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Examining At-Risk Students Based on Their Attitudes Toward Educational Factors:  
Is There a Gender Difference in Identification of At-Risk Students?

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A dissertation  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

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by  
Cynthia B. Tilson  
August 2001

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Dr. Elizabeth Ralston  
Dr. Russell Mays

Keywords: At-risk, Juvenile delinquents, Adolescents

## ABSTRACT

Examining At-Risk Students Based on Their Attitudes Toward Educational Factors:  
Is There a Gender Difference in Identification of At-Risk Students?

by

Cynthia B. Tilson

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships among four specific typologies of environmental factors and at-risk teenagers. The four typologies explored were influences by parents and peers, teachers, educational setting, and factors relating to school behavior.

Six research questions guided the study and six null hypotheses were formulated and tested at the .05 level of significance. The degree of relationship between the independent variables and the environmental factors was analyzed by using the Independent samples t-test and One Way ANOVA. The study sample consisted of 195 middle school students in three counties in Northwestern North Carolina and Northeast Tennessee.

The results of this study indicate significant relationships between students and two factors, teacher expectations and school behavior as studied in the three counties. The relationships between students and the factor, parents and peers, appear to be equally strong for all students in each of the three counties. This also held true for the factor, educational setting, and the students. An inherent purpose of this study was to enhance perceptions of the value of parent involvement, to encourage more research on the relationships between peers and student achievement, and to show that teacher expectations and the educational setting can have a positive impact on student achievement. Parents, peers, students, teachers, and educational settings are allies in that they share the common goal of helping students to become lifelong learners.

DEDICATION

To my precious daughter, Victoria Danielle Tilson, and a special friend, Marty Evans, for their  
unrelenting support and encouragement.

IN MEMORY OF

My Father,

Dave Birchfield

April 5, 1958 - February 23, 1995

Without his love, encouragement, and unending support this dream would never have  
become a reality.

IN HONOR OF

My Mother,

Constant Luedia "Lula" Cook Birchfield

The love of a mother is never ending.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

If there is no hope that tomorrow will be any different from today, and if today is intolerable, there is nothing to stop you from taking what you want and doing as you please . . . . In children, adolescents, and the under class, that behavior is called delinquency. In adults, in the top echelons of society and business, that behavior is called being successful. Their motivation may differ, but the 'delinquents' and the 'successful' adults are intent on taking what they want and doing as they please without regard for the rights of others. The 'successful' adults are rewarded, while the 'delinquents' are punished (Crawford, 1996, p. 1).

Children and youth are at risk of becoming delinquents at a greater rate than at any time in the recent past. In addition, delinquency among at-risk students is becoming more widespread and more violent. Research has focused mainly on young males and how they participate in the delinquent's world. Few studies have included females in juvenile research (Tygart, 1992). A majority of studies have focused on youth outside the school setting. At-risk problems involve students, parents, schools, peers, attitudes, and self-esteem (Crawford, 1996; Lempers, Clark-Lempers, & Simons, 1989; Pederson, 1994; Pink, 1984; Sagatun, 1991; Tygart, 1992).

Englemann (1999) suggested that delinquency is highly correlated with school failure. When addressing problems of students at risk, an excellent place to begin is the school setting. Many teachers and administrators work diligently to learn strategies that will help students learn academically and socially. However the learning process must also include helping students

learn to act respectfully and responsibly (Landau & Gathercoal, 2000). These are characteristics that are necessary for juveniles to become better students and productive adults. Students are influenced by many factors. These may include parental influence, peers, teachers, school behavior, and socioeconomic levels.

Students' learning environments must include parents. According to the U. S. Department of Education (1995) parents and families are critical to children's learning. Low family expectations reinforce students who want to quit school. In North Carolina, students can be withdrawn from school by their parents at age 16. Some parents do not seem to understand that education is a vital part of their children's future and that they should encourage them to continue school. Although dropping out of school is acceptable in many parts of our country, staying in school is very beneficial to the U.S. economy. The average annual income for individuals with less than a ninth grade education was approximately \$19,000 according to the U.S. Census Bureau in 1998. The average income for a high school graduate was \$31,000, and an individual with a bachelor's degree earned \$53,000 (Grier, 2000). Therefore, the completion of a higher education level plays a vital role in our economy.

Students need to be resilient. This allows them to cope with society in a productive manner while developing social skills that will benefit them throughout their lives. They often acquire problem-solving skills that keep them from becoming frustrated with tasks and allow them to exercise more patience. They develop a sense of autonomy, a purpose for living, and enjoy a brighter future. These attributes often develop because of the support they receive from a parental figure. These persons usually communicate high expectations for their children and provide numerous opportunities that will benefit them in the future (Landau & Gathercoal, 2000).

### Statement of the Problem

Researchers are investigating parental support, school attendance, school behavior, and peer pressure to determine their impact on at-risk students. This factor is correlated with a variety of variables. This study will seek to determine the relationships between specific types of educational factors and at-risk students. This study will also seek to identify intervention strategies to initiate, seek, and enhance alternatives for potential at-risk students.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships among four specific typologies of educational factors and at-risk students. Some at-risk students are those who may not experience success in school for reasons of limited English proficiency, poverty, and even race. These factors may lead to potential dropouts. Some of these students are often low academic achievers and exhibit low self-esteem. Generally, the higher-risk students are from low socioeconomic status families and are minority males (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990; U. S. Department of Education, 2000). Lontos (1991) suggested that at-risk students are usually poor minorities from many cultural backgrounds. The parents of these students may have low educational backgrounds. They usually do not have high educational expectations for their children (Donnelly, 1987). Other at-risk students may be from divorced parents, single-parent families, and families with both parents working (Lontos, 1991). The four typologies explored were (a) influences by parents or peers, (b) teachers, (c) education, and (d) school behavior.

### Significance of the Study

This study is significant in that it presents information regarding student attitudes in four areas: Attitudes toward Teachers, Influences by Peers or Parents, Attitudes toward Education, and School Behavior. The results of this study are converted to probabilities of students' dropping out of school. This information may be used to design a preventive or corrective plan of action to help the students while they are in elementary, middle, and high school. This information can also be used to alert parents of children who show signs of premature dissatisfaction with the school system and their peers.

The involvement of parents in the educational process is one of the most significant variables of schools. Parent involvement allows everyone to benefit. When parents are involved, the achievement of students increases. Parental influence also guides students in selection of their peer groups. They may be gently persuaded to associate with a different group depending on the perceptions of the parents. Parent involvement may be seen as a contributing factor in the education of their child. Parents and schools working together will enable students to succeed in reaching their goals. Student success is affected by a variety of influences including the family, the school, and the community (DuFour, 2000; Elkind, 1996; Guttman, 1995b).

### Research Questions

#### Question One

Is parent and peer influence indicative of at-risk behavior and is there a difference between male and female students in their attitudes toward parents and peers?

### Question Two

Is teacher influence indicative of at-risk behavior and is there a difference between male and female students in their attitudes toward teachers?

### Question Three

Is educational setting influence indicative of at-risk behavior and is there a difference between male and female students in their attitudes toward the educational setting?

### Question Four

Is school behavior influence indicative of at-risk behavior and is there a difference between male and female students in their attitudes toward school behavior?

### Question Five

Are the mean total Demos D Scale scores indicative of at-risk behavior and is there a difference between male and female students in their attitudes on this score?

### Question Six

Is the mean total Demos D Scale scores for the four schools studied indicative of at-risk behavior and is there a difference between male and female students in their attitudes on this score?

### Research Hypotheses

H1: There is no difference between the mean parent and peer scores for male and female students' attitudes toward parent and peer.

H2: There is no difference between the mean teacher scores for male and female students' attitudes toward teachers.

H3: There is no difference between the mean educational setting scores for male and female students' attitudes toward educational setting.

H4: There is no difference between the mean school behavior scores for male and female students' attitudes toward school behavior.

H5: There is no difference between the mean total Demos D Scale scores for male and female students.

H6: There is no difference between the mean total Demos D Scale score for the four schools studied.

#### Limitations of the Study

1. Specific results of this study are applicable only to the groups studied.
2. The accuracy of the responses to the questionnaire items is dependent upon the perceptions of the respondents.

#### Organization of the Study

The first chapter was devoted to establishing the basis and the need for this study. Chapter 2 consists of a review of related literature pertaining to environmental factors and serves to support the undertaking of this particular investigation. Chapter 3 contains the methodologies and procedures that were used to obtain data concerning the research questions. Chapter 4 presents statistical analyses of the results gleaned from the data. A summary of results, conclusions, recommendations, and implications of the study are presented in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Society has known for some time that juveniles are becoming more unruly, often displaying non-traditional juvenile behaviors. At-risk behavior, whether in children, adolescents, or adults, is immature and antisocial behavior (Crawford, 1996). A lack of basic security in family, neighborhoods, and community life has been a contributing factor for the trouble in our schools and communities. Living conditions of children in poverty have a powerful effect on children's lives and their ability to learn (Howe, 2000). Many of our juveniles have faced these challenges. We have seen a major increase in discipline problems in school settings. Students with decreasing levels of commitment to school experiences are rapidly increasing in our society. This lack of commitment can be seen through increasing rates of school crime, school misconduct, and school nonattendance (Jenkins, 1995).

#### Role Definition

The role definition of a delinquent focuses on the actions of the student and not on the student. Jenkins (1995) defines juvenile delinquency as student acts committed against persons or property. Many times these students have demonstrated at-risk behaviors prior to their classification as juvenile delinquents. These may relate to school life, as well as home life. Zingraff, Leiter, Johnsen, and Myers (1994) suggested that children who do poorly in school are at risk of subsequent delinquency. These children usually reject authority at school and home. Donnelly (1987) and Seiler (1995) have also shown that at-risk children have disciplinary and attendance problems and have low aspirations concerning their futures, experience family

problems, and may become involved with the use of drugs. They also reveal problems with their peers and experience a great deal of failure. They eventually drop out of school before graduating the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. These situations may lead to some type of court involvement and being labeled as a delinquent. Phillips (1980) argued that at-risk students experience school failure as a result of lowered self-esteem. This often leads them to delinquent involvement as they search for approval and higher status. At-risk students tend not to participate in school events. They have minimal contact with school life and experience more failure than success. Hixson and Tinzmann (1990) characterize at-risk students as having different languages, cultures, and values. These students are primarily minorities with educationally deprived backgrounds. Wells (1990) listed combinations of many different circumstances involving individual, family, school, and community as factors that may lead students to become potential dropouts.

Delinquent students are those who violate specific legal norms that result in legal action taken against them for their behavior. Youth who commit only one deviant act are generally not considered juvenile problems. The juveniles who sustain a pattern of deviance over a long time and use such practices to guide their lives are considered juvenile delinquents. Many students are labeled delinquents at different times during their lives and for different “status offenses.” These offenses may weigh more in one community than in another. Therefore, the punishment may vary. Often times, in the same communities, the punishment may not be equal for all children because of intervening variables such as parental status. Sometimes the study of at-risk students is restricted to small segments of a population. Many times heavy emphasis is given to urban lower-class males (LeFlore, 1988).



### Definitions of At Risk and Delinquent Students

The term “At risk” became a part of our jargon when the report A Nation at Risk was released in April 1983. We found at-risk students, at-risk parents, at-risk education, and at-risk communities. A Nation at Risk defines our nation as a place of serious risk. Cosby (1993) defined at-risk students as those formerly labeled “educationally disadvantaged”. At-risk characteristics can also include children of all races, ages, socioeconomic factors, family structures, and gender (Barnes & Farrell, 1992; LeFlore, 1988). Although the ratios differ, these acts are committed in the families of middle and upper class adolescents, as well as residents of rural and suburban areas. Causes of delinquent acts may differ from one class to the next (Hirschi, 1983). All children can be influenced by at-risk situations. As adults, we must direct, guide, and encourage all children to do their best and make the correct decisions when contemplating alternatives. Some children are not extended the same kind of justice and opportunity by schools that are given to the children of the socially and economically well-off. A higher percentage of children live in poverty now than did a decade ago. Children in poverty are at risk, and the poverty is harmful to their mental and physical well-being. Some are at risk because they are minorities, living in poverty, are teenage mothers, and have disintegrated families. Some are at risk because of violence, drugs, and guns in their environments. We see a lack of ingenuity in improving the social and physical environment of our children. Socially, this continues to be a time of disintegration of families, health care, guidance, childcare, and compassion (Cosby, 1993). Robertson (1997) includes many indicators of at-risk adolescents. Indicators are attention problems, grade retention, poor grades, absenteeism, behavior problems, lack of confidence, and limited connection to school life.

As Robertson (1997) has identified indicators of at-risk adolescents, Hirschi (1983) defined at-risk adolescents as delinquent based on their acts. The adolescent who commits even a single act in violation of the law may be considered a delinquent. When juveniles commit punishable acts, agents of society attempt to alter their acts through probation and jail sentences. Sampson and Laub (1994) defined delinquency as the result of structure and process. Family poverty inhibits the family process, and that increases the likelihood of juvenile delinquency. Structure variables include the family size, birth order, broken homes, and working mothers. The functional variables are parental affection or acceptance, family relationships, parental supervision or discipline, and family deviance (Sampson & Laub, 1994). LeFlore (1988) suggested that the repetitive or serious juvenile delinquents are usually disadvantaged economically. They are often male, disproportionately black, and have a one-parent family with high levels of conflict. These juveniles generally display instability and inadequate supervision (National Advisory Committee for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1984).

### Causes of At Risk and Delinquency

Many problems contribute to at-risk behaviors. Poverty, crime, drinking, school, neighborhoods, divorce, and family problems begin the list of contributors. Many adolescent students experience ethnic and racial problems and a lack of basic security in their schools, homes, and community lives. They often experience weak discipline at home and at school.

Laub and Sampson (1988) reveal that family circumstances have been linked to at-risk behaviors. The child's at-risk status often correlates with the rearing styles or criminal court records of their parents. Shared family influences exist and may account for a substantial part of the total variations in self-reported delinquency by juveniles (Rowe, Rodgers, & Meseck-

Bushey, 1992). The real cause of inner city turmoil is thought to be a result of violent, abusive families, or the disintegration of the family as a positive social unit. This is reflected in the lack of adequate parental skills, education, jobs, affordable housing, and self-esteem (Crawford, 1996).

Patterson (1986) suggests that children who display poor social skills often demonstrate adolescent problem behaviors. These children experience school failure, practice oppositional and rule breaking behaviors, and socialize with delinquent peers (Patterson, 1982). Grier (2000) states that some students feel “pushed out” or “pulled out” of school. These two factors often lead to the student’s dropping out of school. The “pushed out” students may feel unsuccessful and unwelcome and spend less time on academics. They begin to display disruptive behaviors and are often absent. They are behind on their schoolwork, frustrated from lack of understanding subject content, and disruptive. They are soon given suspensions because of their misbehavior. All of these factors exacerbate the problem. The students that feel “pulled out” are those who often have to contribute to the family income, have family problems that cause them to be tardy or absent, and may need to help with elderly or sick family members (Grier, 2000). They may also be teenagers with infants or small toddlers and have no care available for the children. All of these students could greatly benefit from social skills training. This would help them with self-expression, communication, self-perception, and coping.

Hirschi (1983) suggested that intimacy of communication affects supervision: As intimacy of communication increases, supervision increases and the probability of delinquency decreases. Positive communication skills allow open expression of family needs and preferences, empathy, support, and reflective listening. Other appropriate social skills include being polite, using people’s names in conversations, eye contact, and the willingness to interact with others in

a helpful manner. These skills are used, as needed, in social interactions with others and can be learned by direct exposure. The benefit of engaging in prosocial behaviors yields popularity with peers, teachers, and parents (Patterson, Reid, & Dishon, 1992). These results also increase the level of the adolescent's ego (Novy, Gaa, Frankiewicz, Liberman, & Amerikaner, 1992).

Negative communication includes criticism, and the inability to express needs and feelings.

Inappropriate assertiveness includes fighting, lying, biting, picking on others, threatening, yelling, making disruptive noises, and breaking promises (Barnes & Farrell, 1992; Olson, et al., 1983).

Patterson (1982) suggests that parental skills, monitoring, and discipline are necessary to help adolescents develop self-control skills. Effective parental monitoring includes knowing where their children are, what they are doing, and with whom they are doing it. Discipline practices should not be cold, harsh, punitive, or rejecting. Discipline should be consistent using the context of love, respect, and acceptance of the child (Patterson, Reid & Dishon, 1992).

Parental support of children and youth through praise and encouragement, as well as giving physical affection, shows the youngsters they are valued, accepted, and loved (Barnes & Farrell, 1992). These factors are important predictors of adolescent outcomes including achievement, family relations, and acceptance. Parental support and monitoring remain strong determinants and predictive factors of adolescent behavior problems (Barnes & Farrell, 1992).

Many delinquent students who show up in juvenile court had initial contact with the system years earlier, as innocent victims in divorce, custody, or support payment hearings. Many of these students have been abused, abandoned, and neglected. They have lived in many different foster and group homes and eventually find themselves in juvenile court (Crawford, 1996).

Leniency in juvenile courts and repeated probation for several offenses often feed the problems of troubled juveniles. Many adolescents laugh at their teachers, principals, and guidance counselors who attempt to help them. These students have been through the “system” of the courts. They know that being placed on probation for any minor incident could be their maximum punishment (D. R. Shults, Juvenile Judge, personal communication, June 24, 1997).

### Theoretical Perspectives

Hayes (1994) reports that social control theory, labeling, and social learning all lend assistance to explaining the life of at-risk students. He also shares recent work demonstrating initial delinquency as an example of Hirschi’s social control theory, which emphasizes indirect corrective techniques as effective bonding strategies for a child’s attachment to parents. Positive parenting support includes loving, consistency, involvement, cohesiveness, and effective parenting roles (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hayes, 1994).

Sampson and Laub (1994) and LeFlore (1988) focus on discipline, supervision, and attachment as the linking factors between children and their families. Societal bonds include attachment, commitment, involvement, and beliefs. Families and children bond through attachment and direct forms of control, monitoring, and punishment.

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) and Poole and Regoli (1979) endorse direct parental control, monitoring of children’s behavior, and recognizing misdeeds. Punishment or corrections should be done in a consistent and loving manner. They refer to this as the theory of effective parenting. Hirschi (1983) describes good parenting as the parents’ willingness to invest in a child by using parental affection as prevention for delinquency. Children tightly bonded with family, church, and schools are less likely to commit delinquent crimes. Proper bonding and attachment

between a child and significant others early in life help the child develop security and a sense of worth (MaGaha & Leoni, 1995).

Sampson and Laub (1994) share the causes of delinquency as being rooted in generic family processes. Systematically influenced by family poverty and structural disadvantage, this process might produce juveniles who do not respond to supervision, attachment, or discipline. The indirect effects of family poverty on delinquency among children in disadvantaged communities are influenced through structural background factors. These disadvantages may adversely affect successful parenting skills because of the parental disorders and difficulties they have encountered. Many such parents are marginally skilled, experience more stress, and have fewer resources available to them than more successful parents (Laub & Sampson, 1988).

Currently, four distinctive perspectives exist regarding the relationships between juveniles and their environment: social class, family size, parents, and school. Disruption at school interrupts the education of all students. Students displaying delinquent behaviors have few, if any, educational commitments. They seem to value cutting classes, leaving school without permission, and skipping school more than their education. School absenteeism may be the first sign of a potential school dropout.

Many minor incidences lead to major confrontations. Juveniles may destroy or deface school property as a prank. This sometimes leads to more severe outbursts of abusive language, throwing things in the classroom, cheating, insubordination, and even assaults on teachers. More major crimes occur with the use and possession of drugs and weapons at school. These actions, taken by juveniles, contribute to a delinquent lifestyle and subsequent labeling as juvenile delinquents. The justice systems then probate the students or place them in state custody in hopes

of improving their situations (D. R. Shults, Juvenile Judge, personal communication, June 24, 1997).

### Social Class

The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice (1967) suggested that delinquents may come from backgrounds of social and economic deprivation where their families have experienced an impoverished social status and lower average income. Crowded living quarters and families living below the subsistence level give little promise of a better situation for students (Cosby, 1993). Family hardship has a direct and indirect effect on adolescent distress. Lempers, Clark-Lempers, and Simons (1989) have shown that indirect stress may change parental nurturance and discipline techniques. They pointed out that economic hardships yield depression and loneliness as distress factors in adolescents. Economic distress yields less parental nurturance and more inconsistent discipline due to the preoccupation of the parents with their financial situations. Among the younger children, drastic economic changes in the family often lead to irritable behaviors and temper tantrums (Elder, Van Nguyen, & Caspi, 1985).

Unsolved initial problem behaviors seem to encourage continued inappropriate behaviors that often result in labeling a juvenile as a delinquent. Such labels increase the likelihood of future delinquent behavior. Continual delinquent involvement with peers allows the juveniles opportunities to learn and practice more delinquent behaviors.

Laub and Sampson (1988) describe a social learning model of low socioeconomic status as being associated with poor parenting skills. Researchers have linked antisocial behaviors in boys to poor monitoring and inconsistent, erratic discipline by parents (Poole & Regoli, 1979). In

discussing the “coercion theory,” Patterson (1982) notes that less skilled parents may inadvertently reinforce the antisocial behavior of the adolescent. They also fail to provide effective punishment. Patterson seems to believe such parents are the determining variables for their adolescents’ futures. If parents do not track and punish using family management skills, then they are not demonstrating appropriate care about their adolescents’ futures. Pederson (1994) describes the caring parents as considerate, empathetic, warm, understanding, and friendly. They understand, spend time, and talk with their children.

Sampson and Laub (1994) suggest the effects of poverty are shown by inconsistent, threatening, and harsh discipline, low supervision, and weak parent-child attachment. Such poverty also reduces the effect of social control. Poverty appears to inhibit families from achieving informal social controls and yields an increase in adolescent misbehavior. When an individual's bond to society becomes weak or broken, the probability of deviancy increases (Poole & Regoli, 1979). These bonds may be family attachments at work, or school. As the bonds loosen or break, the likelihood of delinquency increases (Hirschi, 1983). Elder and Caspi (1988) relate economic difficulties to increased aversive interactions between parents and children. The lack of parental discipline and monitoring practices exacerbates the effects of poverty and disadvantaged family status on children (Patterson, 1986; Sampson & Laub, 1994). LeFlore (1988) adds that the kind of neighborhood in which the youths live, the kind of family life they experience, and their personalities are also determinants of adolescent delinquency.

### Parents

Some parents spend many hours a week with their children. These hours are very important to the guidance of successful children. Parents who work with their children help



develop good morals, values, and respect for others. Adolescent children of child-oriented parents are usually responsible, socially competent, and achievement oriented. Adolescent children of uninvolved parents are likely to be impulsive, start to drink and smoke at younger ages, and engage in excessively inappropriate behaviors. They lack interest in school and often acquire delinquent records during these years. Elliott, Ageton, and Canter (1979) support parental rejection as a major cause for delinquency. Guttman (1995a) reports that 66 % of employed parents with children under 18 do not spend enough quality time with their children. Guttman shared that only about half the parents of high school students attended their children's school activities, such as open houses, athletic games, and plays or programs.

Patterson (1986) and Elder et al. (1985) endorse the idea that family stress changes parenting practices. Family hardships reduce parental nurturance and increase inconsistent, rejection-oriented parental discipline. Lempers et al. (1989) examined these factors and found that high levels of inconsistent, rejection-oriented discipline augment distress among adolescents. On the other hand, high levels of parental nurturance decreased these distress levels. Other consistent predictors of stressed parents are diminished use of child-centered, effective parenting practices, such as nurturance, involvement, and positive reinforcement. Stressed parents more often display ineffective, inconsistent punishment and rejection-oriented practices (Conger, McCarty, Young, Lahey, & Kropp, 1984; Patterson, 1986).

Elder et al. (1985) proposed that heavy income loss increases the irritability and moodiness of fathers. This results in more punitive, arbitrary and rejective parenting by the fathers. These changes in parental behavior can result in personal distress among their children. Childhood behavior problems often result from the stress-induced changes in the parent-child interactions. This can result in changing parental nurturance. The degree of monitoring and the

extent of discipline displayed by the parents may alter (Patterson, 1982). Lempers and colleagues (1989) found that economic hardship increased depression and loneliness. There was more inconsistent, rejection-oriented discipline and a decrease in parental nurturance. Paternal nurturance was negatively related to inconsistent parental discipline. Such inconsistent discipline increases the distress in children.

Children are very impressionable. They often choose role models from crowds that are not positive influences. Many times, they choose a movie star, athlete, or even the “pander” on the street to imitate. When parents let children choose their lifestyle at a very early age then children will choose what they see as the “in” thing to do and be. Parents should set examples for their children to follow and monitor their role models. Some parents blame their children when misbehavior occurs. They seldom question why this could occur or even if the fault could have been their own. Often, such parents feel a need to defend their egos.

Many parents will take up for their child even when they know the child is wrong. With such parents as role models, children learn that it is all right to lie to stay out of trouble. Parents often blame their children’s peers and friends at school when they are in trouble, refusing to admit their children would do anything wrong. Such parents refuse to see themselves as bearing any responsibility when their children display unruly behaviors (Sagatun, 1991).

The situation becomes worse when parents demonstrate little interest in their children’s school attendance or schoolwork. Such parents expect teachers to discipline their children and make sure they do all of their work at school. Many parents do not want work brought home because they do not want to help them with it. This lack of family support is viewed as conducive to delinquency (Poole & Regoli, 1979).

Parents who nurture their children with love, acceptance, and attachment usually witness achievement and success in their children. These children strive to make their parents proud by associating with the right crowd, doing their school work, and behaving in a manner that recognizes them as model students (Barnes & Farrell, 1992). It was found that living with both parents does not automatically create a strong bond with the parents. Those youth who have a strong bond with both parents generally exercise more sensitivity when considering the parents' sentiments and wishes. Hirschi (1983) promotes the attachment bond. He proposes that the stronger the attachment the less likely deviance will occur. He suggests that such youth will not intentionally disappoint loved ones. This bond can enable parents to exercise a tremendous influence on their children's behavior. This attachment provides a basis for preventive strategies promoted by the family. Some youth even find living with one parent helps to avoid stressful situations. The model nuclear family- two parents, two children, and one parent at home is fast disappearing. The permeable family- two parents working; single-parent families; adoptive families, remarried families-is more fluid and flexible (Elkind, 1996).

### Human Relations

Family disorganization is greater among at-risk than non at-risk children and youth (Hirschi, 1983). The family determines the culture into which a child is born. This culture defines or dictates the expectations, norms, and values a child will internalize. LeFlore (1988) suggested that at-risk behavior relates to economic resources of the family and that social, economic, and cultural factors are related to being at risk. LeFlore also found that at-risk acts decrease as the youth internalizes appropriate norms with the help of the family. The family determines the arena in which children are raised. Sampson and Laub (1994) state that the family

process influences two thirds of the effect of poverty and structural background factors on delinquency. The family structure variables include broken homes, mother employment, sibling rank, and household size. The family functioning factors include parental affection and acceptance, family relationships, supervision or discipline, family deviance or disorganization, and rejection (LeFlore, 1988, Sampson & Laub, 1994).

As a society, we do not demonstrate enough thought or concern about our young people. Attachment is a two-way street. This street reveals a parent-to-child relationship and a child-to-parent relationship. The attachment bond helps the child to conform his or her behavior to the parents' expectations. The more strongly a child is attached to the parents, the stronger the child is bound by their expectations. Therefore, the child is more strongly bound to conformity with the legal norms of the larger system if the parents display conformity (Hirschi, 1983). Olson and colleagues (1983) stated that family communication is a critical factor in forming family cohesion and adaptability. Family cohesion is a balance between autonomy and family bonds. Adaptability is the ability to change rules and roles as needed (Novy, Gaa, Frankiewicz, Liberman, & Amerikaner, 1992). When families use the appropriate problem solving skills, this can provide autonomy, change, and active, open lines of communication (Patterson, Reid & Dishon, 1992).

Morrison, Olivos, Dominiguez, Gomez, and Lean (1993) point out that parents and teachers are important factors in shaping the lives of children. Both parents and teachers should be consistent when giving children clear, direct, and specific communications. This encourages the children to comply. Consistency between parents and teachers generally yields success in getting the children to cooperate. When dealing with problem areas, parents and teachers should

be encouraged to celebrate success as soon as it occurs. This provides greater empowerment of the parent and teacher in the eyes of the children.

All Americans need to work together to rebuild communities that support the well being of our youth (Puriefoy, 2000). Citizens need to become more involved to improve the quality of public education. If we embrace and support school systems, we will add to the value of our children's education. The school system is a vital part of a community and adds to the value of a community as a whole. Each member of a community is significant in "closing the gap in education" that may be present in their system (Anderson & Smith, 1999).

### School

Schools have often been the only haven of security for many at-risk students. Many of these students have experienced poverty, migration from one culture to another, family inadequacy, a lack of involvement in formal and informal neighborhood organizations, and few positive outlets for their interests and energies. Tygart (1992) showed that lower-class adolescents experience more frustration due to such factors. He also suggests frustration with the public schools by such youth because of the structure of the schools. The lower-class adolescents already feel the strain from their status level, and the added frustration from school increases the likelihood of delinquency. Youth often have problems 'measuring up' to the 'middle-class' measuring rod. Experiencing low achievement, a feeling of injustice, peer rejection, blocked opportunities, and loss of self-esteem may result in a heightening of delinquent behavior in these youth (Patterson, 1986). Delinquency may relate to public schools because of the heightened frustration caused by unsuccessful school experiences. Students often have difficulties maintaining interest in school subjects. Teachers could provide greater opportunities if they

would redesign their program of activities to help improve this problem. Tygart (1992) suggests because schools are a source of problems for some youth, they most likely are a source of juvenile delinquency.

Good grades, attendance, and behavior in elementary school associate with substantially reduced delinquent behaviors for at-risk individuals (Zingraff, Leiter, Johnsen, & Myers, 1994). Success in school helps children to normally conform to adult roles and integrate into the adult society. School performance is affected by child maltreatment and often yields some type of delinquency. School counselors reveal some communities have little to offer the adolescent that can compete with the money and prestige acquired through selling drugs. Many adolescents are not interested in the limited, minimum wages of fast food restaurants (Crawford, 1996). Still, a number of researchers conclude that our schools are the major factor in developing an effective, delinquency prevention strategy (Dunham & Alpert, 1987). Schools dispense the skills prized in contemporary society by providing a major arena in which the youth can demonstrate competence and gain status (Pink, 1984).

Murphy (1993) points out that all students deserve a free and appropriate education. Students need the very best education available, and it is up to the schools to help provide it. Every student should have an opportunity to enjoy good teaching that leads to lifelong learning. Students need a hefty dose of the very best teaching available. Good schooling is the ticket to a good job in the future.

Support for schools is available from individuals across all ages, at all income levels, and of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. They are eager to help but may feel uncomfortable because of lack of communication skills. Many people feel that schools purposely exclude them from activities and events occurring at the schools. One of our greatest resources are our senior

citizens in the community. Some of these individuals are retired teachers, and all have a vast amount of experience. We should also involve “empty nesters”, single professionals, and college students (Puriefey, 2000). Test results for 1999-2000 at Mars Hill Elementary School in North Carolina reflected a six-point increase on the fourth grade end-of-grade test. This allowed the school to obtain “School of Distinction” status. Numerous hours of tutoring by college students, teacher assistants, teachers, senior citizens, and parent volunteers revealed that the extra attention given to these students helped them to reach their goals (Tilson, 2000). These volunteer groups wanted to help and just needed to know what to do. When given the chance they monitored, tutored, and encouraged students in their studies. This helped the school immensely. It boosted the self-esteem of the students, their parents, the teachers, teacher assistants, entire school staff, and the tutors from various organizations and college classrooms. This particular faculty and staff had never reached this exemplary status level before and were rewarded, not just monetarily, but also by the state in a variety of ways. This school became an institution with great things to celebrate.

### Teachers

The National Center for Education Statistics (1998) reveals approximately 70 % of all public school students are white, 16 % are black, and 10 % are Hispanic. This reflects a growing population of more ethnic and linguistic diversity. The student body has grown more heterogeneous, but the majority of teachers remain white women. Nearly three out of every four public school teachers are female, and 89 % are white, 7 % are black and 2 % are Hispanic (Feistritzer, 1996). Approximately 35 % of our school age children are from linguistic- or racial-minority families, and about 30 % of U.S. children are from poverty stricken families (Futrell,

1999). To celebrate diversity in our schools today, both minority and majority children need minority role models (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996). The dearth of male elementary teachers is one of the most relevant examples of mismatched representation among the teacher-student population (Brookhart & Loadman, 1996). To increase the diversity, more men with white, black, and Hispanic heritage should be encouraged to enter the educational field. Minority educators play a vital role in enhancing our students' understanding of the social, political, intellectual, and economic complexity of this democratic society in which we live (Futrell, 1999; Waddle, 2000).

Another dilemma we face is teacher preparation. Too often, poorly prepared teachers are not effective in presenting their daily lessons. Some do not recognize that each student is an individual with special needs. Many students require alternative materials to help them obtain the concept being taught. Teachers need to be aware of students' individual strengths and needs. They should use the visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic methods needed to address these needs. When teachers know their individual student needs, year after year, they are able to address those needs by providing special assistance and materials for their students (Sizer, 1999; Zahorik, 1999).

Careless gossip among teachers concerning home life of students can be detrimental to students. In addition, teachers can be excessively rigid or permissive in their discipline. Many students deal with teachers who are inconsistent in discipline (Patterson, 1986).

Elkind (1996) tells student teachers that one of the things that children want is to be loved by the ones they love. Children need love reciprocated by caring and loving teachers. We must remember that we are not the parents, and there are limits to the affection we can provide. The



master teacher tells us that the students and the learning are the things that matter most (Schere, 2000). The students will learn if they feel it is important and that they too, are important.

### Attendance and Discipline

Decreasing levels of school commitment and attendance are linked to increasing rates of school misconduct and school crime. Many school crimes include assaults on teachers, students, and other school officials. Students are often charged with possession, use, and distribution of alcohol or drugs on school premises. Such students continually cut class, leave the school without permission, and skip school altogether (Jenkins, 1995).

Truancy is a major form of delinquent behavior in at-risk adolescents. Many of these adolescents stay home or out of school without permission or the knowledge of their parents. They blame their non-attendance on boredom, inability to read, learning and attention span problems, and a lack of job opportunities when they finish school. Many feel it is not important to complete school because their parents never finished school. Often such parents fail to stress the importance of school to their children (Crawford, 1996).

Researchers have also looked at the transition from juvenile delinquency to adulthood. Thornberry, Moore, and Christian (1985) note that the failure for the juvenile to obtain a high school education often predicts subsequent adult criminal activity. Alpert and Dunham (1986) argue that keeping youth in school reduces adult criminal behavior and reduces subsequent unemployment. Some of these youth find no employment or under employment and entrapment in a level of marginal, low pay and often part-time jobs (Polk, 1984). Research supports the idea that the greatest potential for effective juvenile prevention is school attendance. Positive results of school attendance help in the development of the adolescent identity. Youth are able to

demonstrate competence and develop positive status in the school environment (Pink, 1984). Developing the schooling experience into a collaborative, positive, rewarding, and effective prevention program will benefit the “might be” delinquent at an earlier age. Such programs should emphasize the positives that help to keep delinquent youth in school (Pink, 1984; Polk, 1984; Polk & Schafer, 1972).

Alpert and Dunham (1986) identify several social variables for predicting which students will remain in school and those who will leave. They identify parental influences, negative influences of peers who sometimes have dropped out of school, discipline, and attitude toward school as some of the factors. They also recognize that misbehavior in school may range from one infraction to many. Another target area is whether the students are involved with drugs or alcohol in school. In short, the circumstances of dropping out of school target the categories of parental, peer, and school influences. Alpert and Dunham (1986) found misbehaviors in school to be the most significant factor leading to school dropout. Liking school and classes were both strong predictors for not dropping out of school. Dissatisfaction with part or all of the school experience might lead to misbehaving in school. This behavior should serve as a visible warning sign for identifying students in an at-risk category. Barnes and Farrell (1992) have found that the peer group is an important agent of socialization for the adolescent. There is a significant interaction between the lack of family support and delinquent peers. Poole and Regoli (1979) found delinquent acts were greater when family support was low. The more exposure an adolescent has to delinquent peers the greater the delinquent activities that occur. At times, no matter what amount of control the parent exercises, the influence of the delinquent peers is greater.

## Peers

Adolescence is associated with a period of generalized rebellious behavior. During this time young people define themselves as separate from their parents and learn to make choices in the world. This period of rebellion is exacerbated when the adolescent's childhood is composed of abuse in an aggressively authoritarian home. Then the delinquent behavior is more understandable. Some adolescents tend to get into fights, drink, bully others, and get into trouble at school and in the community (Canada, 2000; Crawford, 1996). Most adolescent delinquents are extremely dependent upon their peer groups. Some adolescents may substitute them for their nonfunctioning families. When adolescents have ineffective parents who show little or no nurturing, are not positive adult role models, or fail to encourage them, they can get needed attention from their peers. These peers often provide a sense of power or belonging. The peers replace family relationships. This attention does not usually emphasize positive activities, but it satisfies the needs of the adolescent. These adolescents come from all ethnic backgrounds and live in middle, upper, and lower class neighborhoods. They become involved in running drugs, stealing, and muggings (Crawford, 1996). Economic depravity may result in decreased respect for the adolescent's father and an increased dependence on the peer group for boys. Effects for adolescent girls are generally a lowered feeling of self-adequacy and reduced goal aspirations (Elder, Van Nguyen, & Caspi, 1985). Peers who drop out or get into trouble are negative influences on a juvenile. Peer influences are very important. Friends who have dropped out and those who are viewed as troublemakers should signal red flags to teachers and parents. Attempting to insulate youth from such influences could yield positive values and relationships. These measures will help build profound and lasting deterrents on dropout and juvenile problems.

Two of the most important factors in children's development are how they view themselves and how they view the world around them. Students who experience maltreatment will probably experience the classroom as oppressive. Others, the competitors, may view it as a challenge. However, teaching students to be collaborative provides them with coping skills both for the present and the future (Rousel, 1996).

### Attitudes and Opinions

Delinquent students display many characteristics. They normally blame their behavior on anything and anyone but themselves. In blaming society for their behaviors, they attempt to protect themselves against guilt feelings and lowered self-esteem. They blame the teacher for their daydreaming in class. They often report that the subject matter is boring and that the teacher does nothing to keep their attention. They take little, if any, responsibility for their actions. Instead of being attentive and adding to class discussion, they become quarrelsome, destructive, and even incorrigible (Crawford, 1996). Some students become depressed, discouraged, and worried over specific facts that may have little importance (Patterson, BeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989; Sagatun, 1991). These students become very unhappy and are often very sensitive. Many juveniles display violence by fighting, screaming, and shouting at peers and adults. They blame their families and family situations for their behavior. Being bored with their lives at home may result even if they have everything they could ever need. Such youth are spoiled with the good things that money can buy and turn to stealing just to experience a "thrill". In some cases, students may believe that this sport of stealing helps them gain "status" among their peers.

Other characteristics of juvenile delinquents may include being boastful, selfish, a tease, and having a lack of popularity. They occasionally have temper tantrums. Mood changes may

result in impulsive, destructive, defiant, and aggressive attitudes. These attitudes allow for disobedience and rudeness. Such adolescents often lie and are frequently truant from school and miss the evening curfews at home (Patterson, Reid, & Dishon, 1992). Because of their truancy, they become excluded from classes and even school. They often acquire a juvenile record for some of these behaviors and actions. They generally smoke, loiter, and associate with other unruly adolescents. They display a sense of insecurity, low self-esteem, and highly aggressive and hostile behaviors. Some characteristics seen in the juvenile delinquent are failure, inferiority, restlessness, and destructiveness (Patterson, BeBaryshe & Ramsey, 1989). They display attitudes of suspicion, hostility, defiance, resentfulness, and stubbornness. Feelings of being misplaced are often dealt with when they are rejected by the “in” crowd and are not wearing the “coolest” clothes. Many times, they are nonsubmissive to anyone in an authoritative role such as parents, teachers, principals, police, and judges (Pederson, 1994; Sagatun, 1991).

Delinquent behavior is often carried into adulthood by taking such forms as carrying guns, accumulating and not paying traffic tickets, and shirking financial and other obligations. Such adults are always “looking over their shoulder” and feeling “just one step ahead of the law or others”.

### Summary

Juvenile delinquency occurs throughout the social structure. It involves students, parents, peers, teachers, behaviors, and attitudes. Trouble in schools and communities are direct results of insecurity in families, neighborhoods, and community life.

When dealing with at-risk students, we must focus on the act and not the person. When the actions can be improved the deviant patterns can be altered. This may yield to a positive outlook on life.

Every child is indirectly affected by delinquency. All races, gender, socioeconomic levels, and ages are touched by these actions. Therefore, adults should use their best judgment when directing and guiding children.

Juvenile delinquents generally lack parental acceptance, meaningful family relationships, and adequate parental supervision. A great deal of improvement in all areas is necessary to enlighten the future of at-risk children.

Poverty, neighborhood, school, and some family situations are all linked to at-risk problems. Poor social skills displayed by the role model parents and other adults are patterned by the children and upheld by the next generation. Appropriate social skills should be taught and modeled in schools, churches, and community centers. This may help break the domino effect of poor social skills.

Elements for delinquency include ineffective and inconsistent practices by the parents. Parents need to monitor and discipline their children. Many times, they do so in cruel, harsh ways. Such parents need to learn different strategies and techniques to apply in different situations. Good parenting skills are strong deterrents of behavior problems. The use of corrective punishment in a loving, respectful manner will show the concern and affection of the parent while reflecting security and a sense of worth on the child. Often, parents are less skilled in active parenting skills. They may inadvertently reinforce the antisocial behaviors of their children. This type parent would benefit greatly from active parenting classes that modeled tracking systems for adolescents and punishments through family management skills.

Children will generally develop good morals, values, and respect for others when parents model those behaviors beginning at an early age. Most of these children eventually develop into socially responsible and competent young adults. Many at-risk students experience high levels of stress, depression, and loneliness. Parental nurturance, in abundance, will lower these levels and strengthen the attachment bond between the juveniles and parents.

Schools play a major role in the improvement plan for delinquents. Alleviating status levels within the culture of the school, neutralizing feelings of injustice and peer rejection, and changing the low self-esteem of adolescents leads to an improved school situation. School experiences should be rewarding, successful, and a door of opportunity for all students. Success during the school years will help produce smooth integration into adult roles and society. Teachers need to individualize and track student progress. Counseling and job career training should be a major focus early in the at-risk child's education. Instead of heavy use of punishments, school detentions, and expulsion, time should focus on positive, rewarding, and effective programs directed to the interests of the students.

The adolescent years are generally times of separation from parents and forming one's identity. Some choices will yield negative results while others, with a positive parental relationship, will help build lasting deterrents to juvenile problems. Adolescents with positive attitudes are usually the success stories heard about in the future. Those with negative attitudes are often read about in the weekly newspapers. Success or failure has a great deal to do with the environment in which the child is nurtured. There comes a time when a child becomes an adolescent and the adolescent becomes an adult. Depending on the formative years of the adult the shape of their future will be consistent with what they lived unless they are capable of changing their life in some way.

“What we live with we learn, and what we learn we practice, and what we practice, we become . . . and what we become has consequences” . . .and  
“usually, I have found, who we become has little to do with who we were meant to be” (Crawford, 1996, p. 6).



## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between at-risk students and environmental factors. For purposes of this research, the types of at-risk problems addressed were parent and peer influences, teachers, education, and school behavior. This chapter includes a discussion of the population, a description of the instrument, the hypotheses tested, the procedure used, and the analysis of data.

#### Population

Previously collected data were used in this study. The sample consisted of students in grade 6 (N= 275) in Northwestern North Carolina and Northeast Tennessee. These systems were chosen because of locations and size in providing a relatively large sample. Students who were surveyed attended four different middle schools within the Appalachian region of North Carolina and Tennessee. Student participation was on a voluntary basis and data were presented on all who chose to be participants. Students who returned a completed survey were given a soft drink of choice as a token of appreciation.

#### Instrumentation

The Demos D (Dropout) Scale was the instrument chosen for this study. This scale is an attitude scale for the identification of student dropouts that was generated by Demos (1989) and purchased from Western Psychological Services. The development of this scale was established using the method of successive intervals requiring a single judgment from each subject for each

statement scaled. There were five intervals used: highly favorable, favorable, neutral, unfavorable, and highly unfavorable. It was assumed only that the attitude categories are in correct rank order and the boundary lines are stable. The Flesch (5) formula was used to construct items with a “very easy” readability rating. This allows readability and understandability by the great majority of students above the fifth grade. If necessary, the examiner was permitted to read the Demos D Scale (DDS) aloud. The student responded by circling his or her choice. This was a brief, objective, 29-question scale. It was easy to administer, score, and interpret. The original DDS totaling 145 statements was used in formulating the 29 DDS attitude continuum. Seven professional judges rated the statements into successive intervals. Only statements that had the unanimous agreement of the seven judges were incorporated into the DDS. The DDS measures student attitudes in four areas: teachers (10 items) and coded T; attitudes toward education (9 items) and coded E; influences by peers or parents (5 items) and coded P; and school behavior (5 items) and codes S.

The results provide an objective method for obtaining expressions of student attitudes related to dropping out of school. This scale can also help identify students with strongly negative attitudes toward teachers and schools. It may alert parents of children who indicate that they may prematurely drop out of school. These data may provide information for counseling or psychotherapy of children with problems. School systems may structure or develop programs for identifying and working with potential dropouts. This could result in a reduction of school dropouts. Researchers can use this data to address areas such as dropping out of school, adjusting to school, effective learning, and counseling programs. Reliability and validity in the Demos D Scale are considered to be synonymous and high, since the attitude responses are readily obtained. Research indicates a retest reliability coefficient of correlation ranged from + .50 to +

.86. Demos also shared that the establishment of the mean DDS Total Score differences indicate validity and reliability for the scale (Demos, 1989).

### Procedures

Data were collected as a part of the school system's data for writing grants and were used in this study. Information was collected two years ago and proved beneficial to many projects, including this dissertation. Approval for collecting this data was obtained from the central office administration for each school system. Packets containing permission forms to participate, surveys, and cover letters, were given to each teacher in grade 6 at all four schools. Students were given a permission form for their parents or guardians to allow for participation in the survey. Students returning permission forms were given a questionnaire by his or her teacher and asked to complete them. All questionnaires were coded as to ethnic group and age for identification of the student. Parents were assured in the request for permission cover letter that student confidentiality would be honored.

### Data Analysis Procedures

Descriptive statistics were used to examine the data carefully. Independent t-tests and the ANOVA test were used to describe the relationships between the independent variables, Demos' four Basis Areas of Expression, and gender.

### Hypotheses

The hypotheses were tested in the null form as indicated below:

- H1: There is no difference between the mean parent and peer score for male and female students' attitudes toward parents and peers.
- H2: There is no difference between the mean teacher score for male and female students' attitudes toward teachers.
- H3: There is no difference between the mean educational setting score for male and female students' attitudes toward educational settings.
- H4: There is no difference between the mean school behavior score for male and female students' attitudes toward school behaviors.
- H5: There is no difference between the mean total Demos D Scale scores for male and female students.
- H6: There is no difference between the mean total Demos D Scale score for the four schools studied.

This study analyzed data previously collected from four middle schools in Northeast Tennessee and Northwest North Carolina. Data were collected from 195 students completing the Demos D (Dropout) Scale. This scale focused on the attitudes students had toward teachers, parents and peers, educational environment, and student behavior. Data analysis used the independent t-test and one-way ANOVA to describe the relationships between independent variables, educational factors, and gender. There were six research questions, and six null hypotheses were tested.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships among four specific typologies of environmental factors and at risk-students. The four typologies explored were influences by parents or peers, teachers, education, and school behavior. Combinations of typologies were also assessed to determine the influence of their overlap.

The Demos D (Dropout) Scale was used to measure the expressions of attitudes of sixth grade students involving these typologies. Previous data from 195-student surveys were analyzed by using the Independent-samples t-test and a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA).

#### Description of Demos D Scale Typologies

The independent variables addressed in this study, student areas of expression typologies, included attitudes toward teachers and education, influences by peers and parents, and school behavior. Questions referring to teachers include 1, 5, 8, 14, 15, 20, 22, 23, 25, and 27. The education system was addressed by questions 2, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 12, 16, and 29. Parents and peers were addressed together. These questions were numbers 3, 4, 18, 19, and 26. The school behavior topic was addressed by answers to questions 7, 17, 21, 24, and 28. These variables represent the composite raw score of the survey items assigned to each typology. The standard deviations and means for each typology are presented in Table 1.

For each of the survey items, response choices were assigned the value (1) for nearly always and nearly everyone; meaning the student is highly favorable of this choice; the value (2) for most of the time and most people; meaning the student is favorable to this choice; the value

(3) neutrality was reflected by choosing the answer sometimes; the value (4) most of the time and few people, meaning an unfavorable response by the student; and the value (5) nearly always, meaning a highly unfavorable response to the survey question.

TABLE 1  
DEMOS D (DROPOUT) SCALE TYPOLOGIES

Typology	Male		Female	
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
Peers or Parents	52.14	1.67	51.70	1.72
Teachers	21.74	5.90	20.21	4.52
Education Environment	14.27	4.23	13.61	3.04
School Behavior	10.67	3.25	9.37	2.54

The DDS Total score converts clinical probabilities of students dropping out of school into score ranges as reflected in Table 2. These ranges are from 29 to 145. The probability of dropping out of school is shown in ranges from 5 chances out of 100 to 90 chances out of 100. Table 2 shows the gender potential to dropout by school and the total DDS for all schools.

TABLE 2  
GENDER POTENTIAL DROPOUT BY SCHOOL

School	N	<u>Teachers</u>		<u>Education</u>		<u>Peer/Parents</u>		<u>School Behavior</u>	
		L/S	S/VVS	L/S	S/VVS	L/S	S/VVS	L/S*	S/VVS**
A	M 19	1	2	16	0	9	1	10	1
	F 19	5	2	13	0	10	0	12	0
B	M 31	4	8	20	2	11	0	12	3
	F 41	3	9	30	0	29	0	28	0
C	M 18	3	4	14	1	9	0	10	1
	F 29	8	3	24	0	21	0	18	1
D	M 18	4	4	13	0	12	0	10	1
	F 20	2	1	15	0	9	0	13	0
195	M 86	12	18	63	3	41	1	42	6
	F 109	18	15	82	0	69	0	71	1

\*L/S little and some probability of dropping out of school

\*\*S/VVS strong and very strong probability of dropping out of school

Notes\*\*\*

<u>Range</u>	<u>Probability of</u>	<u>Dropping out of School</u>
29	Little probability	5 chances in 100
30-39	Some probability	25 chances in 100
40-79	Even chance	50 chances in 100
80-89	Strong probability	70 chances in 100
90-145	Very strong probability	90 chances in 100

The teacher attitude scale indicates that 12 of 86 males had little to some probability of dropping out of school. This scale also showed that 18 of 86 males had a strong to very strong probability of dropping out of school. This group needs to be targeted for preventive or corrective work to take place when addressing teacher attitudes. Teacher attitudes appear to be more influential on males than females. Table 2 also implies that 18 of 109 females have some probability of dropping out of school. It indicates 15 of 109 females showed strong and very strong probability of dropping out of school based on teacher attitudes.

When looking at the potential dropouts by gender and by school for the total DDS score, school B reveals that three males and one female had strong and very strong probability of dropping out of school based on the entire test. School C and D both had two males and zero females with strong and very strong probability to drop out. This showed a total of seven males and one female. The strong or very strong probability of males to drop out of school was 7 of 86 as compared to the female scale indicating 1 of 109. It may be concluded by this information that males will have a higher propensity to drop out of school than do females.



## Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

Six research questions guided the study and six null hypotheses were tested.

### Question One

Is parent and peer influence indicative of at-risk behavior and is there a difference between male and female students in their attitudes toward parents and peers?

H1: There is no difference between the mean parent and peer score for male and female students' attitudes toward parents and peers.

Results were analyzed using an independent-samples t-test. This analysis failed to reveal a significant difference between male students and female students on their attitudes toward parents and peers,  $t(194) = 1.798$ ;  $p = .074$ . The means show that male student scores were quite similar to those shown by female students (male students,  $M = 52.14$ ,  $SD = 1.67$ ; female students,  $M = 51.70$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ).

### Question Two

Is teacher influence indicative of at-risk behavior and is there a difference between male and female students in their attitudes toward teachers?

H2: There is no difference between the mean teacher score for male and female students' attitudes toward teachers.

This analysis revealed a significant difference for male and female students for the teacher variable questions,  $t(155) = 1.997$ ;  $p = .048$ . The means show that male students scored significantly higher than did the female students on the teacher questions (male students,  $M = 21.74$ ,  $SD = 5.90$ ; for female students,  $M = 20.21$ ,  $SD = 4.52$ ).

### Question Three

Is educational setting influence indicative of at-risk behavior and is there a difference between male and female students in their attitudes toward the educational setting?

H3: There is no difference between the mean educational setting score for male and female students attitudes toward educational setting.

This analysis failed to reveal a significant difference between male students and female students on the educational setting,  $t(194) = 1.266$ ;  $p = .207$ . The means show that male student scores were quite similar to those shown by female students (male students,  $M = 14.27$ ,  $SD = 4.23$ ; female students,  $M = 13.61$ ,  $SD = 3.04$ ).

### Question Four

Is school behavior influence indicative of at-risk behavior and is there a difference between male and female students in their attitudes toward school behavior?

H4: There is no difference between the mean school behavior score for male and female students attitudes toward school behavior.

This analysis revealed a significant difference in the student behavior questions between the male and female students,  $t(157.7) = 3.055$ ;  $p = .003$ . The means show that the male students scored significantly higher than did the female students on the student behavior questions (male student,  $M = 10.67$ ,  $SD = 3.25$ ; female student,  $M = 9.37$ ,  $SD = 2.54$ ).

### Question Five

Are the mean total Demos D Scale scores indicative of at-risk behavior and is there a difference between male and female students in their attitudes on this score?

H5: There is no difference between mean total Demos D Scale scores for male and female students.

This analysis revealed a significant difference between the male students and the female students on the mean total for the Demos D Scale. The difference between the two groups,  $t(193) = 2.625$ ;  $p = .009$ . The means reveal that males scored significantly higher on all variables than did females (males,  $M = 57.16$ ,  $SD = 12.69$ ; for females,  $M = 53.08$ ,  $SD = 8.98$ ).

### Question Six

Is the mean total Demos D Scale scores for the four schools studied indicative of at-risk behavior and is there a difference between male and female students in their attitudes on this score?

H6: There is no difference between the mean total Demos D Scale scores for the four schools studied.

Results were analyzed using a one-way ANOVA, between group designs. This analysis failed to reveal a significant difference between the mean total DDS scores for the four schools studied,  $F(3, 191) = 193.78$ ;  $p = .183$ .

The sample means are displayed in Table 3. The analysis on research questions 1 and 3 failed to reveal a significant difference between male students and female students on the attitudes toward parents and peers and the educational setting.

The t-test indicated no difference. This test was also used to analyze research questions 2, 4, and 5. This analysis indicated there was a significant difference in the attitudes toward teachers, school behavior, and the total DDS score. Research question six was tested using the

one-way ANOVA to compare the four schools. This analysis failed to reveal a significant difference between the mean total DDS scores for the four schools studied.

TABLE 3

TOTAL DDS SCORES OF FOUR SCHOOLS

School	M	SD
School A	53.4737	8.54
School B	57.0000	12.16
School C	52.9149	11.08
School D	54.7105	9.98
Total	54.8827	10.91

Results of examining the relationships among the four specific typologies of environmental factors, at risk-students, and gender are shown in Table 4. Results are stated using whole numbers and percentages per group of males and females and total scores for the group. The teacher educational factor reveals that males are more likely at 20.9% to exhibit a greater propensity to be school dropouts because of teacher attitudes than did females at 13.8%. The social behavior educational factor also reveals that males have a greater tendency to become dropouts at 6.9% as compared to the females at .9 %. The total score for the teacher educational factor reflected the highest score for strong and very strong probability for dropout at 16.9 % for

both males and females. The second highest overall score for probability for dropouts was social behavior at 3.6%.

TABLE 4  
PROPENSITY TO DROPOUT BY GENDER AND EDUCATIONAL FACTORS

N	Teacher		Education		Peers/Parents		Social Behavior	
	S/L	S/V/S	S/L	S/V/S	S/L	S/V/S	S/L	S/V/S
M (86)	12	18	63	3	41	1	42	6
	(14.0)	(20.9)	(73.3)	(3.4)	(47.7)	(1.2)	(48.8)	(6.9)*
F (109)	18	15	82	0	69	0	71	1
	(16.5)	(13.8)	(75.2)	(0)	(63.3)	(0)	(65.1)	(.9)
TOTAL (195)	30	33	145	3	110	1	113	7
	(15.4)	(16.9)	(23.)	(1.5)	(56.4)	(.5)	(57.9)	(3.6)

\* percentages are in ( )

The education factor and the peers and parents factor reflected a small percentage of 1.5% and .5%, consecutively. These are probabilities for school dropouts using this instrument and based on this population.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

The primary goal of this study was to determine what relationship exists between four specific typologies of educational factors and at-risk students based on their attitudes and gender. The four typologies explored were (a) influences by parents or peers, (b) teachers, (c) education, and (d) school behavior. The instrument selected, the Demos D (Dropout) Scale (an attitude scale for the identification of dropouts), had previously demonstrated a high degree of reliability and was appropriate for this study.

Six research questions guided the study and six null hypotheses were formulated and tested at the .05 level of significance. The degree of relationship between the independent variables, males and females, and the Demos D Scale typologies were analyzed by using the Independent sample t-test and one-way ANOVA.

The population for the study consisted of 195 middle school students in Northwestern North Carolina and Northeast Tennessee. The data were statistically analyzed with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences.

#### Findings

The first research question was: Is parent and peer influence indicative of at-risk behavior and is there a difference between male and female students in their attitude toward parents and peers? Results of the Independent samples t-test indicated no significant differences between male students and female students. They all felt positive about advice from their friends and the

parental support they received. Parents are a key factor in their child's education and they also influence children as they pick their friends. Richard Riley, former Secretary of Education, called for greater parental and family involvement to help meet the educational needs of children. The development of family partnerships has allowed improvement in student achievement and made community confidence stronger (Guttman, 1995b). Parents should create a home environment (quiet learning area with a well lit space for studying) that encourages learning. They should practice open communication on high interest subjects with their children and have high expectations of academic achievement that is obtainable by the child. Parents should be as involved as possible in their child's education, making time to go to plays, athletic games, and meetings with their child (DuFour, 2000).

The second research question was: Is teacher influence indicative of at-risk behavior and is there a difference between male and female students in their attitude toward teachers? Results from the independent samples t-test indicate a significant difference for male and female students for the teacher variable questions. Male students responded more favorably to open communication with teachers and counselors. They shared that it was important to seek help when they had trouble with schoolwork. They were also more likely to engage in conversation with the principals and vice-principals when needing help. They replied that teachers were too hard when giving punishment and grades. Females responded that teachers were fair to everyone and they could debate their answers more freely than did the males. All students agreed that teachers care about them and try to understand their problems.

Teachers should always consider each student as an individual. They each have their own personal needs and must be addressed accordingly. Teachers must be concerned with getting the attention of the students and keeping it by making the learning experience interesting and open to participation by all students. They must use fair and consistent discipline techniques that can lead to the optimal learning situation when modeled in an organized classroom. Teachers should

strive to make the curriculum and assessments meaningful to the students connecting a task with a daily living skill. They must value diversity and model this in their classrooms. They should daily communicate objectives that build student character (Schere, 1999).

The third research question was: Is educational setting influence indicative of at-risk behavior and is there a difference between male and female students in their attitude toward the educational setting? Results from the independent t-test indicated no significant difference between male students and female students on the educational setting questions. All students agreed that it was necessary to have good grades, work hard, and be interested in school. Students agreed that being interested in school would help them to graduate from high school and be ready to participate in college. Having a college education is the key to earning good money and having a better future.

Educational systems are making available learning situations that take children outside the classrooms. These activities help students become more involved with their own education. Students should be educated in their community environment and available recreational areas that are within their immediate region (Howe, 2000).

Systems should put emphasis on building the school as a place where students and teachers want to be (Howe, 2000). This will help to make the learning and teaching experience as rewarding as possible for all involved. These learning facilities should promote life-long learning for adults and children by encouraging citizens, local business leaders, and members of higher education facilities to work collaboratively in promoting education. This collaboration can help develop a plan of action that will positively help students reach their goals (Puriefoy, 2000).

The fourth research question was: Is school behavior influence indicative of at-risk behavior and is there a difference between male and female students in their attitude toward school behavior? A significant difference in the student behavior questions between the male and female students was revealed. It was important to all students to have good attendance and to be leaders. They also agreed it was good to take part in class discussions. The significant



difference was in the area of school activities. Male students revealed it was more important to participate in extra curricular athletic activities and have a good time in school than to study and learn. Females were more interested in studies than athletics.

All students should know the value of an education. Students should be able to enjoy extra curricular activities but know that their studies are a vital part of their success in the future. Students should be allowed to make decisions about their education while enjoying a peaceful school climate. They need to feel safe, be healthy, and have their learning experience uninterrupted.

The fifth research question was: Is the mean total Demos D Scale scores indicative of at-risk behavior and is there a difference between male and female students in their attitudes on this score? A significant difference between the male students and the female students on the mean total for the Demos D Scale was found. Male students scored significantly higher on the total Demos D Scale than did the female students. Male students scored consistently higher on most of the sub-scores and it would be expected that the total score would reflect these scores.

The sixth research question was: Is the mean total Demos D Scale scores for the four schools studied indicative of at-risk behavior and is there a difference between male and female students in their attitudes on this score? Results from the one-way ANOVA revealed no significant difference between the four schools surveyed. There is no significant difference in the attitudes of sixth grade students in any of the schools surveyed.

Analysis failed to reveal a significant difference between male students and female students on the attitudes toward parents and peers and the educational setting. Analysis did indicate a significant difference in the attitudes toward teachers, school behavior, and the total DDS score. The one-way ANOVA analysis failed to reveal a significant difference between the

mean total DDS scores for the four schools studied. The teacher factor revealed that males are more likely to be school dropouts because of their perceptions of teacher attitudes than females. The social behavior factor also revealed that males have a greater tendency to become dropouts than do females. The total score for teacher factor reflected very strong probability for dropout at 16.9 %. Total score for social behavior reflects 3.6%. The education and peers/parents factors reflect percentages of 1.5% and .5%

### Conclusions

As a result of the findings, the following conclusions were drawn concerning the difference between male and female students when questioned about the four typologies and juvenile students.

1. Both male and female students consider parental support and peer interaction important. These relationships are viable factors in the student's daily routine.
2. Male student scores on teacher involvement are significantly higher than female student scores. Male students appear to interact with teachers, assistant principals, and principals more than the female students, therefore, being influenced more by this educational factor.
3. Male student scores on the student behavior questions are significantly higher than are those scores for female students. The male students were more engaged in the extra curricular activities than were the female students.
4. Male student scores on the Demos D Scale are significantly higher than are those scores for female students. Male students scores were significantly higher in two of the four subtests and proved higher in the total score.

5. The scores for all four schools were similar, and it is surmised that the populations of these schools are similar.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of this study.

1. Teachers, administrators, and counselors should be more aware of the influence their relationships have with male students in decisions of school activities.
2. Additional studies should be conducted to identify predictors for potential school dropouts with a focus on males versus females.
3. Diversity factors should be recognized and addressed to help positively influence students to attend school and thus help prevent excessive dropping out.
4. Additional studies should be conducted to determine the differences of how male and female students are held accountable for their actions during the education process.
5. Female students should be encouraged to take an active part in athletics and participate in more extra curricular activities.
6. Further studies should focus on the student as a factor and the responsibilities of each student.

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