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At-risk youth, past and current are mostly characterized by typical adolescent behaviors and are frequently considered problems, community liabilities, and recipients rather than resources. Many have been mislabeled and diagnosed as future failures despite having the ability to succeed. Those who succeed are constituted as a rare breed and have some type of significant element that cultivated achievement.

This qualitative study serves as a contribution to scholarship on the factors that influence and affect the academic success of resilient at-risk high school students. The research also set out to identify the major influences that enabled resilient at-risk high school graduates to succeed beyond the obstacles and barriers that existed in their lives.

This research study utilized narrative inquiry approach where the participants in this research shared their life's stories and all they attribute to how they overcame adversities to reach their goals and dreams. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) have defined narrative inquiry as a way of understanding experiences. The inquiry method employed for this study was the interview approach where open-ended questions were utilized to uncover factors positively affecting student achievement. A total eight students participated in the interview process.

Data collection included recorded interviews, interviews were transcribed and common themes were determined and coded allowing for data analysis. Through this analysis five major themes were uncovered and found to be associated with the success of

resilient at-risk high school graduates: including a culture of support for students (social support theorem), the belief and inspiration of students (self-efficacy), students being inspired and learning from their surroundings and environments (social learning theory), the level of belief in their abilities (self-efficacy) and a contribution of the small learning environment.

“TO BE OR NOT TO BE”: A STUDY OF THE FACTORS THAT AFFECT AND  
SUPPORT THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF RESILIENT  
AT-RISK HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

by

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This document is dedicated to the innovators in my life who have challenged me to explore new paths, think critically, be creative in my attitude, and grow confidently. It is in honor of my wife Nicole and my three children: Nicholas, Nathaniel, and Quiana, all who made tremendous sacrifices to see this research come to pass. Through them, I have discovered that family support can birth passion, increase self-efficacy, and ease the burden to make the most remote possibility come true. This work is also dedicated to my mother (Julia Williams) and my father (Warren Williams). Through them, I have learned that life is a continuous creative process of believing, doing, reflecting and redoing. Through them, I have witnessed that even the greatest challenges can be overcome with persistence, patience, perseverance, and desire.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **My At-riskness**

Notwithstanding the negative statistical prognosis for at-risk youth, many vulnerable youth find ways to overcome adversity and attain academic achievement and success. I am a testament and stand as an example of one whom others felt would be a component of that negative statistic, but yet prevailed. Life for me could have gone either way, as for many of my peers, and leads one to question how I got here—a passionate husband, father, educator, and spiritual leader with three degrees and now in the pursuit of a doctorate. For my parents and mentors it seems prophetic, being that I was named after the show Quincy, M.D. But for others there may still be the question, “What were the factors that enabled Quincy to travail beyond the hardships of life to achieve?”

Life for me was no different than for many other youth in the world who face complex societal issues, impoverished living conditions, and disparities in school. So I often wonder why my future was not prescribed by my childhood adversity, or what contributed to my outcome. Many of these social problems have become institutionalized in today’s culture and have predetermined the future educational and professional opportunities for many children in this country (Coleman et al., 1966). In addition, recent research presents that other risk factors, such as living in a single-parent family or low parent education levels, especially when combined with poverty, can markedly increase

children's chances of adverse outcomes. Children affected by multiple risks—three or more risk factors—are the most likely to experience school failure and other negative outcomes, including maladaptive behavior (Robbins, Stagman, & Smith, 2012).

Growing up as a young African American male in the 80s and 90s in a very small town was a struggle to where my dreams seemed to be enslaved by my circumstances. It was hard to fathom life getting any better when the feeling of “what’s next?” or “the worst was yet to come” continuously lingered in my mind. The harder life seemed to get the more I correlated it to my possible destiny. Ruby Payne highlighted the issues for children living in poverty throughout her research. She defined poverty as “the extent to which an individual does without resources” (Payne, 2001, p. 16). Resources are financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical; they also include access to support systems, positive relationships with role models, and knowledge of the “hidden rules.” Individuals function under the rules in which they were raised (Payne, 2005). All I could hear ringing in my head were the words of Shakespeare, “To be or not to be.”

As I reflect over my time as a youth, I am not sure what was harder to deal with: trying to matriculate through the harsh living conditions that included limited food, non-conducive housing, subpar or hand-me-down clothing, lack of hot water; or facing the ongoing ridicule from family, friends, and peers. Life felt cruel and at times I was embarrassed to be me. Payne (2005) described some of the barriers that impoverished children faced:

Children living in generational poverty often have lost their sense of pride. They no longer struggle against their surroundings in an attempt to rise above them. In

many ways this lifestyle has become comfortable and the only way they live. (p. 27)

So why was I so special? To what or to whom do I attribute my success? What motivated me to keep fighting? Some children develop the ability to survive despite many adverse situations in their lives. Many not only survive but also thrive academically and socially (Condly, 2006). Was it the support of my parents—despite the fact that they were at-risk children who evolved into at-risk adults?

My mother dropped out of high school while in the tenth grade and later completed her GED while my father graduated from high school and went on to attend trade school, all in the same year I was born. My dad worked two to three jobs just to ensure life struggles never mastered us as a family, while my mom stayed at home because child care was not a financial option. Living from home to home at times and pay check to pay check; my parents experienced some real ups and downs. As many other at-risk students, I believe I benefitted from having concerned and hardworking adults in my life who helped guide me and aided me in getting to graduation.

Living arrangements included a store front building with cement floors, bug infested trailers, and sometimes staying with family members until circumstances got better. I often reflect on the times I would stand at the door and watch my father walk the streets collecting bottles and cans to sell as he would say, “I want you to have a better life than I did and I want my grandchildren to have a better life than you.”

Rumberger (1987) maintained that individuals who leave high school without credentials increase their susceptibility to many detrimental life outcomes. Compared to

high school graduates, dropouts are more likely to experience unemployment, to receive welfare, and to have lower lifetime earning potential. National leaders fully understand the demand for a highly educated population and that development of a modern society depends on educated people to support further progress (Sabochik, 2010). Tough (2012) notes that when one considers vital future outcomes such as yearly income, unemployment rate, divorce rate, and use of drugs and alcohol, GED recipients look exactly like high school dropouts, despite the fact that they have received this extra credential, and are typically considered to be more intelligent than high school dropouts.

Was the parent factor enough? How much of my success and that of others can be contributed to the level of resiliency or motivation? How impactful was the school or the teachers and what role did they play in my achievements? Was there a magic solution that ended one era of life where hopelessness seemed to exist and began the new era where dreams seemed reachable and attainable? There are many at-risk youth who could benefit from these questions being answered and whose lives could be impacted. It is my hope that this study will serve as a tool that provides insight which helps to reduce the percentage of at-risk students who fail and give up on the possibility of a better life. Its purpose is to seek possible answers that can be used to inspire, cultivate, and challenge parents, leaders, and peers of present and future at-risk youth. It is my primary goal in doing this study to identify processes and approaches that have enabled at-risk students to be successful.

### **Purpose of Study**

As a former at-risk student who skimmed through high school and who stumbled through five years of college with little to no support, it is my passion and desire to eliminate the dropout rate in the school, district, and state I serve. This study serves as a contribution to scholarship on the factors that influence and affect the academic success of resilient at-risk high school students. This study will investigate the following research questions:

1. What were the factors that influenced the success of at-risk students who have been academically successful, have graduated from high school, and currently are in their first year of college?
  - a. What attributes did the students possess that enabled them to overcome the challenges they faced in life?
  - b. What influence did educators or the educational environment have on the academic success of at-risk high school students?
  - c. What influence did parents/guardians have on the academic success or failure of at-risk high school students?
  - d. What other factors were influential in their success?

### **Statement of the Problem**

Some projections of high school graduates are that roughly one out of three public high school students will drop out of school and fail to graduate (Thornburgh, 2006). According to Diploma Count (2008), 1.2 million students fail to graduate from high school annually. School dropout is a major issue in the USA. It is estimated that in 50 of

the largest U.S. cities, the dropout rate is almost 50%, with 3.5–6 million students dropping out of high school each year (Bloom, 2010; Bloom & Haskins, 2010). These numbers alongside a report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2005) confirmed a recent decline in the national graduation rate. These data further confirm the idea that the high school graduation rate has been in a steady decline annually after a 77.1% graduation rate in 1969. Since 1969, the graduation rate has dropped as low as 69.9%. In more recent data, Diploma Count (2015) provided that based on those state-reported data, the U.S. Department of Education indicates that the nation's graduation rate stood at 81% for the class of 2013. However, with this high rate, graduation rates for historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups remain substantially below those of their white and Asian peers. Nineteen percentage points, for instance, separate graduation rates for American Indian and Asian students.

Despite decades of school improvement initiatives, changes in the educational process, and a vast amount of ground breaking research, many young people still do not cross the threshold of secondary education with the credentials that indicate success—a high school diploma. A Children's Defense Fund (2002) study concluded that researchers differ in their method of calculating dropout rates; they agree that approximately every nine seconds a student decides to permanently leave high school prior to graduation. In 2000, the national dropout rate in the U.S. for students aged 16–24 was 10.9% per year. More recently, in 2005, the rate had improved slightly to 9.4% per year (NCES, 2005). This at-risk/dropout movement is one that has progressed over time and seems to have come to a place where finding solutions is daunting and at times seems unachievable.



Today, thousands of at-risk youth give up on school and on themselves, or schools give up on them. The National Center for Education Statistics (Aud et al., 2012) provides a wealth of data showing that many U.S. high schools are struggling. Across all public schools, only around 75% of students graduate on time, and approximately 8% of students drop out of high school altogether.

Without continued support from schools, communities, and families, many at-risk youth will shun the notion that they can succeed and eventually drop out of high school. The trend of high school dropouts is so significant that America has declared the decline in high school graduation rates an epidemic. According to Bridgeland (2006), a report released by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation titled *The Silent Epidemic* proclaimed, “There is a high school dropout epidemic in America. Each year almost one third of all public high school students—and nearly one half of all Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans—fail to graduate from public high school with their class” (p. 1.) According to Bridgeland, students who dropped out were much more likely than their graduating peers to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, unhealthy, divorced, or single parents with children who dropped out of high school themselves. American communities suffer from this dropout epidemic because of the loss of productive workers and the higher costs associated with increased incarceration, health care, and social services (Bridgeland, 2006).

### **Academic Failure and the Financial Implication**

Thornburgh (2006) suggested that Americans were concerned with the growing dropout epidemic because 64% of Americans surveyed stated that not enough money was

spent on public schools. Thornburgh continued that of those polled, 59% claimed they would pay higher taxes to improve public schools, whereas 89% of Americans said they were concerned and felt the dropout rate in the U.S. was serious. More recent statistics indicate that only 70.5% of ninth graders in public high schools in the U.S. have obtained their high school diploma four years later (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2013).

As our culture faces a future filled with increased technology and different ways of knowing, higher education has become increasingly important for both individual development as well as future workforce development. Education is not only seen as setting the foundation for society to improve and flourish, education also plays an enormous role in the life success of individual of the past and next generation. National leaders fully understand the demand for a highly educated population and that development of a modern society depends on educated people to support further progress (Sabochnik, 2010).

Societal leaders need to get this right or we will pay for it later in measures beyond return. The increasing dropout rates are also negatively affecting the community in which the rates are the highest. Regions with higher rates of students who have dropped out of school also have higher crime rates and, on average, employees in communities with high dropout rates make lower wages (Messacar & Oreopoulos, 2013).

According to Bonilla, Kelly, and Gaskel (as cited in Lundenburg, 1999), the at-risk problem with our youth has become a nationwide problem that “has social and economic implications for individuals and for society.” It is the civic duty of this nation

to invest in all of our students; especially those labeled at risk, and begin launching a thorough investigation on the causes and effects of how some at-risk students are succeeding and many are failing.

Conrath (1994) states,

The at-risk situation in today's society is not just a problem; it is a national crisis with 25% of our high school students dropping out of school. Seventy percent of our prison inmates are high school dropouts. It costs taxpayers about 6 times as much yearly to house a prison inmate as it does to educate a child in public school. (p. 3)

As parents, educators, researchers, elected officials, and citizens of this great nation, we cannot continue to sit idly by while many of our children fall in the academic gap and below the poverty line even before becoming adult citizens. Bowers (1990) stated that no matter which label is applied to them, it is definite that these children's needs are not being addressed. Both the individuals themselves and society will reap the harvest of these ill-prepared students. Caterall (1985, as cited in Wells, 1990) said,

The economic burden of dropouts is felt in increased taxes to support welfare programs, fight crime, and maintain special programs, as well as in lost revenue through lack of taxes generated by these former students who may not be working or who may be in lower-paying occupations. (p. 2)

High School dropouts potentially place a financial strain on themselves and on society.

The price of educating the undereducated could cost many local, state, and federal agencies a vast amount of funds. The lack of a high school education limits the opportunity for those who drop out of school to compete with an ever-evolving global market.

The job market for dropouts in the current economy is very limited as the demand for education in entry level jobs has increased in the past few decades (Daggett, 2005). In 2002, a high school dropout working fulltime could earn only \$22,093, a decline of 35% in constant dollars from 1971 (Barton, 2006). Bridgeland (2006) pointed out that high school dropouts were twice as likely to move into an impoverished lifestyle as high school graduates, that many of the jobs dropouts did a decade ago have gone to cheaper foreign markets, and that there is no longer a high demand for uneducated workers in the United States. Bridgeland (2006) reported that 4 out of 10 young adults (ages 16–24) lacking a high school diploma received some type of government assistance in 2001. Unfortunately, these same individuals also have a higher incident rate of being incarcerated (Bridgeland, 2006).

According to Roderick (1993), high school dropouts will earn less than their graduate counterparts. In addition, even with some college experience, high school graduates earn twice as much as men without high school diplomas (Kronick & Hargis, 1998). Furthermore, dropouts are also more likely to be unemployed than high school graduates. The lack of employment leads to other societal issues including the need for public assistance and the likelihood of imprisonment (Kronick & Hargis, 1998). Research has shown on a consistent basis that impoverished conditions have a negative effect on students' academic performance. According to Wong (2004), since 1966 when the Coleman Report was released, Americans have known that poverty and the world surrounding students in poverty impact their academic achievement. Children living in poverty conditions are not prepared to succeed in middle-class school environments

(Buckner, 2001)—meaning there seems to be a revolving cycle where the dropout rate affects generation after generation.

Students at risk of dropping out not only have fewer opportunities of getting a job but the ones available are of low quality and sometimes lack the sustainability to enhance their lives. According to Barton (2006),

In 2003, 1.1 million 16-19 year-olds did not have a high school diploma and were not enrolled in school. In the landscape of the economy, these dropouts are often lost travelers without a map. Only 4 in 10 of the 16-19 year-olds are employed, as are fewer than 6 in 10 of 20- to 24-year-old dropouts. Black and Latino youth are doing considerably less well than others are. What about the earning power of those dropouts who have jobs? Do they make enough money to support a household? For 25- to 34-year-old dropouts who manage to work full-time, the average annual salary of males dropped from \$35,087 (in constant dollars) in 1971 to \$22,903 in 2002, a decline of 35%. The comparable annual earnings for females without a diploma were \$19,888 in 1971, declining to \$17,114 in 2002. Even when they work full-time, the average earnings of this age group of dropouts are not far above the poverty line for a family with children—and most dropouts do not even reach this level of earnings. (p. 16)

So what is the solution and what can we as educators learn from past and present at-risk students that will enable us to provide the necessary tools to ensure success for future at-risk students? I believe that understanding the factors that informed success for some could indeed provide success for others. Hearing and unpacking the stories of successful at-risk students could lead to identifying factors that unlock the dropout mysteries for future at-risk students.

It is evident that the differences in wages and salaries for high school graduates versus dropouts can greatly determine the quality of their lives. Bridgeland (2006) notes that high school dropouts, on average, earned \$9,200 less per year than did high school

graduates and about \$1 million less over a lifetime than did college graduates. According to Campbell (2003), high school graduation becomes a mechanism of sorting and contributes to a wide array of economic and political divisions within the current social structure. As Campbell continues, the average yearly income of a high school dropout is \$12,400 compared to \$21,000 for a high school graduate, and \$41,000 for a college graduate. Over the course of a lifetime, a college graduate will earn, on average, \$1 million more than a high school graduate (Amos, 2008).

### **Significance of Study**

This research study is important for educators, community leaders, and constituents involved with at-risk students who are challenged with the demands of tailoring their approaches and creating strategies to meet the needs of the students they serve. The inability of educators, researchers, and program designers to effectively reduce the number of students dropping out of school may be grounded in their approach to understanding dropouts (Beatty, Neisser, Trent, & Heubert, 2001). Sanders and Sanders (1998) observe that in order for any plan to work, it will require the combined efforts and talents of students, educators, parents, community members (public and private), and business leaders coming together to address and meet the needs of their at-risk youth.

We must also couple our efforts with a clear understanding and comprehension of why many at-risk students are failing and how we might assist them in becoming successful. Putnam (2015) argues that fundamental to the American Dream is the belief that our children will have better lives than we do, and that Americans believe in equality of opportunity, limited only by one's talent and hard work. There is an overwhelming

need to educate those who impact at-risk students the most. Helge (1990) indicated that the basic key to helping at-risk students lies within educating parents, *teachers*, and other service providers to better communicate with children and become attuned to their problems before they become crises. This study adds to the existing body of knowledge on what impacts the success of at-risk students.

Allowing successful at-risk graduates to share their authentic experiences and stories provides the groundwork for transforming education to better meet the needs of all students. L alas and Valle (2007) assert that by collecting the diversity of experiences contained in the shared stories of successful at-risk students, educators may glean an understanding of cultural proficiency which may or may not currently be present in today's high school settings. Research findings of a study of successful at-risk students could also be helpful to school-based and district officials leading to:

1. Early detection and support of at-risk students,
2. Identifying systematic solutions that enable success of at-risk youth, and
3. Enhanced collaboration and strategic discussions on how to enhance the graduation rate of all students.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

To provide a context for this study, this chapter reviews the literature relevant to at-risk high school graduates. The first part of the chapter provides an overview of the history of at-risk students in the United States. This review also discusses research on resiliency. The final section reports research of common risk factors directly or indirectly related to the success of at-risk students.

#### **The Conception and Birth of the At-risk Student**

As the research of at-risk students who become high school dropouts has developed, the foundational study done by many of the major authors in the 19th and 20th centuries set the stage for the conception of the educationally at-risk student. This notion of risk as it applies to the educational frame began in the U.S. report commissioned under President Ronald Reagan titled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education [NCEE], 1983). Citing the decline of U.S. economic status and global power, the report implicates schools and the educational system:

Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technology innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world . . . the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. (NCEE, 1983, p. 3)



This contemptuous prosecution of schools in the U.S. informed the future of educational reform and seemed to have been the catalyst that unlocked the communication gates that lead the focus from a nation at risk to at-risk students. Many also believed that much of the report was political propaganda for those seeking future elections. Gabbard (2003) presents that *A Nation at Risk* could be considered to be

the greatest lie that the state has ever produced regarding our America's public schools . . . the most efficacious educational report ever issued by the federal government, judged in terms of the scope and scale of educational reforms that it engendered . . . [and] also a well-designed and orchestrated propaganda campaign. (p. 54)

This report, while focusing on the demise of the nation's status and losing its supremacy in the world, also helped raise the critical question: "Who and what is at risk?" Correlating risk with threat and the potential weakening of our country, the report provided various concepts and facets of risk. Saltman and Gabbard (2003) suggest and provide insight into who and what is at risk in U.S. education:

In the aftermath of the events of September 11, Education as Enforcement serves to remind us that collective problems deserve collective solutions, and that what is at risk is not only a generation of minority youth and adults now considered to be a threat to national security, but also the very promise of democracy itself. (p. 5)

### **Defining At Risk and Identifying At-risk Students**

One encompassing question is who or what is at risk? Kawakami (1995) noted that the first step in conducting the review of the research was to define the term "at-risk students" (p. 2). I will seek to provide various perspectives on the definition of at risk.

McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, and McWhirter (2012) explained that during the past two decades the term “at-risk” has appeared frequently in the literature on education, psychology, medicine, social work, and economics as well as in the legislation of various states and in federal government reports. They continued by insisting that

At-risk denotes a set of presumed cause-effect dynamics that place an individual child or adolescent in danger of future negative outcomes. At risk designates a situation that is not necessarily current but that can be anticipated in the absence of intervention. (p. 8)

According to Herr (1989), there is no categorical or concise definition. The definition changes “as legislation purposes change and knowledge about psychological definitions expands” (p. 191). Herr (1989) continues and also suggested, “The challenge for counselor’s now and in the future is the changing definitions of who among the diverse population of the United States is ‘at-risk’” (p. 189). This heightens the challenge of detecting and identifying students who are at risk.

Morris (2000) reported that the most popular of all definitions of at-risk students are those students who are probably not going to graduate from high school (p. 4). Slavin, Karweit, and Madden (1989, as cited in Morris, 2000) said “The meaning of the term ‘at-risk’ is never very precise, and varies considerably in practice. One possible definition is that students who are at-risk are those who, on the basis of several risk factors, are unlikely to graduate from high school” (p. 1).

There are numerous ways that educators and other professionals define “at-risk.” At-risk can be defined in one or more of the following ways: (a) may not attain reading and writing high enough to go on to the next grade, (b) has been/is physically, sexually, or mentally abused, (c) is malnourished or sleep deprived,

(d) is part of a one-parent household, (e) lacks adequate communication skills, (f) does not have appropriate social behavior with other students and the teacher, (g) cannot maintain attention needed to complete classroom tasks and activities, and (h) is physically or mentally challenged. (Edwards, Pleasants, & Franklin, 1999, p. 23)

Who are the students being labeled at risk and what does the term at risk truly mean?

There has been and continues to be a vast amount of literature and research defining at-risk youth. For example, Capuzzi and Gross (2014) highlighted the characteristics of at-risk adopted by the Montana State Board of Education which was defined as follows:

At-risk youths are children who are not likely to finish high school or who are apt to graduate considerably below potential. At-risk factors include chemical dependence, teenage pregnancy, poverty, disaffection with school and society, high-mobility families, emotional and physical abuse, physical and emotional disabilities and learning disabilities that do not qualify students for special education but nevertheless impeded their progress. (p. 6)

The U.S. Department of Education (2009) defined an “at-risk” student as one who is likely to fail at school. School failure is typically seen as dropping out of school before high school graduation. The DOE examined seven sets of variables associated with at-risk students: basic demographic characteristics; family and personal background characteristics; the amount of parental involvement in the student’s education; the student’s academic history; student behavioral factors; teacher perceptions of the student; and the characteristic of the student’s school. Others define at risk according to socio-economic conditions, especially in high poverty school districts (Munoz-Carmona, 1997). Students potentially at-risk are described this way for various reasons, including those

who have dropped out or have the potential to drop out of school or have repeated a course or grade (Rapp, Eckes, & Plurker, 2006).

For many school districts and educational leaders, trying to understand how to matriculate the process for identifying students is a continuous and daunting task. It causes many to correlate at risk with childhood and birth. In addition, research conducted by Epstein and Sheldon (2002) revealed that the problem of dropping out existed because teachers, school counselors, and even parents failed to recognize the warning signs students inadvertently exhibited before dropping out. Neither is there one single factor that dooms a child's educational experience, nor is there one solution for the problem of academic failure (Parsley & Corcoran, 2003). Individuals are not born at risk, but instead are made at risk from the influences of society (Husby, 1998).

Some educators have developed their own methods and strategies to detect and identify students who may be at risk of not being successful in high school and potentially dropping out. The Grey County School District in North Carolina developed an at-risk characteristic profile outline for their alternative schools to assist with identifying students with the greatest needs and who could in the future become disengaged with high school (See Table 1).

Wells (1990) gave another example of a local school district in North Carolina that uses early identification referral form. The referral form consists of two parts. Section one is "Factual Characteristics" which includes information about attendance, school grade retention, basic skills, subjects failed, and family history. Section two is the "Observable Characteristics" which includes school performance, behavior, study and

work habits, and participation in extracurricular activities, self-concept, and personal characteristics identifying personal friendships, substances abuse, and physical or mental problems. It is important that school system develop a process for identifying at-risk students if progress is to occur. This will also assist with the negative connotations that aligned with the label at risk.

Individuals who are labeled at risk are sometimes viewed with negative and narrow lenses without a broader scope being taken into consideration. Before any social justice is placed on children at risk, the meaning of at risk needs to be clarified and conceptualized (Kronick, 1997).

### **Resilience in At-risk Youth**

While there is no single factor that will guarantee at-risk students will complete or drop out of high school, there are certain characteristics or combinations of factors that may indicate a greater likelihood of either case occurring.

This generation of school-aged students functions in a world where children face increased poverty, a lack parental support, exposure to and increased drug use, a demise in social behavior for youths, lack of discipline among youth, and increased violence and abuse. Nevertheless, many youth, especially those at risk find a way to survive in adverse environments, and some actually excel (Condly, 2006). Children who succeed and prosper despite the challenges they face and the odds against them are called resilient (Edens, 2001). Mohaupt (2009) states,

Resilience can be defined as the “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” or, in the context of developmental psychology, “Resilience . . . is a capacity for adaptation along

appropriate developmental pathways, despite disruptions such as family breakdowns” (p. 384)

The theory of resilience attempts to explain why some students achieve academically even though they encounter many negative environmental or psychological situations (Reis, Colbert, & Thomas, 2005). Conceptions of resiliency include (a) a quality held by invulnerable individuals, (b) protective mechanisms that help individuals respond to risk situations, (c) individual adjustments despite challenging life events, and (d) a person’s positive response to adversity (Reis et al., 2005).

Resilience describes a set of abilities that foster a process of successful adaptation and transformation despite peril and adversity (Benard, 2004). In other research, Ungar (2004) presents that “Resilience may refer to either the state of well-being achieved by an individual at-risk (as in they are resilient) or to the characteristics and mechanisms by which that well-being is achieved (as in they show resilience) to a particular risk” (p. 5). Capuzzi and Gross (2014) presented that resilience is a relational self-fighting capacity that it does not occur in a social vacuum, and may emerge at different developmental stages.

Winfield (1991) submits, “They appear to develop stable, healthy personas and are able to recover from or adapt to life’s stresses and problems” (as cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994, p. 2) provided four factors related to resiliency. They include individual attributes and positive use of time, family, and school.

Research has found that resilient at-risk students stay focused on their future as a coping mechanism for the situation with which they are presently faced. Duncan-Andrade

(2009), citing Tupac Shakur (2000), characterized at-risk students as “young people who emerge in defiance of socially toxic environments as the ‘roses that grow from concrete’” (p. 185).

In one recent large-scale study, approximately 19% of students who could be classified as at risk became individuals who had success in school, with positive goals and plans for the future (Peng, Lee, Wang, & Walberg, 1992). As an at-risk youth, I would often think about what and where I would be at certain ages of my life. The thought of living in France as a car designer, along with making millions of dollars, kept me coming to school every day regardless of what life presented. Resilient students have clear, realistic goals and are optimistic about the future. They have hope, despite all the negative circumstances in their lives, and confidence that they can achieve their long-range goals (McMillan & Reed, 1993).

Research also argues that one of the particular differences in at-risk students who fail and those who are resilient and succeed is the amount involvement that occurs in school and in the community. “Involvement in ‘required helpfulness’ seems to be a factor in resilient students’ experiences” (Philiher, 1986, as cited in McMillan & Reed, 1994, p. 3). Many of the resilient students are involved in extracurricular activities at school, hobbies, participation in church, or other groups or clubs. Involvement increases self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment, thus stimulating motivation when one believes they have the ability to succeed (McMillan & Reed, 1993).

Other resiliency research focuses on the attribute of resilient at-risk students’ pursuit of support, how to foster resiliency in children, and the correlation between

resiliency and self-efficacy. According to Tough (2012), “Parents and other caregivers who are able to form close, nurturing relationships with their children can foster resilience in them that protects them from many of the worsts effects of a harsh environment” (p. 28). Researchers studying the phenomenon of resilience have consistently identified protective factors at the individual and the relational levels that promote resilience in the face of risk from within the community, such as exposure to violence. Individual protective factors include competence characteristics such as self-efficiency, flexible coping strategies, and a sense of autonomy and responsibility (Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990).

McMillan and Reed (1993) note that resilient students do not believe that the school, neighborhood, or family is critical in either their successes or failures. They acknowledge that a poor home environment can make things difficult, but they do not blame their performance on these factors.

Many other studies believe that resilience is established through protective factors in the lives of at-risk students. Protective factors include but are not limited to support of adults; opportunities to enroll in advance placement classes; association with highly achieving, highly motivated peers; participation in numerous after-school and extra-curricular activities; the development of strong belief in self and increased self-esteem; and the development of a coping mechanism for facing the challenging situations in their lives, including family and socioeconomic situations (Reis et al., 2005).

Garg (2002) conducted a study involving 4,034 Canadian students in Grades 8–13 from across the country. The participants completed a questionnaire to determine the



driving force behind their educational ambitions. From the questionnaire, three factors that influenced educational aspirations were constructed. These factors were (a) a background factor, specifically maternal occupation and education; (b) family involvement; that is, parental personal and school-based involvement with their adolescents; and (c) personal factors, including student grades, extracurricular reading, and parental expectations. The results showed personal factors had a strong direct influence on educational goals accounting for 76% of the variance (Garg, 2002).

Hoy (2006) piloted a study on high school students from 96 schools across a Midwestern state. He stated four factors that influenced student achievement in high school: (a) students' socioeconomic status; (b) students' previous academic achievement; (c) whether or not a student attended an urban school, as defined by the state; and (d) a variable they called academic optimism. Academic optimism for each school was determined by a series of questions that determined the school staff's emphasis on academic excellence, their collective efficacy, and the faculty's trust in its student and parents.

### **Self-efficacy**

Perceived academic self-efficacy is defined as personal judgments of one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action to attain designated types of educational performances (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). These judgments influence how students think, motivate themselves, and act (Bandura, 1995). Without the belief in themselves other forms of motivation will be null and void. Current students are motivated differently and need to have high levels of self-efficacy to achieve.

Pink (2011) terms this “Motivation 2.0.” He notes that it is assumed that youth today are still driven by wealth and riches as he was during his youth. He states, “Sometimes these motivators (extrinsic) work. Often they don’t. And many times, they inflict collateral damage” (p. 26). Other researchers, such as Mullen and Schunk (2012), note that Bandura’s social cognitive theory, particularly as related to self-efficacy is the main key cognitive variable influencing motivation and engagement.

Zimmerman (1995) note that student beliefs in their capabilities to master academic activities affects their aspirations, level of interest in intellectual pursuits, and their academic achievements. He continues that these beliefs influence emotional states such as stress, anxiety, and depression, which can intrude and impair intellectual functioning. Bandura (1995) also presented that self-efficacy beliefs plays a major role in setting the course of intellectual development and operate as important contributor to academic success.

Understanding the correlation between academic success of at-risk students and positive self-efficacy is very vital. Much of the research done on this correlation provides for the idea that the more positive and enhanced a student’s academic self-efficacy, the more academically successful they are. Path analysis of causality indicated that perceived self-efficacy influences student’s learning through cognitive as well as motivational mechanisms (Zimmerman et al., 1992). Further findings suggest that students who believe they are capable of performing academic tasks use more cognitive strategies, persist longer, and undertake difficult and more challenging assignments than students who doubt their capabilities (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991).

## **Parental Involvement**

Multiple researches suggest that parents are a key component to the school success of their children (Brandon, Higgins, Pierce, Tandy, & Sileo, 2010; Epstein, 1995; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; McNeal, 2012). An ongoing challenge today as in the past is that many students may live in single-parent households where the parent works more than one job, sometimes trying to finish school and juggle multiple responsibilities. This can limit the availability of the parent to participate in school activities. With the variety of factors that impinge on parents, they are often criticized for their nonparticipation or limited participation in the school environment (Brandon et al., 2010).

Parental involvement in a child's educational life is known to be an important factor in helping students to succeed in school. An analysis of the research reveals strong evidence (e.g., Becher, 1984) that involving parents in the educational process increases their children's academic success. In recent years, there has been increased interest by educational constituents in increasing the role that parents play in the educational environment. Research indicates that parental involvement plays a critical role, not only in the prevention and remediation of education and developmental problems, but also in the facilitation of children's development and achievement (Becher, 1984). In addition, a growing body of research reveals the positive effects of parent involvement in educational programs, the means for bringing about these effects, and the means for improving parent-teacher relationships (Becher, 1984).

Rojas (2008) claims students whose parents were not actively involved in their academic career are more at risk of dropping out of school. One of the most pivotal components of student outcome and achievement is how much support a student receives from parents and community. Rojas (2008) found that parents not talking and reading to their child were two factors detrimental to their child's academic growth. In addition, Stringfield and Land (2002) indicated that the level of involvement of a student's parents was a direct catalyst of the child's academic performance in school.

Much of the empirical research has focused on the structural characteristics of families, such as socioeconomic status and family structure. Research has consistently found that socioeconomic status, most commonly measured by parental education and income, is a powerful predictor of school achievement and dropout behavior (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; McNeal, 1999; Pong & Ju, 2000; Rumberger, 1983, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Research has also demonstrated that students from single-parent and step families are more likely to drop out of school than students from two-parent families (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Ekstrom et al., 1986; McNeal, 1999; Rumberger, 1983, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). However, one recent study found that a change in dissolution of two-parent families did not increase the likelihood of dropping out apart from its effects on income loss (Pong & Ju, 2000).

Other studies have also found that parent participation increases children's academic achievement and cognitive development (Becher, 1984; Henderson, 1981). According to Belcher, Peckuonis, and Deforge (2011), individuals grow up within family

systems and develop important connections among family members that greatly influence their course in life.

Successful approaches that have been studied include parent meetings and workshops focused on educating parents and stimulating more participation in the education and development of children (Esterson, Feldman, Krigsman, & Warshaw, 1975; Evans, 1973; Greenwood, Breivogel, & Bessent, 1972), parent-teacher conferences which serve as opportunities to describe ways in which parents can be actively involved in the educational program (Rotter & Robinson, 1982), and providing parents with specific information concerning the school program and student performance (Evans, 1973; Greenwood et al., 1972).

The Lynch Enabling study (Lynch, Hurford, & Cole, 2002) focused on parent involvement as being a factor that influences the progress of students in school. The study included a survey seeking a greater understanding of enabling behaviors in parents as well as the differences between ninth-grade at-risk students and honor students and their parents. Survey responses of parents of at-risk students indicated a much stronger tendency for enabling behaviors than did the responses of parents of honor students. There was a significant correlation between the parents' managing scores and their children's locus of control. Family background is widely recognized as an important contributor to success in school. Although early research done by Coleman, Jencks, and others suggested that family background alone could explain most to all of the variation in educational outcomes (Coleman et al., 1966; Jencks et al., 1972), subsequent research found that much of the influence of family background was mediated through schools.

Yet in virtually all research on school achievement, family background exerts a powerful, independent influence.

Parent involvement also fosters increased satisfaction on the part of the educator and the parent, while facilitating the development of a positive school climate (Skiba & Strassell, 2005). Thus, findings from diverse studies over time have revealed that an active parent-school partnership can contribute not only to the enhancement of the education performance of students, but also to the improvement of parenting skills and family life. But what aspects of family background matter and how do they influence school achievement?

### **School Prevention and Intervention**

Despite decades of school improvement initiatives, many high school students still do not reach their endeavor and lifetime dream of receiving a high school diploma. Thousands of young people give up on school and on themselves, or schools give up on them. According to Diploma Count (2008), 1.2 million students fail to graduate from high school annually. Without effective support from schools, communities, and families, many at-risk students fall through the cracks and eventually drop out of high school. School prevention and intervention is key if we are to keep students in school. But what will it take? Roderick (1993) notes, “Reducing dropout rates also requires that we have a base of knowledge of the manner in which a youth’s school experiences and the institutional characteristics of the school he or she attends influences the course of his or her school career” (p. 17).

School districts and individual schools must focus on personalizing the education plan of each student, not just those who are at risk. Similarly, schools and school districts should resist the temptation to follow the cookie cutter model, but instead should determine what works best for their district, schools, and individual students. The dropout issue is complex; therefore, every district and school leader must evaluate their individual program carefully to determine the extent of its problem, and proceed by tailoring a program designed to meet their needs, and not someone else's need (Reyes, 1989).

Intervention at the classroom level is obviously of great importance. Finn and Rock (1997) observed that the more students are engaged in school, the more academically resilient they become and the more likely they will be to remain in school through graduation. Duncan-Andrade (2009) reflects,

For urban youth (at-risk), their evaluation of which side of the loved-liked line an educator stands on is often based on whether we share the painful path with them: Do we make the self-sacrifices in our own lives that we are asking them to make? Do we engage in the Socratic process of painful scrutiny about these sacrifices? Do we have the capacity and commitment to support students when they struggle to apply that framework in their lives? Teachers who meet these challenges are beloved by students. The sacrifices they make and the solidarity it produces earn them the right to demand levels of commitment that often defy even the students' own notion of their capabilities. Teachers who fall short can be liked but not loved, and this means they are unable to push the limits of students' abilities; they cannot take them down the painful path. (p. 8)

He continues by observing that with teachers he studied, the move from liked to loved did not happen because of the demands they made of students. It happened because of the level of self-sacrifice, love, and support that accompanied those raised expectations (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

Similarly, Headden (2000) concluded that if students could readily identify and relate to the information being taught, the learning process could begin and dropping out is less likely to occur. Hammack (2005) urged educators to connect with at-risk students by creating a classroom which is inviting. Hammack noted that this may encourage students to continue school because they feel more comfortable in an intensified learning environment. Houk (2005) concluded that educators must work to create an effective, culturally responsive, instructional program for students in schools, but cautioned that if they take no notice of the work that needs to be done outside of schools, they undermine all their work.

Student engagement seems to be a major challenge in the larger traditional school settings and unfortunately, many American public high school students are finding themselves in increasingly overcrowded classrooms and the quality of their education is suffering as a result (Bernstein, Millsap, Schimmenti, & Page, 2008). This is why many school districts in the U.S. have provided for alternative school settings in hopes of decreasing the number of at-risk students leaving school prematurely and serving these students by using different methods than found in traditional educational settings.

Most students who attend alternative schools were unsuccessful in traditional school programs and exhibited poor grades, truancy, behavior problems, or experienced special circumstances that impeded their learning. In addition, 12% of the population served in alternative schools has some type of disability (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Characteristics of schools with the greatest holding power include: small enrollment, fair discipline policies, caring teachers, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful



participation (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Marvul, 2012). Given these outcomes, expanding these small school programs to reach more at-risk students, particularly men, should be prioritized, and in fact, the Department of Education recently proposed funding for 3,000 additional career academies (Aud et al., 2012).

### **Other Factors**

Other research on the success of at-risk students is focused on the school and teacher factors. It is clear that teaching at-risk students is challenging and that at-risk students have particular needs that have to be recognized and addressed by their teachers (Peterson, Bennet, & Sherman, 1991). School and teachers can make a big difference for these at-risk youth (Lenarduzzi, 1992). At-risk students have identified their relationship with their teacher as the most significant feature of their school experience (Pomeroy, 1999). This interpersonal relationship is the key element of educational effectiveness (Osterman, 2000).

In researching at-risk students and potential factors, it is important to be mindful that all students do not react in the same way to the factors that place students at risk of not completing their education. One factor that may negatively affect the academic or personal hopes of one student will seemingly have little impact on another. While many potential students are in at-risk categories, other potential at-risk students may not appear on these categories and are not so predictable (Gaustad, 1991). For every demonstrated at-risk factor that deters many students, there are other students' faces with the same issues who manage to graduate with seemingly few obvious difficulties. In addition, it is possible that any students could be labeled at risk due to a number of circumstances that

are often a more ordinary part of adolescents' lives: depression, drugs, poverty, and delinquency (Turpin & Hinton, 2000).

The combination of issues and their complex interactions with one another make it difficult to single out which are the most important factors in causing students to drop out or to continue pass their challenges (Gaustad, 1991). Since there is no defining circumstance or cause that alone is always responsible for a student dropping out, it could be that there are combinations of factors that have a great impact in influencing the decision to drop out or remain in school. To narrow the risk factor focus it is important to analyze theories that are useful in helping shape an understanding about at-risk students and how they may or may not arrive at the decision to drop out of school.

Moreover the term risk-factor is very global and could be connected to all students as some point and time, for, as Land and Legters (2002) point out, "The sheer abundance of potential risk factors now makes possible the classification of nearly every student as at risk at some point during his or her school life" (p. 3).

### **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study explored the factors that impact and determine the success and failure of at-risk students. I chose to utilize the qualitative study method versus quantitative to gain a more personal understanding of those participating in the research. Stake (1995) pointed to three major differences in qualitative and quantitative research: (a) the distinction between explanation and understanding as the purpose of the study, (b) the distinction between a personal and impersonal role for the researcher, and (c) the distinction between knowledge discovered and knowledge constructed.

Using this methodological approach, I proposed to answer the following questions:

- What were the factors that determined the success of at-risk students who have been academically successful, have graduated from high school, and currently are in their first year of college?
- What attributes did the students possess that enabled them to overcome the challenges they faced in life?
- What influence did educators or the educational environment have on the academic success of at-risk high school students?
- What influence did Parents/Guardians have on the academic success or failure of at-risk high school students?

My choice of a qualitative study and specifically, narrative methodology presented the opportunity to study, analyze, and interpret the constructed narratives, viewpoints, and commonalities of successful at-risk high school graduates. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest that qualitative research stresses the socially-constructed nature of the participants' perspective through detailed interviews and observations. The choice of a qualitative study is based on the ability of the researcher to generate a description of a certain event or an understanding of a definite setting or environment (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

This research study utilized narrative inquiry approach. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) have defined narrative inquiry as a way of understanding experiences. Connelly and Clandinin continue by writing,

It (narrative inquiry) is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in a social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and the progress in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social. Simply stated . . . narrative inquiry is stories lived and told. (p. 20)

Munro (1998) adds the current narrative turn in educational research comes to challenge such traditional paradigmatic epistemological paradigms that view the very nature of knowledge as objective and definite. I chose this design because I believe story telling is powerful.

In a real sense, the telling of the story is the construction of a life (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). Narrative has the potential for advancing research in representing the

lived experience of schooling (Goodson, 1995). It is about “laying bare of questions which have been hidden by the answers” in order to understand the difference and diversity of people actions (Baldwin, 1962, as cited in Barone, 2000, p. 154).

Many of the participants in this research were enthusiastic about sharing their stories and experiences of how they overcame adversity in their lives to achieve their goals. Maintaining the voice of the participants is important in this critically framed qualitative study; as such the researcher uses embedded quotes (Creswell, 1998) as specific, concrete examples to highlight the students’ thoughts on what influenced them to obtain academic success despite the challenges they faced in life. To truly understand the in-depth thoughts of at-risk students it was important to let them tell their stories, their experiences, and their philosophies. Working with stories holds significant promise for qualitative researchers because stories are particularly suited as a linguistic form in which human experience can be expressed (Polkinghorne, 1998).

### **Key Concepts and Definition of Terms**

For clarity of understanding, the following terms needed to be defined:

*At-risk Student*—A student who exhibits one or more of the following characteristics: (a) may not attain reading and writing high enough to go on to the next grade, (b) has been/is physically, sexually, or mentally abused, (c) is malnourished or sleep deprived, (d) is part of a one-parent household, (e) lacks adequate communication skills, (f) does not have appropriate social behavior with other students and the teacher, (g) cannot maintain attention needed to complete classroom tasks and activities, and (h) is physically or mentally challenged (Edwards et al., 1999).

*Resiliency*—The ability to be successful in school and other life accomplishments despite environmental adversities brought about by early traits, conditions, and experiences (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994).

*Dropout*—A student who leaves a school or college before completing a course of study or before the end of a term (Barnhart & Book, 1991).

*Intervention*—School-based efforts to improve clients' lives and change problems (Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1993, as cited in Murphy & Duncan, 1997).

*Academic Self-efficacy*—An individual's confidence in their ability to successfully perform academic tasks at designated level (Schunk, 1994, as cited in Gore, 2006).

*Academically Successful*—Definitions of academic success often include factors such as faculty reports, advisor reports, membership in honors programs, grades, academic records, public recognition for academic achievement, timely graduation, independent scholarship, social confidence, dealing with people, and increased awareness of moral issues and social problems (Anastasi, Meade, & Schneiders 1960). For the purposes of this study, academic success is defined as those elements of students' secondary experiences that relate to retention and graduation.

### **Setting**

The setting for this study occurred in the large urban school district of Grey County Schools. The various interview sites were contingent upon the comfort and availability of the participants in the study.

I recruited ten high school graduate participants and interviewed eight. Two of the students recruited, a Hispanic female and a white male, declined to participate in the study due to personal reasons and lack of time. Those who chose to participate were at-risk students who attended and graduated from Grey County School District, all recent graduates not over the age of 21. While no specific race or ethnicity was considered for this study all the participants in this study were African American. I met with participants to discuss the research process. My participant selection criteria included involving students who were characterized by the following:

1. At risk entering their ninth-grade year at Chicod Academy based on the Grey County At-Risk Characteristics chart (see Table 1).
2. Graduated in the last two years (class of 2012–2014).
3. Attained a grade point average greater than a 2.5 (minimal GPA for state universities).
4. Currently attending a college or university.

### **Data Collection**

For this research interviews lasted 60 minutes to 90 minutes allowing an appropriate amount of time for dialogue and feedback. There were also follow-up conversations with participants that last between 20–30 minutes. Interviews were transcribed and common themes were determined and coded. The interview questions are listed below.

**Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about your growing up years in and outside of school.
2. How would you describe your educational or school experience?
  - a. Was it a positive one or negative one?
  - b. Who or what do you feel contributed to the experience the most?
3. Have you experienced any challenges while in school?
  - a. If so, please elaborate on what they are?
  - b. How did you meet these challenges?
4. What is your best memory of school? What is your worst memory of school?
5. Do you feel there are changes needed in education?
  - a. If so, please elaborate on what they are?
  - b. If you had the power, how would you make these changes?
6. Are you being supported or were you supported as a student?
  - a. If so, who do you feel provided you the greatest support?
  - b. Who do you feel provided you the least support?
  - c. How much did your parents support you?
7. Why do you feel you were successful in school?
  - a. Who or what contributed to your success?
  - b. Who or what contributed to your failure?
  - c. At what grade do you remember first experiencing success or failure?
8. Do you feel you had effective or impactful teachers?
  - a. If so, what characteristics did they possess?



- b. If not, what do you feel made them bad or ineffective? How did they impact your education?
  - c. Which do you remember the most the effective or ineffective teachers?
9. Do you feel you could have been or were you successful without the support of others?
- a. If yes, why?
  - b. If no, why not? What did your supporters provide that you could not have done without?
10. How much of your success is a direct result of your hard work or lack thereof?
- a. Despite all the challenges you faced, how confident were you that you would graduate from high school?
11. Which characteristics do you feel you possess that helped you or hindered you from reaching your goals of graduation?
- a. Which of these characteristics do you feel is the most dominant?
12. During your years in school, have there ever been other priorities that seemed more important than getting your education?
- a. If so, what were they, and why did they take precedence over getting your education?
  - b. Did these priorities become a distraction?
13. On a scale of 1 to 10 how motivated were you as a student? What motivated you to do your best in school?

14. Describe any advantages or limitations you feel you had that helped or hindered you in school.
15. What is your profession or career choice and why? Do you feel that the school system has prepared you for your profession?
16. Before we close, is there anything else you would like to share that is relevant to the topic of today.

### **Data Analysis**

The process by which to gain a deeper analysis of the information collected in qualitative research is through the coding of data (Creswell, 2004).

Glesne (2006) notes,

Data analysis involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so that you can make sense of what you have learned. Working with the data, you create explanations, pose hypotheses, you describe, develop theories, and link your stories to other stories. To do so, you must categorize, synthesize, search for patterns, and interpret data you have collected. (p. 147)

In addition, Glesne also recommended that data analysis be done concurrently with data collection. Taking this recommendation, additional notes were taken as individual interviews were conducted with a group of students. In reviewing some of the information and notes collected from the first couple of interviews guided me to establish additional and follow-up questions with the goal of achieving more in-depth interviews. Additionally, researcher comments while reviewing the transcripts were noted for future reference.

Once the data were accumulated and the interviews had been transcribed, each transcript was read and reviewed a number of times in an effort to gain an in-depth understanding of the stories being told by the participants. After each interview and subsequent revisiting of the data, time was taken for reflective and analytic noting (Glesne, 1999, p. 53).

A formal process of sorting and coding the transcripts began thereafter, where I carefully read the interview transcripts, highlighting and annotating important passages. In doing so, common threads and reoccurring themes were discovered. Frequent revisiting of data resulted in a preliminary list of codes and the assignment of tags or labels to descriptive information compiled in a study which is designed to chunk information resulting in similarly themed data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### **Trustworthiness**

In order for this study to be trustworthy and believable, I sought to be perceived as genuine as well as compassionate during the interviews. By allowing the dialogue to be more conversational as opposed to a formal interview, interactions with respondents were framed in an informal manner. Also, it was important to observe the body language of respondents to assess their level of comfort during the interview, and to assist them if they needed anything to lessen their discomfort.

Interviews were transcribed and transcripts were provided to respondents in order to receive feedback if there was information misinterpreted based on their interview comments. I shared my data analysis and interpretation with respondents during follow-

up meetings. I also conducted member checks with participants to determine if they agreed with my analysis of their interviews.

Wolcott (1990) insisted that the following steps be performed to ensure and to maintain trustworthiness of the research, which I followed:

- **Be a listener.** The subject(s) of qualitative research should provide the majority of the research input. It is the researcher's task to properly interpret the responses of the subject(s).
- **Record accurately.** All records should be maintained in the form of detailed notes or electronic recordings. These records should also be developed during rather than after the data gathering session.
- **Initiate writing early.** It is suggested that the researcher make a rough draft of the study before ever going into the field to collect data. This allows a record to be made when needed. The researcher is more prepared now to focus the data gathering phase on that information that will meet the specific identified needs of the project.
- **Include the primary data in the final report.** The inclusion of primary data in the final report allows the reader to see exactly the basis upon which the researcher's conclusions were made. In short, it is better to include too much detail than too little.
- **Include all data in the final report.** The researcher should not leave out pieces of information from the final report because she/he cannot interpret that

data. In these cases, the reader should be allowed to develop his/her conclusions.

- **Seek feedback.** The researcher should allow others to critique the research manuscript following the developmental process. Professional colleagues and research subjects should be included in this process to ensure that information is reported accurately and completely.
- **Attempt to achieve balance.** The researcher should attempt to achieve a balance between perceived importance and actual importance. Often, the information reveals a difference in anticipated and real areas of study significance.
- **Write accurately.** Incorrect grammar, misspelled words, statement inconsistency, etc. jeopardize the validity of an otherwise good study.

### **Subjectivity**

I was an at-risk student with a success story. I grew up in a low-income home where we lived without hot water for 14 years and with one kerosene heater that was centered within our home to heat three rooms. The home was filled with rodents and insects. There were times when I would return to school with the same torn clothes and shoes that I wore the day before. I hated going to school because of the fear of being scrutinized by my peers, my teachers, or anybody. The lack of resources that I experienced in secondary education carried over to my college years. I was forced to make a decision—quit college or continue to struggle. I chose to continue.

My experiences may cause my ideas to intertwine with that of the research. Dillard (1995) reported that our inner voices seem to blend with that of the research and at times will be evident in the study. Peshkin (1998) made the suggestion that we must be aware of our personal qualities that intersect with the research. I ensured the process and the data were completed in a trustworthy manner. I also shared my experiences with participants as the need arose. Peshkin (1998) stated, "It is an amalgam of the persuasions that stem from the circumstances of one's class, statuses, and values interacting with the particulars of one's object of investigation. Our persuasions vary in time and in intensity" (p. 57). While I did not excuse my informed values, I challenged myself to anticipate how they inform how I analyze my data.

### **Benefits and Risks**

The participants in this study as well as educators potentially benefited from a greater understanding of the factors that affect the success of those at risk. The risks that participants face in this study are that they may uncover some truths about misconceptions that they have about their own behaviors.

### **Limitations**

The participants in this study were limited to perceptions and philosophies of students and educators from the Grey County School District. This study did not include educators from the middle and elementary school level, which may limit insights about early intervention and prevention. Parent points of view are only shared from the perspectives of the students and limits how the parents of the participants perceived the factors that affected the success of their children.

Table 1

## Grey County's At-risk Characteristic Chart (2013)

<b>Academically At-Risk</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lost academically</li> <li>• Not near the zone of academic success</li> <li>• Has been retained</li> <li>• Poor grades</li> <li>• Will likely fall further behind if left in traditional school</li> <li>• Does not complete homework or turn in assignments on time</li> </ul>
<b>Attendance Issues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student does not attend school regularly, is frequently in ISS or OSS, or skips classes</li> <li>• Excessive absences</li> <li>• Expectations that school should help with or ignore absences</li> <li>• Refuses to conform to attendance guidelines for school and/or classroom</li> <li>• Skips school/classes</li> </ul>
<b>Bullied (Per Abuse)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student is being bullied by other students or does not fit in with peer groups</li> <li>• Has been assaulted at school or fears being assaulted at school</li> <li>• Has been verbally threatened/bullied/teased</li> <li>• Has been harassed or feels ostracized due to race, religion, or gender</li> <li>• Has been harassed or feels ostracized due to sexual orientation</li> <li>• Has been harassed or feels ostracized due to physical attributes</li> </ul>
<b>Drop-Out Risk</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disengaged or unmotivated</li> <li>• Has indicated that they wish to drop out of school</li> <li>• High School completion seems to be an unattainable goal</li> <li>• Has considered options other than high school diploma</li> <li>• Doesn't care/is negative about school completion – "hates school"</li> <li>• Lack of trust that school personnel has best interest in mind – "my school does not care about me"</li> </ul>
<b>EC</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student is currently receiving Exceptional Children's services</li> </ul>
<b>First Generation Americans</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Either parent is an immigrant or a naturalized citizen</li> </ul>
<b>First Generation College</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neither parent has attained a college degree</li> <li>• Custodial parent has not attained a college degree</li> </ul>
<b>First Generation High School Graduate</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neither parent graduated high school</li> <li>• Custodial parent has not attained a high school diploma</li> </ul>
<b>Foster Care/Group Home</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student has been or is currently in foster care or a group home</li> </ul>
<b>Free/Reduced Lunch</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student is currently receiving free or reduced lunch</li> </ul>
<b>Homeless</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student is currently or has been homeless or is living with a non-relative</li> </ul>
<b>Instability in School Enrollment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student is not attending school regularly or has a history of not attending school regularly in previous years</li> </ul>
<b>Lack of Credits for Graduation:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student has failed multiple classes and is not on track to graduate with their cohort</li> </ul>
<b>Medical Issues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student has medical issues that impact academic performance or social engagement</li> </ul>
<b>Mental/Emotional Challenges</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student is depressed, has threatened suicide or has other mental health concerns</li> <li>• Learning is impaired by psychological issues</li> <li>• Unable to manage stress of day-to-day routine of school</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problems of a personal condition/nature</li> <li>• Has odd perspective of how to solve problems (lost sense of reality)</li> <li>• Suffers from Panic-Stress Disorder</li> </ul>
<b>Single Parent or Shared Custody, Non-Traditional Family</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student is living with relatives or a single parent/step-parent; parents have shared custody</li> <li>• Lives in a single family home</li> <li>• Has experienced parental separation or divorce</li> <li>• Is emancipated from family</li> <li>• Lives with someone other than parent (grandparent, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>Socially Disengaged</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student is withdrawn or is not participating in school</li> <li>• Unable to establish and maintain rapport in school culture (lack of friend cohort/group)</li> <li>• Has a narrow range of interest</li> <li>• Does not participate in any sports/clubs/school related activities</li> <li>• Personalizes situations that others may perceive as general</li> <li>• Does not share a sense of purpose with the school culture</li> <li>• Has low self esteem</li> <li>• Does not fit in to or enjoy the social norms of traditional high school</li> </ul>
<b>Substance Abuse</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Past or current alcohol and/or drug abuse</li> <li>• Past or current discipline measures in place due to alcohol/drug use (home or school)</li> <li>• Has attended or is attending rehabilitation for alcohol/drug use including outdoor/wilderness camps and/or treatment facilities</li> </ul>
<b>Teen Parent</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student is a teenage parent and is directly responsible for the care of a child living with them</li> </ul>
<b>Under-Represented Populations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student represents a social, gender, racial group not adequately represented at the middle college</li> </ul>
<b>Other Risk Factors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recent economic down turn for family has caused changes in family structure/dynamics (parent recently lost job/laid off)</li> <li>• Lack of family stability and support</li> <li>• Has experienced verbal or physical abuse in the home</li> <li>• Has experienced death in immediate family</li> <li>• Has a strained relationship with one or both parents</li> <li>• Parent or caregiver suffers from drug/alcohol abuse</li> <li>• Is not responsive to or is negative toward customs and values of traditional high school</li> <li>• Lack of belonging in traditional school</li> <li>• Lack of motivation</li> <li>• Lack of structure – problems with organization; disorganized</li> <li>• Philosophical views at odds with traditional high school structure</li> <li>• Is isolated from others at school</li> <li>• Is bored and feels a lack of challenge/purpose in current school setting</li> <li>• Pregnant</li> <li>• Recently moved to Guilford County – attending a new high school</li> <li>• Appearance and/or values do not match that of the dominant school culture</li> </ul>
<b>Other Characteristics not considered as at-risk</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Testing history indicates academic strength</li> <li>• Strength in thinking and analysis skills</li> <li>• Is capable of taking college level courses</li> <li>• Performed well in elementary or middle school</li> <li>• Has the potential to do honors level work in a supportive school setting</li> <li>• Has the maturity to handle the challenge of college classes</li> <li>• Has the maturity to handle the openness of a college campus</li> <li>• Creative and capable</li> </ul>



## **CHAPTER IV**

### **PARTICIPANTS' STORIES**

I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am also so much more than that. So are we all. —James Baldwin

James Baldwin's quote artistically portrays the lives of many at-risk youth in America today.

#### **Tiffany Smith's Story**

Tiffany Smith, who is 18 years of age, was born in Morris City, Virginia. Tiffany grew up in a single family home where her life was overwhelmed by poverty, housing project circumstances, and at times trying to learn how to survive on her own. Despite the hardships she faced during her life she prevailed and has succeeded to where she graduated from high school and is currently a freshman at a four-year university. Moving from house to house and school to school over the years for some would have been a determining factor as to why they failed. But not Tiffany—and she is even more determined not to let it happen to her siblings.

Tiffany currently has four siblings; one older sister, a sister four years younger than she, and two younger brothers who are five and ten years younger than she. All siblings had the same mother but only the last two siblings had the same father. The oldest and youngest sisters' fathers removed them from the home leaving the relationship between the siblings fragile. Tiffany asserted, "I was never really raised with my sisters

because their fathers took them away from my mom because she was out in the streets.”

At a young age Tiffany’s mother was involved in illegal acts which resulted in her having a criminal record and limiting her opportunities for obtaining a legal job. This led to her mom not being able to pay bills and having to move and live in subsidized housing.

As a child Tiffany not only raised herself but her brothers as well. She was nine years old when her mother began to educate her on how to take care of her brothers. There were many nights she would come home and do homework while feeding and nurturing them. There was no childhood for Tiffany as she focused on the welfare of her siblings by cooking dinner, washing clothes, and even walking them to school. Her brothers begin to gravitate to her own as their mother figure. Tiffany maintained that there were days that she would attend parent conferences for her brothers. Answers to all inquiries in school about her mother were that she was sick, and to other family members that she was on a trip and would be back soon.

As Tiffany grew older, the nurturing of her siblings continued as her mother had several stints in and out of jail. Even when her mother was not incarcerated she wasn’t home. Tiffany offered,

my mother would leave some nights while we were asleep and when we would wake up she wouldn’t be there, but it was nothing new. I knew to get them up, have them brush their teeth, get their clothes on, and let’s get ready to go. It was sort of a routine.

There were people who noticed the absence of her mother such as the neighbors in the community who seemed to be discussing and inquiring about her whereabouts after their dog got loose. Tiffany conveyed,

another incident happened where we set the smoke detector off and we couldn't fix it so we just took it completely off and we broke it so they had to come out and fix it and you know, he was, the land—the maintenance man was taking a long time and I guess, you know, the landlord told him to do so, he was like the whole time I was there her mom didn't show up, you know, I came back that night to ask them was everything okay with the fire detector, mom still wasn't there, so he started making assumptions.

After all the attention they begin to receive Tiffany and her siblings moved in with her grandmother. Tiffany and her siblings maintained residency with her grandmother until her mother was released from jail.

As life continued and Tiffany grew older the scenarios she faced during her early childhood continued to occur. She attended four different middle schools and four different high schools, which resulted in her losing motivation to graduate. This also contributed to Tiffany's inept social behaviors and inability to connect with others. While she was not bullied, she was characterized and ostracized at times. Her attempt to stay focused soon dwindled as she found herself getting into fights at school, being kicked out of class, and finally being charged with disorderly conduct. Her will and passion for school began to disappear, and her love for learning started fading along with it. The more she tried to evade trouble the more it seemed like trouble found her. Every transition made during high school seemed to be a wrong turn, and she consistently found herself on the suspension list.

Tiffany described this time in her life as a tough period as her mom would be extradited to another state to spend time in prison. She felt that at this moment in her life she needed her mom the most, but she and her siblings could not go and visit her. As a result the children were forced to move back in with her grandparents because her

mother's boyfriend was arrested as well. Her grandmother was not the only family member that could have helped, but was the only one who chose to help.

Tiffany's father lived in another city but rarely supported her or provided the necessary guidance in the absence of her mother. According to Tiffany, "he is like a friend rather than a father. We talk to each other as if we are the same age." She conveyed that even at this point in life she wants nothing from him but for him to take care of himself. Her grandfather on her mother's side of the family refused to aid or assist the family as he was appalled at the decisions Tiffany's mother made and continued to make throughout her life. Her oldest sister eventually came to the aid of Tiffany and her brothers after she graduated from high school. This seemed to be a turning point as the oldest sister convinced Tiffany to apply to the magnet high school she attended. Tiffany applied and was accepted.

Acceptance to the magnet school was exciting for Tiffany but also caused some anxiety. She could always hide in the traditional high school due to size of the school and student population. But because the magnet school only had 150 students and eight classrooms, all her problems would be exposed. Her experience at this school started off rocky as one month into school she was caught with a pocketknife in her jacket. This could have been damaging and been a setback to her opportunity to change. As the administration of the school investigated the incident, they determined Tiffany was carrying the knife for protection as she walked to school. Tiffany told the story that she was walking to school because the school district would not provide her busing and the car she was illegally driving was broken down and there was an older guy stalking her.

She was afraid. According to Tiffany, “the principal just took the knife, called the social worker to assist with transportation, and explained he didn’t want to hear about this again.” Tiffany broke down in tears and exhaled as she knew she was not only finally at a school, she was finally home.

Tiffany went on to graduate from that magnet school with honors and was accepted to several colleges and universities. She is currently a Social Work major at Virginia State and is being supported by her grandfather. Tiffany provided, “it’s going to get worse before it can get better and you just got to be strong enough to get through it. You got to be focused and really want it not matter what other do and other say.”

Life for many students like Tiffany will not have the same results. Living with a single parent whose own at-risk factors overshadow the needs of her children may prove to be too much for many, but not for Tiffany. How does one survive or overcome the tribulations Tiffany faced, and yet maintain a position as a scholarly student? Was it fate? Life was tough for Tiffany as an adolescent and there were times she imagined herself quitting school like her mother and finding a job to support herself and her siblings. What was the secret to her achieving the dream of one day becoming a social worker and helping other at-risk youth who have limits, barriers, and challenges in their lives? Tiffany’s life is the life of many who are in continuous pursuit of happiness but trapped by the chains of despair low socioeconomic status, gender biases, and generational fallacies. Not Tiffany—she succeeded.

### **Sharon Williams's Story**

Sharon Williams, who is 19 years old, was born in BlueBurg, South Carolina where she was raised by her father. Growing up, Sharon, her brother, and her father lived in the projects where drug use was the norm and the sound of gunshots was a common occurrence. Many of her family members stayed in the same community and contributed to much of the crime that existed. After her father met her stepmother, the family transitioned to living in apartments until they finally found a house to rent. The stepmother previously had three children, which combined created a family of seven, which soon extended to nine after the last two children were born. The combined family coexisted peacefully until the oldest brother was removed from the home due to accusations of abuse committed by their father. Life was tough for Sharon due to the continued custody battle and poverty due to a lack of work for her father as a result of his past criminal history.

Sharon said, “throughout my time in elementary and middle school I was always interviewed and questioned by Social Services and DSS due to the different allegations presented.” Sharon’s biological mother was the person making these allegations as she wanted full custody of Sharon and her brother. As children they would spend every other weekend with their biological mother but lived with their father full time. From the age of eight until 12 Sharon was seeing a therapist because her parents’ continued battling caused much stress. She found herself being completely defiant and rebellious towards her parents. All throughout her childhood she attended multiple court sessions and was asked to testify about what was going on in the home. She exerted,

My mother took a 50B out on father and they had to go to court. My father would be on the plaintiff side and my mother on the defendant side. All I could do was look back and forth and say 'I can't believe I'm doing this.'

As defiant as she was towards her mother, her brother was equally defiant towards her father.

Sharon's brother would go to school and complain about the spankings he received and how he was being abused. He expressed his fear for his father and felt he needed to be removed from the home. "Every time my brother was interviewed at school I was called as a witness and they threatened to remove me as well," expressed Sharon. She was told by her father not to worry and all the distractions would soon go away. At the age of 14 her brother was finally allowed to go live with her biological mom permanently. He soon dropped out of high school and is currently, at the age of 21, pursuing his GED. Life changed when her brother left because all the attention then became hers. Sharon shared,

I noticed that when my brother got removed from the house, which he left around fifteen, the way my daddy started treating me was differently because he was always hollering, he belittled me and talk down to me. I felt like the next target.

As dysfunctional as her life may have seemed to many people, Sharon still did well in school, at least until middle school. During this time she soon recognized her ability to manipulate the contours of living between two households with two entirely different sets of expectations and rules. What she could not do at her father's house she found to be easy to do at her mother's house. The rules at her father's house consisted of

no boyfriends, a required bedtime, and a limited amount access to TV while at her mother's house there were few limitations that included male visitors. Sharon's mother's household was very chaotic; one child was diagnosed with a mental disability while the other suffered from seizures caused from abuse by the mother's boyfriend. The daunting challenge of raising two other children with disabilities limited the amount support and attention she was able to give to Sharon. Navigating the two different parenting philosophies coupled with the tribulations that seemed to exist in both households caused a lack of focus in school. Her focus shifted from making A's and B's to being involved in relationships with various male students. Like other young females, when the affection they are seeking from a male parent seems to be absent they tend to reach out to others to fill the void.

Sharon's dating life was initiated despite her father's restrictions and demanding expectations. She began lying to her parents, skipping school, hanging out with the wrong crowd, and disengaging herself from the learning she once loved. Sharon was starting to show true resentment not only towards her dad but also to her biological mom. She was becoming emotionally unbalanced and her passion for anything positive was nonexistence. She cried,

When I really start trying to date hard I guess it was to really get that affection. My mom tried to give me that affection it felt more like guilt more than love. It didn't seem genuine and I felt uncomfortable talking with her. I felt like she was trying to get information from me to use against my father. I just stop caring.

Many of the young male friends with whom Sharon affiliated provided her with attention, but she was pressured into having sex, doing drugs, and committing illegal acts.



Her first boyfriend was in high school while she was in middle school. Sharon's mother would take her over to his house despite her father's wishes. She then transitioned to high school and started dating a senior who introduced her to smoking marijuana. Sharon stated,

At first I hated it. I would get mad and yell at him for doing it. I would tell him I don't want to talk you anymore. But one day I was with his mother and she smoked with him so we all joined in. He sold it as well.

As Sharon enjoyed the extracurricular activities her academic standings continued to fall below standard. Meanwhile, her stepsisters were doing well in school and were being praised. She felt inadequate, unloved, and ostracized by her family. The decisions she was making were leading to a life of possible failure.

This was no truer than in her junior year of high school when she starting dating a guy on whom she had had a longtime crush. After several interactions she got pregnant and was facing the formidable decision of being a teen mom or having an abortion. She felt it was important to have a conversation about this decision with the father of the baby. However, during a visit at his dorm room they got into a huge argument and he punched her in the stomach. He wanted nothing to do with having a baby. Sharon described her thoughts,

I was freaking out, didn't know what to do, and every day I battled from the time I woke up asking, I am going to keep it or the next day I'm not going to keep it. I really start to evaluate my life.

Being under age, Sharon was required to obtain court documents granting her the right to abort her child. She and the father of the child drove to Wallington, SC to get it done.

This changed her life.

These experiences shaped and cultivated Sharon's remaining year in high school. Sharon was a very smart student but found herself on the brink of losing all she had worked for as a student. She portrayed, "I blame myself as I lost focus. I allowed other things and people to affect my judgment." As Sharon moved into her senior year, she started working multiple jobs to provide for senior items and she refocused herself on her school work. However, she had to request to be removed from the magnet program she attended but she refused to drop out. She continued and graduated despite the obstacles she faced in her life. Giving up for Sharon never seemed like an option, even though others felt it was closely upon her. Sharon is currently a freshman at Texas State University where she is majoring in Business Law.

Sharon, like many other youth who grow up in dysfunctional homes, was raised by separated parents, and found herself lost and confused about which parent's side to take and whose story to believe. Sharon's life lacked the support and love she needed in many areas, but she is still succeeding. Sharon is still at risk as she is seeking ways to financially support her education, as she missed out on several scholarships.

Communication with her father is rare and she depends on other family members like her aunts and grandmother to assist her in graduating from college. Will Sharon make it?

### **Angel Cummings's Story**

Angel is one of those youth whose life has been characterized by the circumstances she faced. However, unlike many who failed, she never allowed her adversities to prevent her from reaching her goals and dreams. She knew she was much more than what statistics stated about her, much more than what her socioeconomic status presented, and so much more than what others stated about her. In her mind she was an outlier, a trendsetter, and most of all, a success story.

Angel, a 20-year-old female from Brownsville, NC was born to teenage parents. They were both 15 when she was born and as a result she had to move in with her father's parents so that her mother could finish school. Life seemed to be going well for her as a child despite having teen parents who both dropped out of high school and became absent in her life.

Growing up, Angel was raised by her grandparents and always had many family members around her. Her great-grandmother had 18 children and life was never dull as there was always other youth to socialize and play with. Family members kept her focused and supported her in school while her father and mother lived a life of stop and go street activities and jobs. When Angel was a toddler her mother had another child which resulted in her dropping out of school. Angel exerted, "My family always pushed me to be successful and I found it beneficial living with my grandmother as my mother ended up having another child which resulted in her quitting school." Life was going well all through her elementary school years and she wanted for nothing. Her grandparents made sure she had all she needed, including ensuring she did her homework, attending

parent conferences, and providing a positive climate in the home. The support proved to be instrumental as her dad who lived in the house with Angel and her grandparents was rarely home. However, his continued absence and life in the streets proved costly.

When Angel was in middle school her dad was shot and killed. The news of her father being forever gone traumatized Angel and changed life as she knew it forever. As with any young females her age, life became a fight, it became more than she could handle and pushed her into feelings of sadness and hopelessness. The invocations on Angel's behalf became important as her attitude towards school, success, and her dreams and goals were no longer important. This could have been the turning point and the catalyst that caused Angel's life to end in failure. For many youth, the death of an immediate family member is often the defining factor that can determine the outcome of their lives. Not Angel—she soon found her grip on life and it showed in her academics. Angel expressed, “my grandparent's desire to see me exceed what no other family member had accomplished by becoming a first generation graduate and college student superseded all the hate and pain I was feeling.”

When Angel was in the ninth grade her life was once again changed forever, but instead of losing a life she would be bringing one into this world. At the age of 15, the same age her mother was when she gave birth to her, Angel found herself pregnant and preparing to be a teen mom. Could she handle this new addition? Now the game had changed for Angel and she was faced with going to doctor appointments which resulted in her missing days and assignments in school, morning sickness, being ridiculed at school, and the feeling of not knowing whether the father of the child would be there for

her and her child. Angel's support from her grandparents still existed and even more so from her grandmother who refused to allow Angel to fail. According to Angel, "her rules became strict and the old school came out of her. She would say you are only going to school, to the doctor, and back home."

Angel's life was evolving into something she never imagined. She was finding that life was now going to demand more of her, exhaust her at times, and even create the feeling of hopelessness. How does one go from losing life and then gaining an unexpected life and still manage to excel? However, she was still determined to succeed in school and in life. At the end of pregnancy up until the birth of her daughter Angel was placed on Edu-home. Hired educators would come out to her home to provide her with instructions and homework. This frustrated Angel as many of the teachers who were sent lacked the content knowledge or pedagogy needed to meet her educational needs. This along with the fact that her teachers at school and the Edu-home teachers were not communicating resulted in lower grades. For one particular class this became a major issue and later proved to be costly as Angel graduated second in her graduating class versus first due to receiving a B versus an A. Angel had many opportunities and reasons to say she would just continue her education later. Angel stressed, "I wanted to quit, I got tired and money started becoming issue as I got older so I just wanted to go and find a job." However, she maintained, she held on, she stayed the course, and never quit. Was this all Angel's doing? Was it the support she received? Or was it the school she attended?

Angel attended a grade 9-12 magnet high school where the classrooms sizes ranged from 5 to 14 depending on the course and where the student population did not exceed 145. This was the perfect educational environment for her because they catered to the needs of at-risk students and centered the program on helping students who were falling behind but had the potential to exceed despite of the barriers placed before them. She loved the school and the school leaders, and found her school to be a home away from home. She was popular, colorful and full of life when she was in school. The culture of the school was advantageous for a student like Angel and fostered a feeling of safety among the students. However, she did have problems with students from the neighboring traditional high school as they bullied her. They would pick on her for being a teen mom, call her derogatory names, and pick fights with her. Angel had the choice to continue to allow this to happen, present this information to someone, or address the issue—Angel chose to fight by persevering and refusing to quit.

Angel had her baby in September of her sophomore year and continued to be successful upon her return to school. Despite all she faced, life seemed to going well and the river of life was calm until she attended a football game of two local high schools which one of the females who bullied her also attended. She stated, “I will never forget that night because I found myself in jail.” As Angel tells the story, she had an uncomfortable feeling about attending the game and knew something would go wrong. As she, family, and friends entered the game and found their seats she saw the other females in her peripheral vision. Angel explained,

I wasn't going to do anything but we ended up going up the steps they were coming down, they were walking on the wrong side you know. Everyone's supposed to walk on the right side, so they were walking on the left side while we were walking the same way but even at that point I still just moved over to the other side. I was really trying to ignore them. We decided to go to the concession stand to get some snacks and like nobody's thinking about nothing but the girls gets up go to the same side that we're sitting on. My cousin that remained seated texted my phone before we even got back up to inform me that they just keep walking back and forth all over the place and front of the crowd. So when we are headed back up the steps they are once again walking on the wrong side, so we both just stopped at each other and then she pushed me and the fight broke out. It was multiple people, the game had to be stopped, and the police was massing everyone. It was so out of control it was headliner on the news.

Angel was handcuffed, taken to jail that night, and charged with disorderly conduct and resisting arrest. She now was faced with another paramount event in her life, one that could potentially keep her from getting into the college or university of her choice. If convicted, she could potentially lose all scholarship opportunities and her dreams of becoming a physician was looking more like a fantasy. Adversity was becoming Angel's friend. Fortunately, all charges were dropped and her record was cleared. She overcame.

Angel persevered and continued in raising her child along with attending school. She presented a strong will and refuse-to-quit attitude. She is currently attending Petersburg University where she is majoring in nursing, managing several hours of rigorous classes, working, and being a single parent. Her story, like many other teen moms, can be used to inspire others about what it takes to prevail beyond the adversities that life presents and that we sometimes create. She proved that she was more than what her circumstances created for her.

### **Quentin Walker's Story**

Quentin is a 6'9", 210-pound black male from Boston, Massachusetts. Although he was born and partially raised in Boston, his parents are originally from South Africa where they were engulfed in the Apartheid movement. Due to acts of genocide, his parents left South Africa and came to America in search of a better life. Quentin's parents, along with other family members, moved in with a family member who was a teacher at a local college. After he and his siblings were born his father went back to South Africa while he, his mom, and his siblings remained in America. After a few years they moved to Peachford, SC with another family member who was struggling as well. Life was tough and it was a struggle as his mother sought to move out on her own while attending school and working a full time job.

Quentin remembered,

It was just my mom for a while and it was a lot on her. I didn't notice then but as I look back on it I remember the long hours she worked, trying to make sure we had clothes, food to eat and things just got hard. I remember getting help from other people giving us stuff.

Living with a single mom and two other siblings made for a life of needs and insufficiencies. Quentin remembers having clothes with holes and shoes that were too small. However, his mother continued to work hard and provided the basic necessities of life.

While his mother was working late nights he found himself taking care of his younger brothers. There were times his mother would be working double shifts and they would not see her until the next morning. She soon started working as a nurse's assistant



at an elderly care home while completing her degree for her CAN license at a local college. Having to take the responsibility of caring for his siblings and ensuring all others family members were cared for took a toll on Quentin's grades and focus in school. He found he was depressed and upset with life and wanted answers on how things could change. There were many nights he cried and wondered about his father and if or when they would see him again. His father could not come back years after departing because he needed a lawyer. However, his mother was able to save up enough money to take the family back to South Africa. Quentin spent six months in South Africa where he was able to meet some family members for the first time and reconnect with his father. His mother had to return but he and siblings remained for a while with his father. He also attended a primary school during their time in South Africa and he spoke of his feeling of being one of the popular kids: "It was really nice because we were the popular kids and I made some friends."

This was very important to Quentin because back in America he was the focal point of many jokes and cruel statements. He was severely bullied on a daily basis with students calling him derogatory names, laughing at his clothes, and even beating him up in the restrooms. He recalls one incident where two guys caught him in the stairwell and punched him over and over. As a result he hated coming to school, his grades suffered, and he started to lose touch with who he was as a person. Due to the fear of having to endure the beatings at the hands of other students he decided to join a gang. He was now moving from being the kind and gentle student people were accustomed to knowing to a

scared flag-wearing gangbanger. This is not the life Quentin desired, but it was one into which he was being forced.

I thought because it would help me try to be cool and maybe they would leave me alone and give me protection. I wanted to be cool with the girls and have money and other stuff. I soon realized it wasn't me.

Quentin never really hung with the other gang members but he felt he needed a survival mechanism and this was his tool.

Throughout middle and high school, life seemed to improve as his father was able to return to America and his mom received a promotion. Along with his life, Quentin was changing physically in a dramatic way. He found himself going from being an average size male to being the tallest person in the family and at school. His height soared from 5'8" in middle school to 6'2" by his freshmen year. To many this astronomical gain in height would have seemed like a blessing, but for Quentin now the students just had something else other than his accent and his clothes to ridicule. He felt awkward and his body was off balance. His preconceived notions could not have been any more wrong. He was now the center of attention as many coaches, teachers, and students were drawn to him. He had a gift that others felt he could use to develop their programs. Quentin's life began to evolve around playing basketball.

Anyone with Quentin's physical stature should have dreams of playing in the NBA. After Quentin heard people asking him the same questions, "How tall are you?" and "Do you play basketball?," the idea that one day with one stroke of a pen his struggles would be over sounded great to him. Quentin tried out for the basketball team

but when he did not perform as well as the coaches thought he should, he just became another tall body on the bench. Due to the lack of funds and transportation support there were no summer camps, no private coaching sessions, and no AAU opportunities. All that he hoped for began to disappear and soon became what many would call a “hoop dream.” Quentin exerted,

Yeah, it brought me down, I remember saying to myself I am never going to make it. I am good size but I understood I wasn't practicing either. I think it was because of me being late and my mom didn't want me to walk home after practice—everyone's dream is to one day play in college and then the NBA.

To add to his frustrations, Quentin was not doing well academically. This was a challenge within itself being he was a student with low reading skills and one with exceptionality, as he had a learning deficiency in reading. Although his mom was supportive and attended parent conferences as needed, more was needed to ensure that he would one day walk across the stage and graduate. As his father retained his place in the family, the structure and focus of school became more apparent. Quentin's grades remained average and his formative and summative assessment scores remained below proficient. He needed to do better and he needed to see progress in order to reach his goal of being a college student. Quentin wanted to quit and like others thought that just finding a job to make sure food was on the table would be enough. He talked with a friend and she convinced him to hang on as things would get better. He was discouraged and afraid and felt he was not going to succeed. In addition, there were teachers who cast doubt and disbelief in Quentin and refused to go the extra mile to assist him. He missed out on

receiving a certification in medical careers due to this lack of faith. But Quentin refused to fail.

Despite all that occurred in his life and all the despair he faced, Quentin worked hard and graduated from high school. He refused to let his reading disability determine his outcome in life and affect his opportunity to attend college. He is currently a freshmen at Peachford College where he is utilizing the support of his friends, teachers, and family. Succeeding in school is an expectation in Quentin's family as he has come from a heritage of achieving and prosperous people. His mother went to get her ADN license to be a nurse practitioner and then completed her bachelor's degree to become a registered nurse. His father is also currently working as a registered nurse. Even with still being at risk, he now has examples to follow and wisdom to gain from those who have achieved so much.

Quentin's life's story can be summed up in an excerpt of Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech,

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. . . . And some of you have come from areas where your quest—quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair, I say to you today, my friends. And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

### **Katie Jones's Story**

Katie Jones has a dream to one day be a pediatrician because of her love for kids and her drive to cultivate the lives of others via the health field. Born and partially raised in Trenton, New Jersey, the first chapters of Katie's life alluded to her being a dropout, a

teen mom, and a negative statistic. However, life for her has become a story of two tales, where she has used her adversities to increase her drive versus allowing them to define her outcome. Many of the obstacles she faced such as living in shelters, attending multiple schools, living without food and appropriate clothing, and growing up in a drug infested environment, were not enough to shatter her dreams of graduating from high school and attending college.

Katie was raised by her mother along with her three other siblings in New Jersey before moving to Wilson, North Carolina. While in New Jersey, they moved back and forth between her father's apartment and her grandfather's apartment. When her parents who were not married would get into arguments, her mother would pack up their clothes, put them on the train, and move back to their grandfather's apartment. The relationship problems between her parents continued throughout her youth. There were months that they would stay with their father and then move back in with their mother. This type of transition went on for years and as a result Katie attended many schools as a youth. Katie recalls, "So I started elementary at TS113 and then for first and second grade it was TS543 and then we went back to TS113 and after a year we were moved into a Christian School." Youth in constant transition live a life of hopelessness, never believing in the present, and suffer academically as a result. The inconsistency informed the doubt that being stable could ever exist. Katie wanted a more conducive living environment—one that was made up longevity and peace.

Life continued as Katie knew it where poverty had dominion and her future seemed bleak. Her family was provided living accommodations as they lived in Section 8

apartments but with substandard conditions. These apartments were infested with rodents and roaches and provided limited privacy. Coupled with the living conditions, her father failed to provide for the primary necessities the children needed due to his fathering of other children. There were times they would receive donations from the church and from volunteer organizations. Soon her mother would lose her Section 8 and the family would prepare to move to Wilson, NC with her grandfather.

This transition was forecasted to be the family's final destination; however, this did not appease Katie. She was very saddened as she was informed that her father would not be making the trip. The separation from her father would be the start of a rebellious and defiant stage in her life. Katie was full of hurt and anger and it was apparent as she lost interest in school. She described, "When I found we were leaving my dad I cried. I thought all of us were moving together." To add to her frustration when they moved in with her grandfather there were six other people living in the house as well. There were constant arguments, fights, discord, and friction to the point where she would often leave the house to ease her mind. Katie's mom felt unwelcomed and often expressed the wish that they had stayed in New Jersey. Life was supposed to get better when they transitioned but to Katie it seemed to become even more complicated.

Moving not only was hard for Katie because of the separation from her father and the turmoil in her grandfather's house, but she found that she stood out from all the other students in school because she talked different, dress strangely, and was smarter than most of her classmates. She found herself in altercations with other female students. They imitated her speech and mocked her disposition to the point where she became very

frustrated and isolated. Katie conveyed, “my sixth grade year in school, girls stayed away from, they called me gay and sought to embarrass me daily.” Like most middle school students, Katie took to social media to resolve these issues but consequently created more for herself and her siblings. Chaos resulted from the conversations on Facebook as many of the girls would come to her neighborhood to challenge her to fight. If Katie wasn’t fighting the girls in the neighborhood she was fighting her family members, which included her mother.

After several months, Katie, her mom, and her siblings all moved into a small three-bedroom house purchased by her grandfather and grandmother. They finally had their own place—something they could call home. Although the grandparents were paying the bills because her mom had not worked since being pregnant with her, the family seemed pleased. Katie’s mom eventually got a job working at Goodwill which eventually led to her working at K-mart. Keeping the jobs was a difficult task for her mother as she was diagnosed as being bipolar. Katie’s mom would miss days of work or would find herself in conflict with customers and coworkers because of her mental illness. Katie found herself becoming the keeper of the house and the caretaker of her siblings. She was asked to be responsible for their whereabouts in the community, the friends they were hanging with, the upkeep of the house, and the preparation of the food. School was no longer her number one priority—helping with the welfare of the household was. Despite the extra responsibility, she continued to progress in school to be an average student.

As she transitioned to high school several events contributed to her lack of engagement and enthusiasm for school. During her freshmen year one of her brothers died from breathing complications where he was found with extreme amounts of liquid in his lungs. This devastated Katie and sent her into an emotional downfall. Katie said, “Right after my brother died I stopped doing work in school. I would go to school and just sit there and I start failing.” To add to the loss of her brother her mother would soon lose her job. They were back to the daily life of just barely making it. School clothes were scarce, food was limited, and restrictions on the family became abundant. Katie lost interest in her education and gained the interest of males. School was not a priority which led to skipping classes, participating in illegal acts, and partaking in casual drug use. Katie could not see past her current circumstances which limited her view of what could be possible.

How would Katie’s life continue? Would she eventually reach her dreams of graduating high school and going on to college? How would she prevail beyond all that life was forcing her to experience? Katie Jones, a gifted and talented youth full of potential was struck by tragedy and circumstances beyond her control. It was not until Katie’s second semester of her junior year that she would start working up to the potential level most believed she was capable of achieving. Many thought it was too late and that she needed to understand that graduating on time may not be a possibility. She persevered and soon proved to all that working hard pays huge dividends. Despite all the challenges and unforeseen barriers in Katie’s life, she graduated from high school. She is



currently at Wilson Fike Community College studying in the field of Cosmetology. She confirmed,

Medicine is still my first love but I have to take it one step at a time. I recognized I am good at doing hair and I will use it to pay for my bachelors in health science and hopefully one day when I go to medical school.

Katie is determined and refuses to accept no for an answer. She is currently working a part time job and continues to be committed to helping her mother and her younger sibling. As an encouragement her mother has decided to return to school; she has finished her GED and is now pursuing a degree in the Culinary Arts. Katie's drive, motivation, and ability to see her future is heroic and deserving of recognition. She has now crossed the threshold of despair into the field of hopes and dreams. Katie Jones is a success story.

### **Jennifer Jones's Story**

Jennifer Jones, who is 18 years of age, was born in Trenton, New Jersey. Jennifer initially grew up in her maternal grandparents' home with both parents; however, she lived in poverty, surrounded by violence, gangs, and very few examples of success to mimic. They also moved around, which caused her to move from school to school. Despite the hardships faced during her life, Jennifer managed to prevail, graduating from high school, and is now currently a freshman at a four-year university.

Jennifer has five siblings; an older brother and sister, and three younger brothers. Jennifer, her only sister, and two of her younger brothers share the same mother and father; her oldest brother and youngest brother are her father's children from two

different women. She also had one other younger brother (a twin to the youngest brother), but he died from an asthma attack. Jennifer's oldest and youngest two brothers were not raised with her and the other children, but even in their "blended" family, they loved each other just the same.

As a child growing up in Brooklyn, Jennifer found herself surrounded by violence and gangs, a high crime rate, and living conditions at or near the poverty level. Her parents did not have a lot of money and neither graduated from high school, so they were limited to working minimum-wage jobs. Jennifer stated,

This made life challenging—we could not always get the things they wanted, or even needed for that matter. I needed money for field trips, science projects, chorus outfits and much more. We wore hand me downs.

However, Jennifer did not allow that to affect her; she learned to be content with life as it was, but always knew she wanted more when she grew up. For reasons unknown to her, Jennifer's mom and dad separated when she was eight years old, and her mom moved her and her three siblings back into her grandparents' apartment. Jennifer stated,

Although there were adults in the home who provided for us as much as they could, there was not much encouragement about school; everyone just expected me and my siblings to do well.

School came easy for Jennifer—she always had good grades and was self-motivated, so no one ever checked behind her to ensure her homework was being done. But because of the circumstances of her environment, Jennifer never thought attending college was a possibility, even with good grades.

During the summer after fourth grade, Jennifer, her mom, and siblings moved from New Jersey to North Carolina. At the beginning of the next school year, she was enrolled in her fourth elementary school to date. They were once again living with her grandparents and multiple people since her mom couldn't keep a steady job and flow of income. Jennifer's dad was less involved in her life, even more so now because of the physical distance between he and his children (he remained in New Jersey). Jennifer remembered,

We lacked the financial resources to help support me and my siblings; there was court-ordered child support, but it wasn't enough to sustain us, so we continued to struggle, depended on others to provide a roof over our heads and just went without.

About a year after moving to North Carolina, Jennifer's grandparents helped her mom get her own place so that they could at least have someplace to call their own. Her mom eventually got a job, but did not make much money, so they were frequently faced with past due bills and utility termination letters. Jennifer presented,

My mom would soon lose her one and only job that she had because of her attitude towards customers and her boss. This type of job on and job off situation continued to occur and we continued to struggle. I hated our situation but I would not let it affect school and my grades.

Jennifer moved on to middle school and developed a love for math. Her sixth-grade math teacher, Mrs. Rowe, recognized how she excelled in math and encouraged her to join the math team, which she did. Mrs. Rowe also inspired Jennifer to pursue a career

in accounting. That nudge would be a first stepping stone into Jennifer's promising future.

Jennifer continued to excel as she progressed through high school. She continued to maintain good grades, even though her home life situation looked bleak. Her mom enrolled in courses at the local community college with hopes of making a better life for Jennifer and her siblings, but her mom did not always remain employed, which made things even more difficult. Coupled with the stress and pressure of becoming a teenager and observing the lives of friends—who seemed to get whatever they needed or wanted and got to travel—one would think such adversity would invoke desires in a teen to “throw in the towel.” Jennifer evoked,

The frustrations of life mounted up and I refused to give in. No father and mother I barely saw, irritating siblings and living conditions that were beyond reproach. I often look back and wonder how did I at least graduate. No one supervised me. I was on my own and have been since middle school.

But Jennifer remained focused on her end goal—she was going to go to college to major in Accounting, so that she could get a job as an accountant, and maybe one day make enough money to help her mom achieve her ultimate career dreams and goals. She stayed the course and even sang in the school choir and participated in extracurricular groups such as Students Against Drunk Driving (S.A.D.D.), Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA), and SCA. She was also an active member of the dance team at her church.

Jennifer went on to graduate from high school and was accepted to her top two university choices. She is currently an Accounting major at The University of North

Carolina at Greensboro, being supported by her family (mom, grandparents, aunt, and uncle). She even has a part-time job to defray some of the costs of college.

Many students with life experiences similar to Jennifer's do not always overcome the challenges they face. Some give up and give in to peer pressure or their environment and surroundings, but not Jennifer; she remained focused and did not let her circumstances dictate her future. She was self-motivated and driven. She attributes her successes thus far to her own hard work and determination, and believes that "one should think about how they want their future to unfold and go for it; have faith in one's self." Jennifer did not allow her environment, circumstances, or low-socio-economic status that she was born into shape the future that she was destined to have.

Jennifer is still at risk as she just received her first semester grades in college and they were all F's but one. She lost her only financial support and was looking at having to sit out for a semester. She is currently awaiting the response from a family member on whether they will co-sign for a student loan.

### **Chase Boone's Story**

Chase is a strong medium-build black male from Big Frog, North Carolina. Chase is the eldest of three children and lived with both parents until the age of eight. Chase recalls,

Things were going well; I blossomed as student, receiving academic accolades on a regular basis, I remembered the proud day in fourth grade when I was a recipient of the A-B Honor Roll and both my parents attended.

All seemed to be going in Chase's direction, but nothing could prepare him for what was about to happen. His parents decided to get a divorce and his dad left him and his mom. This tragedy of divorce changed Chase's perception and everything he knew.

I remember getting into fights and arguments at school. I couldn't come to grips with what happened and began to misbehave in school and no longer saw the need to pursue academic excellence. I knew that deep down the source of the problem was not school, it was my father. The sense of abandonment left me angry, confused, and disheartened. Me and my father's relationship dwindled.

Communication became strained and Chase felt all hope was lost. Talking to his father was ineffective; he was unheard. The impact of the divorce affected not only Chase's ability to communicate but the family dynamic as well. Chase's father moved in with a relative leaving Chase and his mother to fend for themselves. They transitioned to Richard Pryor, the local housing project. Chase exerted,

This was a gang-infested community. There were plenty of times I was scared and wondered what would happen to me and my mom. I felt like I was the man of the house and needed to step up. I was angry with my dad and it showed in my behavior.

While growing up and living with his mother, Chase would get many opportunities on weekends to engage with his father. As time progressed, their relationship would be tested. When Chase's dad became angry at his mom, it would put a tremendous strain on their relationship. The frustrations grew by epic proportions; he was frustrated with the relationship he shared with his father, and having to cope with mom quitting her job was too much for him to handle. With mom unemployed, life at times

became extremely difficult for Chase. Chase's family left the Richard Pryor housing and moved in with his aunt. Chase argued,

This transition was not bad but it was not our own. Having to live in someone else's place there were limitations and restrictions. I continued to rebel and found my grades falling. I didn't care anymore. I just wanted to be left alone.

Chase's academic performance at school suffered as his attitude of not caring about school continued. His mother was called to school on several occasions and he was suspended numerous times. In a span of four years Chase would attend five elementary schools and two middle schools. Although he did well during his elementary school years, his middle school years proved to be very tumultuous. Chase lost focus; he became more interested in trying to prove he belonged than applying himself in school.

I was okay with being mediocre. When it was time to go to high school I made the decision to attend Butler Academy, not to better myself but to follow my girlfriend and my cousin who also attended. It still turned out to be the best decision.

After attending Butler Academy for a while, he felt the Academy suited him because the teachers cared, and he was not just considered a student number. Although Chase found a source of happiness within the school walls, he still dealt with the harsh reality of his mother never being financially stable. Chase stated,

My mom would have good moments for a while then bad periods of unemployment, it was like a rollercoaster. I just learned how to cope with my harsh reality. I tried to come to terms that we were struggling and so during teenage years I would try to get a job but job hunting proved unsuccessful.

As he was focused on helping his mom he was still trying to mend and patch up his relationship with his father. During occasional visits with his dad, Chase would be introduced to all different types of women. While learning of new relationships that his father had, Chase also learned that his mother was entering into a new relationship which produced Chase's baby sister. Chase did not approve of his mother's relationships with his brother's dad. Chase considered,

He was deadbeat, bad seed. I remember him and my mother fighting all the time. The arguments would be so aggressive that I would stand between them. My mother would tell him don't worry about it. My perception of the arguments was that it was unhealthy and the arguments had gotten to the point that my father needed to intercede. We were too young and didn't need to be exposed to this type of behavior.

Chase wanted a different life for himself, his mother, and his siblings. Things needed to be different for him. He needed things to change. One day while riding the city bus to school Chase's eyes started to open. Looking out the bus window he observed homeless people, and he started to realize and question:

If I don't want to end up like this, school just seems to be the only way, so you know; I just got to deal with it. Although I hated the idea of school, I wanted to make mom happy. I also took notice of how some people wasted their time on the streets of our local neighborhood and end up not graduating or doing nothing with their life. My mother would often tell me I struggled and I don't want you to struggle.

As different as his life was from the typical family setting, Chase felt that if he could survive the streets he could make it and one day become an important person in life. Despite what he was experiencing day to day he would not give up hope. Chase



realized he really wanted to be successful. Now a freshman in college it is his goal to finish and graduate from Jackson State University. Chase aspires,

I want to work for IBM as a technician as I understand that IBM is on the cutting edge of technology and that schools work a lot with this company, especially with making Thinkpads. I will one day make six figures and be able to go back and take care of my mother.

Chase is still at risk because the struggles he faced as an adolescent still exist as a college student. He is working to pay his way through school.

I don't receive any financial support from my parents in regards to buying clothes and personal items. All that stuff I purchase on my own. I have learned to be independent, through the divorce, I learned how to cook, wash clothes, and complete chores.

Although things are not perfect, Chase is excited about what the future holds. He visualizes ten years from now he will have a wife, a few kids, with a nice job living a stress-free life. He says "deal with the hard stuff now, smooth it out later." He is a true example of how an at-risk student became successful through hard work and determination. Chase exemplifies that if you set goals and push yourself, success will follow.

### **William Grey's Story**

William is a 19-year-old male who is currently attending South Carolina M&E State University. Growing up Bill, as they called him, was a kid who enjoyed hanging out with his friends, drawing, and playing sports. Bill was a young man with simple needs but huge aspirations. Life for him was confined and restricted which consisted of him, his

older brother, and his mother. Bill's mother was born and raised in Aruba by his grandmother but desired to move to America to start a new life, hoping to one day have a family of her own.

Before William was born, William's mother lived with his older brother's father for a short amount time and then she decided to move and start another life. Moving to South Florida she met William's father, they got married, and Bill was subsequently born. Life was progressing as his mother had envisioned and mapped out until she and Bill's father decided they could no longer coexist. They soon separated and got a divorce. While William's mother and father made a decision that would forever impact their family, his dad remained in his life. William provided, "he wasn't supportive but we spoke on occasion like holidays and birthdays."

The impact of the divorce was evident as his mother struggled financially without the help of either of her sons' fathers. As a single mom she would work many hours and would go days without seeing Bill. As he got older he was primarily reared by his older brother who influenced him in many ways. They were trying to overcome the adversities associated with now living in poverty, including a limited amount food and clothing, poor housing conditions, no assistance with homework, and being ridiculed about their situation. Bill remembered, "I recall wearing these big shorts to school one day because they belong to my brother and I had no belt. I was talking to the teacher and they fell down and my underwear was exposed."

Life would soon become even more challenging for Bill and his family as his mother lost her job and was faced with seeking public assistance. The family moved from

South Florida to Greenville, NC where she would again find work. His mother knew that if she wanted her sons to have a better life she would have to do more. Bill's mom soon started night school where she was able to obtain her associates degree and then moved on to graduating with her bachelor's degree. Bill was proud of his mom and was inspired by her hard work and ability to prevail beyond the challenges they faced as a family.

William stated,

The way she dealt with adversity with having to work two jobs and going to school was inspiring. I still remember how she would come home after working two shifts and work on the computer typing up a paper late at night. Then the times she lost the jobs for months on hand and still would not quit. She let us know just how serious school was.

Despite his view of his mother, school for Bill was not his favorite place. His performance was at best average and below his potential. He attributed some of his lethargic behavior to a non-conducive learning environment at the middle school he attended. He did not fit in because he was in advanced level classes but was the only black male on the roster.

At this school he was bullied, teased, and sometime ostracized by the black students because he was not associating; conversely, he was segregated from the whites because of his socioeconomic status. This was tough for Bill and he became frustrated.

Bill subsequently attended the Greenville Christian Academy on a donor scholarship. He attended Greenville Christian Academy until his eighth-grade year. His mother was hoping that the Christian values, rigorous instruction, and structured and inviting setting would help Bill reach his potential of being an excellent student. William

and his mother soon found that the undertone of racism would follow them. William's mother expressed that they could not overcome the racial barriers that were put in place by many of the teachers who worked at the Christian Academy and they made it difficult for Bill to be himself as a student. He expressed, "with my mother's ethnicity and my skin color there seem to be gap in my learning and others in the school." Despite all that transpired, Bill remained at the Christian Academy until his high school years.

Bill was admitted to a magnet high school where the student population was 175 students with a focus on health sciences and the performing arts. The class sizes were small enough to provide Bill with the attention he needed to be successful. However, challenges would continue to exist in his life. His mother still was working two jobs and was in school, and the support he once had from his brother was gone, as he was now in college. He was not serious about school, refused to do his homework, and sought to have fun. He presented, "I was there for fun, I really wasn't there to learn. I would do my class work but would come home and stay outside all evening and not do my homework."

The lack of afterschool supervision coupled with his lack of motivation proved costly as his grades reached an all-time low. Additionally, the bullying continued throughout his first two years of high school. The school he attended was adjacent to a larger traditional high school and the two schools had conjoined bus routes. Bill hated riding the bus as they sought to make him the punch line of every joke as they despised that he attended the Academy. The mocking and bullying became extreme. He was walking from the neighborhood store one day and five young males followed him and his friend from the store into their neighborhood. They were stopped and a fight occurred.

Bill and his friends were beaten up and their wallets and materials purchased from the store were taken. His mother was upset, afraid, and threatened to take Bill out of the school. She sought the assistance of the police and the principals of both schools. All the suspects were apprehended and charged with strong armed robbery. This was a turning point in Bill's life and he decided it was time for a change.

A critical change occurred for his family as his older brother dropped out of school to work and moved back home. This was not the example Bill needed, especially from someone who had been a male role model and had influenced him all of his young life. However, Bill decided he would seek to be the best. He not only found himself a starter on the basketball team, but was placed in several advanced placement courses in school. He soon discovered the choices you make can determine your outcome and that those around you cannot dictate where you go in life—only you can.

Bill was voted senior class president and would graduate number three in his senior class. He was asked to give the graduation speech in which he talked about the obstacles he faced and those who would help him reach his goal of one day going to college. "My dream is not to only attend a college but to graduate from one and to get a great job." He is currently living a portion of that dream as he is a freshman at South Carolina M&E State University. He is majoring in Communications and has the aspirations of being a sports reporter, a commentator, a coach, or anything connected to the game of basketball. He believes he will one day be on Sports Center providing play-by-play commentary of NBA games.

Bill, an African American male youth living with a single mom who worked extreme hours, being primarily raised by his older brother with limited economical resources, was predicted to one day fail. While he has proved many wrong he is still at risk. With their socioeconomic status remaining the same, they are struggling to pay for college. Bill was not awarded any scholarships and because the university he is attending is not a publicly supported institution, he did not receive enough financial aid to cover the cost of tuition. Will Bill make it? Only time will tell.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

A narrative explanation of the factors that influenced or contributed to the academic success of resilient at-risk high school graduates was examined in this research study. The study investigated the following research questions:

1. What were the factors that determined the success of at-risk students who have been academically successful, have graduated from high school, and currently are in their first year of college?
  - a. What attributes did the students possess that enabled them to overcome the challenges they faced in life?
  - b. What influence did educators or the educational environment have on the academic success of at-risk high school students?
  - c. What influence did Parents/Guardians have on the academic success of at-risk high school students?

Within many of the narratives, there was a clear commonality that should be mentioned before beginning an effort to analyze beyond the surface. The most apparent thread was that most of the participants identified that they wanted to succeed and they made a conscious decision to never quit or give up. It was evident that most to all of the students were resilient. They were hardworking and driven. However, much of what they accomplished can be attributed to other factors in their lives.

### **Research Question 1**

*What were the factors that influenced the success of at-risk students who have been academically successful, have graduated from high school, and are currently in their first year of college?*

The interview questions that were correlated to Research Question 1 provided data related to the relationships they had with other people outside of their parents and the inspiration they received from the observations of the lives of others. The two common threads that evolved from the responses of the participants were (a) social support, and (b) being inspired by the lives of others.

#### **Theme 1: Social Support**

Many of the participants indicated that throughout a portion of their adolescent lives a parent or both of their parents were either absent or not involved. They asserted that much of the support they needed and obtained came from other people in their lives. The support they received from many of these non-parent associates are cited to be an influence that contributed to their belief of one day achieving their goals. Social support is cited as a buffer or preventative factor against two negative outcomes, stress (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; House, 1981; Lin & Ensel, 1989), and depression (Alloway & Bebbington, 1987; Fiore, Coppel, Becker, & Cox, 1986) because it helps the recipient cope when difficult life events occur.

Of the eight participants, seven stated that the support of other people in their lives influenced their success and provided them with hope—kept them believing. With



these relationships they were infused with inspirational speeches, a culture of high expectations, and at times financial backing.

The term social support, generally referred to as resources provided by others that satisfy a person's basic social needs, has been identified as a resource that enables individuals to adapt to highly stressful transition periods (Kraimer & Wayne, 2004; Kraimer, Wayne, & Jaworski, 2001) and deal with stress (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Cohen & Syme, 1985; House, 1981).

Angel strongly ascertained that the support (i.e., emotional, physical, and financial) she received from her grandparents and her extended family was instrumental in her graduating high school and going to college. Angel stated,

My grandparents were always there to help me and support me. My grandmother refused to leave me fail. Even when they weren't able to help I have big family, so an uncle and an aunt a big cousin would step in and make sure I got what I needed. She would take me to their house or they would come over to assist me with projects and homework. There was always someone there.

Angel continued,

Being a teen mom I had people to support by babysitting and helping me buy my daughter clothes and food.

Tiffany agreed:

Other family members would come out and attend my dance recitals when I dance at the community recreation center. It would random family members and parents from other team members that would give me that support I needed.

Significant relationships with adults, high expectations, and recognition for accomplishments have all been cited as factors influencing the student's development of self-efficacy, goals, and personal responsibility (McMillan & Reed, 1994).

Sharon presented,

I'm not where I would be if it wasn't for my church family. Portia [Church Youth Leader] was always there when I needed her. I could tell her the good the bad and the ugly and never felt judged. She was a really close person to me. When I found out I had become pregnant Portia was the first person I called because I couldn't trust anyone else.

Sharon continued,

I was told to not let my struggles (i.e., my living conditions, my dysfunctional home life and my feeling about school) dictate my outcome in life. Portia's along with other church members constant encouragement to remain focus and push was a great help.

Adolescents who live in lower socioeconomic communities have a greater chance of experiencing additional pressure from exposure to racism, neighborhood hassles, and poverty (Mincy, Sawhill, & Wolf, 1990). These common stressors are reflected within the buffering theory of social support. The theory presents that adolescents benefit in multiple ways from support, including decreased stress (Nelson, Fareberrow, & Litman, 1988), fewer problems such as drug use (Nelson et al., 1988; Windle, 1992), life modifications (Demaray & Malecki, 2002), and increased academic achievement (Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Richman, Rosenfeld, & Brown, 1998; Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 2000).

Several of the students expressed the need for this support and how critical it was to their perception of future success. Many of the participants found the support they needed came from people in different facets of their lives. Various research findings propose that different individuals in the support network are used for varying types of support (Furman & Burmester, 1985; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Rosenfeld et al., 2000).

Jennifer stated,

My uncle and aunt always and still do to this day support me. I recently found myself without money for college and they were willing to help. They were called when my mother and I were at our worst moments.

Social support is usually used in a broad way, referring to any process through which social relationships might promote health and well-being (Cohen, 2004). Quentin remembered,

I had an older cousin who was in college when I was in high school. He would come home and talk with us and make us complete goal sheets. He would often call to check up on us to make sure we were doing well in school. I did not want to let him down even though I knew I wasn't doing my best.

Sharon provided,

I got really close to my aunt during my high school years. I knew she was always there but it wasn't evident until then. She looks at me as her daughter now, she buys me groceries, helps me pay my phone bill and assist with clothes. She had a sensitive heart and was there when I needed her along with my grandmother. The rides from school to work were much needed. One day riding home, we both just broke down and started crying because of all I was going through. She told me he would do whatever it took to help me become successful. I knew I would make it.

The buffering theory of social support suggests that the way an individual perceives support from others impacts his or her mental health (Vaux, 1988). Primarily, adolescents who perceive high levels of support do not have high levels of distress despite the occurrence of negative or stressful events such as school issues, dating, parental disputes, and expectations surrounding achievement (Cobb, 1976; Elias, 1989). Various authors working in the educational field use the buffering theory as their conceptual framework (Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Malecki & Demaray, 2006).

### **Theme 2: Inspired by Others—Social Learning Theory**

Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action. (Bandura, 1977)

Many of the students attributed much of their achievement to the inspiration they obtained from wanting a better life for themselves and their family members (i.e., their mothers, their present and future children, and siblings) and/or not wanting the life of others they observed such as failed family members and neighborhood associates. Krohn (1999) asserted that the central piece of the social learning theory is that regardless of positive and negative definitions, it is the learning process itself that influences performance outcomes. Krohn goes on to present that learning is essential, and it is through the reward and punishment and consequences of behavior that an individual is able to assess, define, and react in a given situation.

Chase stated,

My eyes started to open when I would ride the city bus to school and would see lot of people I knew hanging out on the street. Folks who didn't make it and I started thinking that's not what I want to be like. School for me was the only way I knew I could get out and not end up like those people.

He continued,

I saw how my dad and his girlfriend were living. She had a big time IT job and that's the kind of life I wanted to live; the big house, the nice car and the fine clothes. Yep, watching how they had money I knew I would work at IBM one day as an IT tech as well.

Sharon's inspiration was sparked by her desire to prove everyone wrong. She was influenced by the negativism in her house versus the positive. Sharon stated,

I wanted to be better than my mother and my father. My dad graduated from high school but never went to college. He made me feel dumb and belittled me and I wanted to prove him wrong. I wanted to be better than he and my mother who never finished high school. My life will be different.

Katie stated,

I want to come back help my mom and little brothers out one day. I don't want my brothers to grow up and be statistics. That's what family do. I believe if I can grow up and be successful I can be an example. My mother will one day have better.

The participants expressed the desire for a better life and wanting to one day come back help those who helped them. A portion of Akers's (1999) text *Social Learning and Social Structure* outlines social learning theory and rewards:

Social learning theory proposes that the definitions are themselves learned through reinforcement contingencies operating in the socialization process and function less as direct motivators than as facilitative or inhibitory “discriminative stimuli,” cues signaling that a certain behavior is appropriate and likely to be rewarded or inappropriate and likely to be punished. It is anticipated reinforcement/punishment (based on direct or vicarious reinforcement in the past) that motivates the behavior, independent of whatever motivation to engage in or refrain from an act that come from its conformity to or violation of a person’s beliefs. . . . thus one is less likely to act on that favorable inclination if the situation does not allow for expectation of a payoff and low risk of punishment. (p. 84)

In this framework, many of the students presented the desire to go above and beyond their current lifestyles and not to deal with the consequences of quitting school—never getting a high paying job and passing down the continued legacy of being at risk. They expressed that life had to get better and for them, school was the way.

For many at-risk youth who are teen parents, like Angel, the desire to ensure your children have better lives becomes the driving force for success. Angel conveys,

For me when I was in high school it was my daughter. Being that my support came from my grandparents I wanted to give her more. She made me go to school; she made me do what I was supposed to do in school. It was her face that made me get up out of bed to go to school to go to work. I knew if I didn’t graduate from high school I would not have been able to go to college and get a better job to support her as a single mom.

Tiffany focused on being able to give back to her younger siblings one day. She felt she had already raised them so it was important to seek a better life not only for herself but for them as well. She stated,

It was my little brothers that motivated me to keep going. I had no one telling me to graduate or to go the college. I had no one telling me to go to class or to do my homework. Others supported me and encouraged but it was mostly my little

brothers and creating a better life for them. I raised them since I was in middle school and they are still my sons now. Many people think they're my sons . . . the teachers call me when they are not acting right in school. I have to finish for them. They deserve it.

Jennifer stated,

I want a better life for my family. My mom struggled because she didn't finish school. Other family members struggle because they didn't finish school and go to college. But I look at the life of my uncle and aunt who graduate and have several degrees and how their children have all they need and more and how they were able to help me. I knew quitting school would prevent my own children from one day enjoying life. I also want to help my mom as well.

Quentin yielded,

There was a next door neighbor who was two years older than me who became my best friend. He was an A-Honor roll student and would always challenge me to do my best. He understood me as he was without his father as well but made it. Even to this day he keeps in touch with me to check on how I am doing.

Bill presented,

I saw how hard my mother worked to provide for us and how she was going school at the same time. I owe her my life and I want her to have the finer things one day. Even though my brother quit school I refused to give up. My mother had done so much for me and I wanted to her to never struggle again.

Social Learning Theory, in connection to the participants in this study, can be phrased by the term reciprocal determinism which describes how people, especially adolescents, influence the environment and how the environment influences them. In this reciprocal association by person, Bandura (1977) stresses cognitive structures in learning and in performing. To further unpack the theory, Bandura (1977) exerted,

The principles of social learning theory include vicarious, symbolic, and self-regulatory processes. These principles guide learning. People first observe and symbolize their own behavior. They can then evaluate it. Next, their memories of reinforced or nonreinforced past behavior along with anticipated future consequences can then be used as a basis for evaluation. Finally, once this cognition is used as a reference point then self-regulation can be exercised. (p. 23)

### **Research Question 1a**

All participants were asked questions that drew parallels to the research question concerning what attributes they possessed that enabled them to overcome the challenges they faced in life. The answers provided by the participants provided data in correlation to students being independent and the faith the students possessed. The two common threads that evolved from the responses of the participants were (a) self-efficacy, and (b) self-regulation.

#### **Theme 1: Self-efficacy**

Participants initially shared how their faith in God was one of the attributes that they possessed when overcoming many of the adversities they faced in life. The participants' presentation soon materialized into their strong belief in their own ability to be successful. Many of the students described themselves as having high self-efficacy. Walker and Greene (2009) asserted that self-efficacy is the extent to which an individual perceives that he or she is capable of managing a set of circumstances or tasks.

Sharon, even with two parents in the home, perceived that no one else believed in her based on her past and her track record of failures. Sharon stated,

I would not let what was going on around me faze me. My parents had expectations but didn't believe I would fulfill them. I only had me to believe in. I



didn't get motivation from home so I had to motivate myself. My confidence that I was going to make it was very high and I wanted to prove everyone wrong.

Sharon's strong will and confidence in her abilities seemed to increase her perception that she would succeed. It also seemed to help that others doubted and lacked trust that she would achieve her goals. Sharon continued,

I would tell myself all the time you can make it. People took me as being arrogant but that wasn't the case. I think my faith pushed me to be hard worker with a go-getter mindset. I like when others doubted me because it made me say I'm going to go get it. If I was told no I would find another way.

Students who have strong self-efficacy beliefs are more likely to exert effort in the face of difficulty and persist at a task when they have the requisite skills; students who have weaker perceptions of self-efficacy are likely to be plagued by self-doubts, and give up easily when confronted with difficulties, even if they have the skills or knowledge to perform the task (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003).

Tiffany, along with other students, would not allow her circumstances to dictate her perception of what her outcome in life would be. Tiffany advocated,

I know a lot of people use how their childhood was as excuse of why they would not be successful. I refused to let that be me. I know my mom did drugs and my dad was absent in my life but I refused to quit. I just kept my head on straight and continued to think positive.

Self-efficacy beliefs can be changed by increasing an individual's physical potential, reducing stress, and having a positive mood. Belief in one's self plays a major role in

motivation and is a foundational aspect in the formation of self-concept, attributions of success and failure, goals, and self-schemas (Pajares, 1996).

Katie's dreams and hope would not be hampered by the circumstances she was presented in life. Complaining was not her forte for handling adversity, but a constant need to believe and push was her answer. Katie stated,

I just kept thinking positive and focused on what life would be like in the future for me. I knew I was smart enough to do the work. I was determined and focus on graduating. It was my faith in God and my faiths in me that help me reach where I am today. I just kept pushing. You have to believe and push yourself.

Quentin agreed,

I had lots of faith. I prayed all the time that the bullies would go away, that my mother would get a better job, that my father would return and that life would change. I knew things would change, I knew my prayers would come true and my hard would pay off. I always stayed positive even though I had some nights I cried I stayed positive.

Most if not all of the participants believed they were capable of academic success. Angel and William provided that they knew they would graduate despite the barriers they faced and challenges they soon came upon. Angel stated,

I was not going to quit. Succeeding was my decision not what others wanted for me. I am a very assertive person who takes the initiative to get things done. I didn't need a group of friends or people helping me make right decisions. I knew what I had to do and nothing was stopping me, not my friends, not my enemies and not the fact of being a teen mom.

By the time children reach middle school age, the majority of them have developed significant judgements regarding their abilities (Center for Positive Practices, 2005). This

rang true for William, who endured the perception of racial discrimination when he attended a private middle school. William stated,

That school [Private Christian School] was tough. The work was hard and trying to get used to how they did things really challenged me. But I knew if I could get through this high school would be easy. I was prepared and it gave me the confidence to believe we were going to overcome all and I would make it to college.

At-risk students who are able to exhibit a high level of self-efficacy where they are able to handle and travail the obstacles during their school-age have a greater chance of being successful. Bandura (1993) asserted students' self-efficacy beliefs contribute to high levels of academic performance above and beyond the levels of their ability.

Jennifer's performance in school never changed, even when her parents separated, despite her having to move from school to school and regardless of experiencing poverty at its worst. Pajares (1996) exerts that "efficacy beliefs help determine how much effort people will expend on an activity, how long they will persevere when confronting obstacles, and how resilient they will prove in the face of adverse situations" (p. 544).

For Jennifer, her confidence and self-efficacy beliefs tended to change as she progressed through phases of school. Jennifer explained,

I am very determined and I just pushed myself. I am aggressive and self-motivated. I don't blame my mom for how life turned out I just learned to be satisfied with what I had. My grades were always good because school just seemed to come easy. But the more I succeeded the more I believed. I saw myself being successful. I saw myself attending college.

Pajares (2006) stated, “Beliefs that young people hold about their capability to succeed in their endeavors are vital forces in the subsequent successes or failures they attain in these endeavors” (p. 362).

Numerous studies indicate that academic self-efficacy, and not self-esteem, is the major component for school success. The construct of self-efficacy grew out of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977). Personal beliefs about capabilities as measures of self-efficacy may be better predictors of behavior than what one is actually capable of achieving (Bandura, 1989). Research findings have documented the wide-ranging effects of self-efficacy perceptions on learning and motivation. Self-efficacy theory predicts that highly efficacious students will choose to participate in learning more often (Berry & West, 1993). They will expand more effort on challenging learning tasks (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1990).

## **Theme 2: Self-regulation—Independence**

Several student participants articulated that their need to self-regulate their behavior due to their independence, whether from having no parents to being the older sibling and having to raise their younger sibling or being a teen parent, was a strong attribute they possessed. Some students persist and work on their own for their own intrinsic interests, while others work because they are required to work (Alderman, 1990).

Many of the students like Tiffany were able to self-regulate and seek out solutions for life in the absence of adults. Self-regulation during adolescent years involves the

ability of youth to function as an autonomous individual (Patock-Peckham, Cheong, Balhorn, & Nagoshi, 2001).

Tiffany had helped raised her brothers from the time she was in elementary school during the occasional times her mother was in jail or prison. Having to act as the sister and caretaker carried over to her academic behavior. Tiffany forwarded,

I have been able to make decisions on my own since I was very young. I did a lot on my own, from walking to school, to helping my brothers get ready for school, to cooking our meals after school. I had an independent reflex that helped me in school where I fought hard even without the help of friends, family or sometimes teachers.

Tiffany was not guided by others as those in her immediate family were not good role models. Many dropped out school, sold drugs in the street, and found themselves in jail. Permissive parents (i.e., those who are neglectful or uninvolved or provide little direction and minimal consequences) tend show little attention and provide little to no guidance (Patock-Peckham et al., 2001).

Tiffany continued,

Nobody made me go to school. Nobody made me want to come to college. We didn't talk about college. This is what I wanted to do and I'm doing it [attending college] on my own. I work, go to school, and still keep up with what my brothers are doing in school. It's funny people think those are my children when they are with me.

Katie had a similar story as she was the older sibling and found herself having to fend for younger siblings. There were many nights no one was there to make sure she did her homework or studied for a test. A self-regulated youth sets attainable goals and takes

appropriate actions to achieve these goals, utilizing resources while remaining aware of their limitations (Miller & Byrnes, 2001). Katie exerted,

It was just me and them [her siblings] most nights. We were taught how to ride the bus and the train when I was in New Jersey. I get out now and will walk wherever I'm going. I mean I just didn't depend on a lot of people. I had people pushing me but I pushed myself.

For Angel, being a teen mom, she had no choice but to learn independence. Even with her grandparents helping her they were strict and made sure she raised her own daughter.

Angel provided,

My grandmother was old school. It was not hanging out while she kept the baby. She kept my daughter during school but after that I had to manage between doing homework and being a mom. School for me was easy compared to parenting. I found myself being unique as I didn't do what others did or acted the way others acted. I wanted to be me. I had to make my own decisions not what everyone else wanted me to do. The decisions I was make was not just about me but they were now about my daughter.

Chase, who was raised by a single mother with younger siblings, found himself being the father of the family. Having to matriculate and manage through his struggles helped him learn how to stand own his own two feet. Chase stated,

I had to learn early the importance of doing things yourself. After my dad split from my mom, I was taught how to wash clothes, do the dishes, and clean the house and to cook dinner. My mom was working odd jobs here and there and many of nights it was on me to help with my siblings. It was a challenge because I was not mature enough to handle the responsibility at first and my homework grades showed as a result. But the experience soon helped as I realized no one would give me anything in life. I would have to go get it myself.

Many of the students' life experiences and the independent management thereof filtered over to their ability to induce academic self-regulation. Academic self-regulation can be defined as the motivational and behavioral processes allowing individuals to activate and sustain cognitions, behaviors, and emotions in a systematic way toward the attainment of their own learning goals (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994).

Quentin had to self-regulate and monitor his progress as a youth. With his dad being out of the country and his mom going to school and working several jobs, he was the adult of the house. In addition, he was bullied in school which forced him into an isolated state of mind. Quentin observed,

My mom worked crazy hours and went to school and was not at home in the afternoons. Being that my dad was out of the country it was a lot on us. While we had babysitters I was left to learn a lot on my own. To add I was a struggling reader and needed to do more. I had to focus more and get away from those who bullied me and even my friends. I had to find myself.

William's story reads similarly, as his mother was a single parent who worked long hours on various jobs, along with going to school. He was left alone with an older brother and had to work independently. William stated,

I did alright—just enough to pass in school at first because I didn't understand the importance of school. My mom was there for me but she did a lot of working and I was under the supervision of my older brother most of the time. I still found a way. I would watch my mom and how she worked hard without any support from my dad or my brother's father and I was inspired to worked hard just like her.

The various research of self-regulation or independent awareness conducted correlated to how students regulate academia. The Pintrich prototype and research support the

hypothesized links between self-regulation, learning, and self-motivation (Pintrich & Schrauben, 1992).

### **Research Question 1b**

It has been presented that a positive, supportive learning environment can have a profound impact on the academic success of the learners within the environment (Baker, 1999; Leavitt, 1959).

The interview questions related to Research Question 1b, “What influence did educators or the educational environment have on the academic success of at-risk high school students?,” provided data in correlation with how the school structure and relationships had an influence on the success of the participants. The two common themes that evolved from the responses of the participants were (a) school structure, and (b) the educator-student relationship.

Five of the eight students presented that the school they attended informed how they performed in school. There was evidence based on the stories of the students that being in a particular school setting provided for a better opportunity to succeed. Seven of the eight student participants expressed that their achievement was influenced by an educator either in middle or high school and for one participant it was someone at every level.

### **Theme 1: School Structure**

Many of the student participants contributed much of their success to the type of school they attended. They presented how the smaller learning population and setting provided opportunities for them to foster life-long relationships with their peers and



educators. The school attended by these students had a population of 145 students, 21 staff members, and one hallway. Much of what was conveyed by the students was consistent with what has been presented by many studies about smaller learning environments.

Raywid (1997) explains that the organization of small schools simulates that of elementary schools, which in turn affects student achievement positively, especially for disadvantaged students (p. 37). This was the sentiment of William, who attended a small Christian-based middle school and then the magnet high school. William stated,

I choose to attend this high school because it was just like the Christian Academy I attended that was grades K-8. Both schools had a small student population and with small class sizes. I was able to get the attention I needed to get especially in high school. We had a close knit group because we all took the same classes from freshmen year until we graduated. I made friends it felt like I had been there forever.

William, along with other students who attended the small high school, was able to obtain the attention needed by only having a maximum of ten to fifteen students in each class.

William continued,

I got acclimated to everything and the teachers were able to help me out with some of the stuff I was struggling with. I could not hide at the school in those classes. I was always in touch with the people around me and those above me. I knew my principal and he knew me by name. With having such a small school he was able to look at all the report cards and would address everyone not on point. It was like a family away from home. This was also like a college setting because we had privileges like wearing our hats in the building, using our cell-phones in the outside of the classroom and taking the early college courses.

Chase, who had moved away to stay with his father for a year and then returned for his sophomore year in high school, chose the smaller school over the traditional high school.

Chase endorsed,

If I was in a traditional high school I would have just have been another guy in the classroom. I would have gotten lost and no one would have noticed me. I would have just passed or failed and things would have turned out differently for me. The attention I received I needed because of what was missing at home. The work was hard but they [teachers] would not let me fail. They were also concerned about what I was dealing with in life. My principal would often pull many of the guys in a group to have a chat. Sometimes it was because we were coming from lunch late or not doing well with our academics.

Much of this social support was afforded by the size of the school the students attended. According to the participants, having a small number of students enabled the staff to go the extra mile to give special attention and do what most teachers in a traditional setting could not do. Angel offered,

I went to the small academy school where we called it the one hallway school. Everybody knew everybody and we basically like a family. It was more so like home than like school because anytime you had a problem someone was always there to talk to. For me it was when my mom had to do a little time and I had to start helping with taking care of my smaller siblings along with my baby. The teachers were there for me.

Angel continued,

When my father died they came to the house and brought food and other items for me and my grandparents. This school was like a family. They were there for me and it made me work harder.

The students' reflections of their experiences correlated with the research of Darling-Hammond (1995), who exerts that schools with a student population up to 500 students are associated with academic achievement. She also stated

that students attending these school have higher attendance rates and lower dropout numbers. These schools are more effective in allowing students to become bonded to important adults in a learning community, who can play the role that families and communities find it harder and harder to play. (p. 155)

Quentin felt this environment was very conducive for him as he came from a large middle school where he was bullied and ignored. Having a school this size for him was a safe haven where he wanted to come to school. Quentin stated,

This was a very small school and I liked it. My class sizes were never larger than 15 and it was a benefit for me. I thought I would stick out for the wrong reasons but I actually became popular. I was known by everyone as I was the big man on campus. Teachers, students everyone knew me. I would stand at the end of the hallway and could be seen and it felt good. People knew my name and they would actually talk to me.

Quentin proceeded,

When I did badly they would call my mom and have conferences. I hated that part because my mom got to know all my teachers. This was happening for everyone. The academy is a special school and I don't think I would have survived at a traditional school. It was good to get away from those kids in middle school. I remember their names to this day.

Quentin survived the bullying aspect of schooling by attending the smaller learning environment which was similar to what Tiffany presented she needed as well. Tiffany,

who had attended two traditional high schools before being accepted into the academy, was starting to create a trail that would end in her dropping out of school. Tiffany stated,

I had been in so much trouble and was dealing with so many issues I needed a place to just get away from all the drama. You couldn't do drama at this school because they would find out before it got started. I remember wanting to fight this girl because she knew where my run away sister was. Before things could escalate the principal, teachers and Big Mamma [Academy Coordinator] as we called her already had us in the conference room discussing the issue. It helped that my oldest sister attended this school and had the principal's number on speed dial.

Tiffany's experience at the academy was much different than what she experienced at the traditional schools. In the past she was in several fights and was out of school more than she was in school. Tiffany continued,

I would have dropped out if I did not attend that school. They treated my mom with love even though they knew her situation. When I was supposed to be suspended for violating rules they would not send me home.

Research conducted by Wasley et al. (2000) monitored the progress of students attending small schools in Chicago. Quantitative data were collected and used to identify the small school population and the differences in their learning environments in comparison to the traditional high schools. The study advocated that schools with small learning environments were able to provide

. . . small, intimate learning communities where students are well known and can be pushed and encouraged by adults who care for and about them; to reduce the isolation that too often seeds alienation and violence; to reduce the devastating discrepancies in the achievement gap that plague poorer children and, too often, children of color, and to encourage teachers to use their intelligence and their experiences to help students succeed. (Wasley et al., 2000, p. 2)

Wasley et al. (2000) continue by presenting, “the most horrifying recent development in large schools is the increase in violence . . . When children are not known well enough by the adults who care for them; the alienation that they experience can have devastating consequences” (p. 2).

School structure was not mentioned as an influence for success by three of the eight participants. Katie, Sharon, and Jennifer focused on the educators themselves in regards to who informed their achievements.

### **Theme 2: Educator—Student Relationship**

When participants were asked the interview question that focused on their school experience, all of the students reflected back on their most and least favorite educator. For some there were multiple people who played a role in them succeeding.

In cultivating the lives of the participants many relationships between the students and the educators continue to presently exist. And for many of the students remaining at risk of dropping out of college for various reasons the roles played in the past continue to be valuable in determining how successful the students will be in the future.

According to Goddard (2003),

. . . as members of schools, families, and communities, students may have access to various forms of social support that can facilitate their success in school. Indeed, researchers have increasingly recognized the importance of social support for students’ academic success. (pp. 59–60)

Framing the context, Tiffany, who grew up with her mom in and out of jail, continues to keep in contact with her third-grade teacher, her middle school counselor, and the high school social worker. Tiffany stated,

The ironic thing is I was always taught to not speak with social workers because they would divide your home; I hated the social worker at my high school because she was nosy but I find myself wanting to be one now. What I realized is she cared and there was a method to her madness. She wanted to ensure my home life was not going keep me from graduating.

Tiffany developed a long-lasting relationship with the school social worker and often called her to discuss her academic status in college. The high school social worker reminded Tiffany of her third-grade teacher who is still like a mom to her. She continued,

My third grade teacher is still here for me right now. We talk on a regular basis and she supports me. She understood what I was going through at the time and even though I move around a lot my teachers still stayed in contact with me. It teachers like her and the ones I connected with at the Academy that helped me through the tough times.

This also remained true for Jennifer, who transitioned from school to school over the years and found her way to North Carolina. She was being raised by a mother with a mental illness and never obtained the support and guidance she needed at home.

However, she attributes her choice of major to her middle school teacher. Jennifer added,

I will never forget Ms. Rowe as she is the reason I am seeking a degree in accounting. She was my math teacher and encouraged me day after day to seek out my dreams. She told me, “you are a brilliant mathematician and would be great in accounting—you should go after it.” I believed her and trusted her confidence in me. She was also a great teacher and I enjoyed learning from her.

Deiro (2003) found that if teachers treated students respectfully, there was a decline in student incidents. Additionally, the author found that students worked harder and performed better academically when they had a respectful relationship with their teachers.

Several other participants, including Sharon, exerted that it was a teacher who saw something in them that pushed them to make the right decisions. Sharon, who got pregnant while in high school, was starting to see her grades drop and her opportunity to graduate slip. She recalls getting the attention of one teacher whom she liked. Montalvo, Mansfield, and Miller (2007) found that if students liked a teacher, they experienced motivational and achievement benefits. Sharon explained,

I was really in deep with my struggles and I begin to think crazy thoughts. I would not talk to anyone and just felt alone. School was not important and I started to get off track. But I had this teacher who saw my struggle and begin to seek me out. I was not feeling her at first because she was Caucasian and I am black but she could relate to me. She told I have three children of my own and I can tell you are pregnant. This teacher gave me the insight I needed and just allowed me to be heard.

Being heard was very important to Sharon as she was raised in a home where it was her perception that the only attention she received was negative attention. Chase had similar feelings as he was raised in a home with a single mom but often witnessed domestic violence. His desire for a male in his life was great. Chase explained,

My dad was not there but I had teachers like Mr. Hall and Mr. Wall who stayed on me and I really enjoyed their classes. They were fair—they were role models and knew how to talk to me. I was not an easy student at first because I only wanted to be average. They refused to let me be average and stay on my case. When I turned something in that was not excellent they made me resubmit the project. They didn't just pass me they made me work to get the grades I got. They made me ready for the real world.

Chase would soon find himself working and going to school, and could often make the correlation between what he was learning in school and what he was experiencing at

work. Through developing relationships with students, any teacher can create an environment of inquiry and success for students (Crosnoe & Elder, 2004; Howard, 2002; Hughes & Kwok, 2007). To add, Chase recalls,

I always thought Social Studies was boring until I took Civics and Economics. Mr. Hall made everything we learned relevant to the real world. I wanted to learn more because I was motivated by money. I wanted more money and learning about it inspired me.

William and Quentin had similar experiences with the same teachers. They were both athletes and were often told it was important to remember that the student always comes before the athlete. Their perception of their relationship with these teachers centered on high expectations and a perception of caring. William stated,

Mr. Hall and Mr. Wall had high expectations of us. I remember when I was chosen to take the AP course with Mr. Hall I didn't think I belong but he continued to encourage and help me. I was blessed because he really cared. I believe the reason why I was more prepared for college than most was because of the classes I took with Mr. Hall and Mr. Wall. They would pull you to the side and have conversation with you or call your mom on the spot. They did whatever it took to keep me going. These teachers knew what I needed.

Quentin agreed,

The teachers at the Academy supported me especially Mr. Wall and Mr. Hall. They stayed on me about my homework and classwork. They saw me grow [academically] as they engaged me and gave me hope. I struggled in reading but English became fun in Mr. Wall's class. The activities we did taught me stuff I remember today. They acknowledged me and showed things. I felt comfortable to be me in his classroom.



Quentin also presented the effects of the effort of the graduation coach, Ms. Green, who monitored his online progress and reported all troublesome findings to the principal.

Quentin continued,

Everyone thought Ms. Green was pushy and hard and I agreed. I think it was because I was lazy and didn't believe I belong in an online course. She kept track of what I was doing in my classes and continued to argue with me about how good it was. She would say over and over, "you will graduate and go to college and not because of a basketball but because of your brain." She made you think, to be open-minded, to be safe and think about the outside world. We always had those talks about making good sound decisions as an African American male.

Angel had a true admiration for Ms. Green as well. She found Ms. Green reminded her of a younger version of her grandmother. This would prove to be true when her grandmother visited the school and they connected as well. Angel stated,

I would call her Lady Green because she was just down to earth. She was the reason I got financial aid for college. She made all of us sit in that computer lab and fill out all of that information. She [Ms. Green] would contact us on our cell-phones and bug us until we showed up. There was no excuse she wanted to hear and none she would accept. I did not fully appreciate her until I got to college and had to call her for help again and again. She along with the Principal could always be reached and always be there when I needed them.

Angel's relationship with Ms. Green, and even the principal, proved valuable in many ways as she would advocate for them to accept her younger sisters into the Academy program. Pomeroy (1999) described, ". . . the prime importance of the teacher-student relationship to young people's experience of school" (p. 480).

### **Research Question 1c**

In analyzing data from Research Question 1c, “What influence did Parents/Guardians have on the academic success of at-risk high school students?,” the correlating interview questions revealed that only five of eight participants attributed their achievements to the influence of their parents. Han (2008) presents the family environment as the most important factor in learning and development for children. Further analysis displayed that all eight participants had an absent parent(s) in their lives, while one was reared by a stepmom and another by her grandparents.

Children raised in single-parent homes are at a particular disadvantage because they most often experience a reduction in the number of adult role models who are available to them. As a result of the reduction, many of the children may miss out on necessary resources that could have been provided by the absent parent (Heard, 2007). William, Chase, Quentin, Katie, Tiffany, and Jennifer were all raised by a single mother while Sharon was raised by a single father until he married her stepmom, and Angel was raised by her grandparents. Single parents may not have the resources necessary for children to attend a suitable learning environment (Valencia, 2000). In a review of the data there were two major themes that emerged: (a) no parental influence, and (b) parent life context influence.

#### **Theme 1: Parental Influence Not Related to Academic Success**

Tiffany, Sharon, and Jennifer had similar presentations and provided that their parents had limited to no influence on their success. This was especially evident in the

life of Tiffany. Tiffany was partially raised by a single mom who was in jail and/or prison on and off throughout her life. Tiffany presented,

My mother was back and forth in jail so I raised myself and my younger siblings. I would wake up some mornings and she would be gone. I would get up and get my brothers ready and we would walk to school. She never helped me with my homework or attended parent conferences. I attended the parent conference for my brothers.

Tiffany's portrayal of her mother's lack of attention to her brother's academic progress provided for her involvement in his education. Our discussion went as such:

Researcher: So you went to your brother's parent conference?

Tiffany: Yep.

Researcher: What did the teachers or principal at the school say?

Tiffany: Nothing—I told them she was sick.

Researcher: No one ever knew?

Tiffany: Nope—I think they were suspicious but they never said anything.

Tiffany's mother would often tell her she was proud of her but it was not what Tiffany felt she needed from her in order to reach her goals in life. Tiffany added,

I forgive my mom for all she done even still, my younger sister doesn't but I do. I know she could have done better, but I appreciate the little she did.

Tiffany's father lived in another city and played no role in her academic success as he was only like a friend to her—someone to talk when needed, but he provided no financial support or parental guidance. Tiffany explained,

I would see my father when I wanted to. He's like a friend someone who would give me advice that I never took in to consideration because he didn't know me like that. I showed him the side I wanted to him to see but we weren't close.

Sharon's story is similar to Tiffany's as she perceived nothing she accomplished could be attributed to her parents. Sharon was raised by her father and her stepmom who she perceived did not believe she would graduate from high school. Sharon shared,

My dad was not a good supporter of me. I got yelled at and screamed at about all I did wrong but never praised about the good things I did. The only time he supported me is when I made the team in college and he came to the game. That was first time I felt supported. All the support I received came from outside of the home—my aunts, my grandmother and people in the church. That's who helped me.

Sharon's dad graduated from high school but did not make it to college because he got involved in some trouble. Her aspirations were to do better than he and prove all the naysayers wrong. She observed,

I will prove them wrong one day. It's my goal to do better than them all. I will never forget having to bum rides from practice and to work every day because they didn't want to take me places. I will never forget how I would look up in the stands and none of my family was in the stands. Or all the cursing I received and the degrading names I was called. I almost gave up but I didn't and I won't.

Sharon's natural mom, who lost custody of her to her father when she was a toddler, was also not considered to be instrumental. The constant battle for her and her siblings seemed to be the primary focus as opposed her welfare and academics. Sharon explained,

I couldn't trust the intentions of my mother and she had so much going herself I just stayed with my father. She didn't really ask me about school but more about just life in general. She was dealing with so much in her life I was not a priority. It

seemed it was more about the child's support she was paying than about how I was doing.

When a divorce or separation occurs, the family unit often loses at least half of its income. The loss may be significant, considering that it is usually the father, and often the main financial provider, who leaves the family unit (Lamb, 1999). Departure of a father may force new, single mothers to enter the workforce. Because these mothers are now working outside of the home more, they have less time to care for, supervise, and give guidance to their children (Lamb, 1999; McLanahan & Teitler, 1999).

For Jennifer, her father lived in New Jersey and she was raised by her single mother, a mother with a mental disease and limited financial resources. Her parents' separation was significant as her father was the enforcer in the house. Jennifer exerted,

My dad provides the least amount support because he wasn't there. He couldn't do anything financially because he was struggling just like we were. He was paying child support for his other kids and couldn't help us. He did what he could. He would tell us that he wanted us to do good, ask about school and all that.

Jennifer, being an independent youth, contributes much of what she achieved to her hard work and ability to stay focused. Jennifer stated,

I did all my homework by myself. No one ever checked my homework or my grades until report cards. My mom would tell me good job and she don't have to worry about me because I always make A's and B's. School was just easy and I just did what I had to do. She wasn't there as she was working so it was all up to me.

McLanahan and Teitler (1999) note that poverty may affect the emotional well-being of parents, leading to a problematic family life. As noted, single mothers also may have

fewer resources to offer their children (e.g., living in neighborhoods with underprivileged public schools), which may impede their children's development and health.

### **Theme 2: Parent Influence on Academic Success**

Parental contribution has been found to play an important role in student achievement, including academic inspiration, a decrease in behavioral issues, and even educational transformation (Civil, Bernier, & Quintos, 2003; Epstein, 2005; McGuinn & Kelly, 2012; Peressini, 1998). Many factors could account for the degree to which parents are involved, including but not limited to age of children and their desire for independence, parental social network and financial resources (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002), parental life context (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005), parental educational level (Remillard & Jackson, 2006), and parental aspirations and expectations of their children's academic achievement (Levpuscek & Zupancic, 2008).

Participants William, Chase, Quentin, and Katie revealed how their achievements were cultivated by their mother's life context, where they continued to persevere, work, go to school, and continue to provide for the family despite all the obstacles they faced.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995) framework for the Family Life Context presented three key life context variables of (a) parental knowledge and skills, (b) time and energy, and (c) family culture. Under the variable family culture, Walker, Shenker, and Hoover-Dempsey (2010) added a level two learning mechanism that parents engage in which includes (a) encouragement, (b) modeling, (c) reinforcement, and (d) instruction.

Walker et al. (2010) added modeling based on Bandura's (1977) work, reinforcement based on Skinner's (1989) behavioral theory, and instruction based on Vygotsky's work. The collection of work assumed that

parents contribute to enhanced student outcomes when they encourage and model important learning skills such as persistence in the face of difficulty; reinforce behaviors and attitudes related to learning such as managing time wisely; and instruct their children about ways to enhance learning such as breaking down a problem into smaller, manageable pieces. (p. 29)

William was raised by a single mom and sometimes reared by an older brother. William's life had the potential to go in several directions with the absence of a father and having a mother who worked two jobs while attending college. Despite all that he lacked emotionally, physically, and financially, he attributes much of what he has achieved from the example his mother set in overcoming the adversities of life and from the desire to see her have a better life. William stated,

My mom was a great role model as she stayed in school forever while working numerous jobs. She [his mom] showed me the way by always being able to balance both school and work. She just showed me anything is possible as she did it without either my father or my brother's father's help. She played dad and mom for me and my brother. I feel my mother was the biggest factor.

Levine and Nidiffer (1996) found that students from low-income backgrounds who eventually matriculated into prestigious universities identified parents as their primary source of motivation, more so than teachers, counselors, and other educational mentors.

William acknowledged that he and his father spoke on occasion but that he was not supportive in the way needed. William continued,

Honestly, he [his father] hasn't been supportive. We really don't speak that much except for on occasion and holidays and maybe once or twice in between.

During the interview William seemed to get emotional and went back to explaining how he was inspired by the struggle and perseverance of his mother. Her way of pushing beyond the obstacles she faced in life as a single working mother motivated him. She dedicated her life to ensuring he and his brother were taken care of. William believed she was the catalyst to him reaching his goals. William added,

I hate to keep going back to my mother, but she showed me anything is achievable because she has gone through so much, so much like stuff I can't even discuss. Just knowing her story and everything, I felt my life wasn't as difficult as hers has been and everything she's done goes beyond words.

In following up with William, he is currently attending a prestigious college, but the financial barriers continue to exist as he has struggled to pay for his tuition. This is primarily due to the lack of financial aid money available at the institution. William still maintains hope as he and his mother continue to find ways around the barriers of life. Her focus and relentless drive continues to fuel his desire to succeed. William concluded,

I refuse to give up! My mom didn't give up and I won't give up. All those parent conferences she attended, the sacrifice to attend my games after being at work and school, all the days of scrambling to get monies for to live a better life makes me angry but hungry to succeed. There is no quitting!



For Chase, Katie, and Quentin, their lives paralleled William's in that their mothers struggled as single parents as well, and they indicated this as a motivating factor and great influence on their desire to succeed. For Chase, his mother and father divorced and thereafter life was not the same:

My parents decided to get a divorce and my dad left my mom. This tragedy of divorce changed my perception and everything I knew as life as it was. I remember getting into fights and arguments at school. I couldn't come to grips with what happened and began to misbehave in school and no longer saw the need to pursue academic excellence. I knew that deep down the source of problem was not school, it was my father. The sense of abandonment left me angry, confused, and disheartened. My relationship with my father dwindled.

Departure of a father may force new, single mothers to enter the workforce more actively. Because these mothers are now working outside of the home more, they have less time to care for, supervise, and give guidance to their children (Lamb, 1999; McLanahan & Teitler, 1999).

The separation of his father from the family resulted into his mother having to become the dominant caretaker of the family. She was only able to obtain minimum wage paying jobs because she only had a high school education. Chase was attentive to his mother's struggles but was inspired by his mother's disdain for sympathy and her ability to keep moving forward. Chase added,

My mother handled the situation better than my dad. She did not leave us or give up on us because of tough times. She lifted me up and encouraged me even when I wasn't doing my best in school. She disciplined me in the right way and always made me take responsibility for my failures. I had good relationship with my mom even though she was always working and I was keeping my brother and sister I loved her.

Chase's mom was available when needed by the schools, and after attending parent conferences when she could, she often reminded Chase what life could be like without an education. Chase explained,

She sat me down and said Chase you see how my life is and you should want better. I am struggling and I want a better life for you, your brother and your sister. I never had the money to go to school but you can make it. I want you to go to school and make something of yourself.

Chase would often receive these speeches when his academics were not up to par. Coupled with these influential conversations, Chase was also inspired by the affluent lifestyle of his father and stepmom. The speeches his mother provided were enhanced when he spent a year living with his father. Chase provided,

It was two different worlds and I wanted the world my father was living in. His wife had a good paying job and they had all they wanted. My mother was right life could be better. They make a pretty good living and I want that someday for me, my mother and my siblings.

Katie also had the other side of life to view as she aspires to have a life that her uncle and aunt have. Similar to Chase's experience, Katie's mother would often express the desire for her and her siblings to one day have a better life. Katie stated,

Despite my mother's downfalls and failures she had high expectations for my siblings and I. She scolded us when we did poorly in school and would advocate for us when she could. She pushed us and always told us we were not going to be like her and my dad. My dad never finished high school, and she just now finishing her GED and in college and they didn't want that for us.

Katie's mother soon went back to obtain her GED and now is attending a community college to receive a degree in the culinary arts. Katie asserted,

She could have given up but to see her now in school while I am in school was motivation. Seeing her struggle and having to do everything on her own made me want more for myself starting with graduating from high school. Her going back to school made me think if she can go back then I can finish and go on to college.

Quentin agreed,

My mother handled everything for my family as my dad was out of the country. She went to school and worked two to three jobs. There were times I didn't see her for days. My mom was the warrior of the family. Even through emotional time of them not letting my father back in the country, she kept going.

Quentin's parents, who were immigrants, came to America because of the fighting in their country. His mother, despite having to adapt, fought beyond the discrimination and cultural barriers to obtain a nursing degree and obtained a nursing job. This was an inspiration and motivated Quentin. Quentin expressed,

My mother kept us going as a family and expected much from me. I saw how tired she was every day and how much she put into us having a better life and me going off to college. She fought for us and told me often I had no excuse to fail. Though there were times I wanted to quit, she refused to let me quit. I struggled with reading, she made me read more. I struggled with organization; she got me a notebook and made me organize my stuff.

Quentin also observed the passion his mother had for him and his siblings. She attended conferences when she could and met with the school officials when life at school was not conducive for Quentin. Even with her often being absent, Quentin still felt his mother was strict and tough. Quentin stated,

My mother had a big impact on me graduating. She was strict and would not let us go outside or to the movies with my friends. We were always in the house reading and watching TV. She wanted more for us and I understand it now. Looking back on it she just wanted the best. I don't I could have done it with three kids and being by myself but my mother did it and I thank her.

Parental contribution has been found to play an important role in student achievement, including academic inspiration, a decrease in behavioral issues, and even educational transformation (Civil et al., 2003; Epstein, 2005; McGuinn & Kelly, 2012; Peressini, 1998).

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **SUMMARY, FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, CLOSING STATEMENT**

#### **Introduction**

Not all students react in the same way to the factors that place students at risk of not graduating from high school. A factor that impacts the academic or personal aspirations of one student may seemingly have little bearing on another. In many instances, it is not just one factor that impacts student success, but various occurrences of them or a multitude of factors working in combination with one another.

Research reveals that there are many factors that can put a student population at risk of not graduating from high school. Factors such as poverty (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001; Rumberger, 2001), homelessness (Hartman, 2002), drug and alcohol abuse (Fulkerson, Harrison, & Hedger, 1999; Lange & Sletten, 2002), and single-parent households (Horn, Chen, & Adelman, 2003; Zweig, 2003) are just a few of the issues that may impede student success.

Despite these many factors, there are those students who persevere and align themselves with protective factors that enable them to be successful. Examining factors impacting successful at-risk graduates was inspired with the hope of inducing more strategies that promote the educational success of others identified as at risk. In addition, the present study was motivated by an interest in contributing to the limited amount discussion on the success of at-risk students versus the failure of at-risk students. This

research includes findings from the stories of eight successful graduates and the contributing factors that enabled them to reach their goals.

Chapter VI is divided into five sections that include (a) a summary of the research study, (b) conclusions in relation to the research questions guiding the focus of the study, (c) research implications, (d) recommendations for practice and future research, and (e) a closing statement.

### **Summary**

This qualitative study was designed to aid in understanding, through the collective voices of successful at-risk high school graduates, factors that affect and support academic success. In addition, based on the data collected from completed interviews, narratives of each participant were written and analyzed and several themes derived. The primary focus driving this study was to investigate how selected students, identified by research terms as at risk, were academically successful, despite adversity. The following research questions framed this study:

1. What were the factors that influenced the success of at-risk students who have been academically successful, have graduated from high school, and currently are in their first year of college?
2. What attributes did the students possess that enabled them to overcome the challenges they faced in life?
3. What influence did educators or the educational environment have on the academic success of at-risk high school students?

4. What influence did parents/guardians have on the academic success of at-risk high school students?

Data from this qualitative study was obtained from eight face-to-face interviews that lasted from 60 to 90 minutes, not including subsequent informal interviews that took place. The findings of this research study were thought provoking and personally insightful. While many of the themes presented by participants confirmed much of the past and current research about successful at-risk students, the depth shared by the participants allowed for greater insight and understanding.

### **Discussion of Research Question 1**

*What were the factors that influenced the success of at-risk students who have been academically successful, have graduated from high school, and currently are in their first year of college?*

The results in this study correlated with Question 1 yielded two relevant themes: (1) social support—where all participants conveyed it was the support of someone in their lives (not necessarily a parent) that informed the success they achieved and, (2) being inspired by the lives of others—whether in a positive or negative view.

#### **“It Takes One”**

Past and current research aligns with the results of this study, as many argue that for most at-risk students, the people in their lives—those whom they see every day—have the greatest impact on who they become in the future. Research on at-risk students who possess resiliency has found that students are more likely to succeed in a school

environment where they can identify with at least one supportive adult who knows and cares for them (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001).

Cutshall (2001) suggests that when a supporter is involved in a child's life, the child is "46 percent less likely to start using drugs, 27 percent less likely to begin using alcohol, 33 percent less likely to commit acts of violence, and 52 percent less likely to skip school" (p. 1). Willis (2008) studied at-risk students in order to seek effective strategies for educators charged with the care of these youth. Her perceptions and approach to at-risk youth are rooted in positive, constructive techniques rather than the all-too-often destructive approach. Without effort, support, and collaboration by the "home, school, faith-based organizations, and/or community at large, including the criminal justice system" (p. 33), Willis purported that there are at-risk youth whose lives are destroyed when they could have been "saved through the use of a little 'TLC' and a lot of understanding" (p. 33).

Seven of eight study participants indicated they were raised in a single-parent home where the parent present worked or attended school. The participants conveyed that the support they received was from a grandparent, a family friend, a church member, a teacher or counselor in school, and/or an older sibling. Wentzel (1998) noted the importance of perceived environmental support in social relationships and academic motivation. His study found that supportive interpersonal relationships were significant predictors of academic and prosocial motivation. To achieve and have a sense of meaning and purpose in life, theorists posit that people must develop interpersonal relationships that enhance a social support network (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Frager & Fadiman,



2005; Maslow, 1987; Parks, 2000). The results from this study also indicated that the support received from these people in addition to their single parent was a vital component to many of the participants graduating and being accepted to college.

Individuals who survived difficult circumstances despite considerable hardships during their youth have identified teachers, members of the clergy and church, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, coaches, youth group leaders, school counselors, and others as sources of support, inspiration, and positive influence (Garmezy, 1985; Wolkow & Ferguson, 2001). Related research also shows one of the most widely reported predictors of resilience is the presence of a positive relationship with a caring adult, enabling youth who are exposed to high levels of stress to develop competence (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Many of participants in the study acknowledged that it was helping with their homework, attending dance recitals, the buying of groceries, talk sessions, and making them feel secure that pushed them to continue to move beyond many of the obstacles they faced in life. The stories presented in this research allude that many at-risk youth benefit from having social support in any form (i.e., encouragement, financial support, and affirmation from various members of their life circle). Social support is one factor that has been shown to facilitate resilience in at-risk youth along with playing a role in improving students' career aspirations and educational outcomes.

There is some evidence that students' perceptions of social support from different sources (e.g., family members, school staff) are related to students having higher career aspirations (Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003; Wall, Covell, &

MacIntyre, 1999). This evidence promotes the idea that social support may provide protection for at-risk children and promote short-term and long-term success. The results of this research endorse that people in at-risk students' lives influence their success and potentially guide them with hope—keeping them believing. With these relationships many were infused with inspirational speeches, a culture of high expectations, and at times, financial backing.

### **“Lives that Inspired Me”**

The research indicated that many of the participants found inspiration and a deeper drive to succeed from envisioning a better life for their families, particularly their single mothers, and observing the lifestyle of many high school dropouts in their community. Wolin and Wolin (1993) convey that one reason students at risk of failure become resilient is to overcome their painful memories of the past, instead of continuing that type of pattern.

Six of eight participants expressed a strong desire to one day provide a better life for their single moms. Observation of their single mom's day-to-day burdens of working two to three jobs while going to school ignited a fire and passion in them to succeed with a goal of providing a better life for her one day. Many shared the importance of finishing school to show their appreciation for the support and guidance given throughout their youth years.

The student participants expressed much empathy for the parent who cared, raised, and supported them, but in turn conveyed apathy for ones that they felt abandoned them. The study results showed that the students' drive was influenced by their passion to

succeed beyond that of the abandoned parent. Those abandoned felt it would one day be their responsibility to be the caretaker and ensure they provide the support they did not receive.

Many of the participants living in poverty observed the struggles of their family and connected with the disparities their primary parent faced. They also observed the struggles of those in their communities and neighborhoods and the success of other family members. The study professes that the success and failures of others can contribute to the psychological drive of those in observation. As stated in a previous chapter, Krohn (1999) asserted that the central tenet of the social learning theory is that regardless of positive and negative definitions, it is the learning process itself that influences performance outcomes.

The lives the participants observed were portrayed as role models and guiding lights of the dos and don'ts of life. Keating, Tomishina, Foster, and Alessandri (2002) identified role models as contributors to the success of at-risk high school students and contended that they serve as those with whom youth might identify in order to enhance their self-identity. Results from the Keating et al. study also conveyed that the possessions, wealth, and wholesome lifestyle of others in the participant's family circle sparked a desire to replicate that same life style, especially with many living below the poverty line themselves. The study revealed that having a snapshot of the "good life" when visiting successful family members and framing what was determined in the minds as the life not desired contributed to the resiliency of the at-risk participants in this research.

### **Discussion of Research Question 1a**

*What attributes did the students possess that enabled them to overcome the challenges they faced in life?*

This study, in alignment with other research, provided that the belief in one's self and the ability to be independent contributed to the success of the participants interviewed. Belief in one's self plays a major role in motivation and is a foundational aspect in the formation of self-concept, attributions of success and failure, goals, and self-schemas (Pajares, 1996). In analyzing the data, two themes emerged in correlation to the attributes that assisted participants in overcoming adverse lives. One was having self-efficacy and being a self-regulated youth.

#### **“I Believe in Me”**

As previously stated, Pajares (2006) argued that “Beliefs that young people hold about their capability to succeed in their endeavors are vital forces in the subsequent successes or failures they attain in these endeavors” (p. 362). The narratives indicated that confidence was a leading factor in why many of the participants were able to succeed despite the common challenges they faced. In a closer examination of the stories, the support for many of the students in this study did not come in the form of hope building, such as dialogues about how great they were and reading stories about the little engine that could, but their confidence was birthed through the small successes they achieved as they progressed in life.

While seeming vulnerable to the extenuating circumstances and the impoverished lifestyle many encountered, it was the self-pep talks they had with their inner conscience

and the fight within that enabled them to move beyond their daily barriers. This, along with their independence and ability to self-regulate, allowed for their future success. The components of self-regulation and self-efficacy are interrelated as the ability to regulate one's emotions, a sense of control, and a sense of efficacy are necessary components for competent self-regulation and coping strategies (Saarni, 1999).

### **“Being Independent”**

In this study several student participants articulated that their need to self-regulate their behavior due to their independence, whether from having no parents, to being the older sibling and having to raise their younger sibling, or being a teen parent, was a strong attribute they possessed. That independence matriculated over into the student's academic affairs where they did homework without being supervised, studied for tests without the assistance of others, and learned to advocate as needed. In a study conducted by Wehmyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, and Martin (2000), the authors explained,

As a function of their analysis of the environments in which they learn, live, or work, they will need to acquire self-advocacy, assertiveness, and leadership skills if they are to remove barriers that prohibit them from achieving self-selected goals. This model provides a means of getting students actively involved in the totality of their educational program and presumably, will promote a greater commitment to that program by the student. (p. 450)

The ability to handle affairs was a natural gift for some as they helped raised their siblings from early ages of childhood, became a teen parent, or took on the role of one of the absent parents in the household. For the female participants, they were the oldest sibling in the family and were groomed by their single parent to take care of their younger siblings by preparing food, walking them to school, and helping them with their

homework. Many of the participants believed the experiences of independency outside of school gave them the ability and determination in school.

### **Discussion of Research Question 1b**

*What influence did education/educational environment have on the academic success of at-risk high school students?*

It was evident in this study that the educational environment, along with the educators in those environments, played a major role in the perceptions of the student participants' success. All participants attended a small high school where they indicated the size of the school and classes had a positive impact on their success.

The school they attended had only 145 students, with most if not all of the class sizes being under 14. The results of the research indicated that due to the size of the school and the classes, participants were able to connect with the administration and staff in more coherent way. With a 14:1 student to teacher ratio, students were able to receive the appropriate attention needed to keep them focused and on task. Data presented from the study indicated that the school's small learning environment contributed to a family like atmosphere and eliminated any opportunity for students to be invisible. Research presented from Chapter V indicated that when at-risk students attend small learning environments, they have a greater chance of success. Wasley et al. (2000) advocated,

. . . small, intimate learning communities where students are well known and can be pushed and encouraged by adults who care for and about them; to reduce the isolation that too often seeds alienation and violence; to reduce the devastating discrepancies in the achievement gap that plague poorer children and, too often, children of color, and to encourage teachers to use their intelligence and their experiences to help students succeed. (p. 2)

From the small learning environments derived more intimate teacher-student relationships. Students in this study indicated they were able to build healthy relationships with teachers due to the small number of students in each class and in the school. Teachers knew students by name and were able to connect with parents on a regular basis when needed. Students indicated they knew the teachers cared and it was evident as they spent the quality time needed to ensure success.

The study presents that many of the students' perceptions of the correlation between their school environment and academic success was strongly positive. It was discussed that being in a larger school setting would have decreased the ability for teachers to relate to students, the face-to-face time students received, and the partnership between educators and parents. The study results are aligned with research which argues that the organization of small schools simulates that of elementary schools, which in turn affects student achievement positively, especially for disadvantaged students (Raywid, 1997, p. 37). Results from the study indicated that attending the traditional high school setting would have rendered a different result for many if not all of the participants. Data indicate that the traditional setting would have resulted in the students being outliers and just a statistic.

For the participants in this study it was not only the teachers of the school that had a positive influence on the success of the participants, but also the administrators, counselors, and the social workers who were all described as surrogate parents.

### **Discussion of Research Question 1c**

*What influence did parent(s)/guardians have on the academic success of at-risk high school students?*

Many of the participants were raised in a single-parent home where they had a good relationship with that one parent. According to Neighbors, Forehand, and McVicar (1993), resilient children have a good relationship with at least one parent. This was evident in the research for most of the participants. Six of eight participants were raised by a single mother, one participant was raised by her grandparents, and one was raised by a father and step-mom.

Much of the influence that was exhibited in this study by parents was the model of hard work and persistence in their own lives. Parental contribution has been found to play an important role in student achievement, including academic inspiration, a decrease in behavioral issues, and even educational transformation (Civil et al., 2003; Epstein, 2005; McGuinn & Kelly, 2012; Peressini, 1998). The narratives presented expressed how the participants observed their mothers, for most part, work one to two jobs while going to school. Results show it was hard for those parents to contribute after school in doing homework or studying for tests. However, they continued to encourage their children to do their best and visited the school when available to check the status of their children's academic progress. The support that provided for food, clothes, and other life necessities also provided for the limited academic support.

The perception of limited support from parents is aligned with the previous perceptions and beliefs that it was support of others, the independency students exhibited,



and the educational environment and community that were the primary factors that contributed to their success. In the absence of their parents, many discussed having an older sibling, a member at their church, an uncle or an aunt, or a childhood friend who motivated and supported them in various ways.

### **Research Implications and Suggestions**

The interviews conducted throughout this study yielded several key findings in regards to factors that contribute and impact the success of resilient at-risk students. Within every narrative, the participants mentioned the importance of a strong supportive relationship with someone—a family member, teacher, or another adult in their life. The participants also agreed it was the educational environment they attended that had a strong impact and informed the relationships they developed with educators with the school. Finally, those who participated believed it was their high level of self-efficacy and self-regulation that was also instrumental in them reaching their goal of graduating from high school.

Based on these findings, there are several implications for parents, educators, and other at-risk students seeking to accomplish their goals despite the consistent adversities they face in life. The following practical implications are suggested:

- Provide workshops and information sessions for parents with the regard to the importance of being involved in the learning process. All schools should develop and implement various school activities during various times to enhance the school to parent partnership.

- Develop at-risk parental support groups of to provide for collaborative opportunities with the goal of developing strategies and ways of supporting students.
- Establish community partnerships in order to cultivate relationships with all stakeholders. Partnerships can be provided to families and schools.
- Promote at-risk awareness and the influence parents and schools have on the success of individual motivation and success.
- Provide students with academic support in the form study groups, after school tutoring, and success workshops. This will allow students to succeed.
- Establish support groups for at-risk youth within the schools to enable times for collaboration and discussion.
- Create opportunities for peer mentoring and advisory groups. Promote positive peer relations through activities with the Guidance Department.
- Parents should identify and establish mentor(s) for their children in the community sector.
- Schools should develop an at-risk indicator program to help identify students at risk of failure.
- Schools should develop and implement support programs for students at risk of failure.
- Traditional schools with large populations should develop schools within schools or small-sized academies with the goal of providing a smaller teacher to student ratio.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The primary purpose of this research was to find ways of helping at-risk students be successful and graduate from high school. Therefore, based on this study's findings regarding the factors that influence the success of resilient at-risk students, the following recommendations should be taken into consideration for future research:

1. Future studies should include a more diverse group of students (i.e., race and cultural differences).
2. Future studies should include students from various educational environments, not just small, non-traditional schools.
3. Future studies should include the voices and narratives of the parents and educators of the at-risk students participating in the study.
4. Future studies should include a focus on whether the parents of the participants were at risk and the factors they concluded assisted with success and/or failure.

### **Suggestions for Parents from Research Participants**

Parents of current at-risk students could benefit from the following suggestions forwarded from the participants in this study (presented in their words):

- Be there for them, you know, try to give them you know, like a—some type of motivation, some type of—give them a push, you know, like don't just yell at them, you know, be like you could have this if you worked a little harder, you know, maybe give them an incentive, you know, for each A, you know, you get money or you know, better Christmas present, better birthday, something like that, you know
- I would tell the parent is talk about school, don't just act like they're not in school, ask them how school went, ask them what they learned in school. If

they can't answer those questions, the fact that you're asking, they might be ready to answer the next day. They'll be looking for how to answer those questions, and if I feel they're talking about school, then the kids will be more interested in it because I feel that's part of the reason kids get uninterested because it's not that big of a deal at home, so for the parents, they should show their interest in school, they show their interest and push it, not push it upon them but just like show them the way, like I was raised, if you tell them it's important, show them you're interested, and ask them about it, give them, maybe set some goals for them, set some goals, give incentives for these, for reaching these goals. Emphasize reading because if you can't read or if you're not good at reading, reading will affect every other subject because you have to read in every subject.

- Just take it slowly because you either—you're either dealing with a child that has very nonchalant and like I said, they only care about what they're gonna care about, or you're either dealing with a kid who really looks up to you and everybody else and just gonna follow the crowd and need even more assistance. It's either gonna be an independent child or a dependent child, so you should take it slow at first and get to really know your child before you make decisions, don't base it off your experience or somebody else's experience because everybody's gonna be different, and just never give up on 'em because even though my dad wasn't really there, there, I love my dad to death and even when I feel like I shouldn't because he's had, he hadn't did anything for me, it's just sad but I still love my dad, so.
- I mean just tell them that they—they're there for you, that you're there for them and that, I mean you'll do anything that you can to support them.

### **Suggestions for Educators from Research Participants**

Educators could potentially benefit from the following suggestions forwarded from the participants in this study:

- Show that you care, you know, most teachers that see kids they don't really, don't really care, they don't share any care in them, you know, they put a spotlight on all the kids that are trying to make it though which is complete opposite, you know, and for those, the cast like a [What do you mean by that, complete opposite?] Like they cast a shadow on all the people that don't really care about school. Right, they just, you know, send them off to be disciplined, you know, or just fuss at them about, you know, they don't really try to ask them what's—if anything's going on, you know, if they're having any

problems, do they need help, you know. [Right, right.] I got that a lot at the Academy, you know. [You got what a lot?] A lot of, you know, they asked me if I was okay on days that I wasn't, you know, acting right, you know, just—it wasn't always, you know, just go home, you know, and call your parents, that type thing, you know, they actually talked, they used communication, so [Yeah, yeah.] I feel like, I can't really speak on traditional schools because I didn't go to a traditional high school but they just, I—from what I'm seeing, you know, the teachers just don't, they don't care, you know, they just wanna get paid, you know, and continue on their life not trying to change others

- Keep the kids interested and motivated. Do what you can to not make it—because at certain levels, I feel like once you get out of elementary, a lot of the fun of school is taken out of it, it's about, middle school and up, it's not—it's still fun, but the kids view it as work so you gotta find a way to make coming to school everyday something to look forward to. I feel like that's the best way and if the kids are having fun, if the kids are enjoying what they're doing and learning, then they will succeed, they have a better chance to succeed if they like their leaders and that's—that's the type of stuff I like about my leaders, they kept me motivated, they kept me interested, they found ways to relate to us, and that's what endears leaders to kids is the relationship, they find a way to relate, that's how you can really build strong relationships with the kids and if you have that strong relationship with the kids you can leave them much better.
- Maybe to look at the situation from different aspects and you know, get an understanding of each aspects, take into consideration what if or maybe or probably, before you charge at the student because you never know how they'll react. You want to get full details and full research because it'll mean a lot more coming from a family, from a non-family member than it would from a family member, so you'll try to be your best. [Would you have wanted somebody like myself to visit or call or check up on you?] Yes! [or would that have been too much?] No, it wouldn't have been too much only if we had already created a relationship [a relationship] because everybody's different, but our purpose [Is that big, see that's something we need to do better, building relationships?] Yes. [How do you go about doing that with an at-risk kid, who comes to school who don't want to get bothered, you know, I don't need friends?] Yeah, I feel like eventually you should still try, don't push it away, you should still try and they'll notice like wow, he really cares.
- I mean just look at them like they were your children and what would you do, especially like if you was like one of them kids, like if you grew up as in a case, like how do they feel and how did you feel and what would you want somebody else to do for you, you know?

### **Suggestions to Other At-risk Students from Participants**

Current at-risk students could benefit from the following suggestions of participants in this study:

- I would suggest them to talk to somebody, but not just anybody, you know, like somebody that—it could be their friend, their best friend, you know, somebody that listens to their problems all the time. I wouldn't say, I don't really believe in all that going to see a shrink or a guidance counselor because they just tell you what you want to hear but it's not really, it's not real, I feel like it's not real sometimes, so I'd say talk to somebody that actually listens to your problems. It could be your mom, your dad, your friend, a teacher, you know, really just learn how to open up to somebody because most depression comes from holding it in.
- Well, one would be just don't give up because it can be bad, but it can always be worse, and if you get too down on yourself that will ruin your motivation, and if you're already not motivated you gotta find something to motivate you because if you—if you're not motivated you're probably depressed or your probably not happy, and if you want to stay that way the rest of your life then keep doing what you're doing. But if you want to improve, you want to be able to do something with your life you gotta find a way to take your mind off of that, put your mind somewhere else and get goals. Goals are the way you get out of where you are and goals help you improve in many different ways, improve in maturity, improve in intellect, if you set goals and you try to reach them whether it's do better in school or be better around the house, just setting goals in itself sets the path for improvement and so you can get better if you have goals. And I would also say just know school is important and it's not uncool to be smart, it's not uncool to do your work, because that happens in school, I'm sure it still happens now where it's, the cool kids who aren't too interested in their studies and there's some people that would clown the guys that are really interested in their studies. The people that are interested in their studies succeed, I'm almost ninety-nine percent positive of that. You can't succeed if you're not interested in it, so find your interest. Find your interest.
- I would say, it's gonna get worse before it can get better and you just gotta be strong enough to get through the worst because you're not gonna, it's not gonna go from good to good, it's gonna go from bad to worse to alright then better and you just gotta like, all—you gotta be focused and really want it because if you don't want it not matter what people tell you, it's always gonna be something that you want to do and if you don't want to do it, nobody's

can—nobody can make anybody do anything. Others' opinion shouldn't really have a great effect because like I said I didn't, my family, my—nobody, if I wouldn't have come to college I wouldn't a got punished because nobody in my family ever been to college so it was more so like I came here because I wanted to and because you hear all the time like, oh, go to college when you're a child but nobody really cares as much as you're gonna care, so it's all about what you want to do.

- I mean just think about how you want your future to be and go for it and do what you think will benefit you in the long run. [And what happens when they start feeling like they can't make it? What are some suggestions that you have for them?] Just have faith that you will. [*Would you suggest finding somebody to talk to?*] Uh-huh.

### **Participant Updates—*Still At Risk***

#### **Tiffany:**

Starting her second year in college where she is doing well. She has obtained a job and continues to seek to graduate and become a school social worker in the future.

#### **Quentin:**

Starting his second year at the community college he attended last year. He is currently working a job where he hopes to one day graduate and work in the educational field.

#### **Sharon:**

College is on hold for her as she seeks to find funding for school. No plan on how she will pay for her second year of school.

#### **Jennifer:**

Due to first semester low grades, she lost her school funding. She is currently working at a local fast food restaurant and no plans have been developed for paying for school in the fall semester.

**Bill:**

Bill is seeking to transfer schools with the goal of moving closer to home. No update on whether the transfer was successful.

**Chase:**

Starting his second year of college and is currently working as a salesman.

**Katie:**

Dropped out of college and is currently working two jobs.

**Angel:**

Angel transferred from a local university to a community college as she is seeking to find a job to help support her daughter.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this qualitative study has given voice to youth who, despite the adversities presented to them in life, were able to graduate from high school and attend college. This research offers unique information regarding the factors that have influenced and impacted the success of resilient at-risk students. It supports earlier and current research in regards to how social support, the understanding of social learning theory, students who have level of self-efficacy and self-regulation, and those embedded in small learning environments have a direct to indirect impact on student achievement. Moreover, the findings suggest that students with limited to no parental support can also experience success, with the right determinants. However, the research also advocates that all stakeholders must remain cognizant that graduating from high school is not the end. Some remain at risk.



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