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# Student Dropout From The Perspectives Of Junior High Counselors In Northeast Mississippi

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STUDENT DROPOUT FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF JUNIOR HIGH COUNSELORS IN

NORTHEAST MISSISSIPPI

A Dissertation

presented in partial fulfillment of requirements

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by

KELLY ANN BENNETT

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ABSTRACT

I investigated fifteen junior high counselors' understandings about student dropout, particularly about identification of and interventions for students at risk for dropping out of school. As an educator, I desired to research the phenomenon of student dropout to understand how to better reach these types of students. Research is available concerning student dropout from the perspectives of teachers, principals, and student dropouts; however, little research on student dropout from the viewpoint of counselors exists.

I utilized a qualitative design, in particular a descriptive case study, to develop understanding of the counselors' perspectives of student dropout. Data collection included individual and focus group interviews, both through face-to-face and email; demographic surveys; and field notes recorded in a research journal. I utilized the constant comparison method to analyze my data and make connections among the conversations.

The following four themes emerged after thoroughly analyzing my data and searching for commonalities: (a) it's like a cycle, (b) there's only so much we can do, (c) effective interventions are essential, and (d) dropout is more of a high school problem. After the discussion of my findings, I offer the following implications for future research: (a) creating K-12 alignment of dropout prevention, (b) understanding parental support, and (c) defining counselors' position in dropout prevention.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my grandparents, Thomas and Barbara Young.  My heart smiles in

knowing that I have made you proud.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my husband, Josh Bennett; my children, Brandi, Jackson, Novaley, and Mayer; and my always-encouraging family and friends for being right by my side throughout my doctoral experience.  I am beyond blessed to be surrounded by such wonderful family members and friends who were willing to be shoulders for tears, smiles when things went great and not so great, babysitters when Mommy was pulling her hair out, and just stable, positive individuals the whole way.  Gratitude is an understatement.

To my dissertation chair, Dr. Chessin, thank you so much for your faith in me, in my heart, and in my work.  It has been a long, hard, rewarding journey, and you have been there every step of the way guiding, advising, and listening to me vent.  To my committee member, Dr. Bennett, thank you for coming on board and guiding me in this process.  Your direction and support led me to creating a dissertation that I am very proud of and that is of the highest quality. To the remaining members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Sarah Blackwell and Dr. Amy Wells-Dolan, thank you for working with me, supporting me, and providing valuable comments and suggestions along the way.  Because of each of you I have completed a polished, professional, significant document and that means more to me than you will ever know.  Your guidance and encouragement will always be remembered.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

# LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

# CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

High dropout rates over the last few decades in the United States have generated concern for educators, administrators, school personnel and educational policymakers (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Fox, 2010; Harrison, 2010; Stillwell & Sable, 2013), as dropout affects the individual student (Driscoll & Bernstein, 2012; Harlow, 2003; Snyder & Willow, 2012), the community (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002), and the nation (Thorstensen, 2004; United States Department of Labor, n.d.). This concern has led to concerted efforts to increase academic achievement and decrease student dropout, which include: (a) reinforcing positive behaviors, (b) providing appropriate support and interventions, (c) developing dropout prevention plans, and (d) motivating students to succeed (Dynarski et al., 2008; Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003; Glasser, 1993; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2002; Theobald, 2005; Thomas, 2007). Research documenting effective dropout prevention plans is limited, yet various plans, programs, and incentives are created every year to aid in student dropout prevention (Martin, Tobin, & Sugai, 2002; Ryan, 2011). Therefore, it is important to provide research concerning effective strategies and programs that help prevent student dropout in its earliest stages (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Martin et al., 2002; Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2009). The current revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), has called for effective dropout prevention programs (United States Congress, 2002; United States Department of Education, 2010).

The NCLB Act was established to help ensure that all students are taught content based on rigorous standards through the use of effective, differentiated strategies. The purpose of this focus on standards is to promote college and career readiness; "Every student should graduate from high school ready for college and a career, regardless of their income, race, ethnic or language background, or disability status" (United States Department of Education, 2010, p. 3). Student test scores are utilized for accountability purposes to assure that these guidelines are followed. This reliance on test scores for accountability and evaluation demands more thorough standards and higher expectations concerning student achievement (United States Congress, 2002; United States Department of Education, 2009). Due to these guidelines, it is essential that educators, administrators, school personnel and educational policymakers use research-based strategies and practices to develop and maintain effective dropout prevention programs; research suggests that students, who consistently demonstrate low achievement evident in standardized test scores, are more likely to become unmotivated and at greater risk for dropping out (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Meeker et al., 2009; Tyler & Loftstom, 2009; United States Department of Education, 2009).

**The Dropout Crisis**

Student dropout is an issue that affects not only the student but also his/her family, community, and nation. The repercussions of student dropout are extensive: (a) it costs the nation millions of dollars (Thorstensen, 2004), (b) it creates higher unemployment rates (United States Department of Labor, n.d.), (c) it results in lower wage earning individuals (Snyder & Willow, 2012), d) it increases the incarceration rate (Harlow, 2003), (e) it produces individuals who experience more health problems (Driscoll & Bernstein, 2012), and (f) it increases community poverty and lack of resources (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sampson,

Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002). Therefore, understanding student dropout is imperative to increase the quality of life of students and American citizens.

A great deal of research focuses on the high school dropout crisis in the United States. High school dropout is a multi-faceted problem that must be confronted from every angle in attempt to develop and implement effective prevention and intervention strategies (Balfanz et al., 2010; Barton, 2005; Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). Strom and Boster (2007) conducted a meta-analysis in which they concluded that students who drop out of school receive messages from two places: from home and from school. Parents, siblings, family, and friends communicate messages from home; and administrators, teachers, staff, and peers communicate messages from school. These messages, which are positive or negative, based on the student's environment, typically impact students' decisions to drop out of or stay in school. The researchers concluded that if educators, administrators, and educational policymakers can provide assistance to ensure that the messages from school are positive and encouraging, then students may be less likely to drop out. Directly influencing the messages from home is difficult, but educators can endeavor to maintain a strong home/school connection by: (a) providing newsletters, (b) making parent contacts, (c) having parent nights, and (d) guaranteeing faculty and staff consider students' best interests.

Christle, Jolievette, and Nelson (2007) examined school characteristics in relation to dropout rate. In this study, the researchers established factors such as: (a) school climate, (b) school policies, (c) school expectations, and (d) school location as essential in decreasing the dropout rate. They concluded that if educators, administrators, school personnel, and educational policymakers desire effective prevention of student dropout, then they must reflect on and evaluate their schools' environments and policies and make appropriate changes. Other

3

researchers have conducted studies that yield suggestions for decreasing student dropout, which include: (a) implementing a transition program for students transferring from junior high to high school (Cohen &Smerdon, 2009), (b) using strategies that appeal to and motivate students (Corder, 1999), (c) teaching with passion so that students develop a passion for learning (Thomas, 2007), and (d) building positive teacher-student relationships with students (Leitao & Waugh, 2007; Merrow, 2008; Wubbles, 1993). Dropout prevention programs are created using these suggestions and are instituted in school districts throughout the United States (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Mississippi Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Learning, 1998a; Public Education Forum of Mississippi, 2008a). Although research is available on the topic of student dropout, based on annual reports provided by states and from the United States Department of Education (USDE), a call for effective dropout prevention strategies and programs still exists (Barton, 2005; Conklin, Curran, & Gandal, 2005; Martin et al., 2002; Samuels, 2007).

Most states, including Mississippi, have established dropout prevention programs. The purpose of these programs is to institute a strategic plan that encourages students to stay in school and continue their education after high school. The two main programs that support the dropout prevention program in Mississippi are Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program (GEAR UP), established in 1998, and On the Bus, established in 2008. These two programs are driven by similar goals and visions; they were created to support the dropout prevention program implemented by the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) (Mississippi Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Learning, 1998a; Public Education Forum in Mississippi, 2008b).

The GEAR UP in Mississippi focuses not only on encouraging students to stay in school but also on preparing and encouraging them to attend college. By partnering with institutions of higher learning in Mississippi, GEAR UP academic mentors set specific goals and expectations for students that align with their career goals. GEAR UP provides students with the opportunity to become involved in career specific programs, participate in activities that connect learning to the real world, and work with individuals who aid in the decision making process concerning college and career choices. The program emphasizes establishing high expectations, setting goals, and being successful; partnerships are encouraged with the local businesses, community leaders, and families (Mississippi Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Learning, 1998a).

The second Mississippi program created to decrease student dropout is On the Bus, and it focuses primarily on preventing student dropout and does not specifically center on higher education, unlike GEAR UP. "The campaign includes: TV Commercials, Radio Spots, Print and Outdoor, Community Outreach, and Business Partnerships. Mississippi's goal is to cut its current dropout rate of 15.9 percent in half by 2013" (Public Education Forum of Mississippi, 2008b, para. 1). The main purpose of this campaign is to raise awareness of the seriousness of the dropout crisis in Mississippi.

Both GEARUP MS and On the Bus were established to inform and help prevent student dropout in Mississippi, and they both concentrate on high school students. However, research suggests that the dropout crisis could be challenged and prevented more effectively if identification and prevention began at the elementary and junior high levels (Balfanz, 2009; Barfield, Hartman, & Knight, 2012; Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, & Heinrich, 2008; Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2008; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Pagani et al., 2008; Ryan, 2011).

**Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is to provide a look into student dropout from a perspective not thoroughly explored in current research—the perspective of school counselors. Because they are one of the first individuals to interact with at risk students, school counselors can provide significant insight concerning how to recognize and provide effective interventions for students at risk for dropping out. Their perspectives can offer further understanding about student dropout and how to address student dropout at its earliest stage.

It is essential that every student has the opportunity to learn and experience success. A large number of students drop out of school before graduating because their needs are not being met by the educational system (Balfanz et al., 2010; Cataldi, Laird, KewalRamani, & Chapman, 2009). All students must have an education that is tailored to meet their unique needs, and it takes a team to complete this process (Barton, 2006; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2002; Sparks, Johnson, & Akos, 2010; Ziomek-Daigle, 2010). The decision-making procedures of this process need to be thoroughly analyzed to accurately identify students at risk for dropping out at the earliest possible stages and for the selection of appropriate interventions (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Barfield et al.,, 2012; Blount, 2012; Rumberger, 2011).

Educators, administrators, school personnel, and educational policymakers seek to create and implement plans and programs that encourage students to academically succeed, enjoy, and stay in school (Dynarski et al., 2008; Glasser, 1993; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2002; Theobald, 2005; Thomas, 2007). Preventing and decreasing student dropout is a high priority for many high schools, and a majority of schools follow dropout plans that have been set by their state's department of education (Cataldi et al., 2009; Corder, 1999; Farkas et al.,

6

2003; Harrison, 2010; Mississippi Board of Trustees of State Institutions of Higher Learning, 1998a; Public Education Forum of Mississippi, 2008b).

To advance the development and implementation of effective dropout programs and prevention strategies at the elementary and junior high levels, it is necessary to conduct research that reveals why students dropout and exemplifies ways to create and maintain effective dropout prevention strategies and programs (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, & Friant, 2010; Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Meeker et al., 2009; Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009). This research is especially needed in the south, as it consistently has higher dropout rates compared to other parts of the nation; Mississippi's dropout rate was 7.4% for the 2009-2010 school year, compared to the national dropout rate of 3.4% (Stillwell & Sable, 2013) The southern United States has a higher percentage of students who have characteristics associated with dropout, such as excessive absences, academic and discipline problems, drug abuse, and a higher percentage of students living in poverty (Civil Rights Project, 2005; Orfield, 2006; Rutherford, Hillmer, & Parker, 2011; Stillwell & Sable, 2013; Stone &Alfeld, 2004). Dropout factories are, "high schools in which twelfth grade enrollment is 60 percent or less of ninth grade enrollment three years earlier" (Balfanz et al.,, 2010, p.17), and they are characterized by housing a large percentage of minority students and students with a low socioeconomic background. The majority of these "dropout factories" are located in the southern United States (Balfanz et al., 2010).

Principals', parents', educators', and policymakers' opinions about student dropout are important; however, to truly understand the complexity of student dropout and provide effective interventions, the perspectives of individuals who attempt to identify at-risk students at the earliest stages are valuable. These individuals' perspectives are critical because they are most likely the individuals who initially work one-on-one with students at risk for dropping out

7

(Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.).  From these perspectives, effective dropout prevention programs and strategies that motivate students, which are based on the actual needs of students, can be developed and revised.  Bridegeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) suggest this need for effective dropout prevention programs and strategies is essential and that, "…most programs did not reduce dropout rates by statistically significant amounts" (p. 19).  Bridgeland et al. (2006) emphasize the reality that dropout prevention and intervention programs and strategies proven to be effective must be implemented for the dropout rates to decrease.

This study presents significant themes that arise from the stories of junior high (grades 5-8) counselors.  These themes highlight ways to understand the process of identifying students at risk for dropping out and provide suggestions for effective interventions at the earliest stage possible, from the perspectives of junior high counselors.  From these themes, educators, administrators, school personnel, and educational policymakers can examine their current dropout prevention strategies and programs and make modifications, as needed.

Educators, administrators, school personnel, and educational policymakers all have a common goal—to see students succeed and become productive members of society.  To reach this goal, research data must reveal insight into the "why" of dropout, through the stories of individuals directly involved with students at earliest stages of considering dropping out.  Prevention, rather than intervention, is a method that would intercede in a student's education to uncover any significant problems and confront them at their origin, rather than after their advancement, and examining these stories will provide a better understanding of how to identify and address the needs of students at risk for dropping out as early as possible.

**My Personal Connection to Dropout**

Student dropout has fascinated me since I was a child. I was curious about why some students do not like school at an early age, and it still intrigues me as an educator and researcher.

**As a child.** My family has always held that an education was an important priority, and I realized at an early age, that getting a quality education was a way to reach goals that I set for myself. Upholding this high regard involved a value of learning, working hard in school to receive exemplary grades, being recognized for academic excellence, and attending a university. As a young parent, my mother strived to ensure that I would be succeed academically. With my mother's guidance, I accomplished educational activities as a toddler such as assembling puzzles, reading and rereading books, creating art, playing with blocks, singing nursery rhymes, and memorizing songs. My mother and my maternal grandparents instilled in me a desire for academic excellence. I was their first grandchild and with that came many things including high academic expectations; I was setting the example for everyone to follow. From my earliest memories, my mother and grandparents communicated the importance of being an academically intelligent, goal-oriented individual.

My mother then had my two sisters, who were held to this same standard of placing a value on learning, but something was different about me, the firstborn, and this standard. It was unspoken yet understood that my sisters and I were expected to value education, but, as the firstborn, it pertained especially me.

**As a student.** From Kindergarten through high school graduation, I maintained this high regard for education. I took pride in my education, created and strived to reach my academic goals, and attempted to make my family proud of my accomplishments. The importance of obtaining an education acquired a different meaning throughout each phase of my schooling.

*Elementary school.* I remember the day that my Kindergarten teacher coughed frantically, fell to her knees, and was wheeled away from the classroom on a stretcher. I recall the fear of the unknown and worrying not only about my teacher but also about how I would continue to learn without her. As a child, I respected my teachers—they had the information that I needed to learn and for this reason I revered them. Elementary school is where I met my favorite teachers, in particular my first and fourth grade teachers. They shared their knowledge, their passion for education, their kind words and expressions, and their gentle dispositions, which convinced me that they cared about me and the other students. They took the time to connect with me both inside and outside of the classroom. In elementary school, I experienced my first feelings of fulfillment, acceptance, and self-satisfaction. I found my niche, and it was in the classroom.

*Middle school.* For me, middle school was different from elementary school. Middle school included fifth through eighth grade and was located on the other side of town. I did not integrate well into middle school because I believed that I did not have the clothes, style, or status that it required to associate with the popular crowd. I was different from the popular crowd in regards to outward appearance, socioeconomic status, and social skills, but those things never affected my love for school and knowledge. I experienced feelings of discomfort and awkwardness and wondered if others felt the same. At this stage in my education, I observed that some students did not seem to uphold the same standard of education as me. They demonstrated disrespectful behaviors such as talking back to teachers, not paying attention, passing notes, making failing grades, seeming unconcerned, missing many days of school, and demanding attention in class by giving unrelated answers when called on by the teacher. I thought that students entered the classroom with negative attitudes and exhibited disrespectful

actions. I realized that their behaviors and expectations were different from mine, and I questioned their understanding of the importance of being successful academically. Nevertheless, I still loved school.

I learned from ineffective teachers; for example, one of my history teacher's distracting mannerisms and lack of instruction limited my learning. Another teacher consistently embarrassed disrespectful students by loudly announcing their inappropriate behavior to the class, a strategy that usually did not work; because she spent the majority of our class time disciplining, we rarely worked in her class. I disliked that I failed to learn in these classes. Consequently, I took responsibility for my learning by reading the textbooks. Anytime I thought I was receiving an inadequate education, I took initiative and employed available resources to learn all that I could. My experiences with ineffective teachers did not negatively affect my motivation to succeed or my love of learning.

At the end of my seventh grade year, my parents informed me that I would attend a private Christian school for eighth grade and that my sisters would be homeschooled. My parents felt that I would not be able to receive an effective education that challenged me if I was homeschooled. They did not believe that public school was a healthy place for my sisters and me, so they made the decisions necessary to remove us from the situation. I was devastated because I already felt awkward socially, and now I had to meet new people and go through those experiences again. Despite my reservations, I entered this new school in eighth grade where the school climate, school layout, and student expectations were different. Each student was assigned a cubicle in the learning center and work was completed in a series of workbooks that progressed in complexity. Two to three teachers were present in the learning center at all times and were responsible for managing the learning environment and providing academic support.

This system of learning was different from anything I had ever experienced, but over time I liked it. I made friends, began to get comfortable, and loved the self-paced, auto-tutorial learning. I could learn as much as I desired as quickly as I wanted to at this school.

*High school.* I finished my schooling at the private Christian school and graduated a year early. For me, high school fulfilled my academic needs, and I continued to love learning and school. However, I developed friendships with individuals who did not feel the same as I did. Through various conversations, I learned that some of these students disliked school, experienced unfortunate encounters with teachers, maintained a lack of desire to learn or attend school, and did not have support or encouragement at home. I heard stories about students whose teachers provoked them until they reacted by yelling, becoming aggressive, or leaving class; students experiencing abusive situations at home and being disrespectful to teachers and other students to possibly get attention; students who seemed to feel unimportant, so they stopped caring and working; and students who might not have liked school and possibly had no one to provide support to help them feel any other way. Eventually, two of these students dropped out, and one of these students became my husband.

*The story of Shane.* As we were students at a small school, we all talked and spent substantial time with one another, whether we considered ourselves friends or not, and because of this I got to know Shane. Shane was an extrovert who had no problem expressing his thoughts and feelings. He came to school most days with a chip on his shoulder and a smirk on his face; he made it clear that he did not want to be there and that he intended to be disobedient and uncooperative. It was no mystery that he had little respect for authority and got a thrill from disobeying. He talked back to authority figures, blatantly went against instructions, and acted out in class to get attention by doing things like humming, throwing items toward the front of the

learning center, and asking to use the restroom every few minutes.  He smiled and laughed when

the teachers showed irritation and/or anger.  These behaviors sparked my curiosity—why would

he act that way?  The more I got to know Shane, the more I realized why he behaved this way.

Shane came from a divorced family, and he was enrolled at the private school because he was

expelled from public school due to multiple expulsions for fighting, disrespecting teachers, and

skipping class.  During that time, his mother remarried after several unhealthy relationships, his

dad moved away and did not stay in touch, and Shane felt neglected and ignored.  He was angry

with his father for leaving him and with his mother for dragging him through abusive situations,

and because of this anger, his academic achievement was not a priority.  He continued his defiant

behaviors; he mocked teachers, stormed out of class when he felt threatened or controlled, and

began disconnecting from all of us.  Other students and I tried to reach out to Shane, but he made

it clear that it was too late—he had been through too much with no support, and he did not need

any at that point.  Not long after his defiant behavior escalated, Shane dropped out of school.

After that, we did not see him much anymore, just around town occasionally, and even then he

just dropped his head and walked the other way.  I still wonder why no one intervened in some

way earlier in his education and how he made it to high school with seemingly no motivation or

support.

    *The story of Derek.*  My husband enrolled at the private Christian school during the end

of my ninth grade year.  Our attitudes toward education were very different.  He experienced

problems at home, which resulted in behavior and academic problems at school, and he then left

public school and entered private school.  He disliked school and teachers, but he desired to learn

and be successful.  I could not understand his hatred toward school.  However, as I learned about

experiences in which teachers provoked him, ignored him, and labeled him without knowledge

of his circumstances; showed little concern or care for him when he began to show signs of failure; and embarrassed him in attempt to gain his cooperation; I better understood his viewpoints. Eventually, he dropped out of school, but he chose to take his general education development (GED) tests, which he passed. During my junior/senior year of high school, he entered college and began working toward his associate's degree. I was pleased with his decision to overcome his obstacles and begin his journey to realize educational success. To my surprise, he enjoyed learning from his college instructors—he felt respected, valued, and enjoyed learning from individuals who appeared genuinely interested in their specialty areas. He finished his degree, continued on to obtain another degree, and is now a paramedic and manager of our county's ambulance service.

*College.* During my last year of high school, I made preparations to enter college. I decided to become a teacher when I was four, and that decision never changed. I aspired to become a teacher—a good teacher; one that students would learn from, respect, love, and never forget. My goal was to become a teacher who would change students' lives. I enjoyed my time in college because it prepared me for my future career; learning how to be an effective teacher was fulfilling and exciting. While in college, I experienced many things including teaching at diverse field placements, learning from effective teachers who advanced my desire to be a teacher, and completing training that produced feelings of success and preparedness. During my field experiences and student teaching, I was given the opportunity to work with students of all ages, and I made several observations throughout this time. Some students appeared unmotivated and disconnected from school at the elementary level, some students gave the impression that they were angry about learning and participating, and some junior high students seemed unreachable. The schools I encountered in high-poverty locations and with high-

14

minority populations appeared to have more unmotivated students and indifferent teachers. These things reminded me why I wanted to be a teacher—I desired to be a positive, caring facilitator of knowledge to my students and someone my students trusted. I would teach in a way that fostered my students' academic growth and promoted self-worth, determination, and persistence. I finished college a semester early and acquired a permanent substitute position in a nearby elementary school.

*As a teacher.* I have taught one year of fourth grade language arts; three years of sixth grade mathematics, science, and social studies; two years of high school algebra II, trigonometry, and pre-calculus; one year of computer basics in an Adult Basic Education department at a local community college; and two years in the Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education department of a Mississippi university. Throughout all of my experiences, I have noticed several things. The students I taught who struggled in school seemed unmotivated and uninterested in school and/or eventually dropped either: (a) did not have encouragement or support from home, (b) had an ineffective teacher or several ineffective teachers, (c) were labeled as disciplinary problems, (d) lived in poverty, (e) did not fit into any social group at school, (f) were responsible for taking care of other members of their family, and/or (g) believed they were incapable of being successful or learning. When working with these types of students, I did everything I could to guide them, bring in appropriate resources, confirm their ability to excel, provide support and encouragement, surround them with positivity, and assure them that they could always come to me, even when I was not their teacher anymore. Through these experiences, I found that a little care and support lasts a long time.

*As a mother.* I am the mother of four children, one daughter who is now in college, and it is my desire to watch my children to grow up to be intelligent, caring individuals who take

pride in who they are and what they do and to make a positive impact on this world and the people in it.  I have witnessed many individuals on the path of failure, and I am trying my best to provide my children with positive, successful experiences.  I will continue to encourage and love my children, instill in them the importance of learning and success, and ensure that they avoid any obvious pitfalls on their educational journey.

*As a researcher.*  Because of my experiences with students who became unmotivated, disinterested, and/or ultimately dropped out of school, I developed a personal mission to research the topic of student dropout.  I believe it is essential to delve deeper into understanding how to confront the dropout crisis at its earliest stages.  Understanding this topic is vital in identifying students at risk for dropping out and creating interventions for them; therefore, I chose to explore this in my current research study.

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how junior high (grades 5-8) counselors identify students at risk for dropping out, choose appropriate interventions, and view their direct role in dropout prevention.

## Research Questions

I explored the following questions in this study to better understand the dropout crisis and how to prevent dropout as early as possible:

1. In what ways do junior high counselors identify students at risk for dropping out?

2. How do junior high counselors inform their decisions of intervention for students at risk for dropping out?

3. What are junior high counselors' perceptions concerning their direct role in dropout prevention?

**Overview of Methods**

This research study was a qualitative, descriptive case study. I chose to conduct a descriptive case study because my goal was to provide a deeper look at the topic of dropping out. I researched the decision-making processes involved in early identification and intervention; therefore, a descriptive case study allowed for thorough description and exploration of the phenomenon (Yin, 2003). In this case, which included junior high (grades 5-8) counselors from six counties in Northeast Mississippi, I focused on the decision making process related to identifying students at risk for dropping out and implementing appropriate interventions. My data collection method consisted of the use of demographic surveys, individual email interviews, face-to-face individual interviews, and face-to-face focus group interviews. I obtained proper consent from all parties involved. I also kept a field journal to reflect on my research and keep track of significant thoughts, statements, and situations that arose during data collection (Lundeberg, Levin, & Harrington, 1999; Merriam, 1998). I analyzed the data using constant comparison analysis because it allowed me to constantly hone and organize all data findings as they were collected, ensuring complete analysis and more trustworthy conclusions (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). After themes emerged and were verified through the use of transcripts and current theory and research, I provided participants the opportunity to complete a member check, and my dissertation chair reviewed the analyses for validity purposes. I concluded my study by providing implications for further research.

**Delimitations of the study**

The first delimitation was that the participants in this study were individuals who serve as junior high (grades 5-8) counselors in one or more of six counties in northeast Mississippi. This delimitation was set in order to narrow the focus of the research to a particular region and from

the perspective of specific individuals.  The second delimitation of this study was that I included only 15 participants.  This delimitation was set so that I could obtain rich, in-depth data concerning my topic of student dropout.

**Limitations of the Study**

A limitation of my research study is that individuals may not have provided information that directly related to the research questions, and the possibility of misrepresentation of students at risk for drop out existed.  However, as these counselors were professionals and their job description includes improving students' educational experiences, I trusted that their responses were honest and that they had the best interest of the research study in mind.

In addition, due to the sample used in the study, the results may not be transferable to the entire dropout population.  This is a common limitation in qualitative research, as it usually focuses on a particular group, location, or population (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Glesne, 2006).  I compared the data collected in this study with current research to make as many conclusions as possible.  However, this study's design was specifically tailored to benefit Northeast Mississippi

Lastly, during analysis I realized that I did not encourage my participants to elaborate on some of their answers during my interviews.  If I would have probed more on particular questions, especially ones about parental involvement, then I could have provided more discussion and more conclusions related to parental involvement and support.

**Definitions of Important Terms**

*Case Study:* A case study is a study in which a particular idea/person or group of ideas/people are investigated in a real life context (Yin, 2003).

*Coding:*  Coding is the process of assigning identification codes to pieces of data, and similar pieces of data are given the same code.  As more data is collected, new codes are created to accommodate new themes and ideas (Gall et al., 2007).

*Constant Comparison:* The constant comparative method requires the researcher to analyze and compare data as it is collected, as opposed to at the end of data collection.  This type of analysis allows the researcher to constantly make decisions about the data and ensure appropriate analysis is occurring (Gall et al., 2007).

*Dropout*: "An individual who was enrolled in school at some time during the previous school year, was not enrolled at the beginning of the current school year, has not graduated from high school or complete a state- or district- approved education program, and does not meet any of the following exclusionary conditions: transfer to another public school district, private school, or state- or district-approved education program; temporary absence due to suspension or school-approved illness; or death" (Stillwell & Sable, 2013, p. A-3).

*Member Checking:*  Member checking is providing the opportunity for the participants to check the transcripts and analyses for accuracy (Gall et al., 2007).

*Response to Intervention:* Response to intervention is a program used nationwide to develop and implement appropriate interventions for at risk students.  Assessment data and behavioral reports are used to identify these at-risk students (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010).  Response to intervention is divided into three different tiers of intervention and is guided by a teacher support team (Mississippi Department of Education, 2010).

*Teacher Support Team:* Teacher support teams (TST) are teams of administrators, counselors, and educators, and their purpose is to develop intervention plans for at risk students.

Within this process, they assign students to one of three tiers and they continuously monitor the students and make adjustments as needed (Mississippi Department of Education, 2010).

*Thick Description:* Thick description is the method of thoroughly detailing the stories and experience of participants in their original context (Gall et al., 2007).

*Three Tier Model of Response to Intervention:* "The Three Tier Instructional Model was adopted by the State Board of Education (SBE Policy 4300) on January 21, 2005. It is designed to meet the needs of every student and consists of three tiers of instruction, Tier 1: Quality classroom instruction based on MS Curriculum Frameworks, Tier 2: Focused supplemental instruction, and Tier 3: Intensive interventions specifically designed to meet the individual needs of students" (Mississippi Department of Education, 2010, para.3). Students are placed on certain tiers of the model based on student data obtained from student assessments, and the teacher support team makes decisions concerning when students move tiers and the specific types of interventions used with individual students (NCRTI, 2010).

*Transcription Check:* A transcription check, according to Creswell (2009), is when the researcher thoroughly examines the transcripts to ensure grammatical correctness.

*Triangulation:* Triangulation is the process of collecting data using multiple methods to ensure validity (Gall et al., 2007).

*Trustworthiness/Credibility of Researcher:* According to Creswell (2009), various procedures must be completed in order to ensure that the data provided by the research is trustworthy and credible including, but not limited to: (a) transcript checks, (b) accurate coding methods, (c) triangulation, (d) member checking, and (e) thick description.

**Organization of the Study**

      This dissertation is divided into five chapters.  Chapter I provides an introduction to the study and presents information about the framework and organization of the study.  Chapter II, the review of literature, includes information concerning: (a) the Relational Cultural Theory, (b) the definition of student dropouts, (c) causes of student dropout, (d) dropout preventions, (e) school counselors and dropout, and (f) Relational-Cultural theory and dropout.  Chapter III is the methodology section, which includes: (a) rationale for using qualitative research, (b) the researcher's role, (c) ethical considerations and Institutional Review Board (IRB) information, (d) research plan, and (e) data analysis methods.  Chapter IV presents data and data analysis processes.  Finally, Chapter V consists of a discussion of the findings and implications for future research.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Educators, administrators, educational policymakers, school personnel, communities, and families must understand and address the multifaceted issue of student dropout (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Fox, 2010; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012; Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, & Heinrich, 2008; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007). Student dropout is an issue with detrimental consequences that affect the student, his/her family, and the nation (Driscoll & Bernstein, 2012; Harlow, 2003; Snyder & Willow, 2012; Thorstensen, 2004; United States Department of Labor, n.d). Better understanding the intricacies of student dropout, specifically the initial causes of considering dropping out will benefit everyone involved (Blout, 2012; MacIver, 2010). Raising graduation rates, preparing more students for college and careers, and lowering unemployment rates are a few of the advantages of confronting the issue of student dropout (Balfanz et al., 2010; Balfanz, Herzong, & MacIver, 2007; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006).

To confront the issue of student dropout, educators, administrators, educational policymakers, and school personnel need to be aware of the causes of student dropout, interventions used with students at risk for dropping out, and strategies that utilize all involved individuals in confronting the issue. By fully understanding the complexity of student dropout, everyone involved can more effectively create and implement prevention and intervention plans (American Psychological Association, 2012; Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013; Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, & Smirk, 2008; Hardre, 2012; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). This need to

better understand student dropout requires all individuals involved to reflect on their understanding of dropout and their role in prevention and intervention. Many times ideas of dropping out begin when students become unmotivated or begin to feel unsuccessful in school; therefore, understanding student motivation is essential (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Gewertz, 2006; Hardre, 2012; Huitt, 2011; Martin, Tobin, & Sugai, 2002; Reyna, 2011; Scheel, Madabhushi, & Backhaus, 2009; Theobald, 2005).

As I reviewed the literature on student dropout, I referred to my research questions to ensure that I stayed on course and provided pertinent information.

- What are the perceptions of junior high counselors concerning students at risk for dropping out?

- In what ways do junior high counselors identify students at risk for dropping out?

- How do junior high counselors inform their decisions of intervention with students at risk for dropping out?

I begin my literature review by defining the Relational Cultural Theory and its relation to student dropout, defining student dropouts, and providing national and state statistics on student dropouts. This allows the severity of the dropout crisis to be fully recognized. Next, I present information on the causes of student dropout. These causes are divided into four categories: academic issues, cultural issues, behavioral/personal issues, and family issues. In the third section, I introduce the topic of dropout prevention and include discussion about early warning systems, improved instruction, positive relationships, and supportive programs. Finally, I present information about the school counselor's general role and role in relation to student dropout.

**Relational-Cultural Theory**

The theoretical framework of this research study is based on the Relational-Cultural Theory. Proponents of the Relational-Cultural Theory assert, "…creating and participating in growth-fostering relationships are essential dimensions of human development and psychological well-being" (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 278). Relational-Cultural theorists suggest that being members of positive, beneficial relationships promotes physical, mental, and emotional health and that being members of negative, detrimental relationships damages physical, mental, and emotional health (Miller & Stiver, 1997). This theory relates to the topic of student dropout because when students are members of positive relationships, including relationships with family, friends, teachers, administrators, and school personnel, they are more motivated to succeed (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Churchill & Keddie, 2005; Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004; Marzano, 1998; Watson, Ecken, & Koehn, 2003).

A major principle of school counseling is that positive relationships are beneficial to student success; therefore, the American School Counselors' Model is directly related to the Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) (Tucker, Smith-Adcock, & Trepal, 2011). Tucker, Smith-Adcock, and Trepal (2011) discussed the appropriateness of applying the RCT to school counseling,

> Given that the counseling profession is anchored in the concepts of development, wellness, and multiculturalism, this approach fits easily into the developmental matrix of school counseling programs. RCT gives school counselors a well-defined framework for discussing complex issues such as power in relationships, empathy, and relational well-being. Relational-Cultural Theory is easily adaptable to counseling young people and can be used to inform individual, small-group, large-group, and peer programming

interventions in schools.  In addition, as school counselors strive to positively impact the

school environment, RCT may provide them with additional strategies to do so. (para. 35)

With this information, the current research study is viewed through the lens of the Relational

Cultural Theory to gain deeper insight into the topics of student dropout and school counselors'

beliefs about and roles in student dropout.

**Defining High School Dropouts**

According to National Center on Educational Statistics (NCES), a high school dropout is

defined as,

> …an individual who was enrolled in school at some time during the previous school year,
>
> was not enrolled at the beginning of the current school year, has not graduated from high
>
> school or complete a state- or district- approved education program, and does not meet
>
> any of the following exclusionary conditions: transfer to another public school district,
>
> private school, or state- or district-approved education program; temporary absence due
>
> to suspension or school-approved illness; or death. (Stillwell & Sable, 2013, p. A-3)

In this research study, a dropout is defined by these parameters.  In other words, a dropout refers

to a student who dropped out of school and did not reenroll in school the next year.  The NCES

provides high school dropout statistics on national and state levels, which follow in the next two

sections.

**National statistics on high school dropouts.**  According to Stillwell and Sable (2013) in

association with the National Center on Educational Statistics (NCES), 3.4% of students in the

United States dropped out of school during the 2009-2010 school year.  These dropout statistics

provide evidence that student dropout remains a major issue in the United States.  Populations at

greatest risk for dropout are males, non-school age students (students with multiple retentions,

ages 20-24), American Indian/Alaskan Native students, and students from low-income families; the southern region of the United States has highest dropout rates because they have a large population of these types of students (Stillwell & Sable, 2013). The specific national dropout percentages by ethnicity are: (a) Caucasian, 2.3%; (b) African American, 5.5%, (c) Native American, 6.7%, and (d) Hispanic, 5.0% (Stillwell & Sable, 2013). In addition to a breakdown of dropout rates by ethnicity, it is important to consider the dropout rates of gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender students because they represent a growing population of students who face unique challenges in the educational setting (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). Gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender (GLBT) students are almost two times more likely to drop out of school than their heterosexual counterparts (GLSEN, 2009; Goodenow, 2008; Remafedi, 1987).

Concerning specific regions of the United States, the American South is consistently low in most categories related to student dropout, as it contains the highest percentage of "dropout factories", which are high schools where 60% or more of students drop out (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010; Balfanz et al., 2010; Civil Rights Project, 2005; Fisher, Golembiewski, Orlansky, & Willis, 2010; Orfield, 2006; Stillwell & Sable, 2013; Stone &Alfeld, 2004).

**State statistics on high school dropouts.** Mississippi had the second highest dropout rate, 7.4%, in the nation for the 2009-2010 school year. Mississippi's dropout rate increased from 3.7% during the 2002-2003 school year to 7.4% during the 2009-2010 school year, while the national rate decreased from 3.9% to 3.4% (Stillwell & Sable, 2013). To address Mississippi's dropout rates, members of the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) stated,

"Our goal is to raise the graduation rate to at least 85% by the 2018-2019 school year" (Mississippi Department of Education, 2012, para. 2).

Fisher, Golembiewski, Orlansky, and Willis (2010) provided a breakdown of Mississippi's dropout rates.

> Located primarily in urban areas and throughout the South and Southwest, dropout factory high schools produce 73% of African-American and 66% of Latino dropouts, but only 34% of their white counterparts. Forty-nine of these dropout factories are located in Mississippi and represent over one quarter of the state's high schools. (p. 2)

These statistics emphasize the notion that Mississippi's percentage of minority dropouts is significantly higher than the national percentage (Fisher, Golembiewski, Orlansky, & Willis, 2010; Stillwell & Sable, 2013). Over half of these forty-nine "dropout factories" in Mississippi are located in the Delta. The Mississippi Delta is a region with high poverty rates, dropout rates, and unemployment rates (United States Census Bureau, 2000). The economic distress in the Mississippi Delta has been so excessive that the State of Mississippi Delta Region Development Plan was implemented in 2009 to "address this economic dilemma" (Lord, 2009, p. 3). Due to these disadvantageous factors, students in the Mississippi Delta have an increased likelihood of dropping out of school (Fisher, Golembiewski, Orlansky, & Willis, 2010; Lord, 2009; United States Census Bureau, 2000), and this has a significant effect on the dropout rate of Mississippi.

These statistics provide educators, administrators, school personnel, and educational policymakers with a place to begin researching ways to effectively address the issue of student dropout; however, to address these dropout rates, educators, administrators, school personnel, and educational policymakers must understand the causes of student dropout in Mississippi. The

specific causes of these high dropout rates are further investigated in the following section about causes of student dropout.

**Causes of Student Dropout**

Student dropout in the United States is a complex issue influenced by many different factors, but no singular attribute can be identified (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).  Understanding student dropout and applying appropriate prevention strategies are essential in effectively addressing the issue; therefore, identifying the causes of student dropout is necessary (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Dre, 2007; Orfield, 2006).  Researchers of student dropout have discovered many causes of student dropout which can be organized into four categories: (a) academic issues, (b) cultural issues, (c) behavioral/personal issues, and (d) family issues.

**Academic issues.**  Many students experience academic struggles in school, but when those struggles are consistent and result in retention, student dropout becomes an issue (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Hammond et al., 2007).  Therefore, understanding academic issues related to student dropout is vital and enables educators to reflect on their strategies and make adjustments as needed.  According to recent dropout research, the two main academic-related causes of dropout are low academic achievement (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Balfanz, 2009; Sparks, Johnson, & Akos, 2010) and retention (Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Stearns & Glennie, 2006).

*Low academic achievement.*  Students with low academic achievement are more likely to drop out of school than students with average or high academic achievement (Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Suh & Suh, 2011).  Consistently low grades and standardized test scores serve as predictors of student drop out (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).  Students who are successful in

28

school and strive to do well are less likely to drop out and are more likely to attend college (Stewart, 2008). This awareness warrants a deeper look into the effects of low academic achievement and its relation to student drop out.

Stearns and Glennie (2006) analyzed dropout information on all students in the North Carolina Education Research Data Center at Duke University from the 1998-1999 school year. After analyzing this information, they made many conclusions; one being that students who suffer academically are more likely to drop out of school. Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) interviewed 467 high school dropouts from Philadelphia and Baltimore. The participants shared many reasons for dropping out; however, struggling in school was among the top five reasons provided. These dropouts communicated that dropping out of school became a reality when they consistently suffered academically. Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Balfanz (2009), as a follow-up to their 2006 research study, interviewed 603 public high school educators and 169 public high school principals across the nation. This research study echoed the findings from the previous research study; students who had low academic achievement and struggled in school were more likely to drop out of school. "Sixty-two percent of teachers and 60 percent of principals cited students not being academically prepared for high school as a factor in at least some cases of dropout" (p. 19). The participants shared their difficulties with attempting to not only prepare students to pass their class, but to also teach them essential skills that they failed to receive from previous grades. This continuous snowballing of low academic achievement from one grade to the next is a predictor of student drop out (Bridgeland et al.,, 2009).

Many students struggle academically and need extra academic attention to do their best in school. However, when students begin to struggle academically and continue to struggle after academic interventions have been put into place, then the possibility of drop out becomes a

reality (Scheel et al., 2009; Henry et al., 2012).  Addressing low achievement issues at their

earliest stages is the best method for confronting academic-related dropout issues (Cohen &

Smerdon, 2009; Ou, 2005).

　　　　*Special needs.*  In relation to low academic achievement is the topic of students with

special needs and dropout.  Minimal research exists concerning dropout and students with special

needs, but the available research suggests that students with mild to moderate disabilities, such as

learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, and health impairments, do not have a significantly

higher probability of dropping out of school (Reschly & Christenson, 2006; Thurlow & Johnson,

2011).  Thurlow and Johnson (2011) reported, "The causes of a student dropping out of school

are similar for special education students and non-special education students" (p. 1), after they

evaluated dropout statistics in California.  Wessel, Jones, Markle, and Westfall (2009) conducted

a longitudinal study consisting of 11, 317 students with disabilities, and they concluded that no

significant difference existed between the graduation and retention rates of students with and

students without disabilities.

　　　　In a current research study, Zablocki and Krezmien (2013) examined data on 5,018

students with disabilities regarding identification of causes of dropping out.  They found that

students, classified as having a disability, were not at a significantly higher risk of dropping out

than students classified without disabilities.  This further supports the notion that students with

mild to moderate special needs are not more likely to drop out of school and do not have

significantly different reasons for dropping out of school than students without disabilities

(Reschly & Christenson, 2006; Thurlow & Johnson, 2011; Wessle, Jones, Markle, & Westfall,

2009; Zablocki & Krezmien, 2013).

***Retention.*** Educators, administrators, and school personnel decide when retaining a

student is appropriate, and this decision is made after considering all factors involved (Jimerson,

Woehr, & Kaufman, 2007). Retention is a complex decision; when students are retained and fail

more than one class, the likelihood of their dropping out of school increases (Alexander et al.,

2001; Jimerson et al., 2005; Montes & Lehmann, 2004; Neild, Balfanz, & Herzong, 2007).

Retention and its effects on student achievement are pertinent topics in educational research

(Norton, 2011; Tanner & Galis, 1997).

Data gathered from interviews with 467 high school dropouts from Philadelphia and

Baltimore revealed that failing classes was a major factor in their decision to drop out of school;

"Thirty-two percent of respondents were required to repeat a grade before dropping out…"

(Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 7). Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, and Friant (2010) interviewed 60

students at risk for dropping out, their parents, and their teachers. These interviews occurred at

four different locations across the country. Participants consistently shared that falling behind

and the "inability to catch up once behind" (p. 10) were reasons they considered dropping out of

school. Bornsheuer, Polonyi, Andrews, Fore, and Onwuegbuzie (2011) analyzed data from 1,

202 students in a Texas high school and found that, "ninth-grade students who had been retained

were more than six times less likely not to graduate on time than were the ninth-grade students

who had not been retained" (p. 9). Similarly, Nikolas, Charles, and Joseph (2012) explored the

transition into high school and concluded that many students experience "ninth grade shock", a

difficult transition from the junior high atmosphere and work load to the high school atmosphere

and work load, which results in low academic achievement, retention, and in some cases to

dropout. They communicated that many students enter into high school with a below average

academic record and continue to decline academically due to a difficult transition. These

31

statistics highlight the fact that retention has a substantial effect on student dropout, especially if retention occurs in the ninth grade year.

Randolph, Rose, Fraser, and Orthner (2004) examined the connection of retention and student dropout and found that students who were retained at any point were more likely to drop out, and students who were retained in middle school had the highest probability of dropping out. They expressed the significance of taking all possible precautions to avoid retention in the middle school grades because of its negative effect and direct connection to dropout. Similarly, Martin (2011) analyzed data from 3,261 high school students and concluded that retention increases the likelihood of low academic achievement and student dropout. He communicated that retained students were less motivated to succeed in school and more likely to experience excessive absenteeism. This illustrates the notion that student dropout is a complex issue affected by many factors, which are interconnected in a myriad.

When students experience failure that develops into retention, they lose the motivation to succeed and academic achievement becomes less of a priority (Bowers, 2010; Stearns, Moller, Potochnick, & Blau, 2007). If their retention occurs in the elementary grades, they are more likely to experience difficulties transitioning into middle school (Im, Hughes, Kwok, Puckett, & Cerda, 2013; Randolph, Fraser, & Orthner, 2006). However, regardless of when students are retained, they are more likely to struggle academically and experience failure again if they are retained (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; Temple, Reynolds, & Ou, 2004). This information exemplifies the relationship between student retention, low academic achievement, and student dropout.

**Cultural issues.** Many times academic issues related to student dropout stem from cultural issues associated with race and language barriers. If students are not culturally

supported in their schools, then the likelihood of dropout increases significantly (Morgan, 2010; Patterson, Hale, & Stessmah, 2008).  Most of the cultural issues related to student dropout can be organized into two categories: race/ethnicity and language/English language learners (ELL).

*Race/ethnicity.*  Minority students have consistently higher dropout rates than non-minority students and have since the beginnings of research on student dropout (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Stillwell & Sable, 2013; United States Department of Education, 2008).  This is true because of many different factors, and current research studies shed light on the issue.

The Alliance for Excellent Education (2011) released statistics on dropouts, particularly dropouts from minority groups.  "Dropout factories" are " …high schools that graduate 60 percent or less of their students" (p. 1), and they communicated that these "dropout factories" are "…estimated to produce 81 percent of Native American, 73 percent of African American, 66 percent of Latino, and 34 percent of White dropouts" (p.1), according to Balfanz's research (2009).  These statistics suggest that Native American, African American, and Latino students are at a higher risk for dropping out and of being located in dropout factories across the United States.  This is echoed in Bridgeland et al.'s (2006) research study in which they communicated that less than 50 percent of minority students in our nation graduate with a diploma.  Similarly, Dunham and Wilson (2007) analyzed data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey and found that African Americans and Hispanics are more likely to drop out than Caucasians and Asians.  These studies emphasize the importance of our better differentiating instruction so that students of various ethnicities have equal opportunities to succeed and experience high achievement.

Brown and Rodriguez (2009) conducted a case study on two Latino dropouts in the northeastern part of the United States. After researching the high dropout rates of minority students, they desired to examine why minorities decide to drop out. In their research study, Brown and Rodriguez (2009) found that minority students were not given appropriate opportunities to be challenged and grow academically and were alienated, and this eventually led to their decision to drop out of school. This connects to three factors that have been researched in relation to the high dropout rate of minority students: (a) most minority students have little or no experiences with teachers of their ethnicity (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005), (b) teachers have biases and have lower expectations for minority students (Gay, 2002; Meyer & Patton, 2001), and (c) minority students many times receive a substandard education in comparison to non-minority students (Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan, & Foley, 2001). Until minority students are given the same opportunities and expectations as their non-minority counterparts, their dropout rates will remain high.

*Language/English language learners.* Students considered English language learners (ELLs) also have high dropout rates. Aside from the obvious language barrier between educators and their ELLs, many other factors exist that can assist in understanding the high dropout rates of ELLs. Housman and Martinez (2002) shared information collected during a "regional forum in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in June 2001 on effective strategies to address the disconnectedness between ELLs and schools" (p. 1). Participants communicated that the American educational system is tailored to average, non-minority, English speaking students, and that this setup will ultimately continue to result in high dropout rates for ELLs (Housman & Martinez, 2002).

McKeon (2005), in association with the National Education Association (NEA), provided a list of talking points regarding ELLs in the United States. These statistics underlie the fact that teachers are not sufficiently trained and prepared to effectively teach the influx of ELLs in schools nationwide; therefore, they are likely to become at risk for dropping out of school. She reported numerous statistics about ELLs, including:

- approximately 5,000,000 ELLs were enrolled in public schools during the 2003-2004 school year (para. 1);

- nationwide, approximately 2.5% of teachers who instruct ELLs possess a degree in ESL or bilingual education (para. 7);

- of the 41% of teachers nationwide with ELLs in their classrooms, only 12.5% participated in eight or more hours of professional development related to ELLs in the past three years (para. 9);

- approximately 15% of ELLs receive NO special instruction or programs designed to help them learn English and achieve in the content areas, and only 33% of students receive some type of service designed to support or supplement regular instruction such as an aide or specialized ELL instruction provided for fewer than 10 hours per week (para. 11);

- in 2000-2001, of the states that tested ELLs in reading comprehension, only 18.7% of ELLs were assessed as being at or above the norm, and in the same year, almost 10% of ELLs in grades 7-12 were retained (para. 13);

- in February 2001, it was reported that ELLs had dropout rates up to four times that of their native English-speaking peers (para. 13).

These statistics emphasize the importance of ensuring that ELLs are provided an appropriate education, which allows for the utilization of resources that promote success among ELLs.

Sheng, Sheng, and Anderson (2011) reviewed the literature on ELLs and dropout, and they discussed many issues relating to ELLs and dropout including limited language proficiency, low socioeconomic status, and diverse cultural backgrounds. These factors increase the likelihood that ELLs will be in situations which eventually lead to dropout, because many teachers are not trained to effectively address the needs of ELLs. Giambo (2010) conducted a case study and communicated the importance of continually researching ways to have the voices and needs of ELLs placed at the forefront of creating plans for preventing dropout and increasing student achievement. She stressed the significance of addressing the specific difficulties that ELLs face in the educational system in relation to decreasing student dropout. Hughes, Page, and Ford (2011) concurred with this notion in their analysis of data gathered from interviews with 16 ELL middle schoolers. They found that ELLs feel unsupported in their education due to lack of culturally relevant teaching and lack of support in their unique academic needs, and because of this they are at a higher risk for dropping out and experiencing low academic achievement. Again, the connectedness of factors associated with student dropout is clear—ELLs begin experiencing failure because of their limited English proficiency, but they continue to experience failure because of the absence of effective support and because they do not feel connected to their teachers and/or peers (Giambo, 2010; Hughes, Page, & Ford, 2011). Proponents of the Relational-Cultural Theory suggest that individuals must be members of supportive relationships in order reach success (Comstock et al., 2008), and this notion is supported in the discussion about the needs of ELLs, as their chief issue is not having a connection to their teachers because of the cultural/language barrier.

*Academic achievement gap.* A gap exists between the academic achievement of Caucasian students and African American, Hispanic, and other minority students, and it is referred to as the "academic achievement gap". Two contributing factors to this gap are generational poverty and ethnicity. There are numerous studies describing factors contributing to the disparity in achievement among ethnicities and ways to bridge that gap (Madrid, 2011; Miranda, Webb, Brigman, & Peluso, 2007; Reardon, 2011). This concept of the "academic achievement gap" helps explain the relationship of the factors concerning academic and cultural issues to student dropout. Minority students and/or a student from a low socioeconomic background have an increased likelihood of dropping out of school (Christle et al., 2007; Stillwell & Sable, 2013).

**Behavioral/personal issues.** In addition to academic and cultural issues, behavioral/personal issues exist as causes of student dropout. These issues can be organized into nine categories: (a) discipline problems, (b) extensive absenteeism, (c) disinterest in school, (d) lack of motivation, (e) school safety, (f) parenthood, (g) drug and/or substance abuse, (h) job responsibilities, and (i) family responsibilities.

*Discipline problems.* Consequences resulting from discipline problems can range from recess removal to out of school suspension. However, regardless of the degree of the consequence, consistent discipline problems are predictors of student dropout (Balfanz et al., 2007; Neild et al., 2007; Suh & Suh, 2011). Stearns and Glennie (2006) analyzed data from the North Carolina Education Research Data Center at Duke University on student dropouts from the 1998-1999 school year and found that a significant percentage of students drop out of school due to disciplinary problems. "Perhaps these results indicate that public schools rid themselves of

the misbehaving youngsters as soon as it is legally possible to concentrate on education more compliant students" (Stearns & Glennie, 2006, p. 54).

McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun, and Cochrane (2008) explored the academic records and discipline referrals of 330 students from a school in the Pacific Northwest to determine if a correlation existed between school discipline referrals and academic achievement. After analysis, they concluded that student discipline problems do affect academic achievement, which can ultimately lead to student dropout. Similarly, Sparks, Johnson, and Akos (2010) analyzed data from students in a southeastern school district and found that students who received long term suspension due to discipline were more likely to drop out of school; "More than one-third (35.2 percent) of 9th grade dropouts had received a suspension of more than 10 days in either 8th or 9th grade, compared with only 2.4 percent of students who did not drop out" (p. 48).

Discipline referrals that result in suspension and/or expulsion are especially predictive of student dropout. Arcia (2006) reviewed data on over 45,000 suspended students in a large, urban school district. She found that the reading scores of suspended students were lower and the dropout rates of suspended students were over two times higher than the reading scores and dropout rates of students who had not been suspended. In addition, students who are expelled are more likely to not only dropout of school but also to enter the juvenile justice system due to their negative relationship with school (Hirschfield, 2008; Kim & Geronimo, 2009). Relational-Cultural theorists would suggest that this increase in the likelihood of student dropout because of suspensions and/or expulsions exists because of the lack of a fostering relationship between the student and the school experience (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Vitaro, Brendgen, Larose, and Tremblay (2005) researched the connection of student dropout out and the evidence of disruptive behaviors in Kindergarten in a sample of 4,330

38

students.  They found that students who displayed disruptive behaviors in Kindergarten were more likely to drop out of school.  Over half of the students with aggressiveness-opposition or hyperactivity-inattentiveness issues dropped out of school.  Staff and Kreager (2008) investigated data from the Add Health database and found that students who displayed disruptive behaviors, specifically violent behaviors, had increased probabilities of dropping out.  They discovered that peer status and involvement with friends who fight increase the likelihood of dropout for disadvantaged male students.  In both of these research studies, students were more likely to drop out of school based solely on their association with undesirable behaviors in school, but they also experienced low academic achievement.  This illustrates the bigger picture of student dropout—there are interrelated factors influencing students' decisions to drop out.  Students who drop out of school typically have more than one factor influencing their decision.

*Extensive absenteeism.*  When students are absent excessively, they are more likely to become at risk for dropping out.  Consistently missing instructional time results in low academic achievement, and those who are already at risk become even more so when excessive absences are an issue (Balfanz et al., 2007; Broadhurst, Patron, & May-Chahal, 2005; Gottfried, 2009; Kane, 2006).  Schoenberger (2012) analyzed longitudinal data from over 100 students from a "large, urban school district in the Southeastern United States" (p. 9), and he found that students who consistently miss school in the elementary grades are more likely to have excessive absences in high school and are at risk for dropping out.  Beekhoven and Dekkers (2005) conducted a mixed methods study in which they conducted four case studies with student dropouts.  They interviewed these students to gain a deeper understanding of the causes of student dropout, and they found that excessive absenteeism was a significant factor that influenced the decision to drop out of school.

Similarly, Bridgeland et al. (2006) and Bridgeland et al. (2009) found that both student dropouts and teachers of student dropouts communicated that absenteeism was a major cause of student dropout.

- Students described a pattern of refusing to wake up, missing school, skipping class, and taking three hour lunches—and each absence made them less willing to go back.  These students had long periods of absences and were sometimes referred to the truant officer, only to be brought back to the same environment that led them to become disengaged. (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 8)

- Forty-five percent of teachers and 42 percent of principals cited excessive absenteeism as a key factor in most cases of dropout.  Attendance patterns are the most accurate indicators that a student is falling behind academically and may drop out. (Bridgeland et al., 2009, p. 20)

These research studies confirm that excessive absenteeism exists a significant predictor of student dropout.

*Lack of motivation.*  Student motivation and student achievement are linked; students become unmotivated because of low achievement, or they fail to achieve their full potential because they lose motivation (Gewertz, 2006; Huitt, 2011; Martin et al., 2002; Theobald, 2005). One of the main goals of any school is to produce students who are productive members of society and are equipped with adequate academic knowledge and critical thinking skills to prosper (Dynarski et al., 2008; Glasser, 1990; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2002).  However, Bridgeland et al. (2006) communicated that the top reasons for dropping out of school shared by students were that school was boring, classes were not

interesting, and teachers where uninspiring.  This information calls for an examination of teachers' strategies and effectiveness in the classroom.

Student motivation is a topic that is continuously researched in education.  Teachers search for ways to motivate their students to reach their fullest academic potential (Berliner, 2004; Theobald, 2005).  Some students are intrinsically motivated and want to succeed in school without the need of any prompting or tangible rewards, while other students need extrinsic motivation to do their best and reach their full potential (Berliner, 2004; Glasser, 1993; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2002).  Marzano (1998) indicated that students are more motivated to learn when learning is relevant and when they are personally connected with what they are learning.  Orthner et al. (2010) found the implementation of programs into junior high schools that actively engage students in their learning and relate what they are learning to their future increased student motivation and achievement.  This was exhibited when administrators implemented CareerStart; a career program that connected learning to careers with sixth graders in an urban school district, and the majority of over 3,000 students stated that they benefitted from the program.  After the implementation of CareerStart, students were more motivated in school and had a better understanding of why learning was important in their future.

Educators must find ways to motivate their unmotivated students to increase the likelihood of their students completing a high school education.  It is a cycle—by using effective strategies to motivate students, then students' academic achievement increases, and when students succeed they are motivated to continue to work hard.  With that knowledge, it is vital that schools and educators find and implement strategies which increase student motivation and student achievement in order to decrease student dropout (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003; Glasser, 1990; Long, 2004; Theobald, 2005).

41

In relation to lack of motivation, some students drop out of school simply because they do not like it or are not interested.  In these cases, students do not have a particular reason for disliking school; they just do not find it interesting enough to finish (Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2012; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009).

*School safety.*  Student must feel safe in school for learning to occur; if students are fearful of their surroundings, then they are less likely to focus on their learning and academic achievement (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Finnan & Chasin, 2007; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009).  Two issues on the rise concerning student dropout and school safety are bullying and harassment of the Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Transgender (GLBT) student population.

Students who are victims of bullying are more likely to drop out of school than their counterparts.  This bullying can come in many forms, including verbal, textual, and/or physical, but regardless of the type, bullying is detrimental for many students (Buhs et al., 2006; Roberts, Zhang, Truman, & Synder, 2012; Schwartz, Gorman, Nakamoto, & Toblin, 2005).  Cornell, Huang, Gregory, and Fan (2013) analyzed data on a school climate survey take by 25 students and 10 teachers, and they concluded that bullying has a negative academic effect and can increase the likelihood of drop out.  Similarly, Konishi, Hymel, Zumbo, and Li (2010) explored the data on over 27,000 students and over 1,000 principals and found that students who experience bullying struggle more in their mathematics classes and teacher-student relationships have a positive effect on bullied students.  This relates to the Relational-Cultural Theory (1997), as it states that students who experience positive relationships are more likely to experience success, and this research study supports this theory.

Harassment is another issue that causes many students to feel unsafe at school; therefore, affecting their academic achievement.  Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender (GLBT) students are

subject to harassment more often than their heterosexual counterparts, and this harassment frequently leads to student dropout (Herring & Fergerson, 2000; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; Russell & Joyner, 2001). These students are often victims of non-supportive school situations, peer rejection, and isolation, and these things often lead to a decline in academic achievement (D'Augelli, 2006; Elze, 2003; Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2008). Because of the specific difficulties face by GLBT students, it is important that administrators, educators, and school personnel take preventative measures for the safety and success of these students.

*Parenthood.* Pregnancy and parenthood are causes of student drop out, and their prevalence is increasing (Dominico & Jones, 2007), especially in the state of Mississippi (Childrey, 2013). Students in these situations assert that they drop out because they become parents and cannot balance parenthood and schooling due to lack of support and/or finances (Hoffman, 2006; Marcotte, 2013). Meeker, Edmonson, and Fisher (2009) surveyed 158 high school dropouts throughout the state of Texas, and 41 of those dropouts listed pregnancy/parenting a child as their main reason for dropping out of school. Similarly, Bridgeland et al. (2006) communicated that 26 percent of the 467 dropouts they researched shared parenthood as their reason for dropping out. These statistics emphasize the fact that programs which provide support, such as additional tutoring times, take-home resources, and afterschool help, during and after childbirth could decrease the rates of student dropout due to pregnancy/parenthood.

Spear (2004) conducted a naturalistic, qualitative research study and analyzed the interviews of 8 pregnant teenagers. During these interviews the participants shared their desire to continue in school during and after their pregnancies, and stated that being offered academic

support would be essential.  They further communicated that without academic flexibility and support, the likelihood of being able to graduate would be decreased.  Rothenberg and Weissman (2002) researched the effectiveness and growth of a hospital-based program for pregnant and parenting teens.  The program began as a mini-workshop providing teenagers with information and resources.  However, the authors shared that they quickly realized these teenagers needed more than a short-term program.  From this knowledge, the single program developed into several stages of programs to support these teenagers from pregnancy to birth to parenting.  Programs for the toddlers of these teenagers were implemented, too.  These decisions were made because, "We never turn our backs on a young woman or to withdraw support because we may not agree with something she is doing or a decision she is making" (Rothenberg & Weissman, 2002).  The authors suggested this notion should be applied in the educational setting, too.  They communicated that for teenage mothers to make decisions that will benefit them and their children, they need to be provided with adequate support and resources; school administrators, educators, and personnel should have these support and resources available to reduce the risk of dropout among teen mothers.

Pregnancy in school-aged students has many far-reaching effects.  It affects the economy because these students are more likely to need government assistance and are less likely to have stable employment (Brindis & Philliber, 2003; Spear, 2004).  They are also more likely to miss school extensively, experience low academic achievement, and eventually drop out of school (Brindis & Philliber, 2003; Rothenberg & Weissman, 2002), and the probability of these situations increases the younger the students are (Koshar, 2001).  The likelihood of living in poverty increases for these students (Tripp & Viner, 2005), and they are more likely to experience financial hardships in general (Tonelli, 2004).  These various factors, poverty,

academic struggles, and employment issues, present themselves as commonalities among dropout students.

   ***Drug and/or substance abuse.***  Students involved with drugs and/or substances are especially at-risk for dropping out of school (Henry et al., 2012; Townsend, Fisher, & King, 2007).  When students abuse drugs and/or substances, they increase their likelihood of continual abuse and negative consequences, including dropout (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2003). DuPont et al. (2013) "conducted a comprehensive review of the empirical research literature and policy-relevant documents, and consulted with clinicians, educators, and policy makers to gain a better understanding of the dropout crisis and substance/drug abuse" (p. i).  They made several conclusions regarding substance/drug abuse and dropout, including:

- The associations between substance use, academic failure, and dropout are strong and well-recognized among researchers and educators who study adolescent substance use, but they are rarely acknowledged in educational circles or among state and federal policy makers. (p. ii)

- In some individuals, academic difficulties precede the onset of substance use, and in those cases, a vicious cycle can ensue—leading to even more severe academic difficulties and eventual dropout. In other cases, even controlling for individual background characteristics, substance use precedes and contributes to academic failure and dropout, especially when substance use is frequent and severe. (p. ii)

- Adolescents who are at risk for academic failure or have dropped out of school are likely to have substance use problems in combination with an array of other problem behaviors that, if not addressed, place them at extremely high risk for costly long-term adversity, including unemployment, crime, and poor health. (p. ii)

45

- Little is being done to screen for substance use in pediatric and educational settings, and even less is being done to address escalating substance use problems among adolescents at risk for dropout or those who have already dropped out of high school. (p. ii)

- Of all the problems that contribute to dropping out, substance use is one of the easiest to identify and one of the most easily stopped by interventions including treatment. (p. ii)

- Research evidence shows that when adolescents stop substance use, academic performance improves. This is consonant with long standing clinical anecdotal accounts. (p. ii)

From this information, it is clear that drug and/or substance abuse is a significant cause of student dropout and is a problem that can be addressed if it is identified.

Roebuck, French, and Michael (2004) analyzed data from over 15,000 adolescents from the ages of 12 to 18, and they found that students who used drugs, specifically marijuana, were more likely to drop out of school in comparison to their non-drug using peers. Specifically, they stated that any marijuana use was positively correlated to dropout among all participants, and that chronic use (weekly or more frequently) had a more significant correlation todropout than any other category. Similarly, Grant et al. (2012) interviewed 6, 442 males to determine the association between substance abuse and educational attainment. They concluded that students who: (a) use alcohol before the age of 18, (b) become dependent on alcohol, and/or (c) use drugs are less likely to graduate and are more likely to display deviant behaviors. Stella, Ross, and Govone (2008) examined data on 50 students referred to a hospital because of chemical dependency, and they communicated that students who abuse drugs increase their probability of dropout. Of the 50 students that they researched, 37 dropped out of school due to the

consequences involved with their chemical dependency.  These research studies exemplify the negative effects that drug use has on students and their academic achievement.

   *Job responsibilities.*  Some students drop out of school due to job responsibilities. Students have various reasons for deciding to choose a job over school, including: (a) a need to provide for their child(ren), (b) a need to supplement their family's income, and (c) a feeling that working a job is more beneficial than going to school (Paternoster, Bushway, Brame, & Apel, 2003).  Bridgeland et al. (2010) interviewed 60 dropouts and communicated that the dropouts identified needing a job as a factor in their decision to drop out.  Similarly, Bridgeland et al. (2009) found that educators and principals nationwide discussed real-life issues, including job responsibilities, when asked about causes of student dropout. "About half of teachers (48 percent) and principals (44 percent) mentioned a student's need to get a job and support their family as a factor in most or some cases of dropout" (p. 20).  This is evidence that job responsibilities many times take priority over academic responsibilities in students' lives.

   Many research studies illustrate the negative effects that job responsibilities can have on students' educational outcomes.  Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (2005) examined the relationship of employment and dropout in Baltimore, Maryland, and they found that students who worked adult-like jobs were more likely to drop out than those who worked side jobs (babysitting, lawn work, etc.).  They communicated that this was due to the students not having enough time to attend school and/or study.  Lee and Staff (2007) found similar results from their data on over 13,000 students—students who work full time jobs or jobs with intense physical demands are more likely to drop out of school due to job responsibilities.  Specifically, they found that students who worked more than 20 hours per week were associated with higher dropout rates.   Staff, Schulenberg, and Bachman (2010) concurred that students who work

47

fulltime jobs are more likely to drop out of school, but they went further to investigate the reason for employment. They concluded that supporting their family was some students' main reason for taking a job; however, many students communicated that because of academic struggles, taking a full time job made sense. This illustrates the connectedness of the factors of dropout. In this instance, because of academic struggles, some students begin to explore options, such as employment, to compensate their lack of success in school.

**Family issues.** Many students drop out of school because of various family issues, and these issues are usually not in the student's control. These types of issues are the most difficult for educators, administrators, educational policymakers, and school personnel to address, as they involve the members of the student's family rather than the student. The most prevalent family issues concerning student dropout are related to characteristics of the parent(s), including: (a) support and involvement, (b) education and marital status, (c) responsibilities assigned to child(ren) and (d) socio-economic status(Alexander et al., 2001; Beekhoven & Deckers, 2005; Christle et al., 2007; Pagani et al., 2008).

*Family support and involvement.* Many students decide to drop out of school because they have no academic support at home (Jambulingam, Thuraisingam, & Rajagopal, 2013; Jerald, 2006; Ou, 2005). Even if effective interventions are implemented, dropouts experience conflict between home and school, which produces frustrations and leads to their decision to leave school (Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2008; Lagana, 2004; Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2009). In a longitudinal study, Barnard (2004) examined data of 1,165 students and expressed, "Even after controlling for background characteristics and risk factors, parent involvement in school was significantly associated with lower rates of high school dropout, increased on-time high school completion, and highest grade completed" (p. 39). They found that students who do not have

48

parental support and involvement are at a higher risk of struggling academically, failing, and/or dropping out of school. In Beekhoven and Dekker's (2005) mixed methods study in which they presented data from four case studies, they concluded that parental involvement was a significant factor that influenced the decision to drop out of school. Of the four cases, three mentioned parental involvement specifically and included it when describing reasons for deciding to drop out of school. Similarly, Englund, Egeland, and Collins (2008) followed 179 participants from birth to age 23 and discovered that students with parental support and involvement were less likely to drop out of school. They shared,

> Parenting behavior differentiated children who would stay on a trajectory of academic success from those who were the exceptions to the prediction of high school graduation: Children whose parents were involved in their school in middle childhood and who experienced good parent–child relationships in early adolescence were more likely to continue on a positive trajectory toward academic success. By contrast, those who had poor relationships with their parents were more likely to drop out of high school despite doing well academically and behaviorally. (Englund, Egeland, & Collins, 2008, pp. 88-89)

In their research study, increased dropout rates were more likely for students who did not have parental support and involvement, even if the students were not experiencing academic or behavior issues.

Bridgeland et al. (2006) asked 467 dropouts what influenced their decision to drop out, and one of the top reasons was lack of parental involvement and/or support. These dropouts communicated that when they had no support from home, the decision to drop out of school was easier to make. Similarly, in 2012, 513 dropouts participated in a national survey concerning the

49

reasons why they dropped out of school.  These dropouts identified lack of parental support and involvement as a top reason for dropping out (Adams, 2012).  This information illustrates the significance that parent support and involvement plays concerning student dropout.

  ***Parents' education and single parent homes.***  Students with parents who did not finish high school are more likely to not finish high school themselves (Ainsworth, 2002; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Burusic, Babarovic, & Markovic, 2010), and the same applies to students from single-parent homes (Barton, 2006; Kalil & Ziol-Guest, 2005; Kane, 2006).  Pagani et al. (2008) accessed student data from the Quebec Longitudinal Study of Kindergarten Children (QLSKC) data set and analyzed information on 2,000 students.  They researched the academic effects of students having a mother with no high school diploma and being from a single parent home.  They found that students who were in either of these situations were more likely to drop out of school, and students who fit into both of those categories were at an even higher risk of dropping out.  Similarly, Jerald (2006) expressed, "Students who come from single parent families, have a mother who dropped out of high school, have parents who provide low support for learning…are placed at a high risk" (p.4).  This information provides educators, administrators, educational policymakers, and school personnel with a way to easily identify potential dropouts.

  Students from single parent homes are more likely to display disruptive behaviors, experience expulsion, and eventually drop out of school (DeBell, 2008; Griffin, Botvin, Scheier, Diaz, & Miller, 2000; Song, Benin, & Glick, 2012).  DeBell (2008) analyzed data from the 2003 Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey on 12, 426 students, and he discovered a positive association between students from single family homes and lower educational attainment and dropout.  In his research study, students from single parent homes were more

50

likely to dropout of school. Pougnet, Serbin, Stack, Ledingham, and Schwartzman (2012) found

that students from single parent homes are more likely to become single parents when they have

children; therefore, repeating the cycle.  Specifically, they found: (a) males with absent fathers

are more likely to be absent fathers, (b) women with absent fathers are more likely to have

children with absent fathers, and (c) women and men with absent fathers are more likely to

struggle academically and become at risk for dropout.  These studies illustrate the generational

characteristics of being in single parent homes and the increased probability of dropping out of

school.

Poverty is another characteristic linked to students in single parent homes and dropout.

Zalewski et al. (2012) collected data on 78 preschoolers and found that preschoolers in single

parent and/or impoverished homes are more likely to experience negative academic outcomes.

However, the correlation was most significant when the preschoolers were in single parent and

impoverished homes.  Walker, Crawford, and Taylor (2008) interviewed 40 children in single

parent, impoverished homes and concluded that these children are aware of the negative aspects

(having less, their parent working more, etc.) of living in poverty, and many of them experience

negative academic effects because of this.  During the interviews, students identified the

parameters of their poverty and stated the consequences of living in poverty; they were aware of

the consequences of their environment on their academic life and life in general.  These statistics

authenticate the notion that simply being in a single parent home increases the likelihood of

dropping out of school, but living in poverty and in a single parent home even further increases

this likelihood (DeBell, 2008; Walker, Crawford, & Taylor, 2008; Zalewski, 2012).

*Family responsibilities.*  Many students decide to drop out of school due to family

circumstances such as providing for their family financially, taking care of siblings, and/or

taking care of sick family. In these situations, students are forced to drop out because the load from home requires all of their time and energy, leaving little or no time for school (Jerald, 2006; Orfield, 2006; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009). Bridgeland et al. (2006) interviewed 467 dropouts, and 22 percent of them communicated they had family responsibilities that affected their decision to drop out of school. "Some identified personal circumstances at home—needing to be there to care for siblings or take care of other tasks at home because parents were out working or otherwise unavailable—that influenced their ability to attend to focus on school" (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 6). The dropouts who mentioned family responsibilities connected them to the need to help provide for their family for various reasons (sick parent, disabled parent, absent parent, etc.). Bridgeland et al. (2009) noted similar results in their research on student dropout from the perspectives of educators and principals. The educators and principals shared that one reason students provided for dropping out in their experiences was the need to provide for their families by working or acting as a caretaker. They found that many students drop out of school because their responsibilities at home do not allow for time to prepare for and attend school.

Some students are members of households in which contributing to family responsibilities at a young age is part of the culture. In these instances, students are expected to fulfill duties such as cooking, cleaning, taking care of children and/or elderly family members, and working to provide financial support for the family. These students have an increased likelihood of becoming at risk for dropping out because their family responsibilities take dominance over their school responsibilities (Borden, 2006; East & Wisener, 2009; Kim & Steeler, 2008). In situations where family responsibilities are a factor of students becoming at risk for dropping out, educators, administrators, and school personnel must create a strong

school/home connection and provide adequate support to these students and families (Strom &

Boster, 2007; Woolley & Bowen, 2007; Ziomek-Daigle, 2010).

*Low socio-economic status.* Living in poverty is an issue that many students face and

that can have a substantial effect on their education. According to research, students living in

poverty are more likely to need academic interventions in order to be successful in school

(Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2004; Suh & Suh, 2007). These students can be up to

three times more likely to drop out of school than their counterparts (Bemak, Chung, &

Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005). The effects of living in poverty increase their probability of dropping

out of school, obtaining low income jobs, and remaining in poverty as adults (Barton, 2006;

Keels, 2013; Valadez, 2010). Students who come from impoverished families are more likely to

struggle academically, specifically in literacy, and eventually drop out of school because of these

struggles (Barton, 2006; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Henry, Cavanagh, & Oetting, 2011; Landis,

2012). This connection of poverty and dropout has been researched and established, yet it

remains a difficult issue because changing family income is not possible. Educators,

administrators, policy makers, and school personnel can address and implement plans addressing

school factors, but home and family factors are typically not within their control.

Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani (2001) conducted a longitudinal study in Baltimore;

they followed 800 students through their schooling and completed follow-ups at various times.

They found that students from low-socio economic status (SES) families were two times more

likely to drop out than their peers. Rothstein (2008) reported that impoverished children do not

always receive the medical attention they need; therefore, they suffer and are unable to succeed

academically, putting them at-risk for dropping out. In his research study, a positive correlation

existed between low academic achievement and inadequate medical care; furthermore, students

living in poverty and receiving inadequate medical care were even more significantly associated with low academic achievement and dropout.  Research studies by Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) and Beekhoven and Dekkers (2005) also indicated that students from low SES families are at a much higher risk for dropping out of school.  They both found that the sole factor of being from a low SES family was positively correlated to both low academic achievement and increased dropout rates.  The Alliance for Excellent Education (2010) produced an issue brief regarding low-performing schools in American.  In this issue brief, they stated,

> Although the lowest-performing high schools are spread throughout the country and vary
> greatly in size and locale, their unifying characteristic is the prevalence of poor and
> minority students attending them. (p. 4)

These statistics highlight the seriousness of creating effective interventions for students from low SES families is essential to confront the dropout issue.

**Dropout Prevention**

Student dropout is not just an educational issue; it is an economic issue.  The researchers from the Civil Rights Project (2005) communicated, "Increasing on-time graduation rates offers a win/win strategy that will not only improve the region's economic vitality, but will predictably reduce crime, lower incarceration costs, and salvage lives in the process" (p. 4-5).  Congress is addressing the issue of student dropout as it relates to the American economy.  Members of Congress are communicating the importance of attacking the crisis of student dropout as a means of benefitting the economy, and they are calling for everyone to become actively involved (Committee on Education and the Workforce Democrats, 2009).

Being aware of the causes of student dropout allows educators, administrators, educational policymakers, and school personnel to better develop and implement dropout

prevention strategies and plans. The causes of student dropout are vast and differ for every student; therefore, dropout prevention plans must be tailored for individual students. Although the dropout prevention plan for each student is unique, a few prevention strategies are fundamental and used in most cases. These strategies are: (a) early warning systems, (b) improved instruction, (c) positive relationships, and (d) supportive programs.

**Early warning systems.** One of the most mentioned dropout prevention strategies in dropout literature is implementing early warning systems. These early warning systems are used to track students throughout their schooling and indicate characteristics that potentially predict at-risk situations. These characteristics vary within different systems but include information such as: (a) low grades, (b) retention, (c) discipline problems, and (d) absences (Alexander et al., 2001; Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Balfanz et al., 2007; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Henry et al., 2012).

Many states have implemented early warning systems that track certain characteristics of students, and when students have alerting characteristics, they are flagged and examined. Once the students are flagged, they are followed closely and intervention plans are implemented (Balfanz et al., 2010). Balfanz (2009) replicated a study on student dropout in five districts. In this replication he found similar results, one being that students are more likely to graduate if early warning and intervention systems are utilized.

> Early warning and intervention systems provide the necessary means to unify, focus, and target efforts to improve attendance, behavior, and course performance. Their fundamental purpose is to get the right intervention to the right student at the right time. (p. 10)

He found that students are positively associated with decreased dropout rates and increased academic achievement when early warning systems are in place and when students are provided appropriate interventions based on the information received from those systems. Duchesne, Vitaro, Larose, and Tremblay (2008) explored data on 1, 817 students and found a positive correlation between anxiety during elementary school and dropout. They suggested early warning systems would aid in identifying various issues, such as anxiety, at the earliest stages, which would increase the likelihood of appropriate interventions and decrease the likelihood of academic struggle and dropout. Effectively recognizing indicators of dropout at the earliest stages and implementing strategies as quickly as possible increases the likelihood of students completing the journey to graduation (Duchesne, Vitaro, Larose, & Tremblay, 2008; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007).

**Improved instruction.** Even if interventions are implemented early, success is unlikely without truly improved instruction. Doing the same thing repeatedly does not benefit students, so interventions must truly provide the students with different, improved instruction (Dynarski et al., 2008; Golden, Kist, Trehan, & Padak, 2005). Many student dropouts desired inspiring, exciting teachers, but they did not have that experience. Students are highly motivated by their teachers' methods of presenting materials and by the type of assignments, and students are much more likely to be successful and motivated academically if their teachers exhibit passion and provide engaging practice (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, & Friant, 2010; Theobald, 2005).

Golden, Kist, Trehan, and Padak (2005) analyzed the stories of GED students and found a common theme among the conversations—quality instruction affects academic achievement. The participants discussed the influence that boring, irrelevant instruction had on their decision

to drop out of school, and stated that their decision might have been different if they had felt that their instruction was exciting and relevant. Similarly, Theobold (2005) shared strategies provided by teachers that increased their students' achievement, such as: (a) making connections to the real world when teaching, (b) being passionate about the content, (c) using active learning and engagement strategies to teach, and (d) creating an exciting atmosphere for learning. He stated that teachers who exhibited these characteristics produced high-achieving, motivated students. Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) found that one of the top reasons dropouts provided for dropping out was poor instruction. In their research study, they interviewed dropouts, and they discovered that many times dropouts were bored, disinterested, and unmotivated because they could not connect what they were learning to life after school. This disconnectedness led to their decision to drop out of school and either enter the workforce or pass their GED and enroll in college. This demonstrates the significance that quality instruction has concerning decreasing student dropout.

One affordable, realistic change towards higher graduation rates is improved instruction; educators must teach using strategies that encourage their students to be interested and involved. Although this is part of the job description of any educator, many students are members of classes that are boring, which contributes to their decision to drop out of school (Fallis & Opotow, 2003; Finnan & Chasin, 2007; Gewertz, 2006; Smeaton, 2010). Prompting educators to ensure their teaching strategies are research-based, effective, and interesting is a major step in decreasing student dropout rates.

**Positive relationships.** Building positive teacher-student relationships happens only if both the teacher and student are willing to contribute; however, the teacher holds the responsibility of initiating and cultivating these relationships. This strategy increases student

motivation and student achievement, does not require intensive professional training to understand, and is accessible to all educators (Churchill & Keddie, 2005; Glasser, 1990, 1993; Krieger, 2002; Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004; Polk, 2006; Watson, Ecken, & Koehn, 2003).

Gehlbach, Brinkworth, and Harris (2012) researched positive teacher-student relationships in their study of 119 middle school students and their teachers, and they found that these relationships change over time and are beneficial to student motivation and achievement. Both the teachers and the students agreed that when students feel supported by their teachers, they are more likely to strive for success and high academic achievement. Similarly, Marsh (2012) investigated the experiences of 12-15 year olds concerning the effects of student-teacher relationships. Her results supported the fact that positive teacher-student relationships "have a positive influence on students' levels of motivation and engagement at school" (p. 163). She found a positive association between students' motivation to learn and succeed and positive teacher-student relationships Rooder, Koomen, Split, and Oort (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 99 studies regarding teacher-student relationships. Their analyses supported the notion that positive teacher-student relationships benefit both student motivation and student achievement.

Wubbles (1993) gathered information from student questionnaires about the strengths of the relationships with their science and mathematics teachers. The students shared that they were more likely to be engaged in their learning and work towards success if they knew their teacher cared about their achievement. This research indicated that student achievement increased when positive teacher-student relationships were in place. Marzano and Marzano (2003) conducted research in classrooms that illustrated positive teacher-student relationships were vital for students to experience high academic achievement. They found that most students

58

desire positive relationships with their teachers, and their teachers, in turn, develop a deeper understanding of their students and can differentiate instruction in a way that better addresses their students' needs.  Both the teachers and students benefit from the development of these positive teacher-student relationships.  Teachers are able to better serve their students, which is rewarding, and students learn and experience success.  When teachers establish promoting student success as their main priority and invest time and effort into creating relationships, then student achievement and motivation benefit (Corder, 1999; Gehlbach, Brinkworth, & Harris, 2012; Leitao & Waugh, 2007; Tomlinson, 2005; Yoon, 2002).

Churchill and Keddie (2005) examined teacher-student relationships from the viewpoint of boys in middle grades and found that many of them felt their teachers tried to control them or maintained ultimate power in the classroom, which reduced their desire to do their best and actively participate.  However, when the boys felt supported by their teachers, they were more likely to strive for high academic achievement.  Krieger (2002) explored the factor of class size and found that teachers with fewer students in their classrooms were more able to have meaningful positive teacher-student relationships and that students benefitted from these relationships.  This study supported a significant correlation between student success and positive teacher-student relationships.  These statistics support the same idea—students that have positive relationships with their teachers are more likely to graduate from high school and experience success.

**Supportive programs.**  Particular programs that support students as they follow their graduation path exist.  These programs have various missions, ranging from creating specific intervention plans to utilizing resources within the community, and the most common programs implemented in efforts of decreasing dropout rates fit into one of the following categories: (a)

Response to Intervention (RTI) and teacher support teams (TST), (b) mentoring/counseling programs, and (c) community/family/school collaboration.

   ***Response to Intervention and teacher support teams.*** According to the National Center on Response to Intervention (n.d.),

   Rigorous implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI) includes a combination of high quality, culturally and linguistically responsive instruction; assessment; and evidence-based intervention. Comprehensive RTI implementation will contribute to more meaningful identification of learning and behavioral problems, improve instructional quality, provide all students with the best opportunities to succeed in school, and assist with the identification of learning disabilities and other disabilities. (National Center on Response to Intervention, n.d., para. 1)

Response to Intervention is used nationally, and its goal is to identify at-risk students and begin appropriate interventions as quickly as possible. Within RTI are three tiers of instruction.

   Tier 1: Quality classroom instruction based on standards.

   Tier 2: Focused supplemental instruction.

   Tier 3: Intensive interventions specifically designed to meet the individual needs of students.

   If strategies at Tiers 1 & 2 are unsuccessful, students must be referred to the Teacher Support Team (TST). The TST is the problem-solving unit responsible for interventions developed at Tier 3. (Mississippi Department of Education, 2010, para. 1)

If students are considered at-risk and are moved to tier 3, then teachers support teams (TST) are utilized. Teacher support teams (TST) are teams of individuals (teachers, administrators,

counselors) responsible for creating appropriate intervention plans, ensuring their implementation, and tracking their effectiveness.

Those who utilize Response to Intervention (RTI) work together to form a specific pathway for struggling students, and the goal is to take the steps necessary to promote student success.  Once the students' plans are created, all individuals involved work together to ensure that the assigned interventions are implemented, and they evaluate and adjust the interventions at certain periods throughout the intervention timeline.  Because of the individualization of RTI, students are more likely to receive interventions that meet their specific educational needs and that precede academic progress (Dulaney, 2013; Erickson, Noonan, & Jenson, 1012; Mellard, Frey, & Wood, 2012; Saeki et al., 2011).  Many studies exemplify the effectiveness of RTI and TST across the nation (Burns, Appleton, & Stehouwer, 2005; Dulaney, 2012; Marston, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003; McNamara & Hollinger, 2003), and they support the notion that when individuals involved in the education of students collaborate to create plans for success, then achievement is much more likely to ensue as compared to plans created by one individual or no plan at all.

*Mentoring/counseling programs.*  Some students simply need someone to communicate with to get back on the track to graduation (Bridgeland et al., 2006, Bridgeland et al., 2010; Dynarski & Gleason, 2002).  Because of this, many dropout prevention plans include mentorship programs in which students meet weekly with a mentor/counselor in hopes of creating a relationship that fosters student success.  Lever et al. (2004) explored the effects of a mentoring program implemented with at risk students in an inner city school.  A positive correlation between individual mentoring and increased academic achievement was evident, and they found that students who were able to meet individually with counselors or mentors benefitted

academically.  Similarly, Hickman and Wright (2010) examined data on 447 students and

concluded that students involved in mentoring and/or counseling programs are more likely to

experience academic success and stay in school.  In their study, students who participated in

mentoring programs where associated with higher grades and academic achievement.

Dynarksi et al. (2008) reviewed research regarding the effectiveness of national dropout

prevention plans, and from those results they recommended assigning students to adult mentors

to cultivate relationships that promote student success as a major component of dropout

prevention plans.  They asserted,

> Students who have ongoing relationships with adults feel a greater sense of school
>
> membership, attachment, and involvement.  Additional benefits…include reduced risky
>
> behaviors, reduced absentee rates, improve degrades, and improved communication and
>
> social skills. (pp. 17-18)

This research study suggested assigning at-risk students to mentors increases the likelihood of

forming appropriate interventions and guiding students to their success (Scheel et al., 2009;

Ziomek-Daigle, 2010).  This associates directly with the Relational-Cultural Theory (Miller &

Stiver, 1997), because both assert that if students are members of positive, growth-fostering

relationships, then they are more likely to be able to experience success.

*Community/family/school collaboration.*  Along with students having support from

mentors, their family and community must also support them.  Students who have support from

their communities and/or families are more likely to be academically successful and graduate

(Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Martin & Halperin, 2006; The Parent-Child Home Program

National Center, n.d.).  When students feel that they are members of a team committed to their

academic success and that they are cared about by everyone involved, then they become invested

in themselves and take pride in their successes (Charmaraman & Hall, 2011; MacIver, 2010; Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009). This is highlighted in Tyler and Loftstrom's (2009) research study in which they found that building positive community/family/school connections shifted students from the pathway to dropout to the pathway to graduation. Their participants shared that feeling supported and cared about by their family and teachers encouraged them to work towards success and high academic achievement.

Strom and Boster (2007) explored messages from home and school and concluded that students whose families and schools work together toward the goal of student success are more likely to experience success. They found a positive correlation between positive home and school support and student motivation and success; students were more likely to be motivated to do their best when they felt supported by their home and school. Woolley and Bowen (2007) echoed this in their exploration of the effects of collaboration on middle school students. They communicated the importance of collaboration between home and school concerning helping students experience high academic success. This aligns with the Relational-Cultural Theory (Miller & Stiver, 1997), as its main tenet is that positive relationships produce positive results.

**School Counselors and Dropout**

Although many individuals are responsible for developing plans for preventing student dropout, school counselors' roles in dropout prevention have recently been explored (Blaunt, 2012; Carr & Galassi, 2012; Hubert, 2010). School counselors have a unique position concerning their ability to connect with students and assist in the creation of effective dropout prevention plans. To better understand school counselors' roles in dropout prevention, the definition of school counselors and the exploration of their roles must be examined.

**Definition of school counselors.** The American School Counselor Association (n.d.b.) defines school counselors as, "Professional school counselors are certified/licensed educators with the minimum of a master's degree in school counseling and are uniquely qualified to address the developmental needs of all students through a comprehensive school counseling program addressing the academic, career and personal/social development" (p. 4). As this research study was conducted in Mississippi, Mississippi's definition of a school counselor is also included.

> School Counselors' activities are all designed to keep students in school and to help them be successful. Their primary objective is to promote and enhance student learning. Counselors play a valuable role in all dropout prevention programs. They provide consultation in defining and identifying at-risk students. Counselors work as members of a team with other school personnel to provide essential services. The goal is to identify and intervene before students move through a continuum of self-destructive behavior. (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d., para. 1)

Both the national and the state definitions of counselors communicate that counselors are responsible for ensuring students achievement, success, and graduation, to the best of their abilities.

**School counselors' role in school.** School counselors have many roles within school systems. From counseling to testing to assessing to monitoring attendance, counselors' job descriptions are extensive (American School Counselor Association, n.d.a). Recently, school counselors have been challenged to demonstrate their counseling program's effectiveness within their school settings as a means of evaluation and accountability (Hartline & Cobia, 2012). In addition, the counselors' role from the perspectives of teachers and principals is a topic in current

research studies.  Camadan and Kahveci (2013) examined the role of the school counselor from the viewpoints of school administrators and educators.  They found that school administrators and educators view school counselors as guiders and problem solvers, and in these roles they work directly with students.  Zalaquett and Chatters (2012) explored the perceptions of principals concerning counselors' roles and found that, "…middle school principals believed middle school counselors positively affect the academic, social, and personal development of their students" (p. 89).  These findings support the notion that counselors are viewed as vital to dropout prevention more now than ever.

**School counselors' role in dropout prevention.**  Although counselors have many responsibilities, they are specifically responsible for being actively involved in identifying potential dropouts and aiding in the creation of intervention plans (Carr & Galassi, 2012; Scheel et al., 2009; White, 2010).  The American School Counselors Association (n.d.b) lists counselor roles such as, "…individual/family/school crisis intervention and at-risk student identification and implementation of interventions to enhance success" (p. 2).  This illustrates the fact that counselors have significant roles in dropout prevention.

**Summary**

Student dropout is a multi-faceted issue that can only be addressed if each individual involved becomes an active participant regarding creating and implementing interventions and prevention plans (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Hammond, 2007; Orfield, 2004).  When students drop out of school, not only are they negatively affected, but their families, schools, communities, economy, and world are , too.  The previous review of literature provides a basic foundation for understanding the definition of student dropout, the connection of the Relational-Cultural Theory to dropout, causes of student dropout, dropout prevention strategies, and school counselors' roles

in dropout.  Although this information is beneficial and essential, the findings and analysis of the current research study will provide significant and beneficial information from the viewpoints of school counselors concerning the phenomenon of student dropout and effective ways to identify and intervene at the elementary/junior high levels.  In the next chapter, I present the methodology of this research study.

# CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

I conducted my research during the fall, 2012, throughout six counties in Northeast Mississippi. My data collection included sending demographic surveys and interview emails, conducting face-to-face focus group and individual interviews, and keeping a research journal. I chose a qualitative research design because I was interested in exploring and recording the perspectives of a specific group of individuals concerning student dropout, and qualitative research encourages this type of data and allows for its most appropriate collection and analysis (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998; Flick, 2009; Holliday, 2002; Savin-Baden & Major, 2010). I used a descriptive case study design, and I selected this design because it allowed me to explore a particular group of individuals as my case and thoroughly describe the data by recording their stories and experiences (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003).

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how junior high (grades 5-8) counselors identify students at risk for dropping out, choose appropriate interventions, and view their direct role in dropout prevention. The following chapter provides information concerning: (a) the rationale for choosing qualitative research, (b) the research plan, (c) ethical considerations and Institutional Review Board (IRB) information, and (d) data analysis methods. I explored the following questions in this study in efforts to better understand the dropout crisis and how to prevent it as early as possible:

1. In what ways do junior high counselors identify students at risk for dropping out?

2.  How do junior high counselors inform their decisions of intervention for students at

risk for dropping out?

**3.** What are junior high counselors' perceptions concerning their direct role in dropout

prevention?

**Rationale for Using a Qualitative Research Design**

According to Creswell (2009), when attempting to describe, explain, or share the stories

of individuals, qualitative research is the preferred method because it permits the researcher to

extend data beyond numbers and quantities into descriptions, narratives, and explanations; "This

process of research involves emerging questions and procedures; collecting data in the

participants' setting; analyzing the data inductively, building from particulars to general themes;

and making interpretations of the meaning of the data" (Creswell, 2009, p. 232).  Qualitative

research invites readers to better understand the why and how of a situation, person, or culture,

which enables the creation of effective, research-based decisions (Flick, 2009).

I chose a qualitative research design because I wanted to explore the experiences and

stories of individuals, and qualitative was the best design to address my research methods.  These

collection methods included individual interviews and focus group interviews, and coding and

constant comparative analysis methods were utilized.  Quantitative methods, surveys, and scales

would not provide the type of rich, experience-based data that I needed; therefore, qualitative,

rather than quantitative methods fit my research needs best.

Qualitative data are collected through interviews, observations, documents, and/or

communication.  As data are collected, the researcher begins to analyze the data and even further

define the purpose of the study.  In qualitative research, the researcher plays a key role in the

study, as he or she is typically the research instrument.  Qualitative research permits researchers

to explore topics in depth and obtain a deeper understanding of the how and why of their focus. It allows researchers to thoroughly investigate topics in particular instances from reduced populations, which provides for thick, rich descriptions of data (Creswell, 2009; Flick, 2009; Glesne, 2006).

      **Case studies.** Case studies are utilized when specific cases—instances, situations, populations, events, organizations, programs, systems, or occurrences—are being investigated (Creswell, 2009; Rudestam & Newton, 2007; Yin, 2003). Stake (2000) describes a case study as a, "specific, unique bounded system" (p. 436). When a researcher's aim is to explore a particular case extensively, a case study is the most suitable qualitative method to utilize. Creswell (2009) explained, "Cases are bounded by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time" (p. 13). Case studies permit researchers to explore a particular topic from every possible angle.

      Case studies are known for including several particular types of data collection: (a) interviews, (b) observations, and (c) reflexive note taking. Researchers are better able to understand and analyze cases because they are receiving information from various sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003).

      Data analysis in case studies can be completed in many different ways, but regardless of which method is chosen one thing remains true—analysis happens concurrently with collection. Merriam (1998) expounds upon this notion of concurrently collecting and analyzing data, "Analysis begins with the first interview, the first observation, the first document read. Emerging insights, hunches, and tentative hypotheses direct the next phase of data collections, which in turn leads to the refinement or reformulation of questions, and so on" (p. 151). In case studies, the researcher utilizes various types of data analysis, but the significance relies on the

systematic, constant analysis.  In order to avoid overload or confusion, the researcher must

organize data as it is coded and analyzed.  Without this careful process, the findings and

conclusions are not trustworthy or credible (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Yin,

2003).

        **Descriptive case studies.**  A descriptive case study is, "…one that presents a detailed

account of the phenomenon under study…" (Merriam, 1998, p. 38).  Baxter and Jack (2008)

stated, "This type of case study is used to describe an intervention or phenomenon and the real-

life context in which it occurred" (p. 548).  Researchers utilize this particular type of case study

when the main goal of the study is to thoroughly describe their data (Baxter & Jack, 2008;

Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003).  The purpose of this descriptive case study was to explore a decision

making process, through the stories and experiences of the participants, lending a descriptive

case study as the most appropriate to employ.

**Researcher's Role**

        In qualitative research, the researcher is typically the instrument, which is the case in this

study.  When the researcher serves as the research instrument, many things must be considered

such as researcher bias, predetermined notions, personal thoughts and feelings, and

connectedness to the topic.  The researcher should not be disconnected from the topic, but rather

the researcher must ensure that he/she is not skewing the data (Glesne, 1999; Piantanida &

Garman, 1999).

        I have taught for ten years at various grade levels including students who have dropped

out and considered dropping out.  I maintained a neutral stance and allowed only the experiences

and stories of my participants to guide my analyses and conclusions.  I served as a facilitator of

questions and a collector of information and did not insert my own opinions, give leading

responses, or ask one-sided questions.

**Credibility and Trustworthiness**

It is essential that a researcher's findings are credible and trustworthy, which means that

appropriate and accepted strategies and methods are utilized in the research (Creswell, 2009). To

ensure that I was a credible and trustworthy research instrument, I employed several strategies:

(a) transcription checks, (b) member checking, (c) triangulation, and (d) thick description.

I utilized transcription checking, which is a method used to confirm credibility and

trustworthiness. In this study, I transcribed each focus group and individual interview word-for-

word, and then I printed transcripts of each email interview. I thoroughly examined all

transcripts numerous times in efforts to glean valuable information concerning the research topic.

Concurrently, I completed a transcript check through which I carefully inspected each transcript

for obvious mistakes; this process is called performing a transcription check. This helped ensure

that the findings and conclusions were as accurate as possible (Creswell, 2009).

Member checking is another method used by qualitative researchers to ensure credibility

and trustworthiness. According to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007), member checking "…involves

having research participants review statements in the report for accuracy and completeness" (p.

475). Completing this process ensures that only the views of the participants are included in the

descriptions of the findings and conclusions, which helps establish validity and trustworthiness

(Gall et al., 2007; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2000). In my study, each participant had the

opportunity to member check the transcripts from the focus group interviews and the final report.

Triangulation, a method suggested by most authors and researchers concerning credibility

and trustworthiness, is defined as "…a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning,

verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation" (Stake, 2000, p. 440). By providing data from several different resources, the researcher is assuring that the findings and conclusions recorded are not simply his/her opinions but are supported in multiple contexts (Gall et al., 2007; Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). In this study, I conducted email interviews, demographic surveys, face-to-face focus group interviews, and face-to-face individual interviews. I used triangulation of the data from these different sources to produce balanced and unbiased findings and results.

Thick descriptions, often utilized as an additional strategy to ensure credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative research, "…means the complete, literal description of the incident or entity being investigated" (Merriam, 1998, pp. 29-30). Glesne (2006) described it as "description that goes beyond the mere or bare reporting of an act (thin description), but describes and probes the intentions, motives, meanings, contexts, situation, and circumstances of action" (p. 27). Providing a thick description paints a picture in the reader's mind and allows him/her to fully understand the issue at hand—the point is to describe the data to the extent that nothing is left to the reader's imagination (Gall et al., 2007; Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 1998). I employed the process of thoroughly describing and recreating experiences, as explained by the participants, in this study. This produced findings and conclusions that the readers are able to trust because they are based solely on the participants' experiences and stories.

Once credibility and trustworthiness are established, then the research becomes accepted and usable by other researchers (Creswell, 2009; Flick, 2009; Gall et al., 2007). To further warrant credibility and trustworthiness in this study, I utilized the previous strategies and had a panel of experts review the individual and focus group interview protocols. This panel of experts included: (a) Dr. Deborah Chessin, professor of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of

Mississippi; (b) Dr. Sarah Blackwell, associate professor of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Mississippi; (c) Dr. Susan Bennett, assistant professor of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Mississippi; (d) Dr. Amy Wells-Dolan, associate dean and associate professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Mississippi; and (e) Julia Puckett, ABE/GED/ESL instructor at Itawamba Community College. These individuals have extensive experience in research and schools, have advanced graduate degrees in the field of education, and hold scholarly positions within their institutions.

**Ethical Considerations and Institutional Review Board Information**

In any research study, the researcher must ensure that participants are part of an ethical, anonymous research. To guarantee that all information was fully disclosed to the participants concerning the nature of the research, use of the results, and ethical issues, each participant received an information form, which followed the format provided by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. Before any research was conducted, the dissertation committee approved the proposal, I completed the proper paperwork for the IRB, and I followed the approved protocol.

**Research Plan**

My research plan includes descriptions of: (a) participants and their selection, (b) instrumentation and data collection, and (c) data analysis. Each section clearly defines the processes used in this study.

**Selection of participants.** I utilized criterion sampling as the sampling strategy for this study. Criterion sampling is sampling in which "a group of cases satisfy particular specifications or standards" (Gall, et al., 2007, p. 636). In this study, the criterion was that the participants were junior high (grades 5-8) counselors in one or more of six counties in northeast Mississippi.

73

For this research, these specific individuals received the opportunity to be interviewed

individually through email interviews and to participate in face-to-face focus group and

individual interviews.   These individuals' experiences revealed rich data that provides insight

regarding the high dropout rate prevalent in Mississippi and in the southern United States

(Cataldi, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2009; Orfield, 2006; Stone & Alfeld, 2004).

School counselors were chosen as the population in this study because of their unique

relationship with students.  The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) (n.d) website

thoroughly explains the distinctive connection that counselors have with students regarding their

ability to recognize characteristics that may be pointing toward a future of dropout.

School counselors' activities are all designed to keep students in school and to help them

be successful. Their primary objective is to promote and enhance student learning.

Counselors play a valuable role in all dropout prevention programs. They provide

consultation in defining and identifying at-risk students. Counselors work as members of

a team with other school personnel to provide essential services. The goal is to identify

and intervene before students move through a continuum of self-destructive behavior.

Any student may at any time be at risk with respect to dropping out of school, becoming

truant, performing below academic potential, contemplating suicide or using drugs.

Underlying reasons for these behaviors often deal with personal and social concerns such

as poor self-esteem, family problems, pregnancy, unresolved grief, neglect or abuse.

School counseling programs promote school success for all students through a focus on

academic achievement, prevention and intervention activities, advocacy, social/emotional

issues, and career development. All these areas lead to the development of the "whole

person" where students may be successful members of society upon exiting the school

environment. (para. 1-2)

School counselors' perspectives are significant in further understanding the dropout crisis and

how to address it at the earliest possible stage. By choosing junior high counselors as the

population for this study, I gained a unique view of the processes of identification of students at

risk for dropping out and implementation of appropriate interventions.

I recruited the participants for this study using the map and accompanying school district

listing found at the Mississippi Department of Education website. I searched online for each

school that included grades 5-8 and recorded the school phone numbers and counselors' names

and emails. If the counselors' names and emails were not recorded online at the school website,

then I obtained them over the phone. I emailed each counselor offering them the opportunity to

participate in the study, and I provided incentives to increase participation. These incentives

included twenty-dollar gift certificates to local bookstores and restaurants. After responses were

collected, I emailed the consenting participants a demographic survey and email interview.

Concurrently, I scheduled and completed face-to-face focus group and individual interviews.

Fifteen counselors agreed to participate and share their stories, and the demographics of

those counselors are as follows: (a) one male and 14 females; (b) three African Americans and

twelve Caucasians; (c) eight with one to nine years experience as a counselor, two with ten to

nineteen years experience, and four with twenty or more years experience; (d) seven between the

ages 30 to 44, three between the ages 45 to 49, and four between the ages of 55 and 64. The

specific demographics of these participants are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

*Junior High Counselors' Demographics*

| Name | Age | Race | Degree | Years Experience |
|------|-----|------|--------|------------------|
| Reba | 47 | AA | MA, Counseling | 10 |
| Brittney | 64 | C | BS, Economics Ed. | 6 |
| Kim | 50 | C | Ed.S, Counseling | 7 |
| Jane | 52 | AA | Ed.S, Counseling | 25 |
| Cate | 38 | C | BS, Ed. Psychology | 6 |
| Terry (M) | 41 | C | MA, Counseling | 6 |
| Lonny | 61 | C | MA, Counseling | 20 |
| Kris | 44 | C | MA, Counseling | 12 |
| Julie | 56 | C | MA, Counseling | 23 |
| Chelsea | 30 | C | MA, Counseling | 5 |
| Shay (M) | 62 | C | MA, Counseling | 24 |
| Becca | 35 | C | MA, Counseling | 2 |
| June | 50 | C | MA, Counseling | 22 |
| Khloe | 36 | AA | MA, Counseling | 9 |
| Sarah | 44 | C | MA, Counseling | 5 |

**Instrumentation and data collection.** I collected data using three different approaches in this study. Consenting participants filled out demographic surveys, completed email interviews, and participated in face-to-face interviews.

*Demographic surveys.* Each participant completed a demographic survey in which they provided basic information (age, race, years experience) about themselves, their current and past positions, and their level of education. This type of information aided me in finding possible commonalities based on demographics. A major benefit of the demographic survey was that it provided a way for me to become acquainted with my participants on a personal level, which in turn allowed me to better understand their experiences and stories (Flick, 2009; Gall et al., 2007; Glesne, 2006).

*Email interviews.* Once the research study was approved by the IRB, I emailed 52 junior high (grades 5-8) counselors in the six counties in Northeast Mississippi, which included an introductory statement explaining the study and request for participation. Once the counselors agreed to participate, I emailed the demographic surveys and email interviews to them. I created protocols for these interviews that were reviewed by a panel of experts. I asked the participants to respond and return within two weeks of the date received. Concurrently, I emailed the participants the dates and locations of the face-to-face focus group interviews.

I utilized email interviews in this study for several reasons. As the participants were spread across six different counties, using email interviews provided a way to obtain richer data due to the sizeable radius of the area. Through the use of email interviews, participants who were shy or might not have been completely open in face-to-face interviews were possibly more willing to share valuable information in an email interview. According to Flick (2009), email interviews are an acceptable and growing form of data collection. The only drawback is that, "any form of (real-life) contextualization of the statement and the persons in their study are much more difficult" (Flick, 2009, p. 268). However, I conducted one face-to-face focus group and

four individual interviews in this research study, which allowed for the real-life contextualization that might have been missing from the email interviews.

An issue recorded by other researchers is that through email interviews, the participants could create an alternate persona—stories of individuals who are not actually real or beneficial to the study could arise (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Gall et al., 2007). I avoided this issue because I did not email random individuals. All individuals who received an email interview were purposefully chosen based on their position as a junior high counselor in Northeast Mississippi.

*Focus group and individual interviews.* I led a focus group interview to involve the participants in an interactive setting in which they shared their experiences in relation to others'. According to Barbour (2007), "Any group discussion may be called a focus group as long as the researcher is actively encouraging of, and attentive to, the group interactions" (p. 2). Due to the dynamic of the group setting, focus group interviews allow for discussions that might not happen otherwise. Some participants may share certain stories or experiences after being triggered by the information shared by other participants in the focus group. This interaction of thoughts creates rich, revealing data that can be obtained no other way (Barbour, 2007; Bogdan & Bilken, 1998; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Gall et al. 2007; Glesne, 2006).

I determined the date and location of the focus group interview once the participants and their locations were identified. I emailed all of the counselors in the six counties and requested participation in a focus group. I provided several different dates, times, and locations from which to choose, and I asked them to share a convenient date and time if none of the options fit their schedules. However, after several sessions of emailing and replying to emails, I realized that most of the counselors were occupied with testing, retesting, paperwork, meetings, and interventions. Following various attempts to obtain as many participants as possible, one focus

group developed.  My focus group included six participants, and those six participants represented six different schools.  I conducted the focus group interview in an available room at a school district central office, which was an acceptable distance from each of the focus group participants.  During the focus group interview, I guided the participants through questions from a protocol, but their responses were used to form questions and discussions relevant to the study as the interview progressed (Barbour, 2007; Flick, 2009).  I transcribed the focus group interview, which lasted about 55 minutes.

I conducted individual interviews to give each consenting participant an opportunity to share his/her personal story.  My goal was to get six to eight participants to consent to individual interviews so that an in depth look at individual experiences with students at risk for dropping out could be recorded and analyzed.  After completing the process of requesting participation in individual interviews, four participants accepted.  I asked these participants to share their specific experiences, which provided data to guide in further understanding student dropout.  They were given the option of completing their interview by Skype, phone, or in person.  I interviewed one participant face-to-face in her office, and I interviewed the other three participants over the phone. .  I recorded and then transcribed each interview, which lasted approximately 40 minutes each.

*Research journal.*  During the data collection process, I kept a research journal in which I recorded ideas and concepts that I found significant or beneficial to my study.  The journal was beneficial because it included my "… ideas, fears, mistakes, confusion, and reactions to the experience and can include thoughts about the research methodology itself" (Merriam, 1998, p. 110).  This information can be useful in the data analysis process and helps the researcher remain reflexive and sensitive concerning the data (Lundeberg, Levin, & Harrington, 1999; Merriam,

79

1998).  I provided rich, descriptive discussion based on the data provided by my participants and the information that I gleaned from my journaling, as it provided my personal view of the research process.

**Data Analysis**

According to Rudestam and Newton (2007), the constant comparative method "…requires continual revision, modification, and amendment until all new units can be placed into an appropriate category and the inclusion of additional units into a category provides no new information" (p. 185).  This process allows for the most thorough analysis in a descriptive case study.  As each step of the data collection process is completed, the information gathered must be thoroughly analyzed and appropriately sorted.  This collecting and sorting procedure continues on until all data are collected and organized (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998; Gall et al., 2007; Rudestam & Newton, 2007).

In qualitative research, an effective method of analyzing data and determining recurring themes is coding data, which ensures consistency and creates an organization for uncovering commonalities among the transcripts (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Flick, 2009).  To effectively analyze the data, I utilized the constant comparative coding method.  General files were initially created in the beginning stages of research to organize unfolding ideas and themes that became more detailed and distinctive as the research progressed.  As these files developed, I categorized codes for various types of commonalities to better organize and analyze data (Flick, 2009). Recurring ideas were assigned codes, and pertinent information was assigned an appropriate code during data analysis.  When counselors shared information that related to a previously mentioned code, I recorded their exact words under the appropriate code.  If a new idea emerged, then I created a new code and recorded the supporting data with it.  I utilized this process,

described by Tesche (1990), throughout the entire data collection and analysis phase (Huberman & Miles, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

As my research data was collected, I dissected each email and transcript, purposefully looking for patterns, recurring themes, and prominent thoughts and experiences. After filing and coding, I began the process of piecing it all together to develop a final list of themes found throughout the transcripts, along with ideas that were not common but significant to the study. Under each theme, I provided verification from the emails and transcripts, and I connected findings to current theory and literature. In order to ensure trustworthiness, the analyses were member checked and reviewed by the dissertation chair (Creswell, 2009).

**Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how junior high (grades 5-8) counselors identify students at risk for dropping out, choose appropriate interventions, and view their direct role in dropout prevention, in six counties in Northeast Mississippi. The research questions explored were: (a) What are the perceptions of junior high counselors concerning students at risk for dropping out?, (b) In what ways do junior high counselors identify students at risk for dropping out?, and (c) How do junior high counselors inform their decisions of intervention with students at risk for dropping out? I completed data collection through the use of demographic surveys, individual email interviews, face-to-face focus group interviews, and face-to-face individual interviews.

I analyzed the data using a constant comparison method. After themes developed and were verified through the use of transcripts and current theory and research, I gave participants the opportunity to complete a member check. In the following chapters, I provide the findings of my research and then discuss implications and further research.

**Chapter IV: Analysis of Data**

I begin this chapter with a review of the research purpose and questions and a description of the research participants. I then categorized the data into overarching categories that related directly to the research questions. I discovered themes that emerged during discussions guided by the research questions. I provide a discussion of the findings and implications for future research in chapter five.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how junior high (grades 5-8) counselors identify students at risk for dropping out, choose appropriate interventions, and view their direct role in dropout prevention. I explored the following questions in this study in efforts to better understand the dropout crisis and how to prevent it as early as possible: (a) What are the perceptions of junior high counselors concerning students at risk for dropping out?, (b) In what ways do junior high counselors identify students at risk for dropping out?, and (c) How do junior high counselors inform their decisions of intervention for students at risk for dropping out?

**Research Participants**

I created a spreadsheet containing a list of all schools in Northeast Mississippi that included fifth through eighth grades. The spreadsheet contained the school name, school counselor's name, school counselor's email, and school's telephone number. I emailed each counselor and requested their participation in my research study, and I received a total of 15 volunteers. I interviewed these 15 junior high counselors either through email, phone, face to face, and/or in a focus group. From the information on their demographic surveys and interview

responses, I was able to get to know my participants and develop a deeper understanding of my data.  Using pseudonyms, I give a description of each of the participants and a synopsis of their individual responses.

**Reba.**  Reba was a 47 year old African-American woman with 10 years of experience as a junior high school counselor.  Before becoming a counselor, she worked for 15 years in both the psychology and mental health fields.  She completed an email interview in which she was clear, concise, and to the point with her answers.  She repeatedly mentioned that each case is treated individually in the field of counseling, and she stated that many times, "students may have ADHD, ADD, or other mental health issues that may not be diagnosed or the student may not be diagnosed correctly."  Reba recognized the significance of students' individual needs and how important the correct diagnosis is in order to meet that student's needs.  Her background in the mental health and psychology fields influenced her opinions and methods used concerning counseling junior high students.

Reba also participated in the focus group interview, during which time she spoke mainly on the topic of interventions.  She focused on the aspects of previous identification and use of cumulative folders to aid in the identification process.  Reba shared, "If they have a TST (teacher support team) folder come up with them from elementary school, we know immediately that we need to use interventions and monitor those students."  She distinguished these students as being at risk for dropping out; therefore, Reba noted these students need immediate attention to help diminish this risk.  She did not mention mental health issues during the focus group interview.

**Brittney.**  Brittney was a 64 year old Caucasian woman with six years of experience as a junior high school counselor.  Before becoming a counselor, she worked for six years in various capacities as a home economist and consultant for a major food company and special event and

project coordinator for a major university in Mississippi. She completed an email interview in which she gave detailed responses. She was specific with her answers and gave examples from her experiences. Brittney mentioned the significance of positive relationships and influences in students' lives several times during her interview. She shared, "For any intervention or strategy to be successful, the interventionist, teacher, administrator, counselor, or mentor must have a positive relationship with the student and let the student know that they truly care and are concerned about the student's success." She identified relationships with both in- and out- of school adults as major factor contributing to the issue of student dropout.

**Kim.** Kim was a 50 year old African-American woman with seven years of experience as a junior high school counselor. Before becoming a counselor, she worked for seven years as a community counselor, mostly within schools. She completed an email interview in which she referenced excessive absences many times as a determining factor of dropout. Kim also gave strong opinions about meeting all of the needs of the student not just the one that seems most evident. "Students today are faced with so many challenges. It is vital that we address all of their needs." Kim suggested the necessity to contribute quality guidance to the whole student because too many factors influence students' behaviors and emotional state: peers, family, biological, economics, teachers, media, etc.

Kim also participated in the focus group interview during which time she commented on each topic and spoke the most concerning everyone being involved in the process of providing interventions. In addressing the needs of the whole student she said, "They need that push from home and school." Kim believed parents and schools must collaborate to reach the students; she felt having a functioning team was vital.

**Jane.**  Jane was a 52 year old Caucasian woman with 25 years of experience as a junior high counselor, during which time she also worked as an afterschool tutor and as an adjunct psychology instructor at a local community college.  She completed an email interview in which she answered questions in list format or using simple sentences.  Jane gave direct responses that seemed to require minimal forethought or explanation to understand.  She did not repeatedly mention certain topics in her responses; rather, she gave information that was related by topic, but not connected within the topic.  For instance, she listed many characteristics of students at risk for dropping out, but did not give explanation or repeat them at any other place in the interview.  Jane responded factually and succinctly.

**Cate.**  Cate was a 38 year old African-American woman with six years of experience as a junior high counselor.  Before becoming a counselor, she worked for five years as a training coordinator of a medical group and for three years as a youth director.  She completed an email interview in which she was thorough, included many personal experiences, and expressed personal connection to the topic.  She provided the most information concerning students' family issues.  She shared, "I believe students who are at-risk for dropping out, above all, do not have a supportive home environment.  In other words, the home environment lacks one or several variables that are needed for a student to be successful.  For example, if a student doesn't feel loved at home then it's difficult for them to have a desire to be successful in school."  Cate understood the significance of family support; however, she neglected to discuss other issues that might influence students' risk for dropping out, such as academic issues or lack of teachers understanding them. Cate expressed that students at risk for dropping out needed interventions, which included mentors, positive relationships, and an individualized plan.

**Terry.** Terry was a 41 year old Caucasian woman with six years of experience as a junior high counselor. Before becoming a counselor, she worked for eight years in childcare, almost three years in child abuse prevention, and one year in afterschool care. Terry's experiences offered her different perspectives because she worked with children as a teacher and counselor. She completed an email interview in which she provided brief answers—each question had short phrases to two sentence answers at most. All but one of her responses were factual, and it gave an insightful view into her thoughts about student dropout. Terry shared, "The hugs, just being there for them, and unconditional love makes the biggest difference." This statement illustrated her belief that positive relationships are key factors in preventing student dropout, similar to Brittney.

**Lonny.** Lonny was a 61 year old Caucasian woman with 20 years of experience as a junior high counselor. Before becoming a counselor, she worked for one year as a teaching assistant, two years as a research assistant at a major university in Mississippi, and two years as an advisor at a major university in Mississippi. She completed an email interview in which she was thorough and included detailed descriptions of the interventions utilized in her experiences. Those interventions included enrolling students in a program called "Fast Track", utilizing the Teacher Support Team (TST) and the Response to Intervention (RtI) model. Lonny, through her years of experience, gained valuable insight into effective interventions, and her explanations highlighted her understanding of these effective interventions.

**Kris.** Kris was a 44 year old Caucasian woman with 12 years of experience as a junior high counselor. Before becoming a counselor, she worked for 12 years a counselor for the state department of youth services. She completed an email interview in which she provided direct, concise answers. She made no references to personal experiences. Within her responses she did

not mention anything more than once, and she did not make any connections among her answers. She stated that, "grades, attendance, and discipline" were identifiers and, "tutoring and counseling services" were effective interventions. She seemed to have a clear and concise understanding of the causes of student dropout and effective intervention strategies.

Kris also participated in the focus group interview. During the focus group interview, Kris repeated the information from her email interview; however, she added several statements related to parental involvement. "The first thing we try to do at the middle school is get their parents involved, and that's where you'll learn a lot as far as support." She shared more during the focus group interview than she did in her email interview, mostly related to family support or lack thereof. It was evident that lack of parental support was connected to dropout in Kris' experiences.

**Julie.** Julie was a 56 year old Caucasian woman with 23 years of experience as a junior high counselor. Before becoming a counselor and while serving as a counselor, she worked for 11 years as a secondary classroom instructor, for three years as an adjunct instructor at a community college, and for seven years as a secondary advanced education chair. She participated in the focus group interview. During this interview, Julie was vocal about students having limited choices concerning their education. She communicated,

> I think that they want more control over career choices, particularly in the upper levels. I think that a lot of students feel that there is too much that is mandated in every field. Some of them are already beginning to look at their chosen pathway, and they would like to be able to veer off of that strict curriculum into things that would benefit them more in preparing for their career.

Julie felt strongly that students were more likely to succeed and finish school if they had more of a choice in their academic career in junior high and high school. Julie suggested offering ownership to students through choices and making learning relevant to their life and future career, which might lead to a decrease in student dropout rates.

**Shay.** Shay was a 62 year old Caucasian male with 24 years of experience as a junior high counselor. Before becoming a counselor, he worked for 12 years as a science teacher and coach. Shay contributed to the focus group each time that a new topic surfaced. He, like Julie, had strong opinions about students not having enough options in the school system. He commented, "Students would like to see more vocational opportunities; they don't have enough of those in a lot of school systems." Shay, like Julie, expressed the importance of providing choices to the students in efforts of increasing their motivation to be successful in school. He also spoke about general identifiers of students at risk for dropping out, such as excessive absences and academic failure.

**Chelsea.** Chelsea was a 30 year old Caucasian woman with five years of experience as a junior high counselor. Before becoming a counselor, she worked for almost a year in community counseling services. During the focus group interview, she only spoke a few times, but she spoke with certainty and directly from her experiences. Her statement was, "I would much rather be called the bad kid rather than the kid who is not smart. They would much rather look dumb behaviorally." This statement sparked an insightful conversation with the other counselors in the focus group about the interconnectedness of factors concerning student dropout. Although she did not share as much as others, when she did speak her words prompted others to speak. Chelsea spoke to the idea that students would not admit to peers, teachers, or parents that they struggle academically, but they would behave inappropriately to increase student acceptance.

**Becca.**  Becca was a 35 year old Caucasian woman with two years of experience as a junior high counselor.  Before becoming a counselor, she worked for nine years as an elementary school teacher.  She completed a face-to-face interview in which she was thorough in her responses and appeared happy to help with this study.  During the interview, she shared identifiers for students at risk for dropping out and interventions used with these students, but she spoke at length about the importance of counselors connecting with these students;  "Talking to them, trying to provide all the options that are available to them."  Becca expressed the significance of having conversations and interactions, which builds relationships. These relationships demonstrate support and trust with students. In addition, during these interactions students become aware of their choices.  She voiced the importance of ensuring that students knew they had a support system and had options other than dropping out.

**June.**  June was a 50 year old Caucasian woman with 22 years of experience as a junior high counselor.  She completed a phone interview in which she shared many personal experiences that influenced her opinions and processes.  She emphasized the importance of parental support during the intervention process—"That's always been my biggest thing— parental support…we'll have a sit down meeting and we'll just say, look we're blah, and we can calm them down and usually get them on our side."  June shared that once students are in the counselor's office, the issue is typically severe, and the next step is to call the parents in and get them involved in the intervention process.  She expressed that many times the parents are emotional and inquiring during this time, and it takes everyone working together to ensure the student's best interest is priority.  June's statements were straightforward, and she made it clear that getting everyone involved and being positive were essential.

**Sarah.**  Sarah was a 44 year old Caucasian woman with five years of experience as a junior high counselor.  She completed a phone interview in which she was very open and honest about her personal experience with students—and parents.  She shared,

> Do you not even watch TV?  Do you not see things on TV that you would like to have but you don't?  You know, I mean, I just don't get it, and I've noticed that it's a generational thing in families.

She had various experiences in which students were repeating the path of their parent(s)—their parents struggled in school and dropped out, and they were on the same path—and she shared her feelings concerning the connection lack of parental support and dropout.  Sarah expressed strong emotions concerning students at risk for dropping out and how intervening was almost impossible without parental support.  She was one of the only counselors to mention drugs as a serious problem.

**Khloe.**  Khloe was a 36 year old African-American woman with nine years of experience as a junior high counselor.  She completed a phone interview in which she shared many specific programs that her district offered for students.  She spoke about academic programs in which students were given opportunities to double up in classes they were failing, mentoring programs that allowed students to pair up with mentors and talk about their long term goals and set short term goals, and behavior programs that awarded students for having good behavior for a certain period of time.  Khloe explained that doubling up classes involved taking a content area class a second time within a day during special classes like art, physical education, or study hall.  She shared that some students were assigned mentors they could talk with and who they were accountable to, and these mentors were typically high school students, teachers, or adult volunteers.  She also expressed the implementation of incentive programs, which were

90

implemented to aid in increasing students' achievement; students received awards like extra recess time, ice cream, or a movie day.  Khloe felt that her district excelled at supporting students, and her experiences concurred.

In the subsequent sections, I share the themes that surfaced during my data analysis and collection.  My participants' quotes and experiences and current literature support each theme.

**Themes**

During the collection and analysis of data, commonalities among the participants' responses formed four themes.  These themes materialized as I began looking for consistent thoughts and experiences from the participants' stories.  These four themes offer a glimpse into my participants' experiences of working with students at risk for dropping out. Four themes surfaced during and after the coding process.

**It's like a cycle...**  The counselors made one thing clear—connections among the factors inevitably led to students becoming at risk for dropping out.  The counselors shared experiences that supported this notion.  It became evident to me that these connections created a cycle that took expertise and commitment to break.  The counselors' suggested that, (a) excessive absences are usually followed by academic struggles; (b) academic struggles are often overshadowed by behavior problems; (c) behavior problems typically exist due to either academic issues or other personal issues (drug use, mental health issue, indifference, etc.); (d) lack of choices can result in students having excessive absences, academic struggles, and/or behavior problems; and (e) lack of parental support seems to be a commonality in most of the students at risk for dropping out, and its existence relates to all other factors.  This cycle is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Cycle of Becoming a Student at Risk for Dropping Out

```
                    Excessive
                    Absences


        Lack of          Student           Academic
        Parental         Dropout            Issues
        Support


                Lack of
                Choices        Behavior Issues
```
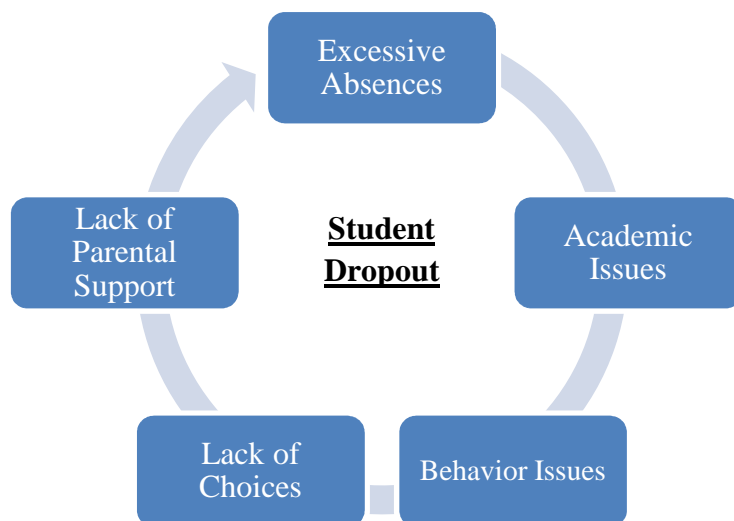
***Excessive absences and academic struggle.*** A connection between excessive

absenteeism and academic struggle surfaced at the beginning of each conversation with the

counselors. First, excessive absence was mentioned; eleven counselors mentioned excessive

absences as a characteristic and identifier of students at risk for dropping out. They

communicated that a student who misses often is not at risk for dropping out based solely on

absenteeism, but often if a student is missing school excessively, then other factors are present.

According to Khloe, "Because they are not at the age where they can dropout, we do see a lot of

absenteeism, and that sometimes occurs when students are behind a couple of years in school."

Another counselor, Sarah, expressed that the problem of absenteeism was difficult to address.

She shared,

> A lot of it is with excessive absences. You know, we do all we can with the truancy
>
> officer, but I mean we can only do so much. There's only one of him, and when you've
>
> got absentee rates as high as we have…he has an impossible job.

Her frustrations with absenteeism seemed evident. Other counselors mentioned absenteeism throughout the conversations, too. Kim shared, "If a kid misses 25-30 days, their grades usually show it. If you're not there, you don't do well", and Sarah communicated, "…Number one, excessive absences; that's number one right there." They expressed that students who extensively missed school were usually students considered at risk, and that students must regularly attend school to be successful.

The counselors also revealed that absenteeism was often a façade for a deeper issue. Becca communicated,

It's absences, but when you really dig into it and get to looking at it, those absences are because of the family dynamic—what's going on at home and the fact that the parents just don't enforce that they be here.

Becca, along with other counselors, shared that if students consistently miss school in fifth through eighth grade, then other issues usually exist, too. Julie shared a similar notion, "In the lower grades, the lack of attendance is going to be more of a reflection of lack of parental support because those children cannot get themselves there a lot of the time." Both Becca and Julie discussed specifically what other participants spoke briefly about or mentioned—that absenteeism is a problem, but it typically ties into the greater issue of lack of parental support.

The counselors expressed that students with high absenteeism were usually students at risk for dropping out, but when asked to talk about identifiers, they gave more specifics. Kim shared, "After five days, if a child was absent for five days, then the attendance officer will automatically pick them up and call to see what's going on with them." Jane reiterated what Kim said by stating, "If attendance is the issue, a referral is made to the school attendance officer after parent contact has been made." The counselors communicated that attendance becomes an

identifier when the students miss five or more times, and at that point, they receive notice and are able to try to investigate the situation.

*I noticed that excessive absences was brought up in each conversation, but the fact that the absences were happening with students who could not get themselves to school was not really discussed. Although many of the students ultimately chose not to get on the bus, if no one was there to prompt them, then why not? What can be done to get these students to school if there is no one at home? How can this absenteeism be addressed head on? I sensed the counselors' frustrations concerning their inability to do much concerning absenteeism, and I also sensed their desire to have the opportunity to share their next concern, which they felt linked directly to absenteeism (Field Notes, October 1, 2012).*

After conversations about absenteeism, the counselors usually transitioned into conversations about academic struggle, suggesting the cycle and interconnectedness. Counselors agreed that students having little or no academic success connected to dropout, even if other factors were involved. Lonny stated, "Students who are two or more grade levels behind, who have no support at home, and who do not value education or are not considered traditional students are typically at risk of dropping out of school." Kim had a similar response. "A student at risk would be a student who constantly struggles with their school work and has no support at home. They would have no interest in school or trying to improve themselves." Brittney shared similar experiences and provided detail concerning the long lasting effects of academic failure. She shared,

> These are students who are many times misdiagnosed as students who don't care! They
> are children who are very low in the skills that they need to help them be successful.

They are students who have "failed" since grade school, and they get into trouble many

times to cover up for their inability to be successful in the classroom.

In relation to this, Sarah spoke strongly about special education students being at a higher risk

for dropping out and shared,

They can't do the work, and if they're going for regular diplomas, and they're SPED, it's

just about not going to happen. I've seen it happen a few times, but I mean we have

tutoring for them, and they go to this one specific person who works just with them. But,

SPED…I should've mentioned that earlier. That's a big characteristic right there.

*I sense in Sarah's voice how this issue is significant to dropout rates because of her*

*disbelief that she forgot to mention this, and it makes me think, "Are special education students*

*just expected to barely scrape by, get a 'certificate', or dropout?" They weren't mentioned in*

*the other interviews, and yet they play a central role in dropout. How do they fit into this picture*

*of student dropout (Field Notes, August 31, 2012)?*

The counselors communicated the importance of providing remediation to students who

are declining academically in a timely manner. They shared that immediate response to

unsuccessfulness and discouragement was a key factor in increasing student achievement. The

words unsuccessful and failure resonated throughout each interview. Kris communicated, "The

lack of success…if they're not successful in that academic world, for reasons that vary, then they

don't want to be a part of it", and Shay shared,

Each consecutive year after that, after the first initial failure or whatever, if they continue

not to have success, it adds more fuel to the fire, and they don't see another option. And

when there are no options for them, or they've been waiting another year to get to the 8$^{th}$

or 9$^{th}$ grade, as soon as they get old enough they are out the door.

Similarly, Terry stated, "Low IQ, repeating grades, and lack of exposure to various experiences are all sure signs of students becoming at risk for dropping out." Both Kris and Terry expressed the significance of the connection between academic struggle and failure to student dropout.

When reading through the transcripts and guiding the conversations, I felt as though academic struggles/failure was the most significant indicator of students becoming at risk for dropping out, and yet it was almost said as an afterthought in most cases. The counselors knew it was a major factor, but when compared to the other, more emotional factors, it did not stand out , because it seemed to be a byproduct of all of the other factors. You could sense them thinking and saying in so many words that student success would not be an issue, in most cases, if the other factors were addressed.

*Again, this weight of "I can only do so much, now sit back and watch the wheel turn" was heavy. The counselors once more were referring to this cycle. They were able to recognize and share how important identifying low student achievement was, and yet they seemed to be discouraged because realistically it was usually superficial of much deeper issues (Field Notes, October 1, 2012).*

The counselors agreed that other factors in the cycle, such as parental support and excessive absences, were pressing issues leading to academic struggles. They concurred that if students were unsuccessful in school and if they began failing grades, then identification and interventions were necessary to elicit a turn around. Several methods for identifying students with low grades were shared. June voiced how important early identification of academic struggle is. "I need to be doing that as soon as school gets started. We look at all the MCT scores." Khloe expressed a similar view,

96

Just going through a record you'll see somebody that was an A, B, and C student, and

then something changed, and the test scores were low. They're not passing their classes,

and they're starting to be retained; that kind of thing.

Her comment relates to the notion that decrease in grades is a sign that students might become at risk for dropping out.

The counselors shared two particular methods to identify students at risk for dropping out, in relation to academics—teacher referral and previous identification. Jane, Khloe, and Kim mentioned teacher referrals, and Jane, Becca, and Reba indicated prior identification through being flagged in the system as their main identification methods for locating at-risk students. The counselors mentioned these methods immediately in our conversations about identification of at risk students, and they seemed confident in their effectiveness as they explained that these referred and/or flagged students are usually the ones who need interventions.

Computer programs that identify students with low grades were mentioned. Reba shared, "I monitor the students' grades, behavior, attendance, and test scores with the school progress monitoring tool." Brittney explained, "Many are identified on the Mississippi Department of Education MSIS Screen." Chelsea discussed how the monitoring program that she utilized identified students at risk. She communicated,

We have universal screenings three times a year in both academics and behavior, and a

lot of those kids are identified at the beginning of the year each year through that

universal screener. They're assessed in reading and math; it's like a 30 minute test. We

use STAR math and STAR reading, and then with our universal screener for behavior we

use what we call COOKS universal screener. And I think you also use grades each

semester and monitor discipline referrals.

97

Similar to Chelsea's mention of a universal screener, Jane referenced the SAMS computer program, "Students can be identified through reports from SAMS data system, teacher, or administrator referral." The counselors explained that these monitoring programs aided in the process of identifying exactly what academic factors were negatively influencing students, which might then impact absenteeism.

As these different counselors were sharing how they monitor grades themselves, use programs, and/or have screenings, I began to wonder. Why could there not be a single monitoring system utilized by all school districts—maybe not nationwide, but at least statewide? By doing this, consistency would exist, counselors could more freely communicate with one another about suggestions and advice because they would all be familiar with "the system", and students could be easily followed if they moved schools, districts, or states. I noticed the counselors took pride when discussing their programs, and I think that happened because it made them feel very professional and knowledgeable to share information like that, and rightfully so. But I wonder if they have ever considered how having a single screener utilized throughout the state might benefit everyone involved, especially the students.

*I also wondered why more counselors did not specifically mention teacher referral of students with low grades. A couple of counselors specifically mentioned this, but not the majority. This led me to think, "Do teachers rely solely on programs to refer students, or are they still as active in sharing this information with the appropriate resources?" (Field Notes, September 25, 2012)*

Many of the counselors shared that if students began excessively missing classes, then their grades typically began to drop, and failure was not far behind. June shared, "If they are missing school a lot and their grades are starting to fall we start worrying", and Shay stated, "The

grades go hand in hand with attendance. When a kids misses 25-30 days, their grades usually

show it. And the same thing, if their grades are up, they're usually there every day. If you're not

there you don't do well." Other counselors confirmed these comments as they agreed that

consistent absenteeism was usually coupled with academic struggle. They communicated that

these two factors typically went hand-in-hand, and again this refers to the cycle.

In the focus group discussion when Shay made this comment, heads nodded around the

room. It was evident that it was that simple—if students do not come to school, then they are not

going to be able to pass the classes and be successful. Throughout the interviews the counselors

agreed that student attendance was necessary for high academic achievement.

Throughout the interviews, the counselors reiterated that students at risk for dropping out

typically have more than one factor influencing them. The counselors shared that investigating

past the most evident factors to the hidden factors is essential. An effective intervention process

includes recognizing the connections among factors and addressing each of them. Otherwise, the

interventions provided are only a temporary solution.

***Behavior and academic struggle.*** Counselors discussed inappropriate behavior and the

various causes of inappropriate behavior in each interview. After these causes were shared, the

conversations turned to the connection of inappropriate behavior and academic struggle, part of

the cycle. When the counselors began conversations about inappropriate behavior, they shared

issues that were not necessarily behavioral but issues that might cause behavior challenges.

These issues were: (a) lack of interest and indifference, (b) substance abuse, (c) mental health

issues, and (d) academics: looking unintelligent versus disobedient.

*Lack of interest and indifference.* Four counselors shared that some students did not like

school or want to be in school. They communicated that encounters with indifferent students

were rare, but these four counselors said they experienced it.  The counselors shared that indifference was sometimes a façade for deeper issues, but that in some cases students would say they simply did not like school.  Jane suggested that some reasons might be "lack of interest and indifference."  Kim mentioned students seemed to have "…no interest in school or trying to improve themselves", and Sarah stated that students "…just don't care, could care less.  Don't care if I'm here, don't care what I do, don't care if I ever do anything."  Both Jane and Kim expressed experiences in which students expressed their dislike of school, which ultimately led to academic struggles.  Kris presented a unique way to consider lack of interest and communicated,

> I think when there's a lack of motivation, academics starts first because they don't want to be there.  So, they think it's easier for me to do whatever it takes for me to go to the office and get sent home, where I want to be in the first place.

Occasionally students do not like school for no apparent reason, but usually their disinterest or indifference stems from other factors like academic struggle.  This is another example of the cycle.

*Substance abuse.*  Jane, Sarah, and Khloe specifically identified substance abuse in their discussions.  While it was just mentioned by Jane and Khloe, Sarah detailed her district's struggle with it.  She shared,

> …drugs…I'm telling you mostly all of it goes back to a severe drug problem that we have in this county, and it's the parents.  They're getting it from the parents, and the parents don't care.  They're giving it to them, and it's bad. …I can't be here because I've been up all night because so and so is making Meth outside in the labor in the living room, and they'll come to me smelling like it, so of course it's true.

Although drug use was not a common thread among the counselors' responses, Sarah shared that this was a major issue in her school district and if it could be more controlled, then the likelihood of more students graduating would be higher.

*Mental health issues.* Three counselors mentioned mental health issues in their discussions. Kim stated, "Some may have mental health problems." Lonny shared, "Some have mental health issues that prevent them from learning at a level consistent with success." Reba provided an even more specific example; "These students may have ADHD, ADD, or other mental health issues that many not be diagnosed or the student may not be diagnosed correctly." Reba's experiences involved working with students who were diagnosed with mental health issues after first struggling academically, which led to her connection of mental health issues and student dropout. In these conversations, the counselors shared that behavior and/or academic struggles typically emerged when dealing with students in these situations, and a discussion about the connectedness of behavior problems and academic issues followed. These discussions emphasized the cycle and connectedness of factors.

*Academics: Looking unintelligent versus disobedient.* Eight counselors mentioned behavior problems as a characteristic and identifier of students at risk for dropping out. They expressed that when students began to fail academically, then behavior problems were followed closely behind. They shared that students usually developed behavior problems to deemphasize their academic inadequacies; the cycle persists. Chelsea shared, "They also think, 'I would much rather be called the bad kid rather than the kid who is not smart.' They would much rather look dumb behaviorally." Julie held a similar point of view and stated,

They think, 'If I can't do the work, then I can still be the class clown,' and so the

behavior does become an issue a lot of times when the root is their lack of academic

success in the classroom.

This statement reflected Julie's belief that students would rather receive attention for

unacceptable behavior than for failing grades.  Brittney stated, "If a student is not successful in

the classroom for academics, this many times leads to inappropriate behavior." These statements

reflected Brittney and Julie's belief that students would rather receive attention for unacceptable

behavior than for failing grades.

*The counselors seemed to have a soft heart here.  I sensed that they felt that they 'have*

*to' punish students when they act out or inappropriately behave due to school policy, yet in some*

*situations it is simply to cover up other inadequacies.  And I sensed that the counselors knew this*

*and felt a little guilty because they were aware of the true story behind the 'bad behavior'.  This*

*is a hard thing—determining what is fair punishment for misbehavior in different instances...or*

*is it ever even an option (Field Notes, September 25, 2012).*

The topic of inappropriate behavior was discussed in many of the conversations.  Jane,

Reba, Kris, Cate, and Terry shared that discipline issues were at the forefront concerning

identifying students at risk for dropping out.  Brittney explained,

They get involved in negative behaviors both at home and in school.  They also have

received many office referrals and have received in-school suspensions, out of school

suspensions, or have been referred to the alternative school for a period of time.

June expressed, "They're not coming to school or they're getting in trouble.  The detention

center—that's another thing.  I mean, they kind of stick out like a sore thumb."  These statements

indicated that in their experience receiving suspensions and/or referrals to the detention center

were characteristics of students at risk. Similarly, Khloe stated that students' "behavior in class—doing things where they get sent to in school suspension or overnight suspension," might be an indicator for the student being at risk. From their experiences, counselors seemed to perceive inappropriate behavior as a precursor to students becoming at risk for dropout.

The counselors agreed that students who declined academically usually began to also have behavior problems. They voiced that these two things went hand in hand—decline in academics and decline in appropriate behavior, the cycle. Regardless of the catalyst, the counselors identified inappropriate behavior as a characteristic and identifier of students at risk for dropping out. Kris suggested students think, "So, if I can't do well here then I would be better off at home." She experienced students who displayed various behaviors in attempt to be sent home to avoid failure, inadequacies, and attention.

*So then what do we do with these students? How do we refocus that energy in a way that creates success and motivation? I imagined that she was probably thinking the same thing. The counselors seemed be disheartened in acknowledging that students many times ended up in worse environments, like detention, alternative school, etc., and yet they also seemed resolved in that, that was just a part of the cycle (Field Notes, September, 25, 2012).*

Throughout conversations with the counselors, I noticed the counselors mentioned behavior problems and then spoke about students hiding the real problem, the academic struggle. For example, Brittany shared, "If a student is not successful in the classroom for academics this many times leads to inappropriate behavior", and Kris communicated,

> I think when there's lack of motivation academics starts first because they don't want to
> be there, so they think it's easier for me to do whatever it takes for me to go to the office
> and get sent home, where I want to be in the first place.

Both of these statements reflect the counselors' belief that many times students' academic struggles lead to inappropriate behavior; "I would much rather be called the bad kid rather than the kid who is not smart. They would much rather look dumb behaviorally." The counselors made connections between behavior problems and academic problems. They communicated that students usually demonstrate negative behavior to conceal their academic inadequacies. Counselors shared that students would rather receive laughter or attention for inappropriate behavior than for academic failure. Ensuring students obtain appropriate academic interventions is important for not only their academic success, but also for the avoidance of potential behavior problems.

*Choice and options.* Many of the counselors shared that students feel trapped in the traditional educational cycle. In other words, if students feel that they cannot follow the established cycle from kindergarten to twelfth grade, then they are unlikely to graduate. Chelsea echoed this notion when she shared,

> I think that a lot of students feel that there is too much that is mandated in every field when some of them are already beginning to look at their chosen pathway, and they would like to be able to veer off of that strict curriculum into things that would benefit them more in preparing for their career.

She went on to say that when students see this predetermined pathway, they begin to feel discouraged. Similarly, Shay expressed, "Everyone does not go to college and they try to pigeon hole kids", and Julie communicated, "You don't ever want to undersell a student, but I still think there are some students who would be best served if they could leave prepared to go to a vocational area." They shared that if students were given more of a choice in their graduation

pathway, then they would be more confident and more likely to graduate; students are more likely to set realistic goals and attempt to reach them if they have options.

In relation to the notion of choice and options is the fact that many students feel like they have no place in the traditional educational system; they get discouraged because they do not understand how education relates to success in their future life and career. However, they do not have any other choices, so they are stuck. Chelsea shared her experience concerning this idea:

I think a lot of kids don't put the connection of why they need to finish school and how that's going to affect them in the long run. I think kids look at their math class they're taking or the English class and they think, 'How is this going to help me be successful at being a truck driver?", or whatever profession they're looking at. A lot of them don't see how that related to their success in becoming whatever they want to become.

*When Chelsea shared this, I sensed that she almost said it with an attitude of, "And what do we do?" You cannot go into every teacher's room and ensure that they are sharing their knowledge in a way that is meaningful and motivating; that they are making real world connections to show relevance. So what does a counselor do then, address a teacher, which risks major emotional consequences if the teacher feels the counselor is going 'against them' or evaluating them negatively? That is a lot to consider, and you can sense that in Chelsea's statement. This blanket of "my hands are tied" is heavy again (Field Notes, September 25, 2012).*

Kris shared a similar experience; "Students become discouraged with the current system because they just don't 'fit'. The current system does not offer options other than traditional diplomas in many systems. There needs to be more vocational and GED options for students."

This idea of not fitting in was echoed by several of the counselors. It became evident that some students did not fit in the regular system. Julie stated,

> They want more control over their career choices. I think that a lot of students feel that there is too much that is mandated in every field when some of them are already beginning to look at their chosen pathway, and they would like to be able to veer off of that strict curriculum into things that would benefit them more in preparing for their career.

Julie seemed to feel that if students had more choice in their educational pathway, then they might be more likely to work toward high achievement complete it. This connectedness between lack of choice and academic achievement is another example of the cycle. The counselors also mentioned the lack of vocational opportunities as an issue. Shay communicated,

> Also, I think, with all students these days, they'd like to see more vocational opportunities. They don't have enough of those in a lot of school systems. At one time we had real good vocational systems in some schools, and they cut it out, and now they're going back to it. And I think the kids are one of the reasons why they're going back to it; they want more vocational.

Reba expressed, "I think providing more vocational information, if the curriculum could change that would be wonderful—where students could actually have the opportunity before they get to high school to be more exposed to different opportunities." These counselors seemed to believe that a variety of choices would produce more graduates. Julie and Shay expressed what other counselors briefly mentioned—some students want more options. In their experiences, the counselors dealt with students who wanted another way to get to the end—to finish. They were tired of failing, being labeled, and never being good enough, and they wanted to know the

quickest way to get out and move on with their lives.  In the words of Jane, some students were, "frustrated with the system."

*During this conversation, Julie and Shay expressed that they were not sure how schools could effectively implement a system of determining students who would go the vocational route rather than the traditional route, but that it would change so many things.  They also mentioned not wanting to shortchange any student, but at the same time they believed that making vocational opportunities available would increase graduation rates.  This was something I could tell that they had discussed a lot and felt strongly about, but I, like them, wondered how that could be implemented ethically and effectively.  The questions that they posed and implied were the same ones developing in my mind. (Field Notes, September 25, 2012).*

Khloe communicated that some students begin to perform poorly and when they become a part of the intervention cycle with little or no results, then they lose motivation and are at a higher risk of dropping out.  Becca echoed this when she spoke about students feeling "out of place" after failing.  Her experiences counseling 15 and 16 year old students who were still in the middle school led to her belief that when students begin to feel isolated and option less due to failure, then they are more likely to be at risk for dropping out.  The counselors agreed that when students feel stuck in a cycle and like they have no choice, then the probability of dropout increases; many times excessive absences, academic struggles, and inappropriate behavior follow.

June and Khloe shared experiences in which students were simply carrying on a generational cycle of failure.  They communicated that when students' families do not make obtaining an education a priority, then they are more likely to do the same.  Chelsea and Kris brought up the issue of not fitting into the educational system.  In their experiences, students who

are not given enough choices regarding their educational pathway are more likely to begin missing school and making poor grades—more likely to enter the cycle of failure that leads to dropout.

*Lack of parental support.* Eleven counselors referenced parental support in our conversations about characteristics and identification of students at risk for dropping out. Once this topic surfaced, thorough explanations of specific instances followed. The counselors responded with fervor and certainty when speaking about parental support. Cate stated,

> I believe that students, who are at-risk for dropping out, above all, do not have a supportive home environment. In other words, the home environment lacks one or several variables that are needed for a student to be successful in school.

Cate's response exemplified her belief that the home environment plays a crucial role in student dropout. June shared a similar opinion, "A lot of these students' parents maybe didn't finish school or even dropped out, you know. They dropped out or only got their GED or something, but I feel like most of this starts from home." The counselors agreed that often students follow in the steps of their parent(s)/guardian(s); therefore, the academic role of their parent(s)/guardian(s) guides these students' decisions. Lonny expressed, "Until parents believe in the importance of an education and the environment in which students live is improved, we are fighting a tough battle." Khloe recognized the negative effects of lack of family support in her experiences, as well. She shared,

> I believe that at this age there are a lot of environmental factors that play into why students may not want to be in school, and it could be their family environment. If their family doesn't put too much emphasis on the value of education, then they kind of have that same feeling.

Lonny and Khloe seemed to feel that the values of students' families were passed on to the students and that they are products of their environments. Other counselors' stories continued to highlight lack of parental support as an issue. Brittany communicated, "Many of them do not have positive role models in the home and they don't have positive influences in their lives." Julie stated, "I think a lot of times dropout goes back to that parental support. I see those kids for whatever reason don't have good relationships with their parents…." This illustrates the counselors' belief that having positive relationships with and support from their families increases their likelihood of success.

Sarah detailed the negative effects of lack of family support. She stated that she had many experiences with this. Sarah shared,

No parental support…Parents think, "Mama and Daddy don't have a high school diploma, so why should you have one? You know, we don't see sense in it; we're doing fine", and they're not doing fine but in their mind they think they are. Which, I just think, do you not even watch television? Do you not see things on television that you would like to have but you don't? You know, I mean, I just don't get it. And I've noticed it's a generational thing in families. Most of the parents didn't finish school and didn't even get a GED. Then all of their kids either have dropped out or tried to get a GED and didn't or maybe some of them might have gotten a GED but that's rare.

This idea, of students becoming at risk for dropping out as a generational issue, appeared in conversations with other participants. Kris expressed, "Sometimes it's generational. It's family. Nobody in the family has ever graduated from high school or been successful in school, so it's a self-fulfilling prophecy for some." Many counselors suggested that students at risk for dropping out were part of a family who did not value education and did not provide educational support

from home.  The counselors shared their feelings of helplessness and sadness for students who were in these situations.  One thing resonated throughout the discussions on this topic with the counselors— if the student's home life is not supportive of the things that the students are learning at school, then the probability of student success is not high.  This notion of lack of parental support connecting to lack of motivation and academic struggles further reflects the cycle.

   *So what do we do, then?  Sarah's frustration with the parents was clear, and there was no doubt that this was a major issue for her and others.  With that being said, if this is such a big problem—always has been and always will be—then how can it end?  Can parents be forced to care—to come to a program?  Do we screen them when their kids enter school and if the parents did not graduate or get a GED, then they are required to attend workshops and go through a program or training?  The emotion that these counselors felt during conversations about this topic was undeniable, and I feel rightfully so.  You could sense that they felt as though their hands were tied, and all they could do was watch these students follow in their families' footsteps.  This was disheartening and thought provoking (Field Notes, August 31, 2012).*

   Several counselors shared that some students had responsibilities at home that did not allow them to focus on their schoolwork and caused excessive absences.  Khloe had experiences with students who were serving as primary caregivers, and they began falling behind in school as a result.  She revealed,

   I have had some experiences with students who've had sick parents.  A couple of parents

   have had cancer and the child has been the primary caregiver, which caused a lot of

   absenteeism.  Trying to take care of a younger sibling has the same affect.

110

The counselors discussed a few other related issues, such as parent/s in jail and student pregnancy. Becca shared other issues that might affect the students; "A family member, usually Mom or Dad, that's been really sick or put in jail; things like that. Something has happened in the family dynamic, and they can't handle it." Although these topics were mentioned, the counselors who mentioned them stated that they were more likely to occur at the high school level rather than the elementary and middle levels; they would rarely appear at the elementary and junior high levels. They shared that these unique circumstances were addressed in a different manner, as these students were not necessarily living in disadvantaged homes, but were in circumstances that needed particular interventions.

Throughout these conversations, the counselors all agreed on one thing consistently—without parental support most of the other factors only worsen. Many counselors even shared that in their experiences other factors only became factors because students lacked parental support. Sarah expressed, "If you just give me excessive absences and lack of home support; those two will do it. Most of them have four or five of these things going on." Julie stated, "It's a combination of factors. The lack of attendance is going to be more of a reflection of lack of parental support because those children cannot get themselves there a lot of the time." These ideas illustrate the relationship of factors—the cycle. In addition to specifying lack of parental support as a factor, Cate went on to say, "For example, if a student doesn't feel loved at home then it's difficult for them to have a desire to be successful in school." Her statement resonated in many of the conversations as the counselors spoke about parental support and its pivotal role in dropout prevention.

Throughout every interview, parents and/or family were mentioned at some point. The counselors, in their experiences, considered the support or non-support of a student's family as a

111

major determining factor in the student's academic path.  When discussing causes of student

dropout, almost every counselor spoke of the vitality of family/parental support, and they also

communicated that even if other factors existed, this one factor had the most influence on the

student.  Their identification of the cycle was clear during these conversations.

Sighs and shrugs accompanied each conversation about the wide spread effects of lack of

parental supports.  The counselors shared that when students do not feel that their family

supports them academically, they are very likely to miss school, misbehave, suffer academically,

and be unsuccessful.  Discussions concerning why the lack of parental supports exists did not

surface, but discussions concerning how its absence was detrimental to student success emerged

during each interview.

**There's just so much we can do…**  The counselors communicated feelings of

frustration when discussing certain topics.  These feelings emerged when the counselors

mentioned boundaries that restricted them from implementing beneficial interventions.  One

boundary mentioned by the counselors related to absenteeism.  They shared that at the

elementary and junior high level students were not able to get themselves to school, so

addressing this issue involved gaining parental support.  When this point surfaced, the counselors

expressed frustration because in their experiences many parents were not supportive or involved,

although why the parents were not involved was not discussed, which led to an inability to

confront absenteeism.  Julie shared, "In the lower grades, the lack of attendance is going to be

more of a reflection of lack of parental support because those children cannot get themselves

there a lot of the time." Other counselors agreed with Julie and experienced frustrations with

boundaries related to lack of parental support and involvement.  Concerning absences, the

counselors shared they could only intervene in limited ways, such as sending home notes or making parent calls; they communicated, "there's only so much we can do."

During discussions about parental support and involvement, counselors' frustrations escalated. When the counselors spoke about boundaries created by lack of parental support and involvement, their body language, voice intonation, and word choice indicated their frustration. Sarah exemplified these frustrations when she spoke about how parents in her experiences were oblivious concerning the value of education. She said,

> Parents think, "Mama and Daddy don't have a high school diploma, so why should you have one? You know, we don't' see sense in it; we're doing fine", and they're not doing fine but in their mind the think they are. Which, I just think, do you not even watch television?

Her experiences involving students with unsupportive families seemed to produce the most frustration; she shared her belief that "there's only so much we can do" to increase parental support. The counselors agreed that without parental support, successful interventions were unlikely to be long lasting, and this reality generated emotions of helplessness.

In my field notes, I expressed my observation of the counselors' frustrated responses to topics such as absenteeism and family support. From their responses it was clear that they felt like they could only do so much with students at the junior high level because these students still depend on their parent(s)/guardian(s) for things as simple as transportation. Clear boundary lines existed that separated what they could and could not do as school counselors, and this proved to elicit feelings of helplessness in the counselors.

Frustration appeared in conversations about low academic achievement when the counselors expressed the connection among the factors. When speaking about the connection

among factors, mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, the counselors shared that low academic achievement typically connected to lack of parental support, which usually connected to excessive absences. The counselors' expressed frustration during their conversations about this cycle of connectedness. Breaking the cycle would involve addressing each factor individually, in turn addressing them as a whole; however the counselors shared that this notion was unrealistic because "there's only so much we can do". The topic of frustration due to boundaries is significant, as no current literature is available concerning counselors' perspectives about addressing student dropout and the frustrations associated with that process.

**Effective interventions are essential…** The counselors stressed the importance of implementing effective interventions, and they mentioned eight particular interventions. The counselors were straightforward and quick to respond to questions concerning interventions. Their knowledge and understanding of appropriate interventions were evident.

*Teacher support teams.* Eight counselors mentioned utilizing the Teacher Support Team (TST) as an intervention method. The TST is utilized to make decisions concerning which tier, out of the three possible tiers, a student should be placed in to receive appropriate intervention. This process is required by Mississippi's intervention program, Response to Intervention (RtI) (Mississippi Department of Education, 2010). Sarah shared information about the TST when asked about effective interventions,

> I'm not over TST, but I help with that. I give the TST committee documents and test
> scores and, you know, stuff they need to get a kid on the tier. There are 3 tiers. Tier 1 is
> intervention, just kind of watch them, you know, see how they're doing. Are they
> attending? Are they going to class? Tier 2 they move on up to they need some help.

They need some tutoring or they're not going to make it. Tier 3 is just a step below being

tested for SPED.

She shared that the three tier system was effective in ensuring implementation of proper

interventions. Similarly, Kim also discussed the TST,

If the teachers in our school say the students are struggling, you know, they'll bring them

to the TST team. For the students that have trouble with their school work or those

students who are failing, we make sure they receive interventions from the tier team

(teacher support team) to help them with the subjects they are weak in. We also include

the parent in the tier process. They are invited to every meeting and are asked for their

input.

Kim emphasized the importance of everyone working together to create the most effective

intervention plan. Reba expressed, "If they have a TST folder come up with them from

elementary school, we know immediately that we need to use interventions and monitor those

students." Her statement initiated conversations about utilizing previous information found in

school data systems and cumulative folders to monitor student interventions and progress.

Lonny discussed how her school utilized the TST,

In the Teacher Support Team, interventionists meet with parents, teachers, counselors,

and students to develop a plan for classroom interventions that meet the individual

student's needs, both academic and behavioral. Students who fail a grade and/or score

minimal on MCT2 state test are identified in our state wide computer program and their

names are generated for each school in the state. After each grading period a committee

of the Director of Curriculum, grade level counselor, assistant principal, and

interventionist meet to discuss classroom interventions and teacher recommendations for

interventions and/or interventions they are using in the classroom to help students be

successful.  The students discussed in these meetings are only failing one or more

subjects, whether it be academic or elective.  This committee works hand in hand with

the Teacher Support Team.

Lonny communicated the importance of all involved individuals providing input to ensure the

creation of appropriate intervention plans.  Sarah, Kim, Reba, and Lonny provided thorough

explanations of how the TST works and shared that it is effectively utilized in their school

districts.  The TST was mentioned in many of the conversations concerning interventions for

students at risk for dropping out.  Brittney communicated, "When students reach junior high and

have been in the Tier Process in previous grades for academics or behavior issues, they are

flagged and are placed on Tier 2 or Tier 3."  Jane stated, "Students needs are addressed

throughout the Teacher Support Team and the tier process."  The counselors communicated that

utilization of the TST was an effective intervention method because it involved all adults that

were in direct contact with the student.  They agreed that collaboration and teamwork were vital

to student success, and that the TST encouraged these things.  Kim shared, "We have to work

together (teachers/counselor/parent) to make sure that the students get all they need to be

successful."  The notion of working together to meet the goal of student success echoed

throughout the conversations and was communicated as the key to creating effective

interventions.

*Mentor programs.*  Four counselors discussed mentoring programs and expressed that

they were an effective intervention in most instances.  Cate shared about her school's mentoring

program and its success,

We use a mentoring program for all students at risk. They meet with their mentor weekly

or more for tutoring, to talk to someone, and so on. This program made a tremendous

difference in decreasing our dropout rate. It is a success.

She emphasized her belief in providing a person, not simply a program, to assist in increasing

student achievement. Brittney also voiced the value of the mentoring program in her school

district,

The mentoring program is made available through grants. These are volunteer leaders in

our community who serve as role models for our students. Many work with students for

several years. They come into the school and meet with the student on a one-on-one

basis, either helping them with school work, playing games, or just talking and mentoring

them. They come once each week at a specified time. Parents are also involved in the

process of assisting the students.

She shared that not only was mentoring beneficial, but mentoring with the same individual was

an effective intervention for students. Khloe explained, "We have a mentoring program in our

district, and if I see somebody who I think may benefit from having a mentor I will refer them."

Kim shared that as a counselor she, "provided support and acted as mentor." The counselors

agreed that having someone detached from the situation who the students could talk with and get

advice from was an effective way to provide support for students. These accounts emphasize

that the counselors believe mentoring programs exist as effective intervention strategies.

*When the counselors spoke about mentoring programs, they seemed to speak with*

*enthusiasm. This seemed to be a method that they had found success with and that their students*

*welcomed. Although the counselors seemed frustrated in many parts of the conversation, this*

117

*was a part where they seemed to see some headway in effectively helping their students get on*

*track. This was nice to see (Field Notes, September 25, 2012).*

**Parental involvement.** Eleven counselors shared that parental involvement was a major factor in the success or failure of interventions. Kris communicated her thoughts on parental involvement, or lack thereof,

> The first thing we try to do is get their parents involved, and that's where you'll learn a lot as far as the support. You'll either get the reaction of we're judging their child, and we're being judgmental and trying to put a square peg child in a round hole, or you'll get full support, and the parent will do whatever it takes, or you have none—no parental involvement. And that makes effective intervention very difficult.

She communicated the importance of attempting to get parental support as a first step and then moving forward based on the parental response. Kim also expressed the importance of getting parents involved,

> We've had parent nights where we invited our parents to the school, and the teachers will have different activities to show them what the kids are doing. A lot of times you'll find that the parents just don't know what to do to help their child. So, a lot of times we bring the parents in and try to teach them, if you will, show them how to help their children when they get home. They need that push from school and home.

She highlighted the notion that some parents are willing to do whatever it takes, but they need adequate exposure to resources related to what the students are learning and guidance from teachers and counselors in order to be an effective intervention. Kris and Kim discussed that parental involvement was crucial in the intervention process. In addition, the counselors shared that parental involvement affected other factors many times, and it was needed to reach

maximum success. Brittney, Jane, Lonny, and Reba specifically mentioned parental

involvement. June shared, "At my level, parental involvement is so important. If we could get

more parents involved I think it would make a world of difference." The imperativeness of

parental involvement in the intervention process resonated throughout the conversations with the

counselors. They shared that without this part of the equation, students were highly unlikely to

recover and achieve at their highest potential.

*Again, I realized the counselors' understanding of how important parental involvement is*

*in this intervention process, and yet how rarely it actually happens, at least in these counselors'*

*experiences. The counselors' countenances changed when they began to discuss how this is a*

*sad, yet realistic part of the process. They communicated that they know if parents would invest*

*just a little time and show a little concern, that it would go a long way. The emotion of*

*frustration was yet again evident in the conversations (September 25, 2012).*

*Academic programs.* The counselors expressed that students who were provided tutoring

time and additional time in the main academic content area seemed to be effective interventions.

Some counselors, such as Brittney, mentioned specific programs that they utilized,

> We use prescribed academic interventions in reading and math to improve these skills.
>
> We use computer programs that address these skill deficits. We have used the reading
>
> program, My Reading Web, in previous years. We also identify students at risk of failure
>
> and place them in additional classes for remediation.

She seemed confident in the utilization of these programs concerning selecting effective

interventions. Lonny also shared a specific program that is used as an intervention at his school,

> We enroll students in a "fast-track" type program in which students complete a year of 8th
>
> grade core subject from August to December. In January they are promoted to 9th grade

at the high school. These students typically attend summer school as well so they'll be classified as sophomores the next school year.

Like Brittney and Lonny, Khloe communicated an option provided by the community counseling program in her district,

> We do have a program here through community counseling called Back on Track. It's a group setting and basically teaches job skills and things they'll need once they are older. The program teaches them now so that they'll be aware that they need to stay in school if they want to get ahead or carry out their dreams and aspirations. It helps to look at setting goals and things like that.

These three counselors had experiences with specific programs that were implemented to offer appropriate academic support to students. In each of these instances, programs were implemented to provide effective interventions, and the counselors stated that without them students were unlikely to succeed. Becca expressed how she and the teachers in her district offered their students extra time in subject area classes,

> The teachers get involved, and they try to offer as much outside help as they can; tutoring or coming to a class at another time during the day. Maybe instead of going to an art elective or physical education elective, they'll go back to that class that's required and get a second dose of it. Maybe take notes again or while the other kids are working on their class stuff, the teacher can work with that student individually. That's where we start. Trying to get them encouraged, get their confidence built back up, and a lot of it is their confidence because either they're not attending or their grades have dropped.

Becca seemed to believe that additional time in academic classes was vital to building confidence in the students, and that student confidence was essential for student success.

Similarly, Kris, June, and Julie expressed the importance of giving extra attention to academic areas. Various routes of providing academic attention were discussed. The counselors shared that providing students with extra time in the classroom or with a tutor to remediate in unsuccessful academic content was crucial. According to the counselors, for students to avoid failure or begin recovering from failure, extra attention to academics played an integral part; effective interventions are essential

*Counseling and referral to mental health professionals.* The counselors agreed that counseling from professionals and themselves, if needed, was important in the intervention process. Terry expressed, "I use my knowledge of the child, their home life, and my overall experience with the child. The hugs, just being there for them, and unconditional love makes the biggest difference." According to the counselors, students must know that an open, honest, nonjudgmental line of communication is always available. They also shared that many times situations were diffused before becoming explosive if the students had the opportunity to talk with them and communicated their concerns and frustrations. Shay shared,

> If I've identified them as a potential dropout, the first thing I do then is ask them what
> they want. Most of them tell me something that they've got on their mind. I ask them
> how they are going to do that. And if it gets to that point where you've established that
> they're not going to stay in school, they're going to quit as soon as they're of age, then
> that's when I start talking about the GED program. If that's the case, then let's get the
> parents in once the kid is interested. Usually, by the time they're in the 9th grade you can
> counsel them, but if they do not want to go there, it's best to find out what they really and
> truly want and help them create a path to get to that goal. Just explain the options to
> them.

Shay seemed to think that giving the student a voice and being honest with them was necessary. Similarly, Sarah stated,

> I'll get them in, talk to them about it, and if it's drugs and all that I report it either to the Sheriff's department or the child abuse hotline. A lot of times they'll come to me. They'll come to me and tell me, "You know, I haven't been coming to school, I can't concentrate, I can't do this or that, I can't do my work, I can't be here because I've been up all night because so and so is doing this, making meth outside in the lab or in the living room," and you know, just stuff like that. But, there's not a whole, whole lot I can do besides talk to them, see what they need. I say, "What do you need? What do you need that will get you here? That will help you? That will get your grades up and help you graduate?" And sadly, for most of them it's nothing. There's nothing you can do…it's the environment and there's nothing you can do to get them out of that.

Sarah's response indicated that asking the students what they need to succeed is one method to help the students to continue on the graduation path. Khloe, Cate, Jane, Reba, Kris, and Becca shared the importance of counseling with the students one-on-one. The counselors expressed that allowing the students the opportunity to communicate about their situations and develop a realistic plan was essential in creating effective interventions. They agreed that being candid with the students was important. June explained how she tackled this task,

> The best thing that we can do is be real open and honest with them and tell them, "This is your circumstance and here are the consequences if you continue to do this." We just develop these really close relationships with these students and let them know that this is what is going to happen.

Similarly, Kim mentioned providing character education classes that emphasized the importance of getting a good education, "I also do character education classes about how important getting an education is and discuss the different careers that are available to them.  As a teacher/counselor, we can help by providing support and acting as a mentor."  The counselors expressed that talking with the students about good character and sharing information on effective decision making was an important part of getting the students focused in a positive direction.

*When the counselors shared about how they personally interacted with the students, they're faces began to "light up" and their countenances softened.  It was evident that they took pride in the fact that they provided themselves as a safe haven for the students to come to, to find escape from frustrating situations.  They were the one person who the students knew they could trust and share things with at any time.  If the students had no one else, the counselors made it clear that the students had them—that they were on the same team.  It was delightful to see the counselors really 'shine' in their position as a retreat for their students (Field Notes, September 25, 2012).*

*Positive reinforcement.*  Three counselors described the use of positive reinforcements in their schools.  Khloe mentioned that her school provided incentives for positive behavior,

> Every 9 weeks students who have zero discipline infractions are invited to what's called the Good Behavior Party, and that's done at the end of every 9 weeks.  Then, on a monthly basis we have drawings of the students who have tickets. Tickets are given out to students.  For instance, it could be a student who usually sleeps all day through class— if they stayed up and followed along they might get a ticket and their name will go in a drawing and that is done every month.  If somebody took up for another student who was

being picked on, that student would get a ticket and his name would go into the pot. Just

things that you don't have to be making straight As and Bs in order to participate. Just

everyday things that to some person might be small but just recognizing that, oh I saw

such and such do this good thing.

She described in detail how the incentive program works. Khloe also spoke about how the

students receive positive attention for doing good instead of receiving negative attention for

inappropriate behavior and how this intervention was effective for many students in her district.

June shared about the positive intervention strategies that her school offered,

We started a positive behavioral intervention program here 4 or 5 years ago. We were

always worried that the kids were doing the wrong thing. We needed to concentrate on

the kids that are doing the right thing, and maybe they'll influence other children. Like,

"Hey, they're getting rewarded, so I better buck up and read my AR book or not get in

trouble so I can go to the pep rally." We do it on a lot of difference levels because it it's

AR reading or not having write ups for so many weeks you go to a pep rally—that seems

to make children want to do better.

June agreed that providing positive reinforcements made a difference in the behavior of students.

Sarah stated, "It's just different things…they may get a free day or a field day, you know." In

each of these conversations, the counselors shared that students had to first experience success

and become motivated for incentives to be beneficial, and this experience was a first step in

ensuring the implementation of effective interventions.

    ***Building community.*** Six counselors expressed the importance of everyone involved

working together—that without everyone cooperating, ultimate success would be highly

unlikely. Khloe shared her thoughts on building community,

It takes the teachers and the parents and the students working together as well as the

community. We do have resources in our community that parents can employ, if they see

that their child may need them. But I believe everyone working together and just looking

out for the best interest of the child is what's needed.

Khloe communicated the importance of putting the child at the center in the intervention process.

Brittney had similar thoughts about the importance of teamwork among all individuals involved

in the intervention process,

In order for any intervention or strategy to be successful, the interventionist, teacher,

administrator, counselor, or mentor must have a positive relationship with the students

and let the students know that they truly care and are concerned about the students'

success. The academic intervention and the behavior intervention have to work together

many times for success to occur.

She expressed building a caring and concerned community was essential to success, because

students need to know they are valued. Building community was pinpointed as an effective

intervention in different ways. The counselors seemed unified in the fact that at risk students

need a support team to guide them. Brittney also shared,

I feel that the junior high years are the crucial years in helping to insure that students

remain in school; these are the years when the student will still listen to adults and maybe

make a turnaround—by the time the student gets to 9th grade, it is harder to influence the

choices that the student makes.

The counselors agreed with Brittney, reaching students by the end of their junior high experience

increases the probability of decreasing the likelihood of dropout and increasing the effectiveness

of interventions. Becca stated, "You have a high success rate when teachers get involved and

everybody supports." The counselors agreed that an important factor in fostering student success is building community. They expressed that to create effective interventions and lasting success, all involved adults must be concerned, encouraging, and dedicated.

**Dropout is more of a high school problem...** Throughout conversations with the counselors, I noticed that—although the counselors openly discussed student dropout, they did not seem to understand their direct connection to the issue. They understood that students struggled in school and needed interventions, but their understanding of this directly relating to student dropout was not evident. At the beginning of the interviews, I asked the counselors to share their thoughts on the topic of dropout. After the first two interviews I realized that I needed to reword that statement because heads tilted and brows furrowed. This body language illustrated that they did not understand how or why they would talk about dropout. Body language and wait time, more than any other factors, led me to the conclusion of their non-understanding of their direct relation to student dropout. However, the counselors also made comments that led me to this realization. Phrases like, "more of an issue at the high school level," "they cannot legally dropout at junior high level," and "we don't really have a dropout problem at these grades" resounded in the conversations. The counselors were well informed and knew how to identify and intervene, but I do not feel that they saw these steps as a part of an early dropout prevention plan.

**Summary**

In the previous chapter, I presented the process of data analysis and the categories and themes that surfaced. I discussed the three themes that developed during the data collection and analysis, which included: (a) it's like a cycle, (b) there's just so much we can do, (c) effective

interventions are essential, and (d) dropout is more of a high school issue. In the subsequent

chapter, I provide a discussion of the results and implications for future research.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In chapter four, I presented my data by communicating themes that surfaced during data collection and analysis. The four themes were: (a) it's like a cycle, (b) there's only so much we can do, (c) effective interventions are essential, and (d) dropout is more of a high school problem. These discoveries offer a meaningful look into the perspectives of junior high counselors concerning student dropout. Although these discoveries are not generalizable to all populations, they are significant in better understanding junior high counselors and their perspectives concerning their connection to student dropout.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how junior high (grades 5-8) counselors identify students at risk for dropping out, choose appropriate interventions, and view their direct role in dropout prevention. These counselors shared their experiences and stories through demographic surveys and interviews. In the previous chapter, I provided information about the participants, the main topics of discussion, and the categories and themes that emerged. In this chapter, I will provide a discussion of the findings in relation to current literature and quotes from the counselors, and I will offer implications for future research concerning student dropout in general and concerning junior high counselors' relation to student dropout.

Teachers, administrators, school personnel, and educational policymakers face the issue of preventing student dropout (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Fox, 2010; Harrison, 2010; Stillwell & Sable, 2013). Student dropout exists as an issue nationwide, but especially in the Southern United States (Civil Rights Project, 2005; Orfield, 2006; Stone & Alfeld, 2004). With the task of lowering student dropout rates and increasing student graduation rates, teachers,

administrators, school personnel, and educational policymakers must explore every angle of the dropout crisis to effectively confront it (Barton, 2005; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Balfanz, 2009; Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, & Friant, 2010; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2009).  Teachers, administrators, school personnel, and educational policymakers must research successful programs, dropout prevention campaigns, and methods of increasing student motivation and then make proper implementations and changes (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Martin, Tobin, & Sugai, 2002; Meeker et al., 2009).  To investigate student dropout from a different angle, I interviewed junior high (grades 5-8) school counselors in northeast Mississippi.  Mississippi Department of Education's (MDE) website discloses that school counselors play a vital role in ensuring student success and motivation; therefore, I wanted to explore their perceptions of student dropout (Mississippi Department of Education, School Counseling).  The research questions that guided my research were (a) What are the perceptions of junior high counselors concerning students at risk for dropping out?, (b) In what ways do junior high counselors identify students at risk for dropping out?, and (c) How do junior high counselors inform their decisions of intervention for students at risk for dropping out?.

**Discussion of Findings**

In this section I describe the findings of my research, and I support my discussions with quotes from the counselors and current literature.  The discussion of findings is divided into the following sections: (a) Relational Cultural Theory in relation to dropout and (b) understandings about student dropout.

The counselors mentioned similar topics related to the interview questions throughout their conversations.  The demographic survey presented no significant information in relation to

129

the research questions.  The counselors used little wait time and gave detailed answers for each question.  They seemed confident in their personal understanding of identifying and providing interventions for students at risk for dropping out.  They spoke with sureness, and they had an answer for every question—no question was left unanswered or with an unclear response.

**Relational cultural theory and its relation to dropout.**  I referred to the Relational Cultural Theory (Miller, 1987; Miller & Stiver, 1997) in the second chapter, and the counselors concurred that students who did not have support through positive relationships, either with teachers, school personnel, and/or family, were indeed the ones who lacked motivation to succeed; therefore, they were more at risk for dropping out.  When the counselors spoke about the students' unsuccessfulness connecting to a lack of family support, they authenticated the fact that when students do not feel valued, loved, and cared for, then being successful academically is not a main priority.  Becca said, "Trying to get them encouraged, get their confidence built back up, a lot, and a lot of it is their confidence."  Terry shared that students need "hugs and someone at home listening to them."  June mentioned the students needing to "feel cared about".  The connection of student success to Relational Cultural Theory (Miller, 1987; Miller & Stiver, 1997) was underscored in Cate's statement,

> I believe students who are at-risk for dropping out, above all, do not have a supportive home environment.  In other words, the home environment lacks one or several variable that are needed for a student to be successful.  For example, if a student doesn't feel loved at home then it's difficult for them to have a desire to be successful in school.  If their physical needs are not being met at home (i.e. poor hygiene, unclean clothes, lack of food), then they are definitely not ready to come to school.

Her experiences and specific words verified the notion that students who are part of healthy, supportive relationships are more successful—most students must have their relational needs met to succeed academically.

**Understandings about student dropout.** Although student dropout has been a crisis for decades, its causes have remained consistent and still prove difficult to successfully address. In this research study, the counselors shared information and experiences concerning their understanding of student dropout. The identifiers and interventions mentioned most frequently by the counselors echoed the most recognized identifiers and interventions in current literature.

*Characteristics and identifiers: It's like a cycle.* The first two questions explored in this study were, "What are the perceptions of junior high counselors concerning students at risk for dropping out?" and "In what ways do junior high counselors identify students at risk for dropping out?" The counselors detailed four main characteristics and identifiers of students at risk for dropping out: (a) excessive absences, (b) behavior problems, (c) low academic achievement, and (d) lack of parental support. In addition, most of the counselors mentioned a connection among the factors, the cycle, as the largest single influence concerning student dropout. Although the counselors expressed several characteristics of students at risk of dropping out, these four were specifically discussed and deemed as predominant and most frequent.

During the interviews, the counselors mentioned excessive absenteeism as a characteristic and identifier of students at risk for dropping out. Sarah echoed the counselors' feelings about excessive absenteeism, "Number one, excessive absences; that's number one right there." The counselors shared that if students were not at school then they could not succeed academically. This coincides with what current literature presents concerning student dropout

and excessive absences. Balfanz (2009) stated, "…both the number of days a student misses and how his or her attendance compares with that of peers signal that a student is not fully engaged and is in danger of falling off the graduation path" (p. 48). In research studies on student dropout, one topic continuously arises—attendance. If students are not attending school, legal issues pertaining to attendance laws and academic issues due to missed instructed surface (Bridgeland et al., 2009; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007) Several other studies specifically point to excessive absenteeism as a sign of students becoming at risk for dropping out (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Bridgeland et al., 2010; Hickman, Bartholemew, Mathwig, & Heinrich, 2008; Neild & Balfanz, 2006). Schools in Northeast Mississippi, according the counselors' experiences, along with schools in states across the nation, are experiencing the issue of excessive absences (Allensworth & Easton; Neild & Balfanz, 2006).

Behavior problems exist as indicators for students at risk for dropping out in current research (Barfield, Harman, & Knight, 2012; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Bridgeland et al., 2010; Darney, Reinke, Herman, Stormont, & Lalongo, 2012; Ryan, 2011). Princotta and Reyna (2009) expressed that, "Students may act out in class, get into fights, or otherwise misbehave in ways that interfere with their learning and make them more likely to dropout (p. 23)." This same implication resonated throughout dropout literature; dropout data consistently revealed the connection between inappropriate behavior and dropout. Researchers concurred that inappropriate behaviors, resulting in students being removed from the classroom, increase the likelihood of students becoming at risk for dropping out of school (Hickman, Bartholemew, Mathwig, & Heinrich; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Suh & Suh, 2011). The counselors in this research study shared experiences that align with this information. The counselors pinpointed inappropriate behavior as a characteristic and indicator of students becoming at risk for dropping

132

out.  Cate shared, "We look at our discipline files to see which kids were displaying poor behavior at school," and other counselors reiterated this in the conversations.  However, according to the counselors' experiences, students usually began displaying inappropriate behavior because of academic struggles—they would rather receive attention from inappropriate behavior than from academic inadequacy.  Kris highlighted this idea and stated,

> I think when there's a lack of motivation, academics start first because they don't want to be there.  So, they think it's easier for me to do whatever it takes for me to go to the office and get sent home, where I want to be in the first place.

 This interconnection, the cycle, of factors is supported in current literature.  Rumberger and Lim (2008) stated, "No single factor can completely account for a student's decision to continue in school until graduation (p.3)."  Throughout dropout literature one notion is always mentioned and supported—dropout does not happen because of a single factor.  Student dropout is a complex issue, and many factors influence a student's decision to drop out of school.  A connection of factors creates a cycle that leads to dropout, without proper interventions (Bridgeland et al., 2010; Christle Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Kennely & Monrad, 2007)

Current research provides evidence that low academic achievement is a predictor of student dropout (Balfanz, 2009; Balfanz et al., 2010; Barton, 2005; Bridgeland et al., 2009; Christle et al., 2007; Dynarski et al., 2008; Neild & Balfanz, 2006; Strom & Boster, 2007).  According to Kennelly and Monrad (2007), "The predictor that is most indicative of dropout is whether a student has repeated a grade in elementary or middle school (p. 2)."  Dropout data supports the notion that when students are retained, they are more likely to drop out of school.  Being retained creates additional issues, such as continued academic struggle, separation from

133

peers due to age differences, and increased attendance issues, and it increases the likelihood of student dropout (Alexander et al., 2001; Bornsheuer, Polonyi, Andrews, Fore, & Onwuegbuzie, 2011; Jimerson, Woehr, & Kaufman, 2007),   The counselors concurred and were brief and to the point when speaking about this topic.  They shared that if students failed, especially if they had failed two or more grades, then they were at a much higher risk for dropping out.  Shay discussed similar ideas as what the other counselors communicated and said, "Each consecutive year after that, after the first initial failure or whatever, if they continue not to have success, it adds more fuel to the fire, and they don't see another option."  Kim supported this notion by expressing, "A student at risk would be a student who constantly struggles with their school work and has no support at home."  The American Psychological Association (2012) reported that most student dropouts have low academic achievement and many have failed at least once, which aligns with the counselors' experiences in this research study.

The counselors shared specific experiences during the discussion on lack of parental support.  I evoked emotions when I facilitated discussion on this topic.  The counselors expressed that this limited family support was the most vital aspect of decreasing the likelihood of students dropping out.  June shared, "A lot of these students' parents maybe didn't finish school or even dropped out, you know.  They dropped out or only got their GED or something, but I feel like most of this starts from home."  Throughout each of the conversations the counselors mentioned "lack of parental support", "no value of education in the home", and "family issues".  This assents with current literature concerning the effects of lack of parental support on student success; when students do not have parental support, they are more likely to be considered at risk for dropping out (Bridgeland et al., 2009; Bridgeland et al., 2010; Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2008; Metropolitian Life Insurance Company, 2010; Ryan, 2011; Stone &

Alfeld, 2004; Ziomek-Daigle, 2010).  We did not have discussions about why the counselors felt

that lack of parental support was an issue and ways that they could increase and better

understand parental support, but I mention this in the implications for future research.

*Successful interventions.*  The last question explored in this study was, "How do junior

high counselors inform their decisions of intervention for students at risk for dropping out?"  The

counselors mainly discussed the interventions of utilizing the Teacher Support Team (TST),

extending time in academic areas, and providing counseling from themselves and mentors.

Teacher Support Teams are a part Mississippi's intervention program, Response to Intervention

(RTI).  These teams include teachers, administrators, counselors, and parents and are formed to

ensure that students are placed on appropriate tiers of intervention (Mississippi Department of

Education, 2010).   The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) mandates utilizing TST as

an intervention, and the counselors shared their experiences related to TST.  This supported that

the counselors are following proper protocol to ascertain student remediation and success.

Reba's comment, "If they have a TST folder come up with them from elementary school, we

know immediately that we need to use interventions and monitor those students," reiterated the

consensus of the counselors; employing TST was effective in assuring proper intervention.

It would seem impossible to intervene with students at risk for dropping out without

providing extra time in academic areas, and the counselors verified the importance of academic

attention.  Brittney, Lonny, and Khloe mentioned specific programs that their schools utilized,

such as Back on Track, My Reading Web, and Fast Track.  Other counselors spoke about general

ways of addressing academic needs such as, "providing extra time in class" and "working one-

on-one with tutors".  It was evident that the counselors believed that this was a vital part of the

intervention process.  Current literature supports this notion of academic attention.  Balfanz

(2009) articulated, "Fundamental in effecting broad-based improvement in the quality of middle grades course work will be developing extra help and support systems that are integrated with class activities/assignments and provided when the need arises, not long after it is needed" (p. 10). The notion of ensuring additional time in academic content areas echoed throughout the literature, and it was discussed as a key component of effective intervention. For students to increase their academic achievement, they must have adequate exposure to the academic content (Balfanz et al., 2010; Barton, 2005; Berliner, 2004; Bridgeland et al., 2010; Civil Rights Project, 2005, Duchesne, Vitaro, Larose, & Tremblay, 2008; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Strom & Boster, 2007; Theobald, 2005; Tomlinson, 2005. The counselors reiterated this viewpoint.

The counselors discussed counseling and mentoring as an effective intervention with students at risk for dropping out. I sensed their genuine care and concern for the students both academically and non-academically. Phrases such as, "really care about them," "provide an open, honest line of communication," "let them get their side of the story out," and "be a listening ear and a smiling face" resonated throughout the conversations. Ziomek-Daigle (2010) reported that "individual counseling" plays a key role in intervention as it "encourages both students and parents to see a connection between dropping out and the future" (p. 381). Bridgeland et al. (2010) stated, "Adult advocates will be crucial not only in keeping track of the various barriers and pressures that some students face, but also with providing them with the much needed community-based supports and guidance to stay on track in school" (p. 15). Each of these researchers emphasized the importance of including individual counseling as part of the intervention plan, and this resonates throughout dropout literature. An effective intervention plan cannot be created and evaluated properly if the students, and their families, are not given the opportunity to communicate their feelings and input (Hickman & Wright, 2010; Lever et al.,

136

2004; Scheel, Madabhushi, & Backhaus, 2009)   The counselors' stories reiterated these propositions, and it was evident that the counselors understood their importance in the intervention process.

**Contributions to the Field of Education**

As much research is available on the topic of student dropout, I sought to look at this issue from a new perspective—the perspective of student counselors.  Little research is available on the topic of student dropout in relation to student counselors, and no current research is available on the specific topic of junior high counselors' perspectives of student dropout and their role in its prevention.  This research study provides data that can help administrators, educators, school personnel, and educational policymakers better understand student dropout and more specifically the role of counselors in the identification, intervention, and prevention process.  From this information, decisions concerning counselor responsibilities, professional development, and dropout prevention could be more effectively made.

Specifically, the themes realized in this research study contribute to the literature on dropout research.  "It's like a cycle" was the first theme and within it discussions arose about the notion of dropout being a cycle that takes adequate planning, preparation, and progress to fully break.  Understanding the interconnectedness and cycle of dropout factors is a chief component in creating and implementing effective interventions (Balfanz et al., 2010; Bridgeland et al., 2010).  Factors influencing dropout arise and connect over time, and the more factors that interconnect, the more difficult to effectively address them and decrease the likelihood of dropout (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Rumberger & Lim, 2008).  The counselors verified what current literature suggests—dropout does not simply occur but happens over time due to various

137

factors (Bridgeland et al., 2010; Meeker et al., 2009; Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009); however, they further specified this cycle by connecting certain factors, as illustrated in Figure 1.

"There's just so much we can do" was the second theme, and it exemplifies the counselors' feeling of frustrations and boundaries involved when intervening with students at risk for dropping out. They shared that academic and behavioral interventions were the key interventions that they could control, but that the difference occurred when issues out of their control, such as attendance and parental involvement, were modified. This idea of providing academic and behavioral interventions is supported in the literature (Fallis & Golden, Kist, Trehan, & Padak, 2005; Opotow, 2003; Smeaton, 2010). Academic support is necessary because students need additional experiences with academic content in order to increase academic achievement (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Sparks, Johnson, & Akos, 2010). Inappropriate behavior decreases student achievement because students are removed from the classroom during instruction which increases the likelihood of low academic achievement (Balfanz, Herzong, & MaciIver, 2007; Neild, Balfanz, & Herzong, 2007). However, the counselors added further to the literature by providing specific boundaries faced when creating and implementing interventions and presenting a starting point to generate further research to assist in addressing these issues. The issues include: (a) the inability to force students to attend school and receive needed academic instruction, (b) the inability to involve unwilling parent(s)/family, and (c) the inability to create additional academic choices for students (other than the traditional academic path).

"Effective interventions are essential" was the third theme and suggested the importance of providing effective interventions to decrease dropout rates, which concurs with current literature (Allensworth & Easton; Churchill & Keddie, 2005; Civil Rights Project, 2005;

138

Dulaney, 2013; Gewertz, 2006; Marzano & Marzano, 1993). Creating effective interventions requires the cooperation of everyone involved, and it involves thoroughly exploring all factors in efforts of best confronting them (Charmaraman & Hall, 2011; Martin & Helperin, 2006; MacIver, 2010). The counselors mentioned interventions such as implementing early warning systems (Duchesne, Vitaro, Larose, & Tremblay, 2008), additional time in academic content areas (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Sparks, Johnson, & Akos, 2010), individual counseling (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Ziomek-Diagle, 2010), and increasing parental involvement (Strom & Boster; Woolley & Bowen, 2007). "Dropout is more of a high school issue" was the final theme, and it illustrates the counselors' feelings of disconnect to the topic of dropout. No research is currently available concerning counselors' feelings about their direct connection to preventing student dropout. Dropout has researched and counselors' responsibilities has been researched, but counselors' perspectives about dropout and their responsibilities concerning and connection to dropout is not available. Therefore, information found in this theme serves as a catalyst for further research on this topic.

During the analysis process, I realized that the issue of parental involvement was consistently discussed in the interviews. The counselors made many mentions of the attitudes and beliefs of the parents of the students at risk for dropping out. They seemed to believe that these parents simply did not value education. Their experiences led them to the conclusion that most of the students at risk for dropping out do not have supportive families, and they became frustrated. This notion provides both a contribution and an implication to the field of education—the mere fact that counselors hold this belief enlightens the understanding of counselors perspectives concerning students at risk for dropping out, and it provides the implication that further research focused specifically on counselors' beliefs about the role of

parental support in academic success is needed.  In addition, administration could provide

training and professional development on how to understand and communicate with parents,

family, and guardians.

**Implications for Future Research**

During and after analyzing the data, several implications for future research surfaced.

Exploring these implications would allow for an improved understanding of junior high

counselors regarding their relationship with and their understanding of student dropout.  Findings

from researching these topics would also allow for a deeper look into causes of student dropout

and ways to address student dropout at its earliest stage.  These implications for future research

are divided into three topics: (a) creating K-12 alignment of dropout prevention, (b)

understanding parental support, and (c) defining counselors' positions in dropout prevention.

**Creating K-12 alignment of dropout prevention.**  Within each district, K-12 schools

should be aligned in their understanding of student dropout, who is involved, and what everyone

involved can do to assist in ultimately preventing student dropout.  A district-wide alignment

ensures that students are properly identified and provided appropriate interventions as early as

possible and that their interventions are tailored and modified as needed as they continue through

the educational system (Barfield et al., 2012; Civil Rights Project, 2005; Darney et al., 2012;

Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012; Martin et al., 2002; National Dropout Prevention

Center/Network, n.d.; Stone & Alfeld, 2004).  Ryan (2011) stated that high dropout rates,

"prompted state and school district officials across the country to develop early warning

indicator systems to efficiently identify students who are at risk of dropping out and provide

targeted supports to get them back on track and graduate (p.1)."  By having everyone, K-12,

involved in the intervention process, students will experience a smoother transition as they

advance through each grade (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Additionally, research should investigate ways to create and implement early warning systems as an important aspect of effectively addressing the dropout crisis.

**Understanding parental support.** The counselors discussed that parents' involvement and support are essential; however, they also shared that lack of parental support is the principal issue concerning student dropout in their experiences. Therefore, strategies which facilitate parental involvement must be created and utilized. Current literature echoes these thoughts— school district personnel need to discuss this issue and brainstorm and implement different strategies for getting parents, specifically of students at risk for dropping out, involved, while stressing the value of education and success to them. This is a challenging task, and teachers, administrators, school personnel, and educational policymakers must research effective strategies before implementation (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Balfanz et al., 2010, Bridgeland et al., 2010; Bridgeland et al., 2009; Christle et al., 2007; Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Jerald, 2006; Kennely & Monrad, 2007). Meeker, Edmonson, and Fisher (2009) researched student dropout from the perspectives of high school dropouts, and they found that the dropouts, "indicated that dysfunctional home and family life impacted on their ability to complete high school…and recorded family situations as the primary reason for not graduating (p.46)." Ziomek-Daigle (2010) stated,

> Students identified as at risk for dropping out had an increased probability of school
> completion when families were involved in the process of limiting those risks. Families
> that communicated, were involved, and challenged irreversible policies gave a strong
> signal that the students had an advocate. (p. 381)

Administrators, educators, school personnel, and educational policymakers must work to provide opportunities to families that encourage academic awareness and support. Commitment, dedication to research, and persistence after failed attempts are essential to effectively address this issue of lack of parental support.

Another implication for future research related to parental support exists, concerning the reasons for lack of parental support. The counselors in this study did not provide explanations for the lack of parental support, but a deeper examination into this would provide significant information concerning ways to effectively involve parents and increase family support. After analyzing my findings and reflecting on gaps in my data, I realized that exploring the reasons that the counselors believe the lack of parental support is significant and also reasons why they thought that parents were not involved would have been beneficial. Current literature suggests various reasons for lack of parental support, such as parents not valuing education themselves, parents work schedules not allowing them to get involved, and parents being sick or disabled (Balfanz, 2009; Bridgeland et al., 2010; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Martin et al., 2002; Meeker et al., 2009; Orfield, 2006; Pagani et al., 2008; Strom & Boster, 2007; Ziomek-Daigle, J., 2010). Further research on the origins of lack of parental support in northeast Mississippi would provide pertinent information concerning how to effectively involve parents and families in dropout prevention.

**Defining counselors' positions in dropout prevention.** The counselors responded to initial questions about their general understandings of student dropout in a way that implied disconnection from the topic of student dropout. They hesitated, took lengthy wait time, or waited for a rephrasing of the question. When I reworded statements in terms of students

becoming unmotivated and possibly becoming at risk for dropping out, then the counselors became interested and invested in sharing. Also, several of the counselors made statements, such as "well, we don't see a lot of that at this level" and "that's not really something that we deal with in these grades." These statements suggest that the counselors did not view themselves as directly involved with prevention of student dropout. This leads to an implication that junior high counselors need to become more aware of their direct role and responsibilities in dropout prevention (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.; White, 2010; Ziomek-Daigle, 2010). Carr and Galassi (2010) stated, "School counselors may need to assume much greater responsibility for an active leadership and a systemic change agent role in dropout prevention both within and outside of their schools (p. 26)." Their research study supports the notion that as dropout rates increase and remain high, getting everyone fully involved, especially school counselors, is essential (Carr & Galassi, 2010). Conducting research that provides information regarding counselors' perspectives about their increasing involvement in preventing student dropout and about ways to ensure counselors' preparedness for this increasing involvement is essential.

**Summary**

The counselors in this research study communicated many experiences and stories, but some themes were shared repeatedly in each set of data and represent the overall perspectives of the junior high (grades 5-8) counselors. The counselors communicated that many factors influence students becoming at risk for dropping out, such as excessive absences, behavior problems, low academic achievement, and lack of parental support, but that the most influential factor was a connection among the factors, the cycle. They went on to share that implementing research-based interventions were effective to some extent, but that if the students' home lives

were unsupportive of the interventions, then the likelihood of the students continuing towards graduation was unlikely. Family support and a positive home environment determine the effectiveness of interventions, from the viewpoints of the counselors. These ideals correspond directly with the data shared by researchers on the topic of dropout identification and prevention (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Barfield et al., 2012; Barton et al., 2005; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Bridgeland et al., 2009; Bridgeland et al., 2010; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Meeker et al. 2009; Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.; Princoitta & Reyna, 2009; White, 2010; Ziomek-Daigle, 2010).

After conducting my research and analyzing the data, a few notions for future research surfaced. The first implication is that research that provides data on the dropout rates of districts that discuss and work together to prevent dropout from Kindergarten through twelfth grade as opposed to those that begin to focus on this issue around late middle to high school grades is needed. Data that supports early intervention and effective prevention would possibly stimulate more districts to look at the importance of including everyone, K-12, in the dropout prevention programs. Secondly, research that provides data on programs and strategies used within schools that are successful in tackling the issue of parental involvement and support is essential. Fully understanding why a lack of parental involvement exists and ways to effectively increase parental involvement will allow educational policymakers, administrators, teachers, and counselors to better address student dropout. Finally, research to further investigate junior high counselors' understanding of their direct roles in preventing student dropout is needed.

This research is significant and enhances the field of education because it: (a) explores student dropout from the perspectives of junior high counselors, which is not found in current literature on student dropout, (b) focuses on a region in the southern United States, which is the

area with the highest dropout rates, and (c) provides implications for decreasing student dropout

rates from the perspectives of junior high counselors.

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**LIST OF APPENDICES**

APPENDIX A

INFORMATION SHEET

**Consent to Participate in a Research Interview**
**Topic:** Dropout Prevention

| **Investigator** | **Sponsor** |
|---|---|
| Kelly Ann Bennett, M.Ed. | Deborah Chessin, Ph.D. |
| Department of Curriculum and Instruction | Department of Curriculum and Instruction |
| Doctoral Student | The University of Mississippi |
| 662-315-5725 | (662) 915-5878 |

**Description**

I would like to investigate the perspectives of junior high counselors concerning student dropout. This topic is being explored because your ideas, along with those of other participants, may help educators better understand students' needs and create better schooling experiences for students. In both the individual and focus groups research interviews, which will last from 45-60 minutes each, you will be tape recorded as you are interviewed so that I can record your answers exactly as you said them. I will ask you a series of questions, and you will be asked to respond to the questions in your own words. You are not expected to give a 'right' answer, as there is no right or wrong answer. Your personal opinion and experiences are what I would like for you to share. To ensure confidentiality, your real name will not be disclosed; a pseudonym will be used. You will be given the opportunity to ask any questions concerning this research interview and its uses.

**Risks and Benefits**

You may feel uncomfortable because you are going to be tape recorded, but try your best to answer the questions as if the tape recorder was not in the room.

**Cost and Payments**

The individual interview and focus group interview will take between 45-60 minutes each to complete. Your time will be the only cost that is involved. You will receive a gift certificate to either a local bookstore or a local restaurant for your time.

**Confidentiality**

I will not put your name in the interview transcription, and it will appear nowhere in the final paper. I will do my best to ensure that no one can identify you by the words that I use in my study and in the paper.

**Right to Withdraw**

You do not have to take part in this study. If you start the study and decide that you do not want to finish, all you have to do is to tell Kelly Ann Bennett or Dr. Deborah Chessin in person, by letter, or by telephone at the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, 310 Guyton Hall, The University of Mississippi, University MS 38677, or 915-5878. There will be no adverse effects if you choose to withdraw from the research interview.

The researcher may terminate your participation in the study without regard to your consent and for any reason, such as protecting your safety and protecting the integrity of the research data.

Institutional Review Board Approval: This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB).  The IRB has determined that this study fulfills the human research subject protections obligations required by state and federal law and University policies.  If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482.

APPENDIX B

INDIVIDUAL EMAIL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Individual Email Interview Protocol


   I would like to communicate with you concerning your perspectives about student dropout and about effective and ineffective strategies for motivating students to stay in school. There are no right or wrong answers in this interview.  This interview is confidential, and a pseudonym will be used in place of your name.  I would like for you to answer each question in your own words and to think about your personal experiences when you are answering.  I am interested in you, your experiences and your unique opinion.  This email interview should take you approximately 45-60 minutes to complete and will vary from general to specific questions. Please be completely open and honest with me, because I value what you have to say.  Your story and experiences are important.

1.  Describe your perceptions of students at-risk for dropping out.

2.  A) How do you identify students at-risk for dropping out of school?

  B) Do you follow your own protocol, a school/district/state protocol, or both for
    identifying these students?

3.  A) List and describe interventions and strategies you use with students at risk for dropping out of school.

  B)  Which strategies do you find to be most effective?

4.  Is there anything else you would like to share concerning students at-risk for dropping out or student dropout.

Thank you so much for taking the time to answer these questions.  Again, I know that time is precious in this busy world, and I truly appreciate you giving me your time to help me in my research.

APPENDIX C


FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Focus Group Interview Protocol

I would like to talk to you all about your perspectives about student dropout and about effective and ineffective strategies for motivating students to stay in school.  There are no right or wrong answers in this interview.  This interview is confidential, and a pseudonym will be used in place of your name.  I would like for you all to answer each question in your own words and to think about your personal experiences when you are answering.  You may take time to think after I ask a question.  I am interested in each of you, your experiences and your unique opinions.  Please be respectful of one another's opinions and be mindful when another person is speaking.  If you have something to say, please do not be discouraged because someone else is sharing at the time; wait for a time and then share.

1.  First of all, please tell me your name and a little bit about yourself, such as your position and the number of years in that position.

2.  (Icebreaker)  In what ways do you think students would want to change their school experience?

3.  Describe initial reasons that students consider dropping out of school.

4.  A) Discuss school policies and programs that identify and assist students at risk for dropping out.
- (Do their personal procedures and the school/district procedures align or is there a disconnect?)
- (How do these policies and programs play out in day-to-day practice?)

    B)  Describe some of the challenges school administrators and teachers face when identifying and working with students at risk for dropping out.

5.  After identification of students at risk for dropping out, what do you think is the next step?
- (Types of interventions and strategies?)
- (Prevention programs?)
- (Follow up?)

6.  What changes should educators make to prevent student dropout?

Thank you so much for taking the time to interview with me today.  If you would like to see a copy of the transcript once I am finished transcribing it, I will be more than happy to meet you and let you look it over to ensure my accuracy.  Again, I know that time is precious in this busy world, and I truly appreciate you giving me your time to help me in my research.

APPENDIX D

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Individual Face-to-Face Interview Protocol

I would like to talk to you about your perspectives about student dropout and about effective and ineffective strategies for motivating students to stay in school. There are no right or wrong answers in this interview. This interview is confidential, and a pseudonym will be used in place of your name. I would like for you to answer each question in your own words and to think about your personal experiences when you are answering. I am interested in you, your experiences and your unique opinion. This email interview should take you approximately 45-60 minutes to complete and will vary from general to specific questions. Please be completely open and honest with me, because I value what you have to say. Your story and experiences are important.

1. Tell me about yourself. How did you decide to become a counselor?
    a. (How long? Enjoy being a counselor? Any other educational positions?)

2. Describe your perception of students who dropout.

3. Discuss a time when you had a student surprise you.
    a. (Examples if need prompting: student have great attendance with a past of missing a lot of school; good behavior from a student with a past of negative behavior; good grades from a student with a past of low grades)

4. Discuss a time when a student's actions/behaviors contradicted your or other teachers' assumptions.

5. Describe instances in which you thought it was necessary to identify students at-risk for dropping out of school.
    a. (What process did you go through? Is your process the same/similar with each student? Follow a protocol?)

6. Explain any types of interventions, effective or not, you've used with students at risk for dropping out of school.
    a. (Which did you find most successful and unsuccessful?)

7. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me today concerning student dropout?

APPENDIX E

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Participant Demographic Survey

This form is being used by the researcher, Kelly Ann Bennett, to gather demographic information about you for this qualitative study.  The information will not be used in any way that will make you identifiable in the study.

Name:_____

School:_____

Gender:_____     Age:_____     Race:_____

Please list the degrees that you hold:

Please list the schools that you have been a counselor at and the number of years that you were a counselor at each school, beginning with the most current position:

Please list any education-related jobs that you have held, outside of being a counselor, and the years in which you held the position(s):

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelly Ann Bennett graduated from public school in Amory, Mississippi. After high

school, she attended Mississippi University for Women in Columbus, Mississippi.

She graduated Summa Cum Laude in 2004 with a Bachelor of Science in education

and began her teaching career at Milam Elementary School in Tupelo, Mississippi.

In 2006, Mrs. Bennett completed her Master of Education degree at the University of

Mississippi.  While teaching at Milam Elementary School, she was accepted into the Doctor of

Education program at the University of Mississippi in August 2006. In the fall of 2008, she

began teaching at Amory High School in Amory, Mississippi.  She accepted a position as an

instructor in the Curriculum and Instruction department at Mississippi State University in 2012.