ABSTRACT

SANDERS, EUNICE O’NEAL. Resiliency and Protective Factors of At-Risk African American Males: A Pathway to Reducing the Dropout Rate. (Under the direction of Dr. Susan C. Faircloth.)

This study explored the characteristics of five African American males who graduated from high school in spite of numerous risk factors such as low academic achievement, grade retention, absenteeism, and high stakes testing). In this study, attention was also focused on individual, familial, and community factors that contributed to or inhibited these students’ academic success. In addition, variations among these individuals were explored to better understand how they survived, and even thrived in high-risk environments. In-depth interviews were conducted. The participants’ responses to interview questions were used to examine their perceptions of activities and experiences that the literature has found to be effective in fostering resiliency among at-risk students. In addition, individual participants’ profiles were developed using demographic information gathered from observations and self-reports.

Ideally, the results of this study may inform the development of interventions, programs, and counseling practices focused on creating and enhancing the personal environmental attributes, such as family, teachers, schools, and community that promote achievement outcomes for other youth in high risk environments (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). Findings from the present study revealed that protective factors (e.g., personal, social, family, and school safety nets) across multiple contexts of students’ lives contributed to their academic success.
BIOGRAPHY

Eunice O’Neal Sanders hails from Durham, North Carolina. She was born during the “baby boom era” and was considered the “knee baby” (i.e., next-to-the-last child) of a family of five children. Her public school experience began in the city school district where she graduated from high school. After graduation from Durham High School, she enrolled in North Carolina Central University and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree. She majored in sociology with a minor in psychology.

Later Sanders pursued study in the field of special education and earned a Master of Arts degree from North Carolina Central University. During this period, she worked at Duke University in various positions. Once she completed her master’s degree, she was hired as a special education teacher in Durham Public Schools and taught both the elementary and middle school levels for over 10 years.

In 1992, she earned a Master’s degree in School Administration and was hired immediately as an assistant principal for a middle school in Durham Public Schools. Within eighteen months, she was hired as a principal of a struggling inner city elementary school and remained there for over four years. During her tenure as principal, tests scores increased and parent involvement flourished. Sanders then was hired as a principal of a newly formed year-round middle school, which had previously floundered as a sixth grade center.

After much success and many academic gains, the superintendent transferred Sanders (now known as a “turn-around” administrator) to a troubled high school. Again, she, along with highly competent staff hired to assist her, made significant positive changes in the school. After four years, Sanders requested a transfer and was moved to the district office.
where she was named Executive Director of Student Services. Sanders retired two years ago after having served as Assistant Superintendent of Student Support Services for three years.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to praise God for giving me the guiding comfort and serving as the source of my strength and endurance to see this project to its conclusion. I am completing this process at a late stage in my life and career, after having started this project over eight years ago.

I must also give thanks to my family for their never-ending support starting with my parents who instilled the value that helping other people is a noble and worthwhile quest that reaps immeasurable personal benefits well beyond monetary compensation. My loving husband, Carlton, my sweet daughters, Kema and Kristen, and my granddaughter, Jorynne, who spent weekends with us but watched me sit for hours at the computer as I worked on my laptop and read books. I also must include my sisters and brothers, who along with my daughters, assisted with the care of my elderly parents while I was consumed with writing.

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Finally, I offer my sincere thanks to the young men who participated in this study.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES ................................................................................................................................. ii

LIST OF FIGURES ................................................................................................................................. x

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................. 1

  Background ........................................................................................................................................ 1
  Statement of the Problem ...................................................................................................................... 2
  Purpose of the Study ............................................................................................................................ 7
  Significance of the Study ....................................................................................................................... 8
  Research Question .............................................................................................................................. 9
  Definition of Terms ............................................................................................................................. 10
  Overview of the Study .......................................................................................................................... 11

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................................................................. 12

  Background ........................................................................................................................................ 12
  Signals of Dropping Out ...................................................................................................................... 13
  Lack of Preschool Services .................................................................................................................. 14
  Middle School .................................................................................................................................... 15
  Transition to High School ................................................................................................................... 17
  Increased Educational Accountability .................................................................................................. 18
  Dropouts and Attendance .................................................................................................................... 19
  Grade Retention ................................................................................................................................. 22
  School Pushout ................................................................................................................................. 23
  The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act ............................................................................... 25
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact of State-Mandated Tests and NCLB on At-Risk Students</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family and Social Relationships and Responsibilities</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher Relationships and School Characteristics</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact of Dropping Out</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preventing Students from Dropping Out</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alternative Schools</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resiliency and Protective Factors in Youth</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Procedures</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Researcher Bias and Subjectivity</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Establishing Trustworthiness</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confidentiality</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Human Subjects Approval</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CHAPTER 4. RESULTS</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Setting</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Demographic Survey of Participants</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Case Study #1: Jimmy</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Case Study #2: Ronald .................................................................................................................. 74
Case Study #3: Donnie .................................................................................................................. 77
Case Study #4: Corey .................................................................................................................... 80
Case Study #5: Jamie ..................................................................................................................... 84
Cross-Case Analysis and Emerging Themes .............................................................................. 87
Intrinsic Factors ........................................................................................................................... 89
Extrinsic Factors .......................................................................................................................... 94
School Supports .......................................................................................................................... 98
Summary ....................................................................................................................................... 104

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS ........................................................................ 107
Discussion and Findings ............................................................................................................. 107
Intrinsic Factors ........................................................................................................................... 107
Extrinsic Factors .......................................................................................................................... 111
School Support Factors .............................................................................................................. 116
Implications for Practice and Policies ....................................................................................... 118
Recommendations for Future Research ..................................................................................... 127
Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 129

REFERENCES .............................................................................................................................. 134

APPENDICES ............................................................................................................................... 152
Appendix A. Informed Consent .................................................................................................... 153
Appendix B. Demographic Questionnaire .................................................................................... 156
Appendix C. Interview Protocol .................................................................................................. 161
LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1. Participants’ Demographic Information…………………………………………71

Table 5.1. Intrinsic Factors Indicative of Resiliency .............................................114
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Factors that Impact Dropouts…………………………………………………………14

Figure 2. Summary of Extrinsic and School Factors that Influence Resilience……………121
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Background

Reducing the dropout rate is a priority for schools across the country. A dropout is defined by North Carolina State Board policy (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2012) as “any student who leaves school for any reason before graduation or completion of a program of studies without transferring to another elementary or secondary school.” Dropping out affects students from all backgrounds and communities and generally is the forefront of the public education agenda. The inability of educators, researchers, and program designers to effectively reduce the number of students dropping out of school may be grounded in their approach to understanding students who drop out (Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, & Heinrich, 2008).

The driving force of research and dropout intervention programs has been targeted toward secondary education. This line of reasoning assumes an "educational vacuum" or void of negative factors in a student's life from kindergarten through eighth grade. Consequently, educators and researchers may be “overlooking the human ecology of students before their matriculation to high school” (Hickman et al., 2008, p. 3). According to Hickman et al. (2008), the dropout process can begin as early as kindergarten. This is contrary to earlier studies, which argued that dropping out was more of an impulsive act rather than a long-term process (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004).

Understanding the high school experiences of at-risk students helps in identifying the various factors that lead to students dropping out of school. Students who are not successful
in schools have disconnected mentally, and, in many cases, physically. They are the children referred to as dropouts. According to Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006):

There is no single reason why students drop out of high school. The decision to drop out is complex and relates to the individual student and their family, school and community. The decision is personal, reflects their unique life circumstances, and is part of a slow process of disengagement from school. There appear to be, however, clusters of reasons or common responses that emerge relating to the academic environment, real life events, and a lack of personal motivation and external sources of motivation and guidance. (p. 3)

**Statement of the Problem**

African American males are referred to by some as an “endangered species” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), not only due to the disproportionate number of them who are high school dropouts, but also because they experience excessive unemployment rates, skyrocketing rates of incarceration, and high mortality rates. For instance, a study by the National Center for Education Statistics (2007) reported that the dropout rate for African American students was 7%, whereas it was only 5% for their White counterparts. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2007), eight states reported dropout rates of 10% or more among African American students. Regrettably, current literature on high school dropouts continues to show that a substantial segment of African American males have not graduated from high school.

Negative outcomes, such as low graduation rates, for African American male students in elementary and secondary programs have been well documented with statistical data, at
national and regional levels and by states and school districts (Holzman, 2006; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Some of the factors for school success or failure include school culture and characteristics, poverty, educational attainment of the mother, access to health care for the family, and other environmental, cultural, socioeconomic, and psychological conditions. While this information is well-documented, it does not appear to have made a positive impact on the dropout rate for African American male students (Greene & Winters, 2006; Holzman, 2004, 2006; Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2004; Orfield, 2004; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004).

Consequently, scholars, practitioners, communities-at-large, and educators alike, as well as those who are in charge of the media, label many as “at-risk.” Many of these individuals are often from poor, uneducated families and perceive going to school as a daily chore (Williams, Hill, & Wilson, 2003). After dropping out of high school, some of these individuals begin to abuse drugs and alcohol, commit crimes, and, eventually, they end up in prison (Williams et al., 2003; Wright, 1991). Some data suggest that personal performance in school is one of the major indicators of failure to fit into the society (Woods, 1995). Thus, African American males attending school are often seen fitting the self-fulfilling prophecy of failure when it comes to academic achievement (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999).

**National Dropout Statistics**

In the late 1960s, the dropout disparity between African American male and Caucasian male high school students was extreme (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). African American males accounted for almost 31% of the students who failed to graduate from high school in 1967 compared to 15.4% for Caucasian males. Although the dropout rate
decreased in the 1970s, African American males still accounted for one-fourth to one-third of students who failed to graduate. The rate for Caucasian males averaged between 10% and 12%. During the 1980s, the situation began to improve. African American males had a dropout rate of 5.8% in 1983-1984 compared to 5.1% for Caucasian males. Within the next decade, African American students represented 45% of dropouts nationally compared to 34% for Caucasian males (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

In 2005, approximately 75% of Caucasian students graduated from high school compared to 50% of African American and Hispanic students (Azzam, 2007; Bracey, 2006; National Governor’s Association Report, 2005; The Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Based on the 2005 national graduation rate of 70%, the inference was that over 1.4 million students would drop out of high school (Bracey, 2006). African American males were and continue to be the vast majority of those students who drop out of high school each year (Bracey, 2006; National Education Association, 2006; North Carolina Public Schools, 2013).

**North Carolina Dropout Statistics**

North Carolina had 11,049 students leave school prior to graduation in the 2012-2013 school year (North Carolina Public Schools, 2013), a decrease of 2,439 from the 12,488 reported in 2011-12. Differences were found among urban and rural counties; for example, Wake, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Gaston, Cumberland, and Forsyth counties reported the largest three-year decreases in high school dropout count. Durham County, where the study was conducted, also documented a decrease (North Carolina Public Schools, 2013). In contrast, rural areas such as Franklin, Mooresville City, Jones, Rutherford, and Scotland counties reported the largest three-year dropout increase. Preston (2001) states that many of
the rural areas in North Carolina have less funding than urban areas, usually because of lower property values in rural areas. However, in spite of improvements in urban areas, African American males continue to experience high rates of dropouts in the larger school districts (North Carolina Public Schools, 2013).

The students who most frequently dropped out of high school during the 2012-13 school year were students in grade 10 (29.3%), followed by grade 9 (27.7%), grade 11 (24.3%), and grade 12 (16.9%). Males accounted for 61.5% of dropouts, up from 60.3% in 2011-12. African American males made up 38% of the state’s dropouts and had a higher dropout rate (3.59%) than the state average of 2.45% (North Carolina Public Schools, 2013).

**Impact of School Location on Students Dropping Out of School**

Patterson, Hale, and Stessman (2007/2008) noted in their studies that students enrolled in the nation’s urban schools are at an increased risk for dropping out, with average rates of 35% due to low income and other stresses associated with financial issues at home. Estimates of African American high school dropout rates, for example, range from 48% nationwide to 54% in some urban areas (National Educational Association, 2006). In 2003, in the states of New York and California, approximately 35% of all students dropped out, yet in inner cities where a large number of African Americans live, the drop out rate was nearly 50% (Perlstein, 2004).

Research from the National Center for Education Statistics (2004) showed a relatively high dropout rate among school districts that served large or midsize cities. According to Kincheloe (2010), unlike suburban and rural school districts, urban school districts are larger and operate in densely populated areas serving significantly more students. In comparison to
suburban and rural districts, urban school districts are frequently marked by higher concentrations of poverty, greater racial and ethnic diversity, and more frequently rates of student mobility.

Gardner, Ritblatt, and Beatty (2000) suggested that large school size and overcrowding in urban schools may contribute to the dropout crisis. In some cases, large school size contributes to a declining quality of the overall school climate, and the weaker students or those at risk get lost in the shuffle. Even though many parents and educational observers prefer smaller schools because of the perceived benefits, overcrowding is a reality. Overcrowding has a detrimental effect on the schools’ ability to adequately address the academic needs of all children (Gardner et al., 2000).

Rural school districts with limited budgets may also contribute to dropout issues because of the inability to provide resources to meet the needs of at-risk students or provide intervention or dropout prevention programs. Also, it is difficult for rural areas to recruit highly qualified and effective teachers and these areas do not have community resources to support their schools (Preston, 2001). Teachers who are skilled in working with diverse groups of students serve as a resource for these students within the school environment (Orfield, 2004).

**Other School-Related Factors that Impact Students Dropping Out of School**

Many students become disengaged from school before they are officially dropped from the rosters. Researchers have been able to predict high school dropouts from their experiences in school going back to the elementary years (Azzam, 2007; Barton, 2006). Factors associated with school dropouts can also be determined through an examination of
documented indicators that occur early in the academic careers of students. Indicators include the absence of quality pre-school experiences, high absenteeism in elementary and middle school, retention and low socioeconomic background (Hickman et al., 2008). Knowledge and comprehension of these indicators makes it possible to examine the academic developmental paths of high school dropouts (Connolly & Olson, 2012).

For some dropouts, especially homeless students, the traditional high school structure and schedule do not meet their needs (Duffield, 2001). Some of the challenges they face include difficulty maintaining the appropriate records to enroll in schools, and higher rates of mobility and absenteeism due to frequent relocation and lack of transportation (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to better understand African American male high school graduates who were identified as at-risk during school. The researcher was particularly interested in these students’ experiences early in their academic careers. She attempted to find out if these participants demonstrated success or if they struggled prior to high school, beginning as early as sixth grade, by examining grade retention, absenteeism, and performance on state-mandated tests. Research (Allensworth & Easton, 2005) indicates that students who are at risk for dropping out of school exhibit lower academic performance in kindergarten, in course subjects such as reading, writing, spelling, mathematics, and English, than their peers who graduate. This qualitative research focused on the experiences of five African American males who were able to graduate despite personal adversity and significant life stressors. Their perspective on how they overcame adversity and were able to
graduate is essential for identifying the environmental protective factors that promote resiliency and has the potential to inform the design of program and services.

**Significance of the Study**

This research is significant in that it adds to the literature on African American male students who are identified as at-risk students, but who successfully graduate from high school. Many of these students demonstrate resiliency. Rutter (1987) states that a resilience perspective contributes to the understanding of the development of competencies, assets, and strengths in African American male lives. Resilience can be defined when both environmental factors and individual differences respond to everyday stressors. These factors may influence how individuals successfully adapt to adverse situations.

One disturbing trend or practice that contributes to African American males’ poor performance in school and possibly leads to dropping out is the identification and placement of African American male students in special education. Suspension rates for these students are higher than for any other racial/ethnic groups (Perlstein, 2004). Perlstein wrote that these students appear to encounter greater problems adjusting to the stricter regimen of high school life than their peers do. Although poverty plays an important role, according to achievement data, African Americans of all economic levels are overrepresented in both special education placements and suspensions from school. Specifically, while African Americans comprise approximately 17% of the public school population in the United States, African American children represent 23% of the special education population. They also represent 36% of suspensions, a condition that seriously curtails their time in classrooms and therefore their time on-task in learning situations (Cooper & Jordan, 2002; Kunjufu, 2005).
Statistics from the Schott Foundation for Public Education’s 2012 study (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012) reflect the absence of African American males from high school graduation ceremonies across the United States, highlighting the large percentage of African American male students who leave high school without graduating. To reverse this trend, it is important for school leadership and teachers working with African American males to employ effective strategies designed to encourage African American males to reach their academic potential. Dropping out is one of the most difficult issues for school administrators in their work with curriculum and instruction and student support initiatives.

To better serve these students, it is necessary to tell the “other side of the story,” by identifying African American males who not only survive and endure, but also show tremendous resiliency. Thus, it is important to understand how African American males perceive and negotiate their lived experiences in schools and society, as well as what can be done to improve their academic achievement. In response, the premise of this study is that much can be learned directly from at-risk African American males who graduated in spite of the risk factors they faced during school. This information could better inform school staff, communities and even families on how to best meet the needs of African American males.

**Research Question**

The following question was addressed in this study: What factors contributed to the academic success of a select group of at-risk African American male students, thereby supporting them to graduate from high school?
Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study the following definitions apply:

Absenteeism. Absent from school three or more days (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2013)

Dropout. An individual who is currently not enrolled in school and has not graduated from high school or completed a state or district-approved education program (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2004)

Dropout Factories. Schools that serve large numbers of minority and low-income students where the freshman class shrinks by 40% more by the time the students reach their senior year (Balfanz, 2007).

Educational resilience. For the purposes of this study, this term refers to the ability to graduate on time regardless of negative influences along the way (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994).

Grade Retention. The process of having a student repeat a course and/or grade — usually one previously failed (Kaufman et al., 2004)

Preschool. “Of or pertaining to the time before a child is ready for school” (Simpson & Weiner, 1989, p. 389).

Pushout. Occurs when a student is encouraged or forced to leave school for reasons that are not lawful (Harris, 2010).

Resilience. A process of successful adaptation despite the fact that a risk factor may be present (Garmezy, 1991).
Risk Factor. Factor associated with poor outcomes for an individual, family, or community (Benard, 1991).

Urban. A large or mid-sized city or suburb or a large city in which at least 40% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches and at least 40% represent minority populations (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007).

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to create profiles of at-risk African American male students who graduated. Although warning signs appear as early as elementary school in students who will drop out, (Barton, 2006; Newcomb & Abbott, 2002), many of these signs go unnoticed. Resiliency, as well as protective factors and their operation in at-risk youth, are an area of focus in this study.

Chapter One presents an introduction to the study, including the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, research questions, and definition of terms. Chapter Two presents a review of current and pertinent research related to what causes students to drop out of school and what has been effective in preventing at-risk students from dropping out. Chapter Three provides information regarding the methodology of the study.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a review of literature relating to high school students who drop out and those who actually graduate. Several major themes will be clearly depicted throughout this study, including factors that affect academic achievement and graduation rates. Other examples of these factors include: (1) a pattern of poor academic performance and excessive absence in school beginning in elementary school and continuing through high school; (2) the impact of grade retention; (3) the impact of high-stakes testing; (4) family and social relationships relative to completing high school; (5) homelessness; (6) resiliency and protective factors; and (7) the utilization of resources, intervention and prevention, known to enhance academic success in school.

Background

Students drop out of school for many reasons other than low academic achievement, including absenteeism, retention, and behavior problems (Nelson, 1985; Rumberger, 2004). However, it is important to acknowledge that low academic achievement in elementary school is an early predictor of dropping out in high school. According to Downey, von Hippel, and Broh (2004), a high proportion of students from non-English speaking backgrounds, large rates of childhood poverty and lower participation rates in quality preschools mean that many students begin school at a considerable disadvantage. For instance, socioeconomically disadvantaged students begin kindergarten about three-and-a-half months behind middle class students in math and two months behind in reading. Figure 1 shows the most common factors that contribute to students’ dropping out of school.
Figure 1. Factors that Impact Dropouts.

**Signals of Dropping Out**

The origins of differences between high school graduates and dropouts occur as early as kindergarten. Azzam (2007) identified the various reasons students ponder leaving school, which eventually lead to dropping out. Figure 1 shows some of the influences or reasons that impact student dropouts and these include poor academic performance, boredom, lack of relevance to lives outside of school, conflicts with other students or teachers, work, and family responsibilities. Barton (2006) found that students who dropped out of school
exhibited lower academic performance in kindergarten than their peers who graduated, in courses such as reading, writing, spelling, mathematics, and English; moreover, these differences in course performance grades achieved by graduates and dropouts were maintained across their developmental paths from kindergarten to graduation or to the point of dropping out of school.

Early behavior problems and negative attitudes toward school can also be a predictor of dropping out (Newcomb & Abbott, 2002). At the end of fifth grade, Newcomb and Abbott (2002) reported one in five students showed low perceived ability and interest in math, or problems with social behavior, such as fighting or arguing with other students. Suh and Suh (2007) argued that when students are working below grade level, behavior issues become one of the stronger indicators of dropping out of school. As noted by Suh and Suh (2007), school behavior issues are identified as one of the three strongest predictors for children 12 to 16 years old in determining high school outcomes. Furthermore, Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) described this type of misbehavior as delinquency, drug use, cigarette use, early sexual activity, and teen pregnancy.

**Lack of Preschool Services**

Socioeconomic indicators suggest that students in poverty tend not to attend preschool (Garces et al., 2000). There is a trend, however, in educational policy in the provision of all-day kindergarten. Although this is an important step in leveling the socioeconomic playing field, little attention has been given to mandating preschool. Although graduates and dropouts are mostly homogenous groups at this point in their developmental trajectory, the “blank slate” they were once theorized to be is no longer
evident from the genesis of their academic endeavors. In other words, it was thought that both groups of students began their education on the same footing; however, research has provided evidence that this is not the case. Prior to formal schooling, these two groups — those who graduate and those who dropout — have very different factors very early in their lives that will determine their paths to graduation. Hence, there appears to be a “critical period” for academic success prior to matriculation to kindergarten (Barton, 2006). A key finding lies in the fundamental differences between graduates and dropouts as they enter kindergarten.

Parents’ attitudes about their parenting role and their beliefs that their involvement will help appear to be foundational precursors to parents’ engagement with their child’s education at home or at school (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). A mother’s general understanding of her role and subsequent involvement in her child’s education are reported to be particularly influenced by her specific ideas about child development, child-rearing, and appropriate roles in supporting children’s education at home (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Early involvement in a child’s life has the most positive benefits for poor and minority children, although their parents are least likely to be involved.

**Middle School**

In one study, Balfanz and Herzog (2005) found that as students entered middle school, the gap between future graduates and dropouts became statistically more pronounced across all course performance grades and absenteeism. A study conducted by Balfanz and Herzog (2005) in Philadelphia found that more than half of sixth graders with the following three criteria eventually left school:
• attended school less than 80% of the time,
• received a poor final grade from their teachers in behavior, and
• were failing either math or English.

This same study found that in a given year, between 1,000 and 2,000 sixth graders in Philadelphia had these risk factors — with most typically exhibiting one or two risk factors.

Balfanz and Herzog (2005) discovered that middle grade students who later dropped out sometimes exhibited problems with academic performance or engagement but not both at the same time, suggesting that an off-track academic path and an off track nonacademic track to dropping out seemed to converge closer to high school. Attending to behavior challenges, engagement, and attendance among students in middle school who are not failing coursework may be one key to reaching a group of students who may otherwise drop out.

One of the strongest predictors of the failure to graduate involves two eighth grade factors: attending school less than 80% of the time (e.g., missing at least five weeks of school in the academic year) and receiving a failing grade in math and/or English during eighth grade (Neild & Balfanz, 2006). Eighth graders exhibit some of the same indications as sixth graders when they are moving along the path to dropping out. Neild and Balfanz (2006) found:

Of those eighth graders who attended school less than 80% of the time, 78% became high school dropouts. Of those eighth graders who failed mathematics or English. Seventy-seven percent dropped out of high school. Importantly, gender, race, age, and test scores did not have the strong predictive power of attendance and course failure. (p. 7)
Transition to High School

Herlihy (2007) found that the transition to high school can also be a contributing factor to school disengagement. Students either are on or off-track during their ninth grade year, which makes it a critical year for many students. More students fail ninth grade than any other high school grade, and a disproportionate number of students who are held back in ninth grade subsequently drop out. One of the biggest risk factors for students who drop out is retention in the ninth grade. Many times, retention in ninth grade is due to the lack of the appropriate number of course credits (Herlihy, 2007).

Furthermore, the transition to high school presents definite challenges for many minorities. Low-income minority children, particularly African Americans, are susceptible to declines in academic motivation and performance during the transition to the ninth grade, which may not be recovered in the subsequent years of high school (Eccles, 1991; Eccles et al., 1993). Simmons and Walker (1991) found that African American males liked school less as they got older, their grades dropped, and they were very likely to experience behavior problems.

A number of students who transition from middle to high school are unprepared for the many facets of high school such as teaching styles, academic expectations, or the culture of the school (Plank, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2008). Elementary and middle school can be responsible for these issues due to social promotion or grade retention (Anagnostopoulous, 2006; Bali et al., 2005). These changes cause a number of students to struggle to successfully pass courses during their first year as ninth-graders (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001).
In a study of ninth graders and causes for dropping out of high school, Neild (2009) found the culmination of course performance grades and absenteeism over the academic career of both dropouts and graduates seemed to solidify with entry into the ninth grade. For example, the first semester Grade Point Average (GPA) of ninth grade students who dropped out was significantly lower than that of first semester ninth grade students who graduated. This pattern holds true over the developmental progression through graduation or the point of dropping out. One possible secondary reason for significantly lower high school GPA of dropouts may have resided in the differential core course selection of dropouts and graduates in the ninth grade year (Leishcer, 2010). More specifically, dropouts took significantly more core courses than graduates did in their ninth grade year.

**Increased Educational Accountability**

In an effort to comply with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and prepare for state-mandated exit exams, educators are forced to enroll academically unprepared students in more rigorous and academically demanding core classes such as mathematics and English (Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2009). What would appear to be "catching up" or "remediating" students who are behind their successful peers may create more pressure for students by requiring them to attend more core classes, as opposed to allowing them to select non-core classes, such as music or art. According to Somers et al. (2009), this process may actually work against educators by facilitating further academic failure and eventual withdrawal as students are forced to enroll in core classes they are not academically prepared to encounter. Neild and Balfanz (2006) identified failure in core academic courses as another predictor of dropping out. They also determined that one key predictor of dropping out for
ninth graders is earning more than one F (based on semester marks) in core academic subjects, together with failing to be promoted to 10th grade. This predictor is 85% successful in determining who will not graduate on time. In both Chicago and Philadelphia, grades tended to be better predictors of dropping out than test scores (Neild & Balfanz, 2006).

In the 2003-2004 school year, Allensworth and Easton (2005) found in a study of Chicago Public Schools that most of the students (60%) were on track to graduate within four years at the end of their freshman year, but 40% did not meet minimum standards of acceptable performance. Most of those students who were off-track for their four-year graduation had simultaneously failed at least two semesters of a core course (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Since many of these students did not earn sufficient credits in the first year, they had to earn extra credits in subsequent years in order to graduate in four years. Their study found a strong association between students who were off-track and at risk of dropping out and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Allensworth and Easton (2005) also found in this study that the on-track indicator was a good predictor of graduation in Chicago Public Schools.

Dropouts and Attendance

Hickman (2008) has conducted research into the factors affecting high school attendance, including the impact of compulsory attendance laws. This study indicates absenteeism as one of the early signs and differences between high school graduates and dropouts beginning in kindergarten. Dropouts miss an average of 124 days by eighth grade, according to the study. Chronic absence in kindergarten is associated with lower academic performance in first grade. Connolly and Olson (2012) documented that absenteeism in pre-k
and kindergarten followed by chronic absenteeism in later years leads to retention in grade, lower achievement, and dropouts in the schools in Baltimore. “Educators should begin developing strategies to improve student attendance from as early as kindergarten” (Connolly & Olson, p. 21).

The impact of extensive absenteeism is long-term, since two thirds of students who miss 20 or more days of school in the first through third grades will eventually drop out before they have graduated from high school (Nunez, 2000). Numerous studies point to absenteeism as a predictive factor regarding the probability that a student will eventually drop out (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Neild & Balfanz, 2006). Because absenteeism is considered one of the strong predictors of course failure (which in turn is associated with dropping out), Neild and Balfanz conducted a study to examine attendance data for the approximately 130,000 students who were enrolled in Grades 6 through 12 in Philadelphia public schools, including charter schools, at any point during the 2003-2004 school year. These studies show that it is important for schools to monitor attendance so that they can intervene quickly. For instance, of the eighth graders in Philadelphia who attended school less than 80% of the time, 78% eventually dropped out (Neild & Balfanz, 2006).

Studies by Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, and Heinrich (2008) described the detailed differences in absenteeism that were observed as early as kindergarten, between high school graduates and dropouts; Hickman et al. found that first-grade absenteeism appears to be significantly higher for high school dropouts than first-grade absenteeism for high school graduates. This trend, according to Allensworth and Easton (2007), becomes even more
divergent during middle school as eighth-grade absenteeism is significantly higher for high school dropouts than eighth-grade absenteeism for high school graduates.

Rumberger (2004) found that the process of dropping out of school typically starts early, in the lower-level grades, where attendance rates provide telltale signs of trouble in a student's educational career, particularly when schools fail to respond to this indication of problems. Thereafter, the cumulative effect of failure, disillusionment and disengagement take their toll. “Something happens by the third or fourth grade, when they start to say, ‘I'm not doing so well’, and by the eighth grade, they decide, ‘I don't need this crap they're teaching me anyway’” (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007, p. 230).

In defining academic disengagement, the primary indicator of a student's level of detachment and disengagement from school academically is absenteeism (Alexander, Entwistle, & Horsey, 1997; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Kaufman & Rosenbaum, 1992; Rumberger, 2004). Evidence shows the number of days out of school impacts dropouts starting in the first grade and continues to be a factor throughout a student's school career, with some evidence that patterns of absenteeism are consistent across grade levels, at least for students with disabilities (Wagner, Blackborby, Camento, Hebbeler, & Newman, 1993). Missing too many days and having trouble catching up was the second-most-reported reason for dropping out of school in a recent survey of dropouts around the U.S. (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006). Other behaviors that can signal academic disengagement include cutting classes consistently, not completing homework and coming to class unprepared.

Hickman et al. (2008) reported in his study that during the elementary school, differences existed between graduates and dropouts—namely, dropouts missed more school
than graduates. He also reported that all states have mandated compulsory attendance laws with ages varying at the state level. Although mandating state laws requiring students in their teens to attend high school may be beneficial, this study demonstrated that differences in absenteeism existed as early as middle school and often times even earlier.

Grade Retention

Another aspect of school performance that is related to achievement, but is also a major factor on its own, is requiring students to repeat a grade (Alexander et al., 1997; Cairns et al., 1989). Significant differences exist in grade retention between high school dropouts and graduates; namely, high school dropouts are significantly more likely to have been retained compared to high school graduates (Stearns et al., 2007). While the impact of retention on subsequent school success is still the subject of some debate, school retention rates continue to increase, with the largest share of retentions taking place in the early elementary grades. Some data, as noted by Stearns et al. (2007), found a definite link between earlier grade retention and dropping out. Stearns et al. (2007) found that by some estimates, 15% of students aged 6-17 are retained. Furthermore, Black students were twice as likely as White students to be retained. Although Black students were slightly more likely to be retained, dropout rates for retained students were comparable for Black, White, and Hispanic students (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001).

It appears that the timing of retention is closely linked to students’ subsequent dropout decisions. Baker et al. (2001) stated that youth whose last retention occurred in the early elementary grades were at less risk of dropping out than those retained in later years. This may reflect the positive effect that retention has in providing additional learning time for
youths, or may capture the effects of special services targeted to at-risk students. Moreover, since the stigma of retention may be greater in the middle and secondary years, older youth faced with retention may be more likely to choose to leave school to consider different life options (Stearns et al., 2007).

According to one study conducted by Alexander et al. (1997), of Johns Hopkins University, 64% of students who had repeated a grade in elementary school and 63% of those who had been held back in middle school left school without a diploma. Additionally, Neild and Balfanz's (2006) study of Philadelphia students determined that more than half of the city's dropouts are not promoted past the ninth or 10th grade but are 17 years old or older when they drop out. As for low achievement, beginning in first grade, retention at any grade level has been found to impact the chances that a student will drop out. What makes retention so powerful is that its effects are additive, where multiple retentions dramatically increase the odds that a student will drop out (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002).

**School Pushout**

School pushout is also a factor related to dropping out (Harris, 2010). School pushout occurs when students are illegally and legally excluded from school. Students leave school for a variety of reasons. Some students leave school because they need to work full-time to help support their families. Others leave because they are moving and their current school is too far away. In these situations, pushout has not occurred, as the school has done nothing to force the student to leave (Shaw, Sullivan, & Chowdhury, 2011).

According to Harris (2010), examples of pushout occur when high school students in their late teens are told that they need to go to General Educational Development (GED)
programs because they are too old and do not have enough credits to graduate from high school. Or, school pushout can also occur when a school chooses to punish a student by repeatedly suspending him or her instead of attempting to address the problematic behavior. Examples of this may be when a student is told she must leave the school because she is pregnant, or when a student is forbidden from returning to school because of a criminal record. Pushout is not limited to actually prohibiting a student from coming to school.

Lewin (2003) states that pushout also occurs when schools do not provide students with the academic support they need. This support could include special education services for students with disabilities, tutoring, and services to pregnant and parenting students that would allow for them to participate in school activities. Lewin stresses that when services are not provided, students may become discouraged by their situation and feel that their only option is to leave school. They are pushed out of school because they are given no viable opportunity for an education. Students who struggle academically on high-stakes testing, thereby lowering schools’ tests scores, are often given options to go outside of the public school system (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

**Homeless Youth and Dropping Out**

The Department of Education, through the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program, Title VII B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, defines homeless children and youth who are (a) sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason (sometimes referred to as “doubled-up”); (b) living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations; (c) living in
emergency or transitional shelters; (d) abandoned in hospitals; or (e) awaiting foster care placement. In one study, Vissing (1996) found that schools play a significant role in the identification of the homeless and in addressing the needs of the at-risk child. However, she notes the structure of schools and their policies contributed to these children’s problems, and that homeless students are at a disadvantage when it comes to producing quality work. Older students may have outside jobs that interfere with doing homework. Younger students may have to go to work with parents or assist in the care of siblings (Vissing, 1996).

**The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act**

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Act was initially a direct response to support Americans challenged by homelessness and was later revised to protect the educational rights of homeless students. The McKinney-Vento Education Assistance Improvement Act in the No Child Left Behind Act (P.L. 107-110), signed by President Bush on January 8, 2002, replaced the McKinney Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program (Myers & Popp, 2003). This legislation stated that homeless children and youth are entitled to a free, appropriate public education and that schools are required to remove obstacles to school success, enrollment, and attendance. Because they receive federal funding, school districts must ensure that these rights are not violated and that homeless children and youth are not discriminated against in public schools.

The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act and subsequent amendments in 1990 and 1994 provided considerable protection for the educational needs of homeless children and youth in the United States. The following are key provisions of the law:
1. The law requires states to ensure that local educational agencies do not create a separate education system for homeless children.

2. States must adopt policies and practices to ensure that homeless children are not stigmatized.

3. States must ensure that every homeless child has access to the same free, appropriate public education.

4. All policies, practices, laws, and procedures must be reviewed and revised so students may experience success.

5. Homeless students must receive access to the same educational programs and services in the classroom as their permanently housed peers (National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 2005).

With the reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the following provisions were amended:

1. Transportation: The McKinney-Vento Act requires school districts to provide transportation for students experiencing homelessness in three situations. First, the school is obligated to provide transportation to the school of origin upon the request of a parent or guardian. Secondly, for other transportation (as opposed to the school of origin), the Act requires districts to provide transportation comparable to that provided to the housed students. Third, school districts must eliminated barriers to the school enrollment and retention of students experiencing homelessness. For example, if a student is living on or near an extremely busy intersection, in a very dangerous neighborhood, or
is otherwise unable to attend school without transportation, the district must eliminate lack of transportation as a barrier to the child attending school.

2. School of origin: Parents or guardians of students in homeless situations can keep their children in their schools of origin (to the extent feasible) or enroll them in any public school that students living in the same attendance area are eligible to attend.

3. Designated local liaison: Local homeless educators are district staff members responsible for ensuring the identification, enrollment, attendance, and opportunities for academic success of students in homeless situations.

4. Immediate enrollment: Students have the right to enroll in school immediately, even if they do not have required documents, such as school records, medical records, proof of residency, or other documents. The term “enroll” is defined as attending classes and participating fully in school activities (National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 2005).

The law also extends accountability to local educational agencies serving roughly 930,000 homeless students in the country, instead of just those that receive subgrants under McKinney-Vento from the state (Jacobson, 2002). Knowledge of the McKinney-Vento Act is essential for those who provide services to homeless children, including shelter workers, educators, advocates, and legislators. The amended law also prohibits states that receive McKinney-Vento funds from segregating homeless children into separate classes or schools, except for short periods of time, for health and safety emergencies (Jacobson, 2002).

Although the McKinney Act helped expand services and educational opportunities for
homeless children, many needs remain. Despite the progress that has been made since the passage of the McKinney-Vento Act, homeless students still encounter many difficulties enrolling in and attending school and in participating in school programs that might help them to succeed (Duffield, 2001).

Homelessness among students in public schools has an impact on completion of school. Aviles and Helfrich (2004) state that homelessness is a pervasive problem among youth who often become homeless due to dysfunctional home environments and poverty. Many of these students’ basic needs, such as food and shelter, are unmet. In 2007, the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (NLCHP) reported that 1.3 million children were homeless in the United States. The homeless group that has increased significantly is youth. Children and youth who experience interruptions during their education often end up contributing to the high dropout rate (Duffield, 2001).

The results of a multi-agency study conducted by Nunez in 1999 also reflect homeless students’ tendencies to repeat a grade (Nunez, 2000). This study found that in Norman and Tulsa, Oklahoma, 30% of students who have experienced homelessness at some time in their educational career will repeat a grade. In New Orleans, Philadelphia and St. Louis, the number of those who repeated a grade was one fourth of those who had experienced one or more episodes of homelessness (Nunez, 2000).

For children who are highly transient and possibly homeless, a stable and nurturing environment for growth and success can be offered by schools (Noll & Watkins, 2003). Barriers to homeless children’s attending schools often may result from their parents or caretakers’ needs and fears, such as: (a) preoccupation with finding food and shelters; (b)
concern that an abusive parent will locate the children; (c) concern that child welfare will take the children; and (d) lack of motivation to send children to school (Rafferty, 1997). The many challenges that can affect school success for homeless students include transience, family and emotional upheavals, embarrassment about their situation, and frustration in school due to lack of academic achievement (Rountree, 1996).

Poverty, loss of housing, and a reduction in or loss of employment are listed among the primary reasons of homelessness (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). According to the National Coalition to End Homelessness (NCH), of the 12.5% of Americans identified as living in poverty during 2007, 35.7% were children (NCH, 2009). The inability to pay household expenses such as rent and foreclosures has resulted in many Americans becoming homeless. Eviction from rented or leased housing has also resulted in families living with family or friends and shelters, or worse yet, living in cars or on the streets.

Impact of State-Mandated Tests and NCLB on At-Risk Students

The Urban Institute (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004) and the Harvard Civil Rights Project (2004) suggest that the high stakes testing mandated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) may increase the school dropout rate. The NCLB Act has a provision to require schools to be assessed based on graduation rates in addition to test scores. In effect, average test scores will increase if there are fewer lower performing students in a school. Jones, Jones, and Hargrove (2003) assert these standardized tests create a system that is unfair as well as destructive to learning because the emphasis on tougher standards and accountability is exceptionally harmful to low-income and minority students. There have been charges that schools are “pushing out” students who are likely to fail high-stakes exams (Viadero, 2004),
and in some schools, teachers are asking students at-risk of failing the test not to come to school the day the test is administered (Jones et al., 2003). Schools tend to hold students back in order to increase the amount of students who pass the competency exams (Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006). After consistently doing poorly in school, low performing students often choose to drop out rather than to be subjected to additional academic embarrassment as a result of testing. More moderately low performing students could benefit from tutors and summer school instead of retention due to failure to successfully pass tests (Orfield et al., 2004).

Allensworth (2009) compared dropouts who failed high stakes testing and found these students struggled as early as elementary school. Dropouts perform slightly lower in the classroom compared to their end-of-grade testing ability early in elementary school, whereas graduates performed in a similar fashion in the classroom. Not only do dropouts decrease in their classroom attendance and standardized performances over time, but the gap in classroom performance becomes further behind their standardized testing ability (Allensworth, 2009). This may be due to frustration with schooling and lowering academic self-concept. Swanson (2008) described opponents of high school exit exams who often complain that testing requirements force already-low graduation rates downward. They argue that raising the bar for graduation forces many students to drop out. Critics see it as fundamentally unfair to deny diplomas to students who have successfully completed thirteen years of schooling. They also see it as cold-hearted, considering that possessing a high school diploma is an important predictor of future life outcomes (Cameron & Heckman, 1993).
Family and Social Relationships and Responsibilities

One body of research (Schargel & Smink, 2001) has shown that factors related to students' social and family background can increase or decrease the risk of their dropping out. Students who are poor, homeless, members of minority groups, male, transferred among multiple elementary and middle schools, and overage for their grade are more likely to drop out of high school (Sum, 2009). Students who come from single parent families, have a mother who dropped out of high school, have parents who provide low support for learning, or have parents who do not know their friends' parents well also are placed at greater risk (Staff & Kreager, 2008). Hawkins, Catalano, and Miller (1992) suggested that young teenagers who take on adult responsibilities—becoming a parent, getting married, and holding down a job—are also more likely to leave school without a diploma (Hawkins et al., 1992). Staff and Kregaer (2008) also found that some social background indicators are neither good nor bad, but instead influence dropping out in very complex ways. For example, their study found that mobility between schools before fifth grade increases the risk of dropping out, but mobility during early high school can be beneficial. Sum (2009) stated that holding a job outside of school can exert a negative, neutral, or even beneficial impact depending on a student's sex and type of job he or she has.

The family may also present problems for teens struggling with a history of problem behavior, family management problems, and family conflict (Rumberger, 2004). The risk factors for the family may affect students via substance abuse, delinquency, teenage pregnancy, school dropout, and violence as found by Schargel and Smink (2001). Their study
determined that a family that has an older sibling who drops out or becomes pregnant increases the likelihood that younger siblings will follow the same pattern.

Some researchers indicated that low levels of education and occupational status of parents were significantly related to the student's decision to drop out (Noth & O'Neil, 1981; Sadowski, 1987). The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (Naylor, 1989) reported that students whose parents have low expectations for their child's success, whose parents place little value on education, and whose family has a history of dropouts are likely to drop out. Self (1985) also indicated that many students who drop out have parents who had low educational achievement and had themselves dropped out of school. According to Grossnickle (1986), home problems are common among dropouts. Similarly, Nelson (1985) found that dropouts typically have family problems such as divorce, death, alcohol, drug, emotional, or physical abuse, and family members who dropped out of school. Sadowski (1987) concluded that the families of students who drop out have little influence from the father, participated little in family leisure activities, and communicated less as a family.

Weaker support systems for education, stress in the home, permissive parenting, and low expectations are indicators from homes with little or no parent involvement or parent support (Rumberger, 2004). Students who have parents who monitor and regulate student activities, encourage independent decision-making, and provide emotional support are generally more involved in their children’s schooling, and their children are less likely to drop out of school (Astone & McLanahan, 1991). In addition to family background, friends also influenced students’ decision to drop out. Students who drop out often have friends or siblings who have similar problems and are also likely to drop out (Sadowski, 1987).
Teacher Relationships and School Characteristics

The power of caring is defined as imperative for student success as described by Geneva Gay (2000), a prominent author in the field of multicultural education. Gay emphasizes the importance of curriculum and instruction designed to meet the needs of the diverse populations reflected in public schools. According to her, teachers demonstrate caring for children as students and as people. “This is expressed in concern for their psycho-emotional well being and academic success” (Gay, 2000, p. 45). According to Nel Noddings (1992), concern for students should form the frame upon which the educational environment is developed. Valerie Polakow (2008) referred to living in poverty and ultimately homelessness as living on the outside. According to Polakow, “schools and good teachers can make a significant difference in children’s stressed and desperate lives, creating a refuge where a child may experience sensitive and supportive intervention from teachers, principals and other support staff” (p. 17).

Teacher attitudes and expectations may also impact student achievement (Evans, 2005; Kober, 2001; Varlas, 2005). Evans found that in schools that had high academic success, the teachers had consistently high “expectations for all students.” This was strengthened by a belief that all students can and will learn (Chenoweth 2006; Moore, 2005; Tucker & Stronge, 2005).

School location appears to also play a role in the high school dropout rate, with southern states consistently ranking lower than the rest of the country in high school graduation rates (Greene & Winters, 2002). In 2004, six of the eight lowest state graduation rates were in the South, with New York being the only northern state in the bottom 20%
(Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Students of all races in southern states had lower graduation rates than students in other regions of the country in 2004. For example, in 2000, Florida had the lowest graduation rate (60%) among Caucasian students, followed by Georgia (63%) and Tennessee (63%). Mississippi had the lowest gradation rate (23%) for Hispanic students, followed by Florida (48%) (Greene & Winters, 2002).

Furthermore, the high school dropout rate is much higher in major cities than in suburban districts (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Based on statistics from the U.S. Department of Education, Georgia’s 2004 graduation rate in suburban districts was 61.85%. In contrast, the 2004 graduation rate in Atlanta was 46.1%. The discrepancy has been even greater in areas, such as New York, where the graduation rate in New York City was only 47.9% in 2004, but in suburban regions was 82.9% (Grey, 2008).

The Alliance for Excellent Education (2009) described “dropout factories,” which are high schools with greater than a 50% dropout rate. There are nearly 2000 high schools identified as dropout factories across the United States, accounting for approximately 12% of all high schools (The Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Most dropout factories are found in large northern and western cities and southern states. All dropout factories had high minority populations, which has been identified as a risk factor by itself (The Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009).

Exacerbating the problem is a host of other factors. Pascopella (2003) found that teachers in these dropout factories were not only underpaid, but they were also much less experienced than the average teacher. These schools tended to be in poorer neighborhoods; therefore, the schools had less money, fewer resources and less educated parents. High
school dropouts from these schools accounted for 60% of all African American dropouts, 63% of all Hispanic dropouts, and only 30% of Caucasian dropouts in the United States (Pascopella, 2003).

Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) studied 196 high schools in Kentucky, comparing high schools with the highest dropout rates to those with the lowest dropout rates. In a correlation analysis, gender, school size, and expulsion rates did not differ among the schools. However, they did vary greatly in areas of academic achievement, attendance rates, and successful transitioning programs. High schools with high dropout rates had a significantly greater population below the poverty level, had a significantly greater grade retention rate, and higher suspension rates.

Many studies concluded school performance factors such as academic achievement and grade retention were the strongest predictors of dropping out of high school (Balfanz, 2007; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Jerald, 2006; Woods, 1995). However, other studies suggested the significant impact of factors associated with (a) demographics, (b) family characteristics, (c) student engagement, (d) adult responsibilities, and (e) school and neighborhood characteristics (Balfanz, 2007; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

**Impact of Dropping Out**

The economic impact of inadequate education has been widely discussed in many arenas such as crime, physical and mental health, and public assistance (Rumberger, 2004). To prosper and serve as productive citizens requires more than an adequate education as measured by high school completion. Income generated by working is many times
determined by the amount of schooling one has completed. Unemployment is high among those who have less than a high school diploma (Miller, 2002). Many years ago, completing high school was seen as a valued asset in the labor market, however, in our present time, it is just a minimum requirement. According to Rumberger (2004), being a high school graduate enables an individual to enroll in a four-year college, a community college, the armed forces, or enter the job sector. Potential economic income and tax revenues can be lost when individuals are not adequately educated.

**Preventing Students from Dropping Out**

Fortunately, the dropout problem is not an inevitable, immutable feature of American education. Demographics matter, but what happens in schools has a great impact on whether students stay in school and graduate. Recent research suggests that even for students who have difficult home lives, dropping out has much to do with how schools operate and the educational experiences students have within them (Neild & Balfanz, 2006). Moreover, the conventional wisdom that dropping out is a highly idiosyncratic process driven by entirely personal factors is not true for most students who leave school (Miller, 2002). In other words, most students are not randomly choosing to dropout because it may be a personal characteristic not to complete any given task. Most dropouts follow identifiable pathways through the education pipeline.

The public schools of Chicago and Philadelphia have shown evidence that smaller classes and creative and knowledgeable teachers who motivate their students add to the prevention of students dropping out of school. They have also proven that experiential and applied curricula also increase student achievement and prevent students from getting bored;
this also leads to students staying in school (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Unfortunately, the No Child Left Behind Act produces schools that emphasize repetitive drilling for the high stakes tests. Both students and high quality teachers who need schools to be more interesting and creative are likely to leave under these circumstances. Students who have fallen behind academically do better with extra support, compared to additional academic punishments (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Many of the students who are being held back in the ninth grade have had academic difficulties for much of their school careers. Poor school performance, which include low test scores, course failure and grade retention, is one of the main characteristics of these students (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

**Alternative Schools**

Good alternative schools can be effective for students with more serious academic needs or for students with other social or personal problems. Alternative schools were started in the 1970s and have grown significantly with over 1,500 career academies nationwide which serve mostly at-risk populations (Foley & Pang, 2006). Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) noted an evaluation of 1,700 high-risk students who applied to career academies indicate the baseline dropout rate was reduced by 32%. They also found that during the projected twelfth grade of the high-risk students, over 40% of these students had earned enough credits to graduate.

A study by Howley and Bickel (2000) revealed that “negative power of poverty can be halved in small schools” (p. 6). This solid education also involves personalized schools were students are known by at least one adult (Raywid, 2001). The students in the study by Howley and Bickel (2000) repeated again and again that the personal attention of individual
staff members and the size of the classes and school in general were two of the most important factors for keeping them in school. Consideration of attitude and structure of the school could have a definite impact on the student faced with difficulties.

It has been established by researchers that the success of alternative schools is based on several factors such as (a) consistent and dedicated involvement of teachers and staff with students, (b) personal and social counseling by these same people, (c) individualized teaching methods that take into account various learning styles, and (d) an ability by all staff, including teachers, to communicate to students a sincere interest in their academic progress and emotional well-being (Bauman, 1998; Dugger & Dugger, 1998). According to students, teachers, and administrators in these studies, the culture of an alternative school encompasses all of these activities and behaviors, thus helping to determine student success or failure, persistence, and feelings of well-being in school.

**Resiliency and Protective Factors in Youth**

The study of resiliency, which began approximately 30 years ago, is relatively new. Its origins can be traced back to studies on schizophrenia, poverty, and response to trauma. Considered pioneers in an emerging filed, the early studies of resiliency by Norman Garmezy and his colleague Michael Rutter began a movement that continues today. Their writings are among the earliest examples of efforts to address protective factors and laid the groundwork for future work in this area (Cinchetti & Garmezy, 1993). Garmezy and Rutter (1983) described in great length risk factors such as illness, family discord, bereavement, and protective factors such as family and community support, temperament and a positive school environment, which help children adjust to new and varied situations.
Masten, Best, and Garmezy (1990) defined resiliency as the capacity to successfully adapt despite challenging or threatening situations. In the education arena, resiliency focuses on strengths of individual youth and their use of these strengths to succeed academically, both with short and long-term goals (Brown, Caston, & Bernard, 2001). On a related note, Linquanti (1992) described resilience as:

…. that quality in children who, though exposed to significant stress and adversity in their lives, do not succumb to the school failure, substance abuse, mental health, and juvenile delinquency problems they are at greater risk of experiencing. (p. 2)

Resiliency is a healthy, adaptive mechanism. Though resiliency is healthy there is often the assumption that resilient youth have little or no stress and that they can recover unharmed from any situation. Unfortunately, this not the case. Resilience changes over time as individuals develop and as the tasks that they need to complete become more difficult. The degree to which a person is resilient depends largely on certain traits called “protective factors” (Linquanti, 1992). Protective factors can be grouped into three categories: caring and supportive relationships, positive and high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation. These three categories are linked to family, school, and community that work together to protect an individual from the impact of negative environmental situations (Rutter, 1987)

According to Rubin (1996), “resiliency, especially in at-risk youth, is generally seen when these children live in disadvantaged conditions, outcomes are better than predicted, and when interventions are present” (p. 10). Similarly, Rutter (1987) depicted resiliency as a successful “rebounding” from a painful situation or stress to beat unfavorable odds, thereby
being able to function in a competent manner. Benard (1991) explained that at-risk youth who are resilient have the following four characteristics:

a. social competence (the ability to elicit positive responses from others, thus establishing positive relationships with both adults and peers);

b. problem-solving skills (planning that facilitates seeing oneself in control and resourcefulness in seeking help from others);

c. autonomy (a sense of one’s own identity and an ability to act independently and exert some control over one’s environment), and

d. a sense of purpose and future (goals, educational aspirations, persistence, hopefulness and a sense of a bright future). (Bernard, 1991, p. 24)

In a study of resilient children, Rutter (1987) found that school environmental support in the form of student led activities, student resources, and high expectations of academic success contributed to the students’ academic development and prosocial behavior in the midst of risk in the students’ homes and communities. Based at the University of Minnesota, this study examined resiliency and protective factors and their relationship to adaptation in children. This adaptation demonstrates an awareness of a difficult reality combined with a commitment to conquer the obstacle and achieve goals despite the negative circumstances (Rutter, 1987). Qualitative and quantitative measures such as interviews, school records, and observations were conducted to gauge academic achievement, problem behaviors and delinquency in the school population were utilized in this study. Rutter found that gender, intelligence, socioeconomic status, parenting qualities, and family cohesion were strong predictors and had the potential to moderate the effects of stressful events or situations.
Rutter (1987) also cited the importance of positive relationships not only with one’s family, but also with other caring and competent people. Because students spend so much time at school with teachers, their attachments are very important. Masten et al. (1990) noted, “Schools, along with families, play a central role nurturing all the tools of resilience” (p. 30).

Teachers, as well as parents, help young children learn skills of self-control over behavior, emotion, and attention while they are helping them to develop intellectual capacity. In effect, teachers and schools assist students in developing resilience (Masten et al., 1990).

Contributions to successful coping with stress include strategies for dealing with risk factors and support of friends and family in the face of adversity (Fuller, 1998). A variety of coping strategies can be made available to at-risk young people by resources such as school counselors, community agencies, and churches. Rutter (1987) considered the importance of coping strategies by placing an emphasis on how people deal with adversity. Rutter found that, “The mechanisms giving rise to resilience might be in personal agency, or coping strategies—that is, what individuals do in order to deal with the challenges they face” (p. 205). These mechanisms also serve as protective factors.

Protective factors are those factors that include family, social, psychological, and behavioral attributes that can provide a buffer for youth (Smokowski et al., 1999). Protective factors can be also defined as how a person modifies their response to a situation. Rutter (1987) found that protective factors work together to shield an individual from the impact of negative environmental circumstances. The presence of multiple protective factors can lessen the impact of risk factors. For example, strong protections, such as parental support and
involvement, could diminish the influence of strong risks, such as engaging with peers who may be involved in substance abuse.

Unfortunately, biological, psychological, and environmental risk factors are dominant among at-risk youth. Protective factors (e.g., personal, social, family, and school safety nets) assist in helping an individual counter and resist risk factors (Kumpfer, 1993; Masten et al., 1990). Resilient youth generally demonstrate a sense of purpose, problem-solving skills, and social awareness, which are the components of protective factors (Rutter, 1987). Protective factors help explain why some children maintain a sense of self-concept and self-efficacy when confronted with similar obstacles or barriers as those children who are less resilient (Masten et al., 1990).

Summary

The research presented in the literature reviewed in Chapter Two addressed key components and themes related to why some students drop out of school. Specific characteristics appear in students who, in spite of the obstacles and barriers in their lives, are able to graduate with their peers. These students benefit from home, school, and community factors, which serve to protect them from the adversities of their environments (Bernard, 2004). Chapter Three describes the research methodology used to explore characteristics of a select group of African American males who, in spite of being labeled at-risk, went on to graduate from high school.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

There is much research focusing on variables that impede students from being academically successful and eventually dropping out of high school (Azzam, 2007; Barton, 2006). In contrast, this study attempted to identify variables that enable at-risk students to graduate in spite of obstacles in their lives. The following research question guided this study: What factors contributed to the academic success of a select group of at-risk African American male students, thereby supporting them to graduate from high school?

By gathering information about at-risk African American male students who graduate, this study sought to describe the variables that have positive impacts on at-risk students who are academically successful. The following areas were explored in hopes of sharing information with educators, parents, and students: significant factors that fostered students’ resilience or impeded their success throughout the course of their school years and individual, familial, and community factors that either supported or impeded these students in school.

It is a firmly grounded tradition that the very nature of an issue drives the research design. When that which is to be examined retells the stories and describes the behaviors of people as they relate with one another, then the proper tradition for the study is a form of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Qualitative research methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) were chosen for this study because they were valued as methods of inquiry for exploratory studies to “identify variables and generate hypotheses germane to populations and groups that have been previously overlooked” (Merchant & Dupuy, 1996, p.
Qualitative research “is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2009, p. 4).

This chapter presents the qualitative research design to be used in this study. Qualitative analysis is a “process of examining and interpreting data in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 1). In particular, the qualitative research methods that were utilized in this study are described in the following sections: research design, multiple case study, population and sampling, instrumentation, data collection procedures, data analysis, researcher bias and subjectivity, limitations, establishing trustworthiness, confidentiality, and human subjects approval.

Research Design

Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen (2006) listed eight key characteristics of qualitative case studies that aim to answer the following basic question: “What are the characteristics of this particular entity, phenomenon, person, setting?” (p. 468). The eight key characteristics of case studies (Ary et al., 2006) include: focusing on a single unit (the student), having multidisciplinary roots (psychology and education), producing in-depth descriptions (through interviews), being anchored in real life (the study of resilience versus dropping out of high school is timely), providing descriptions of themes and issues (themes of resilience sought), using more than one data collection technique (interviews, demographic questionnaires), valuing the time spent with family (family is a support system), and having the ability to combine with other types of qualitative approaches, such as reviewing documents and artifacts, and observations. It is anticipated that this selected
methodology will provide insights that are relative to the current needs of at-risk African American males and their families by providing an in-depth understanding of how resilience is facilitated in light of risk (Bernard, 2004).

**Multiple Case Study**

This research was conducted as a qualitative study using a multiple case study approach to conduct an in-depth exploration of five African American young men who were identified as at-risk in school, based upon factors such as truancy, academic failure or suspension. According to Yin (2003), a multiple case study enables the researcher to explore differences within and between cases. The goal is to replicate findings across cases. Because comparisons will be drawn, it is imperative that the cases are chosen carefully so that the researcher can predict similar results across cases. Yin (2003) describes how multiple can be used to either, “(a) predicts similar results or (b) predicts contrasting results but for predictable reasons” (p. 47). The evidence created from this type of study is expensive to conduct (Stake, 1995).

Qualitative research methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) were chosen for this study because these methods are valued as methods of inquiry for exploratory studies to “identify variables and generate hypotheses germane to populations and groups that have been previously overlooked” (Merchant & Dupuy, 1996, p. 539). Qualitative research “is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2009, p. 4). Qualitative analysis is a “process of examining and interpreting data in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 1). This study, which focused on risk factors,
resiliency, and African American males, investigated the factors that promote success in
school, despite environmental adversities brought on by school, family, and community
conditions and experiences.

In a school system, adults control nearly all of the decisions without consulting or
listening to adults. Paying closer attention to the voices of students would assist in
developing more effective programming. The researcher really wanted to hear what students
had to say about the experiences of high school, their home lives, and significant others and
how they were able to graduate in spite of the many issues in their lives. This qualitative
research method focused on the detailed experiences of the participants to try to understand
the experiences and how each participant makes meaning from the experience.

Case study designs provide a systematic way of looking at events, collecting data,
analyzing information, and reporting the results (Yin, 2009). Baxter and Jack (2008) define
qualitative case studies as:

…an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon
within its context using a variety of data sources. This ensures that the issue
is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses, which allows
for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood.

(p. 544)

The variety of lenses used in this study included a demographic questionnaire (see
Appendix B), responses to interview questions (see Appendix C), and handwritten
notes.
Merriam (2009) argues that case studies are appropriate when “researchers are interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing” (p. 42). According to Yin (2009), qualitative case study designs: (a) enable participants to be the center of the study, (b) maximize what can be learned about a phenomenon, (c) provide for multi-perspective analysis, (d) explain a situation, (e) provide a basis to apply solutions to situations, and (f) explore differences within and between cases. Each of these descriptions of case studies was true in this research project.

In this study, each participant was referred to as a case. Five participants or case studies were examined in this study. According to Creswell (2007), when conducting case study research no more than 4 to 5 case studies should be included in a single study. The more cases used in a study, the less depth in any of the single cases (Creswell, 2007). Meyer (2001) states that it is preferable to include more than one case study in a study but in order to compare and analyze cases implies that the cases must be fairly few. Based on this information, five case studies were developed in this study. These cases were used to identify individual themes, as well as conducted cross-case theme analysis (Creswell, 2007). After the initial coding and theme development were completed, it was determined that no additional students were needed.

According to Stake (1995) and Yin (2003), case study research requires a detailed description of the setting, where the interviews take place, and the participants. This description is critical to understanding the context of this study and its participants. The setting for this research was referred to as the two high schools, which the participants attended. These North Carolina high schools are located in a school district of 33,000
students with five traditional high schools. This school district has approximately 62% African American students with each of these two schools having 75% of their student body identified as African Americans. Both of these schools were labeled as dropout factories in 2010 based upon their significant dropout rates and having only 60% of the students graduating from high school (Balfanz, 2004).

The site chosen to collect data for this study was the public library. The interviews took place in a less traveled area of the library with equipment, such as the recorder, set up well in advance. Since the research focused on a real-life context, it was important to develop a deeper understanding of the setting, the participants, and the common denominator of a high school diploma, so that the research findings were placed in the appropriate social and cultural context.

In this study, it was anticipated that each case would yield findings that were unique to each participant, yet were similar across the breadth of participants due to socio-demographic similarities (Yin, 2009). By conducting this study, the researcher was able to gain an in-depth understanding of how resilience was facilitated in the face of risk and protective factors.

**Population and Sampling**

Participants for this study were purposefully selected. The researcher recruited five African American males who graduated from the local school district. According to Patton (2002), the goal of purposeful sampling is to allow researchers to be intentional when selecting individuals, those referred to as the “best informants,” and intentionally selecting sites to learn or understand the phenomenon of interest. Purposeful sampling provides a
constructive framework for thinking about who to interview (Hatch, 2002). More specifically, homogeneous sampling, which involves selecting sites and participants that possess similar characteristics, was utilized (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participants selected for this study were identified based on a number of risk factors, such as poor attendance, retention, and other barriers. The attribute criteria for this study were:

1. African American male;
2. Age 18 to 25;
3. Graduated from a high school designated as a “dropout factory” (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Balfanz, & Letgers, 2004).

These criteria clearly relate to the purpose of this study, which was to explore the experiences of at-risk African American males. The age criterion was employed to ensure that the study participants were still “close” enough to their school experiences to facilitate their recent recall of these experiences. Individuals selected to participate in this study included those who have defied the odds and demonstrated remarkable academic success in spite of potentially risky conditions in their lives. African American urban young males who graduated from high school are true examples of defying the odds. Hence, these individuals are described as being resilient. For the purpose of the study, resilience is “the attainment of positive development outcomes in the face of adversity” (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998, p. 205).

High school graduation was used as criteria for participation in this study because of the high value placed on a high school diploma. For many at-risk African American students,
the high school diploma is a terminal degree. As Fasik (1994) indicated, school graduation ceremonies are a type of culture-wide rite of passage in the United States, and high school graduation ceremonies have become universal, as such, for increasing numbers of adolescents from low-income backgrounds. Thus, the struggle to get through high school was a real achievement for the participants in this study and tangible proof of their resiliency. Selecting graduates from dropout factories, which are high schools with greater than a 50% dropout rate and those schools with severe dropout problems, will provide participants who thrived in spite of the many barriers internal and external to the schools.

Snowball sampling (Cone & Foster, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Neuman, 2006) was also used in identifying potential participants. Snowball sampling occurs when someone meeting the research criteria is approached about participating in the study and is asked to recommend or refer others who also meet the criteria. The use of snowball sampling can be useful when a population is difficult to locate. Participants for this study were recruited through friends, church, and other service organizations that assist those who may have dropped out of high school. Those participants recruited through their churches would possibly have the support from the church as a protective factor in their lives. Involvement in religious activities strengthens resiliency in a number of young people (Ford, 1994). Religious beliefs provide stability and meaningfulness for some individual, especially through times of adversity (Werner & Smith, 1982).

**Instrumentation**

This study used a demographic questionnaire (Appendix B), and data from interviews of participants (Appendix C). The demographic questionnaire (Appendix B) included the
following items: current age, age at time of high-school graduation, number of years spent in high school, current post-secondary status, current employment status, employment status while in high school, GPA at time of high school graduation or when the participant left school, average number of days absent each year, total number of discipline/behavioral referrals, participation in federal funded free or reduced-price lunch program, legal guardianship when in high school, number of siblings, number of siblings living in home when in high school, number of siblings who completed high school, mother’s educational background, father’s educational background, occupation of parents, teen pregnancy and parenthood, number of years in current neighborhood, and hobbies or interests. Personal interviews, using structured, open-ended questions (Appendix C), were also conducted following the completion of the demographic questionnaire (Appendix B). These questions were developed based on a review of literature on the characteristics of resilient individuals and protective factors that enhance or foster resiliency.

The researcher piloted the demographic questionnaire and the interview protocol with two individuals who were not included in the actual research study. The purpose of this pilot was to determine if the questionnaire and interview questions solicited the responses and information needed for this research. The respondents were provided the opportunity to suggest questions that were not already included in these instruments. The pilot enabled the researcher to revise these instruments as needed prior to the start of data collection for this study (Fink & Kosekoff, 1985). Data from the pilot were not included in the final analysis and presentation of the case studies.
Procedures

Before data collection began, the interview protocol was finalized. This instrument consisted of structured open-ended questions that allowed participants to answer both factual and opinion questions (Yin, 2003). Questions used during this study were beneficial in identifying themes and ultimately answering the research question. The responses to the interview questions were an important aspect of this qualitative research as the interviews allowed for the participants’ voices to be heard. The participants’ own words were used to develop rich, thick descriptions during the reporting of the study findings.

As previously discussed, this study used a multiple case study design with each participant named as a case study. The focus of inquiry was African American male high school graduates who were identified as being at-risk in school. The main source of data was in-depth interviewing or “a conversation with a purpose” (Kahn & Cannel, 1957, p. 49). Each participant was interviewed for 90 minutes to two hours. Variations in the length of interviews among the participants were due to differences in rapport with the participants. The researcher requested an additional session with two of the participants; however, due to their school and work schedules they were unable to schedule another interview. Some participants were comfortable and provided information beyond the information solicited during the interview. All five interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The interviews were structured interviews punctuated by a series of pre-established questions (see Appendix A). These interviews became more conversational as the participants and the researcher became more comfortable with each other. These conversations were guided by data from the questionnaire that was reviewed during the interview. Although a second interview, an open-
ended interview, was originally planned, it was not needed since additional key information, not included in the survey, was provided by the participants during the initial interview.

The interview questions were largely open-ended to elicit the richest and, therefore, the most interesting data. Field notes, which are descriptive in nature, were made during all interviews. They included facts, quotes, and key words. No interpretations were included in the notes themselves. A personal log was used to document the researcher’s reactions to the interviews.

The participants were told that the interview would be for a research project with African American male high school graduates. After introduction and explanation of the study with each of the participants, the informed consent form was presented to the participant and signed. This consent form can be located on Appendix A. For each interview, a gift card of $25 was given to each participant. The interviews were held by appointment, according to participant availability, at the public library. Each interview focused on the participant’s life history and on his “career” in high school. Interviews with these five participants were conducted over a consecutive three-week period.

The goal of these interviews was to find out as much as possible about each young man’s life experiences, establishing as a baseline his early educational and professional aspirations, in order to assess these in relationship to the factors that led to his graduating from high school. Most important was the recording of each participant’s experiences as they viewed them and then described them in their own words in order to identify the internal and/or external factors that they believed caused them to graduate from high school. Pseudonyms were developed and used at all times to identify all five participants.
In summary, much of the data collection and recording procedures detailed by Creswell (2009) were utilized in the following manner:

- Interviews through face-to-face one-on-one interaction documented through notes, audiotaping and transcription by the researcher.
- A prepared questionnaire, designed to foster unstructured, open-ended conversation, to establish continuity among interviews.
- A research log tracking date, time, and place of each interview or examination of data. (pp. 179-180)

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis began with the data collection process. Marshall and Rossman (1999) state that data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation to the mass of collected data. Data analysis includes reading and memoing, describing, clarifying, interpreting and writing the report. It should be noted that data analysis cannot be entirely separated from data collection, as Creswell (2009) asserts: “Qualitative data analysis is conducted concurrently with gathering data, making interpretations, and writing reports” (p. 184). Data analysis, particularly in the case study phase, “is an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data, asking analytical questions, and writing memos throughout the study” (Creswell, 2009, p. 184).

Qualitative researchers collect and analyze data simultaneously to allow for an emergent design (Hatch, 2002). Each phase of the process may shift after data collection has begun and questions may change. The analysis conducted should be holistic in nature in
order to view the entire case rather than specific aspects of the case (Yin, 2003). When conducting data analysis in a multiple case study, researchers must analyze the data at two levels: within case and across cases (Stake, 2006). Within case analysis begins by preparing and organizing the data for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or discussion (Creswell, 2007).

For this study, with-in case analysis was conducted for each of the participants individually. After the analysis of each case was completed, the researcher then conducted a cross-case analysis to compare the responses of the separate cases against each of the other similar cases. This analysis was not simply a matter of listing the findings from each case, but was a comparison of the themes and sub-themes from each of the cases, which aided in the development of categories that emerged through the cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2007).

The researcher collected, analyzed, interpreted, and summarized data sources, interviews and surveys. Written notes from each interview were reviewed for common practices, beliefs, opinions, and issues. Reviewing these written notes provided additional data and documents to analyze. Descriptive in nature, these notes included facts, quotes, and key words. A personal log was used to document the researcher’s reactions to the interviews. Data was analyzed from school progress reports and report cards supplied by the participants.

All transcriptions were reviewed to answer the research question. A coding system was developed to facilitate the analysis of transcriptions and surveys. Open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1998) was used. This approach involved a paragraph-by-paragraph and line-by-line analysis, which generated categories and subcategories. Direct quotes were used to capture
feelings, attitudes and beliefs of participants. Interpreting involved pulling together aspects of
each participant’s stories. Findings from the analysis were synthesized and a written report
was made.

**Researcher Bias and Subjectivity**

As a researcher engaging in a case study of at-risk African American males in their
quest to obtain a high school diploma, it is important to note that the researcher has worked
closely with students similar to those in this study. Experiences observed during a 12-year
principalship revealed how many of these students in urban schools are viewed. As an
African American female educator who is also an aunt and stepmother to African American
males, the researcher has participated and witnessed various supports provided to these
young men. This support ranged from extensive conversations, participating in student-led
conferences with school staff with these young men, to attending sporting events or
performances in which these young men were participants. The researcher’s own personal
experiences could have influenced and shaped the way this research was conducted,
interpreted, and presented. However, as a qualitative researcher, the researcher worked to
bracket or set aside these perceptions, as well as any prior knowledge of at-risk African
American male students (Creswell, 2007). The goal was to critically examine the truthfulness
of the research in order to limit bias. This was done by remaining neutral in the interview
process and not interjecting personal opinions that might influence the participants’
responses. Throughout this study, every effort was made to focus only on the findings of this
research and to use prior knowledge only as needed.
Limitations

There were several limitations in this study. First, the study was limited to five African American males who were deemed at risk for educational failure. According to Fink (2000), when there is a small number of participants, the researcher’s interpretation of comments made by each participant may have a greater influence on the results of the research project. Second, Strauss and Corbin (1997) state that data generated from qualitative research can be difficult to analyze and compare. This presented another limitation of the data generated from this study. Lastly, this study included participants from financially struggling families. Struggling families commonly mistrust unfamiliar interviewers asking personal questions of themselves and their family members (Ferguson et al., 1996). Participants may avoid providing rich, thick information because of their perceptions of the questions. On the other hand, participants in this study were flattered and honored for being asked to participate since this study offered opportunities for resilient students to enjoy some degree of recognition for their accomplishment.

While many young adults spend endless hours talking and sharing with friends, they can become remarkably shy when speaking with adults. First, the researcher made the participants comfortable so they could answer questions fully and truthfully. One technique used was to restate the purpose of the interview and how much they were helping the researcher with scholarly work. The researcher also shared the anxiety, excitement, and other feelings that were felt by the researcher. This was to show similar feelings and emotions regarding this interview even though each was playing different roles.
Establishing Trustworthiness

“All research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner” (Merriam, 2009, p. 209). Credibility depends less on the sample size than the richness of the data gathered and the analysis of the researcher (Patton, 2002). In order to establish trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 59) recommend that researchers ask four questions about their research:

(a) Is confidence established in the “truth” of the findings?
(b) Are the findings applicable for other contexts?
(c) Are the findings consistent and can they be replicated?
(d) Are the findings neutral with the least amount of bias?

Trustworthiness, according to Lincoln and Guba, includes credibility (internal validity); dependability (reliability); transferability (external validity) which can be defined as the reader evaluating or comparing the findings from the study to what may apply in his situation through the interview process; and confirmability (objectivity).

Credibility depends less on the sample size than the richness of the data gathered and the analysis of the researcher (Patton, 2002). In order to establish credibility, specific techniques should be used. With the researcher serving as the chief instrument of this study, confirmability was of foremost importance. This term refers to the degree to which the researcher demonstrates neutrality. This was done through an audit trail consisting of raw data, analysis notes, synthesis products, process notes, and preliminary developmental information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Audits or audit trails document the development of the study. According to Carcary (2009, p. 15), when developing an audit trail, “a researcher
provides an account of all research decisions and activities throughout the study”. Carcary (2009) also states a study’s trustworthiness may be established if the reader is able to audit the events, influences, and actions of the researcher. This suggests that audit trails represent a means of assuring quality in qualitative studies (Carcary, 2009). The audit trail is used for clarification of all major decisions made through the research process to aid others in better understanding the details of the study and for self-reflection.

Creswell (2009) also discussed credibility when he explained that triangulation, member checking, and audits can be used to determine accuracy or credibility. Triangulation involves a process of corroborating evidence from multiple individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection into descriptions and themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Triangulation was also used during within-case analysis and cross-case analysis which included transcribing and reading interviews, taking notes, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across themes, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns across cases. While doing the analysis, it was necessary to move back and forth between the steps. The outcome of the analysis connected the experiences of the research participants. Their unique versions of their experiences in high school provided the quotations used later in the study to explain the themes. Completing this cross-case analysis provided a better understanding of the research question and led towards achieving the established goals of the project.

**Confidentiality**

The most important obligation of the researcher is to respect the rights, needs, values, and desires of the participants (Creswell, 2003). Protecting participants’ confidentiality while
collecting data, analyzing data, and disseminating findings is of most importance (Patton, 2002). In this study, participants and locations (i.e., schools/school district) were assigned pseudonyms from the beginning of the study. This information was shared with the participants at the beginning of the study. No reference was made in oral or written reports, which could link participants or sites to this study. In addition, audiotapes were coded using pseudonyms.

**Human Subjects Approval**

This study was reviewed and approved by the North Carolina State University Office for the Protection of Human Subjects and the Research. The Research and Accountability Department of Durham Public Schools also reviewed and approved this research project. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent (Appendix A) form to participate. This form was presented after a thorough explanation of the study was provided. At any point in the study, if a respondent requested to discontinue participation, the researcher would immediately cease to include the respondent in the study. However, all of the participants were able to participate in the study. Participants were informed that they would receive a gift card after one interview but would be expected to return for a follow-up interview, if needed, and would not receive a second gift card.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this study, the researcher sought to uncover the essential critical factors i.e., the “heart” of how at-risk students can overcome the most challenging life situations, and graduate in spite of these obstacles. The sensitivity and integrity of the researcher is uniquely
vital in a qualitative case study (Creswell, 2003). The preparation and experiences of the researcher should guide both the collection and interpretation of data. Chapters 4 and 5 present the findings and implications of this study for future research, policy and practice, aimed at reducing the dropout rate and improving the graduation rate of at-risk African American males.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore and investigate factors related to at-risk African American males who have attained a high school diploma despite having encountered difficult circumstances. These males reside in an inner city setting where poverty and unemployment rates are high, drugs and crimes are commonplace, and high stress can affect home and school environments, as well as family functioning (Rumberger, 2004; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Nonetheless, these five young men have developed coping strategies to overcome these adverse circumstances.

The researcher conducted interviews with each of the five participants over a period of six weeks to develop a description of their experiences throughout their academic career. In addition, the researcher piloted the interview instrument with one non-participant before conducting the actual dissertation study. The interviews emphasized the participants’ support systems, strengths, coping mechanisms, and other factors, which helped them maneuver through obstacles and reach their goal of completing high school.

Various community and church members nominated the participants. They were identified as young African American males who had “overcome the odds,” and were successful in completing high school within four years. “Overcoming the odds” is a description used for these young men who live in an inner city community and who appear to be socially competent, self-efficacious, and effective problem solvers, who are able to navigate through a web of adversity (Rubin, 1996). Also, Sanders (1998) found that church involvement had a positive effect on the academic self-concept of African American youth.
Reservations were made with the public library where the interviews took place in a conference room. Notification of the designated area was provided to the participants prior to the interviews. Participants entered the conference room unaccompanied and were greeted by the researcher who expressed appreciation for their participation. Each participant was invited to sit in a chair across or beside the interviewer. Participants were introduced to the setting by being asked if they were familiar with the purpose of the interview. Resting beside the interviewer was a silver and gray digital audio recorder. The interview setting was temperate even though the room was quite cold during two of the interview sessions. The researcher apologized to the participants about the coldness of the room and requested they inform the researcher if they were uncomfortable since an alternate room was available.

Each interview lasted between 90 minutes to 2 hours with variations due to several participants sharing additional information beyond interview questions. All interviews were audio recorded and the investigator created comprehensive reflective notes. The interviews were transcribed, producing over 400 pages of text. Pseudonyms were assigned by the researcher to protect the identity of the participants. Any additional identifying information was removed or changed to further ensure the participants’ privacy. All participants signed consent forms (See Appendix A) granting permission for their information to be used in this study.

During the formal interviews the young men were asked what school was like for them; their attitudes about school and their teachers, including the best and worst features of both; and their goals, aspirations and advice about how to be successful in school and
perhaps, in life. Other topics concerning their neighborhoods, their interests and hobbies were also part of the interview questions.

In time, the young men talked freely and openly about all aspects of their lives. They told the researcher about their hopes and aspirations, their frustrations with school and school officials; how they coped in the community; their struggles with their peers; and their perceptions of who they are as a young African American male. Most important of all, as time passed, they talked to the researcher as a person they appeared to trust.

After the interviews, the researcher analyzed the transcripts and the reflective notes for thematic content. A coding system was developed to facilitate the analysis of transcriptions. The goal was to identify common themes and patterns of behavior among the participants. The following procedures were employed:

1. Each of the 16 interview questions was written at the top of a page.
2. Participants’ answers to each question were recorded on the corresponding page. (A minimum of ten answers was recorded for each question.)
3. Answers were reviewed and a short or briefly worded descriptive label was assigned to each answer (focusing on key descriptive words or phrases).
4. Answers were assigned a letter code (A, B, C, D, etc.). Common answers were assigned the same letter code.
5. The frequency of letter codes was tabulated and recorded for each descriptive label.
6. The results yielded common themes and/patterns of behavior.
7. The results were then compiled and reported in Table 4.1.
The analysis was a continual process that occurred throughout the interviews and after. As new information emerged, the researcher developed and asked new questions to further shed light on the new information. Next, the researcher listed the categories and their concepts that emerged from the data.

A common thread that was essential to the academic success of all five participants was the presence of caring, supportive, and empowering relationships. These relationships included the support of at least one person within the students’ family, school, or community environment. When asked what experiences contributed to their academic success despite adversity, the participants first identified the people who made a difference in their lives. Participants vibrantly described the qualities of these people, and how these social support providers not only expressed genuine interest and care, but also empowered and inspired students to succeed. For this reason, the central theme identified in these interviews is supportive relationships.

**Research Setting**

**Morehead County**

Morehead County\(^1\) is located in the southeastern United States. The county is home to the state’s fifth largest school district. Nearly 33,000 students attend the district’s 57 schools, which include six traditional high schools and four small “theme” high schools. For the

\(^1\) Pseudonym used to maintain the anonymity of the district in which this research was conducted.
purpose of this study, participants attended two inner city high schools within the Westview Community.

Morehead County high schools make use of the “4-by-4 block” schedule, which was developed for academic acceleration, remediation, and enrichment. This term describes a schedule in which a student completes four classes in the first semester of the academic year and four in the second semester. Each class meets for approximately 90 minutes each day. The name, 4-by-4-block, comes from the fact that there are two terms of four classes, and classes are taught in larger blocks of time. Some anticipated outcomes of block scheduling include more active and motivated students, a less hurried and stressful routine for students, improved student and teacher morale, increased opportunities to take elective courses, more individualized instruction, and personalized attention for students because of lower student-teacher ratios (National Education Commission on Time and Learning, 1994).

**Westview Community**

Westview Community has always been a stable community in the city of Steepleton. Over the years the racial demography of the Westview Community has not changed much. This community has always been considered an African American community. This community, like other older communities in Steepleton, has a rich history and tradition. Unfortunately, it is embedded in a section of the city that is categorized as a crime-ridden area and is regularly publicized by the news media as being dangerous. While researching the Westview Community, the researcher came to realize that of all the problems besetting the poor inner-city African American community, none is more pressing than that of interpersonal violence and aggression. It wreaks havoc almost daily on the lives of
community residents and increasingly spills over into downtown and residential middle-class areas. Simply living in such an environment places young people (especially young African American males) at increased risk of falling victim to aggressive behavior.

**Demographic Survey of Participants**

Prior to conducting interviews, the researcher administered a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A) to each of the participants. This questionnaire provided the researcher with additional insights about the five participants. The participants were given the questionnaires at the beginning of the time spent with the researcher. Each participant took approximately 15 minutes to complete the survey. Demographic information is summarized in Table 4.1. A number of risk factors for students, such as grades, attendance, and discipline, were indicators of problem areas with each of the five participants.
Table 4.1

Participants’ Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Jimmy</th>
<th>Ronald</th>
<th>Donnie</th>
<th>Corey</th>
<th>Jamie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lived with in high school</strong></td>
<td>Other Relatives</td>
<td>Mother only</td>
<td>Mother Only</td>
<td>Mother Only</td>
<td>Great Uncle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mother’s education level</strong></td>
<td>Beyond High School</td>
<td>Did not complete High School</td>
<td>Completed High Schools</td>
<td>Did not complete High School</td>
<td>Did not complete High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of siblings in home</strong></td>
<td>&gt; 4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>&gt;4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Days absent in high school per year</strong></td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>More than 20</td>
<td>11-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suspended in high school</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Free/reduced lunch</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grade Point Average (GPA)</strong></td>
<td>2.0 - 2.9</td>
<td>1.0 - 1.9</td>
<td>2.0 - 2.9</td>
<td>1.0 - 1.9</td>
<td>2.0 - 2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employed in high school</strong></td>
<td>Part-Time</td>
<td>Part-Time</td>
<td>Part-Time</td>
<td>Two Part-Time Jobs</td>
<td>Did not work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Three of the participants were 19 years old and two were 20 years old. At the time of their graduation from high school, three were 19 years old and two were 18 years old. Two of the participants spent four years in high school and two participants graduated from high school during the summer session at the end of the school year. One participant finished high school during the winter graduation following his fourth year of high school.

Three participants graduated with a GPA (grade point average) within the range of 2.0-2.9 and two participants had GPAs within the range of 1.0-1.9. When in high school, all five students were employed part-time, with one student working two part-time jobs. During high school, three participants were absent an average of 6-10 days each year; one was absent an average of 11-15 days each year; and one was absent an average of more than 20 days during two years of high school. Four of the five participants had discipline/behavior referrals during high school; three had 1-5 referrals, one had 6-10 referrals, and one did not have any. All five participants qualified for the free lunch program; none received reduced lunch prices.

During high school, one participant lived with both biological parents (his father was in prison), two lived with their mothers only, one lived with an aunt and an uncle, and one lived with a pseudo grandfather. All participants had siblings; two had two siblings; one had three siblings; and two had more than four siblings, including half-sisters or brothers. Except for two participants, all of the siblings lived in their parents’ home when they were in high school. Three participants had an older sibling who completed high school. Two participants reported that their mothers were high school graduates; the mothers of three participants had not completed high school. The fathers of two participants were high school graduates; one
was not a high school graduate; and two participants reported no information. Of the five participants, two reported their parents were employed and three indicated that their parents were unemployed. Four had lived in their current neighborhoods for 1-5 years, and one for less than a year. None of the participants became parents while they were in high school.

After graduation from high school two participants enrolled in community college, two were working, and one was enrolled in a culinary arts school. The two students in the community college were also working part-time and the one enrolled in culinary arts school was not employed.

A profile of the participants revealed certain demographic factors. All of the participants came from families with two or more children. Two of the participants were first born. Households were comprised of at least three persons. Four of the five participants lived in a household with more than five persons. Each participant received free lunch; none received reduced cost lunch. All of the participants in the study came from low-income homes that had been affected by family changes, or multiple moves. Two participants lived in public housing. Their peer associations were primarily centered on friends at school and church, rather than from their neighborhoods. In addition, most participants had moved an average of four times since they started attending school, thus the likelihood of forming close friendships in the neighborhood was minimal. In spite of these difficulties, the young men who are profiled in this study survived and graduated from high school.

Case Study #1: Jimmy

The interview with Jimmy was conducted during the morning of July 28, 2014. Jimmy is a 20-year-old African American male. Based on the comments he provided, he is
very personable with a humble attitude. He lives in an area that is considered the old Westview Community. He was an average student in high school and is now attending the local community college. While observing Jimmy, the researcher discovered that he is a young man who likes being around people and is fairly sharp about figuring out people and situations. During the interview he indicated that, “tomorrow is a different day and things will always get better”.

During school, Jimmy lived between his mother’s house and his aunt’s house. He spent the majority of his high school years with his aunt. He attended public school from preschool to eighth grade. His mother then transferred him to a charter school based upon his ability to play basketball. Several of his friends played basketball together in middle school. Coaches from a nearby charter school apparently observed the boys playing ball and convinced their mothers to enroll them in the charter school where their academic needs would be met along with possibly going to college on a basketball scholarship.

Jimmy remained at the charter school for two years, his freshman and sophomore years. After the tenth grade he transferred back to the public school setting. When asked why he moved from the charter school to the public school, Jimmy stated:

To be honest, I was diagnosed with a disability in elementary school. The school told my mom I had a learning problem and needed to be pulled out for a smaller group. While at the charter school the teachers did not know how to adjust my work so that I could understand. I had difficulty in reading and the teachers would give me real easy books that were for little kids. I was embarrassed to read from
these books. My reading is not that bad. The public schools did a better job with my
disability.

Jimmy described his home situation as chaotic, with living between his mom’s home
and his aunt’s home. His mother’s issues with substance abuse caused this situation. When
asked if he missed a lot of days of school, Jimmy responded by saying:

I am the oldest of three children. My mom would leave us for days and we did not
know where she was. Because we moved a lot, the school bus did not pick us up
from our home. My mom would take us to school. When she was missing for days,
I had no way to get my sister or brother to school.

Jimmy shared that one of the friends who attended the charter with him also returned
to the public school system when he returned. According to Jimmy, this friend, Ken, had
been his best friend since sixth grade. In addition, when asked if anyone knew of his home
situation, he shared that Ken was very much aware. He described his friendship with Ken as:

Ken and I share everything with each other. I know my home life is different from
his since he has a mom and a dad and it would look like we do not have a lot in
common. We both love basketball had dreams of going to college on a basketball
scholarship. I still think I can pull that off since I am playing ball with a community
college. Ken has been the one who pushes me when I feel like giving up. When I
am not in school, he calls me on my cell to see why I am not in school. We hang
out together and we both worked the same hours after school got out. We still
keep up with each other even if we did not end up after graduation in the same
spot.
Jimmy also mentioned that he had other friends he admired in high school. He looked up to them because they were role models.

Jimmy felt that his home situation with his mom got in the way of his ability to do well in school. Attending the charter school was viewed as a way for him to do better, but he felt it did not. If he had to do it again he would never have agreed to go to a charter because he felt the charter school did not provide the type of support he had in public schools. He was able to attend after-school tutoring programs in the public school setting but Jimmy also felt that having the responsibility of caring for his siblings prevented him from doing well in school. When asked if anyone at school knew of his home situation, he stated that he did not want anyone to know and that he kept all of his issues to himself. He shared that once he reentered the public school system he bonded with a counselor with whom he was able to provide insight into his home life.

Mr. Elvin, our counselor, understood what I was going through at home. I felt comfortable talking with him because he was cool. He was a Black man who understood and did not judge me based upon my home situation. He went to my teachers when I began struggling with classwork. The teachers gave me extra time to turn in my homework and gave me extra time on my tests. Mr. Elvin continued to help me until I graduated.

Jimmy also indicated that the teachers at his school did a great job with him because he felt they cared; however, at the charter school he was looked over when he had questions or concerns. Jimmy also stated he did not associate with any people in his neighborhood mostly
because his family moved so much and he was not able to bond with any children in his community. In addition, he usually had to stay indoors to help with siblings.

**Case Study #2: Ronald**

The interview with Ronald was conducted during the afternoon of August 5, 2014. Ronald is a nineteen-year-old African American male; he is perceived as a shy person because he speaks softly. In describing himself he said:

Most friends will describe me as a leader, a very people’s person, and a communicator. They say I can be goofy, laid back at times, and very blunt about things. I like to keep people laughing and smiling.

According to Ronald, his mom and grandmother, both of whom lived in his household, worried a lot about him especially when he started driving. At one point he was working two jobs during the summer while in high school and his mom and grandmother were afraid he would fall asleep while driving home from his night job. He also played basketball while in high school. Because Ronald did not go out a lot at night in high school his mom did not have that particular issue to be concerned with.

Ronald attended a charter school while in middle school and returned to public schools upon entering the ninth grade. He felt the charter school was a good school but lacked extra-curricular activities. Also at the charter school, he only had one elective in addition to his core subjects, while the public high school had many electives to choose from. He was in all honors classes but could not ask questions in class at the charter school. If he did not understand in class, he was expected to attend tutoring. He described the situation at the charter as:
If you were lost in understanding what was going on, which I felt was most of the time, I had to go to tutoring. They tried to treat the classes like they were college prep, which is how they sold my parents the school. So I had to attend tutoring for three classes and I also had basketball and had to choose very wisely with my time. Some of the teachers would say that I did the classroom work but I was lazy because of not going to tutoring.

Ronald felt the teachers in the public high school actually cared about his education more than the teachers in private school. They wanted students to succeed in what they were doing and made sure they understood what was being shared in class. In order to succeed, Ronald felt he needed to do better with studying. He shared that he had horrible study habits. At the public high school, he was taught different types of study behaviors. He described them as using Cornell notes, reading over his notes, and writing down ideas.

When asked what contributed to his being able to graduate with his class, he said that he worked his “butt” off every day so that he would be on that list. The factors that he said contributed to him graduating from high school were:

There were counselors, Mr. Elvin, and Dr. Williams, my principal – definitely. They were my main two contacts. Without those two I don’t know what I would have done. They pushed me until I couldn’t go no more. My teachers supported me and also because I played basketball I had my team behind me. My high school has a family-like atmosphere and everybody supports everybody. This was a really good school. I also felt my middle school In School Suspension (ISS) teacher is the reason I am the way I am today. He changed a lot of boys to men.
When asked, what got in the way of his learning, he responded that the charter school would waste time to argue with someone who did not abide by the dress code since they had to wear uniforms. He stated this was a big distraction over something as simple as not having a belt on. He felt that some of these little distractions kept him from being attentive and that the school was too strict— their way or the highway. Ronald also felt that issues with school administration hindered his learning along with others during his middle school years.

I would say I did not have any particular issues in elementary school. But in middle school during my seventh and eighth grade years we had a change in principals. The leadership did not have it together and they were not preparing the students, as they should have. Some people didn’t learn during that time because there were serious discipline issues and we had a lot of substitute teachers. I don’t think they graded our End of Grade tests that year and to be honest I don’t remember even taking my End of Grade tests. I feel that middle school did not prepare me for high school.

Ronald felt that the change in administration in middle school definitely had an impact on his ninth and tenth grade years in high school. He felt he was not prepared for the rigor and stamina needed for high school. Not being prepared academically added to his inability to make new friends in high school. Ronald struggled with acquaintances even in his neighborhood. He stated he did not mingle with boys in his neighborhood because he was involved with basketball. He has been playing little league basketball since he was very young and this sport took up a lot of his time. Ronald also said he is very involved in church.

When asked what could assist African American males, Ronald said:

I feel the schools are doing their part. At the end of the day, it is up to that person.
I guess if schools had more mentor programs it would help. I learned to have good relationships with my teachers. Staying after school, going to tutoring, talking with my teachers after school worked for me. These teachers definitely understood. They were always very honest with us. You also have to be honest to yourself. Either you want to be successful or not. I put in my own demands.

Case Study #3: Donnie

The interview with Donnie was conducted during the morning of August 15, 2014. Donnie is a 19-year-old African American male; he was perceived as a very pleasant, considerate, and family oriented based on the comments he provided. For example, when asked what motivated him to enter a four-year college in one of the neighboring cities, he stated:

I wanted to stay in school after graduating from high school. Because I know at this time in my life I needed to be in school because I would get off track.

Between my mom and my family, they always talked about how I had to make it. Some one in my family had to do it.

Donnie played football in high school and hoped to play football in college. He just recently left college due to his grade point average and was transferring to a community college. He hoped to transfer to another four-year college in the area to continue his education and to play football.

When Donnie was asked about his strengths, he stated once he puts his mind to something he finds a way to get through it. He indicated that he did not let the statistics regarding African American males get to him. During Donnie’s senior year he wrote thirteen
goals, and as he completed them he would check them off. Completing college is a goal he couldn’t check off but he doesn’t feel bad about it because he feels he still has time to get this last goal checked off.

With home environments having a huge impact on one’s life, Donnie said this was definitely the case in his life. Donnie lived with his mom, who was a single parent, along with his younger sister. He remained in the same school during the course of his four years in high school. However, during elementary school he moved quite a bit. Elementary school years were described as:

There were many moves in elementary. I started off in one elementary school in this area and then we moved to a rural area with my grandmother because my mom was unable to manage to pay the household expenses. Once we moved back to this area, my mom enrolled me in a charter school held in a church. I stayed there for a year and a half and then moved to another elementary school in the public school system. I finished up my fifth grade year at yet another elementary school.

He felt that his middle school football coach played an instrumental part in his life. He said that he helped him to develop a passion for football and that when he would become unfocused in middle school and get off track the coach would remind him of what he was in school for. He described his way of motivating himself as, “I would always find a way to pick myself up. Even if it was for a minute, I don’t stay down long and soak.”

During his sophomore year, his mom remarried. He did not like the changes his step dad brought into the house because the changes had an impact on him. For example, he was
pressured into getting a job while attending school full time due to his mom not working; it
was just the step dad’s income. Donnie managed to work and try to stay on top of his
schoolwork but admitted it was difficult. When his mom separated from his step dad, they
were in worse shape because there was virtually no money to pay the bills. His mom came to
him asking what they were going to do. Donnie said working part-time became a big part of
his high school career.

Donnie shared his home situation with his high school coach, one of his teachers and
mostly with his very close friends. He felt he could open up and share with his friends about
his home situation because many of them were going through the same type of issues in their
homes. He also felt comfortable with the adults because the adults in his high school were
also working with many of his friends in dealing with their issues.

When asked what were the areas he felt he needed to improve on, he stated:
Probably during my freshman year in high school, I wished I had asked more
adults what to expect out of high school. I came in thinking that playing football
all the time was that it couldn’t get any better than this. I didn’t play football
during my 10th grade year because of grades and even though I was promoted
my grade point average was not good enough to play football. I wished I had
someone who talked to me at the beginning of my ninth grade year and explained
it to me.

In this situation, Donnie felt he had been advised about the connection between focusing on
schoolwork and the school’s policies that require students to successfully pass a certain
number of courses. He stated he could have made changes or improvements during his 9th
grade year when it was determined that his grades were slipping or that he would fail courses.

Donnie also responded to a question regarding who or what motivated him to continue school even when he felt he might not pass a course or two. He stated that he surrounded himself with mentors who wanted the best for him. He involved himself with a leadership development league started by the principal and a counselor. He shared that they encouraged him and introduced him to various life experiences he had not been exposed to through field trips to college campuses. Donnie stated that his football coach was also instrumental in talking with him in his life.

When Donnie was asked what could schools do to help students who are not motivated or who need to feel that they belong, he responded with:

Have more clubs and organizations for people who are not athletic or who can’t sing, dance, or act, or who may not have the best grades. Find other ways to bring the school together to make them feel comfortable. When they feel comfortable, then they will open up to you and that’s when the adults can assess the situation and find resources to help the situations. If teachers in schools would listen to students and try to find out what make us tick then we will want to be in school.

**Case Study #4: Corey**

The interview with Corey was conducted on the afternoon of August 22, 2014. Corey is a 19-year-old African American male who appeared to be very genuine and passionate about telling his story. The researcher found Corey to be extremely talkative and very clear and candid in his responses. He immediately opened up during the interview and
appeared to trust the researcher as he shared his experiences with school and his life at home.

Corey has several siblings older than he and several younger than he, in a household of over eight people. He was the first in his family to graduate and wanted to do something different than his family members. His family sees him as the great hope for the family. He stated he wanted more out of life than what some of his siblings settled for. He described himself as, ‘an outgoing person. I always do my thing. I am talkative. I’m smart. I work and I have a settled mind so that’s what counts.’

Corey went to one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school even though he did go to an alternative school during his ninth grade year. He was suspended from high school due to an incident that occurred in his neighborhood. Corey described this incident as:

I got locked up outside of school. Attempted robbery and I was just there. Did not have a gun on me. I received an accessory to the robbery by the police department. I was then sent to the alternative school since this was the policy when a serious crime occurs outside of school. They told me this was the policy. I said this was cool and stayed at the alternative for a full year. This happened two days immediately after school started for the school year during my 9th grade year. Once I finished that year I went back to my high school and was able to graduate with my class on time.
Corey said that with the help of teachers, mentors, and his probation officer he was able to focus on school. Part of his probation was to meet once a week with a group of people who helped him with school, home, and his community.

Unfortunately, having to attend an alternative school was just one of the many issues in Corey’s life. He stated that there were financial problems because his mom did not have a job. His dad was always locked up in jail and his mom had to take care of the entire family. With his mom not having any money Corey was forced to get a job. As a result, he was unable to do any extra-curricula activities because he had to work after school. He described this situation as:

Because I had to work after school, I felt stressed out because I felt I didn’t get a fair shot and wasn’t able to have fun during my high school years. When you have to work, it’s a blow. In my junior year I was working two jobs, 50 hours a week. I was working at Harris-Teeter and worked a little private job as a home health care worker. In addition to attending school, I would get up at 3 am and go to the home of the patient, his uncle, who was paralyzed, from 4 am to 7 am, to get him up and dressed. I would get to school around 7:30 am, basically late to school every day. I would leave school at 2:30 and worked from 4 pm to 11 pm. This was daily and really just about killed me. I was so tired.

Corey kept this pace for his junior and senior years in high school. As a result, he did not have time to study and his grades were close to failing. He felt he knew the classroom work but just didn’t have time to do it. Fortunately, Corey did have a good relationship with his
teachers. He said he put his pride aside and told the teachers what was going on in his personal life. He felt telling them the situation helped him out a lot.

In addition to these teachers, Corey felt his uncle, the one he cared for, was his biggest motivator. He described his uncle as:

My Uncle Bobby, who had a master’s degree from University of North Carolina, talked to me a lot. I never really had a male role model in my life. I felt that if my uncle could get an education paralyzed from the neck down then I could. He told me I could do anything I wanted to do. He said that you do something with your life that you love, make money and live a decent life. You have to sacrifice a little right now but have to be willing to go without. College will be a sacrifice but in the end it will be okay.

Corey’s family also moved a lot. They would move in with the grandfather when they were unable to pay the bills and move out on their own when their mother felt she could handle the bills. This went on constantly. Corey’s family eventually moved into public housing. Public housing had negative implications for the children in Corey’s household. Many of the parents in public housing were unemployed, most families struggled to feed their families without food stamps, and many of the children had academic and behavior issues at school. In spite of the challenges Corey and others faced while living in public housing, this is where he also found a source of encouragement:

The barriers for me in public housing were the drug dealers, the gangs, and the pimps.

It was the old people in the community who encouraged me. I would be walking to
school with my book bag on my back and they would ask me if I was going to school. They encouraged me each day to keep going to school. It was the older people. There was no discipline in my house. My mom never looked at my report card beyond the 6th grade. My older sisters were the ones to help. I found there was very little motivation in my community and in my home for me to do the right thing.

**Case Study #5: Jamie**

The interview with Jamie took place on the afternoon of August 28, 2014. Jamie is a 20-year-old African American male who was perceived as casual and humble. Jamie has seven sisters and brothers who are older and one younger sister. Only one sister finished high school. Jamie was determined he would finish. He stated repeatedly during the interview he did not want to be like his sisters and brothers.

Due to Jamie’s mother having a large number of children, she allowed his grandmother to raise him and his sister. His grandmother passed when Jamie was two and Jamie’s mother gave permission for his grandmother’s boyfriend, an elderly man, to raise him. Mr. David, his guardian, has been an integral part of Jamie’s life. Jamie described this relationship:

Mr. David gave me an opportunity and experiences in life that I would not have had if I had remained with my mother and siblings. I watched from the sidelines as they (my siblings) moved from one house to another, one community to another, one school to another while I remained in the same house, same community, same school. I never went without anything. Mr. David was always there for me.
Jamie said he did not struggle in school because Mr. David saw to it that he would go to after school programs for tutoring.

Jamie shared that Mr. David is 84 years old. He admitted that during high school his fear was Mr. David would pass and he would have to live with his mom and family. Although he had never lived with his biological family, Jamie visited them often, at least once a month. Mr. David wanted him to be close with his siblings. Jamie attended the same high school with his younger brother, Major. He constantly worried about Major because he did not attend school on a regular basis. He would often talk with his brother and try to encourage him, but his brother indicated that his home situation kept him from focusing on school.

According to Jamie, Mr. David and his mother described him as hardheaded and being determined whenever he set his mind to it. Jamie felt that his stubbornness did get in the way of his progressing in school. In fact, during his third grade year Mr. David pulled him out of public schools and sent him to a charter school. Jamie also went to a charter school while in high school, which created issues with his high school credits. He almost did not graduate with his classmates from public school because of his ninth grade year in a charter school. Although Jamie realized that his stubbornness could get in the way of his success, he said this could also be strength if used properly.

Although Jamie felt that he was a “hand-full” for Mr. David because of Mr. David’s age and his inability to keep up with Jamie and where he was at all times, when asked who was his motivator, he said quickly, Mr. David. According to Jamie, Mr. David had given so much to him and had never accepted any type of financial assistance to help him, he wanted
to graduate from high school and go to college to make Mr. David proud. Jamie also indicated that his youngest brother motivated him to do well. He wanted to be an example for him and he also wanted to show his other sisters and brothers that he did not want to be like them. All of them were struggling and a few of them were in and out of jail. He did not want to follow in their footsteps.

In addition to the motivation and support Jamie received from Mr. David it became apparent during the interview that Jamie was motivated by his passion about sports and thankful for the role sports played in his graduating from high school within four years. For example, when asked how sports helped to motivate him to succeed, Jamie stated:

For me the idea of going to college was only for the love of sports, playing basketball or football. That was pretty much my picture, that’s how I viewed college as a way to further play football. Participating in sports in high school definitely helped me. Like we had a pretty good team and I was an all-conference player and everything, so…

According to Jamie, his friends described him as kidding around a lot. The only time he would get serious was when he was on the football field. Jamie began little league football when he was eight years old. Mr. David kept him involved in sports and church because he had so much energy. Jamie said that some of the little league coaches saw his potential in playing football even when he was young.

My coaches on the little league teams often said that they wanted to put me off the team because I did not follow directions. However, they saw I was one of their best players and would put up with me. They did have consequences for
my behavior and would make me sit out when I did not listen.

Jamie excelled in all sports including baseball, basketball, and football. Football was his real love. Even though Jamie loved football, he did not play when he first entered tenth grade in the public schools. He was “discovered” as a football player by the in-school suspension teacher who also served as the football coach. He described this interaction as follows:

I was sent to in-school suspension for skipping class several times during my tenth grade year. Coach Jones kept asking me why I was always sent to his room. He said to me, ‘A big boy like you ought to be out on the football field. Why are you not playing football?’ After the third time in in-school suspension, he told me to come out to the field that afternoon. I was so excited that I could not wait to get out there. A chance to play with this team was like my best dream come true. I never thought that going to in-school suspension would end up with me playing football and that football would actually lead to a future for me after high school.

Cross-Case Analysis and Emerging Themes

This section describes the common themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data. These themes and sub-themes reflect the participants’ responses to interview questions and surveys. Open coding was used as the researcher examined the transcription data using paragraph-by-paragraph and line-by-line analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). In the margins of the interview transcripts, the researcher used key words (e.g., “strengths”, “supportive”, “motivation”) to identify recurring themes and salient categories that emerged in the transcriptions. Key passages from the interviews were underscored in the transcripts, then transferred to a coding sheet and organized according to each theme or subcategory.
Based on the nature of the questions the researcher posed to each participant and their responses, along with repeated readings of the transcripts, the researcher identified a set of themes that included recurring concepts such as risk factors, intrinsic supports, extrinsic personal supports, and school supports. The researcher then noted that there were several categories that related to each theme. For example, in relation to the theme of intrinsic supports, the researcher labeled passages in the transcripts using subheadings such as “motivation” and a subheading that included a key word such as “drive”, or “dreams/aspirations.” For the theme of extrinsic personal supports, subcategories were family, peers, and mentors. The theme of school support included the terms, teachers and staff, and phrases such as “teacher-student relationships”, “disengagement”, and “difficult curriculum”.

After coding the interviews and reviewing demographic surveys, the researcher noted that certain characteristics were repeated by the majority of the participants. These characteristics were written down and then translated into succinct codes based on the research question. Three themes emerged: (1) intrinsic supports, (2) personal extrinsic supports (family, peer, and mentor supports), and (3) school supports. These themes were then color coded into code families. These code families served as the basis for organizing the codes thematically along with commonality. Codes that discussed students’ persistence or overcoming obstacles were placed in the intrinsic family. Codes discussing supportive individuals in the students’ lives were placed in the extrinsic family. And, codes discussing various entities within the school environment were placed in the school support family.
Once all of the data were analyzed, an examination of how these codes and families related to the research question took place.

**Intrinsic Factors**

The interview and survey data yielded many commonalities and similarities. All of the participants described themselves as: (a) outgoing, (b), hardworking, and (c) goal-oriented. There was also a commonality in perceptions of personal strengths among the participants. The perceptions expressed most often were: (a) persistence, (b) a sense of autonomy, (c) staying focused, (d) having the ability to cope with trials and troubles, (e) sensitivity towards others, (g) having a good reputation, and (h) having self-respect.

As an example of intrinsic factors, Corey described how he matured during high school:

I tried to be responsible enough to “strike” out on my own, not letting others think for me. I did a lot of things on my own-a lot positive things that sometimes that others were not aware of…I tried to show respect for teachers at school. I worked hard on keeping myself on task and completing my work in school. I was not late to school or even to my classes during my senior year. I was determined I was going to graduate.

Similarly, Jimmy described himself as being extremely self-directed. He felt he made school-related decisions without others reminding him:

I would feel good when I would get a good grade in class. Especially if it’s a class that I was interested in and if it was with a teacher I really liked. I felt like I had to do well so that I don’t let the teacher down. But, if it’s like a boring class and the teacher stinks, and you know, I would like it, then all I would do was try to get through the class with a passing grade.
There was wide agreement among the participants relative to what they had each done to contribute to their academic success: (a) they were persistent in their quest for a high-school diploma; (b) they were focused most of the time in their studies; (c) they set standards for themselves; and (d) they avoided negative peer pressure by purposely isolating themselves and limiting interactions with their peers in school and in the community. They busied themselves with schoolwork, employment, and family responsibilities.

Donnie described resisting negative peer pressures and limiting outside time in his neighborhoods as:

You just don’t hang around all the time. You know there are certain times that you could hang out, and there were other times when certain people were around you knew not to hang out with. I would just try to avoid them. There were like six or seven friends from school that I knew real well. We would hang out at each other’s houses, watch movies, you know… sometimes go out to one of the parties that would be held at school. Most of the time I was with people I knew well.

**Awareness of Strengths**

Although all participants were personable, their temperaments were different. Some of them were easy going and reserved, while others were outgoing. For example, Jimmy, said that he kept a lot of the issues within his household to himself. He did not share anything with anyone, not realizing there were persons at school who could help him. On the other hand, Corey described himself quite differently:

I am an outgoing person. I always do my thing. I am talkative. I’m smart. I work and I have a settled mind so that what counts for me. My friends say I am cool, that I
am always joking around. Some of my teachers didn’t really know me, and sometimes they don’t really care to find out. However, most of my teachers love me and describe me as being smart.

According to Donnie,

A lot of people would say I am very honest, some say blunt, some say humble. I myself think I am humble because I have achieved a lot throughout my high school career and I don’t like to take it for granted. My mom says I am hardworking, dedicated, sometimes goofy, quiet at time, and funny.

Jamie described himself as follows:

My friends say that I don’t play around a lot. My friends say I am serious-minded. My family says I am hardheaded and sometimes stubborn. My teachers say that I don’t listen. I don’t like rules. I don’t know what my problem is. I realize this is something I need to work on and that is to have fun and not getting stuck on having my way all the time.

**Ability to Focus**

Regardless of their temperament, all of the participants identified themselves as being tenacious. They described their ability to stick with it and deal with it as the qualities that sustained them. They did not see themselves as victims of circumstances, nor did they accept personal weakness as being unchangeable. They took responsibility for their actions and were willing to learn from their experiences. Donnie described it this way:

I was supposed to be coming out of school that June. I was told my grades were good enough to graduate but I had to wait until summer school. I kind of fell through the
cracks and not sure what happened. But I didn’t get distracted or give up. My support system was there but I let my own self down.

This feeling of needing to learn from their mistakes, was echoed by Jamie:

I need to take advice from people who want to help me. People are always telling me that I need to listen. Sometimes when I make my mind up to do what I want to do. It comes out wrong, and so I just need to listen more. I know I have made mistakes and I hope that I learn from my mistakes.

Corey expounded on this finding:

I am the first in my family when it comes to my mom, my pop, sisters and brothers to graduate. It was hard because in my house nobody else graduated. I didn’t want to do the same thing they wanted to do. You know that it was hard and I wanted to do something different. I could not be like them. My family sees me as the “great white hope” only because I graduated from high school. Is that sad or what? I want to motivate my younger sisters and brothers to graduate from high school and I do want my older sisters and brothers to know that it is not too late to get a high school diploma.

**Coping Strategies**

Participants in this study clearly possessed keen problem solving skills and were able to deal effectively with many of life’s stressors. They sought various solutions to their problems. Most of them came from homes that had been affected at various points by poverty. Family stressors included family instability, which was associated with separation, divorce, family mobility, drugs, and other problems.
As Donnie described:

During my sophomore year in high school, my mom got married again. I started seeing changes but because I was seen as a child, it’s not your place to say anything. I was seeing changes and it was affecting me. I was being pressured to get a job because my mom was not working; it was just my stepfather who was working. I was trying to get hours but also trying to stay on top of my schoolwork. When they separated, then she was saying what are we going to do now because there was no money to pay the bills. I did not like this role of being the “man” in the family but I had to do whatever I could do to help my mom even if it meant working and going to school.

**Making Positive Decisions**

These participants learned how to separate themselves emotionally from adverse circumstances and people in order to accomplish goals and to overcome difficulties. In making use of problem solving mechanisms, nearly all of the participants used their skills to navigate their home situations, as described by Jimmy:

Financial issues were big for us. My mom did not have a job. My pops was always locked up and my mom had to take care of the whole crib. With her not having any money caused me to get a job early. I never could do any of the after school activities because I had to work after school. That sort of stressed me out because I felt I didn’t get a fair shot and wasn’t able to have fun. When you have to work, it’s a blow.
These young men learned how to make positive decisions. They thought about issues confronting them and tried to make constructive decisions. In some instances, these urban males avoided crime in their neighborhoods, and ignored for the most part alcohol and drugs, and other negative conditions. Corey described living in his neighborhood:

> When you grow up in the inner city and see who have the nice cars and the pretty women are the drug dealers and gang members that have it. It is only for a moment but this is only what they see. There is nothing around them positive. It’s hard for them to see there’s a way out. There’s no one around them to tell them that they can be a doctor or lawyer or teacher.

As described in this section, the intrinsic factors demonstrated by these participants included drive, motivation, determination, and optimistic visions of the future and what it held in store for them. They all had definite plans for the future. The high diploma was just one step in getting them to where they wanted to go in life. These young men all had a sense of purpose and direction in life.

**Extrinsic Factors**

**Importance of Adult Role Models**

The second major theme in this study pertains to the ways in which participants benefited from the presence of supportive systems in the home and with their immediate families outside the home. Although the families of the participants were varied and distinctive in structure, the adult female member, whether absent from the home or in the home, garnered the most respect and was cited most often as the primary source of support and encouragement for each of the participants in the study. The mothers of these young
men, many of them single parents, were key figures in these young men’s academic achievement. Several of the mothers in this study worked long hours but were still able to communicate through emails and phone calls with their children’s teachers and attended parent-teacher conferences.

As Ronald described,

I was in a single parent home. Just my mom and my sisters. Even though my mom worked two jobs somehow she always managed to know exactly what we were doing. She had my grandmother to come over and check on us while she was at work. It was hell when my mom and my grandmother got upset at me for not doing what I was supposed to do. They acted like they were paranoid. I could not go out the house and mingle with any boys while my mom was at work. When my grandmother came the first thing she would start in on was if our homework was done and would have us to drag our book bags out to check to see.

For the participants, the role of parental influence was that of consistency and persistence in making certain demands such as knowing the whereabouts of their sons during school hours and even afterschool hours. This was important in helping and guiding these young men to positive academic success. According to Jimmy:

I didn’t and still don’t want to be a disappointment to my mother because she is always building me up by saying how smart I am. No matter what my report card looks like, she will say I can do better and that I am smart. Out of all of her children, she worries about me and that’s why she keeps pushing me. She says a black man has to have more. She asked my school when I was younger
about having a Big Brother (mentor). She said she knew she could not be a father to me and that I needed a male figure in my life.

All of the participants in this study reported that personal relationships with family members and other adults inspired them to achieve academically. According to Reggie:

One of my aunts and an older male cousin were in a technical school during the time I was in high school, so they kind of pushed me to keep up with them. They would help me with my homework, buy my school supplies, and help me with time management. They pushed me to do what I needed to do and keep up and stay in school and stuff like that. They were, you know, always on me to do my work, go to school every day.

In contrast, Jamie described a somewhat different home situation:

My mother had eight children and my grandmother helped my mom raise us. My grandmother died so my uncle (grandmother’s brother) who was elderly took me and raised me from when I was five. He had a nice apartment and I was happy with him. I always had more than what my other sisters and brothers had. He always came to the school to talk to the teachers and when I got to high school he came to all of my football games.

As demonstrated above, family support and encouragement helped these participants bounce back in spite of adversities. Their mothers and guardians held high educational expectations for their children. The expectations of the adults in these participants’ lives created pressure to remain engaged in school and to focus on high achievement. These
mothers saw high school graduation as an act of academic success for their children; therefore, graduating from high school was viewed as an important event in these families.

**Importance of Positive Peers**

Several of the participants believed that in order to achieve, they had to associate themselves with peers they perceived to be positive and who were on a different trajectory than some of their peers in the neighborhood. Their peers were primarily students who shared classes or other activities with participants. Ronnie said:

> I have a couple of close friends and lots of associates. Basically, they have been in classes with me in the past. I have to focus more on my schoolwork. My close friends all feel the same way. We have to push each other. We all have struggles at home and know that our only way out is to graduate from high school.

Jimmie described his friends as follows:

> I have been with my friends since middle school. When my mom pulled me out of public schools and sent me to charter, my friend James went to. We both came back to the public schools at the same time. If I don’t come to school, Jimmie will send 10 texts to me to ask why I didn’t come. He pushes me. When I get down and out about certain things, Jimmie will tell me it’s going to be all right. He is one of the big reasons why I was able to graduate. I would have given up if he wasn’t in my face all the time.

These extrinsic networks, parents, extended family, and peers supported the achievement of these participants. They wanted the participants to succeed. They invested time and resources to help them achieve their goal of graduating from high school. These
networks also served to strengthen the participants and to enable them to move on to the next phase in their young lives.

**School Supports**

**Caring School Staff**

The third major theme recognized the efforts and influence of school-based professionals who developed strong relationships with these young men and who acted as parental figures while students were in their care. In particular, caring school personnel were portrayed as those who were always willing to listen, encourage, guide, and help as needed. The following narratives serve to highlight this perception:

I worked from 4 am to 7 am so I had to walk to school. The bus came by my house at 6:30 am. I was always late. The lady in the office who was the attendance clerk always had my pass to class ready. She knew my situation. She knew I was coming and was going to be late. I just loved that lady. Also being successful in school includes the help of a teacher. The teacher’s help, understanding and compassion. If a teacher doesn’t have that while you are going through a rough time, it doesn’t help. I couldn’t do much, but when that teacher showed compassion, I did all that I could. Teachers should have good relationships to the ones that need it; everybody doesn’t need it but for those who do, it really helps a lot. Yeah, my numbers [GPA] might not be great, but I FELT like I was one of the highest people in school. I have gotten myself out of school. (Corey, GPA 1.0-1.9)
Mr. Rogers is probably the reason I am the way that I am. He has changed a lot of boys to me. I learned to have a good relationship with my teachers even outside of school. Staying after school, going to tutoring, talking to my teachers after class. It works. All these teachers definitely understand. Mr. Jimmy Davis always has been honest with everybody. That’s what kept me on track. He is very blunt and honest. He tells us to not to lie to ourselves. If you can be honest with yourself you will go far. (Ronald, GPA 1.0-1.9)

My counselor, one of my teachers, and my principal all were very helpful to me. They all were caring and treated me like I was one of their own children. They were there for me and so was my football coach. Mr. Alston, my counselor, really made me realize that some things happen and that you are going to fall sometimes. You are not going to finish everything that you start. It’s not about how you start but how you finish. There were times when I would go to him saying that I don’t what to do next and he would say when are you going to stop complaining. He was straight up and blunt. He told me to stop complaining and what are you going to do now. He said that there is no need to sit here and pout. What are you going to do now? (Donnie, GPA 2.0-2.9)

**Religious Affiliations**

Several of the participants possessed a strong religious orientation. Two of the participants mentioned having an early orientation to church. From early childhood, three of the five participants consistently participated in religious activities.
Participants attended religious services regularly with a relative. Jamie shared, “I am active in church. I attend every other Sunday.” He also added, “I belong to a Baptist Church. I attend almost every Sunday,” Donnie stated. “My mom gave me good exposure to the church. I have been active in the church for as long as I can remember,” Ronald shared. As these quotes demonstrate, the participants valued their religious involvement and were actively involved in church youth activities.

All of the participants spoke of attending church at least several times a year. Each of the participants had an early orientation to church. Participants attended religious services with relatives. Jamie revealed that his church played a positive role in how he was able to function in school:

For me, church was very important because my uncle who was raised me made sure I was in church each Sunday. I spent a lot of time with members of the church. There were those who always encouraged me and always instilled in me about education. Ronald stated that although attendance was not in middle school, he attended church at least twice a month. He shared the impact of the church on his life:

In my church there was a lot of like-minded kind of people in my age group who wanted to do something with their lives, because in my neighborhood the people in my age group were outside on the streets. At my church were lots of family members also so I was around people who had the same focus and dedication about education that I had.

Donnie expressed how the church had greatly influenced his life. He felt the church played a vital role in his life and in the life of his family.
The church I attended was big on education, and so they would take us to like different schools and let us look around at different colleges and stuff like that. They helped those who were interested in college fill out college applications and apply for scholarships. In addition, we had had several programs that allowed you to register and take classes that you could substitute for a class you can take in college. They also reviewed our report cards each grading period.

**Educational Resilience**

Similar to the family arena, the level of caring and support within the school was strongly related to the development of educational resilience among the participants. This study provides compelling evidence to suggest that positive school-based professional student relationships can function as a protective factor that buffers low-income urban youth from the effects of known environmental risk factors. For example, Jamie described how his coach would not only warn him of students who were possibly gang-involved but would many times invite him to join others on the team when they would eat out after games.

I did not have the money to join my team members after games to eat pizza. Coach would just tell me to come on and they would take care of me. Not to worry if I didn’t have the money. He was constantly telling me he wanted me to be around boys who were about something and boys who had something on their minds. I figured he meant boys who had a future. I was happy to join them.

The relationship Jamie described is an example of another characteristic of the theme “school supports.” This description pertains to school-based professionals who addressed external factors/barriers to students’ learning. These were staff members who went beyond the their
typical job descriptions and were concerned about the lives of students outside of schools. Of the five participants, three stated that they were able to develop more meaningful relationships with school-based professionals who took action against a range of non-academic issues that might have affected students’ performance, such as gang violence, financial hardship, and family discord. It appeared that helping students outside the school setting prompted some participants to work harder in school. Corey commented as follows:

My counselor helped me out a lot. She kept an eye out for me. She would always check on me like if I was having a bad day. There were times that I wanted to curse but she helped me work on this. My social worker helped me out with homelessness, helped me and my Mom get somewhere to stay. She also helped me to get a job. She helped my Mom get medical help because my Mom has problems sometimes with her mind. She does some crazy stuff sometimes, yes, pretty crazy. My counselor would talk with me every morning. She has even called since I have graduated and tried to get me in different college-bound programs.

**Relational Trust**

It is quite admirable that these participants took the lessons of their teachers to heart so much so that they recalled them fondly and saw, at an early age, the benefits of the teachers’ high demands. This is an example of relational trust. Bryk and Schneider (2003) describe relational trust as each party in a relationship maintains an understanding of his or her role’s obligations and holds some expectations about the obligations of the other parties. This “connective tissue” between students and teachers binds individuals together to prepare
and advance students to the next level in their lives (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). In this study, participants trusted that the “pain” being inflicted upon them in the short run was going to pay dividends in the long run. The students were also extremely appreciative of the hard work and dedication their teachers demonstrated.

Many of the participants discussed the patience and openness of their teachers. This helped them to feel comfortable enough to be able to approach their teachers and seek out help and assistance when needed. As Donnie described,

Because I had an IEP (Individualized Education Plan), I had a special teacher who I would leave out of the regular setting and go to get extra support in reading and math. My special teacher was white and she would explain those things in math and reading that I did not understand. Sometimes I felt teachers would overlook me because I was black and struggled with my reading. Ms. Edwards would always seek me out see if I needed help in any of my classes.

Importance of Extracurricular Activities

Several of the participants also noted that their activities outside of the classroom influenced their efforts inside the classroom. Joshua emphasized that his activities on the football field helped him to

‘Figure out where I wanted to go in life.’ I liked how all the guys on the team seemed like they were best friends. I would always try to be around them, learn from them, and act like them so I could be good on the football team.

Joshua was not alone. Ronald stressed that his participation on the basketball court was contingent on his doing well in the classroom. The school emphasized that he was a student
first, then an athlete. However, he noted this was not the case with some of his peers at other schools and that the only way graduation was a priority for some of his peers elsewhere was when they were with their families, not at school. Ronald also indicated that his basketball activities helped him to “self-discipline” himself.

As described above, significant staff members enhanced the overall performance in school for these young men. The resilient learners had a tendency to take the initiative when it came to connecting with adults who could help them be successful in school. Fortunately, they felt that most teachers were available for questions or conversations. Their ability to connect with teachers and other caring adults was a critical factor in helping them to develop the resilience needed to face adversity and achieve academic success as a learner.

**Summary**

In this study, the researcher attempted to answer the following question: “What factors contributed to the academic success of a select group of at-risk African American male students, thereby supporting them to graduate from high school?” At first glance, these participants did not distinguish themselves from other African American male students. However, what immediately distinguished these participants was their motivation for learning, vision, and a sense of self. These character traits were clearly evident in the midst of the interviews with the participants.

Although these young men were clearly able to identify the internal compass that enabled them to define success, their interactions with significant others in their lives and the daily supports within the educational environment played a pivotal role in the success and graduation of these young men. In the researcher’s attempt to assess the influences, which
impacted their lives and motivated them to complete high school, there were recurring themes of self-confidence, consistent contact with family and peers, and encouragement and support of school staff. In addition to parental influences that helped shape their academic perspectives, these young men presented a sense of communal responsibility to succeed academically. Their dialogue with the researcher was not just limited to discussion of their immediate families; it was also inclusive of the extended family, neighbors, peers, and adults with whom they had a trusting relationship within their church and other related community organizations.

While the school was the centerpiece of daily interactions with peers, there was also the opportunity for participants to be embraced by supportive teachers who provided a nurturing environment. The role of teachers and the impact they had on participants’ social and intellectual growth was acknowledged by all of the participants. Since the majority of the school day was spent with teachers in a classroom setting, the participants were all eager to provide insight into their experiences with teachers who made a difference in their lives. They felt that motivation and encouragement from many of the school staff members was necessary to enable them to overcome any academic challenge or hurdle they encountered or that would keep them from graduating.

Chapter Four provided insight into the personal perspectives of five African American male high school graduates who overcame personal hardships in order to graduate from high school. Their perspectives yielded themes related to intrinsic factors, which included motivation, persistence, and focus; extrinsic factors, which included family, peers, and church members; and school factors, which included significant adults within the school
environment. In conclusion, these factors fostered the resiliency of students deemed at-risk and provided insight into the personal coping strategies they utilized to succeed. Chapter Five will present a discussion of the implications of this research for working to develop resilient African American males who possess certain individual, family, and school factors, which enable them to succeed.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Discussion and Findings

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to develop profiles of five at-risk African American males and to explore the ways in which these participants, their family, peers, community, and school contributed to their graduation from high school. In this study, the participants exhibited certain factors, which contributed to their resilience. These factors yield valuable insights regarding the reasons why these young men were able to graduate from high school in spite of their adverse circumstances. Topics addressed in this chapter include common factors that were in place in the lives of these young men that helped them develop resilient dispositions necessary for school success. Specifically, the researcher examined factors such as parents, family members, and school staff who supported the participants in their academic endeavors and communicated to them the value of education; the role of mentors and peers in nurturing educational resilience; and the importance of a sense of purpose, religious faith, and drive or resolve as traits that helped these young men become resilient, successful learners.

Intrinsic Factors

In this study, resilient African American males believed in themselves and exhibited coping skills. They had plans and positive views about their futures. In spite of obvious hardships, including family discord, poverty, and numerous other risk factors, these young men persisted and were able to succeed although others from similar backgrounds failed.
There were variations among them both as individuals and as members of their family units. In contrast, this research went beyond other studies (Suh & Suh, 2007) by including personal interviews of participants, sharing their unique perspectives, defining common themes, and identifying factors in their individual lives, families, communities, and school. Suh and Suh (2007) found that as students accumulated risk factors, they became more likely to drop out and dropout prevention programs were ineffective. They also found that school variables (e.g., teachers’ low expectations, relevancy of school curricula, or degree of social acceptance) were consistent predictors of alienation from school.

To help reverse this trend, this study was about more than identifying risk factors beyond school. It was also about identifying the unique perspectives of the participants in this study. Also, instead of focusing on African American males who did not succeed, this research looked at those who did excel in spite of adverse circumstances. Although each of these participants came from low-income families, they maintained a positive attitude, which is a strategy they used for survival. This study identified characteristics consistent with resiliency, such as problem-solving skills, and a sense of purpose and future. This study also found that participants perceived themselves as persistent, goal-oriented, hard working, and strong-willed (Table 5.1).
Table 5.1

*Intrinsic Factors Indicative of Resiliency*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to stay focused and work hard to achieve personal goals</td>
<td>(Benard, 2004; Morales, 2007; Wang &amp; Gordon, 1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good communication skills</td>
<td>(Downey, 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>(Morales, 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>Haggerty, Sherrod, Garmezy &amp; Rutter, 1996; Wang &amp; Gordon, 1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizes one’s control and is accountable for one’s actions</td>
<td>(Haggerty et al., 1996; Wang &amp; Gordon, 1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>(Benard, 1991; Haggerty et al., 1996; Wang &amp; Gordon, 1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-motivation/goal-goal directed</td>
<td>(Wang &amp; Gordon, 1994; Wang et al., 1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong interpersonal skills</td>
<td>Haggerty et al., 1996; Wang et al., 1994; Wang &amp; Gordon, 1994</td>
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</table>

As previously noted, this research centered on the coping skills of individuals deemed academically resilient from the standpoint of data gathered from one-on-one interviews and a demographic questionnaire. Resilience is a process that strengthens effective coping skills thereby lowering various risks and enhancing protective factors (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Coping strategies for these participants took on many forms. They coped by verbalizing their emotions and feelings and engaging in active problem solving. They also used reflection to
evaluate options, family and or mentor support. Identification of these factors through self-reflection over time leads to the development of resiliency attributes. According to Garmezy (1991), “they’ve got to be visible, build relationships, ask questions, and gradually [resiliency] takes place” (p. 424).

Resilience involves seeing oneself in control and being resourceful in seeking help from others. These are two important skills resilient children demonstrate (Wang & Gordon, 1994). Attributes of resiliency include students’ abilities to build healthy relationships, overcome unbearable problems, accept unchangeable problems, develop and move toward achievable goals, develop self-confidence measures and take decisive actions in adverse situations (Masten & Coastworth, 1998). Wright (1991) described resiliency as, “the ability to successfully overcome the effects of a high-risk environment and to develop social competence despite exposure to severe stress” (p. 14).

Students who are deemed at-risk often perceive that their failure is due to some personal deficiency over which there is no control; as a result, students feel hopeless and stop trying to achieve (Azzam, 2007). However, in this study, the participants felt that there was always hope, as they made choices to remove themselves from negative influences, and they found positive ways to deal with their adversity. The participants acknowledged when they needed help and sought necessary sources to receive it.

The participants expressed positive attitudes about their lives in spite of the difficult issues they each faced. The positive attitude shared by the participants affected their academic success as demonstrated in a study by Geary (1988). Surprisingly, the majority of the participants in this study revealed a humorous side of themselves during the interviews.
The participants actually laughed about certain past events in their lives and sometimes made light of their circumstances.

**Extrinsic Factors**

The participants discussed positive peer relationships as a protective factor, which also supports the literature on resiliency (Morales, 2007; Rutter, 1987). A network of close friends was characteristic of these African American male students. They explained how they did not change friends from middle school to high school and these friendships helped to produce more positive outcomes. Each of the five participants gave credit to childhood peers having positive effects in their lives. At least two of the participants indicated their need to be somebody was fueled by nonexistent family support, while the need to belong and to succeed was fostered by their friendships.

Each participant had the need to belong and valued others’ perceptions of them. Most indicated that positive influences enhanced their lives and made up for the adverse issues in their lives. As a way of coping with negative situations in their lives, they would often share their feeling with their peers. They felt protected by these peers from various “hurts” in their lives. With their peers they felt a clear sense of themselves and were comfortable being themselves, as they believed they were less susceptible to scrutiny and judgment.

Participants were asked to reflect on protective factors that have enhanced their development and contributed to their outcome of graduating from high school; they were unanimous in their answers -individual, family, and community factors. It has been noted for years that the best predictor of a student’s academic success is the education level of the parents, particularly that of the mother (Bainbridge & Lasley, 1996). They identified their
mother, grandmother, grandfather, or any other mother figure as the most consistently supportive family members. Although they readily admitted that their mothers (or the like) might have had problems themselves, these problems did not minimize the impact that these women had on the academic successes of the participants in this study. One participant, whose mother had serious substance abuse issues, felt that he raised himself and his two siblings. Other than his grandmother’s continued influence, he looked to others for the good in his life and tried to pattern his life after someone he respected. He felt his mother never showed him love and he sought guidance and direction from his grandmother and other older women in his neighborhood.

The quality of the immediate care giving environment is a powerful predictor of resiliency in children according to Benard (1991). In interviewing two participants for this study, they shared that in addition to their mothers, family guidance played an important role in preparing them to handle the risk factors they experienced in life. It was more than the establishment and reinforcement of rules, but the open discussion of consequences each decision could bring that helped the participants deal with the negative influences in their environments. For some, the home provided a physical security and an emotionally secure place. Within the home these participants had a parent to whom they felt attached and a place they could call home. For others, home was chaotic at times and very little structure or house rules. The participants had a positive effect of feeling secure and sufficiently strong with this protective factor in their lives.

Four of the participants had someone in their family whom they said they were able to count on for support. In addition, all participants listed at least one or more persons either
at school or in the community who were supportive of them. However, two came from a family environment where comments that could lower their self-esteem were frequently heard. According to their interviews, as they both matured they viewed the negative comments from their relatives as a way to keep them on the straight and narrow. During their developmental years, what encouraged them to succeed was their rapport with significant adults who noticed their special qualities. In other words, the presence of at least one caring adult who provided stable care and adequate attention with communication served as a protective factor for the participants across a variety of risk conditions (Davies & Kandel, 1981).

For these participants, the outstanding characteristics of families and other influential adults seem to be that they strongly believed in the abilities of these young men and supported them in their goals. The supportive adults in the lives of these participants took active steps to prepare them with problem solving skills to address the risks they might face, rather than trying to shelter them from risk factors by restricting their activities. According to Masten and Coastworth (1998), home environments characterized by positive parenting practices, secure and stable environments, involvement in school activities, and having high expectations for youth, served as a protective factor countering some of the risk factors these youth encountered.

The family units of the participants in this study were varied in structure, including single parents, grandparents, and a great uncle. The dynamics within the family structure ranged from caring and nurturing to indifferent. Some of the homes were stable and still others were plagued with discord. Each of the participants described their specific roles
within the family unit, which included routine household chores as well as caring for younger siblings and a paralyzed uncle. These circumstances propelled the participants to set routines and procedures for themselves so that they could efficiently handle their responsibilities at home, at school, and at their jobs.

According to Garmezy (1990), adolescents who form strong social bonds with their family are less likely to look for security and attachment elsewhere, making them less susceptible to peer and environmental influences. Those adolescents who may also be more likely to form strong parental values and beliefs may be less likely to form strong attachment to negative peers. According to Garmezy, it takes only one person who genuinely cares about them to start a positive move toward academic resiliency.

All of the participants expressed the importance and value of having a caring person—someone to talk to with some positive direction in their lives. Brown (2006) suggested that children need people to look up to and to serve as role models who deserve respect and admiration. Brown (2006) also shared that one of the most widely reported predictors of resilience is the presence of a positive or close relationship with either a caring adult or parental figure. All influential adults in these participants’ lives demonstrated similar characteristics: they had faith in the individual’s ability and encouraged him (Figure 2). The participants also expressed the importance of being recognized as having done well by someone they respected. They felt a strong sense of connection to those who pushed them academically and who supported their aspirations.
Figure 2. Summary of Extrinsic and School Factors that Influence Resilience

Home:
- Parental education
- Positive parent-child relationships
- Parents establish high expectations for their child and communicate to their child the importance of education
- Educational achievement of siblings
- Parental involvement and advocacy for the children in school

(These factors have been identified by Benard, 1991; Haggerty et al., 1996; Morales, 2007; Wang & Gordon, 1994; Wang et al., 1994; and others.)

Peer and Community:
- Social support by caring peers, adults, and mentors in the community and church
- Opportunities for students to become competent in nonacademic areas
- Community-based projects that involved students in meaningful social work

(Factors related to peer and community have been identified by authors such as Masten et al., 1990 and Wang & Gordon, 1994.)

School Factors:
- Teachers form personal, caring relationships with their students
- Teachers as role models who set high expectations for their students and who instill a sense of competency and confidence in their students
- Curricula that includes student decision making and allows students to become agents of their own learning
- Involvement in extracurricular activities
- A school culture that supports students, values and respects the culture, ability, and aspirations of students
- Positive peer networks
- School environments that cultivate self-esteem, autonomy, academic mastery, and positive social interaction

(The factors above were identified by Downey, 2008; Morales, 2007; Morrison & Allen, 2007; Wang & Gordon, 1994; and Wang et al., 1994)
Several of the participants possessed a strong religious orientation. They valued their religious involvement. Fellow church members were part of their support network and friends. The findings suggest that churches encouraged and facilitated relationships to build upon existing support networks. Churches may also become aware of the schools that young people in their congregation attend, encourage the congregation to participate in school activities and make provisions for tutorial and homework assistance.

These participants, who all attended church at some point, assisted them on how to have positive images of themselves. This was done, primarily through providing meaningful activities, which also boosted their self-esteem. Most of the participants not only regularly attended religious services, but also had religious friends. Researchers suggest that religious people are likely to have an internal locus of control (Jackson & Coursey, 1988).

In summary, these African American male participants received emotional support from caring adults. They each had at least one relative, neighbor, or church member who provided support and encouragement. They also received support from church officials and members. Individuals in their support network provided assurance when they faced a crisis. These individuals were willing to listen and to intervene when problems arose at home or in school, and provided needed support to overcome these problems. According to Rutter (1987), if protective factors (e.g., family, friends and community) are nurtured, they can make the difference between a life of turmoil and confusion or strength and hope.

**School Support Factors**

The participants in this study reported that caring, sensitive teachers and school staff who took the time to know them as individuals and advocated for them when they faced
difficult situations helped to make the difference in their lives. These participants had positive perceptions of the role and purpose of school. They viewed school as a prerequisite for future success. Honora (2003) found that many African American males described the role of school as preparing them for future life opportunities and academic success. This was reiterated by three of the participants who referenced the need to succeed and have the lifestyle they dreamed of without committing illegal acts. According to two of the participants, education was the best way to reach their aspirations.

Personal qualities of teachers and school staff were also deemed important by the participants and included being caring, having respect for students as persons and learners, listening to them, taking them seriously, being available and understanding, and helping and providing encouragement. According to Gay (2000), school staff should be cognizant of how they impact students’ lives and how they are partially responsible for motivating students to do their best. According to the participants in this study, teachers and school staff who related to them on a humanistic level garnered the most respect, especially from those who were most in need of support.

It was also evident in this study that teacher behaviors impacted the participants. Caring teachers motivated them to learn, as they worked to develop positive and supportive relationships with the participants. One participant described one of his teachers as his “in-school” friend. He said that he could count on her and she helped him out a lot. Two other students sustained relationships with teachers who cared about them. They returned to their teachers’ classes every day after school for tutoring or just to talk. One participant made his
teacher well aware of his home situation, and the teacher made accommodations when the participant was late or absent from class.

It appears that interpersonal relationships were also important to these African American male participants. In referring to their teachers, one participant shared that some of his teachers “pushed me forward”. For him, teachers expected him to come to class and to put forth his best effort. Other participants felt that teachers saw them as capable students and would not allow them to ease up. These relationships reinforced their motivation and learning, and touched their hearts and minds.

**Implications for Practice and Policies**

**Implications for Schools**

This study has clear implications for educators, particularly those who work with African American students from high-risk environments. Interviewing and listening to the self-expressions of these resilient high school graduates was both challenging and enlightening. Each day, even after graduation, these individuals have dawn upon their exceptional inner qualities to negotiate everyday life routines, and have done so with conviction and commitment. The risk factors ascribed to them by society’s standards have not been true indicators of “who” these individuals really are; rather they have chosen to define themselves by “how” they responded to their unique circumstances. Unfortunately, the educational system is designed to bring the shortcomings of our youth to the forefront in an attempt to help them to succeed. Instead, the focus of education should be on changeable behavior, such as assisting students in becoming organized, completing tasks in a timely manner, or how to study for an exam (Raywid, 2001). Counselors and teachers, especially at
the middle school level, are provided workshops on how to assist students in these areas. However school intervention teams tend to focus on fixed individual traits, such are shyness, which are more complex and have very little to do with academic achievement (Raywid, 2001).

One surprising fact revealed to the researcher was the lack of communication from the school to the students when they were absent for a number of days. Contact is not required for students over the age of 16, which is the legal age to drop out, but in order to combat the dropout numbers, it would be assumed that schools would make every effort to communicate with potential dropouts. High schools should be instructed to contact every student who drops out or fails to show, to encourage them and their families to re-engage with education and earn a high school diploma.

The researcher also recommends that schools provide resources to students including mental health assessments and family-based support groups. The interviews and transcripts provided extensive information regarding the mental health needs of the young men. Several of the participants admitted to feeling overwhelmed with home situations and helpless in solving issues beyond their control. Understanding and developing assets in youth is a focal point for mental health providers. Strength-based programs are common in the mental health arena (Chenoweth, 2006). However, as a former principal, the researcher did not have access to mental health resources, which are now available to schools and families. At the present time, however, outside mental health agencies are now able to provide mental health services at schools by working directly with the parents and the billing process. A referral process to
identify students who would benefit from these services would be conducted by an intervention team or teacher observations.

Research indicates that African American males are the most at-risk group for school failure and not completing high school. During this study the researcher was unable to find existing research on the impact of the lack of qualified school leadership on African American males. However, this study revealed the loss of quality learning and lack of discipline that occurred during the middle school years of these participants. Several principal and teacher changes that occurred during this time possibly impacted the academic progress of these students, with long-lasting effects into high school. This was especially noted in the math and science grades and test scores for these participants. The participants were able to articulate these circumstances during their middle school years and the impact of these circumstances on their high school experience.

Educators should also focus on building resiliency in students deemed at-risk. Assessment instruments could be developed to evaluate what resilience factors the individual has, as well as which ones the individual is lacking. The results of these instruments could determine appropriate courses of action to be taken. For example, it could be determined that a particular youth has problems with self-esteem and may be best supported in some type of organized activity that would help build his self-esteem. While the educational system will continue to use standardized tests to measure student ability and achievement, educators should also consider adapting these tests to include measures of student resilience. This could help to capture a broader understanding of a student’s chances for success, as well as assist in providing adequate support to increase students’ learning opportunities. There are examples
of existing instruments which measure overall resilience. For example, Benard (2004) references the Child and Youth Resilience Measure which examines three subcategories found to influence resilience processes: individual traits, relationships to caregivers(s), and contextual factor that facilitate a sense of belonging. This assessment should be feasible for schools to use as it is available at no cost.

In addition to focusing on individual students, these findings also suggest that meaningful relationships with adults within school settings, as well as student advocacy and outreach efforts, are crucial ingredients in promoting educational resilience among urban students from high-risk environments. School counselors, who function not only as counselors, but also as advisors, consultants, and advocates (Constantine, 2002) are essential for promoting resilience in schools. School counselors could consult with teachers, administrators, and staff to help them identify and implement school-based programs, strategies, or policies designed to enhance resiliency. Such interventions might include the development of resilience-based school counseling programs in urban districts which promote proactive engagement, assess protective and risk factors within multiple contexts, and provides strategies for overcoming adversity or strategies to help students establish and maintain the connections that can support urban students throughout their high-school tenure.

These recommendations do not mean that teachers and school personnel are not already engaged in resiliency building. On the contrary, the responses of the participants pointed to teachers, coaches, and school administrators who are in fact practicing resiliency building. However, this type of behavior needs to be developed on a larger scale, so that instead of one or two teachers, the whole school is involved in the process. For example, the
participants discussed how some of their teachers were the exception in comparison to the rest of the staff. To have far reaching effects, this type of resiliency building should be a goal of the whole school or school district.

In addition to supportive school staff, associations with positive peer groups can produce positive behavior and healthier behavior (Holzman, 2004). If it is continually found that positive peer groups help to foster and build resiliency, programs could be developed to encourage those deemed at-risk to associate and interact with positive peer groups. In effect, positive peers could help to build resiliency. Providing properly trained adults within the school to guide the peer group will help insure the group engages in positive and productive business. Receiving help and helping others is a way to develop the interconnectivity that is needed to bind these young people together in a common community which can help at-risk youth make better decisions (Berndt & Savin-Williams, 1993).

The idea that everyone has strengths and the capacity for change also requires youth development fields to move past the focus on risk identification and the labels that come with it. One way to move past the focus on risk and change the outlook of the educational system is to disseminate information regarding resiliency. If research shows that certain factors help at-risk youth avoid negative outcomes, this information should be known to the public and become part of the strategy for change.

As this research demonstrates, young people cannot succeed alone. Whatever personal attributes they may possess can be further developed by a strong, supportive environment that focuses on developing youth rather than focusing on their problems. The benefits are obvious. Young people should be supported, cared for, and given the opportunity
to make positive contributions to their community and society. By shifting the focus from assigning “risk” labels to individuals and “fixing” them, to building strong, positive school environments for all, regardless of risk, educators will be able to assist our students in acquiring the academic, personal, and social skills they need to achieve success.

**Implications for Parents**

The findings from this study should also be of interest to parents of African American male students from low-income backgrounds. As this study demonstrates, it is critical that parents and families find ways to be involved in their children’s education. Interestingly, the demographic surveys and interviews revealed the impact of single mothers on their sons and how they served as a protective shield against adversity. More than any other protective factor in the home environment, participants named their mothers as their greatest supporters and resources. They credited their mothers as role models and for setting high expectations, providing encouragement, and sacrificing on their behalf. Accordingly, these findings have tremendous implications for parents and family members of inner city students as well as students who live in rural areas. According to Slack and Jensen (2002), minority males living in the rural United States have greater hurdles of success and have “traditionally been among the most economically disadvantaged members of American society” (p. 229).

Fostering resiliency within the family is also important and will serve as a protective factor for children deemed at risk (Davies & Kandel, 1981). Families can help to build their children’s resilience by promoting care and support encouraging their children’s involvement in school activities, and communicating high academic and social expectations. In this study,
the participants were especially responsive to strong parental encouragement and high
expectations held by their parents or other significant adults.

Since students spend a great deal of time at home, implications may also include
altering the home environment, if needed, as well as fostering relations between the home
and school. Establishing consequences at home for children who display negative behaviors
in school could be an example of altering the home environment. Parents can also participate
in activities in school, such as workshops on behavior management, parent-teacher
conferences and other school related events. Parents must remain knowledgeable about and
interested in their children’s school experiences. Attending parent workshops at the school
will enable parents to expose their children to intellectually stimulating materials and
activities. These workshops could include:

- Teaching parents how to assist their children in organizing for study at
  home and finding needed resources for homework assistance;
- Holding regular meetings with parents to communicate homework, curricular,
  and behavioral expectations, especially when no behavioral problem has
  occurred;
- Fostering feelings of partnership between the school and home; and
- Creating a climate of trust and open communication between the school and
  home.

**Implications for Policy**

Local policy efforts in school districts and communities would benefit from seeking
ways to direct more positive access and opportunities for inner city African American males
in their education and employment. When local elected officials seek community
development opportunities they would do well to focus on this group of citizens who can
participate in not only job training and job placement, but focus on a broader view of
community involvement that can contribute to the career building of these youths.
Meaningful support of youth and their futures can strengthen the overall stability of the larger
community.

Schools can also provide opportunities for social networking among students. Clark
(1991) found that academically resilient students developed strong support networks that
helped students become more resilient in and out of school by developing friendships and
getting support from school personnel and family. As a result, what schools do to counteract
negative peer culture among African American males and to foster more positive attitudes in
spite of cultural influences is very important. It is also crucial to resolve any negative
perceptions that may be associated with students who are academically successful (Downey,
2008).

**Implications for the Church and Community**

In the present study, three of the participants were religiously oriented and were
involved in church. Fellow church members were a part of their support network and friends.
The findings suggest that churches could encourage and facilitate relationships to build upon
existing support networks. Churches should also become aware of the schools that young
people in their congregation attend, encourage the congregation to participate in school
activities, and homework assistance.
Rubin (1996) criticized African American churches, particularly those in urban settings, for failing to meet the needs of their young members who lived in urban areas by not supporting the young people outside of church activities. Gains (2010) suggested that African American churches must engage the larger community through basic charity, sustained support, social service delivery, and comprehensive community development. He called for these particular churches to become spaces where both educational and spiritual needs of members are addressed. The positive effects of African American churches must include the church’s ability to change the minds and habits of its members, insure the presence of positive role models, and place a positive value on African American students.

Community groups must also realize that significant improvement in the attitudes, academic achievement, and outcomes of African American male youth can only become possible if protective factors are enhanced. Neighborhoods and communities may promote many of the individual characteristics that tended to characterize the most successful African American male participants in this present study. These groups should design engaging activities and expect all youths to participate and to achieve at their highest academic level. Both parents and communities should foster the development of children’s positive attributes, such as self-reliance, a more positive self-concept, and a more positive attitude towards school and their neighborhoods.

Finally, although all of the participants reported a lack of protective factors, such as mentors, youth organizations, and community-based organizations, in their community, there are implications for these community-based groups. These organizations should provide students with safe environments and structured out-of-school activities. It is important that
communities ensure and provide student-oriented academic programs and out-of-school structured activities that are available and equally accessible. Programs, such as recreational activities, mental health programs, and counseling groups, should focus on reducing risk factors and promoting positive protective factors within the community. Unfortunately, the participants in this study stated that their parents and guardians were not willing to allow them to participate in any of the community organizations. It was shared by some of the participants that their neighborhoods were not safe in the evenings therefore their parents and guardians would not allow them to go to the community centers and other programs in the evenings. However, other participants stated that they were involved in evening activities such as work and after school activities at school. Given these obstacles, community organizations will need to work closely with schools, which are the main points of contact.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This research adds to the literature on resilience and its importance within African American male youth. More specifically, this research addresses an existing gap in the research concerning African American males and the impact of resilience factors on their academic achievement. The qualitative method of this research presents data derived from an understudied group – the voices and experiences of students who were deemed at-risk but were able to move beyond preconceived expectations.

In the future, it would be worthwhile to explore ways in which students are motivated and to distinguish between two themes of this study, intrinsic and extrinsic factors, and how they motivate students. Through specific interviews with students regarding motivation, perhaps it could be determined not only what motivates the students, but at what age students
begin to make the shift from extrinsic forms of motivation to more intrinsic forms of motivation. While researchers may learn that some students may never make this shift, the information gained would still be valuable in identifying ways to help students make the connection between hard work and the pay off that it offers in the future.

With these findings, there are several areas in which additional studies are needed to explore resilience among African American males. A key component of the academic success of these students appears to be initiative resiliency. Initiative resilience is defined as “the determination to assert yourself and master your environment” (Wolin & Wolin, 1993, p. 136). In other words, in the midst of challenges, the resilient person operates the part of life they can control. Taking a proactive stance in their education, they adopt a positive mindset. Further studies could elaborate and contribute to our understanding of this unique type of resiliency. To further strengthen and enrich this understanding of resilience, a comparison study could include similar type groups by examining ranges of socioeconomic status and ages. The participants in this study were within the same age range. All were from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. By examining age ranges, researchers could also look at the differences and similarities African American males in traditional elementary and secondary schools and African American males in single gender schools. A study of these two groups would possibly give insight into what benefits are gained and the possible positive outcomes on the African American males in an environment focused exclusively on them and their needs.

Additional research is also needed to learn more about the variations in parenting practices and subsequent achievement. Though tracking and studying the effects of parenting
practices may be difficult to do, a clearer definition of positive parenting practices needs to be established in order to have an objective point of view when passing judgment on certain parenting practices. Perhaps the mothers of these students who are tracked could be interviewed to share their sides of the story and the viewpoints they have regarding the success of their sons. Probing the mothers for more information could enrich the study and possibly bring another perspective to the story that has been told by these participants.

**Conclusion**

This research study sought to find answers to the primary research question:

“What factors contributed to the academic success of a select group of at-risk African American male students, thereby supporting them to graduate from high school?” The results of this research study provided a rich description of five participants and gave voice to the complexities of their lives. A structured interview format and a demographic questionnaire were used to assist in identifying themes. The purpose of the interviews was to gain insight into the strengths, protective mechanisms, adaptive responses, and other resilience processes that shielded a select group of African American males from adversity within their environment at home, school, church, and in society, and helped them succeed academically.

It is evident that although these participants shared common hopes and employed similar coping strategies to address the problems they encountered, their lives were uniquely different. Despite adversities, these participants possessed certain characteristics, which contributed to their academic resilience. These included positive believe in self, parental encouragement, support systems, participation in extracurricular activities, and realistic aspirations. In general, they were self-assured, goal-oriented, and possessed good coping
skills. Besides these characteristics, they elicited positive responses from others, possessed problem-solving skills, a sense of direction and purpose. These characteristics are also important for improving academic outcomes of other disadvantaged male students.

This study suggests that at-risk, but capable high school students, who are in control of themselves, will create a resiliency-based culture that can affect others. According to Benard (2004), “all individuals have the power to transform and change” (p. 20). One of the participants described the need for his transformation as follows: “My grades were not good but I know if I don’t do better in school and don’t graduate, I won’t have a good job, so I won’t be able to help my little brothers.” The most effective way of achieving their goals is by helping themselves and others through their individual adversities. Motivation to do better or improve is critical because of the needs of others who are dependent upon them and influenced by their actions.

Trust and strength in each of the participants’ own identity seemed to serve as a significant finding and necessary component in all aspects of attaining positive academic achievement for these young African American males. As reported, each of these participants, to varying degrees, possessed numerous characteristics, which assisted them in achieving positive academic in high school. These participants, who, at the time of these interviews, were either experiencing or had experienced hardships such as family crisis or other external situations. All of the participants demonstrated persistence in their ability to determine a plan of attack for how they were going to bounce back from adversity and regain their positive direction toward high school graduation.
Although the participants spoke of self as they navigated through their education with a strong sense of personal determination, dedication, and work, their basis for motivation appears always to have been connected to family or community. As these students faced adversity, none of them were stagnant or content to stifle their drive towards achieving their goals. It is important to note that most of the participants were resilient as demonstrated by their daily attendance in high school. Therefore, it was shared in the study why these students persisted and the protective factors were documented that positively contributed to the success of each of these African American males.

Positive peer-reinforcements were also evident in this study. The participants’ responses indicated that resilient students attributed part of their achievements to positive peer reinforcements. As one participant shared, “We call each other and make each other come to school. We work together on class projects. We get it done.” The participants became conditioned to reach out to one another and withstand the pressures placed upon them by family circumstances. They felt they often were able to cope more effectively with adversities when they had someone with whom they shared their daily struggles.

Caring adults, who were identified as a protective factor for these participants, also fostered resiliency within these young men. Their support systems included at least one parent and other close, caring relatives including church members. Several participants had parental figures who had high expectations and set clear consistent boundaries. These participants also benefited from authoritative parenting styles and monitoring. Kinship networks were in place for other participants and included relatives and close friends who shared a collective responsibility for caring for these males. These relatives supported
academic and social learning. In addition, their churches taught them how to have positive images of themselves provided activities away from socially deviant activity.

Although they had familial support, the need for a comprehensive support system in their community was clearly noted by the participants in this study. One participant noted, “I do not go to the community center. My mom worries about the gang activity”. It was apparent that had programs such as mentoring, shadowing employees on their jobs, and social skills existed, some of these individuals would have taken advantage of them. However, those individuals who were involved did not express satisfaction with what was available. In spite of not receiving support from the community centers, these resilient individuals were able to compensate for the lack of protective mechanisms in their social environment by relying more on their personal resolve and the caring support of significant adults.

The responses from all of the participants confirmed that they immersed themselves in the culture of their schools. While some of the participants experienced academic pressures from school staff and administration in their earlier schooling, all of the participants felt they were pushed beyond their academic comfort zone or positively challenged by teachers. One participant shared,

I could have responded negatively when my teachers insisted I redo an assignment or stay after class to over homework. Instead, I wanted to do well for the teachers and for myself. I would turn in missed assignments, redo tests with low scores, and remain after school for tutoring.
The participants were told and acknowledged that the hard work they put in academically would pay off in positive outcomes for them, such as completing high school and possibly attending college.

The participants exhibited high levels of trust by listening, enacting, and persisting when teachers and others encouraged them to do so. In addition to academic pressure, teachers and school staff did a tremendous job of encouraging and mentoring these participants. Whether it was inside the classroom assisting students in writing their papers, or on the athletic fields, many of the adults in their schools did everything they could to make sure the students were in the best position to succeed. In order for this to occur, there had to be a tremendous amount of reciprocal trust and respect between teachers and students in order for the students to believe that these teachers were guiding them, sometimes through hard work, towards a positive academic goal.

In order for our most at-risk students to compete in the 21st century, greater educational opportunities will be necessary. Federal and state education agencies and local schools must be linked with agencies and institutions to establish priorities in all aspects of providing services to children in urban areas and to ensure our children and youth are receiving quality education. A quality education that enables all students to succeed in school must be a priority. It will take great leadership and courage to pave the way to a new, comprehensive support system that can make a difference in students’ achievement and move schools towards more collaborative efforts for the betterment of the community.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A

Informed Consent

North Carolina State University

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH

Title of Study: Resiliency and Protective Factors among At-Risk African American Males – A Pathway to Reducing the Dropout Rate

Principal Investigator: Eunice O’Neal Sanders    Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Susan Faircloth

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

I am conducting this research study as a requirement for the doctoral program in Educational Administration and Supervision at North Carolina University. I am asking if you will participate in this study as a part of the case study I am conducting. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to participate in this study, to choose not to participate, or to stop participating at any time without penalty.

The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of motivational factors that influence African American males in their quest to complete high school. This study will address those risk factors that may or may not have influenced you in your attempt to complete high school.

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from participating in this study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.
What is the purpose of this study?
This study will look closely at those risk factors or barriers that hinder many African American males from graduating from high school. African American males have the lowest high school graduation rates and the highest suspension, truancy, and dropout rates in the state. This is true not only in North Carolina but across the United States. During this study, I will interview five students who faced barriers or who possessed several of the identified risk factors and were able to graduate. I am especially interested in identifying specific individual, family, and community factors that help students to complete high school. By interviewing these five individuals, I hope to find out what motivated them to graduate in spite of a number of risk factors.

What will happen if you take part in this study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to meet me in an agreed upon private location such as the public library or a church. Information will be collected through a questionnaire and an individual interview. This interview will last approximately one hour. A follow-up interview may also be required. The interview will be digitally recorded. A transcript of the interview will be made. I will keep all transcripts, as well as the audio record of the interview, in a secure location. Other than the person who will transcribe these interviews for me, no other person will have access to the interview data. No specific names will be used with this study. I will be the only person at any time to contact you for this information.

Risks
The risks associated with this study are no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits
Your participation in this research study will greatly benefit our efforts to understand factors that affect individual students in their high school experiences and struggles they encounter along the way. It will also help us to identify specific ways that we can help students. This information could assist educators in developing programs to meet the specific needs of students who are identified as being at-risk.

Confidentiality
The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored on a password-protected computer in my home office. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study. You will NOT be asked to write your name on any study materials; no one can match your identity to the answers that you provide.

Compensation
At the conclusion of each 60-minute interview, you will receive a $25 gift card.

What if you have questions about this study?
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact me by phone at (919) 914-3847 or by email at nukie1028@gmail.com.

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in this research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-4514).

**Consent To Participate**
“*I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.*”

**Participant’s signature**_________________________ **Date** _________________

**Investigator's signature**_________________________ **Date** _________________
Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire

For each item, please indicate the appropriate response.

1. Current age: _______________________

2. Age at time of high school graduation:
   _____16 or before _____17 _____ 18_____ 19 _____20

3. Number of years spent in high school:
   _____ less than 4 ____ 4 _____5 _____ more than 5

4. Did you attend preschool? _____ yes _____no

5. Did you ever skip or repeat a grade? __ skip __ repeat
   Reason for retention(s) ________________________________

6a. Were you suspended in elementary school?
   _____yes _____no

   If yes, approximately how many days were you suspended in elementary school?_____
   Reason for suspension(s) ________________________________

6b. Were you suspended in middle school?
   _____yes _____no

   If yes, approximately how many days were you suspended in middle school? __
   Reason for suspension(s) ________________________________

6c. Were you suspended in high school?
   _____yes _____no

   If yes, how many days were you suspended in high school?__
Reason for suspension(s)____________________________________________________

7. Current academic status:

_____ enrolled in a community college

_____ enrolled in a trade school

_____ enrolled in a four-year college college/university

_____ not enrolled in a college or university

8. Current employment status:

_____ employed part-time

_____ employed full-time

_____ not employed

9. Employment status while in high school:

_____ employed part-time (less than 40 hours per week)

_____ employed full-time (40+ hours per week)

_____ not employed

10. Grade point average (GPA) at time of high school graduation (based on 4.0 scale):

_____ 4.0

_____ 3.0 – 3.9

_____ 2.0 – 2.9

_____ 1.0 – 1.9

_____ less than 1.0

_____ I don’t remember

11. Approximately how many days were you absent during high school?
____ 0-5 days
____ 6-10 days
____ 11-15 days
____ 16 – 20 days
____ more than 20 days
____ I don’t remember

12. Participation in federally funded free or reduced lunch program while in high school:
_____ yes  _____ no  _____ did not apply for assistance  _____ don’t know

13. Legal guardianship during high school:
_____ biological parents
_____ stepparents
_____ mother only
_____ father only
_____ maternal grandparents(s)
_____ paternal grandparents
_____ foster care or group home
_____ other relative (please specify) ____________________

14. Number of siblings __________________

15. Number of siblings in home while in high school _____________

16. Number of siblings, if applicable, who completed high school _____________

17. Mother’s educational background:
_____ did not complete high school
_____ high school graduate
_____ attended college
_____ earned a college degree/diploma
    ______ completed a two year-degree
    ______ completed a four-year degree
    ______ completed a post-graduate degree
______ did not attend or graduate from college
_____ don’t know

18. Father’s educational background
_____ did not complete high school
_____ high school graduate
_____ attended college
_____ earned a college degree/diploma
    ______ completed a two year-degree
    ______ completed a four-year degree
    ______ completed a post-graduate degree
______ did not attend or graduate from college
_____ don’t know

19. Occupation/job of parents/guardians while you were in high school

_________________________________ mother/female guardian
___________________________________ father/male guardian

_____ don’t know
20. Did you become or were you a parent while in high school?

______ yes ______ no

If yes, at what age did you become a parent? ________

If yes, number of children? _____
Appendix C

Interview Protocol

RESEARCH QUESTION

Individual
1. Tell me about yourself? What are some of your strengths? (Probes – How do your friends describe your strengths? How does your family describe your strengths? How would your teachers describe your strengths?) What are areas you feel you need to improve?

2. As you look back, what have you done to contribute to your own academic success?

3. Tell me about those situations that got in the way of you learning and succeeding in school? Or, what personal issue was most difficult to deal with in school?

4. How did you handle this obstacle or deal with this issue?

Family

5. What family member has influenced you the most or was the most supportive of you while you were in high school? Tell me about this person.

Community

6. Where do you live? (Probes: Tell me about your neighborhood. Did you live in this neighborhood/community throughout high school? Where did you live during high school? Describe any moves your family made while you were in high school.)

7. Is there anything about your neighborhood/community that has helped/hindered you in school? If so, specifically what helped/hindered you? (Probe Were there any programs or activities that you found helpful/harmful?)

School

8. Was there anything that gave you trouble in school? If so, how did you feel about it?

9. Who in school was particularly helpful to you? In what ways were they helpful? Was there a favorite teacher, administrator or counselor? If so, who? In what ways were they different?

10. Were there any programs or activities in school that you especially liked or found helpful?
11. Why do you think some students do not do well in school?

12. What advice do you have for students who do not well in school?

13. What could schools and teachers do to help students do better in school?

14. When you had a problem to solve in school, who did you go to for help and why?

15. Who did you especially admire and why, when you were in school? (Probe: Specifically, what was it about him or her that you especially liked?)

16. What were the keys to your success in school?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for participating in this interview.