AT-RISK HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES AND THEIR POST-GRADUATION

EXPERIENCES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

_____

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership

Sam Houston State University

_____

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

_____

by

Candace M. Pohl

May, 2022

AT-RISK HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES AND THEIR POST-GRADUATION

EXPERIENCES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Candace M. Pohl

_____

APPROVED:

Dr. Peggy Holzweiss
Dissertation Director

Dr. Julie P. Combs
Committee Member

Dr. Susan K. Borg
Committee Member

Dr. Stacey L. Edmonson,
Dean, College of Education

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. To my children, Ryan and Lindsey, I hope I have provided a good example of reaching for your dreams and living your passion. I know being the children of educators is not always easy and many times you shared your life with our other "kids". I hope you now understand why your dad and I chose this path. I want you both to know, each step of my journey has always been with the two of you in mind.

To my husband, Aaron. I do not believe thank you is enough. Though there were times I doubted myself, you never did. Walking step by step with me, always my cheerleader, knowing when to push a little harder and knowing when to give me my space, we've made it. I won't say I couldn't have done this without you, but I will say it would not have gone as smoothly. Thank you for your support, encouragement, and belief that I would get here.

Dad, I did it. Remember when you thought I would never graduate college? Well, how's this? You have always been the steady hand on my shoulder, guiding me with your patience and wisdom. I hope I have honored the sacrifices you made and the love you have for your daughters.

Finally, to the 2019, 2020, and 2021 Graduates of the Academy, without you this writing is not even possible. Thank you for letting me be your voice. You always said I changed your lives. Loves, you changed mine.

ABSTRACT

Pohl, Candace M., *At-risk high school graduates and their post-graduation experiences: A phenomenological study*. Doctor of Education (Educational Leadership), May, 2022, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences and perspectives of students who were identified as at-risk during high school and have transitioned into emergent adulthood. Sources of data included responses from eight participants, selected via purposeful sampling, through a semi-structured interview. This in-depth study revealed challenges and barriers the participants experienced during high school and post-graduation. Three major themes emerged from the study: attitude, influential relationships, and environment. All participants considered dropping out of high school due to similar factors such as negative peer influences, family challenges, mental health, substance abuse, and an overall poor school environment. For all participants, transferring to the at-risk alternative high school made a positive difference and allowed them to graduate high school. Findings from this study provide recommendations for supporting students who are at-risk during high school and as they transition into emergent adulthood. Opportunities for future research include expanding the demographics of the participants as well as examining the significance of peer relationships at an alternative high school.

KEY WORDS: At-risk; Emergent adulthood; Texas; Alternative education

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER I

Introduction

For most youth, the high school years and the ultimate achievement of high school graduation are a celebratory time, a time to realize potential, a time to focus on the transition into adulthood. For some youth however, this time is marred with risk factors such as homelessness, pregnancy, failing academic achievement, changing family dynamics, or discipline problems that overshadow the excitement of their emergence into adulthood. The reality in the United States is that some high school students who find themselves burdened with one or more of these at-risk factors too often never reach that culminating moment of receiving a high school diploma and thus become high school dropouts (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Doll et al., 2013; Rumberger, 2011).

Significant research exists regarding the economic and societal consequences associated with dropping out of high school (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Lee-St. John, et al., 2018; Levin, et al., 2007; Suh, et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011, 2020). For example, high school dropouts have increased problems finding and keeping jobs which in turn leads to earning less wages than their graduated peers (Lee-St. John, et al., 2018; Levin, et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2020). As a result of earning less wages, high school dropouts pay less in taxes, costing taxpayers millions of dollars through increased government assistance such as housing, food, and healthcare (Levin, et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011, 2020). High school dropouts are more likely to engage in criminal activity than their graduated peers and each dropout costs an average of $27,000 in crime-related expenses (Levin, et al., 2007). If the number of national dropouts were decreased by half, their

average collective earnings could be as much as $7.6 billion allowing for states to increase their tax revenues over $700 million (Alliance For Excellent Education, 2011).

In Texas during the 2018-2019 school year, half of all public school students were identified as at-risk of dropping out of high school. In that same year, students who were at-risk scored lower on all tests at all grade levels on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) compared to their non-at-risk peers (Texas Education Agency, 2020b). In the 2019 graduating class, almost 43%, or 164,000 Texas high school seniors were identified as at-risk of dropping out of high school. Of this percentage, 85% graduated on time (Texas Education Agency, 2020c).

The 85% of at-risk graduates who persevered through graduation represent a population of resilient high school students who have overcome barriers and challenges to successfully reach their graduation milestone. This group of high school graduates, now emerging adults, oftentimes transition into adulthood continuing to carry the burdens of their school years. Of interest to the reader, students of color and economically disadvantaged students are identified at-risk at a higher percentage than their peers; yet, racial classification nor students with an economically disadvantaged classification are considered to be at-risk identifiers in Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2020b).

Originating in the 1980's primarily due to the report, "A Nation at Risk," school districts were tasked with developing systems that identified students in jeopardy of not graduating from high school (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). These identification systems were designed to support school personnel in providing interventions to potential high school dropouts who were then classified as at-risk of dropping out of high school. Currently in the State of Texas, 14 criteria exist to determine

whether students are at-risk for dropping out of high school ranging from low academic achievement and grade level retention to pregnancy and discipline. The complete list of criteria can be found in Appendix A (Texas Education Code, 1999/2021).

During a student's school years, a single at-risk indicator will qualify a student as at-risk. Of the 14 at-risk factors identified by the state, factors such as grade retention, pregnancy, homelessness, English language learners, and parents in the criminal justice system will classify a student as at-risk from initial identification through high school graduation. However, other at-risk factors may not remain with students through graduation. For example, students who earn unsatisfactory scores on state assessments and are deemed at-risk based on this indicator are removed from this at-risk category if they earn a higher score on subsequent exams. In another example, students who have received a discipline alternative education placement and are identified as at-risk based on this factor are removed from the at-risk classification after one school year. It is the school district's responsibility to identify students who should be classified as at-risk and maintain accurate student records. Although most at-risk factors can be identified by school district personnel, certain at-risk factors such as a student who is identified as an English language learner or students or family members who are on probation through the criminal justice system, are often only identified through parent notification to the school district.

At-risk identification is collected and entered through the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) to track public education statistics. At-risk classification is used by school personnel to identify and support students who are at-risk of dropping out of high school. Because increased attention has been focused on the

dropout crisis, the dropout rate has decreased since 1972 (McFarland et al., 2019). The development of dropout recovery programs and alternative education campuses have led to recovery opportunities for students who are at-risk (Rumberger, 2011). In addition, an increased understanding of the personal and institutional attributes that contribute to student persistence has provided educators with a starting place to maximize their support for these students.

Many researchers have maintained that a relationship generally exists among at-risk factors and a student may be affected by multiple at-risk factors (Clemens, et al., 2019; Rumberger, 2011). Rumberger (2011) maintained that students who are at-risk of dropping out of school generally have multiple contributing factors including individual and institutional predictors making the identification of a single at-risk factor difficult due to the complex and intertwined influences on students' lives. According to Rumberger (2011), individual predictors such as a student's educational performance, attitudes, behavior, and background as well as institutional predictors such as influences from families, communities, and schools are factors that may affect a student's decision to drop out of high school. It is important to understand all these factors to determine the best support for high school students who were identified at-risk and are transitioning into the next phase of adulthood. Providing services to students who are at-risk is more difficult than choosing an at-risk factor from a list and should encompass other factors such as ecological characteristics, psychological factors, persistence, and precipitating events (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).

Even with diploma in hand, the immediate future for this population of at-risk high school graduates may be a continued struggle. Additional information is needed to

understand how best to support this population of at-risk high school graduates. There is a need for investing funds for services and support systems to assist students who are at-risk; however, due to a lack of understanding as to the specific reasons students may be at-risk, it is difficult to know where to invest these funds (Bloom, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

Students who do not graduate high school may or may not have been previously identified as at-risk for dropping out of high school due to inefficient identification of risk factors (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Numerous statistics have been generated on the negative economic effects, societal problems, and individual effects of high school dropouts and numerous researchers have analyzed the factors that influence a student's decision to persevere through graduation (Bowers, et al., 2013; Dumont & Provost, 1999; Eckstein & Wolpin, 1999; Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Knesting, 2008; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Lessard et al., 2009; Rumberger, 1987, 2011). In addition, several researchers have documented a high school graduate's persistence and resilience (Knesting, 2008; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Lessard, et al., 2009; Martin & Marsh, 2006). Although research exists regarding the transition from high school graduate to adulthood for specific at-risk factors such as homelessness, foster care, and teenage pregnancy, few qualitative studies are available that reflect this transition from the perspective of the graduate.

For many of these graduates, the circumstances that lead to them being identified as at-risk do not disappear after receiving a high school diploma. Behavior problems, low academic achievement, and troublesome family dynamics can still affect these young graduates as they transition into adulthood (Cobb-Clark & Zhu, 2017; Maynard et al.,

2015; Osgood, et al., 2010; Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; Rumberger, 2011). As leaders continue working to eliminate any high school dropouts, the work cannot end there. Understanding the unique experiences of these emerging adults is an important step in supporting their transition from an oftentimes challenging graduation journey to fulfilling their career and educational goals. More information and research are needed to understand the individual and environmental factors and challenges and support systems that may affect graduates leading up to their graduation, as well as experiences post-graduation, to assist school leaders, government agencies, and community organizations in providing relevant support through their shift from high school graduate to emerging adult.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological research study will be to explore the experiences of graduates who were identified as at-risk during high school and are now transitioning into adulthood. As the researcher, I will also explore their perceptions of the various challenges and support systems that influenced their experiences. An in-depth investigation of the experiences and perceptions of selected graduates may reveal barriers to a positive transition from high school to early adulthood. Reflecting upon these experiences and perceptions may offer insight into needed supports, programs, and connections that could be offered to decrease the barriers of transitioning.

Research Questions

To gain insight into both the experiences of students who were identified as at-risk during high school and are now transitioning into adulthood as well as their perceptions of the various challenges and support systems that influenced these

experiences, a qualitative study is being proposed. This study will be guided by the following research questions: (a) How do graduates interpret their post-graduation experiences?; (b) What are the perceived challenges among graduates during their post-graduation experiences?; and (c) What are the perceived support systems among graduates that have influenced their post-graduation experiences?

Significance of the Study

High school graduates who were at-risk may continue to experience similar challenges post-graduation. A need exists for more information about these challenges as literature about this topic is limited. Lessard et al. (2009) stated that researchers have addressed issues for both youth who drop out of high school and youth who graduate; nevertheless, published research studies related to students who were at-risk and who graduate from high school are limited.

The findings from this study will help school leaders, community organizations, and policy makers better understand how at-risk factors influence students leading up to graduation and connect to challenges as they transition into emerging adulthood. School leaders will be able to use these experiences to create a more thorough and complete system for identifying at-risk factors, evaluate current in-school preparation practices, and develop robust professional development for the intricate details of the individual at-risk factors. For school counselors and other personnel involved in supporting students who are at-risk as they near graduation, increasing the collaboration and communication with community organizations may decrease the challenges these young graduates may face. Community organizations may use the findings from this study to strengthen their resource offerings and allow for easier accessibility. In addition, policy makers may

choose to increase funding for additional resources designed specifically to meet the needs of emerging adults who are affected by at-risk factors.

Connecting the needs and addressing resource gaps for emerging adults influenced by at-risk factors has the potential to affect the larger society. Improving resources and the accessibility available to emerging at-risk adults may increase access to higher education and improved employability opportunities which in turn can increase taxable income and decrease government assistance. This study will also add to the limited literature regarding the challenges of emerging adults, especially emerging adults with at-risk factors who can be identified and supported as they near high school graduation.

Conceptual Framework

Rumberger (1987, 2011) developed a conceptual framework based on a combination of previous theoretical and empirical research studies. In constructing his framework, Rumberger determined that the choice to drop out of high school or persevere through graduation are distinct aspects of student performance. In identifying influential characteristics, he created two domains: individual factors and institutional factors. Rumberger asserted that although the framework may appear linear, a reciprocal relationship generally exists as one factor may influence another factor or factors over time.

In Rumberger's conceptual framework, the individual domain includes the following four factors: (a) educational performance, (b) student behavior, (c) student attitude, and (d) student background. Within the educational performance factor, Rumberger (2011) identified three dimensions: (a) academic achievement – student

grades and test scores; (b) educational persistence – school mobility and dropping out; and (c) educational attainment – earning credits and grade level promotion. Expanding on the student behavior factors that may affect educational performance, Rumberger (2011) cited student engagement, deviant behavior, peer network, and employment. Student attitude is a general category including a realm of factors such as a student's goals and values, beliefs and expectations. Demographic characteristics, past experiences, prior school performance, and a student's health are factors of the student background domain.

Rumberger (2011) suggested three institutional factors as influential in a student's educational performance: (a) the student's family, (b) the school they attend, and (c) their community. Within the student's family, Rumberger (2011) stated that the family structure, such as single-parent or two-parent families, stepparent families, and the number of family members in the home can have an effect on educational performance as can the financial and human resources within a family. Researchers have generally used socioeconomic status, a combination of the parent's education, occupation, and income, to determine a measure of family resources, and numerous researchers have cited students with low family socioeconomic status are at a higher risk for dropping out (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Rumberger, 2011). The student body demographics, allotted resources, and school structure can all influence educational performance as well. (Rumberger, 2011). Lastly, Rumberger (2011) cited three categories of community characteristics that affect educational performance: (a) institutional resources such as childcare, employment opportunities, and healthcare; (b) social connections within the neighborhood; and (c) social capital, or the shared values of the community regarding the supervision of youth.

According to Arnett (2000), emerging adulthood is a developmental period of time between the ages of 18-25 in which young adults change and explore the possibilities of their future. Considering this developmental phase, the individual and institutional at-risk factors in Rumberger's framework continue to apply during this transition time after high school graduation. Emerging adults may be continuing their education and looking for employment. Changing peer relationships may be taking place as emerging adults find new interests. Emerging adults with past criminal behaviors may continue to suffer consequences. As emerging adults are continuing to form their identities, their beliefs, values, and expectations may have changed from their time in early adolescence (Arnett, 2000). During this phase, family and community relationships may change as emerging adults are finding their own way during this transition.

Although Rumberger's (1987, 2011) framework is designed to identify and categorize factors influencing a student's decision to drop out of high school or persevere through graduation, the factors described in his framework continue to affect lives post-graduation through emerging adulthood and beyond. In this study, Rumberger's (1987, 2011) framework will guide the connection of factors between student challenges prior to graduation to their challenges post-graduation as they transition into adult roles. Individual factors affecting students prior to high school graduation such as educational performance, student behavior, and student attitude, as well as institutional factors such as a student's family, school, and community will be compared to the student's life post-graduation to determine how these factors may relate to their decisions after graduation.

To enhance the guidance provided by Rumberger's framework, Arnett's (2000) emerging adult theory acknowledges the changes that take place in a young adult's life as

they transition from adolescence into emerging adulthood. In regards to this study, Arnett's theory provides a foundation to apply the influence each of these factors may have on the challenges and choices emerging adults may face during this time of transition.

Definition of Terms

To be consistent throughout this research study, the following terms will be defined.

Annual Dropout Rate

"The annual dropout rate is the measurement of the percentage of students who drop out of school during one school year" (Texas Education Agency, 2020c).

At-Risk

The Texas Education Agency provides 14 criteria to identify students as at-risk. The criteria are located in Appendix A.

Dropout

A dropout is a student who is enrolled in public school in Grades 7-12, does not return to public school the following fall, is not expelled, and does not: graduate, receive a high school equivalency certificate, continue school outside the public school system, begin college, or die (Texas Education Agency, 2020c).

Economically Disadvantaged

A student "who is eligible for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Program" is considered to be economically disadvantaged (Texas Education Agency, 2020c).

English Learner

A student is classified as an English Learner (EL) when: (a) a language other than English is used as the primary language in the home, and (b) the student's English language proficiency is determined to be limited by a language proficiency assessment committee or as indicated by a test of English proficiency (Texas Education Agency, 2020c).

Foster Care

A student who is "under the conservatorship of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services" is identified as a foster care student (Texas Education Agency, 2020c).

Graduate

A student is classified "as a graduate in the year in which he or she is reported in the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) as a graduate from the Texas public school system" (Texas Education Agency, 2020c).

Homeless

A student who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence as defined by title 42 United States Code (U.S.C.) Section 11434(a) (Texas Education Agency, 2020c) is categorized as homeless. The definition of *homeless* includes: (a) children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; (b) are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; (c) children and youths who have a

primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed

for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human

beings; (d) children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public

spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or

similar settings; and (e) migratory children (as such term is defined in

U.S.C. Section 6399 of Title 20) who qualify as homeless because the

children are living in circumstances described previously (Texas

Education Agency, 2020c).

Delimitations

This research study will be delimited to a single alternative high school in

southeast Texas. Participants in this study will meet the following criteria: (a) 2020 or

2021 on-time graduates of this high school; (b) identified as at-risk; and (c) are at least 18

years old. The individual interview protocols will contain questions specific to this

alternative high school and graduates with no participation from other high schools or

high school graduates.

Limitations

One possible limitation of this research study is researcher bias (Creswell & Poth,

2018; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). I acknowledge that I have inherent bias based on

my role as a former principal of the alternative high school in this study. To minimize the

effects of my potential bias, I will take the following steps: (a) acknowledge and

document my assumptions relevant to the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019); (b) bracket

my personal opinions and expectations in a journal according to Moustakas (1994); (c)

recruit two critical debriefers (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to minimize researcher bias during

the data analysis stage; and (d) use member checking as suggested by Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) to improve data accuracy and credibility.

Assumptions

Throughout this research, several assumptions will be made. First, it is assumed that the participants will be forthcoming and honest in their answers during the interview process. Second, I assume that I, as the researcher, will accurately collect and interpret data relevant to answering the research questions. Finally, I assume the themes that will emerge from the research will accurately reflect the experiences of the participants.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation proposal consists of three chapters. Chapter I includes the background of the study, statement of the problem, research questions, conceptual framework, definition of terms, delimitations, limitations, and assumptions of the study. Chapter II contains a review of the relevant literature to the study including a historical perspective at the national and state level on the identification of students at-risk, an identification and description of various at-risk factors, impacts of dropping out of high school, factors that influence a student's perseverance, emerging adulthood, and possible barriers and challenges students who were at-risk may experience. Chapter III will reflect a focus on the research design and method used in this study including the selection of participants, context of the study, data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

The purpose of this literature review will be to (a) provide a historical perspective at the national level on the identification of students at-risk; (b) define the term "at-risk"; (c) provide the history of at-risk in Texas; (d) identify and describe various at-risk factors; (e) describe the economical, societal, and individual impacts of dropping out of high school; (f) consider institutional and individual factors that influence a student's choice to persevere through high school graduation; (g) discuss emerging adulthood; and (h) identify possible barriers and challenges students who were at-risk may experience during their initial post-graduation transition.

In preparation for the literature review, journal articles and books served as the primary sources of information. The primary sources for articles in this study included the Sam Houston State University Online Newton Gresham Library's Engine Orange, the EbscoHost database, JSTOR, ProQuest, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar Search. Criteria for this research included: *at-risk, nontraditional students, dropouts, dropout programs, and alternative school.* Combinations of the listed words were used to highlight particular points.

National Historical Perspective of At-Risk

The term "at-risk" is closely connected to dropout prevention and is a relatively recent term at both the national and the state level. Beginning in the late 1980s, national and state legislation outlined the requirements to identify and assist students who are at-risk. During the past 30 years, at-risk criteria has been revised and modified with multiple

definitions. This section will review the evolution of the term nationally as well as in the state of Texas.

According to Dorn (1993), until the late 1950s, the high school dropout problem was not a large concern. Two decades later, in the report, "A Nation at Risk," the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) highlighted several challenges facing public education and introduced the term "at-risk" to identify students in jeopardy of academic failure. This report prompted a series of federal actions regarding at-risk youth.

In 1989, President George H.W. Bush, together with the nation's governors, adopted *America 2000*, a four-part national strategy: (a) better and more accountable schools; (b) a new generation of American schools; (c) yesterday's students are tomorrow's workforce; and (d) communities where learning can happen (U.S. Department of Education, 1991a). In order to accomplish this national strategy, President Bush and the governors established six goals to improve schools: (a) all children will start school ready to learn; (b) the high school graduation rate will increase to 90%; (c) students will demonstrate competency in challenging foundation subjects and schools will ensure that students are developing their minds for citizenship, higher education, and employment; (d) the United States will be first in the world in science and math achievement; (e) all adults will be literate and have the knowledge and skills to compete in a global workforce; and (f) schools will be drug and violence free with minimum discipline problems (Stedman, 1991; U.S. Department of Education, 1991a; U.S. Department of Education, 1991b).

America 2000 honored state and district control yet wanted a national testing program. Although originally met with enthusiasm, ultimately Democrats were skeptical of a national testing strategy and Republicans were skeptical of expanding the federal role in education (Schwartz & Robinson, 2000); therefore, due to a filibuster led by Republican senators, this strategy was never signed into law. *America 2000* was the first large-scale reform of its kind for education standards and accountability.

As a cochair for *America 2000*, President Bill Clinton continued the education reform effort and signed the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* in March 1994. Unlike the *America 2000* strategy, this Act allowed states to set standards and accountability, reserving the national standards as examples for the states (Heise, 1994; Schwartz & Robinson, 2000). As long as states participated in the reform effort, national funding could be used for a variety of educational purposes with very little restrictions (Schwartz & Robinson, 2000). Although *Goals 2000* did not specifically outline achievement requirements for special populations of students, two goals were added from the original six regarding parental involvement and teacher education. Determining the success of this Act proved difficult due to differences across state standards, accountability measures, and use of national funding (Schwartz & Robinson, 2000). The *Goals 2000 Act* not only provided a framework for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), it also pushed standards-based reform to the forefront of American education.

In 2004, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which incorporated principles from the *America 2000* national strategy and, for the first time, attempted to promote accountability for both education processes as well as

education outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). NCLB increased funding for states and districts that demonstrated high student achievement, thereby removing the funding flexibility of *Goals 2000*. Under this law, states implemented annual yearly progress (AYP), a mandatory accountability system measuring students annually in grades three through eight on rigorous academic standards, and disaggregated results by student populations. Other NCLB requirements included family school choice, the Reading First initiative, drug and violence prevention programs, a comprehensive English Language Learner (ELL) program, and the requirement for districts to recruit and retain highly-qualified teachers. Instead of creating a single national system of education expectations and accountability, the enactment of NCLB created 50 different systems and, as a result of the high achievement requirements to access federal funding, states inadvertently decreased accountability standards (Manna, 2010).

Because the NCLB Act proved challenging for schools and educators to implement, President Barack Obama signed an updated version of the NCLB Act called the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Unlike the NCLB Act, ESSA returned funding flexibility to the states and school districts, removing federal funding requirements and the NCLB requirement for AYP. ESSA continued protections for disadvantaged students and annual testing measures, expanded pre-school opportunities, and required accountability and change for under-performing schools. And, for the first time, ESSA required college and career readiness for all students. ESSA allowed the states to create their own accountability ratings, provide innovative assessments, and determine how to evaluate teachers. Under ESSA,

states had to engage with multiple stakeholders before implementing any state-level decision (National Association of Secondary School Principals, n.d.)

Despite the increased legislative attention over the past four decades, a dropout problem continues in the United States. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019a, 2019b), over 3.3 million high school students graduated in 2018, yet 2.1 million students did not graduate and were identified as dropouts. According to Balfanz and Legters (2004), solving the dropout problem is a complex and confusing process.

Defining "At-Risk"

In general, the term "at-risk" describes a student who has a higher possibility of dropping out of school (Rumberger, 2011; Williams & Sheehan, 2015). Despite significant research, determining conclusive at-risk factors remains challenging (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). At-risk criteria varies, resulting in inconsistencies and inaccurate identification of at-risk youth (Bowers et al., 2013). In attempting to identify specific at-risk factors, researchers have studied academics, attendance, attitudes, discipline, socioeconomic status, demographics, personality, motivation, family supports, and community influences (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Moshidi & Jusoh, 2020; Rumberger, 2011; Suh, et al., 2007). Researchers identify poor academic achievement as the highest predictor of dropping out of high school; however, poor academic achievement can be the result of multiple at-risk factors thereby demonstrating the complexity of the issue (Clemens, et al., 2019; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Rumberger, 2011; Suh, et al., 2007).

The complexity can lead to challenges in assisting students who are at-risk because factors may affect students in different ways (Suh, et al., 2007). For example, students who fail multiple courses may not drop out of school, but add high absenteeism

or a poor outlook on their future and the possibility increases (Suh, et al., 2007).

Programs supporting students who are falling behind academically must be specific and

targeted; otherwise, inaccurate identification focuses time, money, and resources away

from students who need it the most and may inadvertently affect students who are not at-

risk for dropping out of high school (Aguiar et al., 2015; Bowers, et al., 2013; Gleason &

Dynarski, 2002).

Texas Historical Perspective of At-Risk

Nationally, Title I, Part D of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of

1965 (ESEA). defines "at-risk" as

> a school aged individual who is at-risk of academic failure, dependency
>
> adjudication, or delinquency adjudication, has a drug or alcohol problem, is
>
> pregnant or is a parent, has come into contact with the juvenile justice
>
> system or child welfare system in the past, is at least 1 year behind the
>
> expected grade level for the age of the individual, is an English learner, is a
>
> gang member, has dropped out of school in the past, or has a high
>
> absenteeism rate at school.

In Texas, "dropout" was first defined during the 70th legislative session in 1987

and the first reports of dropouts occurred during the 1987-1988 school year (Texas

Education Agency, 2000, 2020c). In the same year, House Bill 1010 defined the term "at-

risk" and included students in Grades 7 through 12 under the age of 21 in at-risk criteria.

As a result of House Bill 1010, the State Board of Education (SBOE) amended the Texas

Administrative Code (TAC) requiring school districts to establish and outline policies

related to academic options for at-risk high school students (Texas Education Agency, 2000, 2020c).

House Bill 1010 also included optional at-risk factors (environmental, familial, economic, social, and psychosocial), required school districts to have one or more at-risk coordinators, and provide supplemental services to support students classified as at-risk. The original at-risk identification criteria in House Bill 1010, while similar to the current day at-risk criteria found in Appendix A, also included whether a student (a) abuses drugs or alcohol, (b) receives compensatory or remedial instruction, (c) is a slow learner, (d) enrolls late in the school year, (e) stops attending school before the end of the school year, (f) is an underachiever, (g) is unmotivated, or (h) exhibits other characteristics. These criteria were subsequently removed in later legislative sessions, and although no specific reasons for the change in characteristics could be found, other decisions regarding at-risk populations occurred due to funding and accountability requirements (Frazier, 1991; Manna, 2010; Reyes, 2006; Texas Education Agency, n.d.).

In order to fund the supplemental services, state compensatory education monies are allocated to the states based on the percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch and the number of pregnant students in the district. Under Texas policy, compensatory education funds are established for educationally disadvantaged students defined as students who qualify for the free and reduced lunch program; however, qualification for the supplemental services is based on low academic achievement (Reyes, 2006).

Of note, Texas does not formally classify drug or alcohol problems, gang members, or high absenteeism as at-risk criteria; however, school boards may adopt local

at-risk criteria with certain restrictions. For example, the number of students receiving services under local criteria cannot exceed 10% of the number of students who meet state criteria, and the criteria must be specified in the district improvement plan (Reyes, 2006; Texas Education Agency, 2021). Students who are identified through local at-risk criteria are not reported to PEIMS and therefore are not included in state reporting requirements (Texas Education Agency, 2021).

During the 71st legislative session in 1989, Texas legislators expanded the at-risk definition in Senate Bill 1668 to include students in pre-kindergarten through sixth grade. Criteria set forth in this definition included similar statements as the 1987 bill, except attention deficit disorder was added. Under this bill, legislators also allowed districts to enroll students who were at-risk into alternative education programs. In accordance with this legislative session, the SBOE required school districts to create a dropout reduction plan if more than 5% of their student population was identified at-risk (Texas Education Agency, 2000, 2020c).

The re-adoption of the Texas Education Code (TEC) during the 1995 legislative session removed the SBOE's authority to declare rules regarding classification of at-risk students (Texas Education Agency, 2000). As a result, school districts could only use the 13 statutory at-risk criteria found in the TEC for reporting purposes. Although the TEC allowed school districts to adopt local at-risk criteria, locally identified students were not reported in PEIMS (Texas Education Agency, 2021). In 2019, Senate Bill 1746 amended the at-risk criteria adding students who had been incarcerated or whose parents had been incarcerated.

Through their Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE), Austin Independent School District conducted a four-year study of students during school years 1987 through 1991 to determine the accuracy of the state's mandated at-risk criteria (Frazer, 1991). This study contributed to the national dropout and at-risk youth discussion, concluding that using the state criteria resulted in inaccurate identification of students who were at-risk and determined a need to refine the at-risk criteria (Frazer, 1991).

The two strongest predictors for determining if a student will be at-risk are racial minorities, specifically, African American and Hispanic students, and economically disadvantaged status; however, Texas does not recognize these two criteria in their at-risk criteria (DiPaoli, et al., 2015; Hammond, et al., 2007; Suh, et al., 2007; Wax, 2017; Zaff, et al., 2017). State compensatory education monies, considered race-neutral, fund at-risk programs and the monies allow for students who are economically disadvantaged to participate in at-risk programs regardless of at-risk status.

At-Risk Factors

Texas allows 14 criteria for identifying and reporting students as at-risk. In the sections below, these criteria are identified and described. Within each individual criteria are multiple factors and influencers that increase the difficulty of determining a single cause that, if solved, would conclusively decrease the chances for a student to drop out of high school. To add to the complexity of the at-risk criteria, a combination of at-risk criteria generally exist for a student, compounding the problems associated with supporting the needs of these students (Clemens, et al., 2019; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). The at-risk criteria are discussed in the sections below: (a) homelessness; (b) pregnancy; (c) foster care; (d) discipline (includes school discipline, exclusionary

assignments, probation, and incarceration); (e) parental incarceration; (f) English Language Learners; and (g) academic achievement (includes course and assessment failure and grade-level retention). Although considered an at-risk criteria, students previously labeled as dropouts is not a criteria discussed in the section below as dropouts are discussed in detail throughout this study.

Homelessness

Nationally, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001 requires, among other items, access to appropriate public education for homeless youth. However, multiple barriers such as access to school records, custody disputes, and extreme poverty exist for students who are experiencing homelessness (Hymen, et al., 2011). Based on data from the Texas Education Agency, (2020a), only 79.8% of homeless high school seniors graduated high school in 2019. Based on a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2021) report, children under the age of 18 represented 60% of people experiencing homelessness in 2020. Researchers maintain that the statistics on students experiencing homelessness may be low because many youth may be hesitant to disclose their living situation (Cobb-Clark & Zhu, 2017; Morgan, 2018; Williams & Sheehan, 2015). The majority of students who experience homelessness indicate a desire to pursue higher education yet face greater risks to their future (Rafferty, et al., 2004). Problems resulting from homelessness include continued mental health issues, early pregnancy, behavior issues, and poor academic achievement (Cumming & Gloekner, 2012; Kim, 2020; Rumberger, 2011; Uretsky & Stone, 2016).

Limited research exists regarding the transition of adolescents who have experienced homelessness into emerging adulthood (Cobb-Clark & Zhu, 2017; Williams

& Sheehan, 2015). Federal agencies have varying definitions and age criteria for homeless youth making it difficult to continually receive support from programs, and as youth age out of the system or graduate from high school, they lose access to many government services (Rahman, et al., 2017). With little resources to advocate for their needs, it is important for educators to understand the challenges homeless youth face in and out of school as well as preparing them for their postsecondary opportunities.

Pregnancy

In Texas, 25.3% of female teenagers gave birth in 2018, and although teenage pregnancy rates have declined in recent decades, teenage pregnancy in the United States is still high compared to similar countries and continues to have a significant effect on racial minority families and families in poverty (Akella & Jordan, 2015; Martin, et al., 2019). There is conflicting research on the post-graduation affects that teenage pregnancy has on emerging adulthood. Some researchers have documented positive outcomes such as an increased maturity level and a willingness to overcome obstacles (Clarke, 2015; Seamark & Lings, 2004). In one study, teenage mothers found limited disruptions to their day due to support from family members, school personnel, and government agencies (Akella & Jordan, 2015). Other researchers maintain that teenage pregnancy can be a continuation of a generational cycle of poverty, poor health issues, and less education (Akella & Jordan, 2015; Dangal, 2005). An increased risk of poorer socioeconomic outcomes exist for teenage mothers when compared to women who wait until later in life to have children (Dangal, 2005). Regardless, researchers agree that teenage pregnancy changes a young adult and affects their educational attainment and ultimately post-

graduation transitions (Akella & Jordan, 2015; Dangal, 2005; Kane, et al., 2013; Robbins & Streetman, 1994).

Foster Care

Nationally, the Children's Bureau (2021) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimated 437,000 children were in foster care during 2018. Due to school mobility, students in foster care may experience low academic proficiency and increased discipline consequences such as suspension and expulsion (Clemens, et al., 2019; Drapeau, et al., 2007; Palmierie & La Salle, 2017; Rumberger, 2011). Post-graduation problems such as limited employment opportunities, mental health concerns, drug and alcohol abuse, and early parenthood may exist for graduates who have experienced foster care during their school years (Drapeau, et al., 2007). In addition, although many emerging adults receive financial and emotional support from their families, youth aging out of the foster care system oftentimes do not have this support network and are expected to live independently of the foster care system (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018). Due to the increased likelihood of children in foster care dropping out of high school, school professionals must be aware of specific risk factors such as an out-of-home placement, length and stability of the placement, and school transfers to best support the unique challenges of students in foster care (Clemens, et al., 2019).

Discipline

Researchers have connected the negative consequences of discipline problems during school years to less than ideal postsecondary outcomes (Maynard et al., 2015; Raphael, 2007; Rumberger & Losen, 2016; Skiba, et al., 2014). Students removed only once or twice from the traditional classroom setting for behavior issues are more likely to

have achievement gaps and experience decreased educational engagement (Randolph, et al., 2006a; Raphael, 2006; Skiba, et al., 2014). The use of school suspensions as a discipline consequence has increased since the 1970s and has greatly affected students of color (Rumberger & Losen, 2016; Skiba, et al., 2014; Welsh & Little, 2018). Researchers have demonstrated the increased probability of a student dropping out of school after discipline removals such as a suspension in early high school doubling the chance of a student dropping out and a single suspension increasing the probability of dropping out to 77% (Skiba, et al., 2014; Suh, et al., 2007). Rumberger and Losen (2016) determined that 10th grade suspensions accounted for more than 67,000 dropouts in the United States.

Exclusionary discipline practices, such as out of school suspensions and expulsions, potentially create more problems than dropouts. In a statewide longitudinal study following almost 930,000 public school students from seventh through 12th grade, more than half of the students experienced either a suspension or an expulsion and half of these students experienced at least four discipline violations (Fabelo, et al., 2011). Of note to the reader, less than 3% of these suspensions or expulsions were for state law mandated removal violations (Fabelo, et al., 2011). For students in this study who experienced more than one suspension or expulsion, almost one-fourth eventually came in contact with the juvenile justice system (Fabelo, et al., 2011). Only 2.6% of students who were never disciplined came into contact with the juvenile justice system (Fabelo, et al., 2011). The Texas At-Risk Youth Services Project (ARYSP) collected data on youth involved in the juvenile justice or criminal justice systems and found that 91% of youth were enrolled in public school at the time of their offense (Legislative Budget Board, 2011). Other characteristics of the youth in this study included the following: (a) 34%

had previously failed one grade level; (b) 33% were currently failing a class; (c) 36% were considered economically disadvantaged; (d) 15% had one or more parents in prison or jail at the time of their offense; and (e) over half of the youth had a substance abuse problem (Legislative Budget Board, 2011).

Since the 1970s, there has been a significant increase in first-time incarcerated youth offenders and minority students, specifically African American males, who have higher incarceration rates than their White peers (Raphael, 2007; Welsh & Little, 2018). Students who receive exclusionary discipline consequences are more likely to be at-risk not only or dropping out of high school, but for continued criminal behaviors, and forgoing postsecondary education (Fabelo, et al., 2011; Maynard, et al., 2015; Raphael, 2007; Skiba, et al., 2014; Suh, et al., 2007).). Students who drop out of high school are more likely than their graduated peers to be arrested for larceny, assault, and drug possession, and once incarcerated, participation in prison education is low (Maynard, et al., 2015; Raphael, 2007). Thus, students who serve time in prison may experience post-graduation challenges such as a lack of finances and difficulty finding employment that delay their emergence into traditional adulthood successes (Raphael, 2007). For school professionals, a thorough understanding of the long-term consequences exclusionary discipline practices have on students is paramount to providing more appropriate interventions for inappropriate behaviors within the school.

Parental Incarceration

Children who have parents in the criminal justice system may suffer from a variety of consequences such as parental separation, family upheaval, low self-esteem, depression, and inappropriate behavior which may affect their academic achievement

(Seymour, 1998). Neither law enforcement officers nor correctional institutions collect specific information regarding an arrested parent's children and limited research has been conducted on this population of children (Seymour, 1998). However, child welfare organizations agree that the children of incarcerated parents have unique challenges such as permanent planning issues and the complexity of the criminal justice system, making it difficult to service their needs (Seymour, 1998).

English Language Learner

Language, reading comprehension, and critical thinking are necessary skills for education and work success in the United States; however, developing these skills is oftentimes challenging for children who do not speak English as a first language and English Language Learners (ELLs) who have not acquired the language skills to be successful in school are at-risk for dropping out (Parrish, 2018; Slama, 2012). In 2018, ELLs constituted 10.2% of enrolled public school students in the United States and 18.7% in Texas (Irwin, et al., 2021). Hispanic ELLs are the majority (77.6%) and Asian ELLs are the next largest ethnicity (10.7%) (Irwin, et al., 2021). Several researchers have documented that racial minority children may be more at-risk due to higher poverty conditions (Balfanz, et al., 2007; Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2000; Slama, 2012). According to the Education Commission of the States (2014), identifying ELLs can be a problem as most states, including Texas, rely on a take-home survey with two questions, "what language is spoken in your home most of the time and what language does your child speak most of the time?" Based on the answers to these questions, an oral proficiency exam may be given to the child to determine the need for ELL services (Education Commission of the States, 2014). Although there has been an increase in professional

development for classroom teachers to support ELLs, a majority of states, including

Texas, reported a shortage of qualified ELL teachers in 2016 (U.S. Department of

Education, 2016). As the population of ELLs is expected to increase, school professionals

need to have the knowledge and skills to support the language and socioeconomic

challenges of this population of students to ensure not only high school graduation, but a

successful transition into emerging adulthood.

Academic Achievement

Researchers have documented that low academic achievement is an at-risk factor

that increases the chances of a student dropping out of high school and subsequently

affects their post-graduation opportunities (Balfanz, et al., 2007; Bowers, et al., 2013;

Peterson, 2000; Rumberger, 2011). Academic achievement, particularly failing classes in

high school, is a determining factor as to whether students will graduate high school

(Rumberger 2011). Randolph, et al. (2006a) determined that early grade level retention,

specifically first grade retention, increases the risk of dropping out of high school which

in turn affects employment and higher education opportunities. It is important to note that

of the 14 at-risk criteria identified by the state, four are directly related to academic

achievement: (a) grade level retention; (b) core course failures; (c) unsatisfactory scores

on state assessments; and (d) unsatisfactory readiness skills in early grade levels.

Researchers have determined low academic achievement may be a result of other

at-risk factors such as homelessness, teenage pregnancy, foster care, discipline, lack of

language acquisition, and incarceration (Drapeau, et al., 2007; Rafferty, et al., 2004;

Rumberger, 2011). The combination of at-risk factors can make improving low academic

achievement more challenging for school personnel (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). In

addition, multiple at-risk factors may increase the challenges these emerging adults face post-graduation (Rosenberg & Kim, 2018; Rumberger, 2011). In a study of higher education completions, the more risk factors a student has, the less likely they are of completing college (Swail, 2009).

As described above, each at-risk criteria has a combination of factors, and for most students, multiple at-risk criteria are present in their lives. Already a complex issue, there is also a lack of interventions designed to address multiple at-risk factors, increasing the barriers for school professionals to support students who are at-risk (Freeman & Simonson, 2015). In addition, although not qualifying at-risk criteria as determined by Texas, research demonstrates the importance of considering the needs of students of color and students who are economically disadvantaged when determining support and resources for students at-risk (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Campbell, 2015; DiPaoli, et al., 2015; Hammond, et al., 2007; Suh, et al., 2007; Wax, 2017; Zaff, et al., 2017). Not only understanding the unique needs of each of the criteria, but also how the criteria interact with each other and other qualifying factors such as demographics and socioeconomics, is paramount for school professionals to fully support students who are at-risk.

Impacts of Dropping Out

The impacts of dropping out of high school have been well documented and researchers agree that high school dropouts experience economical, societal, and individual consequences (Burrus & Roberts; 2012; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Lee-St. John, et al., 2018; Levin, et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2020; Suh, et al., 2007). Of note, Campbell (2015) compared siblings who had dropped out of high school with their

siblings who had graduated high school, stating that dropping out of high school is not a unique act that causes disadvantages, but the risk factors that led to dropping out of high school increased the possibility of future disadvantages. He concluded that although there are more differences between high school dropouts and high school graduates than a diploma, dropping out is directly related to poor socioeconomic outcomes despite background characteristics (Campbell, 2015).

Economical

Students who leave high school without a diploma generally suffer the most in terms of job prospects, especially as the workforce becomes more skilled and technologically advanced (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Rumberger, 2020). By 2020, 65% of jobs nationally and 62% in Texas require more than a high school diploma (Carnevale, et al., 2013). Employees with critical thinking skills, advanced computer skills, and the ability to analyze data are in high demand, and employees who possess a certification or degree generally have increased opportunities in the workforce (Carnevale et al., 2013). High school dropouts typically have more difficulty finding jobs and when they do, they earn less than their graduated counterparts (Burrus & Roberts; 2012; Lee-St. John, et al., 2018; Levin, et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2020). According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2011), high school dropouts earn $8,000 less annually than their graduated peers and $200,000 less in their lifetime. The earning discrepancy increases substantially in comparison to a college graduate, with high school dropouts earning $1 million less over their lifetime (Levin, et al., 2007).

Societal

Researchers have documented the affects high school dropouts have on society including less tax contributions, increased government assistance, less citizenship involvement, and increased criminal behavior (Lee-St. John, et al., 2018; Levin, et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011, 2020). Due to lesser earnings, high school dropouts pay less taxes (Levin, et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011, 2020). According to Levin et al., (2007), the average tax benefit for each high school graduate is an average of $140,000 over a lifetime, translating into billions of tax dollars for a cohort of high school graduates. For example, decreasing the 2018 national dropout rate by half would increase federal tax dollars by $147 billion.

Although high school dropouts contribute less money in taxes, they generally receive more welfare and government assistance than their graduated peers (Levin, et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011, 2020). In 2018, states and local governments spent $718 billion on welfare costs such as housing assistance, food benefits, and job training, more than these entities spent on public education (Urban Institute, n.d.). According to Levin, et al. (2007), half of all recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) do not have a high school education, are majority female, and racial minority groups are disproportionality represented. Over their lifetime, the 2018 cohort of high school dropouts will cost taxpayers an estimated $6.3 billion in welfare assistance. High school dropouts are more likely to have poor health, and due to their lower socioeconomic status, are more likely to qualify for Medicaid (Levin, et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011). According to the American Public Health Association (2018), cutting high school dropout rates in half would save the United States $7.3 billion annually in Medicaid

expenses, $12 billion in heart disease spending, $11.9 billion on obesity-related factors, $8.9 billion in smoking-related costs, and $6.4 billion for alcohol-related spending.

Although they represent about 20% of the overall population, high school dropouts account for more than half of the population of prisoners (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Levin, et al., 2007). Researchers maintain that male students of color are more at-risk for dropping out of high school than their peers; in addition, this population is also overrepresented in prison as the majority of incarcerated individuals are minority males, specifically African American and Hispanic (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Levin, et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011). High school dropouts are more likely to engage in criminal behavior than those with a high school education, yet it is difficult to determine if the cause is financial or behavioral as both individual and background characteristics may also influence criminal involvement (Levin, et al., 2007; Maynard, et al., 2015; Rud, et al., 2018; Rumberger, 2011, 2020). Crime rates are reduced 10-20% for the population of young adults with a high school diploma and each high school diploma represents a savings of almost $27,000 for crime-related expenditures (Levin, et al., 2007).

Individual

In general, high school dropouts report feeling a sense of worthlessness and less happiness than their graduated peers (Rumberger, 2011). Researchers conclude that dropping out of high school increases depression and anxiety although, during the initial time after dropping out of school, a period of increased self-esteem was discovered in young adults - most likely due to the student leaving an environment where they felt incompetent (Liem, et al., 2001). Dropping out of school has been connected to adolescent, nonmarital, and unplanned pregnancies which can negatively affect further

education, financial resources, and access to quality healthcare (Rumberger, 2011). Young adults who have dropped out of high school are twice as likely to attempt suicide than their graduated peers and have more mental health conditions (Liem, et al., 2001; Maynard, et al., 2015).

The effects of dropping out of high school impact more than the student. Researchers have demonstrated how this decision can affect the economic stability and well-being of future generations (Maynard, et al., 2015; Rumberger, 2011). According to Rumberger (2011), children of high school dropouts are more likely to be poor as adults due to a lack of material resources and living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Although the United States provides many opportunities for children, the economic status of future generations is still directly connected to their parent's income and wealth (Bowles & Gintis, 2002). Ultimately, researchers agree that education is the single most important avenue to increase generational well-being and economic stability (Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Lee-St. John, et al., 2018; Maynard, et al., 2015; Rumberger, 2011, 2020).

Factors That Influence Perseverance

Researchers have identified several factors that support a student's perseverance through the successful completion of high school graduation: self-determination, competence, school performance, caring and supportive teachers, a sense of community and connection, a student's positive self-worth, goal orientation, and meaningful connections (Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Knesting, 2008; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Lessard, et al., 2009). These factors can be categorized in Rumberger's (2011) framework which describes two types of factors, institutional and individual. Institutional factors include a student's family characteristics, community, and school specifics. Individual

factors include a student's educational performance, background and history, behavior, and overall attitude. These factors are often interrelated (Rumberger, 2011; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). Institutional and individual factors are described further in the sections below.

Institutional Factors

Family characteristics can influence a student's decision to drop out or persevere through graduation (Cobb-Clark & Gorgens, 2012; Hammond, et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011). Positive support and parenting practices such as monitoring schoolwork, regulating activities, school involvement, and encouragement are linked to improved academic outcomes (Plunkett, et al., 2008; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). In general, families that include two biological parents have more financial resources, more stability, and less conflict and stress than single-parent families, allowing for more opportunities to provide support for their children (Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Wasserman, 2020). Two-parent families mean more available adult role models, and the parents are usually more educated than single-parent families (Wasserman, 2020). Children in single-parent families described a lack of support from their nonresident parent, usually fathers, and shared that often overworked mothers were a hindrance to completing graduation as their financial responsibilities and caretaker roles leave little time to provide academic support (Cancian & Meyer, 2018; Lessard, et al., 2009). Family size is also a contributing factor since with a larger family, there may be fewer resources for education (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

Adding to the at-risk factors affecting African American students, White children are twice as likely to grow up in two-parent families than Black children resulting in less

available financial and social resources (Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Wasserman, 2020). Of

interest to the reader, students of color and economically disadvantaged students are

identified at-risk at a higher percentage than their peers (Texas Education Agency,

2020b). Researchers maintain that male students of color are more at-risk for dropping

out of high school than their peers; in addition, this population is also overrepresented in

prison as most incarcerated individuals are minority males, specifically African American

and Hispanic (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Levin, et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011).

Families with greater financial resources have access to higher quality

neighborhoods and communities, social and professional networks, and better rated

schools (Wasserman, 2020). On the contrary, communities with higher rates of poverty

and unemployment generally have lower educational attainment and higher dropout rates

(Bridgeland, et al., 2009). Schools in suburban areas tend to have lower rates of poverty

and higher tests scores on average than urban and rural schools which provides an

advantage to White students as they are the majority of students attending suburban

schools (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017). Neighborhoods with low socioeconomic

conditions experience increased violence, crime, and overcrowding, all which adversely

influence a student's decision to persevere (Campbell, 2015; Hammond, et al., 2007). Of

note, although researchers maintain family characteristics may be associated with

perseverance, there is not a guarantee that higher socioeconomics, stability, or family

support leads to positive academic outcomes (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006).

Although it is difficult to determine the extent of their influence due to the

multitude of factors that affect students, it is also important to understand the influence

schools and their systems have on students (Knesting, 2008; Rumberger, 2011).

Researchers have noted that a student's perception and bond to a school can affect their decision to drop out or persevere, and in some situations, a stronger bond with a school can help diminish the dropout gap between White students and students who are in the minority such as African American and Hispanic students (Knesting, 2008; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Kotok, et al., 2016; Peguero, et al., 2016). For minority students, participation in school activities increases positive academic outcomes and school retention (Peguero, et al., 2016). In addition, having a supportive adult within the school has increased academic outcomes (Knesting, 2008; Plunkett, et al., 2008). In one study, access to a caring and accepting teacher provided students a reason to persevere more than counseling or academic supports (Knesting, 2008).

Individual

A student's background, attitude, behavior, and performance represent individual factors that affect a student's choice to dropout or persist through graduation (Rumberger, 2011). Self-determination, self-efficacy, a positive self-worth, and resiliency are present in students who persevere through challenges (Dumont & Provost, 1999; Lessard et al., 2009; Martin & Marsh, 2006; McDermott, et al., 2018; Rumberger, 2011; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006; Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013). Individual student demographics affect a student's perception, socialization, and available resources (McDermott, et al., 2018; Wasserman, 2020). For example, boys who grow up without a father or male role model may show increased behavior issues and decreased socialization skills (Wasserman, 2020). Research also indicates that in general, neighborhoods are segregated by race, and minorities typically live in poorer communities with access to fewer resources (Wasserman, 2020). In addition, students who grow up in low socioeconomic

communities may not have access to the same resources that more affluent communities provide such as highly trained teachers (Wasserman, 2020).

Academic performance, academic behaviors, and a student's attitude about school influence decisions to persevere (Hammond, et al., 2007; McDermott, et al., 2018). Students who earn good grades, develop good study habits, and perform well on academic assessments are more likely to persevere through graduation than students with poor academic performance (Hammond, et al., 2007). In addition, a student's connection with and engagement in school such as attendance, involvement in extracurricular activities, and a positive peer network are also important factors to consider towards perseverance (Hammond, et al., 2007).

Numerous researchers agree that educational attainment is influenced by a student's desire to persist and their level of resilience (Dumont & Provost, 1999; Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Knesting, 2008; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Lessard et al., 2009; Rumberger, 2011). Resilience is the "process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances" (Masten, et al., 1990, p. 426). Resilient children and adolescents faced with challenges created by one or more at-risk factors successfully navigate and ultimately persevere through these adverse circumstances without significant distress. Addressing differences between children who are capable of adapting to changes in life circumstances from children who struggle with adapting may provide insight into possible factors that support children who are at-risk in their persistence to finish high school (Dumont & Provost, 1999). Although research exists regarding the resilience of children and adolescents, very little research exists

regarding resilience in emerging adulthood (Dumont & Provost, 1999; Martin & Marsh, 2006; Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013).

Emerging Adulthood

Arnett (2000) determined that the phase of life between ages 18-25 should be identified as a distinct developmental phase. He argued that changes in demographics since the 1950s have substantially changed expectations of transitioning into adulthood. For example, the median age of marriage in 1970 was 21 for women and 23 for men. In 1996 the median age of marriage had increased to 25 and 27 respectively. Arnett (2000) discovered a similar pattern for first childbirths. This trend continues today as evidenced by the 2020 census report which indicates that the median age to marry is 30.5 for men and 28.1 for women (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). As a result, Arnett (2000) determined that the late teens and early twenties are no longer a time to settle into long-term adult roles; instead, this period of emerging adulthood is characterized by change and discovery.

Prior to Arnett's emerging adulthood theory, Levinson (1986) discussed the lack of a model of human development after adolescence and identified the preadulthood era – conception to about age 22, and the early adult transition era – about age 17 to age 22. According to Levinson (1986), the early adult transition era represented the completion of the preadulthood era and the beginning of a new, and oftentimes unsteady, time of development. During early adult transition, relationships may be changed as the young adult attempts to find a place in an adult world (Levinson, 1986). Similarly, Keniston (1970) acknowledged that the transition between adolescence and adulthood warranted a

title. During this time of *youth*, a sense of identity and self-transformation takes place as the young adult questions their social roles, lifestyles, and vocations (Keniston, 1970).

Arnett (2000) maintained there are differences in the employment and higher education decisions that distinguish emerging adulthood from adolescence and adulthood. During emerging adulthood, beliefs about employment become more focused on preparing for traditional adult roles instead of the view adolescents generally hold about employment as way to pay for various leisure activities. Arnett (2000) suggested that emerging adults who choose to attend a college or university often change their major multiple times as they are exploring their options. Similarly, residential status is also more unstable during emerging adulthood due to the amount of diversity within this age group. Emerging adults may choose to move away to attend college, live with a partner, live independently from their families, or choose to live with their families and attend college or work (Arnett, 2000).

There is a significant amount of research regarding the students who drop out of high school (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Lee-St. John, et al., 2018; Levin, et al., 2007; Suh, et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011, 2020). However, Arnett (2000) maintained that research regarding emerging adults who do not attend college is lacking; and, although researchers have begun studying the reasons that students who are at-risk persevere through graduation (Dumont & Provost, 1999; Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Knesting, 2008; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Lessard et al., 2009; Rumberger, 2011), there is limited information on students who were at-risk during high school, graduated, and now find themselves in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

Post-Graduation Challenges

Between 2020 and 2030, the national labor market will increase by 11.9 million

jobs (U.S. Department of Labor, 2021b). In the early 2000s, 65% of jobs in the United

States economy require postsecondary education after high school as well as strong

mathematical computation and reading comprehension skills, thereby increasing the labor

market gap between more- and less-educated adults (Carnevale, et al., 2013; Olson,

2014). In the last half century, increased technology and globalization changed the job

market making it difficult for young adults to achieve stability and independence, which

is a hallmark of attaining adulthood (Danziger & Ratner, 2010). More employers are

searching for employees with critical thinking and communication skills, as well as self-

awareness and professionalism in order to compete in the global workplace (Danziger &

Ratner, 2010; Olson, 2014). However, in a 2006 survey of employers, high school

graduates were rated deficient on the skills required to succeed in the workplace (Casner-

Lotto & Barringer, 2006).

In October 2020, over half of recent high school graduates were enrolled in

college and of the remaining graduates, most were employed (U.S. Department of Labor,

2021a). For young adults with only a high school education, however, employment

statistics were bleak (Casner-Lotto & Barringer, 2006; Danziger & Ratner, 2010; Olson,

2014). In the 1970s, young adults with only a high school education earned 83% as much

as college graduates; however, due to labor market changes, by 2007 that percentage

decreased to only 62% (Danziger & Ratner, 2010). Although there is evidence that the

current job market requires postsecondary education, the United States was estimated to

fall 5 million short of the needed workers to fulfill the job demand in 2020 (Carnevale, et al., 2013).

Economic stability and financial independence are milestones in the path to adulthood and affect the decision to pursue additional education, move out of a parent's home, marry, and have children. Due to rising tuition costs and decreased borrowing limits, many high school graduates are choosing to delay, or never enroll, in postsecondary education (Danziger & Ratner, 2010). Family income and support continues to be a common choice for young adults to use to fund college; however, this is not an option for many recent graduates due to their family's low economic status (Cobb-Clark & Gorgens, 2014; Danziger & Ratner, 2010; Osgood, et al., 2010). Adding to this list of challenges, recent high school graduates may experience feelings of tension and a lack of preparedness for their next steps, causing additional delays in deciding their next steps after graduation (Danziger & Ratner, 2010; Olson, 2014).

Most of the literature regarding post-high school emerging adults focuses on young adults who either graduated from high school or those who dropped out of high school (Arnett, 2000). With multiple definitions for at-risk across the research and difficulty in tracking high school graduates who have not enrolled in college, limited research exists regarding emerging adults who were at-risk during high school; however, the importance of understanding graduates who were at-risk cannot be understated (Bloom, 2010; Kuehn, et al., 2009; Osgood, et al., 2010; Rumberger, 2011; Yates, 2005). Emerging adults who were at-risk during their high school years may experience mental health problems, drug and alcohol abuse, difficulty in finding long-term employment, and financial insecurity (Cobb-Clark & Zhu, 2017; Danziger & Ratner, 2010; Maynard, et al.,

2015; Osgood, et al., 2010; Peterson, 2000; Raphael, 2007; Rumberger, 2011). To add to their challenges, as these graduates turn 18, many of the public support systems and programs they have received assistance from come to an end (Osgood et al., 2010). There is no doubt that increasing resources and services to support students who are at-risk of dropping out of high school is needed; however, due to the multitude of factors influencing this population of young adults, it is oftentimes difficult to know exactly where the resources and services should be directed (Bloom, 2010; Kuehn, et al., 2009; Maynard, et al., 2015; Osgood, et al., 2010; Yates, 2005).

Conclusion

In 2018, more than 3.3. million students graduated high school and 2.1 million students dropped out of school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a, 2019b). Despite legislation, research, and increased attention, a dropout problem continues to exist in the United States.

Established in 1989 in response to the 1980 study "A Nation at Risk", *America 2000* installed the first national reform strategy focused on improving education standards and accountability (U.S. Department of Education, 1991a). Less than 10 years later in 1994, the *Goals 2000 Act* pushed education standards and accountability to the states allowing the states to set their own requirements and removed most restrictions on funding (Schwartz & Robinson, 2000). Although tracking progress proved difficult, the *Goals 2000 Act* established a framework for ESEA and IDEA. In 2004 through the enactment of NCLB, funding was tied to student achievement and states were required to report AYP (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). NCLB also required data to be disaggregated by various student populations including students who were at-risk. ESSA,

the most recent national education law, was enacted in 2015. ESSA removed the AYP requirement of NCLB and returned funding control to the states. ESSA maintained protections for disadvantaged students (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Texas statute first defined the terms "drop out" and "at-risk" during the 1987 legislative session and dropouts were first reported in the 1987-1988 school year. This was the first school year districts in Texas were required to have policies in place to support students identified as at-risk of dropping out of high school (Texas Education Agency, 2020b). School districts receive state compensatory funding for students who are identified as at-risk to offset the cost of providing supplemental services for this population of students; however, the funding is based on a percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch, or students who are identified as economically disadvantaged. Economic disadvantage is not defined as an at-risk criteria in Texas.

Throughout various literature and research, the term "at-risk" encompasses a variety of meanings both nationally and in Texas, but in general the term is used to describe students in jeopardy of dropping out of high school (Rumberger, 2011; Williams & Sheehan, 2015). There continues to be much debate on the various influences, factors, and criteria that create at-risk conditions. For public education purposes in Texas, at-risk criteria have undergone multiple revisions since 1989, including the removal of several original criteria, to the current 14 identified at-risk criteria (see Appendix A). It is important to note that although Texas school districts are only allowed to report students identified as at-risk through the current 14 at-risk criteria, local school boards have the authority to establish local at-risk criteria; however, students determined to be at-risk based on local criteria are not reported to the state (Texas Education Agency, 2021).

Each of the 14 at-risk criteria are individually complex with multiple and intertwined issues and the criteria themselves overlap each other. In many situations, students are affected by more than one at-risk criteria (Clemens, et al., 2019; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Poor academic achievement is the single most important factor in predicting if a student will drop out of school and this factor can be the result of other at-risk factors (Clemens, et al., 2019; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Rumberger, 2011; Suh, et al., 2007).

Significant research exists demonstrating the problems students without a high school diploma may experience (Burrus & Roberts; 2012; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Lee-St. John, et al., 2018; Levin, et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2020; Suh, et al., 2007). Lack of job prospects and lower earnings translate into a loss of thousands of dollars of wages over a lifetime. Although high school dropouts contribute less taxes due to lower wages, they generally receive more government assistance than graduates (Burrus & Roberts; 2012; Lee-St. John, et al., 2018; Levin, et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011, 2020). In addition, high school dropouts are more likely to have decreased access to healthcare, poorer overall health, and increased criminal behavior (Burrus & Roberts, 2012; Levin, et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011).

Multiple factors support a student's perseverance through high school graduation including self-determination, competence, school performance, caring and supportive teachers, a sense of community and connection, a student's positive self-worth, goal orientation, and meaningful connections (Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Knesting, 2008; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Lessard, et al., 2009). In addition, researchers have identified

multiple family, school, and individual characteristics that have an effect on a student's

perseverance (Cobb-Clark & Gorgens, 2012; Hammond, et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011).

Due to changing demographics, Arnett (2000) described the transitioning phase

between the ages of 18-25 as emerging adulthood characterized by the exploration of

choices before settling into true adult roles. Emerging adults find themselves entering a

changed workforce from previous generations as technology and globalization have

changed the economic landscape making postsecondary education a requirement for

many jobs in the United States (Carnevale, et al., 2013; Danziger & Ratner, 2010; Olson,

2014).

The population of students who drop out of high school and the reasons why they

choose to drop out have been well established in the literature; however, little research

exists regarding students who were at-risk in high school, graduated, and are now in the

emerging adult developmental phase (Arnett, 2000; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Lee-St.

John, et al., 2018; Levin, et al., 2007; Suh, et al., 2007; Rumberger, 2011, 2020).

Graduates who were at-risk in high school have increased risks for continued problems as

they transition from students to emerging adults and the importance of establishing

support and services for this population of young adults, while challenging, is an

important investment in their success (Bloom, 2010; Cobb-Clark & Zhu, 2017; Danziger

& Ratner, 2010; Kuehn, et al., 2009; Maynard, et al., 2015; Osgood, et al., 2010;

Peterson, 2000; Raphael, 2007; Rumberger, 2011; Yates, 2005).

For the purpose of this study, the term *at-risk* will include the 14 criteria outlined

in Texas statute, students who are African American or Hispanic, and students who are

economically disadvantaged. Although not identified in the 14 at-risk criteria, students of

color and economically disadvantaged students are identified at-risk at a higher percentage than their peers (Texas Education Agency, 2020b). Specifically, I am interested in graduates who were affected by multiple at-risk factors.

Researchers have recognized low academic achievement as the primary predictor of a student's decision to drop out of school; however, for a student experiencing multiple at-risk factors, increasing academic achievement may not be simple (Clemens, et al., 2019; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Rumberger, 2011; Suh, et al., 2007). As high school graduates navigate their way towards adulthood, many may feel confusion and tension as to their next steps (Arnett, 2000; Danziger & Ratner, 2010; Olson, 2014). For high school graduates already burdened with challenges such as homelessness, pregnancy, language barriers, economic struggles, and prior discipline issues, ensuring that transition support and appropriate resources are in place for their next steps may lessen the barriers they face towards financial security and independence. This study will connect emerging adulthood challenges to at-risk influences graduates experienced during high school. This study also adds to the gap in the literature regarding both the phase of emerging adulthood as well as research on students who were at-risk and persevered through graduation.

CHAPTER III

Method

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of emerging adults who were identified as at-risk during high school. This study examined the perceived challenges in their lives and the support systems that influenced their choices through their school years and into post-graduation. The following sections are addressed in this chapter: (a) context of the study; (b) role of the researcher; (c) research design;(d) selection of participants; (e) data collection; (f) data analysis; and (g) trustworthiness and credibility.

Context of the Study

The participants in this study are graduates of an alternative, at-risk public high school campus in a southeast Texas suburban school district. This school district has one traditional comprehensive high school and one alternative at-risk high school for a district enrollment of more than 6,500 students in the 2020-2021 school year. The selected alternative campus has a maximum enrollment of 200 students in Grades 9-12. Unlike the comprehensive high school, students must apply and interview for admission into the alternative campus. There are three qualifying factors for acceptance: (a) students must live within the boundaries of the school district; (b) students must be identified as at-risk of dropping out of high school through one of the 14 Texas at-risk criteria; and (c) prior significant discipline behaviors, such as gang affiliation or felony drug charges, will not be allowed.

The alternative campus provides special education services as required by state and federal law, but does not offer pre-advanced placement, advanced placement, or

gifted and talented course offerings or services. For most underclassmen, instruction is provided through traditional teacher-led classrooms; however, class sizes are generally much smaller than a comprehensive high school class. A requirement to qualify for alternative education campus status through the Texas Education Agency (TEA) is a teacher-student classroom ratio of 1:15. Online, self-paced courses are offered for some elective classes and upperclassmen if desired. During the 2020-2021 school year, the alternative campus partnered with a local community college to offer students the opportunity to receive an industry certification upon graduation if requirements were met.

This alternative campus was selected based on convenience as I had established relationships with the students and was provided access to this campus and students.

Role of the Researcher

Moustakas' (1994) phenomenology focused on the descriptions of the participants and not the understandings or interpretations of the researcher. He describes the *Epoche*, originally from Husserl's research, where, in the role of the researcher, "we set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Similarly, van Manen and van Manen (2021) describe the practice of phenomenology as seeing the world as it exists and not as we think it exists. The act of *bracketing* provides an opportunity for the researcher to develop an awareness of their own biases and perceptions to safeguard against possibilities of influencing the participants (Bevan, 2014; Sohn, et al., 2017). In describing my own experiences with this topic, as the researcher, I will bracket out, or suspend, my own biases and beliefs before conducting the research (Bevan, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer, et al., 2019; Sohn, et al., 2017).

An assumption that I have brought to this study is that students who were classified as at-risk during high school face significant challenges and barriers both in school and out of school to complete graduation. The students who I served as principal of this alternative high school suffered with a lack of familial support, oftentimes having no place to stay after their parents had kicked them out of the house. Many suffered with undiagnosed mental health problems, or even if a diagnosis had been given, lack of options, such as time, money, and available therapists, made it difficult for these students to get the help they needed. The students would tell me that their parents did not believe there was anything wrong with them. Most of these students had drug or alcohol problems, and if they themselves did not, they lived in a home where family members suffered from drug or alcohol problems. I would hear their stories of emotional, physical, and even sexual abuse at the hands of a biological parent, stepparent, grandparent, or other family relative. And, in many circumstances, if these students lived with family members, at least one biological parent was not in the picture, sometimes in jail, sometimes whereabouts unknown, sometimes in and out of their lives.

Another assumption that I have is that the at-risk factors that these students struggle with during high school continue to affect them after graduation. Although not as privy to their lives after high school, I do believe that the trauma these students faced during high school influences their choices and opportunities after high school. I think about my own transition from high school to college and then beyond. In my predictable middle-class upbringing, my mother stayed at home and my dad worked. We had a full dinner on the table every night. There was an expectation that I would graduate high school and attend college. Both of my parents supported me financially through college,

paying my apartment rent when I was unable to do so. When I wrecked my car, which they purchased for me, they helped me get a tow truck and a rental car. These items, that many people take for granted, I believe do not exist in the reality of at-risk graduates.

A final assumption I bring to this study is the perception of how other people view students who are at-risk. In my experience, I have had parents, teachers, administrators, and community members make statements to me about how problematic these kids are or how they will never be successful. In general, the problematic behaviors mentioned include classroom discipline infractions, academic gaps, and lack of motivation in school. However, knowing some of the students' backgrounds, I find it incredible that these students attend school at all. In order for these students, and ultimately, graduates in this research study, to be viewed more positively, I believe highlighting the challenges and understanding the issues they face outside of the educational setting allows stakeholders to see the strength and resilience of these graduates.

In conclusion, I acknowledge that I bring bias to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018) in my lived experience as a principal, as a high school student, and as an emerging adult. Acknowledging and bracketing my opinions, beliefs, and expectations will help to minimize researcher bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). As the researcher, I want to separate my lived experiences from the participant's to clearly articulate the descriptions of their lived experiences. To this end, I will keep a journal following Moustakas's (1994) Epoche and will enlist a peer debriefer (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Research Design

To gain insight into both the experiences of students who were identified as at-risk during high school and are now transitioning into adulthood as well as their perceptions of the various challenges and support systems that influenced these experiences, a qualitative phenomenological study is being proposed. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), "a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 75). Moustakas (1994) stated that the goal of a phenomenological study is to "determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience" (p. 13) and from these experiences the researcher can find meaning.

Phenomenological research allows the researcher to explore common experiences and perceptions culminating with in-depth meaning and understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The art of phenomenology began in 1913 with German philosopher Edmund Husserl; since then, multiple theorists have expanded the applicability and usability of phenomenology as a viable research method (Alase, 2017; Converse, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Although the method of phenomenological study embodies flexibility, common features of this approach include descriptive lived experiences and perceptions, intentionality, first-person point of view, and researcher subjectivity (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moran, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). In conclusion, phenomenology is a research approach designed to describe a phenomenon through the lens of a person who experienced the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moran, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer, et al., 2019).

This study will be guided by the following research questions: (a) How do graduates interpret their post-graduation experiences?; (b) What are the perceived challenges among graduates during their post-graduation experiences?; and (c) What are the perceived support systems among graduates that have influenced their post-graduation experiences?

The phenomenon under investigation is the transition phase from adolescence into emerging adulthood through an at-risk lens. A qualitative phenomenological design allows for the exploration and examination of the experiences and perceptions of at-risk high school graduates who are now emerging adults. Through in-depth interviews with participants, phenomenological research "provides a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 80).

Selection of Participants

Participants in this qualitative phenomenological study must be able to articulate their perceptions and experiences as an at-risk graduate. In addition, a goal for this research study is that it will have internal transferability beyond the group being studied, the setting of the study, and the context of the study (Maxwell, 1992). As a result, appropriate selection of the participants is crucial (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). Participants were selected for this study after determining (a) the appropriate sampling strategy, (b) the sample size, (c) the criteria for selection based on the research questions, and (d) the method of selection of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Sampling Strategy

Phenomenological research describes a phenomenon lived by individuals and this study requires participants who have directly experienced a transition from high school graduation to emerging adulthood within an at-risk paradigm; therefore, a purposeful sampling strategy will be used to identify participants (Converse, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Ramsook, 2018). Purposeful sampling allows for the identification of a specific group of people with knowledge of the research study (Alase, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Shaheen, et al., 2019).

Sample Size

Little agreement exists regarding the appropriate number of participants for a phenomenological study. Sohn, et al. (2017) suggested five to 20 participants. Boddy (2016) stated that any more than 30 interviews for a similar population of participants would be considered large and that saturation generally begins to become apparent at six in-depth interviews and is evident at 12 interviews.

A total of 101 students graduated from this alternative high school in May 2020 and for the May 2021 graduation ceremonies, a total of 79 graduates earned their diploma. Of the 180 total graduates from these two cohorts, 105 were considered early graduates, meaning they graduated prior to their cohort year, and 18 were considered late graduates. The remaining graduates represented a pool of 87 possible participants. For this study, I sought a total of eight to 10 participants who agree to be part of this study. Sixty potential participants were sent a request to participate and a total of 8 participants agreed to participate in the study.

Criteria

Participants selected for this study must have in-depth knowledge of graduating high school despite experiencing individual and/or institutional challenges, specifically challenges categorized as at-risk factors. Being identified as at-risk is one of the admittance criteria for students to attend the selected alternative campus; therefore, participants for this study will be graduates of the selected alternative high school. Participants will have graduated in either the May 2020 graduation cohort or the May 2021 graduation cohort and must have been "on-time" graduates, meaning the participants did not graduate earlier or later than their original freshman cohort.

Method of Selection

After their graduation date, graduates began connecting with me through Facebook. Through this social media platform, I have access to almost 60 of the graduates from the May 2020 and May 2021 graduation cohort. For this study, all graduates who met the study criteria and were either connected with me on Facebook or can be found on Facebook, were contacted through Facebook Messenger. Facebook Messenger is an instant messaging service connected to the Facebook platform. I sent out a Facebook message explaining the purpose of the study and the extent of involvement required from the participant. Once a participant responded to the initial Facebook message, I asked the participant if they were more comfortable communicating through Facebook Messenger or via email. If the participant chose to communicate by email, we exchanged email addresses at that point and any further communication regarding this study was via email, otherwise, communication continued through Facebook Messenger.

It is important to obtain participants' permission prior to participating in the study; therefore, upon agreement, selected participants were provided with informed consent information (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Seidman, 2019). Although a maximum of 10 participants was my goal for this study, ultimately 8 participants were selected.

Data Collection

Data collection for this phenomenological study will rely on individual interviews with selected participants (Converse, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). In a phenomenological study, researchers strive to understand the phenomenon from the viewpoint of the person who lived the phenomenon (Englander, 2012). Interviews provide the researcher a tool to explore in great detail the experiences and perspectives of these selected individuals (Patton 2002; Seidman, 2019).

Due to the nature of the interview process, I was the primary instrument through which data was collected and analyzed. I asked participants their preference for a face-to-face or a virtual interview. For this study, all but one interview was virtual. For the one face-to-face interview, the participant chose the location. The face-to-face interview was recorded using a 32-GB EVIDA 2324 Hours Voice Activated Recording Device Audio Recorder that comes equipped with password protection as the primary recording device and my personal laptop as a secondary recording device. Only audio was recorded.

For participants who preferred a virtual interview, these interviews were conducted using the Zoom meeting software. Zoom software allows for recordings and was the primary recording device for virtual interviews. For virtual interviews, participants selected their own interview site and their own electronic device to be used for the interview. Turning on their video camera was the decision of the participant;

however, only the audio recording was used and the visual recording was not maintained. Once the interview concluded, the meeting recording was saved to my personal laptop. The face-to-face and virtual interviews were expected to last between 60-90 minutes; however most lasted 30-45 minutes.

Semi-structured interviews are widely used for qualitative research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Willig, 2008) and are the most widely used method for collecting data in phenomenology (Bevan, 2014). I designed a semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended and closed questions (Alase, 2017; Bevan, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Seidman, 2019). Closed-ended questions were designed to gather demographic information such as age, work status, and education status. Open-ended questions were designed to allow participants to expand on their experiences prior to and after high school graduation (Alase, 2017; Bevan, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Seidman, 2019).

In developing the interview questions, I followed the interview guide approach described by Patton (2002) in which I developed a framework of questions within the study area designed to focus on the research questions yet allow for a natural conversation to take place with the participants. Included in the framework were the important questions essential to this study as well as the sequence of questions that were asked to all participants (Patton, 2002). To determine the types of questions included in this framework, I followed the interviewing protocol as described by Spradley (1979/2016) where he identified four types of interview questions: (a) grand tour questions; (b) mini-tour questions; (c) examples of questions; and (d) experience questions. The interview protocol included one grand tour question designed to engage the participant in conversation followed by mini-tour questions to investigate a more in-

depth description of the participant's experiences (Spradley, 1979/2016). I also used example questions and experience questions as additional probing techniques (Spradley, 1979/2016).

After the interview questions were drafted, they were submitted to my dissertation chair for editing and feedback to ensure the wording made sense and that the questions were asked in a way that would provoke a thoughtful response. Leading questions were avoided. After review, the semi-structured interview protocol was finalized. I invited one of my colleagues to serve as a pilot participant (Seidman, 2019). At the end of the pilot interview, I asked for feedback on the interview questions and edits were made to the protocol. The final interview protocol can be found in Appendix B.

Procedures

After my doctoral dissertation committee approved the proposed study, I submitted an application to the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) to request permission to begin collecting the necessary data to begin the research process. Upon receipt of IRB approval (see Appendix D), I began contacting potential participants. Potential participants were initially contacted via social media to explain the study and request their participation. Prior to engaging in the first interview, I explained and then obtained informed consent from each participant who agreed to participate in the study. Selected participants were interviewed. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interview transcripts were then coded for analysis.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the interviews, I transcribed the interviews in Microsoft Word software. Once I transcribed the recorded interviews, I returned the transcript to

each participant for member checking (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Seidman, 2019) to ensure accuracy of the interview transcripts. At this point, I began the process of reading the transcripts for patterns and units of meaning (Alase, 2017; Saldana 2016). Alase (2017) identified three data coding cycles. The first coding cycle involved breaking down participant responses into "meaningful chunky statements" (p. 16). The second coding cycle assisted me in moving closer to the participant's real meanings as I attempted to further reduce the statements from the first cycle (Alase, 2017). The third coding cycle allowed me to categorize the participant's meaning into a few words (Alase, 2017). Transcript excerpts and corresponding codes were entered into Microsoft Excel software for organization during each coding cycle. A codebook was developed separately from the Excel database as a place to organize data and codes as the analysis progressed (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldana, 2016).

The steps I took to analyze the research data were adapted from Moustakas's (1994) process of Epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. The steps I used are as follows:

1. After describing my own experiences and assumptions, I set aside my own perceptions to focus on the experiences of the participants and to see them anew (Epoche).

2. Using the interview transcripts, I recorded significant and relevant statements made by each participant.

3. From the significant and relevant statements, I grouped the statements into meaning units of information and included verbatim examples.

4. I made sure to "cluster the invariant meaning units into themes" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122) including verbatim examples.

5. I did "synthesize the invariant meaning units and themes into a description of the textures of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122).

6. In conclusion, I "construct[ed] a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122).

Results from the data analysis are presented in Chapter IV. The findings section of Chapter V includes the resulting description of the phenomenon under study.

Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a qualitative research process will have trustworthiness if the following criteria are attained: (a) credibility; (b) dependability; (c) confirmability; and (d) transferability. Techniques used to increase the trustworthiness of this study are discussed in the sections below.

Credibility

Credibility is similar to the internal validity of a quantitative study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). To increase the credibility of this research study, I clarified any assumptions and biases that I have and continued to monitor these biases through the use of a journal (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019) and collected data from multiple participants through individual interviews. I also used the member checking strategy of returning the interview transcripts to the participants to check for accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Seidman, 2017).

Dependability

To increase the dependability of this study, I created and maintained a database audit trail and reflexive journal (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, I maintained analytical notes or memos taken during the data coding process (Saldana, 2016). For both the phenomenological research design and the data coding and data analysis, a specific and documented process was used (Moustakas, 1994; Saldana, 2016). These documented processes and records assisted in establishing the dependability of the research findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability

Confirmability relates to the quantitative measure of objectivity; however, as the researcher, I do not claim to be objective, I claim that the findings for this study resulted from the research, not from my biases (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). To increase the confirmability of this study, I recruited two critical peer debriefers (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). One critical peer debriefer has several years of experience working in education and specifically with students who are at-risk. This insight was important as he has in-depth knowledge of the topic and was able to identify any erroneous information. The second peer debriefer does not work within the education field and was able to offer an outsider's point of view to this topic. I also participated in debriefings with my dissertation chair to clarify research bias and increase awareness of my influence on the data. The audit trail and the reflexivity journal increased confirmability of the research findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Transferability

The goal of qualitative research is to provide relevant and descriptive findings that can be applied to a broader context while still maintaining their depth (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Therefore, the degree of transferability is dependent upon how well I, as the researcher, provide in-depth, clear, and rich descriptions of the experiences, perceptions, and influences the graduates had leading up to high school graduation and then thereafter in the early stages of emerging adulthood. To achieve this goal, I provided specific information and detailed descriptions of the participants, methods, and my role in this study.

Summary

In summary, this chapter provided a description of the research methods that will be used to conduct this research study. A qualitative phenomenological study design was used to explore the experiences of high school graduates who were at-risk prior to graduation and more currently, six to 18 months from graduation. Data was collected through virtual interviews except for one face-to-face interview. Multiple cycles of coding were conducted following Alase's (2017) and Saldana's (2016) coding techniques. Data was analyzed following the steps described by Moustakas (1994). Findings from this qualitative phenomenological study are discussed in Chapter IV.

CHAPTER IV

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the perspectives of graduates who were identified as at-risk during high school and are now transitioning into adulthood. Perceptions of various challenges and support systems were also explored during this study. Reflecting on the experiences of these emerging adults provides insight into the unique needs of this at-risk population and presents an opportunity to improve services offered leading up to graduation as well as possible supports needed post-graduation.

Chapter IV will present the findings of the eight graduates who participated in the study. To structure the presentation of these results, this chapter is divided into seven main sections: (a) Overview; (b) Methods in Context; (c) Epoche; (d) Introduction to Participants; (e) Participant Overview; (f) Themes; and (g) Summary.

The following research questions were used to guide this study: (a) How do graduates interpret their post-graduation experiences?; (b) What are the perceived challenges among graduates during their post-graduation experiences?; and (c) What are the perceived support systems among graduates that have influenced their post-graduation experiences?

Methods in Context

My intentions for this study were to interview eight to 10 participants, all 2020 or 2021 on-time graduates of the selected at-risk alternative high school. Participants were selected via purposive sampling through my contacts on the social media platform

Facebook. Initially, 60 potential participants were contacted through Facebook Messenger. Fourteen potential participants submitted a response within the first week; two of whom declined to participate. Of the remaining 12 participants, six met the criteria and were provided with additional information and informed consent. Throughout the process, no responses were received from several graduates and although some individuals responded in a timely manner, others required multiple emails and Facebook Messenger reminders before generating responses.

At this time, I sent a second reminder message through Facebook Messenger, eliciting an additional four responses. Of the additional four responses, two did not have time to participate. The remaining two were interested in participating and both met the criteria. The final two participants were provided with additional information and informed consent for a total of eight participants selected for the study.

All interviews were conducted between November 2021 and December 2021. Of the eight interviews, seven were conducted virtually through the use of the conferencing software Zoom and one interview was conducted in-person. To understand the perspectives and experiences of the at-risk graduates between high school and adulthood, I conducted semi-structured interviews. Each participant was asked the same questions regarding high school experiences and post-graduation experiences. When needed, additional questions were asked to further explore areas for either deeper understanding or clarification. Virtual interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using the video conferencing platform Zoom. Transcription verification began immediately after the first interview. Participant confidentiality was preserved by allowing participants to choose a pseudonym.

Epoche

Before beginning the data analysis, it was important for the study and the experiences of the participants that I make sure to alleviate any biases I may have brought to the study as a result of my personal experiences with the participants and the topic. To achieve this, I began a reflexive journal during the data collection process as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018) and Moustakas (1994). The journal allowed me to collect my thoughts, reflections, and reactions to participant responses.

Having served as the principal of the at-risk alternative high school in the study and having close relationships with the participants through that role, I noted multiple times awareness of the events the participant described and made sure to note any pieces I remembered differently. The journal also helped me set aside any opinions I had formed regarding the participants' family and friends that I had previous relationships with or knowledge of in order to allow the perspectives of the participants to be their own.

Although I had once been a high school student, I did not have similar experiences as these participants had and through the use of the journal, I was able to document any time I had thoughts about how I might have acted differently in a situation. Finally, since these participants and this topic are very close to my heart, I did make a point to note in the journal times when I felt something – sadness, happiness, judgement, and even arrogance. As I wrote their stories below, this documentation forced me to be aware of my personal feelings regarding their responses and keep my personal feelings out of the writing.

To increase the confirmability of this study, I conducted two individual debriefing sessions with two trusted colleagues who served as critical debriefers for this study.

During both sessions, the debriefers listened to my analysis of the participants' responses and provided feedback on possible personal biases. I found the discussion with the debriefers very beneficial as it gave me a chance to discuss my thoughts and opinions on the research.

Introduction to Participants

A total of eight participants were interviewed, which is consistent with Creswell and Poth (2018). Of the eight participants, three were 2020 graduates and five were 2021 graduates. Four participants were female and four participants were male. Of note to the reader, several participants mentioned being in a relationship with other graduates from this at-risk alternative school. The significant others mentioned were not participants in this study. Additional demographic information about the participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Cohort Year
LeeAnn	F	18	White	2021
Meredith	F	19	Asian	2020
Yuna	F	18	White	2021
Bobert	M	18	White	2021
Ricky	M	19	White	2020
Allie	F	20	White	2020
Scott	M	18	White	2021
Charlie	M	19	White	2021

To engage the participants in conversation, I began the interview with a grand tour question asking about their time since graduation (Spradley, 2016). The remaining

interview questions focused on the participants' experiences and perspectives during and after high school graduation. A profile of each participant is provided next.

LeeAnn

Soft-spoken and polite, LeeAnn is an 18-year-old 2021 high school graduate. LeeAnn spent her junior and senior year at the alternative school to recover lost credits and graduate on time. She currently lives at home with her mom and sister. LeeAnn works part-time, virtually from home with a medical billing company, a job her cousin set her up with, and has completed her first semester of community college. LeeAnn aspires to be a clinical psychologist and told me "I'm really just focused on school and just that really is my main focus right now. Um, and is just staying on like the right path and like being just staying on top of my grades."

LeeAnn enjoyed school until her 8th grade year. She explained:

After like my eighth-grade year I just lost all interest in school and that's what kind of like made like my freshman and sophomore year like the worst because it was like now I'm in high school, and I had the same attitude I did when I was in eighth grade.

After her freshman year, LeeAnn changed districts and began attending a new, high school with a larger student enrollment. Between the big high school and lack of friends, her dislike of school continued through LeeAnn's sophomore year: "From freshman to sophomore year, I, I just, I did not like going to school. I wasn't good at it, so I just, I chose not to go." LeeAnn's sophomore year of high school was her worst year, and she gave serious consideration to dropping out. Choosing instead to attend the at-risk alternative campus gave her the motivation to graduate.

LeeAnn's primary goal in high school was to graduate on time. "Like my end goal was just to graduate on time. That's all I wanted to do. I didn't care about what I went to college." Other than truancy, LeeAnn did not have any significant discipline problems during high school. However, her truancy not only affected her relationship with her mom but also led to mental health concerns during high school:

My mom started getting upset with me, she, 'cuz she knew I had potential and she knew I could do it, but it was the fact that I didn't believe in myself, because I was like, I was already three years of just failing school…; then…, I felt I was letting her down. But yeah, so yeah it was just a never ending circle of things, and so, but yeah I would say it affected at like school during that time affected me and my mom's relationship a lot, and so that took a major tole on me because, like my mom was the only person I have, and so, for her to be like disappointed in me, uh, that was just awful and that just made me feel worse and then it made me act worse.

LeeAnn's father passed away when she was younger, putting a lot of stress on her mom to raise two girls. Although LeeAnn blames herself for her challenging relationship with her mom during high school, she is happy that since graduation that relationship has improved significantly. Socially, LeeAnn spent time with a few close friends during high school, friends she considered "a distraction for me to like get away from school."

Since graduation, she spends time with a friend who is also attending the same community college and who LeeAnn credits with helping her register for

classes, something LeeAnn was unsure about after graduation. LeeAnn wished
that she had learned about taxes during high school and although LeeAnn
occasionally finds herself getting up late for school, she does not let these
problems continue: "I've moved on and I've grown from that." Her happiness is
evident in her life: "My grades right now are, like, the best I've ever seen…and I
did not expect me to have such high grades in college, so I was really impressed."
LeeAnn's at-risk factors are provided in Table 2.

Table 2

LeeAnn's Combined At-Risk Factors

At-Risk Factor	
Academic Achievement	X
Discipline	
Homeless	
Pregnant/Parent	
Previous Dropout	
English Language Learner	
Residential Placement	
Parental Incarceration	
Social Influences	X
Mental Health	X
Family Challenges	X
Truancy	X
Drugs/Alcohol	X

Meredith

After spending her final two years of high school at the alternative school, a
decision she made to try and get away from drama at the comprehensive high school,

Meredith, a 19-year-old 2020 graduate, currently works as a cashier in the retail business: "I've been shuffling jobs like crazy ever since I graduated, um, have had good jobs and bad jobs. But right now, I'm working retail as a cashier and I work crazy hours." Living in an apartment with her boyfriend, a graduate of the at-risk alternative high school, she enjoys travelling with him and shared she is soon to be an aunt.

In high school, she "was mainly focused on just getting myself out of my house, to be honest…(*giggle*)…I was like, I'm gonna get my diploma. I'm going to get a good job. I'm going to work and get an apartment." Meredith had strong feelings about the first two years of high school, "I hated it." Her unique experiences from elementary and junior high shaped this feeling:

> I came from a different country, so school was way different. Kids were
>
> way different. When I came here in sixth and seventh grade in junior high,
>
> they weren't used to me, I wasn't used to them, the English language was
>
> not my…was not how it is right now with me so, um it was really hard of
>
> getting everyone to accept your religion beliefs, how your accent is, how
>
> you are…it's a lot. It's a lot of things that people just, don't, aren't educated
>
> about.

It was also difficult going from a middle school to a big high school where she did not have any friends and did not feel like she fit in. She knew dropping out could not be an option, but during one of her most depressed times, she did consider it: "I didn't feel like I had the motivation to keep going and everything at one point, just at home and at school, just kept shutting down, just kept closing around me."

With her mom in a different country, Meredith and her sister lived here with their dad and she "didn't feel like I had a family at home." During high school, she had a very difficult relationship with her dad; now, it is nonexistent. Her behavior problems during high school were about "fitting in and needing a family." "I feel like looking back at it, I did whatever to just keep them, my friends, even if it was being involved in drama I shouldn't be involved in…."

Her behavior severely affected her mental health, "my behavior definitely got bad, to the point where I thought that I was going to do something horrible that would end my life at one point." Not only did the behavior affect her mental health, so did the consequences. Earning days at the district Discipline Alternative Education Placement center (DAEP), "gave me the pinch I needed, but it also brought my mentality way down, my mental state way down."

Meredith was not allowed to participate in social events at school, however, she "managed to show up anyways." She "spent all my time in school or after school, at school…or with friends, with teachers," any reason not to be at home. Meredith's social circle was wide during high school, but not with positive influences. Her and her friends were involved in "certain stuff that caused me to, it just made me dig a deeper hole that I was already in…uh drugs, alcohol." Now, she "can count on one hand the number of people I talk to."

Meredith suggested schools focus on more "adult life" topics such as career options, taxes, and job applications because she admitted that would have helped her after graduation. In the future, Meredith hopes to eventually get into medical school and become a doctor. Even after all the challenges at home and in

high school, now she is content: "I feel like I did, and my sister did, what most kids don't have to do…to get where we are and that's honestly what I hoped for…I just hoped for my own place…I just hoped for this peace. And I got it, that's all I want." Outlined in Table 3 are Meredith's at-risk factors.

Table 3

Meredith's Combined At-Risk Factors

At-Risk Factor	
Academic Achievement	X
Discipline	X
Homeless	X
Pregnant/Parent	
Previous Dropout	
English Language Learner	X
Residential Placement	
Parental Incarceration	
Social Influences	X
Mental Health	X
Family Challenges	X
Truancy	X
Drugs/Alcohol	X

Yuna

Yuna, an 18-year-old 2021 high school graduate, has completed her first semester at the local community college and just started a part-time job as a barista at a nearby coffee shop. Yuna lives at home with her mom and dad and spends most of her free time with her boyfriend, a graduate of the at-risk alternative high school. Her expectations have changed slightly since high school:

"They've gotten a lot, like, like higher, but it's not it's not optimistic anymore…it's realistic expectations of myself."

Yuna attended the at-risk alternative campus during her junior and senior year of high school, hoping to find motivation to graduate. Prior to that, Yuna felt forced to go to school: "My whole life, before I went to the [at-risk alternative school], I hated school." Her ineligibility to take advanced placement classes in high school affected her mental health and attributed to her decisions to skip school. She even considered dropping out:

> They literally sent a letter and was like 'your scores are too low, you can't be in an AP class,' so that made me like feel really bad about myself, and I was like, well if I can't get into an AP class then like, why even like go? I would, um skip school because I just, I couldn't, I just didn't feel like going anywhere and I racked up so many hours that I wouldn't be able to graduate, so I will just drop down like with, with a GED.

Other than truancy, Yuna did not have significant discipline problems in high school possibly because "I really wasn't seen either. I was a quiet kid, so they didn't really see me, so I wasn't really disciplined that much." During high school, Yuna did not join any clubs or organizations, she "just kind of like stayed home…[and] wasn't really social." She was shy and had "a lot of toxic friends."

Yuna was adamant that schools should do a better job of preparing students for life after graduation, "no one prepared me for the, the mountains of like stuff that we had to do." Yuna only remembers one business class describing taxes and budgeting. She shared, "I feel like it'd be great if there if we were able to add that to like schools and

have like and make it mandatory." Yuna also did not feel prepared for completing college applications, registering for classes, or applying for financial aid. She shared that she spent a lot of time at the community college she attends asking questions and getting help. For now, Yuna is "content, but like not pleased with it because it's going to take some time to get where I really want to be" which is becoming a doctor - "since elementary my dream after uh high school was to go to college and be a doctor…." Table 4 summarizes Yuna's at-risk factors.

Table 4

Yuna's Combined At-Risk Factors

At-Risk Factor	
Academic Achievement	X
Discipline	
Homeless	
Pregnant/Parent	
Previous Dropout	
English Language Learner	
Residential Placement	
Parental Incarceration	
Social Influences	X
Mental Health	X
Family Challenges	
Truancy	X
Drugs/Alcohol	

Ricky

A 2020 high school graduate, 19-year-old Ricky is expecting a little girl in a few months. Unmarried, he lives with his girlfriend, who he met during his junior and senior

year at the at-risk alternative campus. Ricky hoped attending the at-risk alternative campus would allow him to recover lost credits and get away from his friends. Since graduation, he "has been working and finding out what life really is…learning how the world is and how people are…the three P's: people, places, and perspective." He works full-time in industry and has a shoe repair business on the side that he is trying to expand.

For Ricky, elementary and middle school was a place he had to be because his parents were also gone during the day. Although he enjoyed being at school, he wanted it on his terms: "With school I didn't realize that you needed to, you had to work for what you had and you had to get up when you're tired and you couldn't just dip out of school." He had no goals or motivation in high school and thought about dropping out of school a lot because of "just not wanting to get up every morning, not trying to do the work, not trying to, not be able to do what I wanted and work and not go and have to deal with all the people." He did not like people at the big high school:

> There everybody was rude, nobody, everybody was judgy. This is really
> just kids, but then again, you had, you had some adults, just like based
> upon how you look like there was teachers or, or people you would like to
> based on how you, or, or just what you presented as….

During high school, Ricky was talkative and argumentative with teachers. He usually had an attitude and would walk out of class:

> I was one of those kids that talked a lot, always talked or always was
> arguing or had an attitude, or just walked out of class…which, well before
> the [at-risk alternative campus], I never went to class. Uh, always, always,
> always, always in fights with teachers. Uh, I did a lot of stupid stuff…I

just didn't like class, didn't like teachers that I thought they had a problem with me.

Ricky received two DAEP assignments during his sophomore year and a ticket for being under the influence during his later high school years. His behavior affected him mentally and academically during high school, "I really did disappoint myself a lot…I never really had good grades." He spent a lot of time partying and doing drugs with his friends during high school and "did not like being alone." However, once he transferred to the at-risk alternative campus his junior year, Ricky was able to make academic progress and had an outlet for his behavior issues.

Ricky had lived with his mom and younger siblings in Texas after moving away from his dad due to violence in the home. During his senior year, Ricky and a few students from the at-risk alternative campus moved into an apartment together, which added more challenges: "everybody was just down at their lowest and it had no nothing else to do." After graduation, Ricky moved to Mississippi to try and reconnect with family and start a new life, but that did not go well either:

I get my nose dirty…horribly from there on…nothing's goes great. I can't keep my head clean we can't, I'm going to work every day but I'm not doing what I'm supposed to do…blowing all of our money…I lost like almost 180 pounds, uh, we lost everything.

Once Ricky and his girlfriend found out they were pregnant, he stopped using drugs, started saving money, and relocated back to Texas. They have their own apartment and a car as well as other accomplishments:

I've been nonstop working. We got a place in this whole, this whole time,

even when I was in high school living alone, I didn't have an ID, I didn't

have a social [security card], and I didn't have a birth certificate, even in

senior year when I was living alone… I just now, like the past three

months got my ID and my social security card.

Although he believes he is a lot better off now than he used to be and is looking

forward to being a daddy, he wished that he had been more prepared for money

management and taxes, especially as he works to expand his shoe repair business.

Readers can find Ricky's at-risk factors in Table 5.

Table 5

Ricky's Combined At-Risk Factors

At-Risk Factor	
Academic Achievement	X
Discipline	X
Homeless	X
Pregnant/Parent	
Previous Dropout	
English Language Learner	
Residential Placement	X
Parental Incarceration	X
Social Influences	X
Mental Health	X
Family Challenges	X
Truancy	X
Drugs/Alcohol	X

Bobert

Bobert transferred to the alternative school halfway through his sophomore year, looking for motivation to graduate and someone he could talk to about his life. An 18-year-old 2021 graduate, he has completed his first semester of welding school at the local community college and is enjoying a mini-vacation after earning high As in his classes. He works part-time with his uncle's landscaping and construction business, a job he had during high school as well, and he continues to live at home with his mom and dad. Bobert loves welding: "that's one thing that I was very excited about is, uh, welding. I would sit my other classes at high school and talk about welding, while I'd be in a Texas history and I was very excited about it." Bobert's plans for the future include:

> I'm gonna go for that degree, so I can always have a backup plan after
>
> backup plan. I always look at it that way, I, I don't want to be able to uh go
>
> into something and then not able to do it and then be lost for the rest of my
>
> life.

For Bobert, his school day depended on how ugly the arguing was between his parents that morning: "Before high school, like some days would just be terrible, then other days would be perfect…once high school hit that's probably when everything went downhill." His freshman year and half of his sophomore year were spent at the comprehensive high school:

> My discipline problems were freshman year when I was at the main high
>
> school…mostly was leaving school, hanging out with my friends in the
>
> middle of the day, um let's see what else…doing drugs, but I didn't do any
>
> hardcore, just, just that [marijuana].

Once Bobert transferred to the at-risk alternative school, discipline for him was not a problem in school, "maybe out of school," but he did not expand on those issues. Once Bobert began attending the at-risk alternative campus, he "stopped that…and started to get uh my life together pretty much." Bobert was assigned to the DAEP during his eighth-grade year, but during high school, he only received in-school suspension for consequences.

He did not have a lot of friends in high school and still does not after graduation. He "never really found that crowd that I could hang out with and have that group of like six or seven friends that all wanted to hang out." He continues to have problems with his parents: "I guess my parents' relationship dropped and then it caused my relationship with them to drop as well," and he is concerned that they are in the beginning stages of Alzheimer's.

Bobert's goal in high school was "not to fail, not to spend any extra time that I didn't need to there." He wanted to graduate "the right way" meaning not get a GED, and although he considered dropping out at one point, he did not. As far as goals, Bobert said, "my goals, I, I really, really didn't have goals, other than just don't fail and don't repeat high school that was my I guess only goals." Bobert was pretty clear that he felt a lot of time was wasted during high school learning things he was not going to use, "but I think schools should teach you more about how to control your assets." Bobert did share that signing up for college classes was tricky and "there are some difficulties that not a lot of people tell you about," but he learned "when you hit college, you ask them why you need help" and that "once you figure that out, things get easier." He is content with his life since graduation: "I uh seem to be doing a lot better for myself and overcoming a lot

more things that I couldn't do in high school." Bobert's at-risk factors are provided in Table 6.

Table 6

Bobert's Combined At-Risk Factors

At-Risk Factor	
Academic Achievement	X
Discipline	X
Homeless	
Pregnant/Parent	
Previous Dropout	
English Language Learner	
Residential Placement	
Parental Incarceration	
Social Influences	X
Mental Health	X
Family Challenges	X
Truancy	X
Drugs/Alcohol	X

Allie

Just turning 20, Allie attended the at-risk alternative campus the end of her junior year of high school and all of her senior year, graduating in 2020. She works as a dog bather and groomer and has a lot of passion and enthusiasm for her work: "I think it's a great opportunity, the company's great um, I definitely, it definitely fell into my lap and I'm very happy it did because this is definitely what I want to do for the rest of my life." Allie's future goals include attending the grooming academy and possibly entering

grooming competitions. Allie lives with her boyfriend, a graduate of the at-risk

alternative high school.

Allie's freshman year of high school started out great, but by the second semester,

things started to take a turn:

> I was with this guy and we were, I was young, I thought I was in love,
>
> you know of course, thing so things fell apart and I was so upset and after
>
> about the first semester of freshman year I started hanging out with the
>
> wrong people and I just I didn't care about school anymore….

For most of her freshman and sophomore year, Allie had significant discipline problems:

"I was like doing, I started doing drugs, skipping school, skipping class, and it was so

easy at the big high school." Allie was assigned to the DAEP multiple times which would

lead to her eventually dropping out of high school during her sophomore year. Her

parents tried to help her during this time: "I mean they put me in a psych ward at one

point to try to help me to get me on medication…uh they tried to put me in rehab." Allie

rebelled and regrets her actions now: "wish I had taken it more seriously and actually

tried, um, motivating myself more to learn more because I could have done a lot more."

The consequences she faced due to her behaviors did have an effect on her after

graduation, "um I wouldn't say negatively, I would say positive, because now, I look

back on it, and I know that's not the way I want to act or live." Dropping out of high

school affected her mental health: "I was honestly a little depressed and stuff and uh I

didn't know what I wanted to do...." For Allie, getting pregnant changed her path:

> I ended up getting pregnant and that was basically what really put
>
> everything on pause and made me really look at everything, and I was like

> wow I don't know what I'm doing, uh I'm, I was a loser, I mean, I was not
>
> doing what I should be doing in life, and I was really behind.

Unfortunately, Allie lost her baby before she enrolled in the at-risk alternative high school. Returning to school gave Allie the motivation she needed to graduate:

> When I uh went back to high school and had a clear mind, and I was like
>
> that is not what I want, I do not want to do that anymore, um I realized my
>
> goal is, I want to make my parents happy. I want them to be proud of me. I
>
> wanted them to forgive me. I wanted to be successful in life.

Since graduation, her relationship with her parents has improved although Allie continues to "struggle with depression and overcoming that without doing my drugs." She does occasionally smoke marijuana "but not on a daily basis." Table 7 summarizes Allie's at-risk factors.

Table 7

Allie's Combined At-Risk Factors

At-Risk Factor	
Academic Achievement	X
Discipline	X
Homeless	X
Pregnant/Parent	X
Previous Dropout	X
English Language Learner	
Residential Placement	
Parental Incarceration	
Social Influences	X
Mental Health	X
Family Challenges	X

(Continued)

At-Risk Factor	
Truancy	X
Drugs/Alcohol	X

Scott

Scott is a 2021, 18-year-old graduate who attended the at-risk alternative campus for his senior year as his final chance to graduate on time. Scott lives with his girlfriend, a graduate of the at-risk alternative campus, and her family. For the most part, Scott is doing what he thought he would do after high school: "I knew I was going to be working, I was hoping I was going to be working in the plants. I knew, I was hoping that I was going to be with my girlfriend still which is going good." In high school, he wanted to be a welder and hopes to be a welder in the future. Due to his work schedule, Scott is unable to attend community college or a trade school at this time.

During high school, simply getting through the day was Scott's goal: "I expected myself to just let's just get through the day, if I can get through today, I'll be good as soon as I get home, I can work on something." Scott thought about dropping out of high school multiple times but did not for two reasons: he did not want his mom to "wash her hands of him" and he did not want his girlfriend to be dating a dropout.

Admitting to having "lots of those" as far as discipline problems went, Scott is stubborn and does not like to listen. He will fight someone if he needs to. Scott was assigned to the DAEP at least three times during high school and "I think I got ISS [In-School Suspension] I don't know how many times, to suspended, I have no idea how many times – a hefty amount though."

His father became disabled while Scott was in high school and this added many responsibilities for Scott, "I was mainly the person who like I cooked for everybody at the house. I cleaned and made sure the trucks were running. I got, I was basically like the main person over there…." With these added burdens, Scott felt resentful of his parents: "at a certain point, I was like you know what? If y'all can't do all this by yourself, then I don't know what to tell you. I'm tired of doing it for you." He moved out of his parent's house during his senior year and began living with his girlfriend's family. His relationship with his mom is still problematic since graduation, but his relationship with his dad has improved.

During high school, Scott was not involved in school activities and "mainly outside of school I just hung out with my girlfriend or worked on my truck or went and did some side work for somebody." Scott did not have a lot of friends in high school and since graduation that has not changed. He spends most of his time working at his job, working on his truck, and with his girlfriend. Scott felt unprepared after graduation for some adult tasks. He was unprepared for finances, taxes, and how to complete a job application, "previous jobs…what jobs can I put…mowing yards?" He told me, "like you don't learn how to buy a house, you don't learn how to get an apartment, you don't learn how to pay your taxes, all that stuff some of those real life skills" would have really helped him out. Scott's at-risk factors are outlined in Table 8.

Table 8

Scott's Combined At-Risk Factors

At-Risk Factor	
Academic Achievement	X
Discipline	X
Homeless	X
Pregnant/Parent	
Previous Dropout	
English Language Learner	
Residential Placement	
Parental Incarceration	
Social Influences	X
Mental Health	X
Family Challenges	X
Truancy	X
Drugs/Alcohol	X

Charlie

Recently completing his first semester of community college, Charlie is a 19-year-old 2021 graduate who spent his senior year at the at-risk alternative campus in an effort to catch up on lost credits and graduate on time. He does not work currently although is considering getting a part-time job. He is interested in pursuing a business degree. For Charlie, his life does not look like what he thought it might before graduation:

No, no, not at all. I, uh, didn't think I'd go to school. I didn't think I'd be

in a relationship…and really, I'm not sure I even thought I'd be alive at

this point, you know…really…I did dumb stuff in high school and then I

went so deep and dark that I didn't see a way out….

Charlie did not talk a lot about his earlier experiences before high school. He had

moved to the district from another city during junior high and we reminisced about how

shy he had been in junior high. He did reference trouble between his parents being the

reason for the move, "that's why we left and I moved here…he, uh, he and my mom

didn't get along very good, so, uh, well, uh, I don't talk to him."

Charlie's expectations during high school were to "graduate. Keep doing what I

was doing." His goals were along the same lines:

Goals, uh…to not get caught…goals after graduation, I figured I'd be

hanging with the same crew and dealing [drugs]…didn't, uh, didn't think

much more about it really, no, not really…I wanted to take care of my

mom…you know, she's a single mom and has trouble working, so I

wanted to do that for her…you know, take care of her, and why change,

uh, well…something that was working?

Charlie liked high school until his junior year. "I loved high school until about my junior

year. Things started to fall apart." Once things started to fall apart, Charlie struggled at

home, at school, and mentally:

There was some time I was really worried about being arrested…so…then

also COVID hit and we weren't going to school like we were before…and

I kinda fell apart at home and with my grades…which were barely

hanging on anyway…got depressed, my mom was struggling too…then

when we could go back at my senior year, I, uh, couldn't, I couldn't do it.

I felt like such a failure and I had started to realize these weren't really my

friends and I really didn't have anybody.

He gave serious thought to dropping out of school: "I didn't want to go back. I, uh, well, had failed my mom…and had really put her in a bind…I just didn't have the motivation to go back…." I mentioned I had seen him once at the big high school and remember thinking how happy he looked. He replied, "ummm…well, I was popular…but maybe for the wrong reasons looking back…." Although Charlie admittedly engaged in poor behavior in high school, he never served ISS nor was suspended from school. He also never served a DAEP assignment. He did mention possible consequences from law enforcement outside of school but indicated that nothing came from those concerns.

Although Charlie was popular during high school, now he spends all of his free time with his girlfriend, a graduate of the at-risk alternative high school. He continues to live at home with his mom who he still looks after. Although Charlie admitted to not being as prepared for his classes in college as he should have been, he blames that on himself, "that's not on teachers…I think I should have paid more attention in school really." Since graduating from high school, Charlie realizes how lucky he was and has decided not to continue his poor behaviors, "I got lucky and I know that now…I think, uh, you know, I think I just learned from it and decided that's not how I want to live my life now." A summary of Charlie's at-risk factors can be found in Table 9.

Table 9

Charlie's Combined At-Risk Factors

At-Risk Factor	
Academic Achievement	X
Discipline	
Homeless	
Pregnant/Parent	
Previous Dropout	
English Language Learner	
Residential Placement	
Parental Incarceration	
Social Influences	X
Mental Health	X
Family Challenges	X
Truancy	X
Drugs/Alcohol	X

Overview of Participants

All the participants in this study attended and graduated from an at-risk alternative high school. One of the requirements for acceptance into this alternative high school was to be identified as at-risk by one of the 14 at-risk factors recognized in Texas. In this study, all eight participants demonstrated at least one of the first four at-risk factors relating to academic achievement such as core course failures, standardized assessment failures, or retention issues. Five of the participants demonstrated an at-risk factor relating to discipline, with a recent DAEP assignment being the most common. Of the five participants with a discipline-related at-risk factor, four also demonstrated the at-risk

factor relating to homelessness. Table 10 outlines the three prevalent Texas identified at-risk factors.

Table 10

Prevalent Texas At-Risk Factors

Participant Pseudonym	Academic Achievement	Discipline	Homeless
LeeAnn	X		
Meredith	X	X	X
Yuna	X		
Bobert	X	X	
Ricky	X	X	X
Allie	X	X	X
Scott	X	X	X
Charlie	X		

Table 11 summarizes the remaining at-risk factors recognized in Texas based on the participants' responses.

Table 11

Texas-Specific Participant At-Risk Factors

Participant Pseudonym	Pregnant / Parent	Previous Dropout	English as a Second Language	Residential Placement	Parental Incarceration
LeeAnn					
Meredith			X		
Yuna					
Bobert					
Ricky				X	X
Allie	X	X			
Scott					

(Continued)

Participant Pseudonym	Pregnant / Parent	Previous Dropout	English as a Second Language	Residential Placement	Parental Incarceration
Charlie					

Although Texas only recognizes 14 at-risk factors for student identification purposes, researchers agree that students may be faced with a variety of challenging factors (Clemens, et al., 2019; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Rumberger, 1987, 2011). For this study, I chose five additional risk factors to examine based on the participants' responses: (a) social influences; (b) mental health; (c) family challenges; (d) truancy; and (e) personal drug and/or alcohol abuse.

All participants admitted to some struggles in navigating social relationships including toxic friendships that led to poor choices and misbehavior during high school. All participants described mental health struggles such as anxiety, depression, isolation, and, for a few, suicidal thoughts. All but one participant shared challenges at home with their family such as financially struggling single parents, parents with disabilities, and past domestic violence. For two of the participants, family challenges included being kicked out of their house due to poor behavior. For all but one participant, truancy, skipping classes, skipping school, and choosing not to attend at all, appeared to be major factors during high school. Finally, five participants reported a personal abuse of either drugs or alcohol during high school. Table 12 summarizes these additional risk factors for each participant.

Table 12

Additional Participant Risk-Factors During High School

Participant Pseudonym	Social Influences	Mental Health	Family Challenges	Truancy	Drugs / Alcohol
LeeAnn	X	X	X	X	
Meredith	X	X	X	X	X
Yuna	X	X		X	
Ricky	X	X	X	X	X
Bobert	X	X	X	X	X
Allie	X	X	X	X	X
Scott	X	X	X		
Charlie	X	X	X	X	X

All participants in this study were identified as at-risk through two of the 14 Texas criteria. Two of the participants identified with six of the 14 Texas criteria. For the other risk-factors, participants identified with three to five factors, with five participants identifying with all five factors. Combining all factors, the participants in this study averaged eight at-risk factors overall.

Themes

Three major themes emerged from the overall data: (a) attitude; (b) influential relationships; and (c) environment. For each theme, sub-themes were also identified and I will discuss each sub-theme in the following sections. A description of each of the themes, their sub-themes, and significant statements can be found in Table 13.

Table 13

Emerging Themes and Sub-Themes

Theme	Sub-Theme	Description	Significant Statement
Attitude		Overall feelings, impressions, or thoughts	"My attitude has changed, I uh seem to be doing a lot better for myself and overcoming a lot more things that I couldn't do in high school."
	Goals and Expectations		"I was mainly focused on just getting myself out of my house…" "I had, uh, kind of low expectations."
	Motivation		"I just didn't have the motivation to go back."
Influential Relationships		Relationships having an effect on the student	"I'd say all the people in in the school staff, including the students, are, all of that matters and every person you meet in high school has an effect on you in your future."
	Peers		"um since graduation I've uh lost all my friends, but one" "…but a lot of the high school friends you will have are not the good, best friends you will remain to have."
	Family		"I didn't really have a strong relationship with my family…" "With my family during school, it was a lot better than what it was now."
	School Personnel		"…the teachers paid more attention…" "I've uh kept in touch with my teachers that I liked…"
Environment		Surroundings or conditions that play a role in the student's life	"It's certain environments that you are around it just brings your mental state down a lot."

Theme	Sub-Theme	Description	Significant Statement
	Living Arrangements		"I ran away I believe twice before I got kicked out…" "…just to get out of the house from an argument I go stay at my grandfather or something down the street."
	Comprehensive High School		"Whenever I was going to the high school I honestly, like the first think it was like my first or second day of sophomore year I was like you know what let me get myself sent to DAEP…"
	Alternative High School		"…my attitude about school that's when my whole attitude about school changed when I came to the [alternative campus]."

Attitude

Researchers agree attitude affects behaviors and performance (Dumont & Provost, 1999; Lessard et al., 2009; Martin & Marsh, 2006; McDermott, et al., 2018; Rumberger, 2011; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006; Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013). For the eight participants in this study, all described an overall poor attitude about school, specifically during their time at the comprehensive high school. Feelings of "just let me out" and "I hate it" were prevalent, especially during their time spent at the comprehensive high school. Five participants also described a poor attitude in elementary or junior high as well.

Goals and Expectations. Reinforcing their attitude about education, participants had very little goals or expectations for themselves, either during school or for their life after graduation. For all the participants, the ultimate goal was to get out of high school. Only LeeAnn and Yuna described an initial goal other than "just getting out." In LeeAnn's case, a school counselor was blamed for not allowing her to be removed from a class she was failing. When she received a failing grade in a pre-advanced placement

(AP) class she did not need, LeeAnn pleaded with the school counselor to be removed and placed in a regular class. When LeeAnn's attempt was denied, her mom made an unsuccessful formal request for her removal, a pivotal moment in LeeAnn's attitude:

> I was in lunch detention all the time, and so, because my grade started failing, that's what made me stop going to school is because I was trying to run from…like hide from like the fact that I had to complete this.

A similar situation occurred for Yuna:

> Because everything that, um, because no one told me to succeed in high school and anything I had to take AP classes. And when they were offered to me, I was shot down from all four of them, the math, science, and English, and history.

For both of these participants, this stumbling block served to reinforce their poor attitude about school. Mental health issues contributed to the participants' poor attitude and lack of goals and expectations about school. For instance, Charlie described symptoms of depression after failing classes and falling behind in credits while Yuna received a formal diagnosis of separation and social anxiety. For other participants, drug use and trouble at home increased anxiety and depression.

Motivation. Through their experiences at the comprehensive high school, all the participants eventually held a negative attitude about school, which greatly affected their motivation to graduate. With the reality that they were at their last chance to graduate on time, they all enrolled at the at-risk alternative campus. At the at-risk alternative campus, the participants found supportive teachers that listened without judgment and an opportunity to catch up on credits, getting them back on track to graduate. With their

ultimate goal once again in sight, motivation improved. With increased motivation, the

participants began recovering lost credits and earning higher grades, leading them to feel

successful and worthy. Along the way, their attitude about school improved as well. In

addition, all the participants felt as if they had no one to talk to, no one that cared about

them and would listen without judgment. In an attempt for attention, participants either

shut down, withdrew from social activities, friends, and family, or acted out such as

fighting or abusing drugs. Two participants admitted to engaging in bad behavior and not

once being disciplined. None of the participants described a time when an adult made an

attempt to find out what was going on with them during their time spent at the

comprehensive high school. Failing classes and lost credits, behavior issues, challenges at

home, and with no one to talk with, participants felt defeated, lost, and looking for a way

out.

Due to their poor attitude about school, dropping out became a possibility for all

the participants, and for Allie, her reality. Most of the participants felt that they had

gotten so far behind in credits that there was no way for them to catch up, as in LeeAnn's

case:

> Because of the stress I was under with graduating, because they were like
>
> 'you're not going to graduate on time and you're gonna have to do another
>
> year of high school because of all the credits you lost,' and so, then I was
>
> like, 'well, I'm just not gonna go.' I'll just give up because I'm not going
>
> to do another year of high school.

Since graduation, all eight participants have changed attitudes about education and have

realized the importance of graduating and receiving a diploma. Scott sums it up for all the

participants, "I'm happy I went through it…I'm kind of glad I got that piece of paper but same time that was a lot of stuff to go through for a single sheet of paper."

Until the participants transferred to the at-risk alternative high school, all shared a general negative attitude regarding school and their future goals and expectations. One factor that contributed significantly to this poor attitude was low academic achievement such as failing classes and loss of graduation credit, possibly delaying their graduation date. As the participants continued to fall further behind in credits, this created a sense of hopelessness, causing the participants to believe dropping out of high school was their only option. Upon transferring to the at-risk alternative campus where they were allowed to recover credits at a faster pace and thus graduate on time, hope reappeared as they experienced success. As a result, not only their grades improved, but their attitude did as well.

Influential Relationships

Relationships play an influential role during adolescence and through emerging adulthood. Rumberger (2011) maintained that peer relationships are particularly influential during adolescence and Arnett (2000) determined that peer relationships begin to change during the move into emergent adulthood. In a similar fashion, family dynamics play a role in influencing and directing choices (Randolph, et al., 2006b; Rumberger, 2011). Knesting (2008) also describes the importance of caring and concerned teachers within a school who are skilled at providing feelings of value and worth to their at-risk students. For the participants in this study, peers, family members, and teachers contributed to positive and negative experiences during high school and post-graduation.

Peers. All the participants described looking for friends who were loyal, accepting, non-judgmental, and had an open mind. However, the friendships the participants described at the comprehensive high school, utilized these traits to support and reinforce negative behaviors. For example, LeeAnn used her high school friend as a distraction from attending school thus giving her a reason to skip school. Meredith, Ricky, and Allie were admittedly popular yet all shared similar experiences of "being in the wrong crowd" or "friends for the wrong reasons" with lots of drugs, alcohol, partying, and drama. And Charlie was only popular because he sold drugs on campus.

Once transferring to the at-risk alternative campus, the peer influences on the participants changed, and in all cases their circle of friends grew smaller, yet stronger. As LeeAnn stated,

> I also met friends…at the [at-risk alternative campus], where it's just like,
> we all come from different backgrounds and we all have our own
> problems at home; but then it's like, it all kind of like makes us want to be
> together because we all know we have problems and it's something we can
> all relate to and be open and talk to you about.

One of the reasons their friendships changed may have resulted from their romantic relationships. Two of the participants are currently not involved in a romantic relationship, nor were they involved with anyone during their time spent at the at-risk alternative high school. For the remaining six participants, their significant other also graduated from this at-risk alternative high school, and for five of these six participants, the relationship began while both persons attended the school. All six participants

involved in a romantic relationship attributed at least part of their success in persevering through graduation to their significant other.

Family. Over the course of their high school years, all participants described various types of challenges with their family members such as financial struggles, poor communication, and a lack of support. Four of the participants lived in single-parent households: Ricky, Charlie, and LeeAnn lived with their mom, and Meredith lived with her dad. All had siblings except Charlie and Bobert. Single parents generally experience more financial instability and lack support networks which may have increase stress and challenges within the home (Cancian & Meyer, 2018; Lessard, et al., 2009). Upon reflection, all four of these participants accepted at least part of the blame for the difficulties at home although Meredith and Ricky both reported feeling as if their parent did not support them during high school. Ricky and Charlie both referenced domestic violence during their interviews as the reason they had moved with their respective moms, most likely due to the increasing level of stress within the home.

Researchers suggest two-parent households, especially two biological parents, have access to more resources such as income and support than single-parent households (Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Wasserman, 2020). In this study, four participants lived with both biological parents (Yuna, Bobert, Scott, and Allie); however, only Yuna described her homelife as "normal" during high school. The other three participants had problematic relationships with their parents during high school that continued post-graduation. Although Allie retained all responsibility for problems at home, Bobert and Scott both blamed their parents for problems in the home.

As a result of their tumultuous journey to graduation or simply having reached emergent adulthood and a level of maturity, their family relationships look different since graduation. Three participants have mended issues with their family members and continue to rebuild trust since graduation. These three participants feel gratitude towards their parents for supporting them even when times were difficult. Another three participants are trying to have a relationship with at least one of their parents and continue to blame the other parent for a perceived lack of support. Bobert, although still at odds with his parents, described a concern for them as they get older.

School Personnel. Before attending the at-risk alternative campus, only two participants reported having an adult at school they felt comfortable talking with, a necessity for students who are at-risk (Knesting, 2008). At the at-risk alternative campus, all eight identified multiple teachers and staff members they were not only comfortable engaging in conversation with, but also sought out to ask advice or get help for academics or personal reasons.

All participants looked for friends and adults who had open minds and would not be judgmental; so, for the participants, the ability to feel heard by a trusted adult was paramount to their personal feelings of self-worth. The teachers at the at-risk alternative campus were skilled in balancing relationships with necessary academics. As the participants' self-worth began to improve, so did their motivation to succeed. Once the participants rediscovered their motivation, teachers were able to provide needed content knowledge to decrease academic gaps, allowing participants to recover lost credits. Yuna summed up how the participants felt about the staff at the at-risk alternative campus in this way:

You motivated me and showing that, like I wasn't just a person in the school system, I was actually like my own person. I wasn't just someone who you're going to see one time and be like 'oh, did you graduate from my school?' Like, you made me feel like I was actually like, known and heard, and not just you, but a lot of, many teachers at the [at-risk alternative campus] made me feel like, worth.

For these participants, being seen as an individual was essential to their success. After graduation, a few of the participants continue to keep in touch with their teachers from the at-risk alternative campus.

In understanding the influential relationships for the participants, two factors appeared to be most prevalent, social influences and family challenges. Although these are not specific to Texas at-risk criteria, for the participants in this study, they were contributing factors to their experiences during and after high school. During high school, participants admitted to having a poor social circle of friends that supported their poor choices. Post-graduation, participants have realized how their friends influence their decisions and have opted to have only one or two trusted friends, in fact, making a point to stay away from negative influences. Family challenges greatly affected their experiences during high school, from financial problems to being their parent's caretaker to previous domestic abuse. After graduating, the participants appear to have come to terms with their past family struggles and are attempting to have the relationships they can with at least one parent.

Environment

Environmental factors may influence the decisions and outcomes for students (Rumberger, 2011) and for the participants in this study, this held true. During high school, four of the participants shared a significant environmental risk factor, homelessness. Researchers report that mental health issues, early pregnancy, behavior issues, and poor academic achievement can result from homelessness (Cumming & Gloekner, 2012; Kim, 2020; Rumberger, 2011; Uretsky & Stone, 2016). In this study, these conditions were described by the affected participants. For all participants, both living arrangements and school environment affected the experiences and perspectives of the participants during high school and continue to influence their decisions post-graduation.

Living Arrangements. Due to problems at home, two participants were listed as runaways at some point during their high school years and four participants lived away from their parents during their senior year. All four participants described challenges in living away from their parents, but claimed this choice was better than living at home. Without parent support, the participants were responsible for their basic needs such as food, shelter, and clothing and to provide these items, all four of these participants also worked during high school. These responsibilities oftentimes took precedence over their academics and caused additional stress that other high school students may not have endured. In several cases, staff at the at-risk alternative campus provided clothing and food and even paid a few utility bills to alleviate stress from the participants.

For all but one of the other participants, although they lived at home, they reported discontent and troubles. Emotional abuse, troubles at school, and financial

struggles all influenced the participants' experiences during high school. For instance, in Bobert's case, his attitude at school resulted from arguments his parents had each morning. And in another example, Charlie, wanting to help his mom financially, became a drug dealer.

Comprehensive High School. From the perspective of all eight participants, the larger comprehensive high school was not an environment conducive to supporting their needs, and in some ways, accelerated their problems. For example, several participants described the ease of leaving campus and skipping classes most likely due to the high student enrollment. Several participants reported feeling invisible, with two participants believing that they did not receive any discipline consequences for their behaviors in high school due to being quiet and generally not seen. Large class sizes provided opportunities for quiet and disengaged students to remain disengaged, especially if there were disruptive students in the class requiring more attention.

Alternative At-Risk High School. The participants all agreed that the environment of the at-risk alternative campus made a positive difference for them in terms of experience, motivation, and attitude. Attending this high school played an important role in their perseverance through graduation. As Charlie stated, "I think I felt hope for the first time…that maybe I could graduate…that maybe I'd be ok."

For all the participants, the smaller student population made a difference. Staff members had more opportunity and time to build strong relationships with most students. Alternative education campuses in Texas are required to maintain a 15 to 1 student to teacher ratio in most classes. For the participants, this was significant in building relationships and personalizing instruction. Personalizing instruction sometimes meant

taking a day or two to individually work with students on post-graduation needs. For example, most of the participants remembered a social studies teacher taking a day out of the required curriculum to help students apply for college and financial aid.

Alternative campuses are not penalized in the state accountability system for high numbers of students graduating on the minimum credit plan, requiring only 22 credits. All the participants were behind in credits and trying to catch up in order to graduate on time. This meant they were recovering credits and also taking current required courses. In most cases, having to add more classes to achieve a 26-credit recommended plan would add significant time to their high school years. In addition, five of the participants had at least a part-time job during high school. Allowing students to graduate on the minimum credit plan allowed time for employment.

For all the participants, feeling valued and seen as an individual was important, as Meredith stated, "I felt like it was easier for teachers, principals, counselors to deal with kids and to focus more on them, on each one individually." The at-risk alternative campus offered a safe place for the participants to express themselves and work towards their individual goals knowing that they had the support of multiple staff members.

Homelessness was a significant at-risk factor for half of the participants in the study, affecting their environment both inside and outside of school. In this study, all of the participants identifying with this factor also had significant discipline problems and low academic achievement. Once enrolled at the at-risk alternative campus however, discipline and academic achievement improved. This improvement is possibly due to the smaller, more personalized environment, but it may also be due to the realization that the goal of graduation is in sight.

Summary

Chapter IV presented an analysis of the eight participant responses according to procedures outlined by Moustakas (1994) in Chapter III. To begin this process, I first bracketed my own biases and experiences in the Epoche (Moustakas, 1994). In an effort to understand the lived experiences of at-risk graduates now emerging into adulthood, participant interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to capture relevant statements (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moran, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Meaningful participant statements were narrowed to categories using coding techniques described by Alase (2017) and Saldana (2016). This chapter included rich descriptions of participant experiences and perspectives during their time in high school and post-graduation.

Three themes emerged from the participant responses: (a) attitude; (b) influential persons; and (c) environment. During their high school experience, participants all expressed a poor attitude about school until they transferred to the at-risk alternative campus. Regardless of time spent at the at-risk alternative campus, all participants experienced a positive change in attitude and desire to graduate high school. A variety of people influenced the participants during their high school years including friends, family, and teachers. Post-graduation, all participants agreed their circle of influence had decreased greatly from high school and all participants were aware of negative influences and now make an effort to protect themselves from those influences. Challenging home environments affected most of the participants and all participants had negative experiences at the comprehensive high school. Post-graduation home lives have improved for the participants, and all were satisfied with their current employment and education environments.

Chapter V will further discuss these themes in relation to the phenomenon. Findings in relation to the research questions, literature review, and framework will be discussed. Implications and future research recommendations will be provided.

CHAPTER V

Discussion and Recommendations

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences and perspectives of graduates who were identified as at-risk during high school and are now transitioning into emerging adulthood. As discussed in Chapters III and IV, the study examined how graduates described their experiences and perceptions both during high school and post-graduation. Eight graduates of the selected at-risk alternative campus participated in this study.

I chose this topic as one that is both personal and relevant to my experiences in K-12 education. As the principal of an at-risk alternative campus, I was able to witness first-hand the challenges this population of students faced both inside and outside of school as they prepared to graduate high school and transition into adulthood. By learning the perspectives of the graduates, my goal was to not only identify supports and barriers along the way, but to also identify additional risk factors that may contribute to the challenges these young adults face leading up to graduation and after. To that end, Arnett's (2000) emerging adulthood theory provides context for these influences to be studied alongside Rumberger's (1987, 2011) framework, which provides for a connection between individual and institutional factors prior to graduation and post-graduation.

Three themes resulted from this study which include (a) attitude; (b) influential relationships; and (c) environment. This chapter contains a discussion of the findings in relation to the research questions, connections to the literature review, connections to the framework, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Research Questions

Three research questions were used to guide this study: (a) How do graduates interpret their post-graduation experiences?; (b) What are the perceived challenges among graduates during their post-graduation experiences?; and (c) What are the perceived support systems among graduates that have influenced their post-graduation experiences? Each research question is discussed in the following sections.

Research Question 1

With regards to the graduates' interpretation of their post-graduation experiences, all eight participants expressed satisfaction with their place in their transition to emerging adulthood when compared to their expectations during high school, albeit more difficult than they originally thought. Initially, most participants expressed a high expectation for their life after high school; yet, faced with risk factors, barriers, and challenges, these dreams were replaced by a desire to get out of high school as quickly as possible.

Attitude. Although all participants described poor attitudes during their time in high school, specifically at the comprehensive high school, their attitudes about school and life have improved since graduation. Participants held the belief that getting out of high school and away from influences they perceived as negative would allow them the opportunity to flourish on their own terms. Although once out of high school the participants continued to face challenges, they shared a sense that these challenges were an acceptable part of adulthood and they developed coping skills to persevere through difficult times they may face. Five participants conveyed a need for self-advocacy, a trait they do not believe they had during high school. They agreed that standing up for themselves is warranted in certain situations and that they have increased confidence now

to advocate for themselves. Successfully reaching a goal they once considered unattainable through significant barriers and challenges has increased their confidence level and provided validation in themselves as a person of worth and value, two characteristics the participants in this study did not have during most of their high school years. This validation has contributed to the participants agreeing they are in a healthier place post-graduation than during their time in high school. Armed with increased self-confidence, positive influences, and maturity, the participants are better able work through problems as they arise.

Influential Relationships. All of the participants expressed changed relationships post-graduation with peers and family members. A few of the participants have a continued relationship with their most influential teachers from the at-risk alternative campus, although the participants shared these relationships have changed as well. The participants explained that they do not talk to these teachers every day like they did in high school, but they do still reach out to them occasionally for advice or to ask how they are doing. One of the participants acknowledged it was nice to know the teachers were still interested in their lives. None of the participants have large social networks post-graduation and instead, choose to spend their time with one or two close friends or family. For six of the eight participants, their significant other is their most trusted person after graduation and the one person they look to for advice and solace. Only one participant described positive experiences with both parents post-graduation. The remaining seven graduates perceived positive experiences post-graduation with only one parent.

Environment. Through their responses, it was clear that all participants held a negative perception about the comprehensive high school environment and a positive perception about the at-risk alternative campus environment. All participants believed that had they not been able to attend the at-risk alternative campus, they would not be where they are now in their life. Through this positive change in environment during their high school years, the participants were able to complete their goal of graduating high school which offered more choices for their post-graduation lifestyles. Whether attending community college or being employed full-time, all of the participants expressed satisfaction and happiness with their environments post-graduation and appeared to look forward to the next milestones.

Research Question 2

In discussing perceived post-graduation challenges, all participants referenced an experience with at least one challenge. Financial issues were the most common referenced challenge. All participants described a lack of preparation for adulthood from either their families, high school education, or both. Most participants wished they had more intentional teaching in regards to financial literacy such as budgeting and taxes. Most referenced not having much experience completing job applications and stated emphatically schools should offer a required reality course to graduating seniors.

Attitude. Although all participants shared various post-graduation challenges, none of the participants had a negative attitude. In their discussions of the challenges they face, all participants appear to have a positive attitude and outlook that regardless of the challenges, they will be able to work through them. Several participants described continued mental health problems post-graduation, but all agreed that not only do they

have better coping skills, they also have at least one trusting person to talk with about any problems that arise. One of the skills participants referenced was simply being able to recognize when their level of depression or anxiety was increasing. Once recognized, they felt confident to talk it out with their trusted person and make appropriate changes.

      Influential Relationships. The challenges with peer relationships and the negative influences from their life during high school have disappeared, leaving all the participants with a very small social circle. For all of the participants, having a small social circle is their choice as they do not want to repeat problems from their high school years. Most of the participants are in a long-term serious romantic relationship and described challenges of living together and learning to work through conflict with each other. For the four participants continuing to live at home, only one referenced continued challenges similar to high school but attributed these problems to his parents getting older.

      Environment. For the four participants enrolled in community college, all shared similar stories of frustration and a general lack of knowledge with college applications, financial aid, and course registrations. Interestingly, these participants all shared that their classes were not as difficult as they had imagined and are all earning high grades. This may be due to a variety of reasons. For one, unlike public education which dictates required classes and required attendance, community college can be perceived as less restrictive with more student autonomy and choice. In addition, for this group of participants who once believed they would not be able to graduate high school and now find themselves attending college, pride and confidence exist where it was hidden before. And although there is also a level of maturity that has been reached post-graduation,

these participants never lacked the ability to do well in school, but perhaps lacked the motivation. Participants not attending college expressed some interest in continuing their education, but other responsibilities took precedence, specifically lack of time due to full-time employment or a child on the way.

Four participants continued to live at home with parents after graduation. These participants expressed interest in finding their own place, yet recognized they were not financially ready to take on that responsibility. Three of the remaining four participants lived with significant others in their own residence. All three had full-time jobs and did not attend school. One participant lived with his girlfriend's family and was hoping to move out soon. Most of the employed participants expressed satisfaction with their current job, although three planned for a different career once they completed college. A few participants described challenges in their workplace such as busy schedules and disrespectful supervisors or colleagues. Learning to manage these problems without resorting to previous behavior such as fighting or walking out had been a challenge for a few participants post-graduation.

Research Question 3

When describing perceived support systems that influenced their post-graduation experiences, significant others and specific teachers at the at-risk alternative high school were the primary supports. Although during their early high school years prior to attending the alternative campus, participants agreed that their friends influenced their activities, after transferring to the alternative campus and post-graduation, all participants acknowledged a much smaller social circle and only a few trusted supports.

Attitude. Participants recognized that negative influences affected their attitude and choices during high school and upon reflection, all acknowledged that these influences were not as supportive as once imagined. The participants agreed that through their relationships and experiences at the at-risk alternative campus, they felt valued for who they were instead of judged. This sense of value possibly led to their improved attitude leading up to graduation and now post-graduation.

Influential Relationships. All participants referred to specific teachers at the at-risk alternative campus as being instrumental in their perseverance to graduation. Two participants referred to a close friend as being influential post-graduation. Neither of these two participants were currently in a romantic relationship and both shared similar stories of their close friend helping them navigate through the college application and registration process. In reference to significant others, six of the eight participants were in a romantic relationship, all with a graduate of this same at-risk alternative high school. These six participants agreed that their significant other was the most influential person in their life post-graduation and in most cases, had been influential in their perseverance to graduation as well. They all agreed their significant other was the main person they go to for advice and support.

Family members held mixed status for participants. All participants described some relationship with family members post-graduation; however, only one of the participants referenced both parents as being supportive and influential in decisions leading up to graduation and post-graduation. Four of the participants described one family member as an influential support person or someone they would go to for advice post-graduation. Of these four family members, all were their mothers. The remaining

three participants had a relationship with at least one parent but did not seek them out for advice or support, nor consider them to be influential in their decisions post-graduation.

     Environment. Collectively, participants believed attending the at-risk alternative campus changed their trajectory, and without that opportunity would not have graduated high school giving them the opportunities they are now experiencing post-graduation. The individualized environment of the at-risk alternative high school allowed them to pursue their immediate goal of graduating high school as quickly as possible, in turn, making enrollment in community college an option. Not only did the participants graduate from this environment, they all agreed the positive and supportive environment of this campus gave them hope for who they were and who they could be.

Connection to the Literature

     In this study, the 14 at-risk factors Texas formally identifies (see Appendix A) were discussed. The first four factors were related to academic achievement and include grade level retention, core course failures, standardized assessment failures, and failure of a readiness assessment in Grades Pre-K-3. In this study, all participants had at least one of the four academic achievement at-risk factors. Of note, only three of the eight participants in this study would be identified with only an academic-related risk factor; the remaining five participants would be identified with an academic-related risk factor as well as other recognized factors.

     Discipline-related factors were the next most common at-risk factors and five of the eight participants identified with both academic and discipline-related factors. In this study, the most common discipline-related at-risk factor recognized by Texas was an assignment to a Discipline Alternative Education Placement (DAEP). Negative

consequences of discipline problems such as being removed from the traditional classroom setting can lead to decreased school engagement and the possibility of achievement gaps, which was demonstrated by the five participants (Maynard et al., 2015; Randolph, et al., 2006a; Raphael, 2006; Rumberger & Losen, 2016; Skiba, et al., 2014). Parental incarceration, an at-risk factor separate from academic and discipline factors, was experienced by one participant.

Researchers have maintained that homelessness increases the likelihood of early pregnancies, mental health issues, behavior issues, and low academic achievement (Cumming & Gloekner, 2012; Kim, 2020; Rumberger, 2011; Uretsky & Stone, 2016). Homelessness is a recognized Texas at-risk factor and four of the participants identified with this at-risk factor alongside academic and discipline-related factors. For these participants, all described mental health issues, behavioral challenges, and poor academic achievement. Two had early pregnancies – one during high school and one post-graduation.

Although not formally recognized by the state of Texas, other risk factors are also present in the literature such as drug abuse, mental health problems, truancy, and negative peer influences (Clemens, et al., 2019; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Rumberger, 1987, 2011). For all the participants in this study, each of these factors contributed to their experiences during high school. Researchers have suggested continued problems with mental health, drug abuse, and difficulty with long-term employment may be experienced by emerging adults who were at-risk during high school (Cobb-Clark & Zhu, 2017; Danziger & Ratner, 2010; Maynard, et al., 2015; Osgood, et al., 2010; Peterson, 2000; Raphael, 2007; Rumberger, 2011). Some participants continued struggles with mental

health issues and drug abuse after high school, and at least one participant struggled with finding consistent long-term employment.

As described in the literature, financial stability was a goal for emerging adults, and deciding to pursue postsecondary education, move out of a parents' home, and even get married were all costly decisions (Cobb-Clark & Gorgens, 2014; Danziger & Ratner, 2010; Osgood, et al., 2010). Although most of the participants in this study were involved in a serious romantic relationship, and one was expecting a child, none of the participants were married. And at least one of the participants decided to attend college only because tuition was being waived.

Connection to the Framework

Arnett (2000) suggested the ages of 18-25 represent a new developmental phase characterized by transition and change in various aspects of a young adult's life. He stated one of the defining characteristics of this new phase was the vast amount of diversity among young adults in this age range including living arrangements, employment, and higher education. In this study, half of the participants continued to live at home post-graduation and half of the participants resided with their significant other. Half of the participants were enrolled in higher education and half were not. Of the seven participants employed, only one expressed certainty of their current job being where they wanted to remain employed.

Rumberger (1987, 2011) identified individual and institutional factors that may influence a student's decision to drop out of high school or persevere through graduation. Although all the participants in this study graduated high school, many of the challenges Rumberger described were evident in the experiences of these graduates. Individual

factors such as educational performance, student behavior, student attitude and student background affected the participants' experiences both during high school and post-graduation. In Rumberger's framework, high grades, good attendance, positive peer influences, and extracurricular involvement generally resulted in students who do not drop out of high school. None of the participants in this study described these behaviors, and without the change in school environments, these participants may have made the decision to drop out of high school.

Rumberger's (1987, 2011) framework described institutional factors that affected the participants' perseverance to graduation. For example, participants living in single-parent households expressed a lack of support from their nonresident parent, and for two participants, the parent they lived with did not offer significant support. School environments also influenced students. Participants expressed a higher level of connection and engagement at the at-risk alternative campus compared to the comprehensive high school, and caring adults in the at-risk alternative school was paramount to their success.

Recommendations for Practice

The first-person descriptions from emerging adults who were identified as at-risk during high school illustrate a need for significant shifts in education practice and policies. The identification, recognition, and continued supportive management of students with at-risk factors should be prioritized. The first step should be to expand the at-risk factors currently included in Texas statute to include substance abuse, mental health issues, and challenging family situations. Expanding the criteria provides an opportunity for schools to specifically identify a student with these challenges and

includes a level of accountability to ensure services and resources are provided. Below are three additional opportunities for schools to support at-risk students including teaching the adults, altering the traditional high school experience, and offering an alternative education opportunity.

Teaching the Adults

It is crucial that each at-risk student have at least one adult in the school who consistently and sincerely engages with them. It is also important to recognize that not every student will identify the same adult as their trusted adult. It should not matter who the student feels comfortable with as long as they have someone available to them on campus. Recognizing that at-risk factors may manifest themselves through poor behaviors such as truancy, discipline problems, academic and school disengagement, and low grades is instrumental. Ideally, classroom teachers would be the first to recognize these characteristics; however, in most comprehensive high schools, general education teachers have large class sizes, short class times, and a variety of student needs. This combination creates a challenge for teachers to build relationships with each student and have time to identify individual student problems. Although decreased class sizes would greatly reduce these challenges, budgetary restraints within the education system may not allow for smaller class sizes. As a result, it becomes the responsibility of every adult in the school, from the custodian to the principal, to build relationships with students and recognize troublesome signs.

Building relationships with students is a crucial first step to identifying and supporting students with at-risk factors. Campus administrators can support personnel with purposeful professional development designed to provide all staff with the skills for

building relationships and recognizing characteristics that may point to an at-risk factor. As a first step, provide opportunities for staff to reflect on their personal values and biases. Have staff think about their experiences growing up and challenges they faced at home or in school. Reflect on how these experiences have affected their choices as they became older. Acknowledge that their current values and beliefs have been shaped by those experiences and they view life through filters created by those experiences. Remind staff that not everyone has the same experiences in life and everyone has different perspectives based on their filters, even students.

As a next step, have open and safe discussions with staff explaining that based on personal beliefs and values, they bring inherent biases to school, classes, and students. Create a safe environment for staff to reflect and engage in conversations about how their biases may affect their relationships with students and ways they can remove bias such as being mindful about the language they use or the tone of their voice. Have teachers role play conversations with each other to mitigate language that may sound judgmental or sarcastic. Have staff think about how they would want their own children to be spoken to and treated if they were going through a difficult time. Most importantly, accept that everyone is going to make mistakes, and then apologize, especially to students, when mistakes happen.

Often, classroom teachers do not receive all the relevant information on their students, information that could be very beneficial in supporting their students. Teachers may not be aware that a student is sleepy in class because they were up all night listening to their parents fight or they had to work the night shift because they have to help support their single mom. Helping all staff realize that students have real experiences in their

lives that are currently affecting their perspectives on school and learning is a necessity.

At most campuses it would be nearly impossible to make sure every staff member knows

every background of every student, and it really is not necessary if all staff respect that

any student may be working through challenges or facing unknown barriers. One way to

help campus staff understand this reality is to write up a combination of backgrounds or

current situations for several current students on campus making sure to remove any

identifying information. Situations of former students can also be used to help preserve

anonymity. Provide time for staff to read through the information and give quiet time to

process what barriers the students represented in these stories might be facing. Discuss

how the challenging situations the students are living through may filter their

perspectives and how that might result in poor behavior or disengagement from school.

Aside from developing sincere and trusting relationships with students, staff need

to have an understanding of the various risk factors and how they affect students. Having

a trained counselor or expert provide in-depth explanations of each factor and real-life

examples can be helpful for teachers to begin to understand the complexity of the factors

as well as their overlap with each other. This learning cannot, and should not, take place

in one session. Learning about the risk factors should be ongoing and embedded in all

staff development. Setting aside time for staff to share student situations that arise both

inside the classroom and throughout the campus should be commonplace and offer staff a

chance to reflect on the situation, identify possible risk factors, and discuss what, if

anything, should change.

In identifying risk factors, good listening skills are vital for teachers. Sometimes a

student may share their risk factor so referring to an administrator or a counselor for

additional support is the next step. Most times, there are several risk factors in a child's life and even teenagers may not know how to verbalize specific issues. When a student wants to talk to a trusting adult, the adult should respect what the student is saying and listen with two purposes: continue building the relationship and recognize potential risk factors. In one example, students may not come out and share they are homeless, instead a student will come to school in the same clothes they wore the day before and mention they were hungry because they did not have any dinner last night. In another example, a student may mention that they forgot to get their paper signed because they had been staying at a friend's house for a couple of days and had not seen their mom. Neither situation should be ignored, and both situations warrant investigation. For some students, earning poor grades or engaging in bad behavior is their normal. In these cases, a trusted adult must take the time to investigate the causes. Students very rarely lack ability, but often lack the will to perform well in school. Taking the time to find out why benefits everyone.

Once possible risk factors have been identified, school personnel must connect the student with appropriate resources such as a referral to a school counselor or school administrator. For the referring personnel, follow up with the counselor or administrator as well as the student to continue solidifying the relationship.

Although it would be most beneficial to provide needed services and resources within schools, campus budgets may not allow for an increase in school counselors or other certified staff to provide the necessary services; therefore, creating intentional partnerships with organizations within the community would offer valuable resources to students in need. Simply offering phone numbers or district-suggested resources to the

parent is not enough. School personnel assigned this task should offer to contact appropriate outside community organizations with the parent and student and follow up with the family to ensure support services were received. For in-district services, confirming contacts have been established and appointments have been kept is essential as well. Schools should determine how to offer continued and consistent support to these students whether through mentorship, group connections, or one-on-one meetings with a trusted adult. Periodic check-ins with students and taking the time to genuinely and sincerely listen to them is essential to help them work through challenges and build self-reliance.

Traditional High Schools

In this study, the environment of the school affected the participants' experience. Although admittedly more difficult due to the larger enrollment, creating a community culture inside the school is important. Generally, there are many things a large high school does to create a community culture, and for many students, these things work. However, the population of at-risk students may be overlooked because they may not have the grades, discipline, money, or confidence required to participate. For example, high schools offer a variety of clubs and organizations for students; however, most have grade and discipline requirements or require fees to join. One suggestion would be to identify students who are not participating in any activities or are not active on any organizational rosters and assign a respected adult or student mentor to reach out to these students. Actively cultivate relationships between teachers, students, and parents, and celebrate often, even small things like a student holding the door open for another student. Often these small gestures lead to bigger gestures such as choosing to eat lunch

with another student who does not have any friends. Provide opportunities for all students to influence decision-making. Many times, this honor is only offered to high-performing students.

Many times in traditional high schools, school counselors are responsible for providing a myriad of resources and information to all students. For post-graduation education, training, and certification opportunities, consider a neutral space within the campus staffed by a dedicated college advisor with expertise in local colleges, certifications, and requirements to guide students towards their next steps. In addition, consider providing space for a rotation of various community organizations and resources such as the health department, legal services, and social security for students and families to access as needed. If possible, hiring a staff facilitator skilled in restorative practices would be beneficial; otherwise, partnering with an agency to provide anger management, mindfulness, and confidence-building workshops would be helpful. Furthermore, providing financial literacy and adulthood preparation courses as students prepare to graduate would be valuable. For scheduling and time considerations, developing a suggested library of YouTube videos for students to watch at their leisure would also be beneficial.

Ensuring that all students have a trusted adult, safe space, and access to needed resources are all important within a school. Providing flexibility and choice with these offerings is the next step. Most schools recognize that families work a variety of hours and as a result, offer family events at multiple times. The same holds true for many students and especially students with at-risk factors. Having access to these services and workshops outside of the traditional school hours could allow for students who might not

otherwise be able to take advantage of these resources a chance to do so. In addition, high schools could consider allowing recent graduates to access these services. For a variety of reasons, students who are at-risk may not choose to utilize the provided services while they are in school; however, allowing them to return to a familiar setting after graduation may help them.

Alternative Education Campuses

An additional option for districts is to provide an alternative education campus designed specifically for students with identified at-risk factors. There are multiple approaches to designing an effective alternative education campus. Ideally, alternative education campuses have smaller student enrollment and smaller class sizes than traditional comprehensive high schools, allowing increased opportunity for staff to build strong relationships with students and their families. With smaller student-to-teacher ratios in classes, teachers are also able to provide more individualized instruction to each student as well, thereby helping to lessen any academic gaps.

In this study, participants were successful at the alternative campus for a variety of reasons such as small student body, caring and supportive adults, and more flexibility in their learning styles and learning pace. For the alternative campus in this study, students had to be identified with at least one risk factor to enroll and, to help offset any negative stigma, students had to complete an application and interview with the principal prior to being accepted to the alternative campus. This process allowed both students and their caregiver to have concerns heard and questions answered. It also provided the campus staff a glimpse into the student's story which gave valuable insight into challenges and barriers the student was already facing. Armed with this knowledge, the

campus staff, student, and caregiver were able to create a personalized plan to support the student towards graduation.

Offering more flexibility was seen as a benefit of the alternative campus for the participants in this study. Students had the option of graduating on a 22 or a 26-credit degree plan and could graduate earlier than their cohort year. Students had the flexibility to take computer-taught classes, traditional teacher-taught classes, or a combination of both. Students who wanted to participate in extra-curricular activities such as band or choir could continue to do so at the comprehensive high school and students who did not want to participate in those types of electives did not have to. This flexibility held true for other activities held on campus such as career fairs and college presentations. Students were always offered an alternative opportunity if they chose not to attend these activities.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study presents more questions to be answered for the population of students and emerging adults who are at-risk. Participants from various races were included in the requests to participate; however, only one non-white graduate chose to participate in the study. This serves as an opportunity for future research, although research of this type may provide challenges. Through their experiences with the school system or community resources, students of color may not wish to share their perspectives openly. Finding a trusted researcher with whom these emerging adults have built a strong relationship may allow for an in-depth study of their experiences to add to the literature.

A powerful influence found in this study was the participants' romantic partners. Six of the eight participants were in a romantic relationship with another student or graduate of the at-risk alternative campus. Examining these connections might provide

additional insight into the significance of close peer relationships with students who were at-risk and the extent to which these relationships affect their experiences during and after high school.

Understanding the various at-risk factors and how they holistically affect students is imperative to providing supportive resources. Valuable information could also be gained from studying the unique effects of a single at-risk factor. Additional research could analyze the implications of a single at-risk factor leading up to graduation and post-graduation.

This research was conducted at a single at-risk alternative high school. Future researchers could replicate this study with graduates from other alternative campuses to explore their experiences. In addition, given that alternative education campuses operate in different capacities and have various objectives, future research could compare and contrast different types of alternative education campuses and their effects on at-risk students.

Finally, a longitudinal study of at-risk students from high school through 10 years post-graduation would be beneficial in understanding how at-risk factors and high school experiences continue to affect adults in later adulthood. Researchers could conduct an annual check in of each of the participants to investigate how experiences during and immediately following high school have shaped their long-term future.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the experiences and perspectives of graduates who were identified as at-risk during high school, persevered and graduated, and are now transitioning into emerging adulthood.

The interviews in this study gave a voice to young adults who, after overcoming a variety of challenges throughout high school, have successfully transitioned into adulthood. Three themes emerged from this study: (a) attitude; (b) influential relationships; and (c) environment.

This research revealed a lack of meaningful individualized attention provided to at-risk students until they transferred to a campus with smaller enrollment and interventions designed to support them. With large class sizes, classroom teachers struggle to manage diverse needs and build relationships with all students. High school counselors are oftentimes spread thin, responsible for a high volume of students and administrative work. Access to a caring and supportive adult in the alternative school was paramount for the participants' success, which demonstrates the importance of recognizing at-risk factors and providing support before the behaviors become severe.

Participants shared multiple challenges they faced both in and out of school and generally acted out through poor attendance, poor grades, and disengagement from school activities. These poor behaviors sometimes led to increased risk-taking such as substance abuse and thoughts of dropping out of high school. Several participants also described issues with mental health that largely went untreated. School personnel must recognize that these behaviors may have underlying issues and ensure that students exhibiting these traits are connected with appropriate resources. Emergent adults can struggle in the transition from high school graduate to young adult, but for graduates who persevered with at-risk factors, the transition can be daunting. Participants in this study discussed challenges such as financial instability, mental health issues, and substance abuse.

The findings from this study offer insights and recommendations for how to support the needs of at-risk students as they transition into emerging adulthood. Additionally, the findings in this study present opportunities for future research such as the experiences of at-risk diverse populations and the significance of peer relationships at an alternative high school.

REFERENCES

Aguiar, E., Lakkaraju, H., Bhanpuri, N., Miller, D., Yuhas, B., & Addison, K. L. (2015, March 16-20). *Who, when, and why: A machine learning approach to prioritizing students at risk of not graduating high school on time.* [Paper presentation]. LAK '15: Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Learning Analytics and Knowledge, Poughkeepsie, NY, United States. https://doi.org/10.1145/2723576.2723619

Akella, D., & Jordan, M. (2015). Impact of social and cultural factors on teen pregnancy. *Journal of Health Disparities Research and Practice, 8*(1), 41-62.

Alase, A. (2017). The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): A guide to a good qualitative research approach. *International Journal of Education & Literacy Studies, 5*(2), 9-19. https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v.5n.2p.9

Alliance for Excellent Education. (2011). *Education and the economy: Boosting the nation's economy by improving high school graduation rates.* [Infographic]. https://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/education-and-the-economy-boosting-the-nations-economy-by-improving-high-school-graduation-rates-among-students-of-color-and-native-students/

America Public Health Association. (2018). *The dropout crisis: A public health problem and the role of school-based health care.* https://www.apha.org/-/media/Files/PDF/SBHC/Dropout_Crisis.ashx

Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychological Association, 55*(5), 469-480. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.55.5.469

Balfanz, R., Herzog, L., & Mac Iver, D. J. (2007). Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation path in urban middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions. *Educational Psychologist, 42*(4), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520701621079

Balfanz, R., & Legters, N. (2004). *Locating the dropout crisis. which high schools produce the nation's dropouts? where are they located? who attends them?* (Report 70) Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR). http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Locating_the_Dropout_Crisis.pdf

Bevan, M. T. (2014). A method of phenomenological interviewing. *Qualitative Health Research 24*(1), 136-144. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732313519710

Bloom, D. (2010). Programs and policies to assist high school dropouts in the transition to adulthood. *The Future of Children, 20*(1), 89-108. https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.0.0039

Bloomberg, L. D., & Volpe, M. F. (2019). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A roadmap from beginning to end.* (4th ed.). Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452226613

Boddy, C. R. (2016). Sample size for qualitative research. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, 19*(4), 426-432. https://doi.org/10.1108/qmr-06-2016-0053

Bowers, A. J., Sprott, R., & Taff, S. (2013). Do we know who will drop out? A review of the predictors of dropping out of high school: Precision, sensitivity and

specificity. *The High School Journal, 96*(2), 77-100.

https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2013.0000

Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (2002). The inheritance of inequality. *Journal of Economic Perspectives, 16*(3), 3-30.

Bridgeland, J. M., Dilulio, J. J., & Balfanz, R. (2009). *On the front lines of schools: Perspectives of teachers and principals on the high school dropout problem.* Civic Enterprises.

https://www.att.com/Common/merger/files/pdf/Schools_Front_Lines.pdf

Burrus, J., & Roberts, R. D. (2012, February). Dropping out of high school: Prevalence, risk factors, and remediation strategies. *R & D Connections, 18*, 1-9.

Campbell, C. (2015). The socioeconomic consequences of dropping out of high school: Evidence from an analysis on siblings. *Social Science Research, 51*, 108-118. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2014.12.011 0049-089X

Cancian, M., & Meyer, D. R. (2018). Reforming policy for single-parent families to reduce child poverty. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences, 4*(2), 91-112. https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2018.4.2.05

Carnevale, A. P., Smith, N., & Strohl, J. (2013). *Recovery: Projections of jobs and education requirements through 2020.* Georgetown Public Policy Institute. Center on Education and the Workforce. https://1gyhoq479ufd3yna29x7ubjn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Recovery2020.FR_.Web_.pdf

Casner-Lotto, J., & Barrington, L. (2006). *Are they really ready to work? Employers perspectives on the basic knowledge and applied skills of new entrants to the 21st century U.S. workforce.* Washington D.C. Partnership for 21st Century Skills

Children's Bureau. (2021, May 14). *Child welfare outcomes 2018: Report to Congress.* U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/cwo2018.pdf

Clarke, J. (2015). It's not all doom and gloom for teenage mothers – exploring the factors that -contribute to positive outcomes. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth, 20*(4), 470-484. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2013.804424

Clemens, E. V., LaLonde, T., Klopfenstein, K., & Sheesley, A. (2019). Early warning indicators of dropping out of school for teens who experienced foster care. *Child Welfare, 97*(5), 65-88.

Cobb-Clark, D. A., & Gorgens, T. (2012). *Parents' economic support of young-adult children: Do socioeconomic circumstances matter?* Institute for the Study of Labor, (IZA), Bonn. http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:101:1-201206146514

Cobb-Clark, D. A., & Zhu, A. (2017). Childhood homelessness and adult employment: The role of education, incarceration, and welfare receipt. *Journal of Population Economics, 30*, 893-924. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00148-017-0634-3

Converse, M. (2012). Philosophy of phenomenology: How understanding aids research. *Nurse Researcher, 20*(1), 28-32. https://doi.org/10.7748/nr2012.09.20.1.28.c9305

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publication.

Cumming, J.M. & Gloeckner, G.W. (2012). Homeless high school students in America: Who counts? *Administrative Issues Journal: Education, Practice, & Research, 2*(2), 104-111. https://doi.org/10.5929/2012.2.2.9

Dangal, G. (2005). An update on teenage pregnancy. *The Internet Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics, 5(*1). https://doi.org/10.5580/9ff

Danziger, S., & Ratner, D. (2010). Labor market outcomes and the transition to adulthood. *The Future of Children, 20*(1), 133-158. https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.0.0041

DiPaoli, J. L., Fox, J. H., Ingram, E. S., Maushard, M. Bridgeland, J. M, & Balfanz, J. M. (2015). *Building a grad nation: Progress and challenge in ending the high school dropout epidemic* (ED556759). Civic Enterprises. Washington, D.C. ERIC. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED556759.pdf

Doll, J. J., Eslami, Z, & Walters, L. (2013). Understanding why students drop out of high school, according to their own reports: Are they pushed or pulled, or do they fall out? A comparative analysis of seven nationally representative studies. *SAGE Open 3*(4), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013503834

Dorn, S. (1993). Origins of the "Dropout Problem". *History of Education Quarterly, 33*(3), 353-373. https://doi.org/10.2307/368197

Drapeau, S., Saint-Jacques, M.C., Lepine, R., Begin, G., & Bernard, M. (2007). Processes that contribute to resilience among youth in foster care. *Journal of Adolescence, 30*, 977-999. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2007.01.005

Dumont, M., & Provost, M. A. (1999). Resilience in adolescents: Protective role of social support, coping strategies, self-esteem, and social activities on experience of

stress and depression. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 28*(3), 343-363.

https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1021637011732

Eckstein, Z., & Wolpin, K. I. (1999). Why youths drop out of high school: The impact of

preferences, opportunities, and abilities. *Econometrica, 6*7(6), 1259-1339.

https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0262.00081

Education Commission of the States. (2014). *What methods are used to identify English

language learners?*

https://ecs.secure.force.com/mbdata/mbquestNB2?rep=ELL1403

Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 20 U.S.C. 6472 § 1432. (1965).

https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-79/pdf/STATUTE-79-

Pg27.pdf#page=1

Englander, M. (2012). The interview: Data collection in descriptive phenomenological

human scientific research. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 43*, 13-35.

https://doi.org/10.1163/156916212x632943

Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (2015).

https://www.congress.gov/114/plaws/publ95/PLAW-114publ95.pdf

Fabelo, T., Thompson, M. D., Plotkin, M., Carmichael, D., Marchbanks, M. P., & Booth,

E. A. (2011). *Breaking school rules: A statewide study of how school discipline

relates to students' success and juvenile justice involvement.* Public Policy

Research Institute. https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-

content/uploads/2020/01/Breaking_Schools_Rules_Report_Final.pdf

Frazer, L. (1991, April 3-7). *At-risk students three years later: We know which ones will

drop out. Publication No. 90-16* (ED337569). [Paper presentation]. Annual

Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, United

States. ERIC. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED337569.pdf

Freeman, J., & Simonsen, B. (2015). Examining the impact of policy and practice

interventions on high school dropout and school completion rates: A systematic

review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research, 85*(2), 205-248.

https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654314554431

Gleason, P. M., & Dynarski, M. (2002). Do we know whom to serve? Issues is using risk

factors to identify dropouts. *Journal of Education For Students Placed At Risk*,

7(1), 25-41. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327671ESPR0701_3

Hammond, C., Linton, D., Smink, J., & Drew, S. (2007, May). *Dropout risk factors and

exemplary programs* (ED497057). Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention

Center, Communities In Schools, Inc. ERIC.

https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED497057.pdf

Hardre, P. L., & Reeve, J. (2003). A motivational model of rural students' intentions to

persist in, versus, drop out of, high school. *Journal of Educational Psychology,

95*(2), 347-356. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.95.2.347

Heise, M. (1994). Goals 2000: Educate America Act: The federalization and legalization

of educational policy. (Paper 693). *Fordham Law Review, 63*(2), 345-381.

https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3133&context=flr

Hyman, S., Aubrey, T., & Klowdasky, F. (2011). Resilient educational outcomes:

Participation in school by youth with histories of homelessness. *Youth and

Society, 43*(1), 253-273. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0044118X10365354

Irwin, V., Zhang, J., Wang, X., Hein, S., Wang, K., Roberts, A., York, C., Barmer, A.,
Bullock Mann, F., Dilig, R., & Parker, S. (2021). *Report on the Condition of
Education 2021* (NCES 2021-144). U.S. Department of Education. Washington,
DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo. asp?pubid=2021144

Kane, J. B., Morgan, S. P., Harris, K. M., & Guilkey, D. K. (2013). The educational
consequences of teen childbearing. *Demography, 50*(6), 2129-2150.
https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-013-0238-9.

Keniston, K. (1970). Youth: A "New" stage of life. T*he American Scholar, 39*(4), 631-
654. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41209802

Kim, J. (2020). Homelessness as difficult knowledge in early childhood education. *Early
Childhood Education Journal, 48*, 815-823. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-020-
01045-5

Knesting, K. (2008). Students at risk for school dropout: Supporting their persistence.
Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth, 52(4),
3-10. https://doi.org/10.3200/psfl.52.4.3-10

Knesting, K., & Waldron, N. (2006). Willing to play the game: How at-risk students
persist in school. *Psychology in the Schools, 43*(5), 599-611.
https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20174

Kotok, S., Ikoma, S., & Bodovski, K. (2016). School climate and dropping out of school
in the era of accountability. *American Journal of Education, 122*, 569-599.
https://doi.org/10.1086/687275

Kuehn, D., Pergamit, M., Macomber, J., & Vericker, T. (2009). *Vulnerable youth and the transition to adulthood.* (ASPE Research Brief). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Lee-St. John, T. J., Walsh, M. E., Raczek, A. E., Vuilleumier, C. E., Foley, C., Heberle, A., Sibley, E. & Dearing, E. (2018). The long-term impact of systemic student support in elementary school: Reducing high school dropout. *AERA Open, 4*(4), 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2332858418799085

Legislative Budget Board. (2011, January). *Texas At-Risk Youth Services Project.* (Submitted to the 82nd Texas Legislature). https://www.lbb.state.tx.us/Documents/Publications/Policy_Report/Texas%20At-Risk%20Youth%20Services%20Project%20January%202011.pdf

Lessard, A., Fortin, L., Marcotte, D., Potvin, P., & Royer, E. (2009). Why did they not drop out? Narratives from resilient students. *The Prevention Researcher, 16*(3), 21-24.

Levin, H. M., Belfield, C., Muennig, P., & Rouse, C. (2007, January). *The costs and benefits of an excellent education for America's children.* Teachers College, Columbia University. https://doi.org/10.7916/D8CF9QG9

Levinson, D. J. (1986). A conception of adult development. *American Psychologist, 41*(1), 3-13. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.41.1.3

Liem, J. H., Dillon, C. O., & Gore, S. (2001, August 24-28). *Mental health consequences associated with dropping out of high school* (ED457502). [Paper presentation]. 109th Annual Conference of the American Psychological Association, San

Francisco, CA, United States. ERIC.

https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED457502.pdf

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. SAGE Publications

Logan, J. R., & Burdick-Will, J. (2017). School segregation and disparities in urban, suburban, and rural areas. *Annuals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 674*(1), 199-216. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716217733936

Manna, P. (2010, February 5-6). *The No Child Left Behind Act and educational accountability in the United States.* [Paper Presentation]. Understanding and Evaluating New Accountability Regimes: Canada in Comparative Perspective, University of Toronto, Canada.

Martin, J. A., Hamilton, B. E., Osterman, M. J. K., & Driscoll, A. K. (2019). *Births: Final data for 2018.* (National Vital Statistics Report Volume 68, Number 13). United States Health and Human Services: National Center for Health Statistics. https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr68/nvsr68_13-508.pdf

Martin, A. J., & Marsh, H. W. (2006). Academic resilience and its psychological and educational correlates: A construct validity approach. *Psychology in the Schools, 43(*3), 267-281. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20149

Masten, A., Best, K., & Garmezy, N. (1990). Resilience and development: Contributions from the study of children who overcome adversity. *Development and Psychopathology, 2*(4), 425-444. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0954579400005812

Maxwell, J. A. (1992). Understanding and validity in qualitative research. *Harvard Educational Review, 62*(3), 279-300. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.62.3.8323320856251826

Maynard, B. R., Salas-Wright, C. P., & Vaughn, M. G. (2015). High school dropouts in

emerging adulthood: Substance abuse, mental health problems, and crime.

Community Mental Health Journal, 51, 289-299. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-

014-9760-5

McDermott, E. R., Donlan, A. E., & Zaff, J. F. (2018). Why do students drop out?

Turning points and long-term experiences. *The Journal of Educational Research,

112*(2), 270-282. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.2018.1517296

McFarland, J., Cui, J., Holmes, J., and Wang, X. (2019). *Trends in High School Dropout

and Completion Rates in the United States: 2019* (NCES 2020-117).

U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education

Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch

McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act, 42 U.S.C. § 11431

(2001).

http://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title42/chapter119/subchapter

6/partB&edition=prelim

Moran, D. (2018). What is the phenomenological approach? Revisiting intentional

explication. *Phenomenology and Mind, 15,* 72-90.

https://doi.org/10.13128/Phe_Mi-24973

Morgan, H. (2018). What every educator needs to know about America's homeless

students. *The Clearing House, 91*(6), 215-221.

https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2018.1524357

Moshidi, N., & Jusoh, A. J. (2020). A narrative review of the literature on students at risk

of dropping out. *EurAsian Journal of BioSciences, 14,* 6009-6017.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE Publications. https://www.doi.org/10.4135/9781412995658

National Association of Secondary School Principals. (n.d.). *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Overview*. [Infographic]. https://www.nassp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ESSA_Overview.pdf

National Center for Education Statistics. (2019a). *Population 16 to 24 years old and number of 16 to 24-year-old high school dropouts (status dropouts), by sex and race/ethnicity: Selected years, 1970 through 2018 (Table 219.71)* [Data set]. Digest of Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_219.71.asp

National Center for Education Statistics. (2019b). *Public high school graduates, by region, state, and jurisdiction: Selected years, 1980-81 through 2029-30 (Table 219.20)* [Data set]. Digest of Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_219.20.asp

National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform.* United States Department of Education, Washington, DC.

Neubauer, B. E., Witkop, C. T., & Varpio, L. (2019). How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others. *Perspec Med Educ, 8*, 90-97. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-019-0509-2

No Child Left Behind Act. Pub. L. No. 107-110, § 1401, Stat. 1429. (2001)

Olson, J. S. (2014). Transitions from formal education to the workplace. In C. A. Davis, (Ed.), *Meeting the Transitional Needs of Young Adult Learners: New Directions*

for Adult and Continuing Education, 143, 73-82. John Wiley & Sons.

https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20106

Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Leech, N. L. (2007). Sampling designs in qualitative research:

Making the sampling process more public (EJ800181). *The Qualitative Report,*

12(2), 238-254. ERIC. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2007.1636

Osgood, D. W., Foster, E. M., & Courtney, M. E. (2010). Vulnerable populations and the

transition to adulthood. *Future of Children, 20*(1), 209-229.

https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.0.0047

Palmieri, L. E., & La Salle, T. P. (2017). Supporting students in foster care. *Psychology*

in the Schools, 54(2), 117-126. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.21990

Parrish, B. (2018). *Meeting the language needs of today's adult English Language*

Learner (Issue Brief). Literacy Information and Communication System, 1-9.

https://lincs.ed.gov/sites/default/files/ELL_Increasing_Rigor_508.pdf

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods.* (3rd ed.). SAGE

Publication

Peguero, A. A., Ovink, S. M., & Li, Y. L. (2016). Social bonding to school and

educational inequality: Race/Ethnicity, dropping out, and the significance of

place. *Sociological Perspectives, 59*(2), 317-344.

https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/a8eux

Peterson, J. S. (2000). A follow-up study of one group of achievers and underachievers

four years after high school graduation. *Roeper Review, 22*(4), 217-224.

https://doi.org/10.1080/02783190009554041

Plunkett, S. W., Henry, C. S., Houltberg, B. J., Sands, T., & Abarca-Mortensen, S. (2008). Academic support by significant others and educational resilience in Mexican-origin ninth grade students from intact families. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 28*(3), 333-355. https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431608314660

Rafferty, Y., Shinn, M., & Weitzman, B. C. (2004). Academic achievement among formerly homeless adolescents and their continuously housed peers. *Journal of School Psychology, 42*(2004), 179-199. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0022-4405(04)00035-4

Rahman, M. A., Turner, J. F., & Elbedour, S. (2017). The U.S. homeless population. *Journal of Behavioral and Social Sciences, 4*, 282-304. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-014-9298-2

Ramsook, L., (2018). A methodological approach to Hermeneutic phenomenology. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 10*(1), 14-24.

Randolph, K. A., Fraser, M. W., & Orthner, D. K. (2006a). Educational resilience among youth at risk. *Substance Use & Misuse, 39*(5), 747-767. https://doi.org/10.1081/ja-120034014

Randolph, K. A., Fraser, M. W., & Orthner, D. K. (2006b). A strategy for assessing the impact of time-varying family risk factors on high school dropout. *Journal of Family Issues, 27*(7), 933-950. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X06287168

Raphael, S. (2006, January 27-28). *Early incarceration spells and the transition to adulthood.* [Paper Presentation]. Conference on the Economics of the Transition to Adulthood. New York, NY, United States.

Reyes, A. (2006). Texas state compensatory education. *Journal of Education Finance, 31*(3), 121-237.

Robbins, C. A., & Streetman, L. G. (1994). Resolution of nonmarital adolescent pregnancy and the transition to adulthood: Educational attainment and financial well-being. *Policy Studies Review, 13*(1/2), 141-156. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1541-1338.1994.tb00584.x

Rosenberg, R., & Kim, Y. (2018). Aging out of foster care: Homelessness, post-secondary education, and employment. *Journal of Public Child Welfare, 12*(1), 99-115. https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2017.1347551

Rud, I., Van Klaveren, C., Groot, W., van den Brink, H. M. (2018). What drives the relationship between early criminal involvement and school dropout? *J Quant Criminal, 34*, 139-166. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10940-016-9326-5

Ruiz-de-Velasco, J. & Fix, M. (with Clewell, B. C.). (2000). Overlooked & underserved: Immigrant students in U.S. secondary schools. *The Urban Institute,* 1-109. https://doi.org/10.1037/e716492011-001

Rumberger, R. W. (1987). High school dropouts: a review of issues and evidence. *Review of Educational Research, 57*(2), 101-121. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543057002101

Rumberger, R. W. (2011). *Dropping out: Why students drop out of high school and what can be done about it.* Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674063167

Rumberger, R. W. (2020). The economics of high school dropouts. *Encyclopedia of the Economics of Education* (2nd Ed.). https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-815391-8.00012-4

Rumberger, R. W., & Lim, S. A. (2008). *Why students drop out of school: A review of 25 years of research.* (California Dropout Research Project Report #15.). https://www.issuelab.org/resources/11658/11658.pdf

Rumberger, R. W., & Losen, D. J. (2016). The high cost of harsh discipline and its disparate impact. *The Center for Civil Rights Remedies*, 1-31. https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/resources/projects/center-for-civil-rights-remedies/school-to-prison-folder/federal-reports/the-high-cost-of-harsh-discipline-and-its-disparate-impact/UCLA_HighCost_6-2_948.pdf

Saldana, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers.* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications

Schwartz, R. B., & Robinson, M. A. (2000). Goals 2000 and the standards movement. *Brookings Institution Press, 2000*(1) 173-206. https://doi.org/10.1353/pep.2000.0016

Seamark, C. J., & Lings, P. (2004, November). Positive experiences of teenage motherhood: A qualitative study. *British Journal of General Practice, 54*(508), 812-818. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1324913/

Seidman, I. (2019). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social science.* (5th ed.). Teachers College Press.

Seymour, C. (1998). Children with parents in prison: Child welfare policy, program, and practice issues. *Child Welfare, 77*(5), 469-493.

Shaheen, M., Pradhan, S., & Ranajee. (2019). Sampling in qualitative research. In M. Gupta, M. Shaheen, & K. Reddy (Ed.), *Qualitative Techniques for Workplace Data Analysis* (pp. 25-51). IGI Global. http://doi:10.4018/978-1-5225-5366-3.ch002

Shannon, S. G., & Bylsma, P. (2006). *Helping students finish school: Why students drop out and how to help them graduate* (ED498351). Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Olympia, WA. ERIC. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED498351.pdf

Skiba, R. J., Arredondo, M. I., & Williams, N. T. (2014). More than a metaphor: The contribution of exclusionary discipline to a school-to-prison pipeline. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 47(*4), 546-564. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2014.958965

Slama, R. B. (2012). A longitudinal analysis of academic English proficiency outcomes for adolescent English Language Learners in the United States. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 104*(2), 265-285. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025861

Sohn, B. K., Thomas, S. P., Greenberg, K. H., & Pollio, H. R. (2017). Hearing the voices of students and teachers: A phenomenological approach to educational research. *Qualitative Research in Education, 6*(2), 121-148. https://doi.org/10.17583/qre.2017.2374

Spradley, J. P. (2016). *The Ethnographic interview.* Waveland Press, Inc. (Original work published 1979).

Stedman, J. B. (1991, May 17). *America 2000: The President's education strategy*

    (ED359635). Library of Congress, Washington D.C. ERIC.

    https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED359635.pdf

Suh, S., Suh, J., & Houston, I. (2007). Predictors of categorical at-risk high school

    dropouts. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 85*(2), 196-203.

    https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2007.tb00463.x

Swail, W. S. (2009). *Graduating at-risk students: A cross-sector analysis.* Imagine

    America Foundation, Educational Policy Institute.

    https://educationalpolicy.org/wp-

    content/uploads/2019/06/GraduatingAtRiskStudents.pdf

Texas Education Agency. (2000). *Dropout study: A report to the 77th Texas Legislature*.

    https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/DropComp_dropout_rider71_2000.pdf

Texas Education Agency. (2020a). *Texas Education for Homeless Children and Youth*

    Program. [Infographic].

    https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/TEHCY_Infographic_Final_ADA_%2001.

    06.21.pdf

Texas Education Agency. (2020b, December). *Comprehensive biennial report on Texas*

    public schools. A report to the 87th legislature from the Texas Education Agency.

    (Document No. GE21 601 04). Austin, TX.

Texas Education Agency. (2020c, December). *Secondary school completion and*

    dropouts in Texas public schools, 2018-19 (2nd ed.) (Document No. GE20 601

    10). Austin, TX.

Texas Education Agency. (2021, June 1). *Frequently asked questions.* State

    compensatory education.

    https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/State%20Comp%20Ed%20-%20FAQ.pdf

Texas Education Agency. (n.d.). *An overview of the history of public education in Texas*.

    https://tea.texas.gov/about-tea/welcome-and-overview/an-overview-of-the-

    history-of-public-education-in-texas

Texas Education Code. § 29.081 (1999 & rev. 2021).

    https://statutes.capitol.texas.gov/Docs/ED/htm/ED.29.htm#29.081

Ungar, M., & Liebenberg, L. (2013). Ethnocultural factors, resilience, and school

    engagement. *School Psychology International, 34*(5), 514-526.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034312472761

U.S. Census Bureau. (2020, December 2). *Census bureau releases new estimates on*

    America's families and living arrangements.

    https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/estimates-families-living-

    arrangements.html

U.S. Department of Education. (1991a). *America 2000: An education strategy*

    (ED327985). (Report No. ED/OS91-13) Washington, D.C. ERIC.

    https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED327985.pdf

U.S. Department of Education. (1991b, October). *Striving for excellence: The national*

    education goals (ED334713*).* Office of Educational Research and Improvement,

    Washington, D.C. ERIC. https://archive.org/details/ERIC_ED334713

U.S. Department of Education. (2004). *The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*.

    https://www2.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/execsumm.html

U.S. Department of Education. (2016, August). *Teacher shortage areas nationwide listing 1990-1991 and 2016-2017.* Office of Postsecondary Education. https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/pol/tsa.pdf

U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).* https://www.ed.gov/essa?src=ft

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2021). *The 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress.* Office of Community Planning and Development. https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2020-AHAR-Part-1.pdf

U.S. Department of Labor. (2021a, April 27). *College enrollment and work activity of recent high school and college graduates-2020* [Press Release]. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/hsgec.pdf

U.S. Department of Labor. (2021b, September 8). *Employment projections – 2020-2030* [Press Release]. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/ecopro.pdf

Urban Institute. (n.d.). *Public welfare expenditures.* https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/cross-center-initiatives/state-and-local-finance-initiative/state-and-local-backgrounders/public-welfare-expenditures

Uretsky, M. C. & Stone, S. (2016). Factors associated with high school exit exam outcomes among homeless high school students. *Children & Schools, 38*(2), 91-98. https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdw007

van Manen, M., & van Manen M. (2021). Doing phenomenological research and writing. *Qualitative Health Research, 31*(6), 1069-1082. https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323211003058

Wasserman, M. (2020). The disparate effects of family structure (EJ1262713). *Future of Children, 30(*1), 55-81. ERIC. https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2020.0008

Wax, A. L. (2017). Educating the disadvantaged. *National Affairs, 49*, 3-20. https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/educating-the-disadvantaged

Welsh, R. O., & Little, S. (2018). The school discipline dilemma: A comprehensive review of disparities and alternative approaches. *Review of Educational Research, 88*(5), 752-794. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654318791582

Williams, A. & Sheehan, R. A. (2015). Emerging adulthood in time and space: The geographic context of homelessness. *Journal of Family Theory and Review, 7*(2), 126-143. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12076

Willig, C. (2008). *Introducing qualitative research into psychology: Adventures in theory and method.* (2nd. Ed.). McGraw Hill; Open University Press. https://resv.hums.ac.ir/uploads/introducing_qualitative_research.pdf

Yates, J. A. (2005). The transition from school to work: Education and work experiences. *Monthly Labor Review, 128(*2), 21-32. https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2005/02/art4full.pdf

Zaff, J. F. Donlan, A., Gunning, A., Anderson, S. E., McDermott, E., & Sedaca, M. (2017). Factors that promote high school graduation: A review of the literature. *Educational Psychology Review, 29*(3), 447-476. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-016-9363-5

APPENDIX A

Texas Education Agency At-Risk Criteria

A student "at-risk of dropping out of school" includes each student who is under 26 years of age and who:

1. was not advanced from one grade level to the next for one or more school years; [excludes prekindergarten or kindergarten students who were not advanced as a result of a documented request by the student's parent under TEC 29.081 (d-1).]

2. is in grade 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, or 12 and did not maintain an average equivalent to 70 on a scale of 100 in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum during a semester in the preceding or current school year or is not maintaining such an average in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum in the current semester;

3. did not perform satisfactorily on an assessment instrument administered to the student under TEC Subchapter B, Chapter 39, and who has not in the previous or current school year subsequently performed on that instrument or another appropriate instrument at a level equal to at least 110 percent of the level of satisfactory performance on that instrument;

4. is in prekindergarten, kindergarten or grade 1, 2, or 3 and did not perform satisfactorily on a readiness test or assessment instrument administered during the current school year;

5. is pregnant or is a parent;

6. has been placed in an alternative education program in accordance with TEC §37.006 during the preceding or current school year;

7. has been expelled in accordance with TEC §37.007 during the preceding or current school year;

8. is currently on parole, probation, deferred prosecution, or other conditional release;

9. was previously reported through the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) to have dropped out of school;

10. is a student of limited English proficiency, as defined by TEC §29.052;

11. is in the custody or care of the Department of Family and Protective Services or has, during the current school year, been referred to the department by a school official, officer of the juvenile court, or law enforcement official;

12. is homeless, as defined by 42 U.S.C. Section 11434 (a), and its subsequent amendments;

13. resided in the preceding school year or resides in the current school year in a residential placement facility in the district, including a detention facility, substance

abuse treatment facility, emergency shelter, psychiatric hospital, halfway house, cottage home operation, specialized child-care home, or general residential operation; or

14. has been incarcerated or has a parent or guardian who has been incarcerated, within the lifetime of the student, in a penal institution as defined by Section 1.07, Penal Code.

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol Project: AT-RISK HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES AND THEIR POST-GRADUATION EXPERIENCES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Part I – Introduction

Welcome and Instructions

Hello and thank you for agreeing to be a part of this research study. My name is Candace Pohl. As I mentioned in our initial conversation, the goal of this study will be to explore the experiences of high school graduates who were identified as at-risk during high school and are now transitioning into adulthood. This study will also explore their perceptions of the various challenges and support systems that influenced their experiences. The findings from this study will help school leaders, community organizations, and policy makers better understand how at-risk factors influence students leading up to graduation and connect to challenges as they transition into emerging adulthood.

You were selected through a voluntary social media response through Facebook messenger from me. You received the message because we are connected through this social media platform. You are one of ten participants being interviewed in this study.

I want you to know that I am interested in what you have to say. It is important to me to understand your experiences and your perspectives. This interview is separated into 4 parts: a) Introduction; b) Demographic Information; c) Post-Graduation Experiences; and d) Experiences During High School. This interview is expected to last 60-90 minutes.

Audio Recording Instructions

I will be recording this interview. If at any time during the interview, you wish for me to stop recording, please let me know. If at any time during the interview, you decide that you do not want to participate in the study, you are under no obligation to continue the interview and any recording will be destroyed and your responses will not be used in the research study.

Informed Consent

Prior to this interview I provided you with an informed consent letter which you completed and signed. I have a copy of this informed consent today. Do you still give your consent to participate in this study? Would you like me to review the informed consent with you at this time? This interview is expected to last between 60-90 minutes.

Part 2 - Demographic Information

Interviewer Name:

Interview Date:

Face-to-Face Interview or Virtual Interview

Start Time:

End Time:

Participant Name:

Participant Code Name:

Participant Age:

Participant Graduation Cohort:

Part 3 – Initial Conversation Question

Tell me about what you have been up to since high school graduation.

Part 4 – Experiences During High School

Now, let's go back to high school.

- Attitude
    - While you were in high school, tell me about your attitude about school.
        - Did your attitude change from when you were in earlier grades? If so, why did it change?
    - Did you ever think about dropping out of high school? Why?
        - Who/what motivated you to finish high school? How did they motivate you?
    - Who did you look to for advice during high school? Has that changed since graduation?
- Behavior
    - Describe any discipline problems you had during high school.
    - Describe consequences for your behaviors – positive or negative.
        - How do these consequences continue to affect you now that you have graduated?
- Expectations/Goals
    - During high school, what expectations did you have of yourself?
        - Who influenced these expectations?
    - Describe your goals in high school.
        - Where did these goals come from?

- o Describe the goals you set for yourself for after graduation?
  - ▪ Who influenced these goals? Who did you talk with about achieving these goals?
  - ▪ Who, if anyone, helped you develop a plan for accomplishing these goals?
- Values/Beliefs
  - o During high school, how did you spend your time? What were things that were important to you during high school??
    - ▪ Has that changed since graduation?
      - If so, , how have they changed?
      - Who or what influenced you to change??
- Relationships
  - o Describe your friend relationships during high school.
    - ▪ What things did you look for in a friend?
  - o Describe your relationship with your family during high school.
    - ▪ How has that relationship changed since graduation?
- General
  - o During high school, did you ever not live with your parents?
    - ▪ Tell me what that was like.

Part 5– Experiences After High School

Now, let's talk about your time since graduation.

- Attitude
  - o Describe your attitude about school/education now.
    - ▪ How has your attitude and beliefs about school/education changed since graduation?
  - o Describe any challenges you have faced since graduation.
    - ▪ How do you feel about these challenges?
    - ▪ Do you feel that you have overcome them?
    - ▪ Who/What helped you overcome these challenges?
    - ▪ Who do you ask for advice? If you need something, who do you turn to?
  - o Describe things you wish you had been prepared for before you graduated.
- Behavior
  - o Describe any behavior problems you had in high school that you are continuing to struggle with now.
  - o Do you have any concerns about these problems affecting your life now? Tell me about those concerns.
- Expectations/Goals
  - o Describe your expectations for your life now.
    - ▪ How have they changed since high school?

- o Describe the work you have been doing since graduation. Was this what you expected you would be doing after graduation?
        - o Have you decided to attend school? Why or why not?
            - ▪ What type of support have you needed to attend classes?
- Values/Beliefs
    - o How do you spend your time now? What are things that are important to you now?
- Relationships
    - o Describe the people closest to you now.
        - ▪ How have your relationships changed since graduating high school (Friends/Peers; Family; Significant Others)?
        - ▪ How have they influenced the decisions you have made since graduation?
- General
    - o How did your academic performance in high school affect you after graduation?
    - o How did high school prepare you for your work and/or education after graduation?

Part 6 - Conclusion

- Does your life now look like what you thought it would look like when you were in high school? Why/Why not?
- Looking back, what would you have done differently, if anything?

APPENDIX C

IRB Approval

Date: Nov 15, 2021 10:58:12 AM CST

TO: Candace Pohl Peggy Holzweiss
FROM: SHSU IRB
PROJECT TITLE: At-Risk High School Graduates and Their Post-Graduation
Experiences: A Phenomenological Study
PROTOCOL #: IRB-2021-337
SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial
ACTION: Exempt - Limited IRB
DECISION DATE: November 15, 2021
EXEMPT REVIEW CATEGORIES: Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes
interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude,
achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public
behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following
criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the
identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through
identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make
the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

OPPORTUNITY TO PROVIDE FEEDBACK: To access the survey, click **here**. It only
takes 10 minutes of your time and is voluntary. The results will be used internally to
make improvements to the IRB application and/or process. Thank you for your time.

Greetings,

On November 15, 2021, the Sam Houston State University Institutional Review Board
(IRB) determined the proposal titled At-Risk High School Graduates and Their Post-
Graduation Experiences: A Phenomenological Study to be Exempt with
Limited IRB Review pursuant to 45 CFR 46. This determination is limited to the
activities described in the Initial application, and extends to the performance of these
activities at each respective site identified in the Initial application. Exempt
determinations will stand for the life of the project unless a modification results in a

new determination.

Modifying your approved protocol:
No changes may be made to your study without first receiving IRB modification approval. Log into [URL], select your study, and add a new submission type (Modification).

Study Closure:
Once research enrollment and all data collection are complete, the investigator is responsible for study closure. Log into [URL], select your study, and add a new submission type (Closure) to complete this action.

Reporting Incidents:
Adverse reactions include, but are not limited to, bodily harm, psychological trauma, and the release of potentially damaging personal information. If any unanticipated adverse reaction should occur while conducting your research, please login to Cayuse, select this study, and add a new submission type. This submission type will be an adverse event and will look similar to your initial submission process.

Reminders to PIs: Based on the risks, this project does not require renewal. However, the following are reminders of the PI's responsibilities that must be met for IRB-2021-337 At-Risk High School Graduates and Their Post-Graduation Experiences: A Phenomenological Study.

1. When this project is finished or terminated, a **Closure submission** is required.

2. Changes to the approved protocol require prior board approval (**NOTE:** see the directive above related to **Modifications**).

3. Human subjects training is required to be kept current at citiprogram.org by renewing training every 5 years.

Please note that all research records should be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact the Sharla Miles at 936-294-4875 or irb@shsu.edu. Please include your protocol number in all correspondence with this committee.

Sincerely,
SHSU Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX D

Sam Houston State University
Consent for Participation in Research

KEY INFORMATION FOR *At-Risk High School Graduates and Their Experiences Post-Graduation: A Phenomenological Study*

You are being asked to be a participant in a research study about high school graduates who were at-risk during high school and graduated, and have now transitioned into adulthood. You have been asked to participate in the research because you graduated on-time from the La Porte ISD Academy of Viola DeWalt High School in 2020 or 2021 and may be eligible to participate.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE, PROCEDURES, AND DURATION OF THE STUDY?

The purpose of this study to understand the experiences and perceptions of students who were at-risk during high school, graduated, and are now transitioning into young adulthood. Through the experiences of the participants, the researcher hopes to offer insight into improved opportunities for supporting at-risk students as they transition post-graduation. These experiences and perceptions will be gathered through one-on-one individual interviews with participants. The interviews will be analyzed and coded for reoccurring themes. The researcher hopes to interview 8-10 participants with individual interviews expected to last 60-90 minutes each. The anticipated completion date of the study is August 2022.

By doing this study, we hope to learn opportunities for improving the support provided to at-risk high school students in preparation for transitioning into adulthood post-graduation. Your participation in this research will last about 2 hours. Individual interviews are expected to last 60-90 minutes. Once the researcher has transcribed the interview, the participant will be offered an opportunity to review the written interview transcript for accuracy. This is anticipated to take the participant an additional 30 minutes.

WHAT ARE REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?

Your decision to participate in this study may provide relevant information for the improved support of high school students who are at-risk as they prepare to graduate and transition into adulthood.

For a complete description of benefits, refer to the Detailed Consent.

WHAT ARE REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE NOT TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?

Due to the potential for sensitive questions during this interview, you may decide not to volunteer for this study.

For a complete description of risks, refer to the Detailed Consent.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any services, benefits, or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

The person in charge of this study is Candace M. Pohl of the Sam Houston State University Department of Educational Leadership who is working under the supervision of Dr. Peggy Holzweiss. If you have questions, suggestions, or concerns regarding this study or you want to withdraw from the study, their contact information is: Candace M. Pohl – stdcmr14@shsu.edu; Dr. Peggy Holzweiss – pholzweiss@shsu.edu. If you have any questions, suggestions or concerns about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs – Sharla Miles - sharla_miles@shsu.edu.

Sam Houston State University

Consent for Participation in Research

DETAILED CONSENT *At-Risk High School Graduates and Their Post-Graduation Experiences: A Phenomenological Study*
Informed Consent

My name is Candace M. Pohl, and I am a Doctoral student of the Educational Leadership department at Sam Houston State University. I would like to take this opportunity to invite you to participate in a research study of high school graduates who were at-risk and are now emerging adults. I hope that data from this research will provide improvements to the support of students who are at-risk as they work towards graduation and transition into adulthood post-graduation. You have been asked to participate in the research because you are an on-time 2020 or 2021 graduate the La Porte ISD Academy of Viola DeWalt High School.

The research is relatively straightforward, and we do not expect the research to pose any risk to any of the volunteer participants. If you consent to participate in this research, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one individual interview with me. Any data obtained from you will only be used for the purpose of this research project. Under no circumstances will you or any other participants who participated in this research be identified. In addition, your data will remain confidential.

This research will require about 2 hours of your time. Participants will not be paid or otherwise compensated for their participation in this project. The interview will be audio recorded. You will be able to review your recording if you choose. The recording will be destroyed as soon as the written transcriptions have been checked for accuracy by you, the participant.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled, and the subject may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask me using the contact information below. If you are interested, the results of this study will be available at the conclusion of the project.

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me, Candace M. Pohl, or Dr. Peggy Holzweiss. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as research participants, please contact Sharla Miles, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, using her contact information below.

Candace M. Pohl SHSU Department of Educational Leadership Sam Houston State University Huntsville, TX 77341 E-mail: ██████████	*Dr. Peggy Holzweiss* SHSU Department of Educational Leadership Sam Houston State University Huntsville, TX 77341 E-mail: ████████████	*Sharla Miles* Office of Research and Sponsored Programs Sam Houston State University Huntsville, TX 77341 Email: irb@shsu.edu

☐   I understand the above and consent to participate.

☐   I do not wish to participate in the current study.

AUDIO RECORDING RELEASE CONSENT

As part of this project, an audio recording will be made of you during your participation in this research project for transcription purposes only. This is completely voluntary. In any use of the audio recording, your name will not be identified. You may review the recording if you choose. The recording will be destroyed as soon as the written transcriptions have been checked for accuracy by you, the participant. You may request to stop the recording at any time or to erase any portion of your recording.

☐   I consent to participate in the audio recording activities.

☐   I do not wish to participate in the audio recording activities.

FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEW OR VIRTUAL INTERVIEW CHOICE

The researcher is offering the participant the choice of a face-to-face individual interview or a virtual interview. Either choice of interview will be conducted at a location of your choosing; however, due to the possible sensitive nature of the interview questions, the researcher recommends choosing a private place to participate in the interview. Virtual interviews will be conducted using Zoom software which allows for a password-protected virtual environment as well as a waiting room admittance feature for your privacy. Regardless of the type of interview, you may choose to stop the interview at any time or skip any question(s) you may be uncomfortable answering.

☐   I choose to participate in a face-to-face interview.

☐   I choose to participate in a virtual interview.

VITA

Candace M. Pohl
Family and Community Partnerships Coordinator
Victoria ISD

EDUCATION
  Master of Education Administration, Lamar University
  Bachelor of Psychology, Sam Houston State University

CERTIFICATIONS
  Superintendent K-12
  Principal K-12
  EC-4 Generalist/ESL
  4-8 Generalist
  ILD/TTESS

PUBLICATIONS
  Pohl, C. M., & Slate, J. R. (2021). Differences in exclusionary discipline consequence assignment by the economic status of black students determine to be at-risk: A Texas, statewide analysis. *American Economic & Social Review, 7*(1), 25-33.

PRESENTATIONS
  Pohl, C. M. (2020, September 30 – October 2). *Differences in exclusionary discipline consequence assignments by the economic status of Black students at-risk: A Texas, state-wide analysis*. (Paper presentation). Texas Council of Professors of Educational Administration, Graduate Research Exchange, Virtual Conference, Texas, United States.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE
  Family and Community Partnerships Coordinator, Victoria ISD
  Principal, LPISD Academy of Viola DeWalt High School
  Principal, La Porte Junior High
  Assistant Principal, Pasadena High School
  Family Involvement Coordinator, Baytown Junior School
  Teacher, Highlands Elementary

HONORS AND AWARDS
  LPISD Secondary Principal of the Year 2017
  LPISD District Principal of the Year 2020