

IN THE MIDDLE: AN EXAMINATION OF THE
FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO
OVERAGE MIDDLE SCHOOL
STUDENTS

by

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my family, friends, and colleagues that have supported my efforts throughout the years. Many of you have encouraged and motivated me to continue on this journey.

To my parents, Pablo and Virginia Rodriguez, who believed and encouraged me throughout the years to pursue my goals; my wonderful brothers and sisters, Angel, Miriam, Osvaldo, Gilbert, Leticia, Carmen, Judith, Hilda, Hector, and Louis. They made growing up in a large family fun while keeping me humble.

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Abstract

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According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2014), the population of overage students is at almost 16%. According to Gewerz (2005), this population of students has a high probability of dropping out of school. Because of this, job prospects and career opportunities can be bleak for these students; therefore, school districts should review current practices and policy to find ways to better support overage middle school students. This study interviewed 17 middle school educators to examine the contributing factors along with best practices to address this educational dilemma. This qualitative study utilized semi-structured interview of middle school teachers at an urban school district.

Keywords: overage middle school students, interviews, social capital, English language learners, at-risk, grade repetition, Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol

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Chapter I: Introduction and Background

“ I felt so stupid, doing eighth grade over again, still not getting it with all these little kids.” --

Third time eighth grader

(Advocates for Children of New York, 2014)

Introduction

Many overage students are enrolled in schools across the United States. According to the 2014 United States Census Bureau, approximately 16 percent of student's age 14 through 15 years old, and in elementary or middle school, fall into this category (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2014). According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA) (2016) the number of students statewide in Texas who are considered overage for middle school are (or 2.2% for kindergarten through sixth grade). For grades seventh through 12th the number is 91,679 students, which is nearly 8.9 percent of the student population statewide (Texas Education Agency, 2016). Addressing the needs of this population of students has created a challenge for schools.

There are many possible factors that can contribute to these statistics. One factor, according to Im, Hughes, Kwok, Puckette, and Cerda (2013), is that the transition from elementary to middle school can be an overwhelming experience. Students must learn to navigate an unfamiliar environment and make new friends. While middle school can be somewhat of a traumatic experience in general, overage students experience the added pressures that come with being considered “too old” for their grade.

Statement of the Problem

Overage middle school students can create challenges for teachers and school districts. These challenges can be related to limited English language skills, cultural differences, attendance issues, or disciplinary actions (Muschkin, Glennie, & Beck, 2014). According to Muschkin, Glennie, and Beck (2014), older students are more likely to engage in misbehavior while at school, resulting in higher discipline referrals. They are also often the perpetrators of disruptions and of disciplinary interactions toward other students (Muschkin et al., 2014).

Studies conducted by Reed (1998) and Jimerson and Kaufman (2003) illustrate some of the possible negative influence of having overage students in the school and the classrooms. While these studies concentrate on some of the negative outcomes of students who have been retained a grade, they also highlight some of the positive aspects of grade retention such as providing the students the opportunity to repeat the grade again and gain maturity. The studies found the students who were retained a grade often performed better academically in the following year and exhibited emotional growth as well (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). Unfortunately, Holmes and Mathew (1984) performed a meta-analysis of grade retention and observed that the positive growth demonstrated due to grade repetition was short lived, lasting one year (Holmes & Mathews, 1984). This study illustrated that the positive academic growth documented by the students after one year wasn't a sufficient measure for overall success for these students.

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Tingle, Schoeneberger, and Algozzine (2012), estimated that in 2007 the average financial cost per pupil was around \$6,000 or almost \$20 billion for a district nationwide. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that the cost of repeating a grade in the state of Texas is an additional “1.7 billion for the extra year” of instruction (Allen, Chen, Willson, & Hughes, 2009, p. 481). This cost of remediation is absorbed by the local educational agencies or school districts that are ultimately funded by taxpayers (Wu, West, & Hughes, 2007). There is also an emotional cost for the children who endure social and emotional scarring as a result of repeating a grade (Smith & Herzog, 2014). Reed (1998) described how these children are sometimes bullied, humiliated, and constantly reminded of their lack of academic success by their peers who were promoted to the next grade.

Although there exists an abundance of studies on retention, there are very few studies that address the topic of overage students enrolled in middle school. The grade levels for middle school are generally six through eight. TEA (2012-2013) defines an overage student as:

[A] student who is older than the expected age in a grade is considered overage. To be classified as overage, a student's age on September 1 must be higher than his or her grade level plus five years. For example, first graders older than six years of age were considered overage. (p. 58)

When several elementary schools retain their prescribed number of students, typically between seven and 15% of the school population, a convergence of overage student's moves into the middle school population (Tingle, Schoeneberger, & Algozzine, 2012).

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This study examines the factors that contribute to overage students in middle school. The author will utilize descriptive analysis to interpret state and urban school district retention rates, review state and local assessments, and survey teachers, counselors, parents, and administrators to gain insights and perspectives on the factors that contribute to overage students at the middle school level. The findings of this study can help to shape and/or influence current beliefs and public perceptions on grade retention – especially in the lower grades. Furthermore, this study will contribute to the literature on how to educate parents and to inform parents on their parental rights to become effective advocates for their children.

Finally, Arne Duncan former U.S. Secretary of Education, at his address at the *National Forum of Annual Schools* made the following statement regarding students in middle school,” “Middle school also presents the last opportunity for educators to reach all students, and not just those that persist and thrive in high school.” This is where the educators and the community to provide students who are becoming disengaged and at-risk early interventions and support.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify and define the factors that contribute to overage students in middle school as perceived by teachers and counselors. This will allow parents and educators at the middle school level to review policy and practice regarding the academic dilemma of overage students.

Limited research exists on the factors that contribute to overage students as identified by teachers or counselors. This study will add to the body of work in the field. The quantitative

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study conducted by Im et al. (2013) recommended that “future studies are necessary to test the factors” (p. 362) in order to understand what contributes to overage students in middle school.

A qualitative study utilizing interviews of campus stakeholders will help us understand the problem from a different perspective. The interview responses from the study participants can further determine and identify successes of the representative schools and perhaps identify measures to assist overage students to be successful in their academic endeavors.

Additionally, this study can help to increase the awareness among teachers, parents, and counselors as they collaborate to make crucial decisions that affect the lives of students. Bringing awareness to the issue of overage students in middle school will also encourage teacher training programs in order to gain an understanding of what to look for as preventive proactive measures for student success.

Finally, this study can generate or continue the discussion among policy makers and educators to further explore best practices for the affected student population by supporting them as they transition to middle school.

Research Questions

This study provided teachers and counselors the opportunity to reflect on the following research questions to explore the factors that contribute to overage middle school students and will provide insights to the dynamics of the campus/district where overage students are prevalent.

1. What are the factors that contribute to overage students in middle school?

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2. What techniques or strategies do teachers and counselors employ when working with overage students in your classroom or school?
3. What structures and measures are in place or can be created to ensure the academic success of overage students in your classroom or school?

This study provided stakeholders the opportunity to identify and confirm the factors that they feel contribute to the overage middle school students. It also helped to effectively identify and define stakeholders' roles in addressing overage students in classrooms and in the schools.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilized the works of Bourdieu and Coleman on Social and Cultural Capital. The combined work of Bourdieu and Coleman centered on how social capital and cultural capital can be used to influence individuals to obtain or benefit from social networks that improve their standing in the community or for the purpose of this study, to improve their educational environments (Coleman, 1988). Coleman describes social capital as a network of resources that parents and students can become part of to ensure the overall academic future for their child. According to Portes (2000) cultural capital is “a form of social control, a source of family mediated benefits or resources by non-family members” (p. 2). The Dynamic Model of Cultural Capital Reproduction, as defined by Portes (2000), maintains these experiences that can be passed on from the family to its members.

Research supports that schools and educators have a tendency to demonstrate favoritism towards students who demonstrate a higher degree of cultural capital (DiMaggio, 1982), and

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Portes (2000) explained how family members could use cultural capital to further the advancement of the children. Parents can accumulate cultural capital to safeguard the academic success of their child in academic environments (Shahidul, Zehadul, & Mustari, 2015).

DiMaggio (1982) described how time invested by the family can contribute to the academic success of its members by simply exposing them to different types of activities such as museums, zoo, vacations, and literature. Cultural capital can also be gained as parents become involved with the various activities offered by the school such as attending meetings, interacting with other parents, and becoming familiar with the intricacies of the bureaucracy of education to provide support for their child.

Significance of the Study

Currently, there is a lack of studies on the contributing factors that can contribute to the phenomenon of overage students in middle school. This study is significant because it identified contributing factors by posing specific research questions to the teachers, the counselors, and the parents who work directly with overage middle school students (Stake, 1995).

The results of the study can be shared with school districts and teacher education preparation programs to identify risk factors in order to prevent additional students from becoming overage in middle schools. Furthermore, the results can be shared with parents and administrators as a preventive practice to recognize the at-risk factors and to plan accordingly to better support at-risk students and their families to make appropriate decisions. Finally, the results of this study can inform policy makers on the factors that can add to overage students in

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middle school to better determine the types of programs that will directly address the needs of these students.

Methods

The researcher selected a qualitative study in order to explore and identify the patterns that contribute to this phenomenon (Stake, 1995). The qualitative method design included a descriptive analysis of the campus, district, and state testing data and allowed each campus personnel to “share the uniqueness of their campus” (Stake, 1995, p. 65). It also provided an opportunity to identify common experiences with other schools.

A comprehensive middle school in an urban district was selected to conduct this study. The schools have a strong diversity of population and have a significant number of overage middle school students enrolled. The campus serves students in sixth through eighth grade. The 2016-2017 showed the student enrollment at 953, including 326 sixth grade, 305 seventh grade, and 322 eighth grade students. Almost 70% of the students are considered as at-risk as identified by the state and district, 89% are considered economically disadvantaged, and almost 52% are classified as English Language Learners.

After the district and the university approved the research study, the campus administrators were each contacted to discuss and arrange time for the teacher interviews, and then teachers and staff were contacted to schedule appointments for the interview. Semi-structured interviews were held with 18 educators; one educator was omitted as her concentration was special education specializing in autism. The interviews ranged between 30

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minutes to an hour depending on the teacher and area of expertise. The interviews, conducted on the middle school campus, allowed the researcher to “observe what thoughts, behavior, and to enter into others world ” (Merriam, 2009, p. 88).

Member checking, along with the triangulation of district data, reflection memos, and peer review of interview transcripts were implemented to ensure trustworthiness’ of the study (Maxwell, 2005). A written transcript of the oral interview was provided to the participants to ensure that the conversation was accurately captured prior to being analyzed by the researcher; only one teacher responded with minor changes.

Data Analysis

For this qualitative study, the author utilized semi-structured interviews, which were digitally recorded. The transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed and coded for common themes and factors (Creswell, 2013). Once the interviews were transcribed, the study participants were contacted again to review their responses to ensure the accuracy of the information. Additionally, an email containing the transcription was sent to the participants to verify accuracy of the information provided by the participants. A review of the documents was conducted to identify common patterns and themes (Creswell, 2013). The codes and patterns were then categorized and organized into common themes for frequency among the participants.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this research project the terms listed below are identified to assist the reader in understanding the concepts to be discussed in this paper:

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At risk: Factors that can contribute to students dropping out of school. These factors can include single parent households, minority groups, limited English language proficiency, or homelessness (Texas Education Code: Section 29.81).

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS): The language skills that an individual uses to communicate basic needs; for example “May I go to the restroom?” (Hill & Miller, 2013, p.16).

Case study: A “qualitative approach that examines a case in real life situation and setting” (Creswell, 2013; p. 97).

Coding: Review of interview transcripts, observations, and reflection memos for recurring themes (Maxwell, 2005).

Cognitive Academic Language Skills (CALPS): This is the academic language necessary for students to be successful in class or on standardized testing (Hill & Miller, 2013,p.19).

Dual Language: Classroom where both language minority and majority are jointly taught English and Spanish.

English Language Learners (ELL): Students enrolled in U.S. schools whose primary language spoken in the home is other than English (Collier & Thomas, 2009).

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that was originally passed in 1965; this act places emphasis on student academic success.

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Field notes: Written notes of “initial impressions” of the environment and the people (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

Member checks: Written transcripts of interviews were sent to participants to check for understanding and accuracy (Emerson et al., 1995).

Metropolitan Independent School District: MISD

Metro Middle School: Pseudonym given to the middle school that participated in the study

Middle school: Schools with enrolled students in grades sixth through eighth or ages between eleven and fourteen or older.

Modifications: Linguistic adjustments in the curriculum that the teacher makes to accommodate and support the needs of the language minority student.

Natural method: A method of teaching students a second language that allows for the natural flow of everyday actions; this method of teaching ESL students was developed by Stephen Krashen (Hill & Miller, 2013).

Overage student: A student who is considered old for the grade by one or more years.

Observations: Method used to gain an understanding by observing the actions and behaviors of the participants in the research study (Maxwell, 2005).

Reflection memos: Created after each interview or observation, these were used to inform and influence the direction and projection of the study (Maxwell, 2005).

Retention: When a student must repeat a grade due to academic or standardized testing deficiencies or not meeting the grade level state curriculum standards (TEA, 2016).

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Semi-structured interviews: Method for obtaining the perspectives of the participants in the research study by asking the respondents the same questions but allowing for follow-up questions (Fontana & Prokos, 2007).

Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP): A method used in a secondary setting to support language minority students (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004).

Sheltered classrooms: ESL classrooms that have placed in the curriculum strategies to support language minority students (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004).

Standardized testing: An exam that is administered by the state that students must pass in order to proceed to the next grade. In Texas, the test used is the STAAR: State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness. The exam is administered throughout the state to third through 12th grade students; only students in grades five and eight must pass both the math and the reading portions to move on to the next grade. The students are given three opportunities to pass the exam during the spring and summer

Social capital: A compilation of social resources or relationships that brings social advantages to the members of the group in society (Gottfredson & Di Pietro, 2011).

Texas Education Agency (TEA): State Agency that provides guidance, policy, and support to Local Education Agencies (LEA).

Triangulation: An examination of collected artifacts from various sources and methods to allow for an objective perspective on the issue being studied (Maxwell, 2005).

Limitations and Delimitations

According to Marilyn Simon (2011) limitations in a study are viewed as “potential weaknesses in the study that are beyond the control of the researcher” (p. 2). The following are possible limitations to the study conducted on the contributing factors of overage middle school students.

1. Teacher interviews relied on volunteers and were not randomly selected.
2. Selection of an urban campus rather than rural or suburban.
3. Limited time to conduct the study to facilitate graduation.

Delimitations, on the other hand as described by Simon (2011), are those variables or factors that the researcher chose to include in the “scope of the study” (p. 2).

1. For this study, the data collected for analysis originated from the teacher interviews at an urban middle school campus.
2. Study was limited to teachers and counselor assigned to the participating campus.
3. Student and parent perspective on being overage in middle school and their experiences were not included.
4. Central staff and campus administrators were not interviewed for this study

Chapter II: Literature Review

Across the United States, close to 16% of students between the ages of 14 and 15 are considered to be overage students for their grade. The state of Texas is slightly lower at 12% of students enrolled in middle school through high school (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2014; TEA, 2014). TEA identifies overage students as those who are one or more years older than their cohort peers (Bali, Anagnostopoulos, & Roberts, 2005). There is an array of reasons as to why these students have achieved this designation; however, the leading cause can be grade repetition or non-promotion to the next grade due to the student not meeting the curriculum standards. Additionally, some parents deliberately hold back their children to give them additional time to mature (Crothers, Schreiber, Schmitt, Bell, Blasik, Comstock, Greisler, Keener, King, & Lipinski, 2010); this practice will not be addressed for this research study. The focus of this study is students who have been previously held back due to not being able to master the state-specified grade curriculum standards.

Middle school teachers across the country and Texas are desperately searching for strategies to best support overage students to maximize their academic potential. Because the research on the topic of overage students in middle school is limited, the focus of this literature review is on grade repetition practices and policies that may contribute to this growing population of students in middle school. This paper provides a discussion on some of the issues that arise as a result of having overage students in the classroom, the positive effects of adult interactions with overage students, and the effects of moving from elementary to middle school

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among this population of students. Finally, the paper concludes with a summary of alternatives to the practice of grade repetition to decrease the number of overage students in middle school.

Overage High School Study

Smith, an elementary administrator and Herzog, a college professor, performed a qualitative study with high school seniors who had been previously retained either in their elementary or middle school years (Smith & Herzog, 2014). They conducted individual interviews with 22 participants. The study participants included nine males (three White, three Black, one Biracial, and two Latinos), and 13 females. Smith and Herzog (2014) sought to understand the individual experiences of the student participants. About half of the students who had repeated a grade between kindergarten and second grade either did not recall the experience or did not see it as a negative experience. By contrast, the students who were retained later, namely after fourth grade, seemed to be resentful over the experience (Smith & Herzog, 2014).

Smith and Herzog (2014) found that when they looked at the academic success of retained students, the retained students outperformed the students that had been socially promoted. Social promotion occurs when students are passed to the next grade level despite not mastering the curriculum or state mandated assessments (Wu et al., 2007). Similarly, Holmes and Mathews (1984), McCoy and Reynolds (1999), and Jimerson (2001) found that the students who had repeated a grade the previous year demonstrated growth the following year. However, in each of these studies the growth diminished within two to three years subsequent to the retention.

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While the Smith and Herzog (2014) study provides insightful perspectives for the point of view of the students, its results were limited. The interviews were conducted with the students who had been retained earlier in their schooling and might not have had a strong recollection of the experience (Smith & Herzog, 2014).

The researchers, Smith and Herzog (2014), also considered the consequences of early versus late retention. Early retention occurs between kindergarten and second grade, while late retention transpires in third grade through high school (Silberglitt et al., 2006). Smith and Herzog (2014), concluded that the experience of grade repetition varied, and it was dependent upon the students and the support the students received (especially from parents, teachers, and friends) and how resilient most students were or became as result of the experience.

The majority of the student participants attributed their academic struggles to two main courses, math and reading (Smith & Herzog, 2014). Although most of the students that struggled with reading were able to overcome their deficits, those students who struggled with math continued to have difficulties with the subject area as they got older (Smith & Herzog, 2014). For this reason, the student participants and the researchers highly recommended early identification of at-risk overage students (Smith & Herzog, 2014). They also concluded that it would be beneficial to provide support and accelerated instruction to motivate and encourage at-risk students and to discourage their disengaging and becoming another drop out statistic (Smith & Herzog, 2014).

Overage Middle School Experiences

A study conducted by Crothers et al. (2010) deliberated some of the challenges of having overage students in the classrooms. The authors of the study wanted to examine if overage students were the perpetrators of negative behavior often attributed to having to repeat a grade as documented in other studies (i.e. Holmes & Mathews, 1984; Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003) (Crothers et al., 2010). The study included the responses of 16 public and private school teachers who completed a questionnaire regarding the behavior of their students. The second part of their study was to determine if the overage students were either the instigators or the victims of bullying among their classmates (Crothers et al., 2010). The researchers analyzed the behavior and academic progression of 67 overage students (Crothers et al., 2010). Earlier studies had found that the practice of having students repeat an additional year had a limited positive effect on the academic growth of affected students (Holmes & Mathews, 1984; Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). By contrast, Crothers et al. (2010) study revealed a significant negative effect on the affected students, especially on their self-esteem.

In addition to academic impact from repeating a grade, Crothers et al. (2010) sought to investigate if the overage students were more likely to be victims and/or the aggressors of physical or verbal bullying. A group of 16 teachers were asked to rate students based on the students' behavior, and the findings indicated that the overage students were the main perpetrators of classroom bullying (Crothers et al., 2010). This study confirmed the findings of another study conducted by Reed (1998) that pointed to the negative and disruptive behavior of

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overage students. The Reed (1998) study, while similar in nature to the Crothers et al. (2010) study, included administrators and district central staff members while the Crothers et al. (2010) study did not.

The Reed (1998) study was a mixed method utilizing both surveys and interviews to gather the results for the research brief. Seven middle schools were participated in the study on the impact of overage students in the schools. Each campus received 12 surveys to be randomly distributed among the teachers to be completed and returned. There were a total of 259 study participant responses.

The findings of the surveys indicated that teachers felt that the overage students in their classes had a “negative impact” on the classroom climate (Reed, 1998, p. 4). Furthermore, the teachers felt that their classrooms could benefit with additional support to address the needs of overage students. The counselors indicated that the overage students needed additional social and emotional support; counselors had to provide additional time and support for this population of students (Reed, 1998). Although the Reed (1998) study does not describe exactly what is meant by additional support in the analysis, the additional support given could be interpreted as time talking, listening, and interacting with the overage student. The campus administrators concurred with both the teachers and counselors and added that overage students had a negative impact on the standardized assessments scores and campus discipline infractions (Reed, 1998). Although the Reed (1998) study did not discuss factors that may contribute to overage students, it did offer some insight on how teachers, counselors, and administrators perceive overage student behaviors

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on their campuses. Finally, Reed, (1998) provided recommended interventions for working with overage students that will be further discussed in the section on interventions.

Grade Retention

Grade retention practices often vary from one state to another; however, according to the study by Im et al. (2013), on average 10% of students enrolled in K-8th schools across the United States are held back each year (US Census Bureau, 2014). There are many serious ramifications that are associated with holding students back a year. First it carries a high financial cost for schools. Tingle et al. (2012), estimated the cost of reeducating students in America's schools in 2007 at the average cost per pupil to be around \$6,000, or almost 20 billion dollars nationwide (Tingle et al., 2012). This cost has to be absorbed by the local education agencies or taxpayers funded school districts (Wu et al., 2007). Furthermore, the U. S. Departments of Education has reported, the cost of repeating a grade in the state of Texas to be at approximately "1.7 billion for the extra year" (Allen et al., 2009, p. 481). These are funds that could be redirected to other educational programs to benefit all students and teachers including overage students.

Rechly and Christenson (2013) provided a mini meta-analysis on many of the studies conducted on grade retention. Furthermore, they provided a historical perspective on the practice of retention and contrasted it with the practice of social promotion (Rechly & Christenson, 2013). They reviewed four major studies for their article (Im et al., 2013; Goos, Van Damme, Onghena, Petry, & de Bilde, 2013; Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; Holmes & Mathews, 1984). The authors provided a clear definition for what grade retention in schools across the U.S is and

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estimated that at least 20% of students are retained in grade each year (Rechly & Christenson, 2013). According to Rechly and Christenson (2013), “Grade repetition refers to the practice of having the student repeat a year of school” because they did not meet the academic curriculum standards or other required factors (Rechly & Christenson, 2013, p. 319).

Additionally, the authors summarized what had been already established, and they discussed the longitudinal studies that have contributed to the research (Rechly & Christenson, 2013). The majority of the studies they reviewed were quantitative longitudinal designs. The authors also referred to a study conducted by Yamomoto in 1980, which surveyed students on stressful events in their lives and found that “grade repetition” was ranked third among the students behind the loss of a parent (Rechly & Christenson, 2013, p. 319). The study solidifies the social and emotional trauma associated with students having to repeat a grade (Rechly & Christenson, 2013). Although the authors provided a clear understanding of the topic on grade repetition, their assessment lacked some critical elements, such as a criteria for the selection of the articles reviewed and a theoretical framework.

The Reed (1998) study also discussed the social and emotional trauma that overage students experience. This could include the personal cost of being constantly reminded of repeating the grade (Smith & Herzog, 2014). These children are sometimes bullied or humiliated by their peers, who were promoted to the next grade, by being reminded of their lack of academic success (Reed, 1998). This can leave emotional scars on the student that could impact

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their social and emotional growth or self-esteem by reminding them of their inability to move to the next level with their classmates.

The study conducted by Lane, Medford, and Knorr (2005) identified several contributing factors of overage students, citing grade retention and delayed entry as among the leading causes. Lane et al. (2005), utilized data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 to identify the factors among South Carolina students. Lane et al. (2005) found that low attendance, poor self-esteem, and feelings of incompetence seemed to be the leading indicators among the overage student population. When a student is not attending class, they miss out the covered curriculum, naturally falling further behind their classmates. Teachers have to take time away from other students to review missed assignments. The researchers advised schools and school districts to be “more proactive” by collecting student information regarding their absences to assess if the students are considered at-risk by the state guidelines, to then use this information to create a plan which addresses the students’ academic strengths or weaknesses.

With the identification of students, the campus could begin to work with overage students by assigning a staff member to closely work with the student on or outside of the campus. This individual could work with the student for the purpose of building trust and self-esteem among the overage students (Lane et al., 2005). This interaction between a caring adult and student could help the student by showing them that there are adults who care about their success in school. This adult could help the student make positive progress in school, and if the student had a bad day, this adult could be an objective person to talk to.

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Additionally, the campus counselor could provide purposeful guidance lessons to motivate and engage the students more in class and school. Furthermore, including the support of the school counselor to provide small counseling groups especially for overage students, could help to boost both the students' confidence and self-esteem (Lane et al., 2005). Each session could focus on some of the challenges that overage student face in the classroom, such as absenteeism, bullying, and how to positively react to such incidences at school or at home.

Holmes and Mathews (1984) were among the first researchers to conduct comprehensive meta-analysis on grade retention. They found that grade retention, as an intervention, was ineffective. Until the Holmes and Mathews' (1984) study, the literature pointed to the positive student growth following grade repetition; however, analysis of available literature dating from 1929 until 1983 highlighted the shrinking effect of retention over time (Holmes & Mathews, 1984). Following Holmes and Matthews (1984) findings, Jimerson and Kaufman (2003) continued to scrutinize grade repetition and arrived at similar conclusions.

For many educators, retaining a student is viewed as an intervention. Some educators go as far referring to this additional year as "a gift" (as cited in Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003, p. 622) since the students have more time to grow academically, emotionally, and to meet the grade level curriculum standards. However, researchers in the field are overwhelmingly perplexed with the practice of grade repetition since the studies seem to agree that it does not benefit the student but rather hinders them socially and emotionally (Smith & Herzog, 2014; Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003; Holmes & Mathews, 1984). Despite most of the research pointing out the lack of support

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for retention, the practice continues to thrive, partially due to state and federal policies (Stearns, Moller, Blau, & Potochnick, 2007).

Demographics of Retention

According to the *Grade Level Retention in Texas Public Schools*, (2012-2014) report which defines retention as: “Requiring a child to repeat a particular grade” (TEA, 2014; p. 8). The research indicates that male students are more likely to be retained with Black, or Hispanic males having higher numbers than Caucasian or female students (Im et al., 2013; Tingle et al., 2012; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999). Furthermore, the Texas document indicates that in 2013-2014 school year, 51.3% of the students repeating a grade in the state were males. (TEA, 2014). Hughes, Gleason, and Zhang (2005) attribute this disparity to the perceptions or bias of teacher expectations, which can lead to students failing the grade. They further confirm that teacher perceptions of student abilities affect student grades and standardized testing achievement (Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005). Tingle et al. (2012) confirmed the findings; they identified close to 64 percent of the boys in the study had been retained compared to only 36% of the girls. Interestingly, Hughes et al. (2005) found that girls have a tendency to formulate close bonds with their teachers, which might account for the lower numbers of girls being held back. Finally, Tingle et al. (2012) concluded that grade retention does not close the achievement gap, especially among boys or ethnic minority students, which is one of the key arguments in favor of grade retention.

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Texas policy on grade repetition has continued to evolve. In 1984, the state legislature mandated an end to social promotion with the passage of Texas Education Code §21.721, which states that a student is only eligible for promotion to the next grade if they meet academic curriculum mastery (TEA, 2014). The Grade-Level Retention In Texas Public Schools report of (2014) summarizes the grade repetition rates among Texas schools for 2013-2014 academic school year. The report shows a slight decrease in the percentage of students that were retained in the same grade of .2 percentage points from the previous year (TEA, 2013-2014). During the 2013-2014 academic school year, the grade repetition rate was highest for Black and Hispanic students when compared to White or Asian students in every grade except kindergarten (TEA, 2013-14; p. ix). According to Bali, Anagnostopoulos, and Roberts (2005) the state grade repetition rates have remained mostly static since the report of 2000-2001, when the rate of Hispanic and Black students was still disproportionately higher than White students.

Discipline

Disruptive behavior from overage students can be problematic for teachers, administrators, and parents (Muschin, Glennie, & Beck, 2014). The authors note that males and Black students were more likely to be engaged in discipline-related issues at school, often leading to office referrals and disciplinary actions towards the students. Negative interactions among the students can lead to disengagement or a disconnection to school to a point where the student might not want to continue to participate in school-related activities (Stearns et al., 2007). Also classroom disruptions by these older students can limit the amount of time that a

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teacher can devote to other students if the teacher's attention is diverted by the disciplinary interruptions (Reed, 1998). Ultimately, the pull on instructional time can become a high cost for all students, especially as they fall behind, putting them at risk (Stearns et al., 2007). According to Stearns et al. (2007) every day that a student spends outside of the classroom due to disciplinary actions contributes to their falling further and further behind their peers in the assignments, ensuring a widening achievement gap.

Middle School Transitions

The transition to middle school can be a trying time for some students as they move from their elementary campuses to continue their educational journey in sixth through eighth grades. Middle school can be challenging for students since they have more "multiple classes, teachers, and many may lack study or organizational skills". Many middle school students experience additional anxiety due to the changes in environment. The researchers examined the added dynamics of having to transition into middle school as an overage student due to retention (Im, et al, 2013).

The purpose of the study was to determine if there were any identifiable differences among students who have been retained compared to their classmates who had passed to the next level and concluded that there were no significant differences for the overage students in middle school. In the study, overage students fared as well as the other students, although they were slightly older than their other peers . The study found that when the overage students transitioned to middle school, they were able to adjust to the demands of changing classes, making friends,

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and meeting the academic requirements. However, the researchers did note that the movement of students from elementary to middle school could bring forward some “negative effects of the students’ psychological and academic adjustment”. The study described the negative effect that the transitioning has on the student’s grades in particular. These consequences are attributed to the students’ scheduling of classes, interacting with new students and teachers, and their lack organizational skills or adequate time management skills (Im et al., 2013). Many of these factors can become overwhelming, especially for overage students as they venture on to middle school.

Dillon (2008) further discussed the effect of puberty on middle school students. The author describes how differently it can manifest for each student. Students can react differently to the physical and emotional changes that they encounter as they become young adults, trying to navigate their surroundings while exploring their individuality (Dillon, 2008). This can be especially true for overage students. It might also be more noticeable since they are older than their counterparts and might exhibit the physical changes that are associated with puberty (Im et al., 2013).

Standards and Accountability

Resnick and Zurawsky (2005) examined the controversial topic of standards-based accountability and how it has evolved to become an ingrained part of an American education. They describe the impact of *Brown v. Board of Education 1954* to desegregate public education for all students. *Brown v. Board of Education* requires all schools to meet the needs of children regardless of their race, sex, or ethnicity. Additionally with the passage of the Education for All

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Act (IDEA, 1975), which stipulates that all children with disabilities are “ guaranteed a free and appropriate education” (Resnick & Zurawsky, 2005, p. 2), teachers are now responsible for the well being of all children enrolled in their classes. In 1983, the National Commission of Excellence released *A Nation at Risk*, which documented the downward spiral of American education and how it was losing its high educational advantage in the world, especially in Math and Science. This was an impetus for the push for more consistent standards in education nationwide.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) introduced by the Bush administration in 2001 and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) introduced by the Obama administration in 2015 were reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) passed in 1965 as part of Lyndon B. Johnson’s “War on Poverty” (Bali et al., 2005). With these two acts, an era of assessment accountability was ushered into its present form (Bali et al., 2005). States responded with the development of mandated assessments that student are required to master prior to being eligible to continue to the next grade. Currently in the state of Texas, the grades impacted are fifth and eighth. Students are required to pass both reading and math assessments that are administered in the spring terms (SSI Manual, TEA 2017). These assessments are administered three times starting in late March, again in early May, and finally during the summer school term, generally held during early June. Students that do not score adequately on these assessments in these grades are referred to the Grade Placement Committee (GPC) for review. The GPC is comprised of an administrator, math or reading teacher, and a parent or guardian.

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Once the test results are submitted to the campus, the students in grades three and five are notified by the building administrator to attend a meeting to discuss the results. The student has up to three opportunities to pass the math and reading portion of the state assessment. After the first meeting, the student is placed on an Accelerated Intervention Plan (AIP), to ensure improvement for the next scheduled administration (SSI Manual, TEA 2017). A parent meeting is held and the student AIP is updated as necessary after each administration if the student is not successful.

The GPC committee meets to determine if the student in question has made sufficient progress to be promoted to the next grade or should be recommended to repeat the grade (SSI Manual, TEA 2017). All committee members, including the parent, must agree with the decision to either promote or to recommend grade repetition.

According to Bali et al. (2005), “the state of Texas held back 177,400 students statewide in grades K-12 in 2001”. Unfortunately, according to the literature review performed by Bali et al. (2005), the overall outcome for students that are grade repeaters was significant student disengagement in school and classes, which ultimately led to the students dropping out of school (Bali et al., 2005).

Parental Involvement

Research indicates that significant adult interaction with at-risk overage students can have a positive impact on the students’ academic success (Banerjee, Harrell, & Johnson, 2011). Specifically, parental involvement has been identified as an important factor in the academic and

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social well-being of a student (Banerjee et al., 2011) as well as an identifiable contributor to students' resiliency (Smith & Herzog, 2014). Having a caring adult checking on grades, attendance, or assignments can give the student the motivation to continue their education.

Mullis, Rathge, and Mullis (2003) further affirm the importance of family and community social capital to students' academic success. An interested and engaged parent can ensure that their child will be successful academically by providing guidance to the student on the importance of maintaining good grades and attending school meetings, making time to understand who their friends are, and attending the activities that the student is involved in during and after school (Mullis, Rathge, & Mullis, 2003).

Additionally school districts or campuses should make available to parents classes on how to best support their child as they enter middle or high school. Many parents who are new to the country do not know how to navigate the educational system. They send their child to school, but due to employment constraints, these parents do not have the time to be at the school during the day. Classes for parents could be provided for both working and stay at home parents. The parents could suggest topics of interest/need and then attend during the day or evening to accommodate as many parents as possible.

English Language Learners

Limited English Language Learners (ELL) is one of the fastest growing populations in urban areas throughout the southern region of the United States (Plata-Potter & de Guzman, 2012). According to Plata-Potter and de Guzman (2012), "Latinos now make up the biggest

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ethnic minority in the U.S. Furthermore every ‘one out of three’ teens in the U.S. will be of Hispanic decent” (Plata-Potter & de Guzman, 2012, p. 94). For the purposes of this study, almost 53% of the students that are identified as Limited English Proficient are Spanish speakers (DISD Data Packet 2017-2018, p. 6).

Latino students have the highest high school dropout rate and the lowest college completion rate (Plata-Potter & de Guzman, 2012). To combat this, teachers should be receiving ongoing professional development not only on teaching strategies but also language acquisition and lesson design and delivery for ELL students. The training in districts where there are large numbers of ELL students, teachers should be required to attend ongoing sessions on how to best serve this growing population of students in their classrooms. Suggested ongoing professional development at the middle school could include Stephen Krashen’s, Second language acquisition teaching second language learners, Sheltered Instruction and Observation Protocol (SIOP), and Differentiated Instructional strategies based on language needs. These methods and strategies will be discussed further in the following sections.

Natural Approach

Tracy Terrell and Stephen Krashen were among one of the first researchers to observe the stages of second language acquisition (Terrell, 1986). Terrell and Krashen , after years of observations and research on second language acquisition, based their work on the Natural Approach to language learning. Natural Approach allows for English Language Learners to experience language while using the first language to learn the second language (L2), with

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support of the first language (L1) (.The Natural Approach to language acquisition is based on the principle that students can learn a second language through exposure to rich environments with opportunities that explore the new language in a safe environment (Terrell, 1986).

Additionally, according to Krashen and Terrell, there are five major stages of second language acquisition that most second language learner experiences (Hill & Miller, 2013). The five stages include (a) *Preproduction*, (b) *Early Production*, (c) *Speech Emergence*, (d) *Intermediate Fluency*, and (e) *Advanced Fluency*, which will be discussed fully in the following sections (Hill & Miller, 2013).

According to Hill and Miller (2013) *Preproduction*, also known as the “silent period” is when the ELL student is acquiring the second language by absorbing their surroundings. While it may appear to most educators that the student is interacting or paying attention, they are actually observing their environment. The student at this stage does not have the skills to communicate in the second language, and they have very low comprehension in oral, listening, reading, and writing skills (Hill & Miller, 2013). These student rely heavily on hands-on activities and the use of manipulatives and visuals or pictures to gain understanding of the content.

Early Production occurs when an ELL student has a limited comprehension of the content and is only able make limited requests. Student start by making small requests such as, “Go to the bathroom or drink water?”” While the second language learners in this stage can begin to understand more of the language, the production of the second language is limited to a few words and simple sentences (Hill & Miller, 2013, p. 12).

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Speech Emergence is the stage where most students are able to comprehend much of the second language and are able to construct more complex sentences. At this stage ELL students begin to gain confidence with the second language by experimenting with the written and oral usage of the language. However, the students still exhibit prolific grammatical errors in their writing and speaking mastery (Hill & Miller, 2013).

Intermediate Fluency is the stage of language acquisition where the ELL students are gaining understanding and confidence with their second language skills. Their sentences are moving to more complex sentences as they continue to explore and better comprehend the new language. The ELL also begins to develop their content Cognitive Academic Language Skills (CALPS) (Hill & Miller, 2013). CALPS are the necessary vocabulary skills that ELL student's need to be successful in English content classrooms. CALPS includes the academic vocabulary of science, social studies, and math. This stage is where the student's comprehension is getting better; however, they are still making a few minor grammatical errors (Hill & Miller, 2013).

The final stage is *Advanced Fluency*. At this stage students are able comprehend content material and are almost at a "near-native" level of speech (Hill & Miller, 2013). This can take anywhere from five to seven years for a student to gain advanced fluency.

Hill and Miller (2013) emphasize the importance for all teachers, not just the teachers teaching ELL students, but also every teacher to be familiar with the stages of second language acquisition so that they can design lessons that will cater to students at every stage. Most sheltered teachers or ESL certified teachers are aware of these stages and do plan accordingly for

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their population of ELLs; however, if a teacher does not have any training or certification, they may lose some of the students during the lesson execution and delivery. Providing an instructional coach that is familiar and can help teachers to design such lessons to meet the needs of all learners is a way to differentiate the content to best address their content and language development needs.

Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP)

Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2004) advocate for their Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol model for classrooms where there are large numbers of ELL students. The purpose of sheltered instruction is to provide support mechanisms for ELL students to continue to engage in classes while improving their English skills in content subjects such as science or social studies (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). SIOP is defined as:

SIOP classrooms can include a mixture of native English speakers and English language learners and works to integrate language and content while infusing sociocultural awareness. The ultimate goal is accessibility for ELLs to grade level content standards and concepts while they continue to improve their English language proficiency. SIOP was developed to support second language acquisition of all learners from different counties, and therefore SIOP lends itself as an appropriate strategy for students where English is not their primary language. According to Echevarria et al. (2004), while most school districts offer teachers professional development during the beginning of the year, there is limited follow up and support; therefore, the researchers and developers of SIOP advocate for continued language acquisition support for

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teachers throughout the school year. These ongoing coaching sessions can help to support the growth of both the students and teachers as the coach observes the teacher and students and suggests improvements in the lessons or content.

One teaching skill teachers are taught is to scaffold the lessons and integrate the content materials with language objectives. As the teachers prepare their lessons, they incorporate both a language and content objective that will further the understanding and English skills of the ELL students. The teachers plan and develop lessons that will increase ELL students' understanding in the English language by creating classroom opportunities for students to demonstrate their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Sheltered instruction is also effective in secondary settings where bilingual education may not be available for students who have recently arrived as they acclimate to their new academic surroundings (Echevarria et al., 2004).

Ideally, according to Echevarria et al. (2004), teachers should take into consideration the following factors when planning lessons for their classrooms:

- Students' language proficiency levels, i.e. what stage of English language acquisition are students currently in – beginner, intermediate, advanced.
- Background knowledge on the content, i.e. what is the level of understanding that the students currently have – is it new? Have they had the material before?
- ELL students are more likely to comprehend the subject matter if they are able to touch or feel it, so making the lessons hands-on can help them have a better understanding of

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the material. Bringing in manipulative or regalia can help to enhance the students' understanding.

- Multi-media can further provide support for students by exposing ELL students to an alternative medium.
- Provide cooperative learning opportunities for students to engage and interact with English speaking students so that they become accustomed to listening to the language.
- Incorporate related literature to expose students to different genres of literature on the topic such as graphic novels, comic books, or poetry.
- Finally, incorporate hands-on demonstration lessons that offer students who have low understanding an opportunity to participate with content lessons.

Support for Overage Students

Researchers such as Stearns et al. (2007), Jimerson and Kaufman (2003), and Smith and Herzog (2014) agree that early interventions can help reduce the need for retention. Some examples would be for school districts to invest in early childhood education, create opportunities to increase parental support by offering workshops on various topics, offer tutorial sessions, and most importantly create a successful mentor program that builds relationships with a caring adult (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003; Stearns et al., 2007). These are alternatives to grade retention, that could help to build a more positive option and future for these students (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003; Stearns et al., 2007). Furthermore, one of the key findings from the Smith and Herzog (2014) study indicated that the students would have preferred to have had “extra help” to

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correct their actions rather than failing (p. 63). These particular students felt strongly that additional assistance would have made a difference, especially those to the students who were at risk of failing (Smith & Herzog, 2014).

The scholars further advocate for early intervention strategies to reduce the number of children retained (Allen et al., 2009; Reschly & Christenson, 2013; Smith & Herzog, 2014; Jimerson, 2001; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999), and they further agree on the need for advocacy to fund early childhood programs, especially in communities with high poverty (McCoy & Reynolds, 1999). Making available early childhood education would provide the incoming students with readiness skills needed to be successful in all grade levels (Smith & Herzog, 2014).

In summary, although there is an abundance of information on retention, there are limited studies on overage students in middle school. While the quantitative study conducted by Muschkin et al. (2014) discussed the experiences of overage students, it did not explore the teachers' perspectives that interact with the students on a daily basis. The challenges that overage students encounter are unique, especially if they are older during the formative years of middle school, which is why a study on the impact of this population would be of use to a district or campus. The next chapter will discuss methodology that was employed for this study.

Chapter III: Methodology

Chapter three describes the methods and procedures that were utilized for this qualitative case study on overage middle school students conducted at Metro Middle School. The qualitative study method was selected to allow for “participants to share their unique stories and experiences” as they interact with overage middle school students (Stake, 1995, p. 65). This research study focused on the factors that lead to overage students in middle school and provided a forum for teachers from the selected site to share their stories. Additionally, the study will use the conceptual framework of social capital as describe by Coleman (1988). The relationships formed in the community and especially institutions such as schools may help to propel a student to achieve academic success. This chapter includes the statement of the problem, research questions, study site selection, participant selection, data collection procedures, data analysis, and trustworthiness of the project.

Statement of the Problem

Few studies have been conducted in the area of overage middle school students and the factors that contribute to this educational dilemma.. While Gewerz (2005) points out that this population of students is at higher risk of not completing high school and estimates that the dropout rate among these students is as high as 28% (Gewerz, 2005). Currently, the Dallas Independent School has identified 4,453 students in grades sixth through eighth that are considered overage and at-risk as reported by (DISD Evaluation). This study was necessary to identify the factors that contribute to this continued educational dilemma and to develop a

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preventive intervention to reduce the number of overage students in the district. The findings from this study can be applied to schools elsewhere.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. What are the factors that contribute to overage students in middle school?
2. What techniques or strategies do teachers and counselors employ when working with overage middle school students?
3. What structures and measures are in place or can be created to ensure the academic success of overage students in your classroom or school?

These questions helped to identify the leading causes as viewed by the stakeholders of the selected research site on the factors that continue to contribute to this educational dilemma. The purpose of this study is to contribute to the ongoing research by identifying the factors that lead to overage students at the middle school level. Furthermore, this study provides possible interventions that can be put in place to lower the number of students that may be considered as overage.

Research Design

The research design selected for this research project was a qualitative study because it helps to “bring attention” to the problem being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 236). The use of this method allows for the researcher to focus and explore the case in a more definitive manner. Using qualitative methodology allows for the researcher to become an objective

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observer of the institution to obtain an understanding of the problem being researched (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

This study examined the factors that may contribute to overage middle school that attend an urban school district located in the southern region of the United States. According to Stake, a qualitative study design is a “system with integrated parts” (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 236). Therefore, the campus that was chosen for the study is part of a larger school district, making it a small part of larger system to be examined.

The selected campus has a concentration of overage students with teachers that were needed for the study. The participating campus in this study is referred to as Metro Middle School.

Site Selection

The campus selected for this research study is located in the northern section of an urban school district. It is a comprehensive middle school that serves grades sixth through eight. It is

Table 1
Metro Student Demographics

Ethnicity	Number	Percentage
Black	131	13.6
White	65	6.8
Hispanic	749	78.
At Risk	700	72.9
ELL	511	53.2

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located in an upper middle class neighborhood (DISD, 2017-2018 Data Packet). In 2017-2018, Metro Middle School represented a total of 953 students with 326 sixth grade, 305 seventh grade, and 322 eighth grade students (DISD, 2017-2018 Data Packet; p. 6). The school offers students three options for transportation to school: (a) the students take public transportation, (b) they are bused in, or (c) parents provide transportation to the school (DISD, Data packet 2017-2018).

The campus was selected in part because of the diversity among the students and staff member. During the 2015-2016, the school's student demographics was comprised of:

The campus was rated as "Met Standards" for the 2016-17 academic year by (TEA, 2017). For that year, the campus performed slightly higher in reading than the district average, with a score of 65.4% for the campus while the district was at 63.7%. The students at Metro Middle School also performed slightly higher than the district in the all-student category with 63.3% for the campus, and 62.0% for the district. This means that all students at Metro Middle School performed better than other students in the district with similar demographics.

Table 2

Campus Teacher Ethnicity Demographics 2017-2018

Ethnicity/Race	Number	Percent
Black	18	28.1
White	28	43.
Hispanic	10	15.5
Other*	7	10.9

Note: other indicates American Indian and Asian/Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

Participant Selection

Upon receiving permission from the school district to conduct the study, the building administrator was contacted to discuss the purpose of the study. The researcher asked for permission to discuss the study with the entire faculty and requested volunteers for the study to begin the first round of interviews. The use of interviews in a qualitative study allows for a rich discussion and engaging interaction between two individuals, as well as the sharing of stories (Fontana & Prokos, 2007). The gathering of these stories is why most researchers use interviews as a cornerstone of their studies. Volunteers were contacted to set up appointments for interviews, and the researcher obtained signed consent forms for the study. The study volunteers were contacted twice: (a) once for the interviews, and (b) later to review the transcript of the interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for coding of common themes among the participants. The participants were emailed an electronic copy of their interview transcript and were instructed to (a) review it carefully for accuracy and meaning, and (b) once they had reviewed the transcripts to email the researcher of any changes or corrections. One teacher participant reached out with a minor request change, which was done.

Data Collection

The collection of materials in qualitative research includes collecting documents regarding the qualitative study, such as standardized data on the campus, field notes by the researcher, and reflections from the interviews with the volunteers. The campus data packets

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were available on the district website and were retrieved and examined for student testing information, enrollment information and student and staff demographic information. For this study, the collection of the data included a brief description of the purpose of the study along with a consent form. The consent form ensured both confidentiality and anonymity of the participants in the study. Semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed for later analysis for common patterns and themes among the participants (Fontana & Prokos, 2007).

The use of one on one personal interviews allowed the researcher to make sure that the participants were at ease and comfortable with the topic and the interviewer. The interview questions were reviewed by a panel comprised of two district superintendents, a teacher, and counselor to ensure clarity and alignment of the interview questions with the research questions. The data collected from the interviews was returned to the volunteers to ensure the accuracy of the discussion; this is known in qualitative research as member checking (Fontana & Prokos, 2007). The transcripts were emailed to the volunteer participants to allow them to respond, suggest acceptance, or add additional comments to the document. Only one teacher responded with a minor grammatical change.

Data Analysis

Merriam (2009) characterizes data analysis as “the process of making sense out of data” (p. 175). The analysis for this study involved the collection of documents, semi-structured personal interviews, and field and observation notes to gain an understanding of the studied

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environment (Merriam, 2009). The utilization of interviews allowed for the researcher to gain an inside perspective and understanding on the problem being studied (Merriam, 2009).

Data analysis also involves continuous review of the documents. The continuous cycle of reviewing the gathered data, interviews, campus documents, and reflection notes can help to identify emerging patterns in the documents that will eventually lead to the common themes (Creswell, 2013). In this case the interview transcripts were analyzed to extrapolate the themes or codes that emerged from the data (Merriam, 2009). Upon completion of the interviews the transcripts were submitted electronically to the study participants for review and confirmation of information contained in the interviews (Merriam, 2009). The information gathered categorized in the order of dates and interviewee were entered into an electronic spreadsheet and color-coded for frequency and commonality of themes among the interviews. The interviews were reviewed several times to determine common patterns (Creswell, 2013). The next step was to review each of the responses to cluster them to create common language while continuing to add to the database (Creswell, 2013). Additional documentation that was reviewed included campus data packets that contain assessments, attendance, enrollment and campus demographics, and finally the campus improvement plan.

Trustworthiness

Merriam (2009) advocates that qualitative research employs various tools to confirm the findings, including the use of triangulation to ensure trustworthiness. Triangulation involves the use of “data collection of interview, observations, and documents” (Merriam, 2009, p. 219). The

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use of member checking, along with scrutiny of district/campus documents, and the data gathered from the interviews are the various strategies that Merriam (2009) urges for qualitative studies. Member checking occurs when the participants review the transcripts of the interview to safeguard that the information gleaned from the interview was accurately conveyed. The participants are able to add clarifications or make any changes that they do not agree with or may not have intended to express.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the factors that contribute to overage middle school students from the perspectives of teachers and staff who are employed at a school that services this population of students. The study used structured interviews of the staff members along with campus and district documents for triangulation purposes. The raw data gathered from the interviews was examined for common patterns and themes. Finally, trustworthiness was merited by the use of triangulation strategies, such as member checking, along with peer reviewing of data and findings to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings.

Chapter IV: Results

This chapter presents the results and analysis of the interviews with study participants that were conducted at Metro Middle School during the fall semester of 2017 and explores the factors that contribute to overage middle school students. Eighteen teachers participated in the interviews, which were conducted at the middle school campus. One teacher interview was omitted from the study since the teacher’s content assignment was special education and outside the parameters of this research study. Table 3 below illustrates the gender and ethnic breakdown of the study participants.

Table 3 : *Participant Demographics*

Gender	Ethnicity
12 Females	7 White
	2 Hispanic
	3 Black
5 Males	2 White
	2 Hispanic
	1 Asian

The instructional content areas represented by the interviewees included Spanish, Math, Science, Reading/Language Arts, Health and Physical Education, and one counselor. The combined years of experience totaled 150 years. The average years teaching was 8.8 years, with

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the most experienced participant having 25 years of experience and the least experienced having one year. Participants were assigned an alias to protect their identity and to ensure their confidentiality. They were provided with an alias actors to protect their privacy.

The teacher interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Once the transcriptions were completed, teachers were sent a copy of the document for them to review for accuracy of the interview transcript and provide feedback. Teachers were instructed to respond to researcher university email with any additions or changes to the transcript, only one responded with a slight change from “our future- to not only are they our future, these are people who live in our society.” I made the correction on the as requested, this was the only change that was requested.

The transcripts were then read carefully for understanding and to notations were made along the margins to summarize and identify themes. The transcripts were then reread and highlighted and color-coded to help to identify the common themes throughout each interview document. Each of the 17 interview transcripts were then reread to identify common themes and themes were collapsed and categorized under each of the three guiding research questions. As each document was reviewed a color was selected for each transcript that contained a similar code. Finally, a spreadsheet was created and again color-coded to easily identify the prominent themes (Saldana, 2015).

Common themes and patterns emerged from the interview sessions held with the participants regarding the factors that can contribute to overage middle school students. The common themes that resulted from the interviews included: (a) the challenges in teaching second

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language learners, (b) the importance of parental involvement and parental training opportunities, (c) developing engaging lessons, (d) professional training opportunities for teachers, (e) and building trust among students and educators. These themes will be further discussed in this chapter as they relate to each of the guiding research questions.

Introduction

The U. S. Census Bureau estimates the population of overage students in the United States to be at almost 16% of middle school students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). The state of Texas has an overage population of almost 12% in the middle school population (TEA, 2016). According to Gewerz (2005) and the National Center for Education Statistics on Grade Retention (1995), if an intervention is not put in place, these students are at high risk of dropping out of school.

While retention is intended to improve a student's chance for school success, some researchers have found that the stigma of failure associated with retention has a negative impact on the student's self-esteem and subsequent academic achievement, thereby increasing the likelihood of dropping out (Gewerz, p. 1). This study revealed practices that schools and districts can put into place as an intervention to help reduce the number of students that may drop out of school. Finally, the U.S. Department of Labor Statistics (2016) projects the bleak employment outlook prospects and income expectations for high school dropouts. The Table on Employment projects the unemployment rate among dropouts at almost 7.4% while an individual with a high school diploma has a much lower rate at 5.2% (U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that contribute to overage middle school students from the perspective of teachers and counselors and to create suggestions to better serve the students in an urban school district. The results of this study will be shared with the district in hopes of designing appropriate interventions for overage students and training opportunities for teachers that interact with this population of students. Furthermore, bringing awareness to this educational dilemma can help to shape future policy and curriculum decisions to help reduce the number of students becoming overage students by middle school.

Presentation and Analysis of the Findings

This study revealed the perceptions of teachers as they encounter overage middle school student on their campus. The research questions were as follows:

1. What are the factors that contribute to overage middle school students?
2. What techniques or strategies do teachers and counselors employ when teaching/counseling overage students in the classroom or school?
3. What structures and measures are in place or can be created to ensure the academic success of overage students in the classroom or school?

The information gathered from the teacher interviews can be a focus of discussion at either the campus or at the district level to best address the needs and concerns of overage students in middle school. Additionally the study results can be examined to develop strategies to assist not

only the students but also the teachers and counselors who interact with overage students daily throughout the academic year.

Research Question One

What are the factors that contribute to overage students in middle school?

The teachers that were interviewed for this study had classroom experience with overage middle school students, and this study provided them with an opportunity to reflect on the practices and daily plights as they continue to work with students throughout the academic school year. One teacher commented:

I had not really thought about overage students as they sat in my classroom but now after talking to you I have become more aware of their needs. Thank you for bringing it to my attention—James Philips.

He indicated that after having this conversation with the researcher that day, he began to carefully design his lesson plans to address the needs of all of his students, especially the overage ones. Several prominent themes surfaced during the interviews among the participants including language, parental involvement, learning gaps among the students as well as parents, and finally grade retention in lower grades. These themes will be further discussed in the following section.

Language. The factor that emerged most often among the interview participants was the lack of English Language skills of the students. The language deficiencies of the students, according to the participants of this study, can be one of the factors that can contribute to overage students in middle school.

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Ms. Cruz is a native of Spain where she taught for 10 years prior to coming to the Texas area to teach as a bilingual teacher in Fort Worth. She has taught elementary, middle, and high school. During the time of the interview, she was teaching Spanish to sixth graders at the middle school. She has over 23 years of teaching experience, and has been teaching at Metro Middle School for the past three years. She is slender in build, wears her hair short, and struggled at times during the interview session due to her lack of understanding of English. I had to translate in Spanish some of the questions because she did not understand them. Sometimes I asked the questions in Spanish, and she responded in English. She said she enjoys the students and the community at Metro Middle School, especially her department, which she said has been very supportive to her. She commented on the student English language skills as:

Sometimes it's language issues, sometimes because they do not have a good Spanish language at home, the second language is harder, if your first language is not good you repeat the same mistakes in the second language and sometimes they are not able to follow the language in the second language.

She has had students in her class that are Spanish speakers; however, she explained that the parents were unable to help at home since the majority of the parents do not have strong Spanish skills themselves. She felt that this was a problem because students who don't have a strong foundation in their primary language spoken at home have difficulty transferring skills to learning a second language such as English.

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Maria Roberts was entering her third year of teaching at Metro Middle School when I interviewed her. She was teaching students to explore and generate interest in colleges and careers. She said she enjoyed the challenge of working with young adults because “this age group needs a lot of guidance and help.” She also wanted to provide the students with support and career options for their futures, which was why she chose to teach middle school. She agreed that the low English proficiency among her students is an “English Barrier” that inhibits the students from achieving academically. She said:

A lot of students come in with English language deficiencies so they are maybe a bit held back because of that or they’re maybe new to United States. And yes, their age says that they should be in a different grade but they don’t have a background knowledge needed to be successful there.

While Ms. Jenny Basset was serving as one of the counselors on the campus. At the time of the interview she had been a guidance counselor in the middle school for 15 years, the last six at Metro Middle School. She has also taught reading language arts at the elementary and middle school level. Ms. Basset is sensitive and caring to the needs of her students. She also affirmed that a student’s inability to master English language skills could be an obstacle to academic success. She said that the students who are new to the country and are rushed to obtain the English skills and vocabulary needed for each of the content courses struggle academically and falls behind their peers. She said:

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The first that comes in mind I think are one student that is coming new to the country.

Sometimes if they are not proficient in English, they are held back.

She further commented that the practice of grade repetition is more common at the elementary school level. Since the students do not have strong Cognitive Academic Language Skills (CALPS), the academic vocabulary for each of the content areas necessary for them to understand, they are retained and arrive at the middle school older than their cohorts.

Mr. James Ponce a tall Hispanic male who is retired from the military, had been teaching seventh grade math at the middle school level for the past four years at the time of his interview. He had been on the campus leadership team and commanded a strong sense of presence. He is tall, yet slender in stature, and appeared to exude both confidence and respect from both teachers and students. He explained the unfairness of the demand on language minority students by restating that it normally will take up to:

Seven years to acquire [language] at a proficient level and when that occurs this these children to acquire the language in one year and be proficient at it in new language. A task that has been shown to be impossible, we are setting them up for failure and not success. The reason that we can have those overage children is sometimes a transfer from another country, those that are coming from another country, and those that are not coming from another country that are bilingual and are having difficulty with the literacy.

Here he pointed out that most students who arrive in Texas must master the English language in one year. He was referring to the studies conducted by researchers on language development that

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indicate that it takes a minimum of seven years to master academic language skill yet the state mandates that they obtain those skills in one year because students are required take a standardized test in English in the content areas of Reading and Math at the end of the school year. If they are in fifth grade or eighth grade, they can be held back for failing to meet the passing standards.

Antonio Vega is a Hispanic male who had been teaching science for over twenty years at the time of the interview. He had several classroom pets including a snake, which he said creates a strong bond with his seventh grade students. He also affirms the observations made by Mr.

Ponce stated:

Just the language itself being able to manage speaking and conversing in English then, without that skill the secondary that leads writing dovetails right in that is being able to read because everything we put on the board is in English. Everything textbook we give them is in English. Even if they can manage a conversation in English they have the next hurdle of being able to just manage the language itself reading it and writing in it.

Ms. Roberts agrees with her colleagues that language can be a factor that contributes to the students falling behind in their classes. She adds the following:

The other thing I can think of is if they fail a grade, sometimes what you see here is like the ESL students who come from another country if their English may not be up to the grade level and their teachers might decide to hold them back just so that their English skills can get better.

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The campus that was selected for the study has a population of almost 53.2% of students that are identified as ELL students, meaning that English is not their native language. Plata-Potter and Guzman (2012), estimated that Hispanics are among one of the fastest growing populations in American schools. Therefore, an honest attempt to provide support and interventions for this growing demographic at middle school and elementary could possibly reduce the number of overage students at the middle school level.

Gaps in education/literacy. While the participants in the study recognized language deficiencies of the students as problematic, they also recognized that gaps in the students' education were a contributing factor to academic success. Mr. Ponce the ex-military math teacher stated:

Most students who tend to be overage are well below their on level literacy. They tend to be anywhere between 2 or 3 grade levels below in literacy, which is what the current research is showing.

His experience in having overage students in the classroom indicates that the students are arriving at the middle school level with low reading proficiencies. He said he prefers to engage students where they are academically rather than to play the blame game. He said he doesn't point the blame at the parents, the students, or elementary teachers.

He shared an interesting analogy regarding students who arrive at school with academic gaps from an episode of the television show the *Simpsons*. As he recalled, Bart was placed in a special class meant to accelerate student instruction so that he could catch up to his cohort peers,

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and Bart responded by asking the teacher, “Wait, wait, wait, let me get this straight. We are behind the other students and so we are going to catch up to them by going slower?” Mr. Ponce’s point was that often schools create student groups based on their learning gaps rather than assessing and teaching them where they are. He believes as an educator that students should be taught at the level at which they are at when they arrive in the classroom. It was evident that he cares for his students and demands the best from all of them, especially those who need his assistance the most, the at-risk students. Mr. Ponce said he shares his personal successes and failures with all of his students, even sharing with them the small break he personally took from his studies to point out that he went back and finished. He feels that by sharing his experiences it allows the students to learn from him and let them know that although his is a successful teacher leader on campus, he has made his share of mistakes along the way. For example, he often shares his need to take a temporary break from his college studies, the lesson that he communicates to them that “He went back and finished, “therefore they can do the same.

Parental involvement. The majority of the teachers agreed that parental participation in the child’s education was a leading factor to the success of the student; however, they also pointed out that many parents are on survival mode, trying to provide for the family. Harry Jones is a White male teacher who was teaching sixth grade Spanish and Social Studies at the time of the interview. He sports a beard, is of average build, and enjoys spending his summers in Mexico working on his Spanish skills. He had been teaching at the same campus for the past six years. He indicated that he enjoys creating engaging lessons designed to both generate student interest

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and engagement by involving the students in the topics that result in student-cooperative projects. He commented:

The main thing would be that the families that are involved do not place a very big importance on education.” The families are busy trying to provide a food, a home that they are busy with those demands on the family and doing as well as they possible can within their means.

He also pointed out that parental involvement has some cultural expectations, especially with female students. He indicated that some cultural inequality of parental expectations exists for males or female students:

They don’t place a very big importance on education, specifically in this area in the United States. I think there’s a lot of Hispanic families here and specifically Mexican families here and if you were to go to Mexico, many of the students that are there specifically girls wouldn’t go pass eighth grade and so they’re meant to become a homemaker so that’s ingrained in that culture.

Mr. Jones’ observations as a teacher along with his travels to and from Mexico, helped him articulate a bias that exists with fathers who might view their daughters as more domestic rather than college or career bound.

Ms. Carmen Lopez is short and soft spoken teacher and was in her first year of teaching Spanish at the time of the interview. Although she had only taught for one year, she had worked at Metro Middle School for over 10 years as a teacher assistant as well as an office manager

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before becoming a Spanish teacher. She was very excited to work at this campus since she was familiar with the students, parents, and the community. She is Hispanic and was the first in her immediate family to attend and graduate from college. She was filled with energy and enthusiasm for the academic school year. Her response to the factors that may contribute to overage students was as follows:

I think that it has like a big weight on them, being able to understand what they're supposed to so that makes them fall behind and then two like sometimes there's not the support at home with the parent like to encourage them to read or encourage them to do the work because some of the parents have multiple jobs. They're not home so it's hard and then they become the caregiver or I don't know what you have to say for the younger siblings so they are not able to do the work. It's just whatever happens in the classroom.

While these two teachers described what the majority of teachers communicated regarding parent involvement and expectations, Ms. Jennifer Cruz stated that although parents may want to be involved, they may not have the academic skills to assist their children at home. She stated that:

Most of them they don't have a really good skills in the first language and they have no ability to receive the lesson in English. Are for that they failing in Math, most of them bilingual kids or Spanish kids they are very bad in Math because Math is always in English and they are not. And maybe they retain for the Math problem. [Sic]

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She further explained that based on her observations and conversations with the parents in her current community, many parents are unable to assist their children with their Spanish assignments since the parent's own skills in the language are poor. Moreover, as a bilingual teacher in the lower grades, she has observed that the students do not have the skills to be successful on standardized exams. This is especially apparent in the area of math since it one of the subjects that must be taught in English whereas reading can be taught in Spanish. Ms. Cruz maintained that when parents are unable to help their children at home with either reading or math, the children fall further and further behind as they their schooling progressed. She indicated that these students' inability to master the grade requirements could lead to grade repetition.

Ms. Cruz observed that:

Some of our kids bring homework home. I'm a math teacher, they'll bring homework home, rational numbers and the parents have no idea what that is. They don't have the academic skills that the children are trying to pick up so they can't help them.

She explained that the parents do not have the necessary skills to help the students at home, and the parents may not know where or who to contact to obtain assistance on homework assignments. Therefore, if the students are unable to master the concepts being taught and the parents cannot help them, the students fall further and further behind, and they become frustrated and have a higher chance of dropping out of school.

Research Question Two

What techniques or strategies do teachers and counselors employ when working with overage students? The following section will describe both suggestions and best practices that the staff employs while working with overage students in the classroom and on campus. The staff identified various areas that could help to support overages students especially in middle school, which included (a) building trust and formulating relationships with the students, (b) goal setting opportunities, and (c) engaging lessons or differentiated instruction.

Build trust and formulate relationships. The sessions with the participants were cordial yet forthcoming; the participants were very open with their experiences with both the district and the campus. When asked to identify areas and strategies that are successful with overage students, the participants indicated that building trust and formulating relationships is important.

Jane Tate had been at the campus for the past two years at the time of the interview and had been employed at other middle school campuses prior to arriving at Metro Middle School. She feels that it is important to build relationships with the students. She stated:

I think the more that the teachers, administrators, and school personnel in general can be involved in that situation I think can help encourage a student.

She further added:

If they're not getting that encouragement at home at least they know that in school that they can have the encouragement, know that somebody is caring enough about them to help them progress and move along.

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She indicated that the students often do not have anyone at home that can guide them on how to be successful in school. Forming those relationships with teachers or staff provides students with a caring adult that genuinely cares for them. One of the strategies that Ms. Lopez said she uses in her Spanish class to build trust between her and the students is to “keep the student close and I think that that’s what gets them to actually work for you and do what they need to do.”

By maintaining close proximity to the students, Ms. Lopez said she is able to ensure that they are challenged while she is monitoring if they need assistance and are remaining on task. Many of the other teachers also used this as a strategy to build trust with the students.

Thomas Taylor, who had seven years of teaching experience and had been teaching at Metro Middle School for the last three years at the time of the interview, was teaching in the Health and Physical Education area, and he also did some coaching on campus. He said he enjoyed working with this age group because he could have reasonable conversations with the students. He stated:

I think what’s effective is maybe talking to them one on one or like reaching out to them and saying, “I’m here with you. You made a mistake. We need to get better together. I can help you.

He said that maintaining optimistic interaction with the students not only benefits the students but other teachers as well. Rather than focusing on what the students are doing wrong, he said he likes to point out the positive decisions that the students are making on their behavior and interactions with others.

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Leticia Moore had been teaching at the middle school for the past two years at the time of the interview. She had previously taught at the elementary level, and she left teaching for five years to work in the corporate world before returning to teach eighth grade English at Metro Middle School. She said she enjoys the personalities of this age group but especially loves to teach literature to students. She gets excited when she speaks of her students and her energy came through as she talked about her experiences with her students. She said, “There is one student couple years ago who gave barely a hard time on most teachers but I found out what made him tick and I built a relationship with him.” She recalled a time when she spent time cultivating the relationship with a student and was able to get the student to produce for her. “It helped to make him want to do stuff for me because he knew I cared. He cared because I cared and he started working.” She also feels that it is important for educators to explore what is important to each student to demonstrate genuine care for them. The students, her opinion, will then work for you.

Miriam Davis had been teaching sixth grade math for the past nine years, the last seven at the middle school level at the time of the interview. She has taught the regular classes as well as the AP math classes. She also said she enjoys working with this age level of students and challenging them to be the best that they can be at school or home. She said she likes to encourage her students and build trust with them by interacting with them in a positive manner. She acknowledges them when they complete a task or attend class. She feels that it is important that they understand that an adult cares and has taken an interest in their success. She said she

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often greets her students with a simple, “You made it. I’m excited to see you. Gosh, you’re here today. I’m so glad.”

Both Ms. Moore and Ms. Davis recognized that students respond to their caring and positive interactions. Ms. Moore described one of her students who seemed to be complaining about all the work that he had to complete. After he was finished talking, she said the following:

“Holy Europe, this is and then, how do you do all that?” He really lit up that somebody noticed or that took the time to appreciate the fact like “Hey, you’re here every day and look at all the stuff you have to do.”

She was able to make the student understand, in a positive way, all the learning that he had accomplished not to mention the skills he acquired along the way. The participants agreed that providing students an opportunity to vent their frustrations and know that a caring adult was listening is important to academic success.

Engaging lessons. Creating lessons that are engaging while following the curriculum mandates can be a challenge for most teachers, especially when the classroom holds different abilities and contains knowledge gaps among the students. This can include overage students who have fallen behind their peers. Mr. Ponce made the following comment based on his classroom interactions:

Most student who tend to be overage are well below their on level literacy. They tend to be anywhere between 2 or 3 grade levels below in literacy, which is what the current research is showing. Most can’t read beyond 2-3rd grade which is where you see a lot of

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the overage students, they are at a 2nd-3rd-grade level, which is where we are seeing them, and they are severely lacking in literacy.

Teachers should design lessons to meet the students where they are to develop their academic readiness. This can be done with Differentiated Lesson planning or DI. Mr. Ponce further explained that:

I will teach you at the fourth grade level until you are ready to move to the fifth, then sixth grade and until you are on grade level. That is the differentiating instruction that we provide. We provide differentiated instructions to allow the students from a low level to obtain, on level while allowing on level students to move at least one level above to truly help the lowers.

His math lessons are structured to meet the needs of the students at their current level while pushing them to the next one with support and collaboration from him and student peers. Mr. Ponce further indicated that he monitors the students to make sure that they are being successful in the material that he assigns.

To create engaging lessons, Mr. Jones said he allows his students some flexibility in the final product of their assignments. For example:

We like to ask the students what they are interested in, and we let them self select what they want to learn for example, we are learning about technology I say ok this group of students about what they are interested in video games so I want this group to research the popularity of video games in their country and learn vocabulary that way and this

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group may be interested in sports or leisure activities so they research and read some articles on sports that are happening in Spanish speaking countries.

He said he is able engage his students while allowing them to present a completed project, therefore generating interest in a Spanish speaking country. His students work collaboratively in teams based on their interest to learn about other cultures.

Meshele Dilan said she engages in similar strategies as her colleagues at the middle school; however, she wants her lessons not only to be engaging but to be fun. Ms. Dilan had been teaching for five years, with the last four at the middle school level. She was teaching eighth grade language arts and creative writing at the time of the interview. She said she enjoys this age group because they are “fun age group to work with.” She stated:

I think that the strategies that I guess I'd find are most effective would be making sure that everything that I'm having them do is meaningful in a way that they can immediately see a benefit to doing it.

She further elaborated by explaining that she brings in real life experiences to learning in her eighth grade language arts class. She said:

Things like filling out an application and how to answer those questions in an interview.

Practicing those things is huge because if you've never done it before and you don't have somebody at home telling you how to do it, these things can be really intimidating.

She also said she engages the students by exposing them to skills that may assist them as they get older and encounter applications. She conducts mock interviews with students to give the

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opportunity to engage and be prepared for a potential job prospect. These are some ideas to engage students while still completing their curriculum requirements.

Goal setting opportunities. Encouraging students to set realistic yet attainable goals can be an effective tool for most students, but especially for overage students. Mr. Jones said, “As educators in the classroom, we should be setting goals, so we should work with the students to set life goals as well.” He has found that the students respond well when they have an understanding of what is required of them in the course and in middle school. Having a conversation with the students on what they want to achieve in life gives the students a target.

Josie Bates had been teaching middle school for the past two years, and was in her first year at this middle school campus at the time of the interview. Her current assignment was seventh grade math. She said she was eager to work alongside of her colleagues and students. She was new to the city and had no family members in the area. She is Nigerian-American and immigrated to the United States with her family, who are still back home in the northeastern part of the United States. She said she has found goal setting with her student helpful:

Setting goal with the student sitting down but like in I have a plan for you and I want to hold you to look to these goals that we set here and how can I help you achieve those things and it can be anything from coming to school every day like I want to work with my students.

She further stated:

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Okay great, how can I help you to help you the type of scenario. Maybe I have a hard time. We get up in the morning and we'll be trying once a bit at 10 or 11 rather than two at night. What it is that keeps you up at night and your phone ... I just like start up with some SMART goals of course and maybe that would be another way aside from academic trying to help them academically.

She views this as an opening for a meaningful conversation to build trust and formulate relationships with her students. She said she works with them to demonstrate the small steps that the students can take to achieve their academic and life goals. She further concluded with the following statement on how SMART goals can be helpful for the students in all aspect of their lives: "You could either help them with like life or school they get also to transfer it to other areas if it lies in the future."

Ms. Jenny Basset was one of the two school counselors at the middle school. She had been in that role for the past 18 years, the last six at this middle school campus. At the time of the interview she was the seventh grade counselor, and her prior teaching experience was as a reading teacher. She agrees with the previous teachers on the importance of having goal setting conversations with her students, getting them to realize that there more out there than each class, and she wants them to realize their life goals whether it is college or a trade. She said:

That's what I think and just trying to get them to see big picture is effective and it is going to be. The age growing up or what is it you want to do with your goal and just talking to them.

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Mr. Vega also uses goal setting with his students; however he tries to simplify it for his students so that they are not intimidated or scared away. He said:

Hey, so and so, I understand where you are. This is usually done privately one on one, Can I talk you after class?" Understand it's just a conversation and then just encouragement them. "Hey look, I know you're in the situation, what I need you to do is, and what I can do stuff is you need to start picking up these skills.

He hooks them and works with them in small incremental steps as illustrated here.

You pick up these skills, you show yourself that you're managing yourself socially and behaviorally if you will within this school year then in my case seventh grade you may move up, you're going to move up to the eighth grade.

He also provided an example of a negotiation technique he uses with one of his students. He described it as the following:

I have one student that was overage and he would come in my class and sleep. Of course as a teacher your first response is, you're just being lazy and this is I'm boring this person's ... then sitting down and having a conversation about just being an unacceptable behavior and conversing with him. I found out he goes to work from seven until two in the morning. He goes to work with his dad. He's got a job at school and that he's got a second full time job just to help the family make ends meet. We struck an agreement, he would do my work and there are times that he could awake, he could stay awake and if he

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needed to fall asleep he could come to my class and sleep during the lecture and then we would work outside those parameters.

Mr. Vega forged a relationship with this particular student that produced results for him and the student. In this particular situation, the student with support and guidance of the teacher set realistic goals to ensure that he was successful in the class.

Research Question Three:

What structures and measures are in place or can be created to ensure the academic success of overage students in your classroom or school? The first two research questions sought to identify the factors that contribute to overage students along with effective strategies that teachers can implement to ensure the success of the overage students in the classroom. The final question explored the additional supports that can be implemented both at the campus and district level. The teachers recognized the following areas that would be helpful for teachers, students, and parents. The topics that they concurred on fell into the following themes: (a) small groups or one on one sessions, (b) an appropriate curriculum, (c) alternative setting, (d) additional teacher training, and (e) parental education training. These are each discussed further in the following sections.

One on one interaction. When given the opportunity to provide insight into strategies or best practices that the teachers considered to be effective, they agreed that working with overage students on a one to one basis or in small groups resulted in student success. The practice afforded them the opportunity to address the individual needs of the students. Roseanne Bartlett

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had been teaching for the past four years and had been at the current campus for the past two years. She was teaching seventh grade math at the time of the interview. She spoke very fondly of her team and appreciated the support that they afforded her during her tenure at the campus. It was obvious that she cared deeply for her students and the teachers on her team. She said: One on one, sometimes one on one or extra additional help or extra help or support outside class hours sometimes just have to do that because it removes them from being in a bigger group and then being say identify individually or singled out. Sometimes for the most part it works, if you are able to pull them through in that kind of providing extra help.

Judith Carr was teaching sixth grade English language arts and reading at the time of the interview. She had been teaching for three years with the past two years at the current campus. She chose to teach middle school students to provide them with a strong foundation to ensure students would be successful in high school. She said she enjoys working with middle school students because there is still wonder and enthusiasm to learn. She believes in small group instruction as a vehicle to support students. She commented:

If teachers can do a one on one outside of class for extra help I feel that could also be done to them let's say after school or before school as a kind of mentoring system like it doesn't have to be their teacher, probably an admin or another school staff who would be constantly there as a guide or a mentor.

Ms. Dilan also concurred that she feels that grouping students together in a similar setting encourages interaction and support among the students. She said:

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I think you're getting them in a smaller class setting. You're allowing for them to be around people that are their age that are kind of going to the same thing as them and you're giving them the opportunity to catch up and then get right back into.

Mr. Vega also suggested:

Maybe a smaller group of those kids on each campus that would have the ability to study together, maybe they take four or five core classes and they have study groups so they can do that homework. They accelerate in that Math class, they're doing the homework, they're going back to that class the next day and they're getting the good grade.

Ms. Roberts described an incident where she had used one on one conversation to motivate the student; she later confirmed that the strategy worked since the student remained enrolled in school. She said:

I did have an example were I had a student, he was overage and he was one of the students who was more of I guess problem students in the class so I had to keep a really close eye on him and encourage him to keep doing his work and that kind of thing. For him, for that particular student I would say I had to really have a one-on-one conversation with him about trying to encourage him to stay motivated to staying at school, do his work so then eventually he could graduate high school.

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While one on one interactions were considered successful with overage students, participants also suggested providing students with a summer camp that would allow them the opportunity to catch up to their cohort peers. Mr. Taylor added:

Or maybe like getting a little summer camp, a weeklong thing or something, let them have some fun but also explain to them like life goes fast and life's quick and all those stuff but you have to be ready for it and you all made a mistake and you all didn't take this seriously and you'll need to buckle down this like coming fall and really kind get move on and maybe even try to take some classes you didn't get back up to your normal class.

Curriculum. The teachers all agreed that the existing middle school curriculum was not appropriate for meeting the needs of overage students. They felt that what was needed is an accelerated curriculum that could allow students to gain real life experiences while working on their existing curriculum requirements. Ms. Davis feels that students should be prepared not only academically but also for real life experiences. She said:

Yeah, the things that are applicable skills in the real world and I think even so much as if it's not going to happen, it's a curriculum or an elective and maybe having clubs like a real-life skill clubs like learn how to change your tire, learn how to check your oil, learn how to balance a check book, learn what interest rates can do, learn what messes up your credit and what doesn't because that's huge and they'll get it.

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Providing overage students with real life skills could encourage them to work hard at school towards a career or further education. Ms. Davis further elaborated on purposeful leaning experiences for students by adding:

Teaching them how to budget or how to plan ahead and how to just have those fine skills that more adult type students would require, focusing on people at middle school but also enhancing that with fine skills, how to use Microsoft Words so that if you want to type your resume, you know resume writing, interviewing skills, making that job focus because really, those older kids are focused on is when hanging out a various works so I'm going to do mine. I think that it really helps to show, well here's how you're going to do that, bring in applications from employers outside, have them fill it out so they know what it looks like, mock interviews, things that help add that career aspect to it so they see the value at a point and education.

She has found this to be helpful especially to engage the older students to keep their interest peaked in her class. She also believes that students should be engaged in project based learning opportunities to increase their engagement in school.

Additionally, Ms. Davis added that perhaps alternative career paths should be an option for some students, especially if they are considered overage. For example:

I think add a different program for them. Anything that focuses on showing them the value of education and what it can do for them, it's not like we're just forcing you to waste your time in our classroom like that. There's a purpose and that purpose is for you

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to achieve your goals. Really focusing on that higher level and not everybody wants to or as to go to college so if that's not the case and not that I was around much, I miss wood shop.

While Ms. Davis found this strategy has worked with her overage students, Mr. Smits thinks that the curriculum should be spiraled and differentiated for the students to meet them where they are while identifying gaps in their learning. He said:

Everyone should come to me with all the basic skills, and if actually if you can walk me through the steps, it might take you a little longer but I'm going to give this process and after that I will get the next. It may take a little longer but the other teacher or a competitive math class will get you into that class. I am not here to teach you speed especially overage kids.

Alternative setting. The participating instructors felt that the students should be offered an alternative setting where students with similar needs could attend while they catch up to their peers and in some cases return to the home campus. The teachers, staff, and administrators would be trained in an accelerated curriculum, motivation, and other areas geared towards supporting overage students.

Ms. Lopez thinks that students will be more successful academically if they were grouped with other students that share similar circumstances. She commented:

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They needed to have some kind like a special class or somewhere where these students can because they all share the same thing. They're overage so putting those students together and then having a tutor or someone to motivate these students.

She went on to add:

I think that's how they would benefit and they would be more encouraged rather than having a younger student read like two levels above them and then they feel intimidated, putting them in a group of students that are in the same level as them and then just motivating to move on.

Ms. Tate also agreed with Ms. Lopez, and went further to suggest a school of choice specifically for overage middle school students. She had worked at another school district where it was successful; overage middle school students attended for either short or long term to catch up on their curriculum requirements. She stated:

I don't know if we have choice program here in district where it can help them move along at their pace. Self-paced and they were able to go to that rather than being in an alternative school for discipline but it was considered choice school and you were able to go there and work at your pace and be able to catch yourself up. When you got older in high school you want to go graduate ... if you needed to or anything like that but a choice school I think would maybe help or something if they had specific classes that they had even in middle school that was like that.

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While Ms. Basset, the campus counselor, agreed that something should be done for overage students, she suggested that students should be offered the opportunity to recover credits similar to the district high school program known as *Reconnection*. The program allows high school students to recover high school credit by enrolling in online high school courses that they are failing or have failed in the past. She stated:

I honestly think some type of reconnect program in middle school where it might be a granted and all of grades maybe five or six but having something in place where those students have the opportunity if they are motivated to catch up to where they were supposed to be and giving them a window and something to work for.

She went on to add the following:

Because middle schools you can't really catch up. In high school, there's a lot of reconnect program, there's a lot of restore system for students to catch up to their current grade but in middle school really don't. We have reconnect program years ago in middle school and it was after school for about four hours after school. You really have to wait until high school and then get into one of their programs.

Ms. Basset is referring to a district program that utilizes an online curriculum at the high school that provides the students the opportunity to recover high school credit by allowing them to complete the course to regain credit. The program is available to high school student enrolled in the district (Porter, 2016).

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Ms. Dilan added the following regarding providing an alternative setting for both students and families to allow the students to catch up to their peers. She said:

I know we have like overage campuses but I feel like they are very or I thought we did. I would think, we need to have an overage campus for these kids to go to even just temporarily to help catch them up to their grade level that would be age appropriate. I think you're getting them in a smaller class setting. You're allowing for the to be around people that are their age that are kind of going to the same thing as them and you're giving them the opportunity to catch up and then get right back into.

Finally, Mr. Vega also agreed that an alternative setting would be of benefit to overage students. He stated:

My first thought is, I wouldn't say an alternative school because we say alternative school for our district an alternative school is a punishment. You've done something wrong. But some kind of academy that might be able to be a dedicated where some of the these kids can't have a smaller group structured but unstructured in that this year is going to be just seventh grade.

He further added:

Maybe when the school year with a bit more maturity, some of these kids can be moved to material because our state, you advance kids based on how they do on the STAR test here in Texas. If a kid can pass a seventh grade STAR test in Science by the first year why couldn't he in the second half of the year do the eighth grade material? That student

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may find himself or herself in situation where in one year they can have two years and suddenly be back with their peers and suddenly have a feeling of learning studying skills.

Teacher training. Several among the participants suggested teacher training would be advantageous for them as they encounter overage students in the school and classroom. They desired training that would provide strategies on how to best support the needs of this special population of students.

Mr. Taylor recognizes that the district and the campus provide teachers with valuable training throughout the year; however he said he would like to see customized trainings or strategies specifically for dealing with older students. Specifically, he said:

I think just extra help, maybe trainings, maybe advice, maybe tips and clues, and strategies of just how to deal with them on a daily basis because it's challenging.

He went on to add:

We need them to go to high school, we need them to go to college, we need them to graduate so I think that's a very important thing from the top to go down to us is how do we deal with these kids on a daily basis, on a positive way and getting them to where they need to go. Are we just okay having them on sixth grade for three years? Are we okay just to pass them along because we want them out of here? We got to find better results. I think having maybe another training on it I think maybe understanding what the kid's going through in a better way because it is difficult at times when you're teaching a

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seventh grade class and you have a kid that's supposed to be in ninth grade or something there, it's different.

Ms. Basset, the campus counselor, agreed that there should be additional training for teachers. She commented:

I won't say this maybe in the side. I personally think we need more training programs for over aged student because they are not motivated all the time to attend college that we pushed. We want them to be productive citizens that are able to take care of themselves and their family. That might be being a mechanic if you like this. You can take care of yourself. That might be a plumber so I can think I understand college is not for everyone.

Parental involvement opportunities. The final theme that emerged from the interviews with the participants was parental opportunities to involve parents more with their child's education. Mr. Ponce recognizes the importance of involving parents. He said:

Are we providing activities for the parents? Sometimes parents themselves do not understand what they need to do, they know that they want their child to have a better position but they do not understand education, if they do not understand then they create a cycle. By not asking questions, the best thing that I can have a parent ask me is "what to do?" and if you ask me what to do, please follow the advice that I give but do not put it by the waste side. If I say, "You should read with your child tonight" and they go home and turn on the TV.

He added:

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I gave you my advice but my advice went unheeded. So I think that sometimes when we talk about overage students and how we identify and how we not want to be overage not just at school, trying to bring them up. There's a, it sounds silly, a saying in an episode in the Simpsons where Bart is put in the let up program and he tells the teachers, "Wait, wait, wait, let me get this straight we are behind the other students and so we are going to catch up to them by going slower?" we need to push those students just as hard as we push the talented and gifted students.

Ms. Basset agreed that students need the parents to be involved; however, they may not have the skills to assist their child and do not know where to go to ask for help. Ms. Basset said:

Lack of knowledge from family on how to guide and encourage their student to excel in school I think. Maybe if you had worked and you have to drop out in 6th grade, you tell them do well in school but you don't know how to support that.

She went on to say:

It's hard to be a parent and if you are a single parent and you have five kids and everybody need something and these are your children who are a product of you and even if you haven't been to school, I have a parent who wasn't educated. He said, "I went to 6th grade but my kids don't want to do." He stayed on. He might not have understood the work but they will always look good. The building was open those children were there. So I try to get parents a little knowledge too and let them know "you know what you didn't know but let me share this with you" or they have this program, they tell to me

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what's the best for their children. They just don't know how to go about it and make that happened.

She further added:

Sometimes its family dynamics too and then I play the part that you were just guessing why the kid failed twice in 6th grade until you really try to really ask them "Why do you think you failed in 6th grade twice?" and sometimes they tell you "Well, I really don't know how to do this" or "Nobody in my family to ever finish school." That's the big deal. "I'm going to be the only one that graduated high school." So sometimes it's more going on. It takes a little time to find them.

Ms. Moore further added that there should be English classes offered to the parents who do not understand the language to cultivate the skills to function better, especially in an academic setting. She added:

If the parents don't speak English or speak the language of wherever they are, it'll affect the children because often they struggle with the native language and if they're being taught the native language, they struggle. If they're not getting it at home so my kids have an advantage, we spoke English and I could read books to my kids. We built up a lot of literacy before they ever start because we were educated, we read books and that doesn't happen in every household.

Ms. Hilda Mitchell added:

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I think parent involvement is really key. They've already showed the lack of not being engaged in their learning and so you really need parent support to team up on this child and try to get them on the right path.

Chapter Five further summarizes the key findings of this study and draws conclusions that may inform current practices and policy regarding overage middle school students. Additionally it will connect the findings with chapter two, literature review, finally the final chapter will also make recommendations on best practices, strategies to provide support for overage middle school students, and future studies.

Chapter V: Summary and Discussion

Chapter five presents a summary of the interview data from the qualitative research study conducted on the factors that can contribute to overage students. Additionally, a review of the statement of problem, the methodology, and the findings, along with connections to the literature, are included. This chapter closes with recommendations for further research study implications regarding overage middle school students.

The conceptual framework that was employed by researcher to guide this study were based on the works of Coleman's interpretation of social capital as perceived by parents in schools (Coleman, 1988). Parents build these forms of capital as they formulate relationships with teachers; staff, administrators and other parents in the school community that may help their child achieve academic goals.

Schools are viewed as institutions where discussions and decisions are being made that will impact the future of children Coleman views it as "an investment in human capital". Therefore, the relationships forged at school may have a positive academic outcome for the student and their families (Coleman, 1988). Portes, (2000), further explains that social capital can be seen as a resource to help to create a supportive network for access to "job, or access to education". Parents that are not involved in the schools of their children do not have this form of capital. They have not formulated the relationships needed to navigate the educational system to help their child become academically successful they are busy working or trying to survive.

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According to the Texas Education Agency report, *Secondary School Completion Dropouts in Texas Public Schools 2012-13*, “80.8% of Texas students in grades seventh -12th grade were categorized as overage and had a drop-out rate of 6.7%. ” (TEA, 2016, p.57).

Therefore, schools and districts should provide early interventions and strategies to educators, administrators, and stakeholders for this population of students. In doing so, districts will be able to provide overage students with the support and interventions necessary to ensure that they do not become a drop out statistic.

The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017), projects that individuals that do not complete a high school diploma will earn significantly less income and have a higher unemployment rate than their counter parts who have completed their high school requisites. The earning potential among high school dropouts in 2016 averaged \$504.00 per week, compared to \$885.00 for high school graduates. and the unemployment rate was at 7.4% for dropouts compared to those individuals with high school credentials at 4%. Clearly having a high school education can be of financial benefit to most individuals. As noted, at-risk students for becoming high school drop outs disproportionately affects overage students.

While most overage students find themselves in this predicament due to grade repetition in either in middle school or elementary, there are a few students whose parents chose to hold them back due to late birthday or maturity. This study focused on overage students from grade repetition. The purpose of this research study was to identify the contributing factors that lead to overage middle school students by conducting semi-structured interviews with middle school

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teachers and counselors. Participants were asked to identify strategies and instructional best practices that they have found effective when working with overage students. Finally, the participants were asked to identify areas of support from the district or campus level that would be of benefit for overage middle school students.

Statement of the Problem

Overage students at the middle school level can create challenging encounters for some teachers. Reed (1998) described some of the negative behavioral issues that teachers encounter as they interact with overage students. Reed (1998) highlighted the negative implications associated with overage students, including bullying of other students and disrespecting teachers or peers. Additionally, studies such as Jimerson and Kaufman's (2004), both support the findings of Reed (1998), while also indicating some positive outcomes of grade repetition. However, Jimerson and Kaufman (2004) noted that the positive effects of grade repetition is short lived, even if the students demonstrated positive growth one year after being retained (Holmes & Mathews 1984; Reed, 1998; Jimerson & Kaufman, 2004).

Furthermore, there is an economic cost to the practice of grade repetition. According to Allen et al. (2009), grade repetition is expensive, costing Texas' schools "almost \$8,916 for the 2004-05 academic year" per pupil retrained (p. 481). According to TEA (2016), almost 14% of the middle school students are considered to be overage on a yearly basis. Furthermore, many of these students have been retained one or more times. This cost adds up.

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This study examined the factors that may contribute to overage middle school student as identified through semi-structured teacher and counselor interviews. The data gathered from the interviews can be used to inform and influence policy and develop best practices to address the needs of overage middle school students. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are the factors that contribute to overage students in middle school?
2. What techniques or strategies do teachers, and counselors employ when working with overage students in the classroom or school?
3. What structures and measures are in place or can be created to ensure the academic success of overage students in middle school?

Review of the Methodology

The research design that was selected for the purpose of this study was a qualitative design utilizing semi-structured teacher interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam, 2009). According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994) the use of semi-structured interviews provides a “greater breadth than the other types in a qualitative design” (p. 361). Furthermore, “Qualitative design looks at relationships within a system or culture” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 212). The opportunity to engage with teachers at the site allowed for the interviews to be conducted at the campus. The participant interviews were collected, transcribed, and analyzed for common themes and codes (Saldana, 2016). The participants in the interviews included teachers and one counselor who taught in various content areas and grade levels. The group of participants varied in gender, ethnicity, and years of teaching experience. Each participant provided a unique

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perspective to the discussion of overage middle school students due primarily to the participant's content of instruction and years of experience. This enabled a rich descriptive nature in the research.

The campus administrator was contacted to arrange an appropriate date and time to announce and conduct the interviews. The researcher was provided a small office in which to conduct the interviews. The snowball method was used for the teachers to refer colleagues for interviews. A total of 18 teachers responded; however one was eliminated because her content was Special education and not part of the scope of this study. For this reason, the study included the responses from 17 participants.

Summary of the Findings

This section provides a synopsis of the findings gathered from the participant interviews regarding the factors that contribute to overage middle school students. The data gleaned from the interviews was categorized along with each of the guiding research questions for the study. The research participants were provided with a written copy of their interview transcript to review for accuracy and meaning. The documents were read several time to uncover common themes and patterns (Saldana, 2015). The researcher used different colors of highlighters to easily identify common language among the transcripts. Finally, a spreadsheet was created to categorize and collapse the codes for analysis under each of the three research questions.

What are the factors that contribute to overage students in middle school? The overwhelming response to this question regarding the factor that contributed the most middle

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school students falling into this category was language. Fourteen of the 17 respondents attributed the inability of the students to speak, read, or write English competently as a contributor to academic failure. Mr. Ponce, summarized the problem effectively as language

I speak to this and again this is what the research, language research, when you learn a language you tend to stick with that language, if you come to new country and your are asked to learn this country's new language, it will take you a minute. Seven years to acquire at a proficient level and when that occurs this these children to acquire the language in one year and be proficient at it in new language.

He was referring to the research that confirms that a student learning a new language will need a minimum of “four to ten years to acquire academic language” (Collier & Thomas, 2009; p. 31). He was also referring to the Cognitive Academic Language Skills (CALPS), in which researchers such as Collier and Thomas (2009) have confirmed that it will take ELL students anywhere from seven to ten years to gain an understanding of the academic vocabulary used in content classrooms across the United States. Echevarria et al. (2004), further illustrated the challenges that ELL students experience in schools. They stated that students must not only learn to communicate in English “orally and written language skills” but they must also produce in contents areas such as science or math (Echevarria et al., 2004, p. 9). Many English language learners (ELL) are held to the same standards as students who have been raised in U. S. schools and have been exposed to the language either at home, church, community, or at school. When it

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comes to standardized testing, which is conducted each year, expectations for ELL students are also the same.

In addition to language being a factor, the participants identified academic gaps and parental involvement as indicators for overage students at the middle school level. The participants felt that the students were entering their classrooms ill prepared to meet the demands of middle school. The students had achievement gaps and poor literacy levels. Ms. Cruz made the following comment regarding the skills of her students and the difficulty that they encounter:

Most of them they really do not have strong first language and they do not have the ability to receive a lesson in the second language. She was referring to the Spanish-speaking students in her Spanish class who struggle because they do not have a strong foundation in their language skills spoken at home.

She went on to explain that most the parents of students that she interacted with did not have strong language skills needed to support their child in their native language.

Finally, the respondents felt that the parents should be more involved with their child's academics. They all agreed that parental involvement was important but acknowledged that the parents may have constraints on their time that do not allow them to support their child in school. Additionally, the parents may not have the academic or language skills needed to assist in their child's learning or the knowledge to navigate the educational institutions in the United States or the state of Texas.

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Ms. Bassett, the campus counselor also agreed regarding the importance of parental involvement. She made the following comment regarding family dynamics and expectations, she felt that providing the parents with monthly parent classes would be helpful for the parents and the students, especially providing information for the parents on district opportunities and resources.

What techniques or strategies do teachers, and counselors employ when working with overage students in the classroom or school? The strategies that the participants found to be effective with overage students included building trust and formulating relationships, goal setting opportunities for students, and the delivery of engaging lessons. Sixteen of the 17 participants interviewed all agreed that building relationships was important in the success of students overcoming the negative outcomes of being overage. Students need someone to demonstrate that an adult cares about their academic progress. Many of the participants commented on how a student can be falling behind in another teacher's class but still be producing in their own class. They believe this is because they are holding the student accountable and setting high expectations for the student. They also believe the students understood that the teacher cared about how the students acted in the school or in their class and met expectation.

Additionally, the participants felt that sitting down with students for goal setting opportunities not only helped to establish trust and build relationships but provided students with an understanding of the big picture. Participants shared with them the small steps that they could

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teach students to take to overcome some the obstacles that hinder the students' ability to engage in their own potential.

Finally the participants identified the need for teachers to create engaging lessons for their students. They offered several options for teachers to create challenging lessons that not only pique the interest of their students but help to generate interest in the students on the subject matter being taught. For example, Mr. Pitt likes to solicit interest among his students by providing a subject area while allowing the students the opportunity to select the medium of the end product. Each year the students are asked to study a Spanish speaking country and are then encouraged to decide what they would like to research. Some of the students may choose to examine video games, food, or cultural customs of the country. Mr. Pitts feels that this empowers the students in their discovery of the country of interest.

While generating student interest works for Mr. Pitt in his Spanish class, other teachers have relied on differentiated instruction to reach their overage middle school students. Differentiated Instruction may have a bigger demand on teacher time since teachers have to consider the abilities of each of their students and make decisions individually for each lesson. Carol Ann Tomlinson (2000) suggests that teachers can differentiate the content, process, and product. The *content* is what the students should learn. The *process* is the activity that is created by the teacher so that students learn the concept. Finally, the *product* is the work that is produced by the students at the end of the lesson of the study (Tomlinson, 2000).

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Prior to enrolling in the district, students are administered the Woodcock-Munoz assessment to determine their listening, speaking, and writing abilities for scheduling purposes (www.disd.org). The test results are shared with teachers to help them plan lessons that will meet the students' academic and English language needs.

What structures and measures are in place or can be created to ensure the academic success of overage students in middle school? The final research question examined those measures already in place along with recommendations that that teachers would like to install to ensure the overall academic success of overage middle school students. These include small group instruction or one on one sessions, an accelerated curriculum that would allow students to catch up to their cohort peers, and additional teacher training on how to best support overage students in middle school, along with parental involvement activities.

The responses from the interviews revealed best practices that would benefit not only overage students but also all students. One strategy included small group instruction. The participants feel that by working in small groups, teachers can group students by ability, language levels, or even content. Moreover, in working with students in small groups teachers can formulate close relationships and build trust. They begin to establish bonds and recognize how to push the students according to needs. Most of the participants also recognize that when the students are disrupting class or do not want to participate in the lesson, if they pull them aside and speak with them "one on one" the situation is often diffused. Often the student becomes more cooperative and reengages in the class. The teachers also mentioned that calling out

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students in front of the entire class was not generally helpful when working with overage students as it usually just embarrassed the overage student more.

In addition to small group instruction, the interviewees recommended the creation of an accelerated curriculum that would allow students to concurrently work on their middle school requirements while enrolling in additional courses that would fast-track them to the next grade level. The accelerated instruction could be conducted either at the students' home campus or they could be enrolled on a special campus to obtain their credits and catch up to their grade level cohort peers. The sentiment was that if they could be grouped together, they could support each other and understand that they are not the only overage students in middle school in district. Furthermore, the teachers at the alternative campus could provide support and monitor the student's academic progress.

Finally, question three disclosed a necessity to provide both teacher and parent training opportunities. The teachers interviewed would like to see more training on how to adequately deal with the needs of overage students. They want additional staff development to address how to best support overage students as they are now part of their main classroom. Participants further noted a desire for training on some best practices to ensure overage student success in content classes. The participants also indicated a need for the district and school to provide the parents of overage students with some trainings on the options that may be available for their child. This could include a demonstration on how to navigate the educational system in Texas,

the resources that are available to them as parents, and most importantly how to support their child in school, especially if the parents personally lack academic skill or language.

Connections to the Literature

Overage studies. Reed (1998) identified some impact of overage middle school students in the classroom, especially the negative behavior associated with older students. The participants did confirm that negative behavior does exist in the classroom; however, they have strategies to minimize the impact of the misbehavior. The majority of the participants agreed that “talking one on one” with the misbehaving student helped to redirect the behavior. Furthermore, building trust among the students by not calling them out in front of their peers was deemed beneficial for all parties involved. This supports what Reed (1998) found in that implementing these strategies are effective and can foster a lasting and trusting relationship among the students and the adults.

The Smith and Herzog (2014) confirmed the importance of a caring adult in the students’ lives, especially the mother. The students interviewed in this study credited the “influence and support” that the mom provided as they pursued their educational endeavors in high school (p. 66). The students in the Smith and Herzog (2014) study enjoyed the interactions at school of both teachers and peers. Strong adult interactions also seemed to increase their participation and engagement in school. Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver (2007) found that regular school attendance is important if the student is going to be successful in school and graduate. Balfanz et al. (2007) stated that “attending school less than 90% of the time will increase” the possibility that

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the student will not graduate (p. 227). This further stresses the importance of developing a trusting relationship with the students to encourage them to attend on a regular basis.

Finally, the support of a caring adult relationship that has high expectations can have a positive and lasting impression on overage students (Hughes et al., 2005). Caring adult relationships create opportunities for teachers and students to build trust, and when they know that someone truly cares and is looking forward to their attending class each day or is making sure that they turn in assignments or projects, they do.

Social and cultural capital. The data collected from the study interviews at Metro Middle School confirm the importance of providing students with an understanding of the importance of an education. Education has long been considered one of the greatest equalizers in American society. Students in classrooms across the United States are encouraged to do well in school to be able to have viable options for their future. Coleman (1988) defined social capital as “a resource which aids students in remaining in high school and achieving their goals of educating and graduating students” (p. 382). Shahidul, Karim, and Mustari (2015) identify social capital as “the most important contributor in improving educational aspiration” among students (p. 255). The researchers advocate for providing students with different experiences that will broaden their capabilities and knowledge base (Shahidul et al., 2015). Schools provide students with experiences at school that parents are unable to provide at home, including field trips, guest speakers, mini-conferences, or other experiences that engage students.

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The interviews also revealed how parents are often too busy with work schedules to assist or support their child's educational goals. Parents are often overcommitted with employment and having to provide for their children. The teachers felt that the parents do play an important role in the academic career of the student. They also realized that the parents are trying their best to help their child by sending them each day to school, and sometimes that is the best that they can provide.

Parental involvement, as a form of social capital, can be construed in various forms. It can be interpreted as checking on homework assignments, attending parent conferences, volunteering at the school, or exposing their child to different types of experiences (Turney & Kao, 2009). According to the research study conducted by Turney and Kao (2009), immigrant parents may not be aware of what the expectations are regarding parental involvement at the school. Therefore, it is up to the schools or school districts to help them to understand how important parent involvement is and how they can show support for their child.

Furthermore, the interviews revealed that some parents just do not have the appropriate skills necessary to help their child at home with the homework. Ms. Cruz made the following comment:

Sometimes it's language issues, sometimes because they do not have a good Spanish language at home, the second language is harder, if your first language is not good you repeat the same mistakes in the second language and sometimes they are not able to follow the language in the second language.

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She was pointing out how some parents may not have the skills necessary to assist with homework, and schools could offer more for these students. One strategy she suggested is to provide students with a space for completing their work. This would make sure that they complete their homework assignments in a timely manner and could provide support they are in need of help to finish a project for a class.

Furthermore, immigrant parents may have additional responsibilities that do not permit them to be physically present at the school or classroom. Turney and Kao (2009) found that “Hispanic immigrant parents are less likely than native born parents to have high levels of involvement in their child’s school” (p. 258). Although they may be more inclined to not be able to help their child at home, or be available to volunteer at the campus, they do attend parent-teacher conferences to be informed on the progress of their child (Turney & Kao, 2009).

English Language Learners. The findings from the interviews disclosed that teachers may need more professional development to address the growing population of ELL students at Metro Middle School. The growth of second language learners was up a percentage a point at Metro Middle School from the previous year, and ELL students are the fast growing population in schools across the United States (Baecher, Artigliere, Patterson, & Spatzer, 2012)

Professional learning communities at the school should continue the dialogue of second language acquisition. One idea is to invite a specialist from the district ESL department to review and engage the campus on the stages of second language acquisition: Pre-production, Early Production, Speech Emergence, Intermediate Fluency, and Advanced Fluency (Hill & Miller,

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2013). The trainer could focus on one of the stages to help teachers to understand the characteristics of each stage and then help teachers develop suitable activities for each to the stages of language development.

The district should also continue to incorporate Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) in the content areas to benefit not only the growing ELL population but also all students. SIOP lessons integrate language with content objectives and are infused throughout the curriculum (Echevarria et al., 2004). Lessons are prepared and designed to engage students at higher level of the content to encourage participation while exposing students to content academic vocabulary for deeper student understanding of the subject (Echevarria et al., 2004). Teachers make the subject come alive for the students by including in the lessons hands on materials/visual aids such as graphic organizers, photos, maps, videos, songs to stimulate and engage students (Echevarria et al., 2004).

Grade repetition. The subject of grade repetition emerged during two of the conversations with the study participants. When asked: “Why are there so many overage students in middle school?” two participants responded by saying that there were “repeaters” who were held back in elementary school. However, contrary to the many studies on overage students, none of the 17 teachers discussed the negative behavior documented in the Reed (1998) or Im et al. (2013) studies. The participants were open with their interactions with overage students and seemed to have effective strategies in place to keep classroom disruptions to a minimum.

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Furthermore, to ease the transition from elementary to middle school, Metro Middle School hosts a summer camp for incoming students. This summer camp could be a reason why incoming students and families feel committed to the school. Parents are encouraged to attend the second on the last day to meet the teachers and become familiar with the teachers and administrators. Practices such as these can help to ease some of the awkwardness and newness of the middle school for most incoming new families.

Recommendation for Future Study

There are several recommendations that emerged as a result of conducting interviews with the teachers that can help shape the discussion on reducing the number of overage students specifically at middle school. The recommendations include teacher trainings, parent educational opportunities, and the development of an accelerated curriculum to facilitate student engagement and skills, and finally adding dual language at the middle school.

Teacher training. Good teacher professional development sessions are “focused on the learner, is engaging, and includes follow-up” (Ende, 2016, p. 6). As administrators or district staff prepare sessions for teachers and staff, they should be careful when planning to include some of the suggestions from Ende (2016) by providing interactive activities and information.

Several of the participants interviewed suggested additional training on strategies on how to best address the needs of overage students. Although the teachers interviewed for this research project already had a set of strategies in place to assist overage students, they seemed to want validation on the best practices currently being used in the classroom. They wanted more

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tools to add to their teaching repertoire along with the opportunity to collaborate with other teachers and experts to build their professional effectiveness.

Many of the teachers interviewed seemed to have a good grasp on classroom management and the topic did not seem to come up during the interviews; however, it may be helpful to offer sessions on student discipline strategies. This topic would be beneficial for new teachers to the campus or to education. It could also provide insight on the disposition of the campus and some of the suggested strategies in working with urban students.

Additionally, the majority of the teachers indicated that the students' inability to speak, read, or write English was a hindrance and a major contributing factor to overage middle school students. The district should schedule a series of teacher's trainings that would provide the teachers with ESL strategies for ELL students. The trainings should be structured to address all of the language abilities of the students and provide sessions on how to create lessons and differentiate them to meet the language needs of the students at the different levels of language acquisition and stages: beginner, intermediate, advanced or advanced high (Bilingual/ESL department). Furthermore, these training can provide teachers with a place to create, exchange, and share lessons or strategies that would be effective for overage students and ELL's.

Parent education opportunities. Parental involvement and parent education surfaced in both research question one and three. Several of the participants voiced concern since many of the parents do not understand the language of the assignments being sent home for their children to work on, leading to frustration for the family and educators. Participants also felt strongly that

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especially parents of overage middle school students should be invited to a series of parent trainings to help with language needs and instruction on how to best navigate the educational system in Texas. These sessions should be made available to parents both during the day and the evening to best serve the needs of the families.

Participants also suggested that the school create a parent survey that would inquire on topics that the parents would like to see offered at the campus or would like additional information on (such as district initiatives). This would ensure that the parents are learning about the things they need to know and care about. Suggested topics could include things such as how to prepare for college, where to secure funding for college, “my child does not want to go to college what are his/her options, difference in a job and a career,” what are collegiate academies and how can my child attend, how to set SMART goals with your child.

Lastly, the district could offer a dual language track at the middle and high school to address the language needs of the incoming language minority student population. According to Baecher et al. (2012), “By 2015 the ELL enrolment in US schools will reach almost 10 million” (p. 14). At the campus where the research was conducted, the ELL population was nearly 53%, up a percentage point from the previous year (<https://mydata.dallasisd.org>). Dual language tracks would offer students arriving from Spanish speaking countries would allow the students to continue at their grade level while learning English among their Spanish and English speaking peers.

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Accelerated curriculum. The district previously had a campus with a focus on overage middle school students that implemented an accelerated curriculum for enrolled students. During the 2016-17 school year, enrollment at the campus was 188 students (Dallas Data Packet 2016-2017, p. 6); 70 were 7th graders and 118 were 8th graders. The demographics breakdown of the campus was as follows: 98.9% were identified as at risk, 27.7% were identified as ELL, and 13.3% were Special Education students. The faculty had a total of 21 teachers (10 African American, 9 White, and 2 Hispanic). Due to low student enrollment, the campus was closed. While many things contributed to the closing of the school, the location of the campus may have hindered student enrollment or attendance and parent involvement. The district did not offer any transportation to the facility, and it was located on the far south section of the metropolitan area. When the campus closed, the students were dispersed back to their home campuses.

The influx of overage students posed a dilemma for the teachers who had limited experience with overage students in their classrooms. Optional accelerated curriculum was provided to the campus administrator to address the incoming students to help fast track them to the next grade level while preparing them for the rigor and demands of middle school requirements. The teachers interviewed indicated that the district did not provide any training or support on the new curriculum for the overage students that were sent back to their home campuses. For this reason, the participants believe that teacher training should be offered at the campus level to provide teachers with strategies and best practices to support overage middle school students.

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U. S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan during his address at *the National Forum's Annual Schools to Watch Conference*, discussed three at-risk factors that may indicate that middle school students are at-risk of dropping out of school as: 1. attendance, 2. student behavior, and, 3. poor grades. Educators can make an effort to identify students, especially those that are considered overage in middle school, to provide them with interventions that could be effective to re-engage students in their classes (Duncan, 2011). Early intervention and identification can help to decrease the number of students that drop-out of school or become disenfranchised with school.

Finally, ongoing professional development on the accelerated instruction developed by the district would be beneficial to the campus. The campus could create a cadre of teachers at the middle school that would work exclusively during a block period with the overage middle school students. The student can then benefit from both the expertise and experience of the teacher while being provided with the support of an extended time period exposed to the content.

Further Research

Recommendations for further research include duplicating this study at other campuses to determine if the findings are similar as well as in a rural district or a district with smaller number of ELL students. Additionally, it might be beneficial to expand the design of the project to include interviews with teachers from feeder schools to determine if the identified factors are similar to those of other middle school teachers.

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Additional research is needed to determine the contributing factors from the perspective of parents and students. Parents can provide insight as to what happened in their child's academic progression. What were the factors that lead to the students becoming overage at middle school? This can be helpful for teachers at the middle school level to understand how the student became overage and how to best support their continued development. Moreover, if the elementary teachers can understand the impact of grade repetition, perhaps the number of retained students can be reduced, thereby reducing the number of overage middle school students.

Identification and implementation of best practices that address the needs of overage students at the middle school level should be incorporated into professional development sessions for teachers. This could include incorporating discussions on the needs of overage students in learning communities at the district and campus level.

Additional research can provide engaging and informative parental involvement sessions at the district and campus level to bring awareness to the challenges that overage students face on a daily basis. This can create an environment where parents generate the discussions and topics of interest on how to best support their child at middle school.

Lastly, interviews or focus groups need to be conducted with overage students to gain their perspective on their experiences and the actions that led to their being classified as overage. Understanding the students' perspectives could provide the teachers with how to best serve

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overage students in the classroom. Teachers will then be better able to design and create lessons to engage the overage students that they serve in schools.

Conclusions

The great leader Malcolm X is credited with saying, “Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today.” Students and parents in classrooms across the United States believe that the promise of a good future begins with a good education. Parents send their children to schools each day wanting for them to be academically successful in school to prepare them for a well-paying career options. Many overage students do not see such a positive outlook for their futures; however, there are specific measures that schools and districts can put into place to keep overage students from losing hope and dropping out of school.

If the state, district, and schools across the United States truly want to reduce the number of overage student in their schools then changes need to be made to help these students to become more successful in schools. This can be accomplished by providing support and interventions early before they start to disengage from school. Here are some recommendations based on the data extracted from the teacher interviews on overage middle school students:

- Professional developments for teachers on second language acquisition stages, it is important that teachers and staff are well informed on each of the stages and how to best support the ELL student.

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- Provide parent classes on various topics send out a survey to see the type of topics that may be of interest to parents and students. Have fun family night to expose parents to the many resources available to them in the district.
- Create and offer dual language track at the middle school and high school to continue to develop the fluency of both languages (Spanish and English) of students.
- Create a welcoming environment for parents, Metro Middle School's front office is warm and inviting to all visitors. Parents will be more apt to visit and support a school where they feel that they are welcomed.

Teacher and Staff:

- Create engaging lessons that allow students to work at their own abilities and language skills.
- Engage in professional learning communities to discuss student progress or lack of progress; and develop a plan of action with realistic achievable goal for students to have a small measure of success
- Create small counseling groups for overage students so that they can discuss any challenges that they may encounter on a daily basis. Help to maintain them on task with class or goals. Allow for them to share experiences that they may be having at home or school and create bonds and friendships with other students.

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- Student mentoring opportunities to develop strong relationships with a caring adult, someone that they can check periodically with the student on their attendance or grades. Some that the student can feel comfortable to confide and respect.
- Student mentoring opportunities to develop strong relationships with a caring adult, someone that they can check periodically with the student on their attendance or grades. Some that the student can feel comfortable to confide and respect.

The students of today are said to be preparing for a future that has yet to evolve, and teachers and parents can help to prepare students for that future by providing learning opportunities that prepare them for 21st century skills and for working in a global society with no borders. Schools can support all learners by engaging them in cooperative groups and allowing them to explore other languages and cultures. Furthermore, schools can provide students with blended learning opportunities by offering online courses that prepare students for college and beyond. Overage learners should be part of this wonderful evolution of teaching and learning so they are not left behind.

This study interviewed middle school teachers on their perceptions of the contributing factors of overage middle school students. The themes that emerged from the study to the surprise of the researcher were language, followed by gaps in the student learning.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Background information on interviewee

- i. How long have you been teaching? Teaching middle school?
- ii. What subject areas do you teach? How many classes do you teach each day?
- iii. What made you decide to teach middle school?
- iv. How long have you been teaching middle school?
- v. How long have you been at this campus?

Interview Questions

1. TEA describes overage students as “being one year older than their same age cohorts on or before September 1st”, what do you think contributes to students falling into this category? Do you have overage students in your school?
2. What are the top three factors that lead to overage students in middle school?
3. How do you identify overage students in your school?
4. Why do you think there are overage students in your middle school?
5. What are some of the challenges that you have encountered while teaching/ counseling overage students in your classroom? On your campus? Please describe for me some of the experiences that you have had in working with overage students.

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6. What techniques or strategies have you found to be effective when teaching/counseling overage students? How do you know that it was effective?
7. What techniques or strategies have you found to be ineffective when teaching/counseling overage students? How do you know that it was ineffective?
8. What additional structures or measures are needed to better support in teaching/counseling of overage students attending middle school?
9. What do you perceive to be the challenges or obstacles that overage students encounter daily as they attend your classes/school?
10. What structures or measures can the district/ school implement to better support overage students in middle school?

Closure:

11. Is there anything else that you would like to share regarding overage students that I did not ask?

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Vita

Delma Martinez has been in the field of education for the past 27 years. She has served as a bilingual teacher, assistant principal, and bilingual specialist. She received a Bachelor's degree from Dominican University in Political Science, a Master's degree from Texas A & M University at Commerce in Elementary Education, and a Master's degree from University of Texas at Arlington in Educational Leadership and Policy. She is currently working as a coordinator with Districtwide Student Services in the Dallas Independent School District. She has presented her work on parental involvement opportunities, Sheltered Observation Instruction Protocol (SIOP), and collaboration with student interns at district, state, and national conferences.

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Appendix B University IRB



Institutional Review Board Notification of Exemption

June 26, 2017

Delma Martinez
Dr. James Hardy
Educational Leadership & Policy Studies
The University of Texas at Arlington
Box 19575

Protocol Number: 2017-0753

Protocol Title: *In the Middle: An exploration of the the contributing factors of average middle school students*

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

The UT Arlington Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, or designee, has reviewed the above referenced study and found that it qualified for exemption under the federal guidelines for the protection of human subjects as referenced at Title 45CFR Part 46.101(b)(2).

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:(i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, either directly or through identifiers linked to the subject; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You are therefore authorized to begin your study as of **June 26, 2017**.

*****Please note that enrollment of human subjects is not permitted for this protocol until the official approval letter from the participating school or school district has been received and confirmed by the UTA Institutional Review Board (or designee). Please submit this approval letter as soon as possible to RegulatoryServices@uta.edu to begin study enrollment.*****

Pursuant to Title 45 CFR 46.103(b)(4)(iii), investigators are required to, “promptly report to the IRB any proposed changes in the research activity, and to ensure that such changes in approved research, during the period for which IRB approval has already been given, are **not initiated without prior IRB review and approval** except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subject.” All proposed changes to the research must be submitted via the electronic submission system prior to implementation. Please also be advised that as the principal investigator, you are required to report local adverse (unanticipated) events to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services

REGULATORY SERVICES
SERVICES

The University of Texas at Arlington, Center for Innovation
202 E. Border Street, Ste. 201, Arlington, Texas 76010, Box#19188
(T) 817-272-3723 (F) 817-272-5808 (E) regulatoryservices@uta.edu (W) www.uta.edu/rs

Running Record: IN THE MIDDLE AN EXAMINATION



UNIVERSITY OF
TEXAS
ARLINGTON

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION
ON REGULATORY SERVICES

July 18, 2017
Delma Martinez
Dr. James Hardy
Educational Leadership & Policy Studies
The University of Texas at Arlington
Box 19575

IRB No.: 2017-0753

Title: *In the Middle: An examination of the contributing factors of overage middle school students*

EXEMPT MINOR MODIFICATION APPROVAL MEMO

The UT Arlington Institutional Review Board (UTA IRB) Chair (or designee) reviewed and approved the modification(s) to this exempt protocol on **July 18, 2017** in accordance with Title

45 CFR 46.101(b). Therefore, you are authorized to conduct your research. The modification(s), indicated below, was/were deemed minor and appropriate for exempt determination/acknowledgment review.

- Minor revisions to the Informed Consent Document in response to feedback from DISD, including a statement to clarify that Target gift cards will only be provided to subjects that complete the interview process and return the transcript; and clarification that the research will impact decisions about overage middle school students

Pursuant to Title 45 CFR 46.103(b) (4) (iii), investigators are required to, “promptly report to the IRB **any** proposed changes in the research activity, and ensure that such changes in approved research, during the period for which IRB approval has already been given, **are not initiated without IRB review and approval** except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subject.”

The modification approval will additionally be presented to the convened board for full IRB acknowledgment [45 CFR 46.110(c)]. All investigators and key personnel identified in the protocol must have documented Human Subjects Protection (HSP) training on file with the UT Arlington Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services.

The UT Arlington Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services appreciates your continuing commitment to the protection of human research subjects. Should you have questions or require further assistance, please contact Regulatory Services at

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