

ABSTRACT

HICKS, GREGORY EUGENE. Back in the Seventh Grade ... Again! Passing the EOG's Was Not Good Enough! A Qualitative Study About At-Risk Seventh Graders. (Under the direction of Kenneth H. Brinson, Jnr. and Peter A. Hessling)

The purpose of the research has been to examine why middle school students who consistently pass state-mandated tests do poorly in school and thus have to repeat their grade. This qualitative study involved twelve retained seventh grade students. Participants' school records were examined, and eight of their former and current teachers were also interviewed to develop a more complete picture of the students involved and to support data triangulation. Student participants were asked about family, friends, teachers, school life, and future plans and endeavors. Multiple case studies and focus groups were used to answer questions leading to thematic data analysis.

Data analysis revealed that students who were retained had a large cadre of personal problems and concerns. From a compilation of the data, I defended the characteristics of a good middle school, a school designed and dedicated to address and meet the particular needs of young adolescents. Retention has had a significant impact on these youngsters and will be a major determinant of their future school success.

Subjects of the study were candid about the importance of friendships and the value of maintaining those friendships as they move to the next grade. Students also identified their readily favorite and least favorite teachers. Teachers that cared were highly prized among study participants. Teachers who did not take time to help students individually and those who did not seem to care about the students' problems students were despised.

Listening to the voices of students is the first step in designing an effective educational program that best meets their needs. The implication of this study is a model middle school that does just that.

**BACK IN THE SEVENTH GRADE ... AGAIN!
PASSING THE EOG'S WAS NOT GOOD ENOUGH!**

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ABOUT AT-RISK SEVENTH GRADERS

by
GREGORY EUGENE HICKS

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Co-chair of Advisory Committee

Co-chair of Advisory Committee

Biography

A native North Carolinian, Gregory Eugene Hicks was born in April 1955 in Durham and spent his childhood in nearby Efland, located in Orange County. The middle of five children, Greg grew up loving sports and every aspect of learning. Attending school, particularly Efland Elementary School with his friends and neighbors, was a passion. This, coupled with his love of people, led to Greg's later career pursuits.

After high school and a couple of colleges, Greg settled on Elon College (now Elon University) to complete his Bachelor of Arts degree in Elementary Education with concentrations in math, science and social studies. Greg returned to Orange County to teach math and coach at Stanford Junior High School, the junior high he once attended. Early on, Greg, with all of his leadership background and drive, knew that he wanted to do more to help students reach their full potential. Teaching full-time and coaching three sports, Greg still found time to enter the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and earn his Master of Education degree in Administration and Supervision in 1986.

In 1985, Greg became an assistant principal at Stanford. Five years later, Greg was named acting principal at Stanford Middle School, a dream come true. At the conclusion of that year, Greg accepted an assistant principal position at Northern Middle School in Roxboro. After four years Greg was named principal at Northern and served in that capacity until transferred to Person High School to serve as principal in 2002.

In 2000, Greg decided to pursue his life-long ambition and work on his doctorate at North Carolina State University. He is now close to finishing that incredible journey.

Greg could never have reached this point of his educational and professional career without the support and encouragement of his lovely wife Marilyn, a successful fifth grade teacher in Person County, and his son, Paul, a student at North Carolina State University. Greg can be contacted at hickshg@person.k12.nc.us.

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Chapter One Introduction

Statement of the Problem

“Improving student achievement is the goal of the ABCs of Public Education, launched in 1995 in North Carolina, and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, signed into federal law in January 2002” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2003b, p. 1). The ABCs of Public Education was born out of a desire to hold local education agencies more accountable for the teaching and learning of the state curriculum. Along with this accountability came the promise of a stronger emphasis on the basics, reading and math, all in the context of more local education agency (LEA) control.

In 2002-03, the ABC’s program was expanded to incorporate the new statutory accountability requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. This federal legislation sets a proficiency goal of 100% by 2013-14 for all schools and requires that all schools make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) toward that goal. The SBE (State Board of Education) adopted AYP as a ‘closing the gap component’ of the ABCs in response to General Statute 115C-105.35. (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2003b, p.3).

Holding school districts accountable includes tying promotion and retention (grades 3, 5, and 8) to success on state mandated end-of-grade tests in reading and math. For a student to be deemed “successful,” he must be on grade level, scoring at Level III or IV, on reading and math end-of-grade tests. According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2003a), students continue to show academic growth with “93.3% of schools

making either expected or high growth” (p.1). North Carolina students are now above the national average in reading and math (NAEP, 2003). But some LEA’s have instituted more stringent promotion and retention standards. Person County Schools, for example, has adopted such a proactive stance with their *Learning First* program. Under *Learning First*, all Person County students (grades 3-8) must pass end-of-grade tests to be considered for promotion. One of the results of the implementation of the ABCs and, more specifically, of *Learning First* in Person County is that test scores have risen steadily. In seven out of ten schools, over 80% of the students scored at or above grade level on end-of-grade tests (Person County Schools Test Data, 2002).

After several years of participating in the state testing program, one phenomenon that began occurring in Person County was the ever-increasing number of students who, for whatever reason, did little or no regular schoolwork, made failing grades, and therefore, relied on passing end-of-grade tests, the minimum requirement, to ensure promotion to the next grade. Consequently, Person County schools started retaining students who made failing grades even if they passed end-of-grade tests. From 1996 until 2000, the middle school where I worked averaged from six to eight retentions a year. At the conclusion of the 2000-01 school year, my school retained sixty-four 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students. That was almost a 200% increase. Approximately twenty (31%) of these retained students passed end-of-grade tests in reading and/or math (Person County Schools Test Data, 2001). However, they did not make passing grades in regular classes, and their teachers recommended retention. As the principal of this middle school, I was the one who had to make the final decisions regarding students’ promotion or retention. As the instructional leader, it was my responsibility to

identify students who were at risk of failing and provide assistance for them (Bulla, 2002, p.10). Sixty retentions had a sobering effect on me, leaving an indelible impression. The question as I saw it was, “what caused these capable students, who passed end-of-grade tests, to not do their schoolwork and thus, be retained?” I mostly agree with Glasser (1969) who states, “the major problem of the schools is a problem of failure. Therefore, ways must be discovered so that more children can succeed” (p. 7).

Imperatives of the Study

After reflecting on this phenomenon, I decided to do a pilot study focusing on retained students who had passed end-of-grade tests and their perceptions and feelings about school. I believe that we do not inquire of students enough when making decisions about *them*. Students need to be heard. Educators do not take the time to listen closely to what students are saying about how they feel they are being treated. Youngsters have a story to tell, one worth hearing and heeding to. The students’ voices need to be heard, and I sought to do just that in the pilot study. And now, with the federal government’s “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) mandate, it is more imperative than ever that we find out all we can about what causes students to do what they do in school. Every school’s “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) depends on it. Anything we can find to help schools do a better job helping at-risk students will support reaching every single child as mandated by NCLB.

Pilot Study

In the fall of 2001, I conducted a pilot study involving students at a local middle school. After securing permission from the superintendent and the principal, I met with one of the guidance counselors and, together, we searched student records to find the participants

I needed for this multiple case study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). We found five seventh grade students who had passed end-of-grade tests but who had failed several classes and were, therefore, retained. I chose seventh graders because they were in the middle grade of the middle school. After I met with the students and explained what I wanted to do, they were given consent forms to take home for parents to sign. Four students, one girl and three boys, returned the signed permission slips to the counselor, and we began interviews the next day. I interviewed each student individually, and two days later, I interviewed all of the students in a focus group.

What I found in the pilot study was that for these students, at first there was a definite stigma attached to repeating a grade. After a time, however, it did not seem to matter. As a matter of fact, these students tried to look at retention in a positive way. They even thought their teachers liked them better in the second year and treated them accordingly. The students in the pilot had definite opinions about teachers. They did not care for teachers who did not care for them or who made the work hard. Two of the students added that their parents had warned them they would fail if they did not pull up their grades. Friends were important to these students, and most felt like their friends treated them the same as always. One female student said that she had made new friends because her old friends made fun of her for failing her grade. Finally, all of the students felt they were doing better in school since their grades had improved, and all of them felt they would pass their grade the this time around.

At the conclusion of the pilot study, I realized that there was much more to be gleaned from working with capable students who had been retained. I was not convinced that peers had little impact. Further, I expected that events in the home would have been more

significant in the lives of these students. Yet, from their self-reporting, it did not seem to have an effect on school performance. I thought the teacher-pupil relationship would be important, and it was probably the most significant determinant when predicting success among the pilot participants. This information, however, was inconsistent among the subjects. I decided, therefore, to take what I had learned and expand my pilot study into a dissertation research project. Using a case study approach, I wanted to interview more students and include staff members as well.

My goal was to focus on a new set of retained seventh graders, the middle grade of middle school. If I could find out more about what causes students to fail their grade when they could demonstrate proficiency on state-mandated tests, perhaps I could help devise strategies to reduce retention among adolescent youngsters. I wanted to help these at-risk students find success in school and keep them from later becoming dropout statistics.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The pilot study and my own experience led me to reflect on the reasons I thought students did not perform successfully in school and pass their grade. Did they not want to succeed? Why were they not more motivated to learn? Were these students just a result of a permissive society and, therefore, inherently lazy? Sylvia Rimm (1995) indicates that students' lack of success in school is because of a pervasive condition she calls, "underachievement syndrome." She goes on to say:

Underachievement Syndrome is epidemic. It enters every classroom and many homes. It is only with the help of many parents and teachers that we can begin to

solve a problem that destroys family life, minimizes classroom efficiency, and robs children of their motivation and sense of personal control (p. xvii).

Rimm would think that students naturally choose to be underachievers. I disagree. I have always thought that students naturally want to be successful, and they want to please their teachers and parents. Somewhere along the way, students lose this desire and begin to fail in school. From my pilot study, I began to see some of the reasons for this loss drive to succeed. I also began to see that overcoming underachievement syndrome is not an impossible task, but one educators must continue to examine and eradicate.

Motivation, that inward drive that causes students to work hard or not, is an important intrinsic mechanism for student success in school. How do outside influences contribute to a child's motivation to do well or to do poorly in school? Adolescent motivation, therefore, is critical when examining student success in school.

In his book, *Schools Without Failure* (1969), Dr. William Glasser, noted psychiatrist and author of *Reality Therapy*, writes,

Where children come from homes in which failure is a part of the home and neighborhood environment, deficient education leads to no motivation or to antimotivation. Without motivation, or in a battle against an education which makes no sense to them, they fail in school, usually locking themselves into failure for life (p. 11).

These and other writers have theories and ideas about why students fail. They can conceptualize about student motivation or the lack of it. I like Glasser's word, "antimotivation" which summarizes what fuels the work habits of failing adolescents.

But little has been taken from the words of these young people themselves. What do they have to say about what motivates them to do well or not do well in school? Do the students all see themselves as failures? Glasser would think so. His work in California with female juvenile delinquents in reform school bears this out. Speaking of several subjects in his study, Glasser relates that they “firmly believed that they were failures in life and that they could not reverse this failure”(p.2). But these are juvenile delinquents in reform school, not seventh graders repeating their grade because they did not do their class work. In talking directly with students in schools, I believed I could learn why the students failed even while they had the ability to consistently pass state mandated tests. From my own tacit theory and observations to personal theory and formal concepts (Marshall & Rossman,1999), it was my desire to find these answers. Perhaps, then, strategies could be devised to help these students.

After reflecting on this information I was ready to begin asking what research questions I needed to address.

Research Questions

Based on personal experience, the pilot study, and a review of the literature, the following questions were formed:

1. What factors in the school environment have had an impact on the student's performance?
2. How has the student's family influenced academic achievement?
3. How important are peer relationships in the success of students?
4. Is the relationship between the student and teacher paramount in determining school success or failure?

5. What other outside influences may impact student achievement?

Role of Researcher

When Person County Schools implemented their academic standards program called *Learning First* in 1998, school officials were confident test scores would improve, indicating higher student achievement. Person County students have been learning more, and test scores have risen in grades 3-8 with most schools experiencing 80% proficiency or better. Person County's *Learning First* program simply states that students in grades 3-8 must score at Level III or IV on end-of-grade (EOG) tests to be considered for promotion. This is only a minimum requirement, however. Local standards must also be met in order for students to be promoted to the next grade.

For the first couple of years there was greater emphasis on passing the test. In other words, students could do poorly in class, score well on the EOG's, and still pass their grade. Teachers complained, and administrators started holding students accountable for class performance as well.

What amazed me was the number of students who did poorly in the classroom, but consistently scored at Level III or IV on end-of-grade tests. What was causing students to do poorly in class, knowing they would fail their grade if they did not do well on the teacher-assigned material?

I have been in education for almost 25 years. Most of that time has been spent teaching, coaching, and administering middle school students and staff. I have a deep abiding love and concern for these emerging adolescents. They are going through many changes, physically, emotionally and socially (Alexander & George, 1981). I thought I understood

them pretty well. When confronted with the clear mandate: do the work, pass the EOGs, or fail, I thought middle school students would respond positively. In 2000, I held students to the line, and sixty were retained; most were seventh graders. I was devastated! What happened?

Strengths I brought to this study were numerous. As a long-time middle school practitioner, I have a good empirical understanding of the characteristics of adolescents. As a teacher, coach, athletic director, assistant principal, and principal, I have had many opportunities to deal directly with adolescent youngsters. Because of my various roles, I have learned when interviewing to listen actively to get the whole story. In other words, I have the know-how and patience to obtain full and complete answers from students. Reading between the lines is a skill one must develop in order to become a successful middle school practitioner; I am quite astute at this skill. Establishing a positive, “controlled” (Seidman, 1998, p. 81) rapport with study participants is certainly a strength I possess. Earning students’ respect and trust in a short period of time was essential for this study. I had the ability to do just that, gain a student’s trust right away, to make him feel safe and unthreatened.

There were biases I had to deal with in this study. As I have found, “when the data must ‘go through’ the researcher’s mind before they are put on paper, the worry about subjectivity arises” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 33). The biases I had to deal with are directly related to assumptions made through years of experience. I used to believe that students who did not do well in school were simply lazy. If the right punitive measures were implemented, even the indolent and apathetic youngster would respond positively and do

better. As a student, this always worked with me. Empathy is important when addressing these concerns. Patton (2002) says, “Empathy involves being able to take and understand the stance, position, feelings, experiences and worldview of others” (p. 52). I have learned to be more empathetic over the years, and this helped me handle my biases. Conducting sound fieldwork and taking “detailed field notes” (Bogdan & Biklen, p. 34) about what was seen and heard were critical for a reliable study. The feelings I had about students and the work they did was important as well. That is why it was imperative to recognize these feelings and deal with them as part of my study. To ignore them would deny the very reason I wanted to do this study in the first place, to find out why students with ability fail in school.

Limitations of the Study

In this study I interviewed a small number of students, twelve seventh graders from two Southern rural middle schools and an alternative-learning academy. I also interviewed eight teachers that had worked with or were currently working with these students. It was more important for me to gain a richer understanding from fewer participants than to acquire data from a large sample. The smaller number provided that in-depth understanding. I chose seventh graders to study because they are in the middle grade of the middle school. “The seventh grade,” according to Lounsbury, Marani & Compton (1980),

therefore, is composed of students who represent a true paradox. These youngsters are alike mainly in their unlikeness, with differences not only from one another but within themselves, often from one day to the next. It is the great variation among seventh graders which make them typical of the entire middle school and make them the most appropriate sample for a study of middle schools (p. 4).

Patton (2002) talks about limitations of interview data as including “distorted responses due to personal bias, anger, anxiety, politics, and simple lack of awareness since interviews can be greatly affected by the emotional state of the interviewee at the time of the interview” (p.306). Knowing these limitations going into the interview process helped me to recognize and avoid these pitfalls.

“Documents and records,” according to Patton (p. 306), “also have limitations. They may be incomplete or inaccurate.” Triangulating the information derived from school records with focus group and individual interviews, however, helped to negate these limitations.

Working with adolescent children has other limits. Donald H. Eichhorn’s (1977) definition of his own term “transescence,” indicates some of the challenges of working with middle school students:

Transescence: the stage of development that begins prior to the onset of puberty and extends through the early stages of adolescence. Since puberty does not occur for all precisely at the same chronological age in human development, the transescent designation is based on the many physical, social, emotional, and intellectual changes that appear prior to the puberty cycle to the time in which the body gains a practical degree of stabilization over these complex pubescent changes (p. 3).

As Eichhorn suggests, these “many changes” occur at different times with different youngsters. This lack of stability can have adverse effects on a child’s ability to learn and retain. The emotional aspect can greatly determine whether or not a student performs well in class or has behavioral problems. The social adjustment needed to get along with peers may also be erratic and unpredictable. My experience told me that even during the study, students

could change drastically. This could have had an effect on the study. Most likely, this would have been evident in the focus groups. Fortunately, stability among the participants prevailed, and interviews were completed with no problems being encountered. This was a result, I believe, of my own ability to work with middle school students.

My work with this age group for so long in a variety of roles places me at an advantage. I have experiential knowledge of how these young people think, act, and, more importantly, react. I have observed them firsthand for over twenty years, and, although I still have much to learn about these students, I have acquired a keen sense about them. Having the ability to establish rapport with these youngsters in a short period of time is also a strength I possess. At times, middle school students can appear to be capricious and unpredictable. Knowing this and how to deal with the various facets of adolescence has strengthened my study.

Summary

North Carolina is considered a national leader in setting high accountability standards and raising the level of academic achievement for students. Some local education agencies have imposed more stringent standards, requiring the passing of all state end-of-grade tests, in order to be considered for promotion to the next grade. There are some students who do well on these tests while performing poorly on regular class work. These students may fail their grade as a result of poor class performance. What causes these students to not succeed in the regular classroom while being able to pass state end-of-grade tests? Is it something in the school? Do they not succeed because of something going on in the home? What about peers? What is their impact? Could the teacher have the greatest influence on success or

failure in school for these students? What other outside influences may impact student achievement? If these causes can be discovered, perhaps strategies can be developed to help these students and keep them from failing. This was the purpose of the study.

Chapter Two Literature Review

Introduction

Much has been written about at-risk students. I wanted to examine literature related to middle school students and their performance in school. In North Carolina, proficiency may be reflected, in part, by scoring at levels III or IV on state end-of-grade tests. “No problem in education,” writes Merriam (1988), “exists in isolation from other areas of human behavior. Consequently, there is always some research study, some theory, some thinking related to the problem that can be reviewed to inform the study at hand” (p. 62). To conceptualize this study, I focused on the following topics:

- Characteristics of early adolescence
- The Middle School concept
- The at-risk middle school student, his or her characteristics and tendencies
- Underachievement Syndrome
- Adolescent motivation

Examining the existing literature in these areas gave me the necessary background to conduct my own relevant research and analysis and, hopefully, add to the existing literature.

Early Adolescence

“Young people undergo more rapid and profound personal changes during the years between 10 and 15 than at any other period in their lives” (Lounsbury, 1995, pp. 5-6). These changes occur physically and cognitively, and have a direct effect on social interactions and motivation (Irvin, 1997). As Eichhorn (1966) reports,

There are two basic interrelated dimensions affecting the individual. First, there are forces from within, caused by internal body changes, which affects the child's relations with the environment. Conversely, there are external forces, generated by the environment, which impinge on the individual (p. 7).

This paradox that exists within the emerging adolescent adds to the complexity and confusion of dealing with these children. "Puberty," according to Meece (1997), "refers to the period in which a young person becomes capable of sexual reproduction," (p.89). When puberty begins depends on many factors – genetic and environmental influences as well as geographic and ethnic differences (Conger & Galambos, 1997). Young adolescents, as a result of changing hormones, typically estrogen in girls and androgen in males, undergo rapid changes in physical appearance (growth spurts) and sexual function. Girls typically experience these changes up to 18 months sooner than their male counterparts, "a fact that both complicates social interactions in middle grades classrooms and creates different psychological dilemmas for early maturing girls versus boys" (Eccles & Wigfield, 1997, p.16). Attainment of sexual maturity in girls is marked by the onset of menstruation. Boys are more concerned with "physical efficiency" and the appearance of being "rugged and manly" (Eichhorn, p. 21). Sexual maturity in boys is characterized by the production of semen. The variance among all adolescents is great; some children may be entering puberty as others are leaving puberty although, chronologically, they are the same age. Studies indicate that each generation enters puberty sooner than preceding generations (Alexander & George, 1981; Eichhorn, 1966; Tanner, 1962).

These rapid changes can have a profound effect on a person's self-concept and self-esteem. The anxiety that can result is greater the later these changes take place.

Unfortunately, most youngsters do not recognize these changes or why they are happening, thus compounding the stress and anxiety that accompanies these changes (Caissy, 1994). Just dealing with an adolescent's physical changes is a challenge for parents and educators alike. The adolescents in my pilot study and in this study fit the above descriptions. Clearly, the students demonstrated low self-esteem and anxiety about being retained, but they tried to downplay the significance. Physically, they were all different. For the most part, female subjects were more developed and appeared more mature socially than their male counterparts. A couple of the males appeared more mature physically, but responses to some of the questions reflected an immature level of thinking. Recognition of these developmental changes was important in both studies.

Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was one of the first to examine the cognitive development of children from birth through adolescence with the development of his four stages of intellectual growth: (1) sensori-motor, (2) preoperations, (3) concrete operations, and (4) formal operations (Piaget, 1963). Briefly, the sensori-motor stage covers approximately birth through age two when the child is mostly concerned with assimilation and accommodation. By age two, the child has developed the preliminary tools for the acquisition of language (Wadsworth, 1971). The preoperational period, ages two through seven, is characterized by language development and "rapid conceptual development" (p.26). Eichhorn (1966) describes this period as one in which children "acquire an awareness of the external world" (p.25). The child learns from trial and error when learning how to interact with his

environment. The preoperational child, therefore, is “primarily concerned with his own goals” (p.25). Developing the ability to apply logical thought to concrete problems (Wadsworth, 1971) covers Piaget’s third stage of cognitive development. This span is from seven to eleven years of age. During this stage, children enter school, and “intellectual processes become more internalized” (Eichhorn, 1966, p. 25). Information can now be acquired and used in a systematic fashion as opposed to the trial and error process found during the preoperational stage. More importantly, reversibility of operations is retained during the concrete period of development. This has to do with having the ability to change an altered object back to its original shape (Eichhorn, 1966 & Wadsworth, 1971).

The last period of cognitive development, formal operations, covers ages 11-15, during which children begin to think logically (Eichhorn, 1966). In this stage, youngsters cannot only gather information systematically; they can form hypotheses and reason scientifically (Wadsworth, 1971). Further, Wadsworth (1971) contends that children in the formal operational stage can solve problems involving combinatorial thought, complex verbal problems, hypothetical problems, proportions, and conservation of movement (p.103). This is beyond what a child can do during the concrete phase of development. Adolescents going through this formal operational stage are also affected by environmental conditions that can slow down or speed up the process of cognitive development. (Eichhorn, 1966). Cognitive changes coupled with physical changes increase the challenges of dealing with adolescents, but these are not the only influences affecting their development.

“One consuming aspect of young adolescent development is the search for personal identity” (Lounsbury, 1995, p.7). This search for self leads youngsters to seek out those who

are most like themselves in hopes of being accepted. Eccles and Wigfield (1997) state: “Indeed, often to the chagrin of parents and teachers, activities with peers, peer acceptance, and appearance can take precedence over school activities, particularly during early adolescence” (p.19). The many cliques that are formed during adolescence characterize this need for acceptance. It is during adolescence that gang involvement often begins or increases.

But all peer relationships are not negative. In fact, most peer relationships are positive as youngsters seek out others who have the same values they have acquired from their parents (Eccles & Wigfield, 1997). Peers have more influence on what one wears or what music one listens to. Young adolescents tend to migrate towards those peers having the same interests they have. For example, athletes will hang around other athletes, band members around other band members, and the like. Brown (1990) points out that young people migrate toward negative peers as a result of poor parenting, not the peers themselves. Young people have a need to find others like themselves and to be accepted by them.

Changes in the family of the young adolescent are also taking place. As these young people change physically and cognitively, they begin to question and challenge the mores and rules of home. They become more independent and autonomous, wanting to do more on their own without the constraints of the home (Eccles & Wigfield, 1997). This is why adolescents begin to pull away from their parents, distancing themselves and not wanting to be associated with them in public, preferring to be alone or with friends when going to the mall, ballgames, or other social events. (Steinberg, 1990).

Although sexual awareness has increased significantly among young adolescents, they have often received little information from adults regarding human growth and sexual development (Eichhorn, 1966). Caissy (1994) reports: “The early adolescent view of sex and sexuality is seldom rooted in truth or reality. Rather, it is distorted and unrealistic, and filled with misinformation and myths” (p.51). The media has made sex accessible to all, even to young adolescents. The open promiscuity of our society wreaks havoc with impressionable adolescents who are already going through many changes. Mature sexual behavior, when observed so infrequently, is hard to expect from these youngsters. Handling their own sexuality is another skill young adolescents have to learn.

Rapid physical changes, a higher level of cognition, and social interaction changes in the home and among peers, including an increased sexual awareness, all contribute to the challenge of meeting the special needs of emerging adolescents. The middle school was proposed to focus on the unique needs of this age group. “In order to be developmentally responsive, middle level schools must be grounded in the diverse characteristics and needs of these young people” (Lounsbury, 1995, p. 5). The NC Middle Grades Task Force Report, Last Best Chance 2003: Educating Young Adolescents in the 21st Century (Farmer & Harrison, 2003) points out that

The middle school years are a time of tremendous physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual growth and development. At no time other than the first years of life does a person undergo the enormous changes that adolescence brings, and while growth may be faster at birth, the infant is not staring into the mirror looking at the changes that are occurring – sometimes daily (p.5).

Taking all of these characteristics into consideration the middle school was developed, and it continues to evolve to meet the specific needs of these particularly special and complex individuals.

The Middle School

In its 1918 report, The Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education recommended a reorganization to include 12 continuous years of schooling. The first six years were to be devoted to students 6-12 years of age and the second six years to pupils 12-18 years of age. The second six years would be divided into two periods, designated as the junior high and senior high. By 1960, four out of every five high school graduates had attended a 6-3-3 system of schooling (Alexander & George, 1981). During this period, G. Stanley Hall's work also advanced the need for the junior high by pointing out that students transitioning from elementary to high school needed particular consideration (Eichhorn, 1966). In 1963, William Alexander, considered the father of the middle school movement (McEwin & Farmer, 1992), proposed a unique program that addressed the specific needs of emerging adolescents. He called this program the middle school. Donald Eichhorn's *The Middle School* (1966) used adolescent characteristics to outline a detailed middle school program. "Eichhorn emphasized a developmental curriculum, described an appropriate school environment, and introduced emerging middle school components" (Godfrey, 2003, p. 38). More recently the Carnegie Council of Adolescent Development has issued three publications that have had a profound impact on the direction of the middle school: *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (1989), *Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century* (1995), and *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents for*

the 21st Century (2000). The latest recommendations for improving middle level schools from *Turning Points 2000* include:

- 1) Teach a curriculum grounded in rigorous, public academic standards for what students should know and be able to do, relevant to the concerns of adolescents and based on how students learn best.
- 2) Use instructional methods designed to prepare all students to achieve higher standards and become lifelong learners.
- 3) Staff middle grades schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents, and engage teachers in ongoing, targeted professional development opportunities.
- 4) Organize relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose.
- 5) Govern democratically, through direct or representative participation by all school staff members, the adults who know the students best.
- 6) Provide a safe and healthy school environment as part of improving academic performance and developing caring and ethical citizens.
- 7) Involve parents and communities in supporting student learning and healthy development.

Changes from the recommendations offered in 1989 (Jackson & Davis, 2000) include a greater emphasis on ensuring success for every student. This is in keeping with “No Child Left Behind” legislation. Also, more importance is placed on the “centrality of teaching and learning to ensuring every student’s success” (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 25). Third, the report calls for teaching a curriculum grounded in “rigorous public standards for what students should know and be able to do” (p. 26). Finally, the current recommendations differ from the 1989 report by calling for a reengaging of families and connecting schools to communities. Originally, these were two separate recommendations, and they have now been combined into one. The council recognized that families and communities need each other and are essential in the educational success of all students. The purpose of the Carnegie 2000 report is to put forth a vision of what middle schools ought to be about: a high-performing middle school where “students and adults operate within an active learning community, engaging the world and each other in an ongoing quest to attain the knowledge and skills embedded in high standards for teaching and learning” (p.27).

The National Middle School Association issued a position paper in 1995 outlining what they believed to be essential components of a successfully responsive middle school program. In *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Schools*, the NMSA states that:

Developmentally responsive middle level schools are characterized by:

- 1) Educators committed to young adolescents

- 2) A shared vision
- 3) High expectations for all
- 4) An adult advocate for every student
- 5) Family and community partnerships
- 6) A positive school climate

The position paper also adds the following suggestions about effective middle schools:

Therefore, developmentally responsive middle level schools provide:

- 1) Curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory
- 2) Varied teaching and learning approaches
- 3) Assessment and evaluation that promote learning
- 4) Flexible organizational structures
- 5) Programs and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety
- 6) Comprehensive guidance and support services

The NMSA's position paper not only states what a developmentally appropriate middle school is, it goes on to state what these responsive middle schools are to provide. The specificity of these expectations is profound. Here we see how an educational program is supposed to work in meeting the specific needs of a particular age group.

More specific needs and recommendations for North Carolina middle level education have been provided in The North Carolina Middle Grades Task Force Report, Last Best Chance 2003: Educating Young Adolescents in the 21st Century (Farmer & Harrison, 2003). These five areas include: “curriculum and instruction, diversity, educator preparation, organization and culture, and partnerships” (p.13). All of these areas were developed around the characteristics and needs of young adolescents.

The At-Risk Middle School Student

Children in danger of failing in school and even dropping out have been characterized as being *at-risk*. In April 1983, The National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. In this auspicious and far-reaching report, our country was proclaimed to be “at risk” and that “if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war” (p.1). The report went on to say, “Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them” (p. 1). The focus on at-risk students caused great concern. This report ushered in the beginnings of a nation-wide effort to reform schools and help students directly. The federal government offered suggestions for reform and provided funds to expedite the report’s implications.

John Goodlad’s book, *A Place Called School* (1984) announced, “American schools are in trouble” (p. 1). He went on to say that the “mood of disillusionment came to affect the attitudes of students toward their studies, particularly among middle-class adolescents” (p. 6). In other words, Goodlad was saying that the negative impact of schooling on youngsters was

pervasive and cause for concern. His book pointed to specific deficiencies in schools and offered suggestions for positive reform.

Middle school students are particularly *at risk* when it comes to succeeding in school. According to Lounsbury (1991), “An increasingly negative attitude toward school and school work is widely recognized as a condition that develops for a significant portion of the students between the fifth and eighth grades” (p.21). I have observed this first hand as a middle school teacher, coach, and administrator. Further, this feeling is pervasive among middle school practitioners. Middle school students, for the most part, overcome these tendencies and turn out to be successful and graduate from high school. Other students, unfortunately, are not able to overcome their negative attitudes toward school and, therefore, become increasingly at-risk of school failure and possibly dropping out. The term “at-risk” is used to describe a myriad of symptoms and behaviors. From social status as a predictor to success in school (Kruger, 1990), to dysfunctional families causing drug abuse (Singer, 1993), there are many definitions and explanations of the term *at-risk*. For the purpose of this study, however, I am referring to academic at-risk middle school students, particularly seventh graders. These are students who are in danger of failing their grade.

Failing in school is more complicated than not making a passing grade in class or not passing an end-of-grade test. Dryfoos (1990) writes:

School failure is a process rather than a single risk event. Low achievement results from an array of forces, many of which are outside the control of the child. The quality of the school is, of course, a major factor, as are the actual classroom practices and attitudes of the teacher (p. 79).

Herein lie several concerns when dealing with the academically at-risk middle school student. First of all, outside forces such as negative peer pressure, dysfunctional homes, television, the economy, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, health deficiencies, physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, combined with the natural changes occurring during puberty, may significantly increase academic at-risk behaviors. Any one of the aforementioned forces, or a combination of two or more, could contribute to a child doing poorly in school. None of these forces have to be directly related to ability.

Secondly, the quality of the school (Dryfoos, 1990) and what goes on there may contribute in determining who becomes and remains at-risk. If the school is unable to make a viable connection with a student, that student may become detached from the school and be at-risk of departing altogether.

Finally, and more importantly, classroom practices and attitudes of the teacher (Dryfoos, 1994) could be the most important factor when trying to decide why capable students fail in school. Caring, concerned, and compassionate teachers, particularly at the middle school level, appear to be more crucial than academically proficient teachers. The old adage “Kids don’t care what you know until they know that you care” exemplifies this belief. My pilot study seemed to bear this out, and this study seemed to support this notion as well.

Underachievement Syndrome

I am concerned about the students who are average to above average in intelligence but who perform poorly in school. These students suffer from what Sylvia Rimm (1990) calls “Underachievement Syndrome” (p.4). “Underachievers,” Rimm continues, “waste educational resources, try the patience of even the best teachers, manipulate their families

toward chaos, and destroy their own confidence and sense of personal control” (p.4). These students are sometimes manipulative, mostly of parents. They readily make excuses as to why they don't complete their homework. One will often hear these students proclaim that “school is boring” although they will not try to do the work. “Underlying the poor study habits, weak skills, disorganization, and defenses,” according to Rimm (1990, p.7), “is a feeling of lack of personal control over their educational success.” In other words, these students feel that no matter how hard they try; they can never be successful in school. Frustration builds and, eventually, they may drop out of school altogether. Rimm goes on to say that, “Schools and teachers can make dramatic differences in children's achievement. There is a wide range of appropriate styles for teaching children. Avoiding the extremes and maintaining a firm, positive classroom atmosphere are productive guidelines for all teachers” (p. 95). Again, it appears that the teachers play a vital role in the success or failure of students.

Retention

According to Schwager, Mitchell, Mitchell & Hecht (1992), there are little data that exists on national retention rates; however, they estimate a possible range of 5% to 19%. In 1999, over 60,000 students, 5% of the students in state supported public schools, were retained in North Carolina. Students in grades kindergarten/first grade and students in the ninth grade were retained most frequently (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2000).

Those who support requiring students to repeat their grade say retention provides students with an opportunity to acquire necessary skills for the next grade level (Bulla, 2002).

Those who oppose retention say that it negatively affects student improvement, increases dropout rates, and causes students to develop negative attitudes toward school (Goodlad, 1984; Holmes, 1989; Roderick, 1994; Reynolds, 1992; Rumberger, 1995). Both positions were reflected in the beliefs of the teachers interviewed for this study. Rudolph and Jennings (1999) state that available research concludes that “retention is more likely to be administered to students who are male, poor, a racial minority, attend school in an urban area and/or are considered to be behavioral problems by their teachers” (p.2). Early predictors of retention, according to McCoy and Reynolds (1999), include early school performance, gender, parental participation in school, and the number of times a child changes schools. They also recommend summer school and individual tutoring to raise achievement as opposed to retention.

In a 1992 study, Thomas, Armistead, Kempton, Lynch, Forehand, Nousianinen, Neighbors and Tannebaum studied students in grades four and five who had been retained in kindergarten or first grade to see if there were long-term benefits to students repeating their grade. The first year after being retained, standardized test scores in reading, math, and language improved. These improvements were not sustained over time, however. This conclusion is also supported in a similar study by Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, and Stroufe (1997). Pomplum’s 1988 study on the effects of forty-seven retained first through fourth graders, and seventh and eighth graders, reveals that students retained in the early grades did better than students retained in later grades. Several studies indicate that retained African American students did better than their white counterparts (Holmes, 1989; Alexander, Entwisle and Dauber, 1995).

Evidence also indicates that retained students are more likely to drop out of school (Roderick, 1994; Rumberger, 1995). This is another reason I wanted to study retained seventh graders. If there is reason to believe these students will drop out, we need to develop strategies to keep them engaged and in school.

Adolescent Motivation

A preponderance of literature exists relative to motivation. I have included a small amount of this literature in my review.

I believe most educators would agree, “student motivation is an important influence on learning” (Anderman & Midgley, 1998). This is particularly true when working with adolescents. According to Lumsden (1994), “Student motivation has to do with students’ desire to participate in the learning process.” Getting students to “participate in the learning process” could, conceivably, eliminate their failure. As students move into the middle school, however, the love for learning shown in the early grades has begun to dissipate.

As children grow, their passion for learning frequently seems to shrink. Learning often becomes associated with drudgery instead of delight. A large number of students—more than one in four—leave school before graduating. Many more are physically present in the classroom but largely mentally absent; they fail to invest themselves fully in the experience of learning, (Lumsden, 1994).

There is also evidence suggesting that students may just choose to do poorly in school to keep from “looking stupid in front of teachers and classmates – even if it means undermining themselves in the process” (Viadero, 2003, p 8). These students are more concerned with how they appear to others and not how they perform in school. They will often disrupt and

distract others. They are the “class clowns,” the ones who are always driving the teacher “crazy.” In other words, when given a choice of appearing bad or appearing dumb, students may choose to appear bad and thus cover-up their lack of academic ability or their lack of motivation. Some researchers suggest that self-handicapping behaviors may increase when there is a greater emphasis on achievement, like the emphasis that comes from the pressure of end-of-grade tests, rather than “on understanding and mastering the material being taught – rather than just getting the right answer – and teachers encourage children to take risks and view mistakes as part of learning” (Viadaro, 2003, p.8).

Motivation to learn is a primary factor when determining the potential academic success of an adolescent. Hermine Marshall (1987) defines motivation to learn as “the meaningfulness, value, and benefits of academic tasks to the learner—regardless of whether or not they are intrinsically interesting” (p. 135). Motivation to learn is characterized by Ames (1990) as “long-term, quality involvement in learning and commitment to the process of learning” (p. 410). Therefore, being motivated to learn rests with an intrinsic desire to better one’s self. In their respective works, Wlodkowski (1995) and Champagne (1995) have outlined six factors they believe have a substantial impact on learner motivation. These are: attitude, need, stimulation, affect, competence, and reinforcement.

Attitude

The authors state that attitudes are learned. They are formed through experience, instruction, and observing role models. If attitudes are learned, according to Wlodkowski and Champagne, they can be changed. This could have implications for educators when assuming that bad attitudes, not ability, are contributing to school failure. Perhaps student success

could help reverse this trend. This could have an impact on teacher or instructional motivation as well. Success for all students is not only being legislated by No Child Left Behind, it is the right thing to do.

Need

An individual's needs may be described using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943). From the physiological to self-actualizing, students' basic needs should be met in order for them to be motivated to learn, particularly at a higher, cognitive level. A closer examination of a student's personal needs may reveal obstacles that inhibit motivation. Youngsters from a low socio-economic situation, students on free and reduced lunch, for example, may lack the motivation to do well in school.

Stimulation

The student's learning environment should not be stagnant. This can result in students becoming tired and distracted. They will become bored and inattentive. If this stimulation is not provided from around them, the students will often find ways to stimulate themselves, generating behavior problems for themselves and leading to the increased misbehavior of others. As mentioned earlier "self-handicapping behaviors" could be a result of a boring class. According to Anderman and Midgley (1997), "any student's quality of motivation reflects an interaction of characteristics of the individual and of the environment surrounding her or him" (p. 41). It is important that what students are being asked to learn be relevant to their current life situation. Glasser (1969) writes, "we must attempt to relate every subject taught – arithmetic, social studies, science, health, and even spelling and handwriting - to something that the children do in their own lives outside of school" (p. 49). Students that are

highly interested and engaged in what is going on in class, will be more motivated to learn and stay out of trouble.

Affect

Affect has to do with the student's emotions. Student's feelings, concerns, and passions should be taken into consideration in the learning environment. The feelings of self-worth derived from the affects of pride and guilt, happiness and unhappiness, hopefulness, pity and anger (Ames & Ames, 1984) contribute to a positive or negative cognitive attitude. If a student's emotions are ignored, learning could decline. Mood swings are common among middle school students who are beginning to experience puberty (Caissy, 1994). I have witnessed many times when a student would experience euphoria one minute and total rage the next. Teachers need to carefully observe the affect of students in their class and try to keep them balanced emotionally.

Competence

Self-confidence is a tremendous motivator for adolescents. *Success breeds success*. If students can be successful, they will try more difficult tasks the next time. Therefore, success is a positive motivator for students. Students may refuse to try when faced with possible or certain failure. Encouraging and even rewarding risk-taking could help these students gain confidence and success. Tiered activities where students can choose their own level of difficulty is a successful strategy that can help students raise their level of competence.

Reinforcement

Reinforcement may be positive or negative. Positive reinforcement takes place when a pleasant experience follows a desired behavior. Negative reinforcement occurs when the

desire to reduce or avoid an undesirable condition influences behavior. Reinforcers can be external or internal, depending on the individual whose behavior is being changed. It should not be assumed that positive reinforcement is unnecessary for most children. The reinforcement received at school may be the only positive reinforcement a child experiences.

Summary

The literature is pervasive relative to the at-risk student. Motivation is a key element when discussing why students perform well in school or not. Still, there appear to be a number of students who are more than capable of doing well in school but who do not perform up to expectations. Whatever all of the causes may be, most of the authors agree that students can change. As Rimm (1995) puts it, “The characteristic behaviors of Underachievement Syndrome were learned; therefore, new behaviors, habits, and attitudes can also be learned. The reversal of underachievement will involve new learning for children and for you as parents and teachers” (p.161). This is an ongoing challenge for all educators and the educational community.

Chapter Three Methodology

Introduction

This was an applied qualitative research study using a multiple case study approach in collaboration with focus groups. Lincoln and Guba (1985) write that, “qualitative methods come more easily to the human-as-instrument” (p. 198). They go on to say that

human-as-instrument is inclined toward methods that are extensions of normal human activities: looking, listening, speaking, reading, and the like. We believe that the human will tend, therefore, toward interviewing, observing, mining available documents and records, taking account of nonverbal cues, and interpreting inadvertent unobtrusive measures (p.199).

In this applied study I wanted to “contribute knowledge that will help people understand the nature of a problem in order to intervene, thereby allowing human beings to more effectively control their environment” (Patton, 2002, p. 217).

The case study approach best fit the kind of study I wanted to conduct with adolescents because I could then hear their stories through their voices. To help narrow my research focus, I wanted to work with students from a North Carolina middle school who scored in the passing range, levels III or IV, on end-of-grade (EOG) tests. I wanted to select a middle school that was on a traditional calendar, not a magnet, not a charter, and not over 1000 students. Since the focus of my pilot study was on retained seventh graders, I wanted to continue with that age group. Sixth graders may still be affected by the transition from elementary school. As Godfrey (2003) states, “Just as early adolescents are undergoing the physical, cognitive, and emotional changes of puberty, educators ask them to adjust to a

different format in their schooling” (p.3). Eighth graders may be more interested in looking ahead to the high school, and my experience led me to believe that they had begun the emotional transition to the ninth grade already. Seventh graders should be over the transition of coming to the middle school from elementary school, acclimated to the middle school, and accepting of the fact that they have one more year in this setting.

Academic achievement was my main concern. Using insider informants, i.e., counselors, teachers, and principals, and “snowball sampling technique” as mentioned by Bogdan & Biklen (1982, p. 64), I planned to locate students who passed reading and math EOG’s but did not meet local promotion standards. Although it was not essential, I preferred that the students not be in the exceptional children’s or limited English proficiency (LEP) program. And none were. Adding these diverse groups would complicate the study. Implications of the study, however, should be applicable to diverse groups.

In my pilot study, I started with four students and ended up with three. This was a good number for my limited pilot, but for richer data I wanted a larger sample of at least eight to ten participants. With the help of insider informants, I wound up with twelve students and this turned out to be a good number with which to work (Table 1). As Patton (2002) states: “The object is to get high-quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others” (p.386). Twelve subjects provided the rich data for these multiple case studies. Of the twelve students, eleven were able to participate in two focus groups. After conducting individual interviews, I met with the two groups. Based upon what I knew about middle school students, I knew that the interaction among these adolescents would enhance responses derived during the group

interviews. Interview questions needed to be thought provoking and meaningful for the participants. During individual interviews and in focus groups, I repeated some of the same individual interview questions to see if responses in the focus group were affected by peer interaction and influence. The twelve selected students eagerly participated in the study and they provided excellent data.

Data Collection

Data were collected primarily through interviews and secondarily through document analysis. The purpose of this study was to find out what contributes to middle school students' doing poorly in school; the interview was a good way to acquire this information. "The purpose of interviewing, then," according to Patton (2002), "is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective." Patton goes on to say, "We interview to find out what is in and on someone else's mind, to gather their stories" (p.341). I wanted to get the "stories" of these pre-adolescents, to understand their "perspective," and find some of the answers to their repeated failure in school. Document analysis consisted of examining students' cumulative records including attendance, grades, and test data. Recorded teacher comments proved helpful also. Patton (2002) supports using this kind of data with, "These kinds of documents provide the evaluator with information about many things that cannot be observed. They may reveal things that have taken place before the evaluation began" (p. 293). I wanted to see if the records reveal patterns that have evolved over time.

I conducted several interviews, one with each of the twelve individuals and one with the two focus groups. One focus group had seven participants, and the other, four. To keep the attention of the students, interviews lasted no longer than thirty minutes. With

permission, interviews were audio taped and then transcribed verbatim. Using an interview guide (Patton, 2002) helped facilitate the interview process (Appendices A, B & C). By using this approach, I was able to develop a more accurate response analysis. As in my pilot study, I wanted to ask some of the same questions to the individual students as well as the focus groups. This would show if peer pressure influenced responses. As issues arose and common themes became apparent, I altered questions as necessary. Interviews were conducted in the early spring, at the beginning of the third nine weeks of school. These retained students were well into the school year and had adjusted to their classes, teachers, and new friends. During the interviews, I focused on how much reflection they had done on their status as retained students.

To gain as much information about the student participants as possible, I interviewed other informants, some of the students' teachers. Several of the teachers that were asked to contribute refused. Combining all of these data collection methods and sources facilitated triangulation and accuracy of findings. "By triangulating with multiple data sources," according to Patton (2002), "observers, methods, and/or theories, researchers can make substantial strides in overcoming the skepticism that greets singular methods, lone analysts, and single-perspective interpretations" (p.556). Subjects were selected using the same criteria, were asked some of the same questions, and, as much as possible, interviewed in the same type of setting, in the school and free from distractions. Similar questions were asked of teachers. I examined similar documents found in cumulative records for all participants that included test information, grades, and attendance data. Vast differences did not occur, and further inquiry was not required.

I had to keep in mind one important facet; this was not a study about teachers. Much information was revealed about teachers and teaching in this study, but my focus was to be on students.

Data Analysis

“Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation to the mass of collected data” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). As stated earlier, I audiotaped the students, transcribing the interviews verbatim. Using different colored markers, I coded the data after transcriptions and began looking for common relationships and patterns. From these relationships and patterns I developed “categories of focus” (Glaser, 1978). I had the flexibility to alter categories, when needed, as analysis progressed throughout the study.

Careful analysis led to patterns or themes (Patton, 2002). As specific themes emerged, I made inferences and developed theories (Merriam, 1991) about why, as narrowly measured, capable adolescents failed in school. This led to possible solutions for helping these students succeed in school as outlined in chapter five.

Triangulation

“Triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods” (Patton, 2002, p. 247), and this added to the validity of my study. Interviewing students and teachers provided different perspectives on this topic. Using similar questions from the interview guide and selecting students using similar criteria also served as a form of intersection. Document analysis of student records provided triangulation as well.

I wanted to gain a better understanding of these students’ perceptions of what caused them to fail in school. Triangulation in this case, therefore, was not to measure the accuracy

of what the students said but, rather, to add to the students' perceptions about themselves and how they felt they were perceived by others. By examining the students' school records, I was able to not only verify test data, grades, and attendance, but also see at what point school achievement started to decline. Insider information provided by teachers added a great deal to the study. They knew things about the students and their families that were not revealed from the records and student interviews. All of this information gave me a better understanding of study participants. As Patton (2002) says, "Triangulation, in whatever form, increases credibility and quality by countering the concern (or accusation) that a study's findings are simply an artifact of a single method, a single source, or a single investigator's binders" (p. 563).

Validity

Goetz and LeCompte (1984) define validity as being "concerned with the accuracy of scientific findings." (p.210). My study was about at-risk adolescents who are failing in school. I sought to find out why these students were not succeeding and to accurately portray those findings. The pilot study I conducted in 2001 began to provide insight into some of these answers.

Recognizing my own biases while designing the interview guide helped me to develop good interview questions and enabled me to develop a good interpersonal working relationship with these students. Trustworthiness between the students and the researcher enhanced validity.

Recording interviews improved validity when gathering data. Transcribing interviews verbatim and careful analysis of the data acquired helped to avoid misinterpretations.

Several threats to validity mentioned by Campbell and Stanley (1963), including history, selection, and maturation, could have had a direct relation on how these children responded during the interview process. If the fighting was continuing to be heavy in Iraq, for example, this could have had an effect on responses. In my pilot study I questioned students from the sister middle school (selection) in my district. The students knew I was the principal from the “other” school. This, I felt, could have affected their responses during interviews. Getting the assistance of counselors and administrators when selecting students minimized this threat to validity. If the seventh graders I wanted to interview had been retained two or more times, they could have been 15 years old or older. In fact, one subject was 15 years old. The age of participants (maturation) could, therefore, have had an effect on validity. This did not occur, however, since all participants have been retained at least once anyway.

Recognizing these threats to validity and being sensitive to the possibilities associated with these threats minimized their possible effects. This added to the accuracy of my findings.

Ethics

To accurately assess the stories I received from students, I quickly established a positive working rapport. The participants must trust me and be open to me. Fortunately, I have had years of experience working with pre-adolescents, and, through trial and error, I have learned how to effectively communicate with them. My expertise in this area was an advantage. But, in working with minor middle school students, great care had to be taken. Bogdan & Biklen (1998) state that “Two issues dominate traditional official guidelines of

ethics in research with human subjects: informed consent and the protection of subjects from harm” (p. 43). This was critical when dealing with children. The consent form (Appendix C) outlined what I was doing and why. It explained my expectations of the students. I told them the risks they faced by agreeing to participate in the study. I let participants know that if I were told something that could be considered harmful to them or others, I would have to report it. Students were given the opportunity, at any time, to drop out of the study with no penalty. No one did. Participants were assured complete confidentiality, protection, and anonymity. Using pseudonyms for all places and subjects ensured that no one would ever know who the subjects were or where they were from. Students and their parents were asked to sign the consent form and were provided a copy. As a reputable school administrator, I gave no reason for subjects not to trust me. This also afforded me the opportunity to access various schools and student records necessary for my study. I provided the name and number of my superintendent, as well as the names and numbers of my committee co-chairs as references if a participant’s parents wanted to call and check on me.

For reciprocity, when the interviews were completed, student participants enjoyed leaving campus and going out for lunch. I did this during my pilot study, and the students thought it was great. Although I did not receive one this time, students in the pilot sent me a “thank you” note. Offering to take a counselor out with us, as I did in the pilot, provided an added sense of safety to this process. They also helped with transportation. Parents signed a consent form to allow their children to go with me to lunch. The students made sure the parents signed it. This was quite a benefit for adolescents, and it made the whole consent process go much more smoothly.

Middle school students love to talk about themselves and are, generally, very cooperative. Except in the most extreme cases, I foresaw no problem receiving permission from parents and children to conduct this study. And there were no problems. All of the students contacted agreed to participate. All of the teachers, unfortunately, did not agree to participate. The teacher students spoke most negatively about, refused to contribute. I was confident that the information received and the ensuing analysis would lead to positive results.

Chapter Four Findings and Discussion

Introduction

This study used a multi-case approach (Bogdan & Biklen, p. 62). I interviewed twelve students, eight males and four females, who were repeating the seventh grade. Two focus groups with seven and four members, respectively, were also conducted. Table 1 (p.46) shows that all participants passed one or both North Carolina End-of-Grade tests in Reading and Mathematics, or they missed passing by only a point or two. Nine of the students were black; three were white. The ages of the students ranged from 13 to 15. Four students were being served in the district's alternative school. The other eight students were assigned to two different 6-8 middle schools. Seven students were on free lunch; three, reduced lunch; and two paid full price for meals. None of the students were identified as being in the exceptional children's program or having limited English proficiency (LEP).

All of the students contacted, with parental approval, agreed to participate in the interviews. Most were nervous at first, but soon all of the students relaxed, and the interviews flowed smoothly. My experience and proficiency in working with adolescents facilitated our interactions. All of the interviews took place at the students' respective schools. I interviewed each student individually and, later, within the focus groups. Some of the same questions were posed in the individual interviews and focus groups. I was curious to see how peer pressure might influence responses. During focus group sessions, although several times I noticed students looking at each other for reinforcement for what they were saying, answers remained consistent. A couple of students took the opportunity to entertain the rest of the group with their responses. When corrected for being disruptive, students responded

positively and quickly got back on task. For reciprocity, all of the students and their respective guidance counselors joined me for lunch at a local restaurant. All seemed to enjoy themselves, and all participants thanked me for lunch and for getting them out of school.

Except for one fifteen-year-old, all of the students were thirteen or fourteen. Although student records indicated that some of the students were not doing well in school the year of the study, all anticipated passing their grade. All of the students stated that they planned to graduate from high school and go to college. Based on school records and teacher observations, all students could be considered to be from the lower middle class or borderline children of poverty since most were on free and reduced lunch.

Teachers consenting to be interviewed taught these students the year prior to the study, were teaching them the year the study was conducted, or students had these teachers both years. Eight out of the twelve teachers contacted agreed to be interviewed. On average, the teachers participating in this study had been teaching for over twenty years. When asked what they would tell a friend about their school, most of the teachers made positive statements about their respective schools. One teacher stated that her school had excellent teachers and high test scores. Another teacher said that the teachers support each other and work well together. When the teachers were asked what they would like to change about their school, responses ranged from “administrative support” and “better communication” to “putting more emphasis on teaching the curriculum and less emphasis on testing.” Some teachers thought students should be grouped by ability. One teacher even said that the junior high should be re-instated. Generally, teachers were not happy with the way administration handled discipline. They thought the students were not being held accountable for their

behavior. Their colleagues characterized the best teachers as being “caring, loving, and earning the respect of their students.” Other teachers thought that the best teachers were also the best classroom managers, incorporating best practices in teaching and discipline. The good teachers work hard and have high expectations for themselves and their students. The worst teachers lack both competent pedagogical skills and structured classrooms, according to teachers interviewed. “The worst teachers,” said one professional, “do not teach the curriculum, are more concerned with entertaining instead of teaching, and act like children themselves.” One teacher was emphatically opposed to retention for any reason. Retaining some of the students did not help the students do any better in school. “Retention increases drop-outs,” he said. Interestingly, most of the teachers felt retention should be used if students do not possess the skills they need to be successful at the next grade level. And it did not matter if EOG’s were passed. This dichotomous reaction, hold students accountable and retain if necessary even though teachers believed it did not help the students, mirrored what Bulla (2002) found in his study. Most teachers did not think retained students should stay with the same teachers another year. The rest made no mention of it at all. Pseudonyms have been used to protect all of the participants’ identities. Extra care was taken to protect teacher anonymity.

Table 1**Study Participant Demography**

Student Name	Race	Gender	Age	Free & Reduced Lunch? (Y or N) (R=Reduced)	EOG Reading Score/Level	EOG Math Score/Level
Alonzo	B	M	14	Y	262/III	268/IV
Sara	W	F	14	N	253/III	258/III
Courtney	B	F	14	R	253/III	261/III
Tiffany	W	F	14	N	254/III	255/II
John	B	M	13	Y	266/IV	268/IV
Eddie	B	M	13	R	253/III	258/III
Timothy	B	M	13	Y	253/III	258/III
*Thomas	B	M	14	Y	261/III	260/III
*Anthony	B	M	14	Y	268/IV	266/III
*Jeff	B	M	13	Y	259/III	261/III
*Wanda	B	F	15	Y	253/III	255/II
Frederick	B	M	14	R	253/III	264/III

For seventh graders the scale score range for level III achievement in reading is 249-262; for math, it is 258-266. The scale score range for level IV achievement in reading is 264-291; for math it is 267-307. Students scoring at levels III and IV are considered to be proficient or at grade level. In 2003, 80.8 percent of North Carolina's students were at grade level (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2003c).

* Students currently being served at the local school district's alternative school.

Participants

Alonzo

I was excited about getting started; Alonzo was the first student I interviewed. We met after school in the cafeteria. Alonzo is a fourteen-year-old African American male who will be fifteen in March 2004. He lives with his dad, mom, and three sisters. One of his sisters attended this school as well. For the last two years, Alonzo has scored at level III in reading and level IV in math on end-of-grade (EOG) tests. Alonzo's school attendance has always been good, but since arriving at the middle school, his grades have been mostly D's and F's. His grades in elementary school were mostly A's, B's, with a few C's. From the beginning of our interview, Alonzo was obviously more interested in entertaining me than providing me useful information. When asked what he liked about school, for example, he told me "Getting free lunch." From the way he stated this, Alonzo obviously said this to make me laugh. He also admitted that he liked to talk and that talking got him into "trouble sometimes." Although he was constantly trying to be funny, Alonzo was articulate, and he expressed himself well. In our focus group, Alonzo was almost disruptive, trying to make everyone notice him and laugh at his silly remarks. I was able to keep him on task, however, and his comments added much to the group. He wants to be a professional basketball player or a fireman when he grows up.

One of Alonzo's teachers claimed that Alonzo had average ability, and was doing much better than he did last year. "Alonzo wanted to be the class clown last year," said the teacher. "But this year, he has settled down a lot and is doing much better. He is more serious"

Another teacher believed that Alonzo should have been held back because he lacked basic skills and he put forth little effort.

Sara

Taller and thinner than the other girls in the group, Sara is a fourteen-year-old Caucasian female who always did well in school until she got to the middle school where her grades began to slip. According to Sara, she failed because of her poor attendance and “terrible attitude.” She went on to say that she felt she could “never do nothing right. I was talking more than I was learning.” Of all the students interviewed, Sara seemed the most thoughtful and caring. She loves her family, and she loves her teachers. Sara was the only participant to ask for a copy of the interview guide to look over during the interview. She did not ask for a copy of the questions during the focus group, however. Sara spoke and acted the most mature of all the participants. She seemed to have her act together and was eager to be promoted this year. Weaker in reading than in math, Sara still passed her EOG’s in those areas. She is an only child living with both parents. Sara loves her two cats and two dogs, and she looks forward to playing with them when she can. She enjoys being with her parents and working with them in the yard and garden. They attend church regularly together. Sara wants to be a veterinarian when she grows up.

One of Sara’s teachers commented that Sara’s mother was sick a lot last year, and she thought Sara mimicked her, and thus missed a lot of school. The teacher also indicated that Sara had few friends, was unpopular among classmates, and displayed low self-esteem. This particular teacher also indicated that Sara did little homework last year, but could perform adequately when she put forth the effort.

Another teacher indicated that Sara was very polite and mannerly. The teacher also said that Sara had average intelligence, lacked basic skills, and should have been retained. A teacher who had Sara the year of the study and the year before the study pointed out that Sara did not do her work, and that she should have been retained. The teacher reported that Sara is much more mature and responsible now. She was proud of the fact that Sara had recently been on the honor roll.

Courtney

The most emphatic and animated of the group, Courtney has strong opinions about life and how people should treat each other. Wearing a skirt that covered her knees, she was the only participant wearing glasses. Courtney quickly, almost defensively, professed her Christian faith and indicated that it was her faith that caused her to dress the way she did. Courtney also said that she believed it was her dress and faith that caused her to be picked on by others. Academically, Courtney's sixth grade year mirrored her elementary experience, where she made mostly C's while barely passing EOG tests. In the seventh grade, however, Courtney's grades were mostly D's and F's. Although she passed her EOG's (low III's) and attended summer school, Courtney was still retained. The shortest girl, this thirteen-year-old African American female on reduced lunch, was one of the more immature acting of the group. She often interrupted others in the focus group with her overly expressive comments. With eyes wide, head weaving, and hands on hips, Courtney would focus her anxiety on the boys in the group, trying to get them to notice her, whether positively or negatively.

Courtney is close to her parents and two sisters. They enjoy traveling to King's Dominion theme park each summer and watching TV together. She blames her negative

attitude for failing her grade, but stated, “ I lost my great grandmother and grandfather last year. This caused a lot of stress for my family.” Courtney was implying that these deaths contributed to her being retained. Her father “works all the time,” and so he “doesn’t always know what is going on in our family. He works hard to take care of us.”

Courtney’s teachers call her “very religious.” According to the teachers, the family attends the Jehovah’s Witness church. The girls in the family always wear skirts, no pants. The mother is very diligent in attending conferences. Courtney is considered by her teachers to perform in the low average range, needing lots of practice and sustained focus. One teacher stated that Courtney is considered to have a “victim mentality,” and often uses race as an excuse for any perceived injustice. Another teacher said that Courtney lacked basic skills and knowledge and should not have been promoted last year. Courtney, by her teacher’s reports, did little work last year and did not get along well with others.

Tiffany

As with most of the students, this fourteen-year-old Caucasian female had always been an average student until she arrived at the middle school. By her own admission, Tiffany’s interest in boys and her poor attitude led to her failing the seventh grade. Most of her grades were F’s. And although she did score a high level III in reading, she scored a high level II in math. Having the same boyfriend for three months, Tiffany considers herself very stable this year. She is close to her stepmom and her mom. Tiffany reported to me that her mom is pregnant by her mom’s current boyfriend. Tiffany does not like him, and they do not get along. Tiffany’s father has custody of her; she considers herself a “daddy’s girl,” but she lives with her grandmother. Tiffany was concerned that her little brother, who “looks up to

her,” was disappointed when she failed her grade. Tiffany’s boyfriend was also one of those people she felt close to, stating, “I can talk to him about anything.” She wore his middle school letter jacket during the individual interview and in the focus group. Physically, the most mature female, Tiffany did not talk a lot in the focus group. She seemed more interested in what the other participants said and how her lip-gloss looked. Tiffany wants to be a lawyer when she grows up.

One of Tiffany’s teachers reported that Tiffany did poorly in school because she was not interested in school, would not do her work, and was “sexually active.” “Tiffany knows all the right things to say,” said the teacher, “because Tiffany has been counseled to death!” The teacher felt that her parents and school counselors had enabled Tiffany to do poorly in school, and that Tiffany’s lack of basic skills supported retaining her.

Another teacher stated that “Tiffany wears too much make-up and her clothes are too tight.” The teacher reported that Tiffany often brags about socializing with older boys. Said the teacher; “Tiffany is constantly trying to get the attention of the males in the classroom who are not performing well academically.”

John

John, a fourteen-year-old African American male, is, by EOG score standards, the most capable of all the students interviewed. He scored IV’s in reading and math. Making mostly A’s and B’s in elementary school, John’s grades sank to D’s and F’s at the middle school. Good grades and high EOG scores, however, were the only positive things going for John. He made it clear from the beginning that he hated school and everything about it. He thought math and social studies were “boring.” He even hated the food. When trying to

communicate with John, I found him to be apathetic and sad. In our individual conference, I had to cajole and pull every answer from him. With the appropriate probes, however, John offered the most intelligent and insightful answers of all the participants. In the focus group when asked a direct question, he mostly put me off by stating more than once, “no comment.” John’s high elementary grades and EOG scores were no accident; John is very intelligent. His teachers support this observation. Unfortunately, if something does not change, I predict John will be the first of the group to drop out of school. That would be a tragedy. He lives with his mom and sixteen-year-old brother. John is close to his grandmother and feels he can talk to her about anything. She was disappointed when John was held back. He wants to play in the National Football League (NFL).

One of John’s teachers observed that John “lacks close supervision from his single, uneducated, mother.” The teacher revealed that John had missed a lot of school and would not complete assignments. She taught John last year as well, and although he has not been a behavior problem this year, the teacher thinks John is doing less work than last year.

Another of John’s teachers feels that John is doing less than last year. The teacher states, “I worry about John. I think he could be a lost soul if someone doesn’t help him.” He has told this teacher that he often rides around with older guys while they drink and smoke pot. The teachers know John is very smart but lacks motivation. His father died of AIDS, and his mother works late, leaving John alone and unsupervised much of the time.

Eddie

Even after passing his EOG’s in summer school, thirteen-year-old Eddie was still retained. “My EOG’s were bad, and my grades sucked!” declared Eddie. The smallest of the

participants, this fourteen-year-old African American male was friendly, cooperative, and mannerly during all of our time together. He wanted to please. An average elementary student, Eddie's grades began declining in the fifth grade and got worse in the middle school. With an older, influential brother at the high school, Eddie is motivated to be like his sibling. The middle of three boys, Eddie feels like he "catches it" more from his parents than either of his two brothers. He wants to be a professional basketball player or wrestler when he becomes an adult.

Eddie's teachers report him to be "very immature" and "weak in basic skills." Eddie often did no work, and he did poorly on tests. He blames others and makes excuses for his own behavior. Eddie is disruptive in class, and he is disrespectful towards his teachers. Teachers also reported that the police had been called to the house because of family arguments where the father had threatened to shoot himself or others. The Department of Social Services is aware of the home problems.

Timothy

Repeating a grade for the first time, Timothy is a thirteen-year-old African American male on reduced lunch. He has always produced low grades in school, but he likes attending. "I like school 'cause it helps me out," stated Timothy. From his own analysis, Timothy was promoted each year because of passing end-of-grade tests. This strategy worked until last year, when failing grades and low-level III EOG scores held Timothy back. Slow and inarticulate, Timothy mumbled most of the time during our interview, giving responses that were hard to hear and understand. I had to ask Timothy more than once to repeat what he was saying. When in the group, his peers seemed to have a hard time understanding him as well.

He was kind-hearted and tender but immature. He lives with his mother, father, two brothers and two sisters. Another sister lives with his “other mama.” Timothy loves music, and he is a drummer in the school band. When he grows up, Timothy wants to be a drummer in a band or a truck driver.

Thomas

I interviewed Thomas, a fourteen-year-old African American male, at the alternative education center. This school is an alternative program for highly at-risk students, students who are one step away from being put out of school permanently for misbehavior and bad grades. Since elementary school, Thomas has had poor grades: C’s, D’s, and F’s. On the other hand, he has always passed end-of-grade tests, scoring at level III in reading and math every year. In the interview, Thomas made it clear that he did not care for school. He thought the work was “hard.” He did not like his math teacher because he thought she was “hard” and because he “didn’t care” about the class. Thomas lives with his father, and he feels closest to him. Occasionally, he sees his mother and five sisters. Thomas wants to be a professional football player, although he has yet to play on an organized school team. He seemed interested in gangs, however, informing me of gang-related characteristics. I think he was in awe of them and captivated by them. I do not believe he wanted to be in a gang necessarily. He spoke of the fear he had of gangs.

Teachers reported that Thomas lives with his father who works nights, leaving Thomas home alone much of the time. The mother works at Hardees and does not want to be bothered with her son. One teacher characterized Thomas as a “clown,” and stated that Thomas just did not try last year. Very disruptive and disrespectful to teachers, Thomas often

bullied other students. He was considered “slow” and having a hard time with the material. When the school year started, Thomas did not attempt any work, and his behavior worsened. Thomas was referred to the alternative learning center.

Anthony

Just returning from suspension, Anthony was not anxious to talk with me, but he seemed glad, even relieved, to be out of class. A fourteen-year-old African American male, Anthony started making poor grades in the sixth grade, and they got even worse in the seventh. He scored two IV’s on his EOG’s in the sixth grade and a III and a IV on math and reading EOG’s, respectively, in the seventh grade. It was clear to Anthony that he felt he was retained because of his poor behavior and negative attitude. He claims to have been “written up” more than fifteen times for misbehavior and missing more than twelve days of school due to suspension. School records support his admission. Anthony has a younger eleven-year-old brother, older twin brothers, and an older sister. All of the siblings live with Anthony and his parents. They all like to watch TV and videos, and play video games. Anthony is on free lunch. Although fidgety at times, Anthony settled right down with me, and we had a good interview. He demonstrated impressive, mature articulation in the group interview as well. Anthony wants to be in law enforcement when he grows up. “I want to be a policeman or CIA agent because I like helping people, and it gives me an adrenaline rush.”

One of Anthony’s teachers reported that Anthony is “indigent,” coming from a very poor home. The family has to walk everywhere or hitch a ride because they do not have a car. His father shaved Anthony’s head after receiving a negative report on Anthony from school. A teacher told me that Anthony’s father had been reported for being abusive. Another teacher

reported that the father is an alcoholic. Anthony is considered “bright” by his teachers, and will work if he “likes you” (the teacher). “He displays a lot of frustration and anger, said one teacher. “He has gotten into a lot of fights.” Anthony did not meet the criteria for promotion, according to his teachers, and thus was held back. Behavior became worse after Anthony was held back. He was referred to the district’s alternative education program.

Jeff

On last year’s report card, thirteen-year-old Jeff made two C’s, one D, and the rest F’s. The tallest male among the group, this African American young man had consistently scored III’s on end-of-grade tests since elementary school. His grades began to plummet, however, when he entered middle school. Living “out in the country,” Jeff likes school because he gets to see his friends, and “school keeps me off the streets.” He hates the rules and cannot figure out why he cannot wear white t-shirts. Like Thomas, Jeff is also interested in gangs but stated that he was “scared of gangs.” Jeff lives with his mother, father, and three sisters. Two older sisters have moved away. Jeff wants to be a professional basketball or football player. He is on free lunch.

One of Jeff’s teachers reported that Jeff is a “fun-loving guy that would rather follow than lead.” Although considered a capable student, another teacher reported that Jeff lost interest in doing his schoolwork and thus, would not do it. Jeff’s grandmother is battling cancer, and this has contributed to his academic problems. Generally, this teacher revealed that Jeff had gotten into some trouble at school, but not in her class. Jeff had problems behaving in the bathrooms and hallways. The teacher also felt that if his parents had been

more involved, Jeff would have done better. The parents would not return this teacher's phone calls or attend school conferences.

Another teacher stated that Jeff was "spoiled rotten," and that his parents let Jeff "have his way." The teacher also stated that Jeff was a "behavior problem," and, when caught, "lied" about what he had done. She said that Jeff often "spoke out in class," and that he "got out of his seat a lot." Due to poor academic performance and inappropriate behavior, Jeff was placed at the alternative learning center.

Wanda

Fifteen years old and in the seventh grade for the third time, Wanda is the tallest African American female in the group. She was on free lunch. In elementary school Wanda had been re-tested and taken out of the exceptional children's program. According to one teacher, "Wanda needs major work on her teeth." Recently returning from suspension for fighting, Wanda is actually doing better academically in school than in the past. She made all B's and one C on her last report card. For the last two years, her grades have mostly been F's. Attendance has been a problem for the past three years, however. Wanda has missed 21, 17, and 27 days respectively. In her first year in the seventh grade, Wanda scored at level II on reading and math EOG tests. She passed the reading EOG by one point last year, and she failed the math by one point. She was allowed to go to summer school but had to quit due to transportation problems. Wanda has moved several times and has attended both of the district's middle schools. She is currently being served at the alternative learning center. Wanda told me that she lived with her mother, stepfather, four sisters and two brothers. A teacher told me that Wanda lives with a single mother who never attends any conferences

with her child. This was a direct contradiction. Wanda said she wants to be a doctor or someone who “helps troubled kids.”

Wanda’s teachers claimed that she is low academically. She puts forth the effort, teachers say, but Wanda needs lots of one-on-one help, and she has a hard time understanding basic concepts. One teacher felt particularly close to Wanda and had observed her to be sad and lonely. The teacher stated, “Wanda just wants someone to care for her. When I was nice to her, Wanda’s behavior problems disappeared.” “I know there have been problems,” the teacher said. “They lack furniture and the electricity has been turned off more than once.” Another teacher added that the mother told her that Wanda stayed out late at night and came home whenever she wanted.

Frederick

Frederick was disappointed because he could not play football or basketball this year. He said he wanted to be a “professional basketball player” when he grew up, stating, “I’m good.” In this school district, retained middle school students may not participate in athletics the first semester. Frederick will be fifteen next October 2004. He is a tall, physically mature, African American male with broad shoulders and strong looking arms and legs. He seems athletic. Poor academic performance in the sixth grade led to Frederick’s exodus from the academically gifted program. Last year in the seventh grade, Frederick made mostly F’s on his report card, but he passed both EOG tests. According to his counselor, Frederick, for some reason, was taken away from his mother during sixth grade and placed with grandparents. This change coincided with his poor school performance, including negative, acting-out behaviors. He is back with his mother now and is doing well in school. Frederick

has been on the honor roll, and he says, “I like school. I like the teachers. They know how to teach you stuff.” Frederick did not participate in a focus group but joined the larger group for lunch. He knew many of the students, and he was easily accepted.

Teacher Input

This study was about seventh graders who had consistently passed state end-of-grade tests but did poorly in school and were held back to repeat the seventh grade. This study was not about teachers. In talking with teachers, however, much was gleaned about study participants, but much was also determined about the teachers who supported the study.

The intimate details about some of these students shared by teachers indicated that a close relationship had developed between the teachers and their students. Teachers knew when students’ electricity and phone were turned off. They understood why some of their students came to school hungry and abused. Some teachers reported about how they had turned abusive parents in to social services. Other teachers talked about conferencing with parents about school and home problems. Parents, in some cases, came to rely on teachers to help them raise their own children. The sensitivity of these professional educators towards their students was admirable.

Still, it was interesting to note that although problems outside the school impacted student performance, teachers still felt students should be held accountable and retained if warranted. Only one teacher felt students should never be retained for any reason. The seven remaining teachers stated that students should be retained if they did not successfully do the work as it was assigned. As stated earlier, this was a paradox.

Teachers, as reported by the students, had a tremendous impact on student performance. Conversely, I did not think teachers realized just how important their influence was to their students.

Themes

During our interactions, individually and in focus groups, several general themes emerged that were common to most, if not all, of the students. These included:

- the significance of friends
- accepting the blame for failure
- implication of end-of-grade testing
- effects on promotion and retention
- dependence on family
- strong feelings about teachers
- transition from elementary to middle school
- anticipating grade promotion
- reflection on current school situation
- changes they would like to see take place in their respective schools

These complex issues, as revealed during our interviews, indicated how, together, they affected participants' poor school performance. This supports Dryfoos' (1990) contention that, "School failure is a process rather than a single risk event" (p. 79).

Friends ... Not Just A TV Show.

Friends were significant to these students. Except for Thomas, who "didn't like anything about school," and Alonzo, who said "the girls, because they look great," almost all

of the students, when asked what they liked best about school, indicated “friends” and the opportunity to see and be with them. Most said they had lots of friends, but when asked about “close friends,” the majority said that they only had only two or three. Most friends, although now eighth graders, treated these seventh grade repeaters the same as always. Anthony stated emphatically,

I like seeing my friends. They treat me the same as always. They give me a safe feeling, and they help me enjoy life. Nicholas, my best friend, and me are close. We share everything. Good friends don't put you down, even if you fail. They look beyond school.

Seeing friends helped Jeff overcome loneliness. Jeff seemed outgoing, and in the focus group he got along well with other study participants. He listened to others in the group, and he waited until the person speaking stopped before he spoke.

I can't wait to get to school to see my friends 'cause I live way out in the country and don't get to see many people. My friends are cool 'cause they don't pick on me much for failing my grade. We get along great! Coming to school gives me something to do during the day.

Tiffany and Courtney were more reflective in their response to the question. “I like being with my friends,” Tiffany states, “because I can be myself and practice my independence. My boyfriend was in my class last year. And since I failed, everybody treats me the same. They're all cool.” Courtney responded with,

You can tell your friends anything, and they will listen to you and take up for you. I have about four really close friends and lots of associates. Most of them don't care I failed, but one asks me stupid questions about it sometimes. She teases me.

While repeating a grade separates students from "old friends" and requires making new acquaintances, Frederick made it clear that he liked school because of his teachers and not his friends. He said that he did not like staying at home with his brothers and sisters, and that was one of the main reasons he liked coming to school, to get away from them. Although he tried to downplay the importance of his friends, Frederick clearly missed his eighth grade buddies.

I don't have many friends this year. I have two really close friends. They are in the eighth grade, so I don't come (to school) because of them. My buddies hated that I failed. They said that the eighth grade would be a lot more fun if I were there. Of course, they don't treat me any different. They just don't get to talk to me much because I don't see them that much.

John and Wanda, like most of the others, said the same thing: "No one picks on me because I failed my grade." John added, "Some of my friends are mad because we're not in class together."

Sara was more pragmatic. She accepted the fact that she had to be at school so she might as well make the best of it. Sara also seemed to realize that her true friends liked her for who she was, and that they were not as concerned about her failing.

I like everything about school. I'm impressed with my teachers and their performance. I have made new friends since being back in the seventh grade. They

take you for who you are, and treat you like you have never been held back. Heck, it was my fault. They act like I never failed.

Eddie has “one or two close friends.” When asked how they treated him when they found out he was held back, Eddie said, “They treat me OK because they were held back, too! They (my friends) were mad at the teachers.” Students retained together naturally try and find a common ground that will hold them together as friends. I have seen this happen many times. They will not admit their own shortcomings to each other, but will try and find common excuses for their failure.

“It Was All My Fault.”

Reflecting on why they were retained, most of the students accepted the blame themselves. The initial reaction of most was that of anger. Some were mad at themselves, and some were mad at their teachers. Timothy typified why some of the students were retained. “I played a lot last year. Didn’t do homework. Had a bad attitude. Got ISS (in-school-suspension) a lot. When I was held back, I thought, ‘Oh there goes another year.’ I was surprised and hurt.”

At first, Eddie was confused about why he was retained. He thought he had done what he was supposed to do in order to be promoted.

My grades sucked. I was mad, mad at myself because I could have done better. At first they told me I could go to summer school. Then they told me I couldn’t go to summer school. The teacher said it would benefit me more to repeat my grade. I was really mad about that. I was doing better than some of those other students. I was upset, but I knew I had not done my best.

Sara was more thoughtful. When asked about why she failed her grade, Sara twisted in her chair, pulled her hair, and looked upward, as if in deep concentration to find the correct response to the question. Sara finally spoke,

I missed a lot of school days. Missed a lot of learning. I was not able to catch up. It happens to a lot of people. I was upset with my grades; had bad report cards. I felt that I could do nothing right. I was talking more than I was learning. I stayed out over twenty days. I didn't have to stay out so much. I was upset and surprised that I failed, but I knew it was coming. It was all my fault.

Sara blamed herself for her failure, but she also recovered by saying she was doing better in school, and that she was proud of her performance.

Alonzo mostly blamed being sent to ISS (in-school-suspension) for failing his grade. According to Alonzo, he had gotten into quite a bit of trouble last year. The result was his being placed in ISS.

I was in ISS all the time. Last year was the first time I had ever been in ISS. And I just kept going and going and going. It got to the place I was being sent for every little thing. Of course, my grades in math and social studies were not good either. I was mad because I got held back. Dang, man, I didn't think that was going to happen. I passed the EOG's. I was disappointed. I had not thought about failing. I knew I was going to the eighth grade.

John had two IV's on his EOG's. But, accordingly, he felt like he was held back because he would not do all his work. "I was mad, mad at myself 'cause I didn't do

my work,” John said. “They thought I was smart, but I wouldn’t do my work. I used to get sent to ISS a whole lot for talking, for talking back, and not working.”

Frederick reflected, “I did not buckle down and did not do homework because I didn’t want to do it. I made D’s and F’s in math. I had a bad attitude.” He went on to say, “When the teacher told me I was retained, I thought she was playing. Then I was mad, and I wanted to get away from her (the teacher).” Frederick’s conclusion was the same as Sara’s: “I guess I shouldn’t have gotten too mad. It was all my fault.”

When Courtney found out she had failed her grade she was sad and emotional. But Courtney also accepted why she failed.

I was crying. I knew I didn’t do homework, got bad grades. I got into a lot of Trouble, even suspended one time. I tried to defend myself and get people off my back. I knew I didn’t deserve to pass.

“My attitude was bad,” proclaimed Tiffany. “I did not do my work, and I bad-mouthed the teachers. That is why I failed.” Tiffany confessed, “I knew it (retention) was coming, and I felt bad because I could have done better. I should have stopped focusing on the boys.”

When Jeff first found out he was retained, he said,

I was mad at myself. I could have done better. I could have passed. I passed the EOG’s. They were easy. I played around too much. I could have picked better people to hang out with. Some of my friends hurt me (academically and behaviorally).

Thomas seemed a bit surprised that he failed his grade. Thomas blamed his “fighting,

cursing, and getting into trouble” for his being retained. “I did not feel great about flunking. I knew I won’t doing the work, but I was doing the EOG’s and passing them.” Thomas said that he had always passed the EOG’s in the past and always passed his grade.

Anthony blames his 15+ disciplinary write-ups and all of his out-of-school suspensions for failing his grade. “I got suspended a lot. But I thought all I was flunking was math. I thought I was going to pass. I was a little disappointed and surprised,” he said.

Although her grades were poor, Wanda felt she would pass the seventh grade because she had already repeated the grade once. “Bad grades.” That is the reason Wanda gave for failing the seventh grade for the second time. “I was upset because I thought I was going to pass. I didn’t believe they would hold me back again since I repeated the seventh grade before.”

This Is A Test. This Is Only A Test.

High stakes end-of-grade testing has been around in North Carolina since the mid 1990’s. Since social promotion was so prevalent during the last decade, implementing a testing program that impacted student promotion and retention was profound. Parents, teachers, students, and the general public have complained about the high level of stress accompanying these tests. This did not appear to be the case in my study, however.

These retained seventh grade students have been taking state end-of-grade tests in reading and math since the third grade. In this school district, passing EOG tests in grades 3-8 is a minimum requirement for promotion to the next grade. North Carolina only requires passing third, sixth, and eighth grade EOG tests for promotion (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2002). These students understood what the testing was all about and the

significance of passing or failing the tests. When asked what they thought of end-of-grade tests and if EOG scores should determine promotion and retention, most of the students thought the tests were easy and that the scores should be used to determine promotion and retention. This is probably because these students had a history of passing end-of-grade tests resulting in promotion. That is, until last year when they were retained for not passing regular schoolwork. Some felt that grades and behavior should also be used to determine promotion and retention, but not at the weight as EOG's. A couple of students added attendance as a determinant. This is what some of the students had to say about the EOG's:

Alonzo started,

They (EOG's) are like, OK. They are easier than going on grades and stuff to decide if you are going to pass. If you go by grades, more people are going to flunk. If you go by EOG scores, they got a better chance to get it right. I think the EOG's are easy. I can fail all year and still pass EOG's. And I think if you pass the EOG's, you ought to pass your grade, no matter what your grades are.

Jeff and Thomas shared the same sentiments: "The tests (EOG's) help you educational-wise," stated Jeff. Thomas added, "As long as you pay attention, you should pass the tests." Both agreed that the tests should be used for determining promotion and retention because the "tests are a good way to see if students are doing their work and paying attention." Jeff and Thomas also thought that grades and behavior should be used to determine if a student is promoted or not.

Tiffany thought the reading test was easy and math, hard. When asked if the tests should determine promotion Tiffany stated, “I think so because it shows your ability. It shows what you been doing all year. Grades should be used too.”

Frederick, on the other hand, thought the reading test was harder than the math, but overall, thought the EOG tests were easy, stating, “I never had any trouble passing them. The EOG’s don’t have everything you have done so you should have good grades to pass, too.”

“The EOG’s are all right, although sometimes hard,” Wanda said. “They should be used to decide if you pass or fail because they let the teachers know if you know the stuff and are ready to go on to the next grade.”

Courtney had a dissenting opinion. “I don’t like the EOG’s,” she said. “My mama don’t like them either. You have to use them to see if you pass, but I think they should just use your grades.” In the focus group, Courtney continued, “I don’t think they (EOG’s) should be at school, period, because if you make C’s and D’s, you are gonna need the EOG’s to pass. If you make F’s, that’s your own fault.”

It’s A Family Affair

After interviewing the students and teachers, I found it interesting that for the most part, the students actually got along well with their parents and families. This does not seem to fit the stereotypical model of how adolescents and their families get along. The students seemed very concerned that failing their grade disappointed their parents. The participants recognized that their parents wanted them to do well in school, and the parents continued to encourage them to do so. Teachers pointed out several instances of physical abuse by parents, but this was rare. The teachers said that only a couple of parents would not attend

parent/teacher conferences. For the most part, parents attended conferences and appeared to the teachers to be supportive. Six study participants live in a family consisting of father, mother, and siblings. The other six reported living in extended or modified families. That is, they live with one parent, or stepparent, or aunt and uncle. Most families were reported to be supportive of the retained students, surprised at the retentions, and encouraging of a productive future. When asked how families spent time together, most responded that they watched TV and played games, particularly video games. When asked who they were the closest to, being able to talk to about “anything,” most mentioned a family member. A few mentioned friends.

Frederick said that his family wants him to “make it through college since I want to be in the NBA and stuff.” Frederick went on to say that:

They (family) want me to make good grades. My uncle and grandma live with us. I have two brothers and a sister. I am close to my mom. I can talk to her about anything. She talks to me about my grades. I was AG until the sixth grade. She got married at 17, and she did not go to college. She wants me to get out of this town.

When I failed my grade, she wanted me to repeat because she said that I had not done my best.

Wanda reported that her family liked to play games like Monopoly and Uno. Going to the movies and watching TV are favorite pastimes. Wanda said she is closest to her “mama and grandma.” She also said that,

I talk with them about my problems and how I feel, about school and stuff. When I was held back, they were shocked at first. Then, Grandma said, “You can do it. Stick with it.” That was a real encouragement to me.

Timothy talked about living with his dad, mom, his two brothers and three sisters. One of his sisters lives with his “other mom.” Timothy said his family likes to go bowling and that he “usually scores close to 200.” Going on trips to visit out-of-town aunts is something they like to do together as well. “I am close to my parents,” said Timothy. “They have been through many of the same things I have questions about. Sometimes I will ask one of my friends. My parents were disappointed when I was held back. They knew I could do the work.”

When asked about his family, Thomas stated:

I live with my daddy. That’s it. My two sisters live with mama. I like living with my daddy. Sometimes he lets me drive the car on the back roads. I am closest to my daddy. We can talk about anything. He did not like it at all when I failed. He said I would be the oldest in my class.

Courtney lives with her mom, dad and two sisters. According to Courtney, the whole family likes to go to King’s Dominion every summer and to Memphis to visit to visit her mom’s family. Courtney added:

We watch a lot of TV together and during Christmas, we had a movie night. My dad works a lot to support our family. I am really close to Dad. I talk to my mom about boys and stuff. If I have problems, I talk to my older sister because she has already

gone through these problems. No one in my family picked on me when I was held back. Mom and Dad kept telling me to keep on trying. I could do it!

Tiffany lives with her dad and step mom. Her two brothers live with her mom.

Tiffany's mom, pregnant by her mom's boyfriend, is expecting a girl.

I like to spend time with my mom and stepmom. I went with Mom to the doctor last week. She is pregnant. Afterwards, she took me shopping, and we had a lot of fun. I spend every other weekend with her. I was having problems with my mom's boyfriend; I did not like him, and so I moved in with my dad last year. It was a big change moving in with Dad. A couple of months ago, my stepmom and me got into a fight. I pushed and hit her. I also punched a mirror. My teacher got me to the counselor and she called a DSS (department of social services) social worker. Things are going okay now. No arguments. My dad and I get along good. I am a daddy's girl. I feel close to my mother, my boyfriend, and my cousin Cindy. My boyfriend is sweet and funny. He listens to me and helps me. Sometimes we argue because I like Eminem (rap singer) and he doesn't. When I failed my grade, my little brother was upset the most because he wanted me to be a lawyer. He wants to be a doctor. He told me I was supposed to do better than him 'cause I was older.

Study participants relied heavily on their families for support and encouragement.

This is not typical for adolescent youngsters. Further study about adolescents and their families might be beneficial to gain a better understanding regarding this phenomenon.

Teachers: The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly

Participants had poignant statements with regard to teachers. They had no difficulty naming and describing “favorite” and “least favorite” teachers. Students were asked how teachers “showed they cared” about them. They were asked what their least-favorite teachers could do differently to be better. Students were asked if teachers treated them differently since repeating their grade. Participants were also asked if they thought teachers treated students differently based on race (“skin color”) or gender (“sex”), or socio-economic status (“how dressed or rich or poor”).

Tiffany proclaimed Mr. Williams to be, “my favorite teacher.”

He talked with me about my problems. He asked me how things were at home and gave me individual help when I needed it. Mr. Williams made science fun. I hated Mrs. Walton. She got on my case too much, got an attitude too fast. I would get an attitude too, and get myself in trouble. If they would just spend more time helping me with the subjects I am not good at. Like, I couldn’t stand Ms. Agner last year either, but this year she helps me after class and after school. She explains things better. She’s been nice. I am on the same team as last year. At the beginning of the year, all my teachers treated me the same (as last year). Now they treat me better. I do think teachers treat some kids differently, mostly by the way they dress and their race and the way they act. The biggest difference is the way they act.

Sara named Mr. Williams along with Ms. Jacobs and Ms. Phillips as her favorite teachers.

They break things down for you so you can understand it. They helped me out with my problems; they understand me. If I have a question, they come over and help me individually and take extra time with me. I didn't like any of my teachers last year. I had a bad attitude. I needed more encouragement. Ms. Walton was at her computer quite a lot. And she lost her place a lot. Ms. Walton was mean to a lot of kids last year too. I thought she was harder on black kids and that wasn't fair. This year I am on a different team and I have excellent teachers. They treat me like everyone else. I am really going to miss Mr. Williams. Students are not treated any different here because of race, money, or sex. My teachers do seem to be more aggressive towards students that do not work.

“Tolerant and nice.” That’s how Anthony described his favorite teacher, Ms. Jacobs. “She wouldn’t send me to ISS so fast when I messed up.” Anthony went on to reflect about other, “favorite” teachers:

If you make a bad grade, they will let you re-do the work after school. They tell you that they care about you, and tell you that you’re smart. They help you with your work, and they work with you one-on-one. This year, my teachers really don’t treat me different. They know my behavior problems and how I react, so they know how to treat me. I could not stand Mrs. Walton last year. She liked to yell a lot, and she would write you up real quick. She just needed to be calmer and work with me one-on-one. To be a better teacher, she needed to help more. None of my teachers were prejudiced. They treated you different if you got into a lot of trouble. They treated

you based on your attitude. I got along with Mr. Williams real well. Ms. Agner liked to see me succeed even though her class was one I was flunking.

Frederick described his favorite teacher, Mrs. Thompson, as someone “I can tell things that is happening to me. If I am having a bad day, she will help me through it.” He added, “Good teachers show that they worry about you and tell you why they worry about you. They let you know when your grades are falling.” Frederick hated Ms. Fine.

She yelled at me and got up in my face. She stayed on my case, made smart remarks, and she was loud all the time. She was old. If she would cut the smart comments and help me, she would be a better teacher. She didn't know I came up in a bad background. My teachers this year take up more time with me because they want me to pass. They say I'll have a good future. I don't see racial stuff from teachers. It has to do with your work. They want you to work hard. If you don't, they don't have much to do with you. It does seem that they help the project kids more.

Eddie liked Mr. Unk. “He makes learning easier than other teachers. When I got into trouble, he would help me out. He kept me from getting into fights. Sometimes he would give me candy.” Eddie described Mrs. Walton, his least favorite teacher, as “making learning hard. The work is hard ... terrible!” He added:

Mrs. Walton will give you a study guide and not go over it until the day before the test. That ain't enough time. She won't answer your questions. I mean, your mama don't understand it, your brother don't understand it, and you go ask her (Walton) a question, she won't answer you! I don't like Ms. Agner either. She needs to talk, explain stuff more, rather than just writing it on the overhead. She makes the work so

hard; you don't understand. This year, my teachers treat me like everybody else. They treat kids different when they (kids) suck up to them. Now, I am not the kind of kid to suck up to anybody, but I would depending on who the teacher is. Most of the teachers like it when a kid sucks up to them. If the teacher likes the kid, they will treat him differently. If they don't like them, they will not treat them right. I don't see teachers treating kids different because of race. Girls, they got it made. I guess it is because they suck up better than boys do.

"Ms. Jacobs helped me through troubles when other people picked on me," exclaimed Courtney. "She would ask me about my problems or if I'm having a good day. Mr. Williams helped me with my self-esteem and attitude. He was a fun teacher." Courtney had strong feelings about her least favorite teacher, Mrs. Walton:

She did not treat me right. She only took care of the A/B students. And she was strict and wouldn't tell me the notes. Mrs. Walton needed to help me with my problems instead of ignoring me. Kept telling me to get my notes from someone else. She didn't want to give them to me. The teachers I have this year love me, and they give me lots of encouragement. Students that make bad grades aren't treated right. The men teachers treat girls with more respect because they know what the girls go through in school. Boys don't really want to be in school, so teachers push them harder.

In the focus group, Alonzo talked about how "cool" Mr. Unk was and how he punished the guys by making them lean against the wall with their legs in a bent position. It was also in the group that Alonzo talked about how Ms. Walton would "pick her nose," and "pull wedgies." The rest of the group enjoyed laughing at Alonzo's comments.

Jeff, while in the focus group, talked about how his teachers were harder on him this year. He said that his counselor told him he shouldn't be with the same team again. Jeff talked about how the teachers would make comments about his staying back. They would say things like, "You should know this. You had it last year." Or they might say something like, "Oh, you don't have your homework. That is just like last year."

One thing to note here, Ms. Walton, the least favorite teacher, refused to be interviewed.

Becoming One Of The Big Dogs!

Although I was told this school system tried to do some things to ease the transition from elementary to middle school, these students all remembered how they felt when they came to the middle school from the elementary school. It was "scary" for most but a change that was exciting and welcomed. After being at the middle school for a short time, the students realized that it was "no big deal" coming "into the Big House!" All of the students agreed that coming to the middle school did not hurt them academically. Interestingly, school records indicated something totally different. Almost all of the students' grades fell when they entered the middle school.

Alonzo was afraid he would never see any of his friends again. He would have to get used to new classes and new friends. Luckily, his best friend was in all of his classes when Alonzo started sixth grade. In the group, Alonzo said he felt he would "meet some fine girls now!"

Sara had been in a brand new elementary school, and she was not ready to leave it for the middle school.

I really enjoyed my new elementary school. I did not want to leave. All my friends were coming so I felt pretty good about it. I was not scared. I felt comfortable, really. When I got here, my best friend was in my sixth grade classes with me. That was nice. I have a different best friend now.

With eyes wide with excitement, Courtney made it clear she had been afraid to come to the middle school. "I was scared, being shorter than everybody else. Middle school is bigger and you have more responsibilities. You have to take up for yourself. It took over half the year before I really felt comfortable being here."

Thomas, on the other hand, couldn't wait to get to the middle school. "I felt I would be one of the big dogs," he said. "I was going to have to find new people to hang out with. I was not nervous at all. Besides, my sister was already there."

Tiffany was always on the A/B honor roll in elementary school. "I was always the teacher's pet," she said.

I was excited about the middle school because my cousins had told me wonderful things about the school and that I wouldn't get lost. I couldn't wait to be in the band. I was afraid of all those other kids, though, and I was afraid I would not be in class with some of my friends.

Eddie felt nervous coming to the middle school. "I liked elementary school. There I was top dog. I had to make new friends and learn new teachers coming to the middle school."

John was "all right" coming to the middle school. "I was happy," he said, "because I was going to a new school. My elementary school was OK, but I already knew most of the kids here."

“The other kids would be bigger than me and would order me around,” exclaimed Wanda. “I was nervous because I thought middle school would be hard. I was wrong,” she said. “It simply did not happen that way. I love it here! I have so much more freedom than when I was in elementary school!”

Frederick thought he would “be a bigger person and learn new stuff and meet a whole lot of new people.” He added, “I thought people would look up to me because I used to tutor in elementary school. I was afraid of gangs and stuff, but then I didn’t see any.”

The Future Is Now!

When asked, all participants felt they would be promoted this year, and they could articulate why.

Sara emphasized that she was paying attention and trying my best to complete assignments. My grades are good and I made the honor roll. (Focus group applauded when Sara reported this.) Everything that has to do with my life has changed. My self-esteem is high, and I am very confident. I am looking forward to going to the eighth grade next year and then on to high school to get my diploma.

Alonzo pointed to his grades and behavior as reasons for his inevitable promotion. My grades are better. I have not been in ISS at all this year. Last year, I was in ISS almost twice a week. I know you have to make passing grades and pass the EOG’s. I have not made any F’s this year.

“I have a better attitude this year,” proclaimed Courtney. “I was struggling, and there

was a lot going on with my family. My grandfather and great-grandmother died. My mom and dad were going through a lot of stress.” Courtney went on to say, “My teachers are helping me a lot this year. I have great self-esteem, and my grades are much better.”

Tiffany was a little more guarded in her response. “I hope I pass this year,” she said. “My grades are definitely better. I still don’t like social studies and math, but I don’t have any F’s. My attitude is a lot better.”

John said he was going to pass because, “I am doing my work and making passing grades. Social studies is still hard, but we are using a different book, and so I am doing better.”

“My grades are a whole lot better, a whole lot better,” Eddie reported. “I am doing my work and studying more. I am trying harder than I did last year. There were things last year I just didn’t do.”

Timothy said he was going to pass because he “had more confidence than last year. People treat me better, and I am trying to act better.”

Anthony was more specific. “ There is stuff I am learning that will definitely help me on the EOG’s and help me pass my grade. After school tutoring is a big help too.”

Wanda is repeating her grade for the second time. When asked why she thought she would pass, she first said, “I think I will pass, because I don’t believe they will hold me back again.” When pressed, however, Wanda stated, “Because I have a better attitude and my grades are better, I think I will pass. I have had the stuff so many times, I ought to know it by now!”

“Teachers help me out more than they did last year,” Frederick said. “The work is easier, I ask more questions, and I am doing my best. I am not doing as well on projects, but I have made no F’s. I have made one D.”

It was interesting to hear what students had to say when asked what they wanted to be when they grew up. My experience with students comparable to the study participants is that it would be hard for them to finish high school, but they could do it with effort. Going on to college, though not out of the question, would be difficult for these students. Two participants said they wanted to be veterinarians although they were weak science students. Several want to be professional athletes even though current grades keep them from participating on school teams. These unrealistic expectations are not unusual for middle school students, but may contribute to at-risk students eventually dropping out of school.

Listen Up!

All participants were asked what they would tell someone who was in a situation similar to the one they were in last year. They were also asked what they would say to a new friend just arriving at their school. Most of these responses were offered during focus groups.

Alonzo was clear, “Listen up, I would say, grades do count! Worry about your grades. Passing the EOG’s is not good enough. ISS ain’t good and you need to stay out of there. School is hard.”

“You need to enjoy the seventh grade and go on to the eighth grade with your friends,” said Sara. “That means you have to work hard. Our team and our teachers are the best! You should look forward to a good rest of the year.”

“Courtney admonishes friends to “Keep on trying. Don’t listen to what other people say about you. If they talk about you, tell your teacher, your parents, or the Board of Education!” She added, “This school is a public school, and the teachers are very nice. The students are very nice. If you are having trouble, you can go to the counselor. They will listen to you.”

Tiffany in her gregarious way said that she tells other students, “Don’t end up like I did.” Tiffany goes on to say,

I tell kids all the time, you don’t want to fail and wonder what your friends are doing. Don’t worry about your boyfriends or girlfriends or how you look or dress. Education is like money. The more you get, the better you will get. Focus on your work. You need the stuff teachers give you. I tell the new kids that this is a good school, but they better watch the teachers, ‘cause they will get on your back.

John was more pessimistic.

If you keep messing around, you will be held back. Teachers don’t care if you fail. Do the work or else. My teachers said I would fail if I didn’t do the work. I didn’t believe them. I have not said this to anybody myself because I don’t care if they (students) fail. It really didn’t bother me that other students didn’t care that I failed. I would tell new people that the food is lousy and that some of the teachers are good.

Eddie admitted advising others. He stated, “I told other kids that they better do it (the work)! It is no fun being held back. Eighth grade has got to be better than seventh. Too bad they just tune me out.”

“Try to do your best,” Timothy would admonish. “Don’t talk back to your teachers. If you show them respect, they will show you respect. I haven’t told anybody this myself. Some people have a short temper.” Timothy adds, “I would tell a new kid that this is a good school with nice teachers. If you give respect, you will get respect. But you have to give respect first.”

Thomas was more vindictive. “I get a kick out of seeing others get into trouble, because they like seeing me get in trouble.”

Jeff says he has some cousins that have been “messing up,” and he tries to help them by telling them to “straighten up.”

“Keep doing it (the work),” Wanda would tell friends who are having trouble, “If you can do it this year, you can pass and go on.” She adds, “This is a nice school, and you will do fine if you get into some small classes.”

Frederick states it plainly. “Acting stupid ain’t worth it, because you ain’t going to get nowhere in life doing crazy stuff. You will make the same decisions in life you make in school.” He concludes, “I would tell a new kid that it is easy to get along with teachers and other kids in this school if you get to know them.”

If I Could Change The World

Students were given the opportunity to submit any changes they would like to make in their school if they could.

Sara began,

Discipline ... it would be nice if students did not pick on other students. I try to ignore them (bullies) myself. I wish all students could stay in class and not go to ISS where their work is sent to them.

Courtney was more into aesthetics, "I would change the way the school looks," Courtney said. "The bathrooms are terrible. We need bigger classrooms." She also wants to see the dress code strictly enforced. "There should be no hats or doo rags. No shorts or little koochie stuff, even in PE, would be allowed. If boys wore baggy pants, I would tie them with a string so they couldn't walk."

Tiffany wants smaller classes. "I would like to see classes limited to 10-12 kids per class. Then teachers would have more time with kids for more individualized attention."

"Change some of the teachers," says John. "Some of the teachers don't really try to help you do your work. They just want to send you out and get a pay check"

Eddie had a similar response. "I would change some of the teachers," he said. "Tell them what they are doing wrong, and that they can do better. I wouldn't fire any of them, but would give them a chance."

Timothy wants to do something with math. "Switch some of the courses around. Watch more movies after lunch. Make math easier. I don't want to throw it (math) out, good gracious, but make it easier!"

"Change the rules, because we got too many," states Thomas. "Some rules we ought to have like rules about gangs. If you are not in a gang, though, you should be able to wear what you want. I think we ought to have ashtrays in restrooms."

Anthony said he wouldn't change anything unless it was "to find better teachers."

Wanda wants to “change some student attitudes.” She goes on, “We need to stop the bullies, and keep kids from picking on others.”

Summary

Analyzing the themes that emerged from these interviews indicate that the participants share common feelings about themselves, friends, their families, and school. From these common feelings, emerge perceptions leading to some of the reasons these students failed in school.

Several study participants mentioned their own low self-esteem and how they felt about themselves. They also talked about how teachers contributed to their high or low self-esteem. Young adolescents have many issues to deal with while maneuvering through this time of change in their lives. Caissy (1994) asserts,

Coping with constant change and struggling with identity formation, early adolescents are insecure and vulnerable. Thus, it is difficult for them to develop a good self-concept and positive self-esteem. For this reason, self-concept and self-esteem are at their worst during early adolescence, particularly between ages 12 and 15 (p.42).

I have observed that youngsters having difficulty coping with changes in their appearance, changes in academic performance, and changes in peer and family relationships, have difficulty establishing and maintaining a positive self-concept. Low self-esteem developed over the years and manifesting itself during early adolescence could have been a contributing factor to these students failing their grade.

Friends could also be a contributing factor when analyzing why these students had to repeat their grade. Relationships are critically important to adolescents. Caissy (1994) says, “friendships and peer interaction become more important than anything in their lives,” (p. 76). These students will usually seek out and fraternize with other young people just like themselves (Eccles & Wigfield, 1997). The authors go on to say that students, who do not perform well in school and/or misbehave in school, tend to migrate toward other students that are not successful (p. 20). In other words, friends can help you or hurt you.

Family conflicts, though barely mentioned while interviewing these study participants, are known to exist (Caissy, 1994). Teacher interviews revealed that several student participants gave false information about the relationships they had with their families. They were either embarrassed or ashamed of the family relationships, or, perhaps, they did not know how to communicate what was going on at home. Either way, what was discovered were several cases of dysfunctional families, families that, for whatever reason, did not live harmoniously together. Social services, law enforcement, and possibly other public agencies were involved with most of these families. Early adolescents want to look good and thus impress their selected peer group (Caissy, 1994, p.82). If the family cannot afford the name brand items the children want, more conflicts can arise. With so many study participants on free and reduced lunch (75%), low socio-economic status could be another factor contributing to grade retention.

The school and what goes on there could be the single most significant factor when trying to determine why these students failed their grade. Indeed, the school is the only avenue educators have if they want to have a positive impact on the life of an adolescent.

Jackson and Davis (2000) state, “One overarching goal, ensuring success for every student, drives the Turning Points model of adolescent education. This goal is the central focus of every effort to improve schools for young adolescents” (p. 23). I believe students would not be failing in school if the above goal, “ensuring success for every student,” were being accomplished.

In chapter five, I will discuss the implications of this study.

Chapter Five Implications and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine and discover why middle school students who consistently pass state-mandated end-of-grade tests do poorly in school and are, consequently, retained. There were twelve retained seventh grade students in the study, and while they may not be representative of all retained middle school students, their descriptions and explanations may help to provide an understanding of students in similar situations. All twelve students were able to pass state tests. For some reason, however, they performed poorly in school, did not meet local promotion standards, and were thus held back to repeat the seventh grade. One participant was repeating the seventh grade for the third time. Much has been researched and written about young adolescents. I have included some of this information in chapter two. Important to this study, however, is the effort taken to listen to the voices of the students themselves.

My first research question was, “What factors in the school environment have had an impact on the students’ performance?” (p.7). Other research questions asked about what study participants had to say about their family, peers, and teachers. I also wanted to listen to retained students to hear what they had to say about other outside influences. If we could find out what caused these students to fail, then perhaps strategies could be devised to help students in similar situations to succeed.

Analysis of data from written records, teachers, and the students themselves, revealed themes from which my conclusions and recommendations were derived. For clarity and

organization, implications are ordered by the themes I discovered. There is no level of importance implied by the order in which the implications are listed.

Relationships

“What factors in the school environment have had an impact on the students’ performance?” (p.7). More specifically, I wanted to know about the importance of peer relationships, teacher/pupil relationships, and influence of the family on student success. Developing and maintaining positive peer relationships were important to these students. Jeff stated that he could not wait to get to school to see his friends. Tiffany liked being with her friends “because she could be herself and practice her independence.” “You can tell your friends anything, and they will listen to you and take up for you,” Courtney said. While many participants stated they had lots of friends, most said they only had one or two close friends.

My years of experience have taught me that when peer relationships are not going well, learning stops or it is certainly impeded. I have also learned that conflicts arise between students because they simply do not know one another. Schools must recognize the importance of friendships to the social development and educational success of students. The school should be organized to enhance the development of a positive learning environment (Burke, 1997; Cooney & Bottoms, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d; Unrath, Robertson & Valentine, 1999). Groups of students and teachers organized into teams, with each child having an adult advisor, are critical components of an effective middle school and the social development of adolescents (Alexander & George, 1981; Farmer & Harrison, 2003; Lounsbury, 1980, 1991, 1995).

It should not be assumed that students will develop positive relationships on their own. Students must be taught the proper way to introduce themselves and how to carry on a conversation with other students they may not know. To do this in a responsible manner recognizes the importance of character education development. For example: During advisory time, why not go over proper etiquette techniques and practice them in class? Assign seats in the cafeteria at lunch and rotate weekly until the entire group has met each other. Have the class develop a set of questions to ask one another. Practice beforehand how one might respond. Let the students arrange the seating. This would be a good math lesson. After all of the students have had an opportunity to meet all of their classmates, they should be allowed to sit where they like. As a culminating activity, the team could go to a nice local restaurant and practice the good manners they have learned.

In physical education students should be taught the social benefits of learning to dance properly. For example, I believe all North Carolina students should learn how to “shag.” A popular North Carolina dance performed using what is called “beach music,” this would be a great opportunity to bring in community members to help teach students the proper way of performing this dance. These are only two examples of how students can develop closer, more diverse, and long-lasting friendships.

Success in School

Almost all of the students blamed themselves for failing their grade. Some were angry. Eddie said that his grades “sucked,” and that he was “mad because he could have done better.” Others said they should have done homework, and did not study as much as they could have. Some added that poor attendance, bad attitudes, and bad behavior contributed to

their failure in school. Surprisingly, students made few excuses for failing their grade.

Adolescents tend to blame others for anything bad that happens to them. This egocentrism causes adolescents to think themselves incapable of making these kinds of cognitive mistakes (Piaget, 1963). Still, these students accepted the blame for failure.

There are many ways to help students succeed in school. Robert Lynn Canady, Professor Emeritus, University of Virginia, (Lecture notes, February 25, 2004) gives seven factors related to improving student achievement.

1. Balance the workload of students; pay special attention to homework requirements and independent work expected.
2. Balance the workload of teachers.
3. Provide extended learning time; institutionalize this practice; do not just assume individual teachers will do it!
4. Provide time in the master schedule for tutorials; for some students this assistance must be provided by the teachers responsible for the initial instruction.
5. Create a small group, cared-about learning environment; this practice is essential for the most alienated students in our schools!
6. Alter policies and grading practices that focus on “sorting and selecting” vs. teaching and learning.
7. Increase the amount of time students are actively engaged in their learning.

Setting high expectations and building a system of extra help and time (Cooney & Bottoms, 2003d) facilitates all learners. Because students learn in different ways and at different rates, students need enough time and support to master the curriculum. Promoting a

clear academic focus with quality instruction and support for teaching and learning further support this notion (Trimble, 2004). Building in time during the regular school day to provide tutorial assistance is essential for students needing extra help (Canady, Lecture notes, February 25, 2004). After school help may also be necessary, and schools should figure out ways to provide transportation for students needing it. School grading practices need close evaluation. "Schools and teachers cannot prevent all failure," says Canady (Lecture notes, February 25, 2004). "But," he continues,

repeated failure often makes human beings give up; yet, some teachers will defend their practices of repeatedly failing students with the belief that they are making students more responsible and preparing them for the work force once they leave school. There is little evidence that repeated failure will make people more responsible.

These students have been taking end-of-grade tests since the third grade. Most study participants said the tests were easy and that the scores should be used for promotion and retention decisions. Feelings were mixed about including classroom grades in these decisions.

There is too much emphasis on testing and grades. Testing and grades are often used as clubs to drive students to study and learn, threatening retention for poor test performance and low grades. Using on-going authentic assessment will help teachers better determine if students have mastered the curriculum and should provide information to interested parties to help plan for further learning (Farmer & Harrison, 2003). Further, alternatives to retention should be found and implemented. Repeating a whole school year

assumes the entire year was wasted and merits doing over again. Retention does not work, and it encourages students to drop out (Bulla, 2002). After school, Saturday school, alternative school, and summer school have not been fully utilized to maximize their full potential for helping students who are behind and in need of extra help and encouragement. Sara, for example, said that her favorite teachers “broke things down so you can understand it. They helped me out with my problems; they understand me.” Mastery and success should be the focus for raising the level of student achievement.

As students become more successful, self-esteem will grow, and they should continue to become more motivated to do well in school. Almost all of the students said they were doing better in school and that they would pass their grade. Although repeating their grade, most felt good about the year they were having.

Home – School Partnerships

One of my research questions asks, “How has the student’s family influenced academic achievement?” (p.7). Students whose parents are actively involved in their education do better in school than those students whose parents are not as involved (Caissy, 1994; Cooney & Bottoms, 2003b, 2003d); Farmer & Harrison, 2003). Unfortunately, as students leave the elementary school for the middle school, their parents become more and more disengaged from their children’s education. The adolescent, attempting to break away from his parents and develop his own independence, migrates more towards peers and their influence (Caissy, 2003; Eccles & Wigfield, 1997). My experience has been that as adolescents enter puberty, the relationship with parents becomes more unstable and volatile.

For the most part, study participants said that their family was supportive, though disappointed at their failing their grade. Unfortunately, relationships like the one Tiffany has with her mother's boyfriend may be all too typical. They just did not get along.

Schools have a responsibility to help parents remain actively involved with their children during these critical years. Every middle school would benefit by having a full-time nurse and social worker. Middle school students have many concerns about their own physical development and the needs that accompany the rapid physical changes young adolescents experience. It is important for students and their parents to receive accurate information regarding medical concerns that accompany these rapid changes. Further, information regarding sexual issues, although covered in health classes, may not be as thorough as the student needs. I have found the medical professional's input was more respected and trusted than the often times false information derived from peers.

A school social worker or a home-school liaison is needed to help bridge the school to the home. My experience has been that there are times when parents just don't know what to do with their young adolescent children. They don't understand the changes the youngsters are going through and, therefore, they do not know how to cope. From my experience parents do not want the school to know how much they do not know, so they avoid the school altogether unless it is to defend the actions of their child. No one wants their ignorance pointed out to them, particularly a child's parent. A liaison working with the family can establish a working relationship with them and help them help their child. If the parents can be convinced that the school is genuinely trying to help their child, perhaps they would be more willing to work with the school. Providing safe and meaningful opportunities for

parents to come to the school to participate in parenting workshops would help strengthen the home - school relationship.

It is also important to enlist the assistance of every available resource the community has to offer in order to promote the middle school in a positive way. Guest speakers, proctors for testing, and volunteers in the school and on field trips, and as coaches on athletic teams, strengthen the school – community relationship and, consequently, the home – school relationship as well.

Schools cannot afford to be isolationist institutions. With “No Child Left Behind,” it is incumbent upon schools to develop and maintain positive relationships with the home and community. The schools need parent support but most of all, the children need the understanding and support of their parents.

Teachers

I wanted to find out if “the relationship between the student and the teacher were paramount in determining school success or failure” (p.7). As in my pilot study, this study showed that teachers had a significant impact on the learning success of young adolescents. First of all, what I have discovered over the years and my study bore this out is that if the students like the teacher they will work harder than if they don’t like the teacher. Secondly, if the students think the teacher does not like them, they will not work as hard and will blame every deficiency and every problem on the teacher. What the student perceives in this case is what is real. Mrs. Walton, the least favorite teacher, was accused of being unfair, too hard, uncaring, and unconcerned about the students. She must have sensed something was not quite right, since she refused to be interviewed.

The students seemed to respond more positively to teachers who were able to demonstrate that they cared and were concerned about them. And when this care and concern extended into the student's personal life the results seemed even more profound. For example, Tiffany said that Mr. Williams was her favorite teacher because he "talked with her about her problems. He asked how things were at home." Frederick stated that his favorite teacher, Mrs. Thompson, would help him if he were having a bad day. "Good teachers show that they worry about you and tell you why they worry about you," Frederick said. All these elements contribute to the making of an effective middle school teacher and advisor. A good middle school advisor is one who demonstrates proficiency in the classroom while understanding the need for being a significant adult role model in the life of a young adolescent.

Supplying highly qualified teachers in the middle grades cannot be left to chance. They need to be screened carefully, supported and mentored fully, and provided with quality, on-going professional development (Cooney & Bottoms, 2003a, 2003d; Farmer & Harrison, 2003). I agree with Farmer & Harrison (2003) when they state that

Middle school professional development should focus on young adolescents, middle schools and best practices for all teachers who hold or are seeking lateral entry or add-on licenses at the middle level within the first year of teaching at the middle level (p. 18).

Further, I would like to see as part of a middle school teacher's license renewal requirement, at least three continuing education units directly related to the skills listed above. Certainly, teachers need to be highly qualified in their subject area, but they must also

be proficient in how to deliver that subject to young adolescents. Teachers need to be students of adolescent behavior as well as students of the subject or subjects they teach. All middle level professional development should be conducted in the context of the young adolescent learner. Also, it would be beneficial to see local cohorts of teachers seeking master's degrees in middle level education. The state and local school districts could encourage this endeavor by helping offset the cost. Cooperation between local colleges, universities, technical colleges, and local school systems would strengthen this effort.

Finally, in order to attract and retain the best middle level teachers, more money should be offered and working conditions must improve. Having worked with elementary, middle, and high school students, parents, and teachers, I believe working at the middle school level is the most challenging and difficult. The demands made on middle level educators are huge, and they should be remunerated accordingly. With the current teacher shortage in all areas, the shortage of middle school teachers is most profound. Since most middle level teachers are initially trained and licensed in areas other than middle school, turnover is the highest at this level (Cooney & Bottoms, 2003a).

More research studying the relationship between middle school teachers and middle school students would be beneficial to all middle level practitioners.

Transitions

My final research question asked about the impact of outside influences on student achievement (p.7). The literature along with my own experience, point to the transition from elementary to middle school as having an impact on student achievement. When reflecting about coming to the middle school from elementary school, the students in this study,

however, had only vague memories of what it was like. If moving to the middle school from the elementary school had adverse effects, these students were not aware of it or they had forgotten. All participants seemed comfortable at the middle school, and all seemed to be looking forward to going on to the high school. While Courtney said she was “scared,” most students like Thomas, “could not wait to get to the middle school.” Research reveals a decline in academic achievement when students transition to the middle school (Cooney & Bottoms, 2003b; Mizell & Mullins, 1997), and school records indicated the same for study participants. Middle schools need to work with elementary schools in order to better prepare students for transition.

Principals, counselors, and even teachers from the middle school should take the time to get to know and be known by the elementary students coming to their school. Regular visits and scheduled meetings with students, parents, and teachers would help to ease the transition to the middle school.

Opportunities for elementary students and their parents to visit the middle school should also be provided. In the spring of each year I would like to see individual students from the elementary school shadow a middle school student for part of a day to get an idea of what attending middle school is all about (Mizelle & Mullins, 1997). When the sixth grader starts school in the fall, the person they shadowed the spring before could become that student’s surrogate big brother or sister. This built-in support system would provide a student advocate for the neophyte middle school student. Visits to local elementary schools or neighborhood churches would be a good way to provide information to parents and the

community about what to expect at the middle school. Student presenters would add to the credibility of these open meetings.

After the first nine weeks, students and parents would be surveyed to solicit feedback about how the transition had gone. Adjustments could be implemented for the next time.

Ensuring Success

Although study participants felt they would be promoted, several of their teachers were not so sure. Sara had made the honor roll. One of John's teachers said he was actually doing worse this year than last. Grades this school year indicate that these students have been doing better, but according to teachers; this may not be good enough to ensure promotion.

Teachers and schools need to be doing more to help students be successful. Teachers will need to find ways to help encourage and motivate these students to do the work necessary for promotion. Support from an advisor and team of teachers would help foster student success. As stated earlier, workloads must be balanced and grading practices examined (Canady, Lecture notes, February 25, 2004).

Two other "outside influences" (p. 7) impacting student performance may be the curriculum students are expected to learn and how that accumulation of knowledge is assessed.

The middle school curriculum should be "challenging," "integrative" and "exploratory" (Lounsbury, 1995, pp.20-24). Students exposed to a fully integrative curriculum will do better in school (Vars, 1997). Pedagogical strategies proven to be effective with middle school students need to be utilized. Cooney & Bottoms (2003d) point out that, "Middle grades students need varied learning activities that link to challenging

academic content and provide opportunities to use new skills and concepts in real-world applications” (p. 19). The authors add that technology should be fully utilized as well.

Authentic assessment should be implemented to accurately measure the students’ mastery of the curriculum (Cooney & Bottoms, 2003d; Farmer & Harrison, 2003). One strategy I believe would be valuable is the utilization of student-led conferences. This is where the traditional parent-teacher conference is replaced with the student sitting down with their parents and the teacher and explaining the work they have done and the reasons for the grades earned. This student presentation would make the students more aware and more accountable for what they have been doing.

When the curriculum is relevant to the learner, highly integrative and presented using a variety of innovative pedagogical methods with full use of technology, students will be more engaged in their own learning and thus more successful.

Mentoring

Important peer relationships may support student success through student mentoring. Students in my study believed they could help other students in similar, at-risk situations. Alonzo said that he would tell students to, “Listen up, grades do count! Passing the EOG’s is not good enough.” Courtney said that she would tell students to, “keep on trying. Don’t listen to what other people say about you.” Students given the opportunity to mentor and encourage other students could be an effective strategy for strengthening the self-concept of the mentor as well as the mentee. Most of the participants in my study did not want to fail, and they did not want other students to fail either. Peer tutoring, when effectively implemented, could have a positive impact on student achievement. Timothy would tell other students to, “Try to

do your best. If you give respect, you will get respect. But you have to give respect first.”

This should be more meaningful coming from a peer rather than an adult.

Student Input

Another outside influence having an impact on student achievement could be the extent students are allowed to participate in the governing of the school. Study participants had definite ideas about what they would like to see changed in their school. Some were concerned about how the school looked; others were concerned about class size and what was taught; some were vocal about replacing their teachers with new ones.

Courtney wanted nicer bathrooms, and Tiffany, smaller classes. John and Eddie wanted to change some of the teachers, and Thomas wanted to see some of the rules changed. Wanda wanted see some student attitudes changed, and she wanted something done about the bullying going on in school.

I have realized that students, when given the opportunity, have valuable input to share about what goes in their school. I believe that students engage in vandalism and, generally speaking, class and school disruptions, because they have no vested interest in the school. Students need to be given an opportunity to be involved in school governance. They should be included in helping devise school and classroom rules and consequences (Bennett, 1997).

My Model School

Reflecting on my study combined with my 25 years in public education, 23 at the middle school, I have devised my own model middle school. I would not consider this school to be ideal, by any means, but I do believe it would be a school that would help all of the students achieve and be successful.

Great Teachers

First of all, my school would have great middle school teachers, teachers that understand young adolescents and love them anyway. If I could handpick my own teachers I would prefer teachers who are certified in grades 6 – 8 and able to teach at least two subjects. Being Nationally Board certified is fine, but I prefer that they have a master's degree in middle level education and/or a specific subject area. If they do not have a master's degree, I would like to work with a local university and start a cohort at my school, free of charge to the teachers, and help them acquire their master's degree. As experts in middle level pedagogy, teachers would be involved in on-going professional development with the characteristics of young adolescents being an integral subject of study.

School Organization

I heard Dr. Ken McKewin, a professor at Appalachian State University say years ago (Lecture notes, 1987) “the kind of middle school you have will depend on how it is organized.” Organization is what would make my middle school unique. Ideally, I would like to divide my school into separate “houses” with the same number of students in each house. Smaller teams of two, three, or four teachers would be formed. A multi-age, heterogeneous grouping (Hough, 1997; McLaughlin & Doda, 1997; Unrath, Robertson, & Valentine, 1999) structure that incorporates “looping” (Daniel, 1997, p.1; Salvetti, 1996, p. 1) would be imbedded in my school. In other words, students in each house would be from all three grades, and they would remain with the same teachers the whole time they were in this school. Using the state curriculum and a core set of goals and values would have been developed by the school community to help determine what every child should be able to

know and do before going on to the high school. Once these goals have been determined, each child along with his parent and advisor would devise a course of action to help the child meet these goals.

Regular authentic assessment would measure success. Student-led conferences with the teacher and parents would be held on a regular basis to communicate how the student was doing in meeting his or her goals. Students would move among the house as prescribed and scheduled by the teachers. At any one time, students from age 10 or 11 to age 14 or 15 could be together.

The socialization of the house would be incredibly important. As fifth graders, these students would have spent at least a day with a house “buddy” going to their classes, lunch and breaks, and hearing all about the middle school. The buddy would have already been trained on how to do this in a positive way, displaying sensitivity to the student getting ready to go through transition from elementary to middle school. Time would have been set aside to get to know all of the house teachers since they could have all of them while in this school. Once in the house, the student would become a full family member, keeping the same buddy until that buddy moved on.

Each student would be assigned to an already existing advisory group. The advisory would be a small group of 12-15 students with a caring and concerned staff advisor. Conventionally, 4-5 students would be from each grade. For example, incoming sixth graders would have a seventh grade buddy. The seventh grade buddy would have an eighth grade mentor. The advisor would be working with the student and his parents to develop and maintain their educational plan while in the school. On-going communication between the

parent, student, and advisor would be the norm. In advisory, students would learn how to be successful in school. Advisory would meet daily and would be the main vehicle for helping students develop socially and prepare and organize academically. The friendships fostered in this group could easily last a lifetime. As students move on to the high school, more students would rotate in. Great care would go into developing this family group. A successful advisory would lead to students having positive self-esteem and the confidence to excel in school.

Since the group stays together until all goals are met, retention would be non-existent. It would be conceivable that some students would be ready to go to the high school in two years while others may take as long as four. On-going tutorials and remediation held during the school day, after school, on Saturdays, and during the summer, would keep students from having to stay longer than four years.

There are always exceptions, however, and sometimes a good fit may not exist. In those very rare cases, students may have to change houses or teams.

Extra-Curricular Activities

Extra-curricular activities that are developmentally appropriate for the middle school would be integrated into the model school's program. Intramurals and inter-scholastic athletics should be included. Lifetime recreational sports should be emphasized. Service clubs would get students involved in their own communities to make them better places for everyone. Courses and activities promoting the arts and individual interests would also be needed. Well-planned and organized social activities such as dances, parties, attending

theatrical performances and even ball games, provide a variety of opportunities for helping students relate to others effectively.

Regular times would be set aside to celebrate student success. This is critical for students who have known little success in school.

Summary

As I have discovered, students fail in school for many reasons. Even some of our best students do poorly in school and fail their grade. After studying the literature and listening to the voices of retained students, I have found that retention is not necessary for the success of young adolescents, and it may contribute to more students dropping out. Developmentally appropriate school structures with caring and concerned teachers who are proficient at working with young adolescents would eliminate school failure and promote successful learning experiences for all middle level students.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Individual Interview Questions

Informant Number/Pseudonym: _____

Date: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

Interviewer: Greg Hicks

Thank you for meeting with me.

1. Tell me something you really like about school and why.
2. Tell me something you dislike about school and why.
3. Who are some of your favorite teachers and why?
4. How do they show they care about you?
5. Who are some of your least favorite teachers and why?

13. Why do you think you were retained?
14. What do you think of end-of-grade tests?
15. Should they (EOG's) be used to determine if someone is promoted or not?
16. What do you want to be when you "grow up?"
17. About how many friends do you have?
18. How do your friends treat you now, since you are back in the same grade?
19. How about your teachers. How do they treat you now?
20. Do you think some of your teachers treat some students differently from others?

21. What has changed for you since you have been in school this year?

22. Why do you think you will pass this year?

23. If you could go back to last year, and could change anything you could, what would that be?

24. If you had the chance to say something to another student who was in the same situation you were in last year, what would you tell them?

25. Tell me about how you behave in school.

26. What would you tell a new friend about your school?

27. If you could change anything about your school what would it be and how would you change it?

Appendix B

Group Interview Questions

Informants' Numbers/Pseudonyms:

Date: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

Interviewer: Greg Hicks

Thank you for meeting with me.

1. Tell me something you really like about school and why.
2. Tell me something you dislike about school and why.
3. Tell me about coming here (to middle school) from elementary school.
4. Who are some of your favorite teachers and why?

5. Who are some of your least favorite teachers and why?
6. How did you feel when you first found out you were going to be retained?
7. How do you feel about it now?
8. How are your grades?
9. Why were you retained?
10. What do you think of end-of-grade tests?
11. Should they be used to determine if someone is promoted or not?
12. How do your friends treat you now since you are back in the same grade?

19. If you could change one thing in this school to make it a better place, what would that be?

20. What is the hardest part about being a student? A teacher? A principal? A Parent?

Appendix C

Staff Interview Questions

Informant Number/Pseudonym:

Date: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

Interviewer: Greg Hicks

Thank you for meeting with me.

1. Please tell me a little about yourself and what you do at this school.

2. Tell me about _____.
(Subject's Name)

3. What do you know about his/her background?

4. Tell me about him/her academically.

5. Tell me about him/her behaviorally.

Appendix D

North Carolina State University INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Study: A Qualitative Study of Retained Seventh Graders

Principal Investigator: Gregory E. Hicks Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Kenneth Brinson, Jr.

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine what causes students to fail their grade even when they pass end-of grade tests. I want to find out why this occurs.

INFORMATION

1. I will meet with you at least two times to ask you questions about you, your attitudes and feelings, your home, school, extra-curricular activities, study habits, teachers, family, and friends.
2. Each session will last approximately 60 minutes or less. The interviews will be audio taped.
3. Your school records will be examined for attendance, discipline, test scores, and grades.
4. All of this is voluntary and strictly confidential.

RISKS

Some of the questions may seem personal and no one's business. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer. If you choose to do so, you may drop out of the study at any time with no penalty. No one will ever know what you say to me. However, if you reveal something to me that is against the law, I will have to report it. If you tell me something that makes me think you may harm yourself or someone else, I will have to report it. I will use fictitious names for you, your school, and all friends and adults. I will even use different names for your pets. Everything will be audio taped to help me keep up with the information I collect, but it will be kept in a secure place until the study is complete. After finishing the study, all tapes will be destroyed.

BENEFITS

Hopefully, you will have a better understanding of yourself and why you did not pass your grade. This should encourage you to work harder and do better in school. Also, I hope the information I collect can be used to help other students who are experiencing the same concerns in school.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless you specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. During the interview I will assign you a

number and not use your name. Your real name will not be used in the study. I will use a fictitious name instead.

COMPENSATION

For participating in this study you will receive, with your parent's permission, lunch off campus with me. For helping me, your guidance counselor will also be invited. Another way to earn the same amount of credit is giving you a gift certificate to a local restaurant. If you withdraw from the study prior to its completion, you will receive the same deal, lunch off campus with your counselor and me. I feel I owe you that just for agreeing to help me.

EMERGENCY MEDICAL TREATMENT

My insurance will cover you while you are traveling with me to and from the restaurant. If you have diet restrictions, I will expect you or your parents to let me know ahead of time.

CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Gregory E. Hicks, at 336-364-9754. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Matthew Zingraff, Chair of the NCSU IRB for the Use of Human Subjects in Research Committee, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/513-1834) or Mr. Matthew Ronning, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Research Administration, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/513-2148). You may also contact my superintendent, Ronnie Bugnar (336-599-2191) or my dissertation co-chairs, Dr. Peter Hessling (919-515-1769) or Dr. Kenneth Brinson, Jnr. (919-513-4327).

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Subject's signature _____ Date _____

Parent/Guardian's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

Appendix E

North Carolina State University INFORMED CONSENT FORM (School Staff)

Title of Study: A Qualitative Study of Retained Seventh Graders

Principal Investigator: Gregory E. Hicks Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Kenneth Brinson, Jnr.

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine what causes students fail their grade when they pass end-of grade tests. I want to find out why this occurs.

INFORMATION

1. I will meet with you one or two times asking questions about you, what you do at this school, and specific questions about students you teach or have taught who have been retained in the seventh grade.
2. Each session will last approximately 30 minutes or less. The interviews will be audio taped.
3. All of this is voluntary and strictly confidential.

RISKS

Some of the questions may seem personal and no one's business. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer. If you choose to do so, you may drop out of the study at any time with no penalty. No one will ever know what you say to me. However, if you reveal something to me that is against the law, I will have to report it. If you tell me something that makes me think you may harm yourself or someone else, I will have to report it. I will use fictitious names for you, your school, and all friends and adults. Everything will be audio taped to help me keep up with the information I collect, but it will be kept in a secure place until the study is complete. After finishing the study, tapes will be destroyed.

BENEFITS

What I hope to discover are some specific reasons why students fail in school, particularly students who are able to pass state end-of-grade tests. If we can discover the reasons, perhaps strategies can be developed to help these students be successful in school and not drop out.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential. You will be assigned a number during taped interviews and numbers will be matched with a pseudonym on a separate master list. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless you specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study.

COMPENSATION

I will provide a copy of the final dissertation to your school. I would also like an opportunity to share my findings with your entire faculty since I believe the results will be beneficial to all practitioners.

EMERGENCY MEDICAL TREATMENT

This should not be necessary.

CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Gregory E. Hicks, at 336-364-9754. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Matthew Zingraff, Chair of the NCSU IRB for the Use of Human Subjects in Research Committee, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/513-1834) or Mr. Matthew Ronning, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Research Administration, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/513-2148). You may also contact my superintendent, Ronnie Bugnar (336-599-2191) or my dissertation co-chairs, Dr. Peter Hessling (919-515-1769) or Dr. Kenneth Brinson, Jnr. (919-513-4327).

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Subject's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____