guide data analysis. During this section, I communicate the details regarding the methodology used for data collection. Finally, I state the process used to ensure trustworthiness in the study.

#### Research Questions and Summary of Methodologies

For this study, I explored the elementary school experiences that affected students' academic trajectories and how they would have benefited if they had received an intervention at an earlier age or stage in their academic career through the use of interviews. Table 3-1 includes the research questions and summarizes how research questions align to specific methodologies for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. I provide this brief overview although each of the methodologies will be discussed in detail later in the chapter.

Table 3- 1 Research Questions Aligned to Methodology

<p>1) What are the elementary experiences of at-risk youth attending alternative HS in SC?</p> <p>a. What would have helped them academically?</p> <p>b. What would have helped their environmental factors?</p> <p>c. What would have helped them psychologically?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timeline Analysis</li> <li>• Interviews</li> <li>• School Records Analysis</li> </ul>
<p>2) What could have helped these students while in elementary school?</p> <p>a. What would have helped them academically?</p> <p>b. What would have helped their environmental factors?</p> <p>c. What would have helped them psychologically?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews</li> <li>• Timeline Analysis</li> </ul>

The first research question was:

1) What were the elementary school experiences of at-risk youth currently attending an alternative high school in South Carolina?

I asked 10 high school students labeled as at-risk of dropping out of school who were enrolled in a dropout prevention program to create a chronological timeline of important events in their life in to see if any major events occurred during their elementary school years. The timeline the students provided was also used to find if there were any common barriers among the students' experiences during the elementary school years that could have shaped their trajectories towards becoming a high school dropout.

The interviews included questions regarding their academic achievement such as questions regarding grades, attendance, favorite and least favorite subjects, and

behavior. Questions also included their feelings towards school staff members such as teachers, counselors, and administrators. The purpose of these questions was to determine if the students felt that any of these academic factors either assisted or hindered their academic success in elementary school and beyond. In addition to using interview data, I collected institutional demographic data, from the students' permanent records. I specifically examined fifth grade state test scores, which helped me determine if the students struggled academically in elementary school. I then reviewed the student's grade point average (GPA) and eighth grade state test scores, which gave me an indication of how the students were performing academically in middle school and high school. When cross referencing test scores and grade point averages with the student-created chronological timeline, I was able to see if the student identified an event or change in situation that possibly affected their academic achievement.

The second component to addressing the first research question entails the exploration of what the student's home environment was like while in elementary school. In order to answer this question, I looked at student data to see if the students were on free or reduced lunch, which gave me an indication of their poverty level. I then counted the number of schools the student attended from kindergarten to the end of elementary school because studies show that students who come from low-socio economic status homes tend to move more often than non-impooverished students due to poverty and family related issues (Herbers et al., 2012). Equally important, was the examination of grade retention data beginning from kindergarten all the way to twelfth grade. This data was important in order to understand if and how retention strengthened or weakened elementary, middle school, and high school academic achievement.

The second research question in this study was:

2) Based upon the perceptions of the participants, what could have helped these students do better while in elementary school?

For this question, I relied on student responses from the in-depth interviews. Because this question is subjective, it is important to understand what interventions, programs, or services students found to be beneficial to their academic success. Using probing questioning techniques, I focused on the persons that potentially could have influenced the students. Once I explored the roles of school staff, peers, family, and community members in the students' lives, I questioned the students regarding school-based programs, such as tutoring, clubs, and mentoring. All of the students were also questioned regarding their attitudes and views towards school during all three educational levels. This line of questioning was a type of probe to assess whether student actually had some type of support to help them be successful in school but chose to make decisions that, according to the students, hindered their academic success.

This line of questioning was crucial for understanding why and how students develop certain feelings and attitudes towards school and school personnel. These types of questions are crucial because the research indicates that interpersonal relationships could increase a student's academic self-esteem, leadership experiences, and institutional support (Nora, 2004). Students are able to gain social and academic capital through relationships they build because those relationships can support them in the attainment of the degree (Coleman, 1988b; Gardner & Holley, 2011). Through exercising agency to create interpersonal relationships, students can be successful in school through the formation of supportive relationships with teachers and classmates. Students who build strong relationships can also develop a role or an identity within the context of their environment that support them in overcoming challenges. Both the creation of



relationships and the formation of identity, whether positive or negative, influence if a student is successful in school.

These two research questions will provide key findings that I will discuss in relation to the research literature. In addition, I will inquire in Chapter 5 how useful is South Carolina's at-risk policy framework in understanding the experiences of the at-risk students while in elementary school. I tackled this idea by analyzing the indicators of each of the three categories of the South Carolina framework to see if the students interviewed in this study identified similar barriers. I used the summary of findings (based on interview and institutional data). I looked specifically at the student created timeline to identify any events that were not addressed in some way or another in the interview. I used the same process for the themes I created from the interview data that specifically focused on the factors the students perceived to be the most influential in framing their decision to drop out of school. I also focused on the three main school periods, elementary, middle, and high school, to find commonality between the participants. I then added the information from the institutional student records to look for aspects that were not already in the framework. Through this process, I was able to find if there were any indicators that could be added to the South Carolina framework.

#### Data Collection Procedures

The timeframe for conducting this study was approximately four months, which is equivalent to one academic semester in a university setting. The semester was broken up into two-quarter periods. The first quarter was spent completing the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application and securing the Informed Consent Document (Appendix B) as well as applying for written approval from the school district to conduct the study (Appendix C). Then, I spent the last several weeks of the quarter working along the

Communities In Schools (CIS) social workers to identifying the participants and scheduling a presentation for the students to explain the study.

The second quarter period focused on obtaining participant consent forms (Appendix B), scheduling interviews, and completing the 10 face-to-face student interviews with the approved protocol (Appendix A). The last few weeks of the academic school year consisted of gathering campus-related data from the student's home school. This process was challenging because all of the participants in the study attended neighborhood schools before enrolling in the alternative. The district's policy is to keep all of the student permanent records (institutional data) at the neighborhood school and not transfer the data to any of the alternative schools. The primary reason for this procedure is to keep the records secure in the neighborhood school because they are the ones responsible for reporting graduation status and rates to the district and the state. Not having access to the records at one central location caused a delay in the data gathering process because I had to get approval from the principal of every neighborhood school to access the permanent folders. When I was not given access to the records by a neighborhood principal, I had to depend on the school's data clerk to retrieve the information for me, which was often a time consuming process. The second to last phase consisted of transcribing the interviews, coding the themes, and analyzing the institutional data. During the last stage of the study, I analyzed data and wrote up the findings. More details about each step are presented in the following sections.

### *Site*

The school district selected for the study was a school district in South Carolina in which I am currently employed. This school district is also the second largest school district in the state. It has a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools in South Carolina, and serves more than 46,000 students from early childhood to twelfth grade.

The district participates in the Schools of Choice Program, which offers parents a variety of options for their children: neighborhood, charter, and magnet schools. The school district holds the second highest rank in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)/ Federal Accountability Rating System of a B, and has an absolute rating of “Good” in the state accountability system, which means the school district performance exceeded the standards for progress toward the 2020 South Carolina Performance Vision goal (CCSD, 2013).

The site for the study was purposefully selected because it is the only campus in the entire district that hosts a high school dropout prevention/recovery program. The site was also appropriate for the study because since 2010, the school has graduated 204 students from high school with the support embedded in this program despite the students’ risk factors (CCSD, 2013). The criteria used for selecting the site for the study were as followed:

- Ease of access to school data because of my employment in the district
- The school serves only high school grade level students (9th-12th grade) who are at-risk of dropping out or have dropped out and returned
- Secured cooperation of the program director and staff at the school to assist with the study
- The primary focus of the school is on high school dropout prevention and recovery

Thus, the site selected for the study is an alternative school academy whose sole purpose is to target and service the at-risk student population, specifically those in danger of dropping out of school or those who have dropped out of school and returned in hopes of graduating from high school. There are three alternative schools in the school district. One is a self-contained special education school for high school students with

special needs, while the other two are disciplinary schools for students who have been expelled from their home school or were recommended for expulsion. This site is also appropriate because it falls in line with the research literature that shows that alternative schools or programs are the most common types of schools that address the issues surrounding high school students who are at risk of school failure (Gilson, 2006). These types of schools have been created all across the United States to address the high school dropout issue. It is also particularly popular in South Carolina as a main intervention strategy for this population (Richardson, 2007).

The program strategically recruits students by sending out informational flyers to the district's middle and high schools. Students are required to apply and go through an interview to gain admittance to the program. All of the classes offered are academic in the sense that they provide credits for graduation. The school provides the students with support services that include two full time Communities In Schools (CIS) social workers, one student concern specialist, a guidance counselor, and a school resource officer to assist the students with academic, social, and economic concerns. The campus provides small classes and individual attention to students by offering small teacher-student ratios of 12 students per one teacher. The school does not offer electives or extra-curricular activities that are required to graduate from high school. The school assists students in meeting the state's required twenty-four credits to graduate from high school (South Carolina Department of Education, 2014).

Table 3-2 shows the demographic make-up of the district population and graduation rates for the school district as well as the demographic information for the study site along with district As of the 2013-2014 school year, the district's student ethnic composition consisted of 45% White, 43% African American, 8% Hispanic, 1.3% Asian, and 3% Other. The district enrolled 2,996 students that were English Language Learners

(ELL) representing about 6.3% of the population, and had 24,798 students on free and reduced lunch (52%). The student composition of the study site consisted of 95% African American, 3% White, 2% Hispanic students. Most of the students that attend the alternative school are economically disadvantaged (76%) which is much higher than the district average.

The 2013 graduation rate for the district was 75.5% (South Carolina Department of Education, 2013). Graduation rates are particularly low for Hispanics and African American students, and for those who are economically disadvantaged or lack language skills.

Table 3- 2 The 2013 Demographic Make-up of District Population and Study Site & District Graduation Rates (%)

	Overall	White	Hispanic	AA	Asian	Pacific Islander	NA	2+ Races	LEP*	ED**
District		45	8	43	1.3	0.1	0.3	1.6	6.3	52
Study Site		3	2	95	0	0	0	0	0	76
District Graduation Rate	75.5	82.6	69.6	71.9	87.8	N/A	N/A	N/A	61.1	69.4

\* LEP- Limited English Proficient      \*\*ED- Economically Disadvantaged

*Student Population*

During the 2013-2014 school year, the alternative school program enrolled 142 students throughout the school year. Students could enroll at the school from their ninth grade year all the way up to their twelfth grade year. Specifically the school enrolled 34 ninth graders, 48 tenth graders, 21 eleventh graders, and 39 twelfth graders during the 2013-2014 school year. The age of these students ranged from 14 years old to 20 years old. The majority of the students were 17 (49 students) or 18 years old (38 students) and only 6 of the total students enrolled were considered over-aged at 19 and 20 years old (See Table 3-3). Seventy-six students of the total student population were female, while

66 were male. Out of the 142 students, 131 were African American, two were Hispanic-Limited Language Proficient (LEP), eight were White, and one was identified as bi-racial.

Table 3- 3 Grade and Ages of Students Enrolled in Academic Alternative School

	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12	Age: 17	Age: 18	Age: 19 and 20
Number of Students	34	48	21	39	49	38	6

The school has a high percentage of special education students. Thirteen out of the 142 students enrolled received special education services, which translated to 9.2% of the school population. The graduation rate cannot be calculated because the school is technically a program and does not collect this data. Instead, the student's home schools collect graduation data for state reporting purposes. Out of the 36 students who were on track to graduate from high school this year, only 41.6% graduated on time (within a four-year period).

*Participants*

Purposeful sampling was used to identify the participants. I used this method because I wanted to keep the focus on the research topic and look for insights into the issues of at-risk youth in alternative schools by identifying information-rich cases. The site was chosen with the intent that common "viewpoints or actions are present and can be studied" (McMillan & Schumacker, 2010, p.398). The participants selected for the study were enrolled in the alternative school program site for the 2013-2014 school year.

In order to find the participants, the director of the alternative school program helped me obtain access to students enrolled by directing me to work with the school's two Communities In Schools (CIS) social workers. I informed the two school staff members that I wanted to select as many students as possible that were at least 18 years old in order to avoid having to collect parental consent. After discussing the study, the

two social workers informed me that the school currently enrolled 44 students who were 18 years old or older and would not require parental consent to be included in the study. The Community In Schools social workers also helped select the students by eliminating those students who were failing their classes and thus should not be removed from class to participate in the study.

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, I made a presentation to students regarding the purpose of my study and reviewed the possible risks and benefits of participation. This presentation helped me establish a rapport of trust with the students because it let them know why I was conducting the study and who would have access to their responses. I also informed them that the information collected would not be shared with the school district or their parents and that a pseudonym would be used to protect their identity. I also explained to the students that they would receive compensation for participating in the study. Indeed, each participant received a \$25.00 gift card to Wal-Mart. Payment was given to the research participants as a form of compensation for their time because participation in my research study resulted in a loss of instructional time. The IRB approved the use of compensation for this study and it was determined that there would not be a case of undue inducement with the \$25.00 gift card. Posters, also approved by the IRB, were hung around the school to advertise the study.

Three weeks after the initial group presentation, the social workers and I identified a group of 20 students who were over the age of 18 that were willing to participate in the study. After a second trip to explain the details of the study, 10 students out of 20 agreed to participate and none of them dropped out of the study. The Community In Schools (CIS) social workers collected the consent forms from the students and scheduled the interviews during the school day.

More participants were not recruited because phenomenology allows for using small samples (e.g., 15-25 participants) in order to gain in-depth accounts of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2009; Hill, Thompson, & Nutt-Williams, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1989). In summary, the following criteria were used for sample selection:

- Participants who were at least 18 years of age and did not require parental consent to participate in the study were selected (See Appendix B).
- Participants who had not graduated yet with a high school diploma program or from a GED program.
- Participants who felt comfortable speaking about their past experiences.
- Participants who would grant me access to their school records for the purpose of verifying institutional data such as retention records, disciplinary referrals, testing data, and grades.

Even numbers of male and female students over the age of 18 were selected for participation. I initially wanted to select a sample that would be representative of the demographic diversity of the student population in the school district, which would have included at least three Caucasian students, two Latino students, three African-American students, one Asian student, and one student classified as two or more races-other. Unfortunately, I was not able to do so because the study site's demographic makeup was predominately comprised of African American students. The 10 students selected for the study came from eight out of the 15 high schools in the district. Prior to attending the alternative school, all of the students attended regular comprehensive high schools except for two that attended technology academies and one that attended a military magnet school. Table 3-4 shows study participants' demographic characteristics and academic information. Pseudonyms were given to the students to protect their identities.



Table 3- 4 Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

Student Name*	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Free and Reduced Lunch	Grade Entered Alternative School	Retained Grade(s) in 5-8	Retained Grade(s) in 8-12
Courtney	F	18	AA/Black	Free	9	0	1
Devon	M	18	AA/Black	Free	9	Not Available	0
Jemari	M	18	AA/Black	Free	11	1	0
Kavion	M	18	AA/Black	Free	9	0	2
Maya	F	18	AA/Black	Free	11	0	1
Shantee	F	18	AA/Black	Free	10	0	1
Talekuz	M	18	AA/Black	Free	10	1	0
Wayne	M	18	AA/Black	Free	9	1	0
Octavia	F	18	AA/Black	Full Pay	10	Not Available	0
Nora	F	18	AA/Black	Free	10	0	0

\* Pseudonyms

The participants discipline records varied greatly among the ten students. Most of them had little to no code of conduct violations in elementary school. Discipline infractions increased greatly in middle school. For some students, discipline infractions significantly increased in high school. Table 3- 5 shows the number of code of conduct discipline infractions the students received from elementary school all the way to high school.

Table 3- 5 Student Discipline Histories

Student Name*	Number of Discipline Referrals (K-5)	Number of Discipline Referrals (6-8)	Number of Discipline Referrals (9-12)	Number of Discipline Referrals TOTAL
Courtney	4	3	20	27
Devon	Not Available	4	2	6
Jemari	0	24	41	65
Kavion	0	4	15	19

Table 3.5—*Continued*

Maya	3	8	7	18
Shantee	0	11	14	25
Talekuz	4	2	8	14
Wayne	3	13	10	26
Octavia	Not Available	Not Available	16	Not Available
Nora	0	2	28	30

*The Interview Process*

In late January 2014 I received IRB approval and began the data collection portion of the study. I began by conducting two pilot interviews in February to ensure the usefulness of the interview protocol, and to know approximately how long each interview would take in order to schedule the future interviews. During the pilot interviews, I asked each of the students to complete a drawing of what they remembered about their elementary school experiences in order to use it as a springboard to begin questioning. I began this process by giving the students two pieces of blank printer paper, a pen, and a box of Crayola Markers. I asked the students to think back to elementary school and to make a non-linguistic representation (a drawing) of what they remembered. Both students took approximately five minutes to complete the drawing (Literat, 2013). The pilot interviews revealed that the images the students depicted were not detailed enough to get in depth information from students as both students drew a picture of them playing at recess. Upon receiving feedback regarding my pilot interviews from two committee members, I changed the format of the interviews by asking the students to create a timeline of their life course with important events such as graduations, housing moves, changes in schools, grade retentions, parental divorce and other family events, celebratory events, etc. to use as a platform for questioning.

Another important benefit of the pilot study was to refine the interview protocol (Appendix A). I did my best to ensure that the interview protocol was clear enough so students would be able to answer the same general questions. I also strove to make the

protocol credible by being cognizant of the way I asked questions in order to generate valid and truthful accounts. Specifically, the interviews were semi-structured and written in a format that included one central question followed by three probing questions. Semi-structured questioning techniques and probes were used during the interviews so the participants could articulate their perceptions and experiences freely and spontaneously (Drewry, Burge, & Driscoll, 2010). When needed, I restated the question in a different way when a participant simply answered the question with a yes or no, in order to extract more information. Therefore, I had to probe the students to reflect deeper into their elementary school years. I chose this method because individual in-depth interviews would allow me to delve deeper into the academic, social, and personal issues of the students in hopes of discovering factors that influenced later outcomes (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). I originally anticipated that the interviews would take approximately 30 minutes to one hour to conduct, but found that I had to make adjustments depending on how forthcoming the participant was. Thus, the interviews ranged from 15 minutes to 45 minutes in time. I focused on obtaining data from one single interview because many of the students selected were classified as twelfth graders and were close to finishing their academic requirements at the alternative school. Thus, school staff and the Communities In Schools (CIS) social workers could not predict when the students would return to their home school or graduate and leave the program.

I began each interview by reviewing the purpose of the study, the confidentiality agreement, and describing their rights to terminate participation in the study at any time. The interviews took place in the conference room of the alternative school building during the regular school day at a time that was convenient for both the student and the school in an effort to not interfere with classes. The interviews were audio-recorded by a digital

recorder. An iPhone voice memo app was used as a back up to the recorder. The interviews were carried out in conversational style, and were fully transcribed.

### Study Design

Qualitative research is a type of scientific research method that consists of investigations that use a predefined set of procedures to answer the questions (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). In addition, qualitative research seeks to understand a problem or topic from the perspective of the population involved. This method is especially effective in obtaining information regarding the values, opinions, and behaviors of certain populations. The strength of using a qualitative research design is that it allows the researcher to gain a deep understanding of an experience perceived through the eyes of the people who have lived it (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). It also aims at understanding how participants derive meaning from their experiences and how that meaning influences their behavior. Qualitative research enables researchers to “delve into questions of meaning, examine institutional and social practices and processes, identify barriers and facilitators to change, and discover the reasons for the success or failure of interventions” (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p.1372). The qualitative method not only investigates the experiences of a group but it also focuses on the why and how of decision making not just the what, where, and when.

### *Methodological Approach*

When undertaking a qualitative approach to research, it is part of the responsibility of the researcher to justify why the methodological approach selected for the study is the most appropriate for the phenomenon under investigation. In this study, I adopted a phenomenological research method because phenomenology is “the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view” (Smith, 2013). This approach allowed me to investigate the lived experiences of a group of

people who have been at-risk of dropping out of school. The phenomenon of being at-risk of dropping out of school is examined retrospectively by asking high school students to recall their elementary school experiences. Phenomenology was chosen because its basic purpose is to compress the experiences of people experiencing a common phenomenon in order to extract its universal nature (Creswell, 2007).

The founder of phenomenology as a philosophy and as an approach to descriptive inquiry was the German mathematician Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). His central argument was that consciousness is the condition of all human experience. An important tenet of Husserl's approach was the belief that the meaning of lived experiences may be revealed through "one-on-one transactions between the researcher and the objects of research" (Husserl in Wojnar & Swanson, 2007, p. 173). Husserl believed that through listening, interacting, and observing, the researcher could understand the reality of the participant's life (Husserl in Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). In later works, Husserl (1970) presented the idea of transcendental subjectivity, which is a condition in which the researcher abandons their own lived reality and describes the explored phenomenon in a pure and universal sense. Husserl's method included having the researcher strip away any prior experience and personal bias with the phenomenon in order to prevent influencing the description of the experience (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). This method, which he called "bracketing", allows the researcher to gain insight into the common features of almost any lived experience.

In order for the researcher to go through the process of bracketing, the phenomenon has to be separated from the world and be inspected and dissected in order to unravel its true structure. Bracketing includes suspending all preconceptions regarding the phenomenon and confronting the subject matter on its own terms thus removing bias (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Husserl believed that through bracketing, it is possible for a

researcher to gain insight into the common characteristics of any experience. Lastly, Husserl believed that human beings are free agents responsible for influencing their own environments. This is important because this method of inquiry is based on exploring the phenomenon through direct interaction between the researcher and the participants. The method requires the researcher to use several frames of references such as transcendental subjectivity in which the researcher remains neutral and open to the experiences of the participants. Husserl defines these experiences as *eidetic essences* or universal truths in which the participant and the researcher interact (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007), which allows the researcher to create a universal description of the phenomenon. Researchers following the footsteps of Husserl argue different philosophical points for using phenomenology today. However, there is general agreement that phenomenology is not about trying to explain or analyze a phenomenon, but provide an accurate description of the participant's experience of the phenomenon (Creswell, Hanson, Clark-Plano & Morales, 2007).

### *Psychological Phenomenology*

The first approach chosen to interpreting the findings for this study was pioneered by the American psychologist Clarke Moustakas (1994). This psychological framework focuses on describing the experiences of participants while having the researchers set aside their own experiences and interpretations of the data. This approach first begins by identifying if the problem can best be examined using a phenomenological approach and if the problem is an area of interest to investigators. Then, the researchers recognize and specify their assumptions of the phenomenon by bracketing out their own experiences as much as possible. Next, data is collected through multiple in-depth interviews with participants. In addition, the participants are asked two central questions:

1. What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon?

2. What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences with the phenomenon?

These two questions place attention on gathering data that will lead to textural and structural descriptions of the experiences thus ultimately providing the common experiences of the participants, which are then fused into a universal essence or “object of human experience” (Creswell, 2007, p.177). Subsequently, the data collection process consists of in-depth interviews regarding the participant’s experiences in which details are clarified by utilizing probing questioning techniques (McCracken, 1988; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Other forms of data, such as observations and institutional data, are also utilized (Creswell, 1998). The researcher collects the data from participants and develops a composite description of what they experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). Because the phenomenological method has a structured approach to data analysis that focuses on the participants’ specific statements and experiences (Creswell, Hanson, Clark-Plano & Morales, 2007), the method only requires a sample size of one to 10 people who can provide a detailed account of their experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Data emerges from the analysis of the interviews, which highlight statements, sentences, or quotes that represent the understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. This process is called *horizontalization* and once it is complete, the researcher groups the clusters of meaning into themes (Moustakas, 1994). These statements are used to write a textural description of *what* the participants experienced and a structural description of *how* they experienced the phenomenon. The last step includes the researchers writing about participants’ experiences and the context and situations that have influenced their experiences. An advantage of using Moustakas’ approach for analyzing data is that it helps provide a

framework for novice researchers (Creswell, 1998). This methodology also allows the novice researcher to understand participants' common experiences that could later influence practices and policies to address the features of the phenomenon.

### *Hermeneutic phenomenology*

A second approach for interpreting the findings to this study consisted in using the hermeneutic phenomenology developed by the educator Max van Manen (1990) which offers a less structured method that allows the researcher to provide an interpretation of the meaning of the lived experiences of participants. Van Manen explains the process of hermeneutic phenomenological research in the human sciences as the interplay of six research activities (van Manen, 1990).

The first research activity is identifying a phenomenon that seriously interests the researcher and commits them to the world of the phenomenon. Van Manen believed that in selecting a topic you are passionate about, you naturally conclude that subconsciously, you were already searching for answers. This passion then commits you to the world as a researcher. In my experience, this is very true. For the last two years, I have been passionate about helping at-risk elementary students be successful in school. As I worked with them in my role as an assistant principal, I also wondered how they would perform academically and socially as they progressed through school. Unknowingly, I committed myself to the world of at-risk students.

The second research activity is based on investigating the experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it. Van Manen suggests not studying a topic through reading books and journals or engaging professional discourse, but by living it. My experiences with the at-risk topic began when I visited an alternative school in the Texas school district in which I worked. The visit was part of the district's leadership academy program, in which assistant principals were taken to different schools and sites within the



district to learn about the resources available to them as administrators. The principal of the alternative school created a student panel that allows students to share their childhood, middle school, and early high school experiences with my group. The students also shared specific reasons as to how they ended up enrolling in the alternative school. The stories of those students left me in tears. The challenges they faced captivated me and created even more curiosity relating to their elementary school experiences and if anything could have been done to assist them at that age. I first focused on just elementary school experiences, which led me to really immerse myself in the early childhood literature, focusing on academic and social skill readiness upon entering kindergarten. From there, I began to learn more regarding middle school and high school at-risk factors.

For the third research experience, van Manen suggests reflecting on the essential themes, which characterize the phenomenon. In this experience, reflection implies attempting to capture the meaning of the experiences that were lived. In other words, the essence, or that which grounds the things of our experiences, is the frame. Phenomenology research requires direct contact with the experience in order for the phenomenon to be revealed. This can be a difficult task because all researchers have their own perspective and lived experiences; thus, it is a lot more challenging to articulate a reflective determination and explanation of what an experience means. Because of this, structures based on themes are needed in order to fully understand the experience. My attempts to understand the phenomenon of at-risk students dropping out of school included a review of the literature on early childhood and elementary school as well as school success in middle and high school.

According to van Manen (1990), the fourth research activity is describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting, which requires striving to express

the thoughts of the participants in a manner as clear and precise as possible. As a method for understanding a phenomenon, writing its description through the identified themes should reveal the basic experience in such a way that its foundational nature is revealed (Rothe, 2000).

The fifth research activity is maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon. According to van Manen (1990), this means creating and maintaining a strong relationship to the lived experiences of the participants. More specifically, it is about the researcher's experience of looking for answers to the fundamental research question. In this study, a fundamental question is how an at-risk student began a trajectory of dropping out of school. Van Manen states that, "to do research, to theorize is to be involved in the consideration of the text, the meaning...that render a human science text a certain power and convincing validity" (van Manen, 1990, p. 151). For me, this meant focusing on the deeper level of the phenomenon of seeking to interpret, explain, and understand it.

The last and sixth research activity is balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. It is the relationship a reader has between himself and the text. In other words, there is a relationship created with the intent of understanding the aim of the author. When a reader begins a text, they read a phrase or sentence at a time (part), and although there is still more text to read (whole), the reader immediately forms an opinion about the specific part with respect to the supposed whole (Gadamer, 2004a). The reader then uses the meaning they created of the whole to read the successive parts. This process becomes a cycle of engagement that entails moving back and forth between preconceptions about the whole from studying the parts, then moving back from the parts to the whole and so forth in a circular pattern (Gadamer, 2004b). This process can also apply to the writer of the research study in which the researcher can get so

caught up in the writing of the phenomenon that they can get stuck (van Manen, 1990). For example, in this study, I consistently had to balance the overall design of the research against the parts that were significant and contributed to the work as a whole. I found that balancing personal involvement while staying objective in interpreting the text was often challenging because of biases I had towards the population. These six research activities in phenomenology research help “ward off any tendency toward constructing a predetermined set of procedures, techniques, and concepts that would rule-govern the research project” (van Manen, 1990, p. 29).

For this study, I employed elements from both of Moustakankas’s (1994) and van Manen (1990). First, I used Moustakas’ approach to explore the phenomenon through the description of the participants to conduct the study. Second, I used van Manen’s approach to interpret the experience of the at-risk students through the analysis.

#### Data Analysis Procedures

I selected an approach that Moustakas (1994) proposed, the Modification of the Stevick (1971) – Colaizzi (1973) – Keen (1975) Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data, because it has systematic steps for data analysis procedures and guidance for assembling textual and structural descriptions. I also chose to use this method since the question under investigation aligns well with my personal passion of understanding the elementary school experiences of students at-risk of dropping out of school. Another reason for choosing the Moustakas’ method is that it is more popular among researchers (Creswell, 1998) thus there is a body of literature that provides clear description of the steps of analysis.

The first part of data analysis began before data collection with the practice of *epoche*, in which I, as researcher, set aside all biases to the phenomenon by visiting the site. I did this to get a feel for the types of students that attended the school and to speak

to the program director (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). I then began to delve into Moustakas' (1994) Modification of the Stevick (1971) – Colaizzi (1973) – Keen (1975) Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data by obtaining a full description of the experience of the phenomenon of dropping out of school through the transcribing all 10 of the participants' interviews verbatim. Once completed, I read each transcript with a critical eye, considering each statement with respect to the significance in describing the experience of being at-risk of dropping out of school. As I reviewed each transcript, I adopted the constant comparative method of analysis as used in grounded theory (Boeije, 2002; Fram, 2013; Miller & Crabtree, 2004) by recording all relevant statements and listing each non-repetitive and non-overlapping statement and categorized them into like units (Kolb, 2012).

During this phase, I coded the interviews with descriptive key words on Post It Easel Pad to characterize the content of each interview. Once coding was completed, I cross-analyzed the interviews by categorizing similar topics with a graphic organizer. Using this method, I identified thematic descriptions that contained shared aspects of the experience of being at-risk of dropping out of school. When I compared these descriptions, I searched to identify key moments or events that seemed to be central to the experience of beginning a dropout trajectory. Once I found that the units were saturated and no new descriptions could be extracted, the units were clustered into themes, which were then synthesized into a description of the textures of the experience including verbatim examples from the student interviews. I then reflected on my own textural description and constructed a description of the structures of participants' experience.

For the last step, I constructed a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon the student's experienced. I described experiences of

the at-risk high school students by using the research questions as a frame of interpretation. Using this technique, I identified themes and subthemes that emerged from the interviews to reveal how experiences are shared through stories that show “ways humans experience the world” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The emerging themes were categorized to show commonality among student experiences. The interviews produced descriptive data in which I utilized the participant’s own words in order to construct meaning from their experiences (Healy-Etten & Sharp, 2010).

#### Trustworthiness

I made sure that the internal and external validity in the study was addressed through member checking, triangulation, and generalization (Oliver-Hoyo & Allen, 2006). I focused on the internal validity by using the member checking technique to ensure the accuracy of the interviews by allowing students to review the completed transcripts (Creswell, 2007). Luckily, all the students were still enrolled in the alternative school program and I was able to meet with all of them. This allowed me to clarify content that was hard to retrieve from the audiotape due to intonation, dialect differences, and low volume issues. At this time, I also gave them their compensation for participating in the study. Once I completed the analysis and derived the findings, I met with the program director to review the findings and the analysis of the study. I then ensured the internal validity of the data by using the institutional data I collected from the school student permanent records.

#### Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I explained how the two overarching questions of the study will be answered using data from in depth interviews as well as institutional information collected from the participants’ permanent school records. Next, I revealed important details regarding the school district, the school site, and the participants selected for the study. I

provided the rationale for selecting qualitative research methods for this study. I then explained in detail the reason for selecting phenomenology as appropriate approach for the research design and discussed the two most common approaches found in the phenomenology research. Finally, I provided information regarding data collection and analysis procedures that were used to conduct the research. In Chapter Four, I present the data, based upon thematic categories that emerged through my analysis. In Chapter Five, I discuss the findings, using the three categories of the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide: academic barriers, environmental barriers, and physical/psychological barriers.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

It was evident in this study, as supported by the research literature, that at-risk students face a wide range of barriers that put them in danger of dropping out of school. While the findings represent a presentation of the data, I seek to minimize interpretation by following the methodology of Moustakas' (1994) approach to phenomenological research in which the experiences of participants are highlighted by setting aside the researcher's own experience as much as possible in order to have a clear understanding of the phenomenon being examined. In this chapter, I organized and presented thematically the stories of students who participated in the study. This study presents supporting evidence that students experience a vast array of academic, environmental, physical/psychological, and work-related barriers that hinder their academic success. Some of the students revealed these factors hindered their success even during their elementary school years while others experienced the effect of these barriers in middle school and/or high school.

The students used in this study were identified as at-risk based on specific behaviors and characteristics observed over time that indicated they were more likely to fail academically or drop out of high school. The participants included five male and five female African-American students enrolled in an academic alternative program specifically created for students at-risk of dropping out of high school in South Carolina. The students' characteristics varied in:

- Age ranging from 18 to 20 years old
- Level of student performance in relations to academic achievement
- Representation of diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

The student interview protocol (Appendix A) was guided by the two main research questions of the study:

1) What are the elementary school experiences of at-risk youth attending alternative high school in South Carolina?

- a. What were their academic experiences in school?
- b. What was their environment like while in elementary school?
- c. What were their feelings towards school?

2) Based upon the perceptions of the participants, what could have helped these students do better while in elementary school?

- a. What would have helped them academically?
- b. What would have helped their environmental issues?
- c. What would have helped them psychologically?

The two research questions will be addressed in this chapter and the findings are organized into three main sections that correspond directly to each of the research questions and their sub-questions. For instance, the themes that emerged relating to the first sub-question of research question one, which focused on the elementary school academic experiences of the at-risk students are: transient status, failing a grade level, and large classroom size. The second sub-question pertaining to the student's environmental or home experience while in elementary school includes: death of a family member, limited involvement of father, siblings with school and criminal issues, exposure to domestic violence, and working to assist parents with financial burdens. Additional themes that surfaced relating to environmental factors included: a good relationship with their father, social capital connections that led them to enrolling in the alternative school, and the influence of being part of a church community. The themes that emerged for the third sub-question, which focused on the student's feelings toward school during the



elementary school years varied greatly. The first include a positive elementary school experience due to having good relationships with their elementary school teachers, while the second set of themes had a negative connotation due to experiencing bullying, apathy towards school, and behavioral issues.

The second research question, which focused on what could have helped students succeed in elementary is also broken down into three categories. The first sub-question focuses on assisting students academically through bullying prevention programs and parental involvement. In exploring how students could be assisted with environmental (home-related) issues, students identified that the school could provide counseling programs to assist parents with economic and domestic issues and by having the school staff take the time to create meaningful relationships with students. Students also gave feedback for how to assist others with the psychological aspect of school through the creation of programs to address anger issues and bullying.

In Chapter 5, the study will explicitly examine the usefulness of the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide for understanding the elementary school experiences of at-risk students is argued through the identification of the themes that emerged from the interviews. For instance, whether the most important barriers identified in the framework are also recognized by students interviewed in the study, what is missing and should be added to the framework, or what other realities of elementary education impact at-risk youth. Findings are also reviewed through the lens of the conceptual framework of the at-risk categories included in the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide.

Research Question #1: What are the elementary school experiences of at-risk youth attending alternative high school in South Carolina?

*Academic Experiences in School*

Students in the study shared diverse perspectives on their experience in elementary school. Many of the students reminisced about having fun at school when playing with their friends during recess and going on educational field trips. Others identified at least one teacher who made them feel like they could succeed. A few students shared their experiences on bullying and academic failure. The most common academic themes experienced by student were transiency, grade retention, and the impact of a large classroom size.

*Transient Status*

In most school districts, attendance lines created by the school district determine which school a child will attend depending on the location of their residency and its distance from the school. All of the students revealed that they had good attendance while in school but some mentioned changing schools. Table 4-1 shows the students' attendance history included number of schools attended and attendance records.

For many at-risk students, multiple changes in living situations, not running from truancy issues, was the cause of students having to change schools. At times, the participants in this study were able to finish the school year but often they were withdrawn during the school year. Changing schools during any time of the year can be challenging for students not only because of the academic need for consistent schooling but also because of the social aspect of school interactions. The participants who were transient and changed schools numerous times during their elementary school years often felt like they were not prepared for middle school or high school.

Table 4- 1Participant School Attendance Histories

Student Name	Number of Schools Attended in K-5	Number of Schools Attended in 6-12	Number of Absences in Elementary School	Number of Absences in Middle School	Number of Absences in High School
Courtney	3	3	11	3	2
Devon	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	7	0
Jemari	3	3	1	0	0
Kavion	1	4	0	2	0
Maya	3	3	1	5	5
Shantee	2	2	7	0	3
Talekuz	1	5	10	3	0
Wayne	1	2	2	0	0
Octavia	Not Available	2	Not Available	Not Available	2
Nora	4	2	5	9	3

Devon was a student who stated that he attended three different schools during his elementary grade levels although there was no institutional data available to support or discredit his claim. He recounted that out of those three schools he remembers, three were the same schools from which he withdrew and returned to at different point during the school year and sometimes during a different grade level. Devon's experience with transiency was rooted in his parents' rocky relationship, in which they would often reconcile their relationship for short period of time, and then separate once again. Devon's elementary school experience was very tumultuous because of his mother's inability to be stable in her relationship with his father. Because of this instability, Devon feels he suffered academically. He believes that the changing of schools led him to academic failure:

I really didn't like it because I went to different schools and I really didn't like moving around. I started playing around and I didn't know that it would affect my grades and I still thought I had it pretty easy, and later on I failed first grade, and

then I go back to my previous school, and in every school I've been to I failed at least one point.

He also added his academic achievement began to stabilize when he went to live with his father permanently in the third grade. Unfortunately, the academic damage that had been done in the earlier grade affected his ability to pass the fifth grade. These failures at the elementary school level made him at risk of dropping out of high school, because he did not have a strong foundation to tackle the academic rigor of middle and high school. He also was two years older than most of his classmates, which created social problems with his peers.

Similarly, Nora was a transient student who attended four different elementary schools also due to a parental separation. She remembers being sent back and forth between her mother and father and having to switch schools each time. Although Nora does not remember the specific reasons why she moved to different areas that required her to attend a new school, she did vividly remember that she did not like attending so many different schools and recalls having to work extra hard in middle school because of the gaps acquired from moving so often during elementary school:

I stayed after school, did tutoring. I did everything I needed to do. If I was failing the class, I made sure I got my grades up. I asked for extra help-- uh... what else? If there was extra credit offered, I make sure I did the extra credit.

Nora demonstrated resiliency in overcoming the negative effects that moving caused her academically in middle school, even though she was one of the few students who were able to finish each school year at each of the different elementary schools she attended. Despite being a transient student, Nora had good attendance and still treasures the positive experience with the elementary school teachers at the different schools.

Shantee was a student who also traced her transient elementary school experience back to a parental issue. As she thought back on her mother's issues with drug use, she realized that her transiency began when she was taken away from her mother by the Department of Social Services at the age of three. At first, Shantee and her siblings were placed with her aunt in a nearby city where they stayed until she was in the first grade. When her aunt's health began to deteriorate and she could no longer care for herself and her brother, she was once again removed and placed into numerous foster care homes. The moving around to different schools evoked memories of not being liked by certain elementary school teachers, and being teased by classmates. Although she had grades placing her in the A/B honor roll in elementary school, she felt out of place at school. This feeling continued on to middle school where she continued to struggle socially, but was able to maintain passing grades. Shantee believed that if she had not moved around so much as a child, she would have been more successful in school.

While Shantee's transient living situations were due to her mother's drug use, Jemari's transiency was due to his mother's inability to manage his behavior in school. Jemari added that he attended three different elementary schools because his brothers convinced their mother to move in order to attend a new school that was opening. Jemari shares that even though he enjoyed moving to the new school, the academic work was not challenging enough for him and this would cause him to misbehave in school. Jemari reveals:

It was just me. It was just me causing trouble in school. Not causing trouble just not getting my work done. And she (mom)... couldn't deal with the situation, so we just switched schools so we can meet new people too.

Jemari explained that teachers often called home and scolded him for off-task behavior. His mother's response to the complaints of the school resulted in him being moved to

other schools. And although he continued to live in the same residence, Jamari could not offer an explanation when he was asked during his interview as to why he changed schools so many times.

*Academic Achievements and Failing a Grade Level*

Table 4-2 shows the academic attainment of the students who participated in the study. All of the students in the study had below a B average (3.0 GPA). Almost half of the students had C and D averages combined from middle school and high school grades. When it came to state testing at the elementary level (fifth grade), the students were expected to take the PACT state assessment, which classified student scores into four categories: below basic, basic, proficient or advanced. All but two of the students scored below the basic standard in reading. This means that most of the students did not meet the standard for the content area and they could not demonstrate mastery of the academic content in that subject for the fifth grade. As for math, all but three of the students also performed at the below basic level.

Table 4- 2 Participant Academic Achievements

Student	GPA (Weighted)	Letter Grade	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade Test Scores in Reading (PACT)	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade Test Scores in Math (PACT)	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Test Scores in Reading (PASS)	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Test Scores in Math (PASS)
Courtney	1.633	D+	496 Basic	507 Basic	575 Not Met	558 Not Met
Devon	2.581	B-	476 Below Basic	496 Below Basic	586 Not Met	610 Met
Jemari	1.336	D+	492 Below Basic	484 Below Basic	555 Not Met	563 Not Met
Kavion	1.026	D	487 Below Basic	484 Below Basic	556 Not Met	586 Not Met
Maya	1.678	C-	475 Below Basic	476 Below Basic	555 Not Met	570 Not Met

Table 4.2—Continued

Shanequa	2.037	C	510 Proficient	497 Below Basic	622 Met	571 Not Met
Talekuz	2.541	B-	479 Below Basic	503 Basic	522 Not Met	575 Not Met
Wayne	2.342	C+	492 Below Basic	506 Basic	586 Not Met	579 Not Met
Octavia	2.439	C+	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available
Nora	2.485	C+	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available

As the participants progressed through school onto the eighth grade, only one student achieved at the proficient level in reading on the PASS test. This assessment included three scoring categories: not met, met, and exemplary. Similarly to their fifth grade results, the students equally performed poorly on the PASS test. Only Shanequa and Devon met a standard on their eighth grade state test. Shanequa was also the only student who passed both the elementary and middle school reading tests.

The table also shows that the participants struggled both in elementary school and middle school. Students like Devon, Octavia, and Wayne who were the ones retained in first grade, did not show higher levels of academic achievement in their fifth grade or eighth grade scores. The same is true for students who were retained twice one in the fifth grade and a second time in middle school before their eighth grade year.

Devon who was also one of those students retained in two different grade levels. He failed both the first and fifth grade. He shared that he did not know why he was retained in the first grade. He does believe that his failure in the fifth grade was due not being able to keep up with the high level of rigor. Devon also elaborated that his off-task behavior and playing around in classroom led him to fail the fifth grade. Although his retentions were both in elementary school, his academic achievement did not improve in

middle school.

Like Devon, Wayne could not remember why he was held back in first grade but he identified that the source of his second retention in the seventh grade began with a code of conduct violation in which he aided another student in starting a fire in the boys' bathroom. This action led to a two-week suspension from school. The ten-day hiatus from school triggered his apathy towards his schoolwork. Wayne shared that when suspended, he did not do his work assigned nor did he complete the work missed during his suspension. This caused him to fall further behind academically, which in turn caused him to become even more disengaged in school. He explains, "I was like in that I don't care attitude. Just--I don't know, it just came out. Teenager attitude, I don't know". His attitude and lack of effort led to another grade retention, placing him two years behind his graduating class. When entering eighth grade, his behavior escalated and he was later placed at the disciplinary school for another code of conduct infraction, due to drug possession at school.

Talekuz was another student who failed the seventh grade, who attributed his failure to lacking basic skills not acquired from previous years because he did not pay attention in school:

After I left elementary and I went to middle school, I was like 'I'm smart. I can get this stuff.' So I wasn't really paying attention in class and then when I start looking at the work, I didn't really learn that other stuff in elementary. The stuff they had given me in Cameron Charter was a really hard, and I wasn't learning any of that stuff, so I end up failing the seventh grade.

Talekuz learned his lesson from failing a grade level and what he could have done differently if focusing more on school schoolwork and paying attention. Talekuz also attributed his lack of interest in school to having a crush on a female student. Talekuz



was not the only student that lost interest and focus in school.

Jemari's apathy towards school included getting caught up in the middle school environment and placing his social life, staying out late at night, above his studies. This behavior resulted in sleeping in class and not turning in his work. According to Jemari, his parents were extremely disappointed and upset that he failed the seventh grade. They also made it very clear to him that they would not tolerate any more school failures. He believed this was a lesson he had to learn in order to be able to move on through school.

#### *Large Classroom Size*

When it came to discuss the elementary school environment, most of the students made general comments on how the classroom dynamics impacted their academic achievement. Most of the students believed that elementary school provided them with skills and knowledge needed to be successful in middle school. Jemari was the only student who believed his elementary school did not prepare him for the level of rigor in middle school. Although he remembers that his elementary school was strict with the uniform policy, he believes the free time given in elementary school did not set realistic expectations for middle school:

I think kids shouldn't go to recess as much as they do in elementary school, and have more discipline in elementary school, because you can do more in elementary school then you do in middle school. In middle school, they do not give you recess. There's just too much time in elementary school to play.

The participants shared Jemari's sentiments regarding not being prepared for the next level of schooling but only when it came to middle school and high school. This was especially true when it came to the impact that large class sizes had on their academic achievement. Nora, a student who had never been retained and was an A/B honor roll

student, thought her high school classes had too many students:

I felt as though Stall has too many students... they have over 1000 kids... and there was like thirty-something kids in one class, so I felt like I wasn't getting the attention that I needed to do my work because they were too many kids in one class.

Similarly, Maya also identified that a large class environment prevented her from learning. She said:

I was getting behind in all my classes because in (her school) they have classes with a lot of students in the classes, and when I was trying to get help, I didn't, like, understand and they didn't break it down like they did in elementary--and it was hard.

On a similar note, Wayne alluded to class sizes in his neighborhood high school when talking about what he liked about at his current school. He said, "If I went to (her high school) I wouldn't be as far as I am now because of the classes are the right size... I get everything in (school work). Its good, it's not too overcomplicated." Even though Devon agreed that large class size impacted his academics, he identified a different problem as the reason:

At first I was failing because people was being too loud and I didn't get my work done and it was mostly because they (the other students) weren't doing the work. Over time, they would laugh and talk a lot and don't let the teacher teach. And she would always have to stop and wait till they finish talking and after that I couldn't get work done a lot.

While students pointed out the challenges of not being able to access the content because of the large class sizes, other students highlighted the social issues that arose because of having big classes. Shantee mentioned that attending a big school often led

to “drama” where students would engage in fighting and creating rumors about each other. Courtney shared having troubles at both the neighborhood middle school and high school as both the academic and social aspects of school created barriers for her. In high school, she identified the large number of students in the class as a challenge for her because she was not used to being around so many people. She explained this within the middle school context:

I used to be so close to the teacher, trying to get my work. And when you're trying to learn, everything messes with you that surround you. You always have all the students they were like, 'Courtney, Courtney' and call my name, and try to get answers and I'm trying to concentrate. You have them learn nothing if you cheat, so I wouldn't cheat, so they would get upset and start calling me names and stuff and stuff like that.

The students identified that having a large classroom size affected them at all three levels of schooling: elementary, middle, and high school, although there were distinct reasons connected to the hindrance of academic achievement.

#### Environment While in Elementary School

##### *Death of a Family Member*

A death in the family is an event that affects the academic achievement of a student. In the African-American community, family is a vital component to surviving and succeeding in life and in school (Barbarin, 1983). Students like Nora, Kavion, Wayne, Octavia, and Courtney all experienced a death in the family that altered their academic trajectory in some way. Nora elaborates on the death of her grandmother shattered her world, sharing, “[At one point time in life], my grandmother was the most important person to me. She basically raised me.” Having moved in with her grandmother after her parents divorced, Nora explained that her grandmother stepped up to take care of her when her

mother practically abandoned her. She shared the influence of her grandmother, noting “she taught me everything: how to be independent, never depend on nobody. She’s just another part of me and the way I am now.” Similarly, Wayne also was greatly affected by the death of his grandmother. Wayne explained how the day he returned to school from a suspension, due to a code of conduct violation, was also the day she passed away. Although his grandmother did not live with him, he spent every day after school with her waiting for his mom at his aunt’s house. For him, she was a nurturer and a supporter. Octavia also felt supported by her great-grandmother who she said was the “the backbone of our family.” Octavia added details on her death:

It really impacted me and it hurt me a lot because I was used to always seeing her and I thought she would see me graduate. That was one of the main reasons I went back to school: because she wanted me to go back and that really hurt me.

In her case, her grandmother was the reason she decided to go back to school. Kavion was another student who suffered the loss of a close family member– his aunt. He shared how his mother and his aunt were very close, and how she actively participated in his school success, noting, “She was there when I graduated from (his school); she went to my graduation.” He also added that after graduating from elementary school, she became sicker and sicker, and passed away. Kavion felt that his aunt was one of the few people who accepted him.

Courtney’s experience with loss was unlike any of the other students: her life had been filled with one tragic loss after another. She revealed that she had three family members die within two years’ time. The first was the tragic death of her brother, whom she believes was poisoned by his girlfriend. She recalls:

He died from sugar diabetes, but his girlfriend poisoned him. I was there and I told them. I told them what happened, like I was young and I guess no one believed me, and I let them know what was going on but she (his girlfriend) was like 'Courtney doesn't know what she's talking about; she's lying she's lying,' and when they got to the hospital they did everything, and they found out that I wasn't lying, and that someone did poison him. But they couldn't tell who poisoned him, and the only people over there (at her home) was me and my nephew, and my nephew's older than me, and her, and it was us three of us. I was washing off when all this was going on, and I came down and she gave him some food and I was like, 'Can I have some of that food?' It was on a big plate, and she was like no I'm fixing him a special plate and she was just doing something with his food and it was just unusual. She was pretty screwed up, but (she) didn't put it in ours and I was like I was like something's wrong.

Not only was she traumatized by this experience, but also soon after she lost her grandfather who was another father figure she had in her life:

My grandfather, we used to be together all the time. He was actually like my father. Actually, he played the role that my daddy didn't. He used to take me to places he would go, buy me clothes and shoes and stuff, and he used to do everything for me. If I wanted to go to this place he would take me, but he would say, 'If I can't take you today I think tomorrow,' and he used to do everything for me. He would teach me how to do things. He would talk to me and let me know things. So before he died, I was at summer school, and he told them to call me before he died, and my mama called [said] 'I got some good news and bad news,' and I was like 'What's the good news? I was eating ice cream at the time. The good news is that your grandfather, he loves you, he will always be there for

you no matter what,' and the bad news was that he passed away, and I dropped my ice cream and started crying. At the time, I was at (school) and I was, like, crying I was so upset and I didn't even get a chance to tell him goodbye.

Soon after, Courtney's family suffered the loss yet of another member. The death of her eldest brother was reported as a drive-by shooting in downtown Atlanta. Courtney also recounts many nights where she cried herself to sleep. Courtney recalled how all these deaths placed a lot of stress on her mother and family. She also disclosed that the loss of these family members changed her demeanor from a rambunctious little girl to a quiet, angry, and reserved one. This change caused her to have trouble building relationships with her peers in and out of school due to her angry disposition.

#### *Limited Involvement of Father*

During elementary school, many of the students did not have relationships with their fathers due to parental separation/ divorce, while some never met them in the first place. Shantee and Kavion were some of the students who never met their fathers while Courtney and Octavia had fathers who would come in and out of their lives.

Shantee opened up and revealed that the only memory she has of any male figures in her life were her mother's boyfriends who used to "come in and out of the house doing drugs." She also adds that her foster mother never got married or took on any boyfriends that she could remember. For her, her older brother, who was six years her elder, was the only father figure she had in her life. Similarly, Kavion never met his father, while Courtney's father was in and out of her life. She did not currently have a relationship with her father because of how he treated her when she was younger:

One thing that hurt me was that I called my dad at the time (of elementary graduation) and he did show until after the end of the ceremony and I had let him

know what time, it was ahead of time but he showed up late and that's what made me really upset.

She also recalls years of reaching out to him and having nothing but disappointment to show for her efforts:

I try to get him in my life. My mom tried, too. Actually, when I was little and stuff he used to come pick me up and take me places, especially going out everywhere. As I got older around the age of 13 and he just stopped, he started disappearing. He would call me—well, actually he won't call me. I have to call him and he don't even call to talk to me. He'd call and talk to my mom and talk to her about medicine, asking her [if] she has any ibuprofen medicine or something to help him. But he doesn't call to ask how his daughter is doing or anything. At the time, like I'm in elementary. Now, in middle school he would pick me up after school if I asked, but he always be like, 'Well do you have gas money?' So I would never ask him, and my mama felt like she was though the only parent doing everything and she needed help from my daddy.

Octavia's relationship with her father was very similar to Courtney's. Octavia shared:

My dad was in and out or whatever. That's what made it that I really don't have a good relationship, because, like, he recently came back from New York. He was in New York and he left and he didn't tell any of us. He didn't tell my sisters, not my brother, and we didn't know where he was, and he came back like two months later, and then he went back again without telling us or anything. That was recently. He, he came back just like two weeks ago, I think, and I was calling his phone and everything, and me and his relationship (in the past) I was like a daddy's girl when I was little. So, like, if I called he used to say like I'm coming to

get you and your sister and he would never show up. I will cry my eyes out. I mean, I cried until I got sick.

Many of the students had to face the barrier of living in a single parent home. Some of the students were able to be successful, but some had siblings with different issues.

#### *Siblings with School and Criminal Issues*

All of the students except for Kavion and Talekuz had numerous brothers and sisters. Kavion was the only child, while Talekuz had only one brother. Nora and Mykayla shared that their siblings often got in trouble in and outside of school. Specifically, Nora said:

My oldest brother, he was just like my best friend. He got locked up-- so yeah, that really made a big impact on my life, and that's probably the reason why I am the way I am now cause he just motivates me for the stuff that he didn't do and he couldn't do it, and he's the reason why I do everything I do now, and now I'm just trying to finish high school and do stuff that I thought I couldn't never do.

Mykayla's brother had behavior issues in school, which he also carried to the realm outside of the school and ended up incarcerated. She mentioned that the only reason she ever met the principal of the school was because "of my brother... he used to have problems in school cause he was bad".

#### *Exposure to Domestic Violence*

While most students were at times exposed to violence because of their siblings, Talekuz was a student who at an early age was exposed to domestic violence. He recalls that violence was both from his father and his mother, and that their tumultuous relationship would often result in heated arguments. Talekuz remembered:

At the age of 9 my mommy and daddy get divorced. We were moving with my granny because we were in (city name) at the time, and when they got divorced



we moved in with our granny and my daddy around the corner. After that, after we had moved in with her, it was a couple years later until we moved into a house. We were living downtown at the time, and we move into a house by Food Lion, and like it wasn't a big house. My brother had to share a room. It was only two rooms, and my mama and my sister had to share rooms. So we be living there for about two years, and after that we moved back in with my father and, uh, we were there for probably-- I say for probably year, and they got into a huge fight and I remember stopping my, uh, daddy, cause my momma was about to hit him and I was holding my daddy back cause they already had fight before, and the first time I didn't do nothing, but my brother did so I didn't want him to hit my mother.

He also recounts that the domestic violence episodes resulted in moving from one home to another, which negatively affected his academic achievement. Talekuz's exposure to domestic violence did not affect relationships with his peers as a young adult like Octavia's. Her exposure to domestic violence framed her understanding of romantic relationships.

The first time I saw my mom and her boyfriend fight that impacted me because I was really young and I really didn't understand what was going, but like I was older than my little sister, so she didn't really understand what was going on either. And, like, I would see it, and she would call the police and stuff like that, but then she would like actually take up for him. Like, you know, 'Ahh this didn't happen,' and stuff like that, and that affected me because I thought that was how it was supposed to be.

Not only did Octavia grow up thinking this type of behavior was normal between a man and a woman but also so did her sister:

Another incident was when my sister-- my oldest sister-- she got shot by her boyfriend and I thought that impacted me. It made me really, really, really scared like, I was like, I don't know if she's going to live. That impacted me because, because I thought I was going to lose her and she was one of my best friends. Although Octavia explained that the experience of almost losing her sister terrified her, that event was not enough to prevent her from placing herself in a similar situation. She recollected:

I used to have this ex-boyfriend and we got into an argument, and he hit me and all I could do-- I couldn't even fight back. I was like all I could see was my mom, that's all I could see in my mind. It was like I was her and I said I'm not going to be like my mom. This is not going to happen to me, I'm not going to let that happen to me, so I just called it quits.

Luckily for Octavia, she had the inner strength and courage to leave the abusive relationship. Octavia shared that since that experience, she was taking time to work on herself and focus on graduating from high school. She believes that succeeding in school and working towards attending college is more important than a romantic relationship.

Maya was another student who experienced domestic violence from a boyfriend she met in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, who not only was physically abusive towards her, but also got her pregnant. In explaining the nature of their relationship she noted:

He was a good guy at first, and then after the first year of our relationship, that's when he started getting kind of physical-- like he used to push me, used to boss me around. I didn't like it.

She believed that her boyfriend began to become abusive a year into their relationship, after seeing his brother mistreat his girlfriend. Maya stopped the cycle of violence by threatening to stab him if it continued. Her boyfriend then distanced himself from her.

Soon after, she found out that she was pregnant, so she initiated a relationship with him again. After her initial threat of stabbing him, Maya reported that he never showed any violence or aggression towards her again. On the contrary, her baby's father is now one of her bigger supporters in graduating from high school. She shared that although they do not live together, he is an active parent and that he secured a job at night so he can take care of their child while she goes to school during the day.

#### *Working to Help Parents*

The financial burdens of a household sometimes cause students to have to work in order to help their parents meet their basic needs. Octavia was a student who identified that working while attending school, led her to drop out of school. She lamented on her experience of having to work while attending school in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade:

I started working at [pizza place], and before then I would blame it on me not going to school because of work, because I could've gotten up and went to school every morning, but it was my choice not to. I don't understand why I just started getting so lazy, and when I was at [city name], I was in a certain math class and, like, you know-- if you miss five days, that credit is denied. So, I missed so many days in one year I was not able to make up everything, so I had to start over. So when I went to math class one day, the teacher was like 'Why do you even go to school? Well, you shouldn't even come back.' And after that day I didn't went back.

Octavia mentioned that the fatigue from ending her late night shift at 11 o'clock caused her to struggle to wake up on time for school. Octavia added that her mother was unaware that she was not attending school, because she would leave the house early for work. The lack of parental supervision also made it easier for her not to wake up and

make it to school. Octavia also discussed the impact that a teacher's comment made on her and her decision to drop out of school:

That teacher really, really...hurt my feelings when she said that. Even though I act like a tough girl, she really [influence] me when she said that, because I was like, it doesn't matter what I do, doesn't matter how many times I've come to school. Even if I only go to school once a month, I feel as though no teacher should tell a student that they shouldn't come back. 'There's no reason for you to even come back to school.' That really made me feel really low about myself.

Octavia felt very strongly that a teacher should never tell a student not to attend school. She added that the only reason she was able to go back to school was by switching schools. Talekuz was another student who worked during high school. Through the help of his stepfather, he landed a job as a bus boy in a premier restaurant downtown. Contrary to Octavia's experience, Talekuz felt that working part-time not only did not affect his grades but also actually helped him be better at multi-tasking and getting his work done. Both students needed to work to help their families. The result of working while attending school was very different for each of these students, perhaps due to other factors, such as their resiliency level and commitment to finish school.

#### Feelings Toward School

##### *Positive Elementary School Experience*

When exploring the elementary school experiences, students shared positive stories about school and their interactions with teachers and other students. Very few students mentioned that elementary school either did not give them a sound academic foundation for later schooling and/or did not support them emotionally/socially. Nora alluded to having fun in elementary school and developing a special bond with a few teachers. She reminisced:

In elementary, I remember it being fun, being around my favorite teachers, just having a good time. Elementary was the best days. You could have one-on-one time with the teachers, you could've... it wasn't really how it is now. In elementary, they was attached to you. In middle school they can't, they let you go be on your own. It was just like-- it was just the best days (laughing). It was just unexplainable, like you have that one-on-one bond with the teachers. I mean you could have that in high school but it wasn't how elementary teachers were.

She also elaborated about a specific teacher that she felt really cared about her and was the best teacher she'd ever had, because this teacher helped her no matter her problems, and even made herself available outside of school hours. Nora also vividly remembered receiving help from her teachers especially when it came to her academic struggles. For her, teachers would stay after school and offer tutoring as well as extra credit to help her with her grades. She also included memories of activities and relationships she experienced with classmates during the holidays and different school-wide activities, such as cupcake walks and green eggs and ham day.

Devon shared similar stories in which recess, field trips, and caring teachers were the norm. His favorite memories include playing in physical education classes and learning different sports from the teacher such as kickball, baseball, and particularly basketball, in which his physical education teacher taught him to dribble and how to bounce the ball in between his legs. Another teacher that really made a positive impact was his English teacher, who helped him academically:

She always help me with a lot of stuff that I do and I never hesitate to ask her anything. I just go and ask her about this question, what about this answer, and she be telling me a lot of steps.

His relationships with his friends were so strong and he felt that his two best friends were almost like his brothers. Talekuz highlighted how his teachers not only built relationships with students, but also created partnerships with the parents. He said, "She [the teacher] really knew my mama. They had a real good connection." Talekuz's relationship with his teacher assured that he not only did well in elementary school but also that he had good behavior. Other students also had positive experiences with their elementary school teachers especially when it came to teachers rewarding their efforts. They remember the teachers being nice and taking the time to ensure the students were learning. They also elaborated on how elementary school created reward systems for students who achieved academically and demonstrated good behavior. They also added how the principal supported the teachers with this initiative by creating special principal treats for the students.

One of Octavia's teachers not only helped her be successful in elementary school, but continued to support her throughout her academic career, all the way to becoming a high school senior. Her teacher assured that her mother knew how she was progressing academically, put up with her disrespectful behavior in school, and supported her by attending her awards ceremonies. Octavia also identified her first grade teacher as a teacher who cared for her students in a motherly way:

My first grade teacher, truly [genuinely] cared about the students and, like, when they cared, it was not, like, 'You can do whatever you want.' Just, like, they actually really cared, and if something happened to me, like if I was to act out in class, she would pull me aside, or wait and really adjust the situation. Like if she talked to one of their kids at home, not like in a disrespectful way. She really acted like we were her kids, so I don't think that they could've of did anything better.

Courtney was another student who reflected on how her elementary school teachers tried to help her be the best student she could be:

When I needed help they [teachers] would always come and help me without a fuss, and it would say, 'Courtney, if I don't get to you right now I'll get back to you in a little while.' And they used to, like, instead of just sitting the people down in front of them, they would explain to me, and if I got frustrated, they would sit and help me. They would help me with the first ones so I can understand the rest of them, and actually taught me stuff that I didn't know. My science teacher, she taught me a lot of stuff I didn't know and we did a lot of science projects and fun stuff like that. Social studies was my best subject as well. We did a lot of stuff and we learned.

Courtney also mentioned her school principals were staff members who contributed to her having a positive elementary school experience. Maya shared that she had a positive elementary school experience as well because the students were placed in developmentally appropriate classes. She shared, "In elementary it was like they had testing it was called PACT testing and they put you in the right classes that you need, but in middle school we didn't have that." She also identified one teacher who supported her with the issues she was facing at home. Like the other students, Jemari also had positive experiences in elementary school. He recounted having to tuck in his shirt, learning how to speak respectfully to adults, and the students learning how to share and get along. He specifically remembered his first grade teacher, who was a laid-back older lady who ensured all of her students would complete their work and learn. This teacher also sent Jemari to the principal's office as much as possible to help him and other students get themselves together. He also spoke of his second and third grade teacher in the same manner; both were respectful, kind, and wanted him to do his best in school.

A few of the students shared that they had a teacher at one point or another who was like a second mother to them. Jemari was one of the students who repeatedly referred to his teachers as mother-like figures. He said, "She [kindergarten teacher] was like another mother, because I was young at the time so she would baby all of us. [She would] just kept us going, kept us laughing, she used to joke with us." He also shared that when he was in school, the staff would make school feel like a second home by treating students well, feeding them, and talking to them when they were struggling with any type of issue. The teachers would "pull you aside and talk to us...they just kept our heads going when we were feeling down. They knew everything when we was down." He also talked about how teachers would make sure the students would have everything they needed to be successful in school:

[Teacher at her school], she was like a mother... like a grandmother, she made sure we had a belt. If we didn't have one, she would get one and make sure our shirt was tucked in. She was just strict, but nice, too.

Wayne identified his first grade teacher, the one who retained him, as a mother-like figure. He said, "she was so nice, she really was like another mom basically."

Although many of the students felt they made connections with teachers who cared about them, some of the students experienced social problems at school that their teachers could not help them resolve.

### *Bullying*

Dealing with bullying was one of the barriers that several of the students had to face during elementary school, as well as in middle school and high school, that impacted their schooling in one way or another. Devon got into several fights in school due to bullying in elementary school. He felt that the students bothered him because they thought he was one of the weaker students. Although he never reached out to teachers



for assistance with being teased, he believed that in order to get it to stop, he had to show that he was physically able to stand up to them. Wayne added although he also got into several altercations, although the school did not discipline him:

The teacher saw that they were bothering me and they stopped. And then next thing they start bothering me a lot. I was like, the teacher know that he be bothering me now, so I didn't get in trouble, but he got in trouble, because he keep bothering me and I be telling him to stop and all that.

Similarly, Shantee experienced bullying in elementary school starting in the second grade. She recounted, "The students really didn't like me because I was always smaller than everybody else. They used to pick on me and stuff." She reveals that teasing continued well into the third grade. Unlike Devon, Shantee was not really bothered by the peer conflicts in elementary school. She revealed that during the period when she was bullied in school, she was still able to maintain her grades. The severity of the bullying increased when the same students who had picked on her in elementary school ended up also attending the same middle school. She recounted getting teased at school and on the school bus, often being called names such as "Roach," and having to endure physical acts of teasing such as pulling her hair. Not only did this experience created a negative connotation about school, it also shaped the way she interacted with people:

When we were outside they said, 'Fat Albert,' and it was a joke coming back at me, and we were laughing and they said, 'they're not laughing with you, Shantee, they're laughing at you.' And that really just sticks in my head. I was like what are you talking about? So, I don't have friends. I have associates, because everyone who says they're your friends, they aren't your friends, so I just stay to myself.

Although the school tried to help Shantee with the teasing, the problem continued. Even Shantee's mother said there was not much that could be done about the teasing when

she came to her for help. Because of the bullying, Shantee became more withdrawn, and her grades severely suffered in high school. The school counselors recommended that she attend the academic alternative school in hopes of keeping her on track to graduate with her class.

Another student who was impacted by bullying was Kavion. Although he said he knew that he was different starting in elementary school, his experience with bullying occurred mostly in middle school. The source of him being bullied was due to his sexual orientation. Teachers tried to assist Kavion with the bullying but it still continued. He also acknowledged that other students had similar experiences as he said, "I saw other people that got picked on because you know they was gay." One of the few things that made this time period bearable for Kavion was that his cousin also attended his school, and her popularity would stop the bullies from bothering him when she was around. He remembered that the experience "wasn't all bad times, but I just wish I would have something different." Kavion recounted knowing he was gay as far back as elementary school. Although he was never teased about his sexual orientation as an elementary school student, the knowledge of his sexual orientation made him extremely quiet and shy. These personality traits, along with his orientation, made him an easy target for bullying in middle school, which resulted in a decline in his academic achievement. Kavion said that when he went to high school, the bullying ceased. He believes that in high school no one cared anymore that he was gay. He also shared that he felt safe at the academic alternative school, and there, he has been able to make friends.

#### *Apathy Towards School*

Students who were teased or experienced other barriers often suffered from lack of motivation and apathy towards school. Students that had been retained in school identified apathy as the main source of their academic failure, while only a few identified

the school environment as being challenging. Jemari was a student who was distracted by the social aspect of schooling. He recognized:

I met up with some friends I grew up with and I was just in that school environment and I lost focus. I was doing work but not turning it in, you know, just not being myself. Just following and being a follower sleeping in class, not getting sleep at night.

Jemari revealed that his father, with whom he lived with, was unaware of his low academic progress:

You know it was easy to come home and tell him one thing, that yeah I'm doing my work and doing what I got to do, but when I got to school I really wasn't doing it. Not paying attention in class, just distracted by a lot. Girls too.

Also a school athlete, Jemari shared that he struggled to maintain his grades during the off-season. He reported that during the off season, he not only began hanging around the wrong crowd, but he also found it challenging to complete his work, because he did not have the motivation to pass his classes in order to play. Unfortunately, Jemari learned to pay attention in school and to get his work done by failing the seventh grade.

Like Jemari, Kavion also suffered from a lack of motivation due to his experiences with teachers simply passing him on the next grade level, even though he was not performing academically. Kavion identified that his apathy towards school began in middle and continued into high school because of the social conflicts he encountered due to his sexual orientation. Although he had failing grades, Kavion felt that his teachers did not care, so they continued to pass him to the next grade level. When he got into high school and changed schools, he did not apply himself academically, because he believed that the teachers would continue to pass him like they had in middle school. This resulted

in him failing the tenth grade. His apathy soon changed when he moved to an environment where he was accepted, despite his sexual preferences.

### *Behavior Issues*

When looking at students who struggled with school, it is important to explore if any of them had behavior issues or problems in school. Several of the students connected their academic achievement to poor behavior and conduct problems in school. Devon was one of the students who admitted to fighting a lot in school. He said:

I used to be a real bad kid. I used to get into a lot of fights with my brother. They (other students) would mess with me first, or they would hit me for something, and I just finished the job off and I be hitting them.

He attributed a lot of his fights to his position as youngest of three brothers and he often had to learn to defend himself. Jemari was another student who also engaged in fighting in school. His reason for fighting was sticking up for a neighborhood friend. He acknowledged, "A girl I grew up with was telling me another student was bothering her, so I went and confront that student and we just started fighting". Jemari felt he needed to stand up for this girl because they had grown up together, and he considered her almost like a sister. Jemari was not the kind of student who sought adult assistance with the issue. Jemari reflected:

I wasn't that kind of student that would run and tell the teacher they were always bothering her. Well, she went to a couple of them [teachers] and was like this guy is bothering me and whatnot, and she said that the teachers really wasn't doing nothing, and they talk to him about it. But then she came to me. I guess he didn't like what I said about him so we both got riled up.

Jemari discussed that the fight led to him being suspended from school for ten days, which also caused him to fall behind in school. The suspension added additional strain to

his academic achievement and his grades suffered because of it. A female student who had a disciplinary record in school was Maya who said her negative behavior in school began when another student was talking about her to other students. She noted:

Basically, the other girl, she was sending people over to tell me what she had to say... because I confronted her and she got upset and said 'do something.' I didn't do anything. She pushed me, and I pushed her down, and then we just started fighting.

Mikalya elaborated that the girl she fought with would comment on her looks, especially about her hair and clothes, so she, "went up to her and I said, 'Why are you worrying about me? Worry about yourself.' That's how we started fighting". When probed about why she thought this student was focusing on her, Maya stated that she did not know the reason, but she assumed that the other student simply did not like her. All three students, none of whom identified themselves as the initial aggressor, dealt with their social issues through fighting.

Octavia and Wayne were students who struggled with similar behavior issues. Octavia remarked that her behavior issues consisted of being disrespectful to adults starting in elementary school. She defined her behavior as being:

Really disrespectful. I was acting out. I would not do my work, and by me not doing my work and me acting out, it was showing, like in my grades. I was really behind my fourth grade year. I was really behind. I was like just being real defiant for some reason. I don't know, I don't know.

Octavia's behavior, according to what she recalled, was not triggering by any specific home or school-related problems. In middle school, the behavior became so severe that her mother often would have to go up to the school. During that same time period, Octavia struggled listening to her mother, and often displayed disrespectful behavior

towards her as well. While Octavia struggled being respectful and doing her work, Wayne struggled with negative peer pressure that led him to several school suspensions and being sent to the district's disciplinary school in the eighth grade for drug possession.

Wayne recounts:

I was in the bathroom with this kid named Tanner, and he started a fire in the bathroom, so I got in trouble for that, too. I threw the toilet tissue and left. He lit it on fire. So it was like, yeah, I had something to do with it. So I got suspended for a while, like 10 days, then I came back, so I was all mixed up with stuff.

With respect to his suspension, he shared that he did not do any work during his absence, and that he returned to school with an apathetic attitude towards his teachers and his schoolwork. He also shared that he began smoking marijuana soon after that incident with a friend from school. Wayne and three other friends were caught with the marijuana at school. Although he admitted to being an occasional smoker, he insisted that the marijuana he was caught with was for a female classmate and not for him. Wayne and several of his friends were sent to the disciplinary alternative school where his apathy for school increased due to the discipline school's slower pace in following the district curriculum.

No matter the barrier, all but a select few of the students interviewed experienced some sort of academic barrier in school. Although a majority of these students had positive academic elementary school experiences, the few that did not felt the impact of those barriers as they continued on to the next stage of their academic careers.

Research Question # 2: What Could Have Helped Students Succeed in Elementary  
School?

Protective Academic Factors

*Retention as a Positive Experience*

Out of all the participants, only one female student was retained. Like most students, Octavia could not remember why she was retained at such a young age. But unlike the other participants, she is the only one who saw her retention as a positive experience. She believed that her retention in first grade helped her get a better foundation in school because later on in elementary school she was selected to participate in the Gifted and Talented program. The experiences she had in this program helped her be selected to participate in honors classes in both middle and in high school.

Octavia felt that retention helped her, but most of the other students that were retained, did not feel the same. The research literature on retention concurs with the experience of the majority of the students that retention has more negative effects on a student's academic achievement than positive. In this scenario, we cannot be certain that retention did indeed help Octavia since there is no other information, such as institutional data, that supports her claim. We can only speculate that the skills she learned in the Gifted and Talented program are what gave her the confidence and reassurance to think that she was doing well in school.

*Social Capital Connections*

A majority of the students revealed that someone in their life played a role in introducing them to the academic alternative school. This school is especially designed to assist students to recover credits in order for them to graduate from high school. Some of the students greatly benefitted from a social capital connection that recommended their participation in a school program.

A teacher recommended the program to Shantee because of her low to failing grades. Her inability to overcome the social aspect of school caused her grades to truly suffer. Because she had a good relationship with this teacher, she toured the school, applied, and interviewed for a spot. Devon recalled his aunt telling him about the school when he was struggling in middle school. He also heard of the positive experiences his three cousins had at the school:

I have three cousins that went there and she [aunt] told me about the school to better help me more, and so I just been thinking about it. And like my middle school year, everybody in my class, they keep being loud and I couldn't get my work done, so that's when I decided I don't want to be at the school no more. I want to go to that Academy. I think I can do better and they can help me out.

When I got here my first year they help me with a lot of my work I had a real good time at the school and I did things like I never done before.

Talekuz learned about the academy from his mother who heard through a friend about the school. The program appealed to Talekuz because having failed the seventh grade, he was already one year behind his graduating class. He heard the school would accelerate him enough to be placed in his original grade level. Wayne also learned about the academy through his mother who was informed by a school counselor while he was attending the disciplinary alternative school. Wayne believes that this recommendation was the right setting for him because of the small classes in which he felt he could focus more and not get into as many problems.

Although almost all of the students had a person in their life that informed them of the opportunities available to them at the alternative school, many of them had no one to positively influence them before they reached the point of academic failure. The students



with support mentioned how these social connections enhanced their experiences and opened their eyes to the possibility of changing their situations.

### *Parental Involvement*

The students sampled had many common family dynamics and characteristics. For example, all but two experienced parental separation or divorce. Although most of the students primarily lived in single parent homes, almost all of them identified at least one of their parents as their biggest supporter.

Courtney's mother always tried to make sure she did her best:

My mother influenced me a lot, because even though I would give up all the time, she would always encourage me to do better even though she was a little hard on me. She will always say, 'Courtney, you can't do this because if you do this the outcomes will be this.' She would always encourage me to do better than what I would do, and I would always think that she was being hard on me. I would say, 'Mama you're always being hard on me,' and I would get upset. And I said that she was being mean but she was always right saying all the things to do right in my life.

Like Courtney, Nora believed that her mother was the most supportive person in her life. She believed that her mother was just the type of person that wanted her to do her best and to do better than she did in school, especially because her father never graduated from high school. Talekuz was another student who also had a supportive mother. Although his parents were still together, he felt that his mother "always talks to me about stuff like school and stuff and when I do something she always tells me something positive to keep me going." She was his positive motivator to continue attending school when he almost dropped out.

For Octavia, her family and support system consisted of her grandfather and her aunt. She details how her grandfather was a motivating force for her to graduate from high school:

I wanted to make my mom happy and I wanted to see my mom and my granddads face this year [when she graduates]. My mom doesn't have to pay for senior pictures or anything. He [her grandfather] wants to pay for them because he really, really is a part of me, but what I'm doing at the school and stuff like that makes me feel good about myself. When I wasn't in school he [would] call and check up on me but he would not give me money. And now, since I've been in school, he will come calling to check up on me and say, 'I have some money for you' out of the blue. And I was like, 'Why is he giving me money?' And he talked to me about, you know, why I'm giving you this, because I'm proud of you, and I see that you're trying, and that's all that I want. I want you to try. He doesn't care if I go to college; he just wants me to get a diploma. That's really why came back to school.

Her aunt was also another person who consistently talked to her about making plans for her future. As an avid music lover, Octavia had hoped to study music at a college after graduation. Her aunt's influence now has her thinking about becoming a nurse first so she can have a stable income while she pursues her musical dreams.

Although these students did not come from traditional homes, they all had key people in their lives that tried to advise them and motivate them to stay in school. According to the research, these students did not receive the type of parental support that has been found to increase academic achievement. Even so, the research does very clearly say that students who do have parental support have higher levels of academic achievement.

### *Creating Meaningful Relationships with Students*

Several of the students shared the belief that the lives of students could be improved if the students had the opportunity to make meaningful relationships with an adult in the school. Nora specifically believes that time spent one-on-one would help teachers build a relationship with a student. This relationship will allow students to open up regarding home issues that could be possible barriers to their academic success. She believes this is key because, “you never know. Somebody may be happy all the time, but deep inside they have something going on.” Jemari was another student who mimicked Nora’s advice. He was certain that getting to know the students personally and giving them the one-on-one time would allow students at one point or another to open up about home issues, and also ask for help if they are struggling academically. Devon’s advice was similar but focused on how teachers and staff treated the students. He conceived that teachers should elevate both the good and the struggling students by raising their expectations of them.

### Environmental Protective Factors

#### *Positive Relationship with Father*

Approximately half of the students in the study shared that they had a relationship with their fathers. Maya shared that her father and mother went through a rough patch for a couple years and almost divorced, due to her father doing “things” behind her mother’s back. She elaborated that even through that rough time, her father was always supportive of her mother’s rules and consequences in the home. Her father would often have the say on whether or not she was able to get off punishment early. She also shared that her father played a key role in her character development. Her father taught her to “stand up for myself” and not let anyone “put you down.” Similarly, Jemari’s father supported his mother’s discipline decisions, even though he did not live

with him. He remembers that his father “would be on me (laughing)...even though he didn't live with us but he was still a father figure in my life.”

Talekuz's comments about his father were similar to Jemari's. He shared that his father was in his life and that he lived close enough to see him on regular basis, but his brother had a broken relationship with their father due to being older and having felt the impact of their parents' divorce. Talekuz's father also supported his academic success by assuring that he understood that attending school was mandatory. Likewise, Wayne's father consistently supported and urged him to do well in school. He recalled, “My dad, he wants me to get my diploma, no matter what, as long as I get it.” Nora's parents also divorced when she was in elementary school. She recalled how hard it was for to be separated from both of her parents, and having to split her time during the week with her mother and on the weekend with her father. Nora felt that even though her parents' divorce was one of the toughest experiences she had to deal with in her childhood, she was able to “keep her head up and strive for the best.”

Devon's experience with his father was unique because he went to go live with his father in middle school. After his parents separated, his father participated in his life and fulfilled his obligations as a provider by assuring that he had basic needs of clothing and school supplies. Devon and his father began to build a strong relationship when his mother became unstable and decided to let him go live with him. His father taught him to play sports, but more importantly, taught him how to be a man:

He (his father) mostly lets me learn from my mistakes. What I did, and like sometimes when I do something mostly bad, he just beat me a little, but not too much. And I be like, I had to learn how. Right now, I have pay the phone bill, start paying the cell phone bill, so he just wants me to pay \$15 or \$50 a month to learn to be responsible.

Devon's father wanted him to graduate from high school, but also wanted him to learn some responsibility along the way.

For the students who did not have their fathers in their life, many expressed how they wished they had them. Many also believed that having a father in their life would have helped their financial situations and their behavior. These stories demonstrate that establishing positive relationships with parents, particularly with a father, can bring stability and support to the lives of at-risk students.

#### *The Influence of Being Part of a Church Community*

For students like Courtney, Shantee, Kavion, Talekuz, and Wayne, church served as a form of social capital that influenced their lives in many distinct ways. Wayne remembers going to bible study on Sundays and creating a strong friendship with a younger parishioner. This relationship was important to Wayne because when he was retained, this boy was only a grade level under him. This allowed him not to feel so out of place and alone at the school when his other friends moved on. At first, Courtney's experience with the church was negative, as she recounted the numerous gossipers who made attending church unpleasant for her family. She elaborated on how the behavior of the parishioners was completely contrary to what they were preaching at the church. She remembers being judged for how she dressed and her family structure. Luckily, this experience changed when her family moved to another part of town. She acknowledged:

We actually went to church every Sunday because we used to live in [city name].

In the church we went to, they would talk about you, but God says come as you are. So, when we moved from John's Island to downtown, we started going to church in [city name], and the people there, they don't talk about you, and they are nice, and things are better there.

Contrary to Courtney's experience, Shantee's attendance in church led her to finding a better home. As a student, she was removed from her family by the Department of Social Services because her mother used drugs and neglected her and her brother. After being taken in for a while by a sick aunt, Shantee and her brother bounced around a few foster homes. She remembered:

My momma was on drugs and they called DSS on me and my mom because they found me like at two or three years old walking around in diapers and stuff, and they didn't know what was going on, so they called the DSS on us. And then my auntie took me and my brother in, and then she got sick and we went into a foster home. There was this lady at the church and she used to be over the little kids choir, and my brother went up to her one Sunday and was like, 'I think you should adopt me and my sister.' And she did, and then we been with her ever since.

All these students understood the role the church played in their lives. Many other students mentioned that they attended church but it was so sporadically that they did not have any meaningful experiences to share. It is uncertain by the limited experiences of the students with a faith-based community if they could have benefited from association to such an organization.

#### Protective Psychological/Physical Factors

##### *Anger Management*

Several of the students identified that they suffered from anger issues early on during their elementary school years and throughout the rest of their schooling. All of these students pinpointed anger as a factor that hindered their success in school. Devon remembers how his anger issues would lead to outburst in class:

I had a temper problem, yeah. My temper problem, every time somebody like be dissing me, I blew up. I had a temper problem. I try to count to 10, and every time everybody hit me up, I'd blow up, hit me up again, and then the third time they hit me up. I'd just lose it.

He revealed that the cause of his anger was due to being bullied in elementary school. Because he was considered weak, his brothers and cousins would fight with him to get him tough. He believed that always having to fight them led him to having a short fuse.

Other students who shared having problems with anger and controlling their emotions were Maya and Octavia. Like Devon, Maya's anger issues stemmed from a rough transition into kindergarten and escalated when she began being teased in school. Maya's anger issues never escalated to physical actions or outburst of rage but they were serious enough that her elementary school recommended that she be moved to a special school with a program to assist her with her aggression and anger that would manifest through yelling and throwing things in class. Although her mother tried to work with the school to stop the teasing and assist her with her behavior, nothing was resolved and the teasing continued.

Octavia's experience with anger was very different than both Devon's and Maya's. Her anger manifested itself with the death of her grandmother, who was the backbone of her family and practically the person who raised her. Her death caused Octavia a lot of pain and her death:

Really hurt me. It made me become angry. I'm the type of person that doesn't talk about a lot of things. I don't know how to express my feelings to certain people, and then that's when trust comes in, and I don't know who to express my feelings to because I don't know who's really going to listen, and she was the one that was really there for me.

For Octavia, her grandmother was also one of the main reasons she decided to go back to school and graduate.

### Conclusion

While the findings of this chapter were organized thematically, they were also organized to answer the two research questions of the study. I revealed the data that emerged from the academic, environmental, and psychological experiences of at-risk students. I also brought to light the opinions of the students in regards to what might have helped them academically, environmentally, and psychologically while in elementary, middle, and high school.

The first research question was answered by the analysis of the data that emerged from the interviews and the institutional information gathered. Specifically, the at-risk students from this study experienced academic barriers relating to transient status, failing a grade level, and large classroom sizes. The students also experienced environmental factors such as the deaths of family members, limited involvement of father, siblings with school and criminal issues, exposure to domestic violence, and working to help their parents. Psychological factors that impeded the success of at-risk students included issues with bullying, apathy towards school, and behavior issues. Only one positive psychological factor was determined, which was a general positive feeling about their elementary school experience.

The second research question relating to what could have helped students (i.e., protective factors) be more successful academically in elementary school was answered by the emergence of the themes that fall under the academic, environment and psychological categories. Academic factors students identified as supporting them are retention as a positive experience, social capital connections, and parent involvement. Environmental factors such as a positive relationship with their father, and the influence



of being part of a community church were identified as being supportive to students' success. Protective psychological/physical factors would have been anger management.

In chapter 5, I will discuss the usefulness of South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide for understanding the experiences of students in elementary school by identifying and comparing elements of the SC framework with the most important barriers that emerged from the interviews. Lastly, I discuss the implications of the research study on theory, research, and practice.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the elementary school experiences of high school students who were at-risk of dropping out of high school. Research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 10 at-risk high school students along with a review of institutional data acquired from the school district site (South Carolina Department of Education, 2013). This chapter reviews, compares, and discusses the findings of this study as identified by the themes in the Literature Review (Chapter Two) as well as any additional themes that emerged in the Findings (Chapter Four) using Van Manen's hermeneutic approach to phenomenological analysis. Summary of key findings presented in relation to the research literature provides also the basis to address the usefulness of the South Carolina At-Risk Framework for theory and practice. The chapter outlines the implications of the study findings on school policy and practice. It also reveals the effect of academic, environmental, and/or psychological barriers on the lives of students who struggle because of those risk factors during elementary, middle, and high school. This chapter concludes with suggestions for further research in the realm of studies of at-risk students.

#### Summary of Key Findings

Two research questions framed this study:

1. What are the elementary school experiences of at-risk youth attending alternative high school in South Carolina?
2. What could have helped students succeed in elementary school?

The two research questions were answered in Chapter Four through the description of students' experiences following Moustakas' phenomenological approach. In Chapter 5, I used an analysis of the current at-risk literature, as well as the data from the study to

answer how useful the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide's framework was for understanding the experiences of at-risk students in elementary school. This discussion is presented in this final chapter and employs hermeneutic phenomenology that requires reflecting on the essential themes that characterize the phenomenon in order to capture the meaning of the lived experiences of the participants (van Manen, 1990). Using this approach, I selected the themes that students revealed most impacted their academic achievement. The themes included attendance, grade retention, large classroom size, socio-economic status, social relationships, bullying, parental involvement, behavior problems in school, and school disengagement.

#### *Attendance*

Although the research literature identifies attendance, or absenteeism, as an at-risk barrier of high school dropouts that can be traced as far back as the first year of school (Darney, Reinke, Herman, Stormont & Jalongo, 2013), participants from this study revealed that they had good attendance in elementary school. Institutional data collected by the school district supports their reporting and shows that only a few students missed more than ten days during their entire elementary school experience. Most of the students recalled missing school due only to illness. These findings go against the research literature, which often found that high school dropouts or students at-risk of dropping out of school suffer from absenteeism. Findings also contradict other studies that show that one in ten children living in poverty are chronically absent from school (Chang & Romero, 2008).

Another interesting point is that the findings do not align with the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide, which stresses the importance of good attendance. The section on critical checkpoints of readiness clearly suggests that

attendance is a factor that should be used as a benchmark for academic readiness in the third and fifth grade. In this study, none of the at-risk students suffered from absenteeism in either of those grade levels or in any other grade level.

### *Retention*

When it comes to retention, only one student's experience aligned with the small body of research that shows that retaining a student in a grade level can be a positive intervention strategy for a struggling learner (Gleason, Kwok, & Hughes, 2007). The other students who were retained in elementary, middle, and/or high school all experienced the same outcomes as found in research, such as social maladjustment, a negative attitude towards school, and behavior problems (Holmes, 1989; Knesting, 2008). Many of the retained students elaborated feeling ineptitude due to being held back. The outcomes of the participants, especially those apathetic towards school and demonstrating behavior problems, should be a warning for administrators and teachers who believe students should be retained.

This is also a difficult issue to address because the findings of the study also revealed that retention was a type of wakeup call for many of the students who were not putting forth effort in their studies. Almost all of the participants who were retained mentioned that being held back was a motivating factor in enrolling in the academic alternative school in order to graduate with their original class. For some, being retained was a motivator to pass their schoolwork. Unfortunately, the participants' state assessment data did not fully support their claims that they may have passed their courses but still did not demonstrate grade level content proficiency. More specifically, all of the students who were retained scored mostly below basic in their middle school state assessments and/or below proficient test scores on their high school state assessments.

These findings are in line with the research literature that suggests that retention does not improve long-term academic achievement (Jimerson, 2001).

Diametrically, the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide also aligns with the findings of research in that it mentions retention as one of the most important indicators that school districts must consider in identifying at risk the students but it only mentions retention in connection with high absenteeism and truancy. In this study, none of the participants experienced being retained due to either high absenteeism or truancy issues. The guide does not provide indicators, tiered programs suggestions, or emphasis for practioners for retention due to low academic achievement or lack of motivation etc. This is another area in which the framework is lacking and is in need of qualitative research to strengthen it.

#### *Mobility*

Participant transiency findings also aligned to the research literature. Few of the students shared that their residential mobility was due to issues such as domestic violence, while most of the student's experienced parental mobility, due to divorce or parental separation. Students shared that the transiency affecting them the most happened during elementary school. This aligns to the research suggesting that mobility during elementary school decreases the chances a student will graduate from high school (Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996). Institutional data revealed that the participants experienced just as much if not more transiency beginning their sixth grade year than they did all of their elementary school years combined. Some of this data can be explained for students who went to the disciplinary alternative school more than one time. For others, the experiences relating to affecting academic achievement were more profound in elementary school than in middle or high school.

The mobility research also indicates that transiency affects math scores more than reading scores in third through eighth grade (Parke & Kanyongo, 2012; Voight, Shinn, & Nation, 2012). For the participants, fifth grade state assessment data aligned with the research in which students that attended three elementary schools or more scored lower in math than in reading. The results for students on the eighth grade state assessment were not aligned to the research. Most students who attended three or more middle schools scored lower in reading than in math. More interestingly, students who failed the elementary fifth grade PASS math test scored better in math than on the PACT middle school math test compared to reading. Because students took two completely different assessments, it is difficult to compare and explain the discrepancies in math achievement, especially because the major change in test format of the PASS test with respect to constructed response items (South Carolina Department of Education, 2010).

The South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide does not identify or address mobility directly. Instead, it identifies environmental barriers of displaced students such as those living in a residential facility, foster care, not living with a parent, and homelessness. The framework does not come to addressing this barrier. One can only assume that the creators of the guide placed more importance on the situations on displaced students than mobile ones.

#### *Large Classroom Size*

One academic at-risk barrier emerging from the study data that was not identified in the literature review (Chapter Two) was the impact of classroom size on at-risk students. Many of the participants noted that they experienced difficulties in classrooms with a large number of students in middle and high school. Peer distractions and the lack of assistance from the teacher, due to the high number of students in class, resulted in frustration and disengagement. These findings are interesting because the research on

the effects of classroom size presents a mixed picture. One side of the literature argues that smaller class sizes, especially for younger and at-risk children, leads to higher academic achievement, while other research shows little support for class size effects (Altinok & Kingdon, 2012; Ballentine & Spade, 2015). Other bodies of research argue that an effective teacher can overcome the challenges posed by a large classroom environment, thus concluding that classroom size has little to no impact on academic achievement (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). Educational policy at the federal level also has influenced the perceptions of educators and parents regarding the effects of smaller classroom sizes. Title II of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, which included legislation that required funding for the reduction of class size (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2012), influenced almost half of the states by 2005 to implement class-size reductions, despite the tenuous results (Chingos, 2011). In the current study, it was surprising to hear participants note that large classroom size hindered participants' academic success. Some students recalled that classrooms were so disruptive that the teacher could not deliver instruction. The experiences in middle school or high school revealed limited access to the teacher, while in elementary school, students recalled having one-on-one time with their teachers, which resulted in a positive perception of the teacher and of their academic achievement.

The South Carolina Intervention and Implementation Guide does not include large classroom size in any of the categories of barriers that at-risk students experience. It does include large school size in the critical checkpoint readiness benchmarks for the sixth grade. Perhaps this is because sixth grade is the first year in middle school for most students in the state and this is when students from different elementary schools merge into one building. The grade level selected for the checkpoint, the first year of middle school, primarily aligns with the participants' experience of when they began to

experience academic hardship in school due to the dynamics of a large classroom. This barrier is a difficult one to address because large classroom size is a factor often determined by individual school district employment formulas based on yearly student enrollment numbers and district budget for hiring teachers although the federal government has taken steps to reduce class sizes across the nation. This barrier would be a district or even a state issue that may not be within the scope of the framework to address. Perhaps this is why it was not included in the barriers/indicators section.

#### *Socio-Economic Status*

Although research has found that low-income children, as young as two years of age show cognitive and behavioral deficiencies compared to the higher-income children (Halle, Forry, Hair, Pepper, Wandner, Wessel, & Vick, 2009), none of the participants shared experiences relating that their economic status influenced their academic achievement or their home environment either negatively or positively. These findings are surprising because across the United States, research proposes that low socio-economic status causes academic failure for large numbers of children (Evans, 2004).

Institutional data collected revealed that almost all of the participants came from low socio-economic homes, as all but a few were identified as not receiving free and reduced lunch. Although most of these students came from low-income homes, none of the students in the study mentioned that their socio-economic status (poverty level) impacted their academic achievement. On the contrary, many of the students revealed that they had everything they needed to be successful in school (clothes, books etc.) and reflected on having a childhood where their needs and wants were met. None of the participants ever mentioned their socio-economic status as a cause of parental disagreements, mobility, or social problems at school, which are often found to be the by-products of living in a low-income home (Halle, et. al., 2009). These findings are



contradictory to what is found in the research literature, which suggests that low socio-economic status is one of the most impactful indicators of a student becoming at-risk of dropping out of school.

The South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide lists the barrier of being economically disadvantaged under the work-related category but does not provide any direct reference to a student's socio-economic status. The framework includes two other barriers also related to work indicators: little or no work experience and lacks marketable career and technical skills. Both of the barriers would not apply to students at the elementary level. The guide does mention one other work-related barrier, regularly working more than fourteen hours a week, which again would generally not apply to the elementary school experiences of students. In the study, there were a few students who worked while attending high school. Their experiences with working and attending school was diverse in that for one student it increased motivation to achieve academically while the other student used it as an excuse not to attend school. Because the research on socio-economic status and academic achievement is so vast, the lack of mention and attention of the barrier is surprising. This is an at-risk barrier that should be added to the guide under the environmental barriers section since poverty levels are identified through parental indicators.

### *Social Relationships*

The themes that emerged from the data relating to social relationships varied greatly for the participants. Some of the students commented on how their friends, primarily in elementary school, were either positive influences or neutral influences in their academic achievement.

The outcomes aligned with the research literature that shows that at-risk students often fail to take advantage of the social capital around them (Drewry, Burge, & Driscoll,

2010). It was evident by the limited information provided by participants that they failed to build meaningful and advantageous relationships with people in community programs, adults in school, and churches. Although a few students mentioned positive relationships that surfaced due to attending church, most of the students could not identify any mentor besides a parent (or close relative) who helped them to succeed in school. Only a few of the students mentioned a teacher who went above and beyond their required duties to motivate students. The lack of data for this theme was not surprising because many of the students in this study lived in the same city all of their lives. This means that although students did not experience much transiency between demographic areas, they were limited on their exposure to resources within their community. This outcome supports the research literature that states students living in poverty do not access community resources that could help supplement their academic achievement (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

While only a few students identified peers as negative influences during the elementary school years, those students elaborated on being influenced to participate in off-task behavior. Others shared that they were the victims of peer teasing and harassment later on in middle and high school. The research literature shows that peer influences also become more powerful as students get older, specifically during the adolescent years (Walter, Vaughn, & Cohall, 1993). Like the research, several of the participants spoke about how their peers influenced their behavior, which lead them to violate the school code of conduct. These violations resulted in school suspensions and even placement in the disciplinary alternative school.

The South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide only addresses the social relationships of students as an indicator if a student spends time with other dropouts or potential dropouts. The framework does not address the social

components of school, such as peer pressure, under any of the four categories but it does address it under the checkpoints of readiness. The guide identifies the importance of a student having social skills as a checkpoint in the third grade and a social adjustment in the sixth grade. It is interesting that they would include two social components in the readiness checkpoints but not in the framework of barriers and indicators especially knowing that the research shows peers can greatly influence each other.

### *Bullying*

Bullying is not one of the topics that were found in the research literature discussed in Chapter Two. However, it is a topic that several of the participants shared as influencing their emotional welfare and their academic achievement.

Several of my participants, articulated experiencing bullying, such as name calling, being embarrassed in public, being spit upon, and having spreading rumors about them during middle school. One student experienced bullying due to his sexual orientation. All of these experiences shared by the participants aligned to the current research literature, because they were bullied during school hours either in the classroom or on the bus in middle school. The current research from the National Center for Education Statistics (2010b) indicates that approximately 28% of students in grades sixth through twelve experience bullying. This data supports that middle school is one of the time periods where students experience the highest frequency of bullying. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2013) supports this claim, indicating that frequency of experiencing bullying drops from 28% to 20% in high school. Statements of the participants who claimed that the bullying either stopped or lessened in high school also align with this data.

Although bullying is a serious concern for all students, at-risk students who often do not have the support needed to overcome such a threat, are even more susceptible to

the negative consequences of bullying. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, students who experience bullying are at an increased risk for psychological/physical issues, such as depression, sleep difficulty, anxiety, and poor school adjustment (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). Research also reveals that students who suffer from psychological risk factors are also more likely to be victims of bullying-- specifically, those students who demonstrate greater internalizing of problems, and students who have peer relational problems (Marini, Dane, Bosacki, & Cura, 2006).

The South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide does not mention bullying at all in the framework. I believe one of the reasons is because when it was created and published in 2007; there had not been a lot of media, public attention to, or research on the issue. Now that the issue has imploded into the media outlets and the schools, bullying programs and interventions have been developed and mandates for implementing are rapidly growing. As for the participants in the study that endured bullying, many grew up during the time where bullying education and prevention was not mandated or thought to be needed in schools. Although there are no federal laws that directly address bullying, there are several civil rights laws now being enforced by the Department of Education and the Department of Justice to assure that schools respond appropriately to bullying (United States Department of Health & Human Services, 2015). The framework should not only add bullying but it should also include cyber-bullying, as social media is now becoming a norm for communication and easy way to bully others.

#### *Parental Involvement*

Participants from this study shared diverse experiences when it came to the role their parents played in their education. Some students shared that their parents, mostly their mothers, supported their education efforts. Their living situations mimicked the

growing body of research showing that a majority of students living in poverty reside in single-parent families, primarily with single mothers (Schlee, Mullis, & Shriner, 2008). The fact that most of these students lived with single mothers is important, because the research also states that students who live with single mothers have less parental involvement than students who live with both parents (Comer, 1984; Epstein, Croates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997). The level of parental involvement also decreases the less education the mother has. Because the participants primarily lived with a single mother as head of the household, they experienced parental involvement in limited ways that aligns with findings from other studies.

Thus, some of the students stated that they received help with homework, mainly during elementary school, because the content in middle school was often too rigorous. The research literature supports these findings by suggesting that parental involvement is more prevalent during the elementary school years than during the secondary school years (Catsambis, 2001; Simon, 2004).

The second way parents showed involvement was by supporting the school with disciplinary issues. Several students mentioned that their mothers would assure they were on punishment if they misbehaved in school. The students who lived with their fathers also commented on how their fathers supported the disciplinary actions of the school. At the same time, a few students mentioned having to change schools because their parents did not want to deal with school staff regarding their child's behavior issues. These findings do not align with the research that indicates that children whose parents who are involved with their schooling have fewer conduct problems, especially as they get older (Patrick, Snyder, Schrepferman, & Snyder, 2005). The institutional data from this study showed that students, even those who said they had high parental involvement, had a high number of disciplinary infractions especially during middle and

high school. This suggests that their interpretation of the parental involvement they received does not match what researchers and educators define.

The South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide identifies parental involvement as a readiness checkpoint for the sixth grade. Having this checkpoint in the sixth grade makes sense because this is the age in which students are transitioning to middle school and are bombarded with the social aspect of school as well as having to adjust to new academic circumstances much different than in elementary school. For students in middle school, it is essential to have parental involvement in the form defined by research. The guide supports this notion by clearly stating, “students whose parents are involved in their education are more motivated academically, attend school more consistently, perform better in school, behave better, and are more likely to graduate” (Richardson, 2007, p. 2). For the participants, their institutional and interview data support that many of them were not motivated to do well in school, most of them did not do well academically, and that some had chronic behavior issues.

#### *Behavior Problems in School*

Many of the students in the study indicated that they had disciplinary issues starting in elementary school. Review of institutional data revealed that most of the participants experienced the most disciplinary issues in middle school and high school. Some students attributed the root of their misbehavior to peer pressure pulling them off-task, lack of motivation to complete schoolwork, or social issues, such as bullying and feeling isolated at school. A few of the students could not offer any type of explanation for their behavior, which included talking back to teachers, showing disrespectful behavior towards school personnel. For some students, both of these behaviors were projected onto their parents at home.

While most students appeared to be honest regarding their elementary school experiences, the descriptions given regarding disciplinary infractions in middle and high school did not match the vast amount of disciplinary infractions found in the institutional data (See Table 3-4). In elementary school, only a few of the students had more than three codes of conduct violations on their permanent record, while almost half had none. Surprisingly, in middle school, the numbers jumped significantly for most of the participants. These findings are parallel to the research literature, which states that students who show disruptive behavior at an early age are also prone to show the same behavior later on (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001). The data also showed that most of the code of conduct infractions occurred in high school while the second most occurred in middle school.

Specifically, there were only a limited number of students who had less than 10 code of conduct violations on their permanent record while the majority of the students' infractions ranged from the high teens to the mid-twenties. A few students specifically had code of conduct violations numbering in the 40's and in the 60's. These findings also align to the research literature that suggests African-American students, especially males, show more disciplinary problems the older they get (Schaeffer, Petras, Ialongo, Poduska, & Kellam, 2003). This data is also alarming because the research also indicates that students with disciplinary problems tend to have lower academic achievement than students who do not (Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, & Heinrich, 2008). Students with disciplinary problems are also a concern because this behavior is considered an at-risk indicator for dropping out of school (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007). The South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide aligns to the research by identifying fifth grade as a readiness checkpoint for behavior as well as identifying dramatic changes in behavior as an at-risk indicator.

### *School Disengagement*

Students who feel disengaged in school are often identified as being at higher risk of dropping out of school (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006; Schoneberger, 2012). Researchers have found that school disengagement can be categorized into four groups: academic, social, behavioral, and psychological disengagement (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007). Similarly, almost all of the participants in the study reported some sort of school disengagement that falls into one of those categories.

Only a few of the students identified that they were academically disengaged during elementary school due to actual schoolwork. Most of those students revealed that they were able to overcome academic disengagement by asking for help from their teachers. Most of the students who revealed they were academically disengaged identified middle school as the main time period that they suffered from not being engaged in school. The participants shared that disengagement was often the result of not being able to manage the rigor of the schoolwork, specifically due to lack of basic skills. The timeframe identified by the students is important to notice because the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide (Richardson, 2007) identifies that fifth grade should be a benchmark grade to assess the basic school readiness of students before entering middle school. Special attention should be given to the students' attendance, reading and math achievement, as well as behavior.

Another important layer of school disengagement for educators and researchers to examine is the social and behavioral aspects of schooling. These are very important as research shows that a large part of school success is based on students being able to feel happy and secure within the school environment (Barrow & Newton, 2004). This includes being able to make and sustain friendships, as well as being able to resolve peer conflicts. Several of the participants struggled with making friends and resolving



peer conflicts during elementary school. Those students commented on not fitting in which led them become reserved and introverted students who often existed under the radars of teachers, while others were subject to teasing and were labeled social outcasts. For some, this caused them not to ask for help from teachers when struggling academically. Others acted out and showed inappropriate school behaviors such as class disruptions and disrespect to teachers. These students often manifested inability to manage strong feelings, such as frustration, anger, and anxiety. These negative elementary school experiences shaped the expectations and the behaviors of the students as they moved on to middle school and high school, where only a few were able to recover from the setbacks and difficulties attributed to poor peer relationship.

The last type of school disengagement is psychological disengagement, in which student's experience a range of emotional disorders that cause them to feel disconnected from the school environment, which impairs their education and academic achievement. The research on this topic is abundant when it comes to highlighting the importance of interactions between teachers and students and the link to achievement, especially among ethnic minority children (Stramblera & Weinstein, 2010). The participants, who were all minority students, shared having positive relationships with their teachers during their elementary school years. Many elaborated on how these teachers went out of their way to help them with their academic and behavioral struggles. At the same time, many of those same participants also shared that their relationships with their teachers changed in middle and high school, due to large class sizes. This aspect of engagement is interesting because the research on class size shows mixed results (Aldinok & Kingdon, 2012). Even though the research does not overwhelmingly suggest that class size matters, the students' perceptions of class size certainly indicates that it had effected their level of school engagement. The participants clearly felt that disruptions in the

classroom, due to too many students, were part of the reason they did not succeed academically in middle and high school.

Similarly, not only does the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide also identify the four categories of school disengagement (academic, social, behavioral, and psychological/physical) as individual indicators in the framework, it also provides educators with a promising Tier 2 program to help address it. This barrier is one of the few in the guide that is supported by a targeted program. The addition of the K-12 program suggests that school disengagement is a growing problem for students all grades starting kindergarten through twelfth grade.

#### Implications

The findings answered the study's research questions relating to understanding the elementary school experiences of students at-risk of dropping out of school. The themes that emerged have several significant implications for assessing the elementary school experiences of students. These implications are addressed through a discussion of theory, research, and practice. Also included are suggestions for research and lessons learned from conducting the study.

#### *Implications for Theory*

In order to answer the third research question relating to the usefulness of the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide, it is important to understand that this guide was designed to encompass the frequently cited reasons students give for dropping out of school. This structure was very useful for focusing on specific aspects of the students' experience and helping define the specific viewpoint for the study. The framework provided a guide in which the four main categories (academic, environmental, psychological/physical, and work-related) were used to create the research questions guiding the study. Because the possibilities of questions that could be

asked of the students were endless, the framework assisted in narrowing the focus of the questions to three main areas of focus: academics, home life, and the mental state of students as it pertained to their academic achievement. This is also extremely important because these reasons, barriers, predictors, and/or indicators manifested themselves in several areas of students' lives, and affected students in multiple ways. Without having an understanding of all the barriers, I would not have known when to probe students for further explanation.

Furthermore, the framework also assisted in searching for articles to narrow the scope of the literature review, because the at-risk research literature is vast. These three categories helped narrow the research literature to that which focused on the elementary school experiences of at-risk students. This is where I ascertained that there were gaps in the literature pertaining to the at-risk factors of elementary age students. Although there was a plethora of literature that focused on the academic success of early childhood students, the literature was limited on the experiences of at-risk elementary students. Most of the research that focused on elementary school students was quantitative in nature and focused on providing statistics of at-risk factors. Only a few studies took a approach to inquire if current dropouts or students at-risk of dropping out had barriers present during their elementary school years, but again, most of them are quantitative in nature. The limited literature that does focus on the experiences of elementary students suggests that students endure at-risk barriers at a much earlier age than previously thought.

The framework also served as means by which the research data were interpreted and coded. By using the three categories provided by the guide, I was able to analyze the data in order to interpret the findings and code the barriers the participants identified as being present during their elementary school years. This framework helped me

understand which factors were only linked to academics, which issues were only connected to home-related issues, and which issues were psychological/physical in nature. By having this differentiation, I was able to narrow the scope of the study to those particular aspects of the participants' elementary school experiences that were the most important. It also helped me understand how one factor could impact several categories, which led to the identification of the most important, or most impactful, barrier identified by the students. The use of the framework also revealed, during coding, that it is lacking in several areas. Although the authors of the guide state that the factors in the categories are not an extensive list of at-risk factors, the findings of my study revealed that the list is not current, and is missing several at-risk factors that are currently receiving national attention, and bullying.

The At-Risk framework allows for the identification of new issues and for creating of critical research questions that have yet to be answered. It also provides a common language among the professionals of the discipline and a frame of reference for defining terms. Lastly, it is useful for guiding and informing research that strives to improve professional practices and services aimed for at-risk students.

One shortcoming of the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide as a conceptual framework is that it does not lend itself to evaluating solutions to the research problems; instead, it just provides a foundation for understanding the problem. The framework also lends itself to give old data new interpretations and new meaning. Nonetheless, through the use of this framework, I was also able to identify grade retention and apathy towards school as the most important academic barriers experienced by the at-risk students. It also allowed me to identify death in the family as the most important environmental factor, and apathy towards school as the most important psychological/physical barrier. I also identified three

additional themes that were not explicitly labeled in the framework but were still very much a part of the realities of the at-risk students: sexual orientation, and bullying.

#### *Implications for Research*

The general lack of research literature regarding the elementary school experiences of at-risk students has left school practitioners with limited interventions for students who demonstrate at-risk behaviors and experience barriers during this timeframe. The lack of qualitative research in this area has prevented educators from creating and implementing interventions for students prior to entering secondary school that are meaningful and align with what students feel impact them most. The methodology utilized in this study offers an examination of the experiences of students labeled as at-risk of dropping out of school, which resulted in data revealing how those students dealt and overcame the barriers experienced, but more importantly, shared what they thought *would have* made the most difference in their lives. Educators and researchers must now address these risk factors at such an early age by asking students what impacted them, and what they think would benefit them in hopes of deterring students from developing a high school dropout trajectory. I also believe more research needs to be conducted on the psychological barriers of school in order to understand the type of environments in which at-risk students thrive.

#### *Implications for Practice*

The evidence from this study suggests that educators and educational researchers should focus more on the at-risk factors that students experience during the elementary school years. My findings show that elementary aged students are exposed to many of the same academic, environmental, psychological/physical barriers previously only identified in the middle and high school grade levels.

This study suggests that more focus needs to be given to students at the elementary school level. Specifically, students who at an early age demonstrate environmental at-risk factors need assistance with developing basic academic and social skills. These findings are important because educators and researchers must try finding ways to help at-risk students learn the social skills necessary to overcome these barriers during their elementary school years in order to lay a successful foundation for later schooling and hopefully prevent the creation of a dropout trajectory. In addition, more attention should be given to providing early childhood education to all students nationwide. Lastly, research needs to be conducted on developmentally appropriate interventions for the psychological barriers elementary students demonstrate in order to prevent those factors from impacting their achievement in elementary school and beyond.

#### Suggestions for Future Research

Although this study represents a start for developing a larger body of research on the elementary school experiences of at-risk students, further research is still necessary. First, a future study should focus on students' perspectives of the factors that interfere with their academic success by focusing on students with behavioral difficulties and social maladjustment traits. Specifically, research should focus on students who have been enrolled or are currently enrolled in a disciplinary alternative school at the elementary, middle, and high school levels to look for commonalities. There could also be a benefit from exploring if and how disciplinary data is tracked and used in order to create interventions for the students, and whether interventions lead to an increase in academic achievement. This focus could be part of a larger study about the elementary school experiences of at-risk students identified by specific factors for example low socio-economic status, students living in a single-parent family, students with parents without a high school diploma, and/or students born from teen mothers.

Second, it would be advantageous to examine if and how schools and school districts use systematic approaches to identify elementary students who exhibit at-risk barriers as early as the first year of school. Finally, a study could compare data collected by schools and school districts where proactive practices have been implemented with the resulting improvements on academic achievement. Such comparisons could reveal the strengths and weaknesses of practices in producing intended results. Additionally, any data collection and tracking methods created and used for a study should also be examined and compared.

#### Lessons Learned

The reason I chose this topic to study was due to the experiences I had serving as an assistant principal at an elementary disciplinary alternative school. Having seen so many students struggling with behavior that impacted their academic achievement left me wondering how these students would do later on as they progressed in school. Then, my visit to the high school alternative school solidified my curiosity on the impact of students' elementary school experiences. Hearing the stories of those students, especially those regarding the circumstances around their upbringing, ignited the desire to understand how those types of factors impact students and what I could do as an administrator to assist students in overcoming them.

During this study, I learned several important lessons that not only impacted my job as an assistant principal, but also how I interacted with students. The first lesson I learned was that there are an overwhelming number of teachers and administrators who have no knowledge of the research that has been conducted on grade retention and the impact of retention on later academic achievement. I began reading the research on this topic while my elementary school was closing out the school year. Anytime I mentioned what the research on grade retention has found, I was greeted with opposition from

teachers and even administrators wanting to retain students as young as kindergarten and the first grade. I especially felt opposition when I suggested to administratively promote students based on what I had learned about grade retention. This topic impacted me even more when I began the following fall semester as a sixth grade administrator and had to review the academic files of students. Out of almost two hundred students, nine of the students had already been retained in the sixth grade. I also discovered that many more were over-aged for the grade level due to being retained in elementary school. When I discovered this and spoke with the other administrators, they revealed that they believed in retention because it teaches the students the lesson that they have to complete their work and pass their classes in order to move on. During our conversation, no one mentioned any type of interventions that were given to the students prior to retaining them. This is especially alarming to me because this school is predominately African-American. It worried me that the administrators making the decisions were so unaware of the impact of their actions.

I learned that in order to help students, you have to understand and take the time to know all of the factors that are impacting them. I now take the time to meet parents and conference with them prior to administering high-level disciplinary consequences such as suspension or other consequences that impact academic achievement. I feel that this is important because you get to know if the student has parental support with academics and behavior. This allows me to implement intervention strategies specific to the students that will set them up for success.

Because of this study, I also learned that when I become a principal, I would create a benchmark system like the one from the South Carolina At-Risk Student Intervention Implementation Guide to assist the teachers and me in assuring students are mastering their grade level content and are displaying age-appropriate social-skills.



One limitation to the study was that I only interviewed at-risk students. I could have interviewed parents and family members, counselors, teachers, and principals who may have been able to offer insight into the experience of the students. By interviewing students only I limited the scope of the study and the type of information describing the circumstances experienced by at-risk students. However, the study provided a good start to future research that could include the perspectives of those involved in students' lives.

#### Final Thoughts

This study utilized data collected from 10 participants who reflected upon their elementary school experiences. This data were collected primarily through interviews, although other data sources, such as institutional data, were also considered in the analysis. The interviews focused on the shared experiences of individual students regarding the phenomenon of being at-risk of dropping out of high school. This research study attempted to provide understanding of the elementary school experiences of at-risk students in order to discover whether students experienced at-risk barriers during these years and whether or not these experiences placed them on a high school dropout trajectory. By interviewing actual at-risk students, I was able to understand which barriers caused them to suffer academically and place them on a dropout trajectory. The findings revealed that at-risk students do experience barriers during their elementary school years that impact their academic achievement as they move on to middle and high school. Almost all of the barriers are beyond the student's control, such as their home environment, their socio-economic status, and their community.

While conducting this study, I reflected on my own experiences as an at-risk student. I was a minority female student and an English Language Learner when I first entered the public school system in the United States. I was also the child of a single mother with two children, who at the time only had the means to provide apartment

housing. Because my mother hated the apartment environment, I changed schools every year from first to fifth grade until we finally secured buying a home. Although my mobility was all within the same school district, unlike the participants, I cannot remember if the transiency affected me in any way. I do not remember if it impeded my academic achievement, nor do I remember if I suffered from any social or emotional issues due to changing schools so often. What I truly believe made the difference for me is that my mother had a college education and instilled the importance of doing well in school on a daily basis. Whether it was by checking homework or finding someone to help me, she did everything in her power to ensure I did well in school by setting high expectations. She also involved me in community programs, such as Bible study with the local Catholic Church, and enrolled me in youth sports programs to help manage my energy and develop confidence.

Like many of the participants, I experienced teasing in middle school often being ridiculed for my height, body shape, and at times my ethnicity. Although those years did not alter my academic trajectory, I do recall coming home crying because of the teasing. I think that being a school athlete and being engage in community sports helped deter disengagement towards school. Unfortunately, many of the study's participants were not able to overcome their negative situations. I also learned that many of the factors that influenced the participants and myself as at-risk students, such as school engagement and the motivation to do well in school, were within our control.

Appendix A  
Participant Interview Protocol

**Instructions:**

I will distribute a blank piece of paper to the participants with a box of markers. I will ask each of the participants to draw a timeline of events starting from birth until the current year. Following the completion of the timeline, the following questions will be for the interview:

1. Tell me about your drawing?
2. Tell me what was school like for you?

**Academic Questions:**

1. How was your attendance in elementary school?
2. How were your grades?
3. What were your teachers like?
4. Was your experience with the principal/Counselor? What kinds of things did they do?

**Environmental Questions:**

1. Who lived with you in elementary school?
2. Did friends influence you when you were in school?
3. What role did your parents play in your schooling?
4. What did your parents think of the school?
5. What could have helped your home life?

**Psychological Questions:**

1. How did you feel when you were in elementary school?
2. What was your favorite/least favorite subject? Why?
3. What grade did you like the most?

Appendix B  
Informed Consent (IRB)

**UT Arlington  
Informed Consent Document**

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR**

Jennifer Anderson-Baez, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies  
[jenniferaanderson@mavs.uta.edu](mailto:jenniferaanderson@mavs.uta.edu)  
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Email: [mtrache@uta.edu](mailto:mtrache@uta.edu)  
Phone: 817-272-2109

**TITLE OF PROJECT**

THE ELEMENTARY EXPERIENCES OF AT-RISK YOUTH ATTENDING  
ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL IN SOUTH CAROLINA

**INTRODUCTION**

You are being asked to participate in a research study about the elementary experiences of at-risk students. Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or discontinuing your participation at any time will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Please ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

**PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study is to examine the elementary school experiences of at-risk high school students who are currently enrolled in an alternative school program.

**DURATION**

You will be asked to participate in one study visit that will last approximately 90 minutes.

**NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS**

The number of anticipated participants in this research study is 10.

**PROCEDURES**

The procedures which will involve you as a research participant include:

1. At the beginning of the interview, you will receive a blank piece of paper in which you will be asked to illustrate your thoughts about your elementary school experiences.
2. The interview will focus on your experiences in elementary school.

The interview will be audio recorded on tape. After the interview, the tape will be transcribed, which means they will be typed exactly as it was recorded, word-for-word,

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IRB Approval Date: FEB 25 2014

IRB Expiration Date: FEB 25 2015

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by the researcher. The tape will be kept at the University of Texas Arlington for a minimum of three years.

**POSSIBLE BENEFITS**

There is no direct benefit to the participants or to others.

**POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS**

There are no perceived risks or discomforts for participating in this research study. Should you experience any discomfort please inform the researcher, you have the right to quit any study procedures at any time at no consequence.

**COMPENSATION**

The participant will receive a gift card for \$25 for participation.

**ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES**

There are no alternative procedures offered for this study. However, you can elect not to participate in the study or quit at any time at no consequence.

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to decline participation in any or all study procedures or quit at any time at no consequence. Should you choose not to complete all study procedures, you will still receive the \$25 gift card.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. A copy of this signed consent form and all data collected [including transcriptions/tapes if applicable] from this study will be stored in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies offices at UTA for at least three (3) years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a participant. Additional research studies could evolve from the information you have provided, but your information will not be linked to you in anyway; it will be anonymous. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the UTA Institutional Review Board (IRB), and personnel particular to this research have access to the study's records. Your records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above. The IRB at UTA has reviewed and approved this study and the information within this consent form. If in the unlikely event it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review your research records, the University of Texas at Arlington will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law.

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time. You understand that since you are under 18 years of age that your parent(s)/legal guardian(s) have consented for your participation.

You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, and you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits, to which you are otherwise entitled.

\_\_\_\_\_ I **do not** wish my child to participate in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I consent for my child to participate in the study.

**SIGNATURE OF PARENT/LEGAL GUARDIAN**

**DATE**

**SIGNATURE OF MINOR VOLUNTEER**

**DATE**

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IRB Approval Date: FEB 25 2014

IRB Expiration Date: FEB 25 2015

Appendix C  
School District Consent

January 9, 2014

Jennifer Baez  
University of Texas at Arlington  
701 S. Nedderman Drive  
Arlington, TX 76019

Dear Ms. Baez,

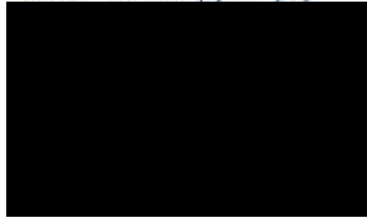
This is to inform you that your request to continue your research "The Elementary Experiences of At-Risk Youth Attending Alternative High Schools in South Carolina" has been reviewed and approved.

Please adhere to the following guidelines:

- Except in the case of emancipated minors, researchers must obtain signatures of parents or legally authorized representatives on a consent form prior to a student's participation in the research study. All consent forms must contain the following sentences:
  - "I do not wish (my child) to participate." (This must be an option on the form.)
  - The school district is neither sponsoring nor conducting this research.
  - There is no penalty for not participating.
  - Participants may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.
- Assent of children who are of sufficient age and maturity should be obtained prior to their participation in research. In all cases, students should be told that they have the right to decline participation.
- Parents or guardians of students participating in your research must be notified of their right to inspect all instructional materials, surveys, and non-secured assessment tools used in conjunction with your research. This notification should include details of how parents can access these materials.
- Student social security numbers should never be used.
- Data directly identifying participants (students, teachers, administrators), such as name, address, telephone number, etc., may not be distributed in any form to outside persons or agencies.
- All personally identifiable information, such as name, social security number, student ID number, address, telephone number, email address must be suppressed in surveys and reports. Reports and publications intended for audiences outside of the district should not identify names of individual schools or the district.
- Any further analyses and use of the collected data beyond the scope of the approved research project, and any extensions and variations of the research project, must be requested through [REDACTED] Department of Achievement and Accountability.
- Researchers should forward a copy of the results of the research to [REDACTED] Department of Achievement and Accountability.

Please note that this district-level approval obligates no school or employee to participate. Final approval, consent to participate, and cooperation must come from the school principal or administrator of the unit involved. Please show this letter to the school principal or administrator.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Charles [unclear]", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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