**Secondary “at-risk” students’ perceptions of experiences within a comprehensive
high school and a continuation high/ alternative high school**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor Education in Leadership for
Educational Justice

by

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University of Redlands

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I can do all things through Christ that strengthens me.

—Phil. 4:13 (New King James Version)

None of these accomplishments would be possible without the love, mercy, and faithfulness of the Lord above. My journey from a poor boy in a small town in Western New York and near high school dropout to Doctor Loomis and principal is a miracle in itself.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my children. [REDACTED], trust in the Lord with all your heart and He will guide your paths straight (Proverbs 3:5, 6). Go forward with boldness and make a great impact on the world. The path is before you.

In addition, to all the labeled at-risk students, never give up. Your journey is difficult, but not impossible. Seek out educators and people who care about you and who will support you. Until the injustices of the flawed system are corrected and the system has the capability of meeting the needs of all students, I will fight for you.

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Abstract

Comprehensive high schools have been unable to meet the needs of all students (Cotton, 2004). Students face challenges, and some have been labeled *at risk* for various reasons. For example, some have encountered challenging life circumstances within their families that compete for their attention instead of school. Others may have lacked a sense of belonging to a school culture where they were failing in terms of the social, emotional, intellectual, and ethical growth. These students constitute a unique group who often require more time, energy, and resources than large, comprehensive schools can offer. Consequently, they fall behind on credits and get discouraged (Cotton, 2004). To reduce dropout rates, educators in comprehensive high schools may need to adopt new attitudes toward at-risk students (Knoeppel, 2002). Various reform efforts have not led to change at the systems level, and schools operate according to a design based on the needs of an industrial society. The failure of students to succeed in school is a critical problem. This is because the needs of an information-based society require people to possess informational and technological literacy so they can be involved in work requiring knowledge generation (The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills [SCANS], 1991).

This qualitative research examined the perceptions of 10 at-risk students regarding their experiences of attending a large comprehensive high school before transferring to an alternative high school. The perceptions of at-risk students were examined and described in terms of how the comprehensive high school either supported or failed to address their academic, personal, and emotional needs. The results indicated that the students felt discourage, disconnected, and unsupported while at the

comprehensive high school. The large school and class sizes, coupled with a negative school culture and lack of positive, caring teacher-student relationships, pushed students to fail their classes. When the students failed their classes and fell behind on their credits, they gave up hope of graduating from high school and even believed they would not have much of a future after high school. After transferring to a smaller continuation high school, students were successful, felt supported and cared for, and believed they could graduate and have a productive life after high school.

Three key factors that led to student success were a smaller learning environment, sufficient academic and personal support, and caring teacher-student relationships. Insights attained from the results of this study may help teachers, counselors, and site and district administrators more effectively support at-risk students in comprehensive and alternative high schools.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Background

Student population size and policy often restrict the flexibility with which comprehensive schools can respond to the unique needs of individual students (Cotton, 2004). The school consolidation movement that began in late 1800s resulted in secondary schools increasing their size as a way of being cost effective in terms of efficiency (Guthrie, 1979). This could be characterized as a “one-size-fits-all” approach to educating students. Personalization between students and students and educators and students was sacrificed in this movement. Students have faced challenges and some have been labeled *at risk* because of various reasons. For example, some have encountered challenging life circumstances within their families that compete for their attention instead of school. Others may have lacked a sense of belonging to a school culture where they are failing in terms of the social, emotional, intellectual, and ethical growth. These students constitute a unique group who often require more time, energy, and resources than large, comprehensive schools can offer. Consequently, they fall behind on credits and get discouraged (Cotton, 2004). Without effective intervention, these students can easily drop out of school.

In the 2007-2008 school year, California’s 4-year dropout rate was 15.3%, whereas the dropout rate in San Bernardino County was 17.2% during this same period (California Department of Education, 2009). To reduce those rates, educators in comprehensive high schools may need to adopt new attitudes toward at-risk students (Knoepfel, 2002). This might mean, for example, implementing personalized learning environments to better ensure that the classroom environment and instructional strategies

are learner centered (Colcord, 2007; Knesting, 2008; Knoepfel, 2007; Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008). Because the voices and perceptions of the students themselves have tended to be absent regarding their experiences of school, ways of supporting them may not have been identified. This study examined the perceptions of experiences of 10 students deemed at risk who transferred to an alternative school in Southern California, where they began to experience the success necessary to graduate.

Problem Statement

Comprehensive high schools have been unable to meet the needs of all students (Cotton, 2004). Various reform efforts have been implemented. One such effort has been the restructuring of large high schools into smaller learning communities. The Gates Foundation, for example, awarded millions of dollars in the form of federal grants to support such restructuring. However, the leaders of the foundation found that once the money was expended, schools tended to revert back to previous structures and ways of operating. This reform did not lead to change at the systems level, and schools operated according to a design based on the needs of an industrial society. The failure of students to succeed in school is a critical problem. This is because the needs of an information-based society require people to possess informational and technological literacy so they can be involved in work requiring knowledge generation (The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills [SCANS], 1991). The difficulty is meeting the needs of all students. Studying the perceptions of students regarding their experiences of attending large comprehensive high schools before transferring to alternative high schools provides a way of examining the problem in this qualitative study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to understand the experiences of at-risk students at a large comprehensive high school who transferred to an alternative high school. The perceptions of at-risk students were examined and described in terms of how the comprehensive high school either supported or failed to address their academic, personal, and emotional needs. Insights were attained from the results of this study that may help teachers, counselors, and site and district administrators more effectively support at-risk students in comprehensive and alternative high schools. The 10 at-risk students who participated in this study consisted of five females and five males. All 10 students graduated from an alternative school. Students were interviewed regarding their perceptions of their experiences at a large comprehensive high school. Over the course of one month, participants were interviewed three times. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed immediately after each interview so that the data could inform the future interviews scheduled.

Overarching Research Question

The following overarching research question was used to focus and organize the researcher's work throughout the dissertation process: What are the perceptions of 10 students regarding their experiences of not progressing in a large comprehensive high school, which put their graduation in jeopardy, but progressing and graduating in an alternative high school?

Importance of the Study

The results of this study may help fill a gap in the existing body of knowledge regarding reasons students transfer from large comprehensive high schools to smaller

alternative schools. Although studies exist regarding the academic performance of certain subgroups of students (i.e., English language learners, special education, Hispanic, and African American students), most utilize data gathered by standardized testing. Little research has been done that allows the voices of at-risk students to be expressed and heard (Poplin & Weeres, 1992). The results of this study may help other students who are at risk to know that they are not alone in facing their challenges and that alternatives exist that may better meet their needs. Educators in comprehensive schools may gain insights into the actual lives of at-risk students and be able to establish more personalized learning environments in their classrooms. This study may provide insights for policymakers at the site, district, county, state, and federal levels. Policymakers may be able to use findings from this study in their decision making regarding the future of schooling. Other stakeholders may gain insights into the magnitude of changes needed within the education system if students are to be prepared for the demands and opportunities of the 21st century.

Scope of the Study

Because in qualitative research the researcher is the primary “tool” for investigation, this researcher used qualitative methodology to examine the meaning of change through investigating 10 at-risk students’ perceptions of their experiences at a comprehensive school. This research was limited to a continuation school within a district serving 9,400 K-12 students in a large county in Southern California. This study was not quantitative in design, because the intent of the study was not to prove causality or test a hypothesis. The purpose was to better understand the perspectives of at-risk students.

Limitations of the Study

Some researchers, especially those immersed in a quantitative paradigm, raise concerns about sample size. They do not understand that qualitative research seeks to delve into the experiences of people who shared or are in the midst of experiencing phenomena. Because the goal of qualitative research is to understand participants' perspectives on their experiences, in-depth investigation into their experiences is necessary. The sample size in this study is appropriate for a phenomenological study, and focusing on 10 students enabled the researcher to ensure that the study contained rigor by recruiting participants who were articulate and experienced as students within the two different educational settings.

Assumptions About the study

1. All participants were honest in expressing their perceptions of being at-risk students.
2. The comprehensive high school from which the at-risk students transferred housed 3,000 students at the time of this study and had adopted the curriculum-centered content standards and assessment-driven reform model of education. Students were not able to succeed in courses because the pacing of instruction was such as to ensure broad curriculum coverage, and students were labeled at risk. In addition, class sizes in this high school tend to average 37 students per class, and the large class sizes compromise students receiving immediate intervention in their learning.
3. Alternative high schools function in ways that are learner centered and focus on personalizing education for the students who transfer to these schools, given their label of being at risk. The average class size in the school studied was between 20 and 23 students.

Researcher's Background

I became interested in exploring this research topic due to my unique background. At an early age, I was labeled as at risk. My academic performance, personal choices, and home environment made it a challenge to academically succeed in school. I was held back in the first grade, and my challenges continued through high school. In the 1980s, when mass ability grouping was still popular, I was consistently placed in the lowest group. In ninth grade, I actually failed three out of my six classes, but was still promoted. I was able to stay connected and graduated from high school mainly because of supportive coaches, given that I was an athlete. In addition, my older brother, Craig, significantly influenced me and my choice to pursue postsecondary education. He not only modeled the value of an education by completing high school and earning a bachelor's degree and two master's degrees, but he also consistently encouraged me and taught me the importance of perseverance.

I began my postsecondary educational career at Erie Community College in Buffalo, New York. Through the encouragement of Craig and my mother, as well as much self-determination, I experienced success in higher education. For the first time, I began to believe that I was a learner who could succeed. I also recognized the importance of self-beliefs regarding the potential to succeed. I committed myself to pursuing as many life opportunities as possible through higher education. I found that my previous labeling of being at risk was erroneous, and I proved it by obtaining two bachelor's degrees from California State University, San Bernardino.

Prior to my first contractual teaching position in a predominantly White, middle-class district, I held substitute positions while I took college courses at night. I held

several long-term substitute positions. One in particular was in juvenile hall, which served impoverished and traditionally underserved students. I immediately fell in love with teaching these students and continually encouraged them so that they could succeed. I proved that the positive expectation a teacher holds for students impacts their success.

With the encouragement of my principal, I took on a couple of administrative projects that gave me a taste of administration. I quickly realized that I possessed the skills, abilities, and passion to be an administrator. I pursued additional education and obtained my master's degree in education. Shortly after completing my degree, I was offered my first administrative position as an assistant principal at an elementary school. The following year, I was appointed to an assistant principal position at a comprehensive high school within the same district.

I truly enjoyed my 5 years as an assistant principal at that high school. I was able to learn every facet of the comprehensive high school, from student discipline to assessments, curriculum development, master scheduling, and budgeting. I learned the most important lessons and effective practices from a highly effective principal. With his leadership and guidance, I witnessed a school transform from a mediocre high school to an effective one that was honored with a Distinguished School Award from the California Department of Education. This principal always reminded me, "Education is a people business."

After my fifth year at the comprehensive high school, I was appointed to be the principal of the district's continuation high school. I quickly fell in love with my new position, which was a good fit for me given my previous life and educational experiences. I was able to utilize many of the things that I learned at the comprehensive school to

make some positive changes at the continuation school, but I also learned that continuation schools and alternative education were vastly different from comprehensive, or traditional, high schools. I appreciated the flexibility in alternative education to best meet the needs of at-risk students.

The following year, I experienced another transition as the district reconfigured several programs, partially due to the state's budgetary issues. My responsibilities increased in my second year to include oversight of the district's K-12 independent study program and adult school. I am now completing my third year as a principal and second year with the program reconfiguration.

The following reasons serve as a summary of why I was uniquely qualified to conduct the research for this dissertation:

- My personal and life experiences as an at-risk student in high school
- My experiences as a substitute teacher, teaching long term at juvenile hall and in impoverished districts, serving large numbers of traditionally underserved students
- My training and experiences as an administrator at the elementary and high school levels
- My current position as principal of alternative programs

Definitions of Terms

The following definitions were used in this study:

Academic Performance Index (API). This was a main component of the Public Schools Accountability Act passed by the California legislator in 1999. Districts and schools are given a specific API number based on students' scores on the annual

standardized tests. API scores range from a low of 200 to a high of 1000 (Betts, Rueben, & Danenberg, 2000).

Alternative education. An alternative to a comprehensive high school, primarily for students who are considered at risk. Most students in alternative education are credit deficient and have not been successful in a traditional high school.

At-risk students. Label students are given by teachers, counselors, and/or administrators for a variety of reasons. Students are at risk of dropping out of school. The reasons include behavior or attendance problems, home or environmental issues, drug or alcohol abuse, failure of classes, pregnancy, or generally not performing effectively in a large comprehensive school.

Banking model. A term coined by Paulo Freire (2008) that describes an educational philosophy of how knowledge is inputted or “banked” from the instructor to the student. The teacher makes “deposits” of knowledge that the students “absorb.”

Continuation school. A program that is an alternative to a comprehensive high school, primarily for students who are considered at risk. Most students in continuation schools are credit deficient and have not been successful in a traditional high school.

Critical pedagogy. A philosophy of education created to help students develop consciousness of freedom by understanding how to connect knowledge to power and the ability to take action.

Critical theory. A broad approach to challenge and destabilize established knowledge. It derives from the German Frankfurt School, which emphasizes that all knowledge is historically biased (Paul, 1992).

Eugenics movement. An applied science that advocated the practice of genetically improving society. It was a practice that was widely accepted in the 20th century and was utilized in education. This led to the practice of discrimination and racism.

Monoculturalism. The practice of actively preserving a culture to the exclusion of all other cultures.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Standards-based education reform act that was enacted by the U.S. Congress in 2001. The act established high standards for student achievement with measureable goals. State common assessments are used to determine students' achievement. All students are mandated to participate in testing if the school receives federal monies.

Progressivism. The key principles of this philosophy were (a) children learned best in experiences in which they had a vital interest, and (b) children learned by transacting meaning with others in the context of learning experiences. The overarching focus was on the students themselves and how they learned most effectively, rather than an emphasis on efficiency (Washburne, 1952). Progressive education opposed formalized authoritarian procedure and fostered reorganization of classroom practice and curriculum as well as new attitudes toward individual students (Dewey, 1963).

Regional Occupation Program (ROP). Supported by the California Department of Education, the program trains students who are at least 16 years old and adults in various career and technical fields (i.e., automotive, nursing, and business).

School Accountability Act. Significant California legislation passed in 1999. The intent of this act was to increase the accountability to districts, schools,

administrators, and teachers for student achievement (Betts et al., 2000). Students were mandated to complete annual standardized tests. Schools and districts were issued an API number based on student scores.

Social reconstructionism. A philosophy that emphasizes the addressing of social questions and a quest to create a better society and worldwide democracy.

Reconstructionist educators focus on a curriculum that highlights social reform as the aim of education.

Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program. The program that is utilized to administer annual standardized exams to all students in 2nd-11th grade in the State of California.

Taylorism. The theory and science of management and workflow. Its main objective was to improve economic efficiency, especially labor production.

Theoretical sensitivity. Defined as studying the collective meaning of the responses that constitute the category identified and then returning to the review of the literature to ascertain what similarities existed.

Summary

This chapter introduced the problem of students experiencing failure in a large comprehensive high school. It outlined the purpose of the study, than discussed the study's significance, the overarching research question, scope of the study, limitations of the study, assumptions of the study, researcher's background, and definitions of terms used in the study. Chapter Two is a review of the existing research literature, which laid a foundation for conducting this study. Chapter Three presents the methodology, outlining the specific phases of the study so that, if desired, it could be replicated in the

future. Chapter Four presents the categories and their properties that emerged from the analysis of transcribed tapes of student responses to semistructured interview questions.

Chapter Five contains a discussion of the findings and conclusions.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Introduction

The review of the literature related to schooling and at-risk students began with an historical overview of education dating back to the Agrarian Era. Within the literature, there were two contrasting paradigms regarding education. The first, known as the *banking model* (Freire, 2008) or the *didactic model* (Paul, 1992), constituted the present model of education. This model is based on an industrial model that has been called the *factory model* (Ford, 1922; Taylor, 1913). The second model, called *critical pedagogy* (Apple, 2006; Freire, 2008; Giroux, 2003) or *critical theory of education* (Paul, 1992), is oriented toward social change in the pursuit of social justice resulting in the pursuit of human rights for all people. In the review of the literature, these two conflicting paradigms were examined because the current model was not designed to meet the needs of all students, leaving some students at risk of school failure. The review revealed that the current banking, or didactic, model has continued functioning in a normative dominating mode within comprehensive high schools (Church, 1976; Friedman, 2004; Reese, 2005). Some students within such a context have experienced neither a sense of belonging nor a connection between the curriculum and their own diverse cultures and lives (England, 2005; Kozol, 2005). Often, this has been because the current system has based itself on the monoculturalism of the White, Western, Northern European culture (Noddings, 2005).

Later in this review, the eugenics movement is briefly described because it has impacted the current banking model of education. In addition to examining these two conflicting models, this chapter reviews the literature regarding the school consolidation

movement that arose as result of a shift from an Agrarian Era to an Industrial Era; the eugenics movement that historically laid the foundation for the standardized norm-referenced testing movement that impacted middle-class, non-White students such that they became traditionally underserved; and the rise and continued use of continuation high schools to meet the needs of at-risk students. The chapter concludes with a statement of the key reasons why traditional comprehensive schools have failed to better meet the needs of all at-risk students, and how continuation high schools have offered interventions that have not, at times, met students' needs.

Historical Background

The historical roots of education in the United States began in Boston in 1635 with the establishment of the Boston Latin School, the forerunner to today's traditional high school. This school became the first public school in the British colonies (Friedman, 2004). Moreover, Boston Latin School, which was patterned after the English school system, became the model of secondary schools (Spears, 1941). However, education was still primarily reserved for the wealthy (Friedman, 2004). Those that could not afford private education were taught through churches and other charity organizations. Most often, religious instruction was also provided by the churches. Children in rural areas were taught similarly, or sometimes towns supported their own schools (Reese, 2005). The primary goal of grammar schools at the time was to prepare the children of landowners for positions of leadership in the state and church (Cuban, 1984).

Massachusetts continued to push for public education through the passage of the Massachusetts Acts of 1642 and 1647. These acts instituted compulsory education and created guidelines for the creation of elementary schools in small towns. Although these

schools in Massachusetts faced financial hardships and struggled to remain open to educate students, they were the forerunners for what would eventually become the public education system in the United States (Friedman, 2004). Other colonies did little to formulate a structured public education system. Thomas Jefferson helped to continue the movement of free public education.

In the late 1700s, Thomas Jefferson strongly promoted free public schools to promote the virtues of liberty, hard work, and morality (Cuban, 1984). In 1778, he proposed a bill in Virginia that called for a state system of free education for all students in elementary schools through secondary schools that would be supported by tuition and scholarships. Jefferson's bill provided a framework for future school systems, especially the pattern of decentralized control and localization of financial responsibility (Friedman, 2004). In addition, the bill helped develop an American perception of educational equity, which is often at the center of today's education reform debates.

Horace Mann and Henry Barnard impacted the development of the public education system in the mid-1800s. Mann was a Massachusetts legislator who led the effort to create a state board of education. He went on to serve on the state board of education and succeeded in attaining state tax support for schools, teachers' salaries, supplies, and training (Reese, 2005). In Mann's tenure, 50 new high schools were established. Also, his educational philosophy of providing a free public education to White students influenced other states (Friedman, 2004).

Barnard was a legislator in Connecticut who served on the state board of education in Connecticut and later in Rhode Island (Spears, 1941). Also, like Mann, he espoused a democratic philosophy of education that was similar to Jefferson's: morality,

duty to country, and responsible citizenship. Barnard was effective in spreading his message through the publication of the *American Journal of Education* (Reese, 2005).

Both Mann and Barnard were leaders advocating free public education.

Schools reflected the time and circumstances of the societal systems in which they were embedded. Prior to the 19th century, the societal and economic systems largely revolved around agriculture, with cotton and tobacco being the largest cash crops in southern states (Friedman, 2004) and industrialization prevalent in northern states (Orfield, 2004). This was called the Agrarian Era. For most people, the function of school within this period was to provide basic, rudimentary instruction in mathematics, reading, and writing (commonly referred to as “the three Rs”). In rural or agrarian areas, children’s education usually took the form of apprenticeships. They learned how to contribute to the maintenance of the family farm, and school was considered of secondary importance (Mitchell, 1992). The focus of most agrarian families was to sustain and expand the family farm. Consequently, society as a whole did not place much value on formal education. Neither the agrarian work nor the industrial work required a highly literate and educated workforce (Ravitch, 2000).

The demands of society and economics drastically changed as the Industrial Era emerged. Given that the education system was embedded within the larger societal system and its workforce needs, the purpose and value of education also evolved (Reese, 2005). The Industrial Era, also referred to as the American Industrial Revolution, largely took place in the 19th century and extended across much of the 20th century. Major changes in agriculture, mining, technology, and transportation produced significant changes to American society. Steam engines powering machinery created the need for a

workforce, and people left farms and moved to urban areas where they got factory jobs (Church, 1976).

Factory model of education. Schools were microcosms of mainstream society. As a result, schools reflected the principles and philosophies that fueled the Industrial Era. There was a shift from an agrarian model of education toward a factory model of education (Ford, 1922; Mitchell, 1992; Taylor, 1913). In this era, small schools were consolidated and larger schools were centrally located in bigger communities (Reynolds, 1999). The goal of the consolidation of smaller, rural schools was twofold: (a) schools could be more efficient and effective in their instruction, and (b) the intent was that public education would be more uniform and consistent from one school to another (Reynolds, 1999). The consolidation movement reflected the growth in industrialization.

The function of schools evolved from teaching basic knowledge and apprenticeships to training skilled workers who would be employable by large factories (Ravitch, 2000). Similar to Henry Ford's implementation of the automobile assembly line, secondary schools were agencies of mass education (Church, 1976). One of the main purposes for secondary education was to rank and sort students such that a majority of the students ended up in labor- and service-oriented jobs (Mitchell, 1992). Students who thrived in this system were considered "above average" and "superior" on report cards. These same students tended to secure management jobs and positions of leadership after they graduated from high school. The rest of the students who did not do well within this system went on to be laborers after high school (Taylor, 1913; Ravitch, 2000). The emphasis in factories and industry was on efficiency, and this concept was applied to the running of schools as well.

The goal of secondary education at this time was to educate as many students as possible, following a concept of efficiency based on the way factories were run (Church, 1976). Fredrick Taylor was considered an important leader in the area of business management, given his emphasis on efficiency. He designed scientific management principles to get the most out of managers and workers in a factory setting (Mitchell, 1992; Owens, 2001; Taylor, 1913). Taylor believed that high efficiency could be achieved through specific and deliberate methods that included clear, written goals and outcomes for both supervisors and laborers. Maximum efficiency was achieved, Taylor (1913) suggested, when the workers knew the exact steps to accomplish each task and managers understood how to clearly reach the business's goals (Mitchell, 1992; Owens, 2001). Taylor placed a heavy emphasis on precision through the use of science to break down a job into its smallest tasks (Owens, 2001). Taylor's management principles were also called the *efficiency model* and *Taylorism* (Mitchell, 1992). The core principles of Taylorism were the following:

1. Scientific study of tasks and jobs replaced the "rule-of-thumb" work methods.
2. Managers and labors were scientifically selected, trained, and developed rather than passively trained by themselves.
3. Detailed instruction and supervision of each worker in the performance of a specific task was provided.
4. Work was divided equally between managers and workers, so that managers applied scientific management principles to plan the work and the workers performed the tasks (Owens, 2001).

Many of Taylor's principles on scientific management were also implemented in secondary schools. The Industrial Age brought about significant change to education.

Dewey (1956) stated,

The change that comes . . . is the industrial one [and involves] the application of science resulting in the great invention . . . the growth of a world-wide market as the object of production. . . . That this revolution should not affect education in some other formal and superficial fashion is inconceivable. (p. 6)

The purpose of the factory model of education was to teach students the facts and skills they needed for industrial jobs that they were likely to hold their entire lives (Church, 1976; Reese, 2005). The factory model of education, coupled with the school consolidation movement, led to the transition from small, one-room school houses to large, centrally located buildings. Students were sorted by grades and sat in straight rows, and the teachers controlled the students. In addition, the roles of the teachers and students were clear (Ravitch, 2000). Schools were used to socialize students to be good, productive citizens. Classroom practices such as the recitation in concert of literature, the expectation for the students to keep their "toes on the line," or the requirement for students to raise their hands were often utilized (Ravitch, 2000). In addition to socialization, schools also promoted the culture of the dominant power group. This monoculturalism has continued into the current education system.

In the early 20th century, the dominant power group reflected Anglocentric cultural values. As a result, codes of behavior, structural arrangements, and distribution of power, procedural norms, privilege, and responsibility were created and maintained by this group. Moreover, policymakers, school administrators, and teachers tended to come

from the dominant Anglocentric culture (Reese, 2005). Families and students that shared the same or similar cultural background of the dominant group experienced more advantages and privileges than those whose ethnic, racial, cultural, and socioeconomic background differed from the dominant group. Since the cultural and educational norms were established upon Anglo values and beliefs, the inevitable result was division and conflict between those in the dominant group and those in nondominant groups, such as African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans (Apple, 2004).

The implementation of Taylor's (1913) efficiency principles with the factory model of education further exacerbated cultural conflict between those privileged by the system and those disadvantaged by it. Privilege occurred for those students whose backgrounds were of the dominant White, middle-class group. Those whose life circumstances differed from the dominant group, especially African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans, were disadvantaged because of their lack of knowledge of the norms governing the White group. This took the forms of both racism and classism (Darder & Torres, 2004; Windfield, 2007). Evidence of institutionalized racism and classism is found in the birth and spread of the eugenics movement (Darder & Torres, 2004).

Eugenics movement. Sir Francis Galton (1904), an English mathematician, provided the following definition of eugenics: "The science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage" (p. 35). Darwin, developer of the theory of evolution, influenced Galton, who also was his cousin (Bowler, 1983). Galton described people using the term *stock* and stressed the need to preserve those people who possessed

“superior” stock. Heredity and genetics were important, but not as important as what to do with heredity and superior stock. Windfield (2007) wrote, “Eugenics ideology relied on the premise that human work was the function of a hierarchical system based, in part, on race and class” (p. 5). The eugenics movement was pervasive and flourished throughout the time that urbanization was growing (Bowler, 1983; Windfield, 2007).

Lewis Terman wrote in 1916,

It is interesting to note that M. P. [i.e., one of his test subjects with a low intelligent quotient] and C. P. [i.e., one of his test subjects with a low intelligent quotient] represent the level of intelligence which is very, very common among Spanish-Indian and Mexican families of the Southwest and also among negroes. Their dullness seems to be racial, or at least inherent in the family stocks from which they come. The fact that one meets this type with such extraordinary frequency among Indians, Mexicans, and Negroes suggests quite forcibly that the whole question of racial differences in mental traits will have to be taken up anew and by experimental methods.

Children of this group should be segregated in special classes and be given instruction which is concrete and practical. They cannot master abstractions, but they can often be made efficient workers, able to look out for them. There is no possibility at present of convincing society that they should not be allowed to reproduce, although from a eugenic point of view they constitute a grave problem because of their unusually prolific breeding. (pp. 91-92)

The idea of innate deterministic intelligence reinforced the differentiation of students, especially those who were not part of the dominant monocultural society

(Friedman, 2004). Given the identification of African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans as intellectually inferior to Whites, the current achievement gap between Whites and these groups should not be surprising. African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans have been forced to adapt to the dominant White culture and school system (Apple, 1995, 2004; Darder & Torres, 2004; Kozol, 2005; McLaren, 2005). The school system was established with a White monocultural perspective that excluded other cultures (Apple, 1995, 2004; Darder & Torres, 2004; Kozol, 2005; McLaren, 2005).

Progressivism. Contrary to Taylorism and a model of education that emphasized the transmission of information from the teacher to the student via lectures and textbooks, the progressivism movement began. Based on Dewey's (1956) philosophy of pragmatism, a very different vision of the education system emerged. Led by Dewey in the 1920s and 1930s, the purpose of this movement was to reform education (Friedman, 2004). Assumptions of this movement were (a) children learned best in experiences in which they had a vital interest, and (b) children learned by transacting meaning with others in the context of learning experiences. The overarching focus was on the students themselves and how they learned most effectively, rather than an emphasis on efficiency that was based on the running of factories (Washburne, 1952). The progressive educators insisted, therefore, that education must be a continuous reconstruction of living experiences based on activity directed by the child (Dewey, 1963). Progressive education opposed formalized authoritarian procedure and fostered reorganization of classroom practice and curriculum as well as new attitudes toward individual students (Dewey, 1963).

The central concept of Dewey's view of education was that greater emphasis needed to be placed on the expansion of intellect of students through critical thinking and problem-solving skills rather than rote memorization of facts and information (Dewey, 1956). Two central components of Dewey's theory were continuity and interaction. Continuity pertained to the idea that the people's life experiences contributed to their futures. Interaction referred to the situational influence on one's experiences. In other words, one's present experience is a function of the interaction between one's past experiences and the present situation (Dewey, 1956). Dewey believed that learning occurred within the context of transacting meaning through discourse between students and their teachers. Dewey argued that educators were responsible for providing students with experiences that necessitated thinking and problem solving within real-life contexts. The aim of this approach was to prepare students to become citizens capable of improving society (Dewey, 1956).

With the emergence of the progressive movement, the entrenched transmissive system was threatened. Because established human systems resist change, progressivism eventually was subjugated to the dominant transmissive system. The power of the transmissive system to endure into the present can be seen in the work of both Freire (2008) and Paul (1992). Freire (2008) referred to the transmissive model as the banking model of education. He revealed that in this model, the role of the teacher was to "deposit" bits of information into the heads of students. The role of the teacher was to be the authoritative source of information and to transmit the information to students. The role of students was to accept the information transmitted. The curriculum continued to be Eurocentric, and multiculturalism was resisted. The emphasis was curriculum

centered, and an unexamined assumption was that the degree of absorption of information was dependent on the intelligence of the students. This became the model of schooling that dominated education throughout the 20th century. It has been known also as the didactic model (Paul, 1992).

Didactic Theory vs. Critical Theory

In contrast to the transmissive system, the progressive movement viewed the teacher as a facilitator of learning experiences (Paul, 1992). Paul called the key progressive movement principles *critical theory*. He examined the two conflicting theories: didactic and critical. Table 1 highlights a few summaries of his comparisons.

The two opposing theories have maintained different and distinct perspectives. Didactic theory, or the banking model, has focused on the replication of the status quo within a society. This has involved reinforcing the monocultural education system based on a White, Western, Eurocentric worldview. Implicit within this worldview has historically been the superiority of the White race over African American, Mexican American, and Native American races (England, 2005; Noddings, 2005). In contrast, the critical theory of education (Paul, 1992) has reflected the progressivism of Dewey. Critical theory viewed the student as the most important element in education. Paul (1992) wrote, “Most instructional practice in most academic institutions around the world presupposes a didactic theory of knowledge, learning, and literacy, ill-suited to the development of critical minds and literate persons” (p. 35). School reform efforts have essentially reinforced the banking or didactic model (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Ravitch, 1983). The reforms have failed.

Table 1

Differences Between Didactic and Critical Theory

Subject	Didactic theory	Critical theory
Needs of the students	Students are taught <i>what</i> to think. Students are given information, facts, and details to memorize.	Students are taught <i>how</i> to think. Significant content should be taught through current life issues that stimulate students' interests.
Model of educated people	People are repositories of content and information. They are data banks that believe their understanding and knowledge is the truth.	People understand and can utilize problem solving strategies. They are fundamentally a seeker and questioner and are cautious in claiming absolute knowledge.
The nature of knowledge	Knowledge, truth and understanding can be transmitted from one person to another by lectures or verbal statements.	Knowledge and truth can rarely be transmitted from one person to another through verbal statements alone. Teachers can only facilitate the conditions in which students can understand and learn through thinking things through.
The desirable classroom environment	An emphasis is place on a quiet classroom with little classroom discussions. Students cannot effectively learn in classrooms where there is talking.	Quiet classrooms with little conversation are typically environments in which learning is <i>not</i> taking place. A classroom with focused student discussions on current issues is an example of where learning is taking place.
Depth versus breadth	It is more important to cover a great deal of knowledge or information verses a small amount in depth.	It is more important to cover a small amount of information in great depth. An emphasis is placed on critical thinking. Students must justify their conclusions.
Status of personal experiences	There is no place for personal experiences in education.	Personal experiences are a crucial part of the learning experience.

(continued)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Subject	Didactic theory	Critical theory
Assessment of knowledge acquisition	Students learn through drills of information and definitions. Students who effectively memorize and recite the facts and definitions prove their understanding and knowledge of those facts.	Students can often repeat definitions and provide correct answers, yet fail to fully understand the process of how the answer is derived. True understanding is demonstrated by students explaining their answers in their own words and the significance of the information.

Note. Adapted from *Critical Thinking: What Every Person Needs to Survive in a Rapidly Changing World*, by E. Paul, 1992, Dillion Beach, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking.

Significant Reform Attempts

Significant reports in the 1980s and 1990s shed light on the failed reforms. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education submitted its report to the U.S. Secretary of Education. This report was titled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* and clearly outlined the fears and failures of the education system. It called for major reform to address the deficiencies found in the educational institutions. The report began,

Our nation is at risk. . . . [T]he educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people. . . . [O]ur society and its educational institutions seemed to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them. (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5)

The commission attempted to initiate reform throughout the entire educational system, kindergarten through college, by claiming students were failing compared to their

international counterparts. This document was intended to reinforce the need for a stronger emphasis on the basic skills emphasized during the Industrial Era. The commission examined historical trends and patterns of students' performance in several areas, such as international assessments, Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT), college and high school graduation rates, and the percentage of students who required college remediation (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The report also detailed the economic and fiscal impact on businesses and the country due to these failures.

The commission insisted on a commitment from all key stakeholders—businesses, policymakers, educators, teachers, colleges, and parents—to overhaul the educational system. Below are the key areas in which the commission called for reform:

- A collective commitment by all stakeholders to excellence in education.
- A dedication to become a learning society and an emphasis to life-long learning.
- Mobilize the existing resources—business and education leaders (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

Overall, the commission insisted that the educational system needed to be reformed for the betterment of all people. The report stated, “All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 8). Although the report brought much-needed attention to educational reform, it failed to address the critical issues, such as racism, poverty, and unequal opportunity (Ladson-Billings, 2003). Furthermore, the document did not call for

a reform that differed substantively from the transmissive model of education (Ladson-Billings, 2003).

In 1989, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development released a report that highlighted the shortcomings of the educational system in an attempt to promote reform. The report, titled *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, focused on the middle grades and the challenges that students face. The council called early adolescence the turning point for youth to reach their full potential. It revealed that many adolescents are vulnerable to the emotional roller coaster of hurt and humiliation. The task faced by adolescents is the transition from dependency on their parents and family toward independency (Erickson, 1994). In addition, the report portrayed the plight and issues that many young adolescents faced. Eight major recommendations were brought forth:

1. Create small communities for learning.
2. Teach a core academic program.
3. Ensure success for all students.
4. Empower teachers and administrators to make decisions about the experiences of middle-grade students.
5. Staff middle-grade schools with teachers who are experts at teaching young adolescents.
6. Improve academic performance through fostering the health and fitness of young adolescents.
7. Reengage families in the education of young adolescents.

8. Connect schools with communities (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989).

Another report after *Turning Points* influenced educational reform in the early 1990s. In 1991, the U.S. Department of Labor sponsored a report by the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). The SCANS report defined the competencies and the basic skills required for effective job performance, proposed levels of proficiency, offered effective methods to assess proficiency, and developed a dissemination strategy for the nation's schools, businesses, and homes. It was the first time that businesses were provided an opportunity to clearly communicate to educators what students needed to know to be successful in the workplace. SCANS was concerned with the high percentage of high school graduates that did not have the knowledge or foundation required to find and hold a good job. The report indicated that low skills lead to low wages and low profits (SCANS, 1991). The SCANS report drew three major conclusions:

- All American high school students must develop a new set of competencies and foundation skills if they are to enjoy a productive, full, and satisfying life.
- The qualities of high performance today characterize our most competitive companies and they must become the standard for the vast majority of our companies, large and small, local and global.
- The nation's schools must be transformed into high-performance organizations in their own right. (pp. i-ii)

The report emphasized the importance of meeting high standards in performance, product quality, and customer satisfaction in order for businesses to meet the demands of the global market (SCANS, 1991).

In order to improve the performance of workers SCANS (1991) called for the following five competencies:

1. Resources: The ability to allocate time, money, materials, space, and staff.
2. Interpersonal skills: The ability to work with others in groups or teams, teaches others, lead, serve customers, negotiate, and work well with culturally diverse backgrounds.
3. Information: The ability to evaluate and utilize data, organize and maintain files, and use computers to process information.
4. Systems: The ability to understand social, organizational, and technological systems, monitor and correct performance, and design or improve systems.
5. Technology: The ability to select equipment and tools, apply technology to specific tasks, and maintain and troubleshoot technologies. (p. iii)

The commission also called for the following three foundation skills:

1. Basic skills: The ability to read, write, understand mathematics, speak, and listen.
2. Thinking skills: The ability to think creatively, makes decisions, solve problems, visualize, understand how to learn, and reason.
3. Personal qualities: The ability to be responsible, self-manage; and possess a positive self-esteem, and sociability. (p. iii)

The foundational skills were considered minimum skill requirements that were necessary for all jobs. Without these basic skills, one could not be an effective employee.

The SCANS (1991) report concluded with the challenge to the American people to become educational revolutionaries and reform the education system. Moreover, SCANS declared that the educational system has not kept pace with the global economy. It recommended the development of standards assessments that would ensure students would be proficient in the five competencies and three foundational skills (SCANS, 1991). This report was significant in that it acknowledged the shift toward a global economy and the need for students to be proficient in information literacy and technological literacy. However, this report did not influence future legislation in the sense of bringing forth an educational system that differed from the didactic or banking model of the existing system.

In 1999, California passed the Public Schools Accountability Act (PSAA). The PSAA was the first attempt to increase the accountability to districts, schools, administrators, and teachers for student achievement (Betts et al., 2000). This major legislation, however, utilized the same education model with the introduction of high-stakes standardized tests. Under the PSAA, the state created standardized tests that aligned with the California academic content standards (Betts et al., 2000). Students in 2nd grade through 11th grade are required to take the standardized tests each year in each core content area (mathematics, English, science, and history). School progress is monitored through the aggregation and calculation of the students' scores on the tests. Each school and district is given an Academic Performance Index (API) number based on how the students perform on the standardized tests. If districts and schools have poor

API numbers, the state can place punitive sanctions upon them. Under the PSAA, the state can even intervene and take over the districts or schools that consistently perform poorly on the tests (Betts et al., 2000). The PSAA placed California in a good position to meet the provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 was first hailed as one of the most significant legislative events in the history of the Department of Education (Winfield, 2007). Howell, West, and Peterson (2008) declared the NCLB the “most far-reaching federal effort to reform public schools” (p. 13). The following are major goals of NCLB:

- Close the achievement gap for disadvantaged students.
- Improve teacher preparation and rewards.
- Implement state and national standards.
- Implement standardize testing.
- Hold schools accountable for students’ academic progress.
- Provide parents options for their children when schools are not successful (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

A major component to NCLB was a requirement that forced states to establish academic standards in the core academic areas of English, mathematics, science, and social science. In addition, states were mandated to implement annual standardized assessments to monitor students’ and schools’ progress. By the end of the 2013-2014 school year, NCLB required that all students nationwide be proficient in English and mathematics within their respective grade levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). If schools did not meet their Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), federal assessment

measurements of students' academic progress, they faced sanctions. These sanctions have included mandating that students can attend higher performing schools (at the expense of the district), the removal of teachers and administrators, state takeover of the school, or closure of underperforming schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).

Criticism of the legislation began to emerge, given the magnitude of content standards that state policymakers required be taught, the use of a single norm-referenced test to determine accountability, and the use of multiple assessments. Essentially, the results of this legislation were to reinforce a curriculum-centered (didactic/banking/transmissive) model of education to the exclusion of a thinking-centered and learner-centered model (Ravitch, 2000). Grant (2006) argued that NCLB focused on accountability policies that used selective scientific research in instructional practices. Although the policy acknowledged the problems of racism and poverty in the United States and asserted that these cannot be excuses for the low achievement of students, it did not do anything to address these challenges. Grant stated,

NCLB naively assumed that all children are potential recipients of both U.S. democratic ideals and the practice of those ideas. In other words, the reasoning behind NCLB was that equality (when it is considered) was a technical issue, not a structural one. (p. 159)

In addition, the NCLB legislation was largely responsible for ushering in a content-standards and assessment-driven model of education (Orfield, 2004).

The content-standards model of education derived from policymakers and educators who believed it was necessary to hold districts, schools, administrators, and teachers accountable for specific knowledge that should be taught and that students

should understand. Cornbleth (2005) concluded that the one major reason for the content-standards movement was to create a “world-class” education system. Kendall and Marzano (1997) suggested four reasons why many educators and policymakers pushed for content standards: (a) the erosion of the common curriculum, (b) the variation of grading practices, (c) the lack of measurable and attainable learning outcomes, and (d) competition with other countries. The underlying belief was that the education system was failing, and accountability was necessary to bring about reform. The changes that were sought were not much different than the earlier eugenics model of reform (Winfield, 2007).

The NCLB legislation was thought to be the solution to the problems with education. The increased accountability that came with the content-standards model attempted to force reform on the system; however, many issues arose out of the implementation of NCLB. In fact, the legislation may have created more challenges than it solved. NCLB focused on the symptoms of the failing education system, but did not address the core issues of poverty and racism (England, 2005; Giroux, 2003; Grant & Sleeter, 2007; Noddings, 2005). Students who did not perform well on standardized tests were viewed as “deficient” and at risk (England, 2005). Giroux and Schmidt (2004) believed that standardized tests always favored the rich and powerful. They also stated that standardized tests had “origins in the eugenics movement” (p. 218).

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills produced a report in 2004 that attempted to address the shortcomings of the educational system. The report was titled *A Report and MILE Guide for 21st Century Skills*, and it was published to promote skills and knowledge that students would need to be successful in a 21st-century global market.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills was a committee made up of business leaders, educators, and policymakers. The group was sponsored in part by the U.S. Department of Education. The committee focused on closing the gap between the skills and knowledge taught in schools and the skills and knowledge that would be required in a 21st-century global economy (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2004). It was stated in the report, “Today’s education system faces irrelevance unless we bridge the gap between how students live and how they learn” (p. 3). The report was built upon and complemented NCLB. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills provided a vision in which the guidelines of NCLB could be fully implemented. The six key elements of 21st-century learning stated in the report were the following:

1. Teaching of core subjects (English, reading or language arts, world languages, arts, mathematics, economics, science, geography, history, government, and civics).
2. Teaching of learning skills (creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication and collaboration).
3. Using 21st century tools to develop learning skills (use information and communication technologies to manage, evaluate, and construct new knowledge).
4. Teaching and learning in a 21st century context (teach and learn with real world examples and experiences).
5. Teaching and learning in 21st century content (teach global awareness, financial and economic and business literacy, and civic literacy).

6. Using 21st century assessments that measure 21st century skills (high-quality standardized assessments that test 21st century skills). (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2004, pp. 4-5)

The report from the Partnership for 21st Century Skills was another example of perpetuation of the banking model or didactic model of education. Emphasis was placed on the “how” and “what” of teaching and not the “who” and “why” of teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2003). As a result, the curriculum-centered reform perpetuates the monocultural norm of schooling (Apple, 2006; Noguera, 2003) so that poor and traditionally underserved students do not see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Students who do not fit into the system or “box” of the traditional comprehensive model of education have been labeled at risk (Knoepfel, 2002).

Literature Regarding At-Risk Students

The term at risk has been used in education to describe students in jeopardy of not succeeding in school (Calabrese, Hummel, & Martin, 2007). Many factors have placed students at risk, including economic circumstances and behavior problems (Bradshaw, O'Brennan, & McNeely, 2008; Stuht, 2008; Zvach, 2006). Other, less obvious risk factors have included lack of connectedness or the experience of positive, caring student-teacher relationships (Poplin & Weeres, 1992). Large comprehensive high schools, especially serving students of color and poverty, have failed students.

Leading researchers agree that the following factors directly affect the success of students: poverty, nontraditional families (i.e., single parents, grandparents as guardians, stepparents), academic challenges (i.e., students in special education), older students because of being retained at one or more grade levels in their schooling, students of color,

and personal and/or family problems (Bradshaw et al., 2008; Calabrese et al., 2007; Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009; Stuht, 2008; Zvoch, 2006). Typically, at-risk students have dropped out of school based on disengagement from school as a result of years of discouragement and academic failure (Berliner & Barrat, 2009). Students who have experienced traumatic personal events outside of school or encountered major health issues often have ended up designated as at risk (Bradshaw et al., 2008; Calabrese et al., 2007; Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009; Stuht, 2008; Zvoch, 2006).

There were other factors related to school failure. Some students lacked the necessary credit for graduation. They were not able to recover the credit, given the inflexibility encountered in comprehensive high schools. Inflexibility in meeting student needs arose from impersonal school cultures that impede a sense of belonging for all students (Poplin & Weeres, 1992). In such school settings, at-risk students have fallen behind, have had little opportunity to retake failed classes, and have been unable to recover lost credit (Berliner & Barrat, 2009).

Regardless of the particular factors that contributed to their vulnerability, what at-risk students have in common is struggling academically and experiencing failure in courses (Zvoch, 2006). These students' hope of obtaining a high school diploma diminishes, and they experience an increased disengagement in school since these at-risk factors perpetuate discouragement over time (Knoeppel, 2002).

Anyon (1997) found that at-risk students tended to internalize the following message: "We know that you were not successful with a normal course load, but now we are increasing the number of classes you must pass." Given that there has not been wide-scale restructuring of secondary schools, interventions for students have consisted of

attending summer school, taking additional courses during the school day, or attending adult school in the evening. Thus, the need for the creation of a personalized education system has not occurred. Interventions, while implemented to help students within the existing large comprehensive high school, have focused on the symptoms and not the true issues that at-risk students face (Zvoch, 2006).

A student's economic background and ethnicity impact his or her success or failure in high school. Calabrese et al. (2007) insisted that a disproportionate number of economically disadvantaged students and African American and Hispanic students have been more at risk of academic failure than their White, non-economically challenged peers. Thus, the achievement gap between traditionally underserved students and their more advantaged peers has remained a persistent problem for generations.

The achievement gap has existed within the current model of education between traditionally underserved students and White students from more affluent backgrounds. In California, African American and Hispanic students have consistently performed lower than their White counterparts (California Department of Education, 2008). Former State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell argued, "California cannot afford to allow our Latino students and our African American students to continue to lag academically behind their peers" (California Department of Education, 2008, p. 1). The most disturbing fact about California's achievement gap is that there is a direct correlation between race and achievement. O'Connell insisted, "It is a moral and economic imperative that we close the achievement gap" (California Department of Education, 2008, p. 1). Evidence of this has been that African American and Hispanic students who are not economically disadvantaged have continued to perform lower in

math than White economically disadvantaged students (California Department of Education, 2008). In fact, middle-class African American students have performed the same as poor White students in English language arts. Non-economically challenged Hispanic students performed slightly better than poor White students in English language arts (California Department of Education, 2008). Poverty and racism have contributed to the achievement gap and have remained societal problems.

California's dropout rate has followed the same trend, with Hispanic and African American students dropping out of school in greater numbers than their White peers. The California Department of Education (2009) reported a 4-year dropout rate of 10% for White students, while African American students drop out at a rate of 29%. Hispanic students have a 22% dropout rate (California Department of Education, 2009).

Students who fall behind and drop out are viewed as possessing a deficiency and lacking motivation (Scott & Marshall, 2005). Large, comprehensive, curriculum-centered high schools, reflecting the historical monoculturalism of White privilege and meritocracy, are viewed as obsolete in the beginning of the 21st century (Kozol, 2005; Littky & Grabelle, 2004). Giroux and Schmidt (2004) proposed,

Research is indicating with ever more consistency that state accountability systems, in and of themselves, will not necessary improve students' opportunities for learning, nor will they inherently close the achievement gap between poor, minority, and more affluent students. Moreover, researchers have found high stakes testing racially biased, condemning students of color to bottom slots within the educational hierarch. (p. 218)

Many would argue that the achievement gap is largely due to the cultural differences between White students and African American and Hispanic students (Grant & Sleeter, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2003). Counselors and administrators have often referred students who have not succeeded academically in traditional comprehensive settings to alternative programs. Referrals were based on these students being at risk of dropping out of school.

Alternative Education/Continuation Schools

The modern alternative education movement developed and grew during the 1970s. Alternative education has been defined as any type of school or educational program that is not traditional (Kerka, 2003; Knoepfel, 2002). Charter schools, independent study programs, and continuation schools have been examples of alternative education programs (Owens, 2001). Usually, at-risk students transitioned from traditional comprehensive high schools to alternative programs because they were unable to fit into the traditional system (Hoy & DiPaola, 2009). There were over 500 continuation schools in California with over 70,000 students enrolled statewide in 2010. Approximately 10% of high school students are enrolled in continuation schools (California Continuation Education Association, 2011; Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008).

Continuation schools play a vital role in the support of at-risk students. In California, students must be at least 16 years old in order to attend continuation schools. Many students who transfer to continuation schools from traditional comprehensive schools are credit deficient and are at risk of dropping out of school (Kratzert & Kratzert, 1991; Wong, Wiest, & Trembath, 1999). Kratzert and Kratzert (1991) explained, “The continuation high school is concerned with helping students find some measure of

educational success, which has eluded them in their previous school placement” (p. 13). Continuation schools were designed to better support at-risk students through a smaller, more personal learning environment and with greater flexibility than a traditional high school (Hoy & DiPaola, 2009; Knoeppel, 2002, 2007; Kratzert & Kratzert, 1991). Many continuation schools have student enrollment of approximately 200 students, and the average class size is 20 students (Knoeppel, 2007; Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008). The smaller school and class sizes allow staff and faculty to work more closely with students. Knoeppel (2002) wrote, “One of the very best things we do in continuation education is come to know our students” (p. 3). As a result, students’ academic and personal needs are better met (Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008).

In addition to a smaller learning environment, California continuation schools offer more flexibility within their academic programs than traditional comprehensive high schools. One key factor is that the California Department of Education requires students enrolled in continuation schools to attend school for a minimum of 15 hours per week (Townley, 2004). These enrollment hours can be met through the continuation school or combined with other educational programs, such as Regional Occupational Program (ROP) for career technical training. The fewer mandated enrollment hours also provide students opportunities to pursue work experience (Townley, 2004). Continuation schools have the ability to provide flexibility within their programs as well.

Since many students who attend continuation schools are credit deficient, schools often offer students accelerated credit accrual strategies so that students have an opportunity to graduate (Hoy & DiPaola, 2009; Nandi, 2009; Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008). Moreover, unlike traditional comprehensive high schools, continuation schools

can adapt and modify how the curriculum is delivered to students. Teachers are able to implement a plethora of instructional strategies to best meet the needs of at-risk students (Hoy & DiPaola, 2009; Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008). Knoeppel (2002) explained, “Because of their flexibility, continuation school teachers often reach the most difficult students” (p. 4).

Students who are identified as at risk are often those who do not fit the mainstream mold; their cultural and life experiences, learning styles, learning disabilities, or behavior are considered unacceptable in traditional comprehensive high schools (Kerka, 2003). Kratzert and Kratzert (1991) noted, “Often, a continuation school education is the only chance for many students to graduate” (p. 13). Continuation schools are able to design programs that allow for maximum flexibility to best meet students’ needs and provide them with opportunities to obtain high school diplomas.

Summary of Literature Review

The review of the literature examined briefly the history of education in the United States, identifying that economic and societal factors have frequently provided the impetus for changes in the education system and that the current model of education was inherited from the Industrial Era. The review also shared significant reform attempts to address the symptoms of an obsolete education system. The reforms continued to perpetuate the banking model of education. Many African American, Hispanic, and Native American students, along with children living in poverty, have not experienced academic success in a traditional comprehensive high school. These students are labeled at risk and do not perform as well on standardized tests as their White, middle-class peers, which has led to an achievement gap. The review also addressed the literature

regarding key issues that place students at risk and discussed continuation schools, which are a common placement for students who are not successful in traditional comprehensive high schools.

The review supported the need for at-risk students to have their voices heard through the sharing of their insights, perceptions, and perspectives due to the fact that there is little research that examines the personal stories and challenges of these students. This review of the literature prepared the researcher to shape the formation of the research problem, develop the overarching question, and choose the methodology that is most suitable to his research interest of examining at-risk students' perceptions of their experiences within a comprehensive high school and a continuation high school. The methodology is described in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Research Model

The problem guiding this research was that current comprehensive high schools do not meet the needs of all students; therefore, some of them transfer to alternative education programs. These at-risk students often struggle to meet the graduation requirements at large comprehensive high schools. These students also may face difficult life circumstances, such as poverty or other home situations that hinder asset development experienced by their more advantaged peers. Sometimes they also face the challenge of not experiencing a sense of belonging within those schools that were not designed to personalize education so that all students succeed academically, socially, emotionally, and ethically. As a result, there is a need to better understand what challenges hinder students' success at large comprehensive high schools. In addition, it is important to understand why at-risk students may be more successful after they transfer to an alternative high school. This study may provide insights for policymakers at the site, district, county, state, and federal levels. Policymakers may be able to use findings from this study in their decision making regarding the future of schooling. Other stakeholders may gain insights into the magnitude of changes needed within the education system if students are to be prepared for the demands and opportunities of the 21st century.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to understand the experiences of at-risk students at a large comprehensive high school who transferred to an alternative high school. The perceptions of at-risk students were examined and described in terms of how the

comprehensive high school either supported or failed to address their academic, personal, and emotional needs. Insights were attained from the results of this study that may help teachers, counselors, and site and district administrators more effectively support at-risk students in comprehensive and alternative high schools. The 10 at-risk students who participated in this study consisted of five females and five males. All 10 students graduated from an alternative school. Students were interviewed regarding their perceptions of their experiences at a large comprehensive high school. Over the course of one month, participants were interviewed three times. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed immediately after each interview so that the data could inform the future interviews scheduled.

Theoretical Orientation

A theoretical orientation is important in conducting qualitative research. It influences everything related to the methodological approach for conducting a study. The phenomenological theoretical orientation was necessary for this study because it is a method of inquiry. The German philosopher Edmund Husserl developed phenomenology (Scott & Marshall, 2005). This orientation is important because of its emphasis on consciousness and experiences regarding a social world (Scott & Marshall, 2005). Such inquiry attempts “to understand the meaning of events and interaction to ordinary people in particular situations” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 25).

A phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study because the researcher wanted to describe and explain the world as those involved in a phenomenon perceived it (Green, Camilli, & Elmore, 2006). A phenomenological study design was chosen because it has achieved status as a viable and necessary method for doing

qualitative education research (Green et al., 2006; Yin, 2009). This design enabled this researcher to study a phenomenon systematically by interviewing 10 participants who had experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam, 1988). This methodology was appropriate given that through this design, the meaning participants gave to the phenomenon and the interpretations they gave to their experiences of the world within the particular settings of both comprehensive high schools and alternative high schools were studied. Using a phenomenological theoretical orientation meant analyzing data in order to accurately communicate with others interested in the phenomenon under investigation, and doing so with the necessary depth of description in order that the participants in the study confirm that the results possess credibility (Merriam, 1988). A qualitative phenomenological study methodology was used to capture the stories, insights, and perceptions of these students. These participants were selected because the broad range of circumstances and experiences are similar to many other at-risk students.

The student participants were interviewed, their interviews were transcribed verbatim, the data for themes or categories of meaning were analyzed, and then thick descriptions of the researcher's perceptions of their experiences were written by the researcher. Member checking was used to increase the credibility of this study and to ensure that the findings were accurate in their representation of the phenomenon encountered.

In essence, this method enabled this researcher to describe the perceptions of experiences of at-risk students at a large comprehensive school. This research design guided him in the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting observations, and was

the logical model of proof that allowed him to draw inferences concerning causal relations among the variables that were under investigation (Yin, 2009).

Procedures: Phases of the Study

The following four phases were used in completing this study: planning, beginning data collection, basic data collection, and data process and analysis (Kirk & Miller, 1986).

Phase 1: Planning. The following section discusses planning.

Initial interview questions. There were 10 semi-structured interview questions prepared for the participants. These questions were drawn from Yin (2009), who stressed the use of such questions to elicit the stories of participants. The perceptions and interpretations of their experiences are vital to this process and the purpose of this study. To examine the phenomenon, the following 10 semistructured questions were developed to guide the interviews with students:

1. How did you feel about yourself, others, and the school as a result of being labeled at risk while you were going to a large comprehensive high school?
2. How did being an at-risk student relate to your intentions, goals, and values about your future in school?
3. How did being an at-risk student relate to your intentions, goals, and values about your future in life beyond school?
4. There seems to be a growing criticism that large comprehensive high schools are outdated given this technological (or advanced) world. How would you change education so that students no longer were labeled at risk?

5. Describe a teacher who helped you in terms of the way he or she taught, the way he or she interacted with you, and the ways he or she worked with you. Was this person teaching at the comprehensive high school or continuation school?
6. Describe a teacher whose teaching and interactions with you made learning more difficult for you. Was this person teaching at the comprehensive high school or continuation school?
7. How did you feel about the STAR (standardized) tests that you were required to take?
8. There is concern about the need for schools to be relevant (or important) to the lives of students. In what ways was the comprehensive high school relevant (or important) or not relevant (or important) to you?
9. In what ways was the continuation high school relevant (or important) or not relevant (or important) to you?
10. What were the differences between the comprehensive high school and the continuation high school?

Choice of setting. The selection of the site met the criteria recommended by Bogdan and Taylor (1975), which included the substantive and theoretical interests of the research and the availability of a research site. The site selection process was simplified due to the fact that the researcher was a principal working with at-risk students. This researcher's natural interest and position facilitated the selection of the setting. Moreover, his position streamlined the challenges that come with finding cooperative gatekeepers.

Dealing with gatekeepers. The gatekeeper is the initial contact for the researcher and leads the researcher to the key informants in the organization (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). For this study, it was important to obtain official permission from the district superintendent, who was the gatekeeper for the district. After explaining the intended study to the superintendent, permission to conduct the research was granted. This researcher had access to potential participants, and this facilitated the recruitment process.

Participant recruitment. This phase of the study involved recruiting people who fit the criteria for selection. These criteria included the following: (a) the students were graduates of the alternative high school selected as the setting for this study, (b) the students transferred from the comprehensive high school in the same district to the alternative high school during their junior or senior year of high school, (c) the students had been labeled at risk while attending the comprehensive high school, and (d) the students were willing to share their perceptions of experiences regarding the entire phenomenon leading up to entering the comprehensive high school, experiences within it, transitioning to the alternative high school, experiences within it, and graduating. Because of these criteria, purposeful sampling was used, as this is the sampling method used in qualitative research.

Sampling. The participants used in this phenomenological study were selected by a strategy known as purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2007). Purposeful sampling was used because qualitative inquiry focuses on a specific phenomenon. Typically, a small sample size is utilized to best understand the phenomenon in great depth (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009). More specifically, the participants selected met the criteria outlined in the

previous paragraph. This enabled this researcher to select rich samples whose study would highlight the research's overarching question.

Voluntary participation. The selection of the participants is one of the most important components in qualitative research (Green et al., 2006). It was imperative that the participants in the study felt comfortable during the interviews. Therefore, the researcher made a conscious effort to maintain good rapport with the participants, since he would spend a significant amount of time with them (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

The initial interview with each participant began with a restatement of the purpose of the study and a response to any questions that were asked. In addition, the following questions and recommendations formulated by Bogdan and Biklen (1982) were used:

1. *What are you actually going to do?* A general rule to follow in answering all questions is to be honest. Do not lie, but do not be too specific or lengthy in your explanations. . . .
2. *Will you be disruptive?* . . . Assure them that you will not be making excessive demands and you will attempt to be sensitive to their problems and requirements. Share with them your intention of fitting your schedule around theirs.
3. *What are you going to do with your findings?* Most people are asked this question because they fear negative publicity or the political use of the information the researcher gathers. . . . Tell them that you do not plan to use anyone's name and that you will disguise the location. . . .
4. *Why us?* People often want an explanation of why they or their organizations were singled out for study. . . . Unless you have come to see a particular group

whose reputation is exemplary, it is usually important that you communicate to people in the setting that you are not so concerned about the particular people in the study, or in the particular organization where you may be collecting data. Rather, your interests center on the general topic . . . of whatever specific aspect you are pursuing. . . .

5. *What will we get out of this?* . . . You should decide what it is you are prepared to give. Some want feedback about what you find, a report, or even a meeting with you after the work has been completed. (pp. 123-124)

These questions and recommended responses helped this researcher to present his explanation in a clear, concise manner.

This researcher met with each potential participant who seemed to fit the criteria, explained the purpose of the research, and reviewed the criteria. He reviewed with them the information submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), and he explained that he wanted to understand their experiences and thoughts about attending a comprehensive high school, being labeled at risk, and transitioning to and graduating from an alternative high school. He gave them an informed consent form and reviewed the form with them. He strove to ensure that each potential participant clearly understood the study so that in making a decision as to whether or not to participate, he or she would be able to have informed consent. He explained that the interviews would be recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The researcher shared that he would ensure anonymity by protecting the identity of each participant through the use of a pseudonym. He indicated that he would be the only person to know their identity, that the pseudonym would appear on the transcribed

interview, and that all data collected would be kept in a locked file cabinet accessible only to him. He shared that a participant was free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. He also shared that he would maintain a journal consisting of his thoughts relating to what was shared, and this also would be used in data analysis.

He explained that through the use of these data sources, he would be able to analyze them to determine common themes or categories and their descriptive properties. Given the importance of accuracy, the researcher shared with participants that he would check back with them as the findings emerged to ensure the accuracy of the findings. He indicated that if the person participated, he would be sensitive to and respectful of the time of the participant so as not to create unnecessary burdens.

The researcher shared that his plan was to conduct three interviews. In the first interview, he would gain the bulk of the information. In the second interview, he would share his findings for participant verification and ask follow-up questions to gain clarity if anything stated was not clear. He indicated that a third interview might or might not be necessary to ensure that the findings from my study were as accurate as possible.

He emphasized throughout the recruitment session that his goal was to understand and describe rather than to judge what was stated. He shared that the participation of the person may result in a study that could bring about changes in the education system that would support future students, especially those facing challenging life circumstances. Finally, he indicated that he was willing to share with each participant his completed dissertation upon request.

Phase 2: Beginning data collection. The process of recruiting participants and building credibility data will be explained in the following section.

Initial contact, meeting, and informed consent. The process to recruit participants began with a personal invitation to each person. The personal invitation also included a brief overview of the research, the requirements of participation, the approximate time commitment necessary on their part, and a general timeline on the first interview and time of completion. Out of the 13 individuals asked to participate in the study, 10 accepted the invitation. The researcher initially collected participants' contact information, which included their cell phone numbers and e-mail addresses. The 10 participants signed the informed consent letters. The researcher asked participants to confirm their participation by signing two forms: one for the researcher and one for their own records.

Description of research participants. The participants were given the pseudonyms outlined in Table 2.

Table 2

Study Participant Pseudonyms

Participant pseudonym	Description
1. PM1	19-year-old Hispanic male
2. PF1	18-year-old Hispanic female
3. PF2	19-year-old White female
4. PM2	19-year-old Black male
5. PF3	19-year-old White female
6. PM3	19-year-old Hispanic male
7. PF4	19-year-old Hispanic female
8. PF5	18-year-old White female
9. PM4	19-year-old Hispanic male
10. PM5	18-year-old White male

Building a web of credibility. Credibility was built based on qualitative inquiry that views the “person as an immanently active, meaning-constructing being, to the importance of context, and to the pivotal role of the ‘lived experience’” (Heshusius, 1989, p. 413). It was important for the researcher to understand the real-life context of the participants to gain deep insights of their real-life events. The role of the researcher was to be a careful and attentive listener, observer, absorber, participator, organizer of data, and able narrator (Heshusius, 1989).

In this study, a web of credibility consisted of (a) checking the researcher’s interpretations of the data with the participants in the study to verify accuracy, and (b) using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) during category generation. The constant comparative method consisted of comparing the similarities and differences of the major categories of incidents and perceptions across participants. Lastly, theoretical relevance was achieved by comparing the categories to the existing literature.

Phase 3: Basic data collection. The interview process and protocol will be described in the following section.

In-depth interviews. An interview has been defined as any face-to-face conversational exchange where one person elicits information from another (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Participants were asked to participate in three 1-hour individual interviews. In the initial interview, the purpose of the research was shared with the participants, and they were reminded of the research protocol. In addition, the participants were asked to answer the semi-structured questions that were listed in the Initial Interview Questions subsection above. The second interview served to clarify the

participants' perceptions and verify the accuracy of the information gathered. The purpose of the last interview was to further confirm the accuracy of the information.

When conducting the first interview, the researcher was sensitive to his technique of asking the questions. He did not attempt to standardize the setting or flow of the interview (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). The goal was to bring to light the phenomenon in the most natural way without the attempt to control the interview.

It was important that the researcher verified his findings with the participants to promote the accuracy of perceptions and increase the credibility of the study. This process of checking and clarifying was based on the belief that

Interviewers and respondents, through repeated reformulations of questions and responses, strive to arrive together at the meanings that both can understand. The relevance and appropriateness of questions and responses emerges through and is realized in the discourse itself. (Mishler, 1986, p. 65)

Also, at that time, permission was sought to record the interviews, and participants were assured that no one would hear the tapes except the researcher. They were told that the tapes would be transcribed verbatim and then studied to discover common themes. Everyone gave their permission to be tape recorded.

The process of taping and transcribing went smoothly. The recordings were transcribed in Microsoft Word utilizing the Dragon Naturally Speaking (Version 11) speech recognition software. The transcribed interviews were then reviewed for accuracy. Additional notes were taken as specific insights or questions arose in the researcher's mind.

Role of researcher. There are many roles that researchers can play in qualitative research. For example, possible roles considered were an observer, a full participant, a participant-observer, an insider-observer, an interviewer, and the dual role of participant-researcher (Schumacher & McMillan, 2001). The role that was most consistent with conducting phenomenological research was that of interviewer. Therefore, the researcher adopted the role of interviewer for this study.

Creswell (2007) outlined the following procedural steps for an interviewer:

- Identify interviewees based on purposeful sampling.
- Determine what type of interview is practical and will net the most useful information to answer research questions.
- Use adequate recording procedures when conducting interviews.
- Design and use an interview protocol.
- Refine interview questions and procedures.
- Determine the place for conducting the interview . . . a quiet location free from distractions.
- After arriving at the interview site, obtain consent from the interviewee to participate in the study. Review the purpose of the study, the amount of time that will be needed to complete the interview, and plans for using the results from the interview.
- During the interview, stay to the questions, complete the interview within the time specified (if possible), be respectful and courteous, and offer a few questions in advance.
- Finally, be a good listener rather than frequent speaker during the interview.

The above procedures were followed closely with each participant a MP3 recorder was used to capture the interviews and transcribed them in Microsoft Word utilizing the Dragon Naturally Speaking speech recognition software. Field notes were taken by the researcher after the interviews to capture thoughts regarding the interviews. Thus, transcribed interviews and field notes served as data sources.

Phase 4: Completion (data process and analysis). Data processing and analyzing will be described in the following section.

Constant comparative method. The invention or plan-of-action phase and the discovery or data-gathering phase of the research design contained within them the fourth phase. This latter phase was interpretation, and this denoted a phase of analysis that resulted in understanding (Kirk & Miller, 1986). In other words, analysis began early in the study and occurred throughout the data-gathering phase of the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Concepts not only come from the data, “but are systemically worked out in relation to the data during the course of research” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 6).

The constant comparative method formulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was used throughout this study to analyze data. This process involved “perceiving, comparing, contrasting, aggregating, and ordering; establishing linkages and relationships; and speculating” (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p. 167). Categories were created through a process that compared key events or ideas while in the data collection phase. The researcher searched for recurring examples or themes.

Category generation. The researcher looked for similarities in thoughts and phrases while he transcribed the interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The data were

imported into the NVivo software program, and the researcher analyzed the information. He noted the similarities and differences and began to generate codes.

The next phase of category generation consisted of rereading all of the initial interviews. Tentative coding categories were formed. The codes consisted of short phrases representing the recurring actions and thoughts of participants. These tentative coding categories guided future interviews and observations.

The NVivo software enabled the researcher to clearly recognize specific codes. It allowed him to sort the codes and begin to make meaning of them. Throughout the process of analysis, categories were studied for their theoretical importance. This involved two emphases. First, theoretical relevance was achieved by relating the categories to the existing literature review to determine areas of agreement and disagreement. Second, the researcher's investigation was conducted by carefully rereading the categories to verify his perceptions with those of the participants that resulted in explanatory power. This process, referred to as *theoretical saturation* by Bogdan and Biklen (1982), involved working to exhaust "the dimensions of the categories" (p. 69). As the categories continued to reappear, descriptions of these categories and their properties were refined. Data from these interviews were coded. The final categories and their properties were then studied to discover common themes connecting the categories.

This phase finalized data collection and began the process of analyzing the data into meaningful themes. The words, stories, and experiences of the participants were analyzed to understand their experiences both as related to theory and to each other. As a result of this analysis, patterns emerged. The patterns determined whether the data

collected fit the theory or were contrary to the theory. The analysis helped to support the previous research presented or provide alternative views in theory and between cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the final phase of the process, findings were reported and discussed, conclusions were drawn, and recommendations for future research were made.

Summary

This chapter presented the structure for the study. The rationale for qualitative research was presented, and the purpose of the study was addressed. The rationale for the use of phenomenological research methodology was explained. The phases of the study were described should someone wish to replicate it in the future.

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

This phenomenological study was conducted in order to pursue the need to recognize perceptions of students based on their experiences of attending both the same comprehensive high school and the same continuation high school. This study was pursued because of the following problem: comprehensive high schools have been unable to meet the needs of all students (Cotton, 2004). Various reform efforts have been implemented; however, these reforms did not lead to change at the systems level, and schools operated according to a design based on the needs of an industrial society. The failure of students to succeed in school is a critical problem. This is because the needs of an information-based society require people to possess informational and technological literacy so they can be involved in work requiring knowledge generation (SCANS, 1991). The difficulty is meeting the needs of all students.

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of at-risk students at a large comprehensive high school who transferred to an alternative high school. The perceptions of at-risk students were examined and described in terms of how the comprehensive high school either supported or failed to address their academic, personal, and emotional needs. Insights were attained from the results of this study that may help teachers, counselors, and site and district administrators more effectively support at-risk students in comprehensive and alternative high schools. The 10 at-risk students who participated in this study consisted of five females and five males. All 10 students graduated from an alternative school. Students were interviewed regarding their perceptions of their experiences at a large comprehensive high school. By striving to

address the problem and pursue the stated purpose, this study was able to generate findings from the analysis of data.

This fourth chapter describes the nine categories that emerged from the data analysis and the properties associated with these categories. A qualitative study was chosen because of the understanding that reality is socially constructed. People make sense of their current “reality” based on previously interpreted experiences that exist as the knowledge based in the brain from which people draw in the sense-making process. Therefore, the most appropriate theoretical orientation for analyzing the data was phenomenology. Through the use of this theoretical orientation, 10 participants were provided with the opportunity of giving voice to their experience. The researcher sought to internalize their voices in his own pursuit of becoming a more effective administrator, in engaging in activism to change the education system to meet the needs of all students in an increasingly communication-oriented society with a global economy driven by knowledge creation, and in providing an opportunity for school administrators and other stakeholders to gain insights into the need for transformative change of the very education system itself.

Semistructured Interview Questions

Phenomenological research is based on the understanding that people experience phenomena and that those experiences can be described. In order to provide a context for eliciting responses from participants in this study who experienced the phenomena of attending both the same comprehensive high school and transferring to and attending the same continuation high school as a result of being labeled *at risk* of failing school, 10 semistructured questions were developed that guided the interviews. The researcher

sought to probe as deeply as possible the perceptions of the participants using the following questions:

1. How did you feel about yourself, others, and the school as a result of being labeled at risk while you were going to a large comprehensive high school?
2. How did being an at-risk student relate to your intentions, goals, and values about your future in school?
3. How did being an at-risk student relate to your intentions, goals, and values about your future in life beyond school?
4. There seems to be a growing criticism that large comprehensive high schools are outdated given this technological (or advanced) world. How would you change education so that students no longer were labeled at risk?
5. Describe a teacher who helped you in terms of the way he or she taught, the way he or she interacted with you, and the ways he or she worked with you. Was this person teaching at the comprehensive high school or continuation school?
6. Describe a teacher whose teaching and interactions with you made learning more difficult for you. Was this person teaching at the comprehensive high school or continuation school?
7. How did you feel about the STAR (standardized) tests that you were required to take?
8. There is concern about the need for schools to be relevant (or important) to the lives of students. In what ways was the comprehensive high school relevant (or important) or not relevant (or important) to you?
9. In what ways was the continuation high school relevant (or important) or not relevant (or important) to you?

10. What were the differences between the comprehensive high school and the continuation high school?

Once the categories and their properties were identified, the researcher sought to strengthen the credibility of the findings. This was done by searching back through the review of the literature to make connections between the categories identified in this study and findings from the review of the literature. In qualitative research, this is called theoretical sensitivity. Holloway (1997) described the role of the researcher in that he or she needs to be “sensitive to the important issues in the data . . . theoretical sensitivity derives from professional and person experiences. A thorough knowledge of relevant literature and interaction with an immersion in the data also contribute to this awareness” (p. 153). The researcher attained theoretical sensitivity through this process.

Overview of Categories That Emerged From the Data

After the analysis of data was conducted, nine categories and properties that further described them were written. Participants were unanimous in indicating that their experiences at the large comprehensive high school impacted them negatively in terms of reported feelings of low self-esteem. Four of the categories dealt with these experiences at the comprehensive high school. Participants also were unanimous in indicating that their experiences at the continuation high school impacted them positively in terms of reported increased self-esteem whereby they felt more confident and competent at the smaller school, which enabled them to graduate from high school. These perceptions of experiences were described thickly in the other four categories.

In addition to strengthening the credibility of the findings through the use of theoretical sensitivity, the researcher also strengthened credibility through verification of

the findings with the participants themselves. Member verification was critical because it deals with the issue of accuracy. Thus, the researcher contacted each of the participants and shared with them both the categories and properties. The participants verified that both the categories and the properties were accurate. This also meant that the researcher attained trustworthiness in that he faithfully rendered the voices of the participants.

The first category that emerged from all respondents was the students' perceptions of the school culture at the comprehensive high school. The second category was the students' perceptions of the school culture at the continuation high school. The third category was the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the instruction at the comprehensive high school. The fourth category was the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the instruction at the continuation high school. The fifth category was the students' perceptions of the teacher-student relationship at the comprehensive high school. The sixth category was the students' perceptions of the teacher-student relationship at the continuation high school. The seventh category was the students' beliefs and feelings about themselves while enrolled at the comprehensive high school. The eighth category was the students' beliefs and feelings about themselves while enrolled at the continuation high school. The ninth and final category was the students' perceptions and beliefs about the STAR testing.

Category 1: School culture at the comprehensive high school. Participants articulated concerns regarding the large size of the school and classes and lacking a sense of belonging. They believed the school culture made it difficult to connect to teachers, and oftentimes they were pushed away or unhappy due to the “drama” caused mostly by

their peers. The students defined drama as intentional verbal or physical harassments from peers that included conflicts, arguments, and even physical altercations.

Overview of properties of Category 1. Concerns regarding the school culture at the comprehensive high school are summarized in the numbered list that follows and are described more in detail in the paragraphs that follow:

1. Participants expressed a lack of sense of belonging and they described this using the following terms: *not connected* and *drama*.
2. Participants indicated that both the school itself and the class sizes of the courses they took were too large.

Experiences of not being connected to school and drama. The first property of this category was the recognition that the school culture of the comprehensive high school led participants to feel disconnected and out of place. They did not have a sense of belonging. In addition, the participants expressed that “drama” also led to them being less connected to the comprehensive high school. They defined drama as intentional verbal or physical harassment from their peers that created conflict and dissatisfaction and unhappiness at school. Oftentimes the drama would escalate to a physical altercation.

Large class sizes and large school campus. The second property involved the understanding that the class sizes and large school campus were detrimental to the success of the participants. The large school and class sizes made it more difficult for students to build relationships with their teachers. They felt that they were just a number and viewed solely in the role of student rather than as a complex person. The large size also made it difficult for students to get the support they needed to be successful.

Statements from participants around Category 1. Sample statements from participants illustrating the first property of this category—experiences of not being connected to school and drama—included the following:

- I felt like at the other school we were segregated and other students would drift away. There is more drama at the comprehensive high school. (PF1)
- [The comprehensive high school] was full of drama, fighting, rumors. (PM2)
- When I was at [the comprehensive high school] I felt like I didn't want to be there. The vibe is not there. (PM2)
- I was not too focused at [the comprehensive high school] because there's too many distractions there, way too many. [The comprehensive high school] is not too important. (PM2)
- My attendance was bad. I did not get a good vibe at that school. Not too many people like that vibe. The school gets paid for when students go to school. And I felt that [was] all they cared about. And it made me think about all the things that they do. They have all those activities. And the dances and stuff like that. The vibe was not a positive vibe. It was a kind of "you do whatever you want" vibe. The school is not there to push you to do better. It would say, "Okay, you are here at school and go to class." Bad vibe. The vibe was "take or leave the school the way it is or you can just leave." You either fit in or you don't fit in. Not too many people fit in to that school. You have to have your own little clique and that's it. And that was not a good vibe to be in. (PM2)

- There is a lot of drama at [the comprehensive high school], stuff happening every day. This person was angry at this person, this person fighting that person. (PM4)
- At the comprehensive high school you could be invisible there. It's a big thing and it's fun, but at the same time I really didn't like it. If you really had a hard time feeling needed or wanted or anything you don't get there. If you go you go, if you don't you don't. They didn't really care too much. Some of the teachers cared. Most of them don't; they were worried about getting paid. They worried about giving education to other kids. And if you're falling behind, they really don't follow up with you. (PF4)
- I felt like I was being separated and put in a different category. And not really being paid attention to as much as I was supposed to be doing. So I was put in a trashcan basically. (PM5)
- Some of teachers looked at me like a lost cause because I was not doing anything. And so they focus on everybody else. So that could've made it more difficult for me. I got it in my head that I was a lost cause. That made it harder too. That was at the comprehensive high school. (PM5)
- There were cliques and different groups and you hung out with your friends at [the comprehensive high school]. There were people you didn't get along with and stuff like that. (PM5)

Sample statements from participants illustrating the second property of this category—large class sizes and large school campus—were as follows:

- The comprehensive high school was a bigger environment; there is lot more things going on. There was more people. There are more students. (PF1)
- The comprehensive high school was way too crowded. There are just too many people. (PF2)
- The only thing that really bothered me was the class size. There were too many people; it was harder for me to focus with so many people around me. Smaller class sizes would help students from not being at risk. You can focus more instead of 30 other people. That is insane. That is way too many people for one classroom. (PF2)
- Not to be rude but I hated the comprehensive high school. They are not looked at as students, they are looked at as a number [by teachers]. And whether you passed or failed they [teachers] would not care, in my opinion. (PF2)
- I think there needs to be smaller classrooms. That was one of my biggest problems there. The classrooms were too big where you cannot sit down and talk to the teacher if you didn't understand something. Some people are slow and it takes me a while to learn things. I was not able to talk to my teachers about things. So I usually failed or I was at a point that I knew was going to fail so I started not going. I gave up hope. (PM3)
- In the comprehensive high school not too many of the staff really cared about you. There's too many students in most situations for them [teachers] to know who you are. So unless you're like their favorite student, it doesn't really matter much to them. You really do end up feeling like you really do not have

an identity at the schools because you are not important to anybody. When I was at the continuation school that was completely different. You were important [to teachers, administrators, and other students] and school personnel really tried to work with you. They were concerned about you graduating. At the comprehensive school, they did not really care. That's just how it's going to be; if you're not going to graduate, too bad, we have like one million other students that we have to work with to make sure they do. It just doesn't matter. (PF3)

- While I was at [the comprehensive high school], I really did end up falling through the cracks. Around a third of the way into my senior year, I was completely erased out of the school system for a period of time. I learned of this when one of my teachers informed me that I was removed from their roll sheet, as did others as I went on through the days, and when I was sent to the office to inquire about it, they ended up asking if I was a new student that year when I had been there the previous 2 years. They told me that I must have accidentally been erased from the computer system and they would have to see if they could relocate my files. (PF3)
- I know at the comprehensive high school classes have doubled or tripled. I've heard of students that were standing. I like more of the one-on-one with the teacher, and the teacher does know me and can help me a lot better. Versus when they're 60 other students in the class and I am the one that got left behind. And I'm afraid to raise my hand because they're going so fast. That was a big problem too. (PM4)

- That was one of my biggest problems there. The classrooms were too big where you cannot sit down and talk to the teacher if you didn't understand something. (PM4)
- At [the comprehensive high school] I don't remember his name. His classroom would be so big that he was unable to circulate around the classroom to help students who were struggling. (PM4)
- The comprehensive high school was not important to me. I did not care for it very much. There was so many kids there that they really didn't look for every individual. If someone went missing, I don't think they would know that they are really gone. Or if something happened, I don't think they would really care. They were just there. If they went to school, they went to school. In such a place you just stop caring and teachers seem not to notice you. When I went there I think I missed 3 months of school and no one talked to me about it. I just came and went as I pleased. So I think they just give up on people. (PF4)
- The comprehensive high school was more generalized. And they had to work with the whole class, not just single people, because their classes were also a lot bigger. (PM5)
- The comprehensive high school was big; there are a lot of students. The comprehensive school, their teachers really didn't care. Some did, but most of them did not. At the continuation high school, all the teachers cared. They cared about us personally. At the comprehensive high school there was a lot of peer pressure, just because of all the students that were there. (PF5)

Literature theoretically related to Category 1. Theoretical sensitivity existed with this theme, as evidenced by the existing research literature:

- The school consolidation movement that began in late 1800s resulted in secondary schools increasing their size as a way of being cost effective in terms of efficiency (Guthrie, 1979).
- Modern high schools were designed in the Industrial Era. There was a shift from an agrarian model of education toward a factory model of education (Ford, 1922; Mitchell, 1992; Taylor, 1913). Small schools were consolidated and larger schools were centrally located in bigger communities (Reynolds, 1999). The goal of the consolidation of smaller, rural schools was twofold: (a) schools could be more efficient and effective in their instruction, and (b) the intent was that public education would be more uniform and consistent from one school to another (Reynolds, 1999).
- Similar to Henry Ford's implementation of the automobile assembly line, secondary schools were agencies of mass education (Church, 1976).
- The report from the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2004) was another example of perpetuation of the banking model or didactic model of education. Emphasis was placed on the "how" and "what" of teaching, not the "who" and "why" of teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2003). As a result, the curriculum-centered reform perpetuates the monocultural norm of schooling (Apple, 2006; Noguera, 2003) so that poor and traditionally underserved students do not see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Students who do not fit into the system or "box" of the traditional comprehensive model of education have been labeled at risk (Knoeppel, 2002).

- Large comprehensive high schools, especially those serving students of color and poverty, have failed students (Poplin & Weeres, 1992).
- Typically, at-risk students have dropped out of school based on disengagement from school as a result of years of discouragement and academic failure (Berliner & Barrat, 2009).

Category 2: School culture at the continuation high school. Participants articulated that the school culture at the continuation high school was positive and conducive to learning. The “family-like” and friendly culture of the continuation high school was a significant component that led to the participants’ academic and personal success. The participants expressed that the smaller school and class sizes were important to them.

Overview of properties of Category 2. Statements regarding the school culture at the continuation high school are summarized in the numbered list that follows and are described more in detail in the paragraphs that follow:

1. Participants used the terms *family-like*, *friendly*, and *no drama* to describe the culture of the continuation high school.
2. Participants indicated that both the school itself and the class sizes of the courses they took were small and manageable.

A family-like, friendly school culture with no drama. The first property relates to the school culture of the continuation high school as welcoming and warm. The participants referred to the school as family-like, friendly, and having no drama. What the participants meant by “no drama” was that the school was peaceful and there was

little or no peer conflict. The participants also shared that they did not witness any major behavior incidents on campus, which included fights.

Small class sizes and small school campus characterized by relationality. The second property involved the understanding that the class sizes and small school campus were extremely important and positive to the success of the participants because of the relationality promoted.

Statements from participants around Category 2. Sample statements from participants illustrating the first property of this category—a family-like, friendly, close, and drama-free culture at the continuation high school—included the following:

- I think because they are genuinely interested in what's going on in your life and they're willing to see where you're coming from other than the teachers at the comprehensive high school. At the continuation high school, they know what's going on with your life; they are willing to help you through things. Not all high schools are like that. (PM1)
- When I came here, everybody was willing to work with me, and the fact that we had a counselor that I could talk to and how close we were was a big thing too. (PM1)
- The first one being close with each other. There were never any fights because everybody knew everybody. There is no getting in with a bad crowd. (PM1)
- Everybody's close with each other. It was almost like a family in a way. And that was a good thing. The teachers helping you through everything was a big thing. (PM1)

- I liked going to continuation school because we would be altogether. (PF1)
- Less drama at the continuation high school. When you went to [the continuation high school], there's no fighting, there were no rumors, and it was a more mature atmosphere. No drama. It was easier to focus. (PM2)
- And here I have that. I didn't have drama here. Like there weren't people at the continuation high school antagonizing other people's problems, because people didn't care here. It was a place to get your stuff done and you leave. You didn't have the drama or the parties and everything else. (PF2)
- The continuation school was very important to me because I knew that I had to graduate. But more so than that, the teachers and everybody that was there cared more about you as a person, as a student; they care more about your life. You were not just another name or another number. They actually cared to know who you were. And they actually worked to help you graduate. That was important to them. And that kind of help was just amazing. It was exactly what some people needed was that kind of support, and they gave it. (PF3)
- When I was at the continuation school, that was completely different. Each student was considered important and teachers were committed to helping you understand what you were supposed to be learning. They were concerned about you graduating. (PF3)
- At the continuation high school, everybody was in the same boat and tried supporting each other. (PM3)

- If I miss school even a day, I would get a phone call and they would ask where I was at and why I was not in school. This showed that when I was absent, my absence was noticed, and I felt as though I was missed. Teachers also related to us. If we were just walking past them, all the teachers would say hi and laugh and talk. It was like a family. Everyone was together. Everyone would have their own little thing, but everyone knew each other. Everyone would talk to each other. There was not very much drama. It was nice. It was not like you're coming to school; you were coming to learn and get an education, which was a plus. It was more like a family. (PF4)
- The continuation school was smaller; it was more like family. There was no drama. You really did not have to worry about too much. Everyone knows everyone. (PF4)
- There was a lot less drama at the continuation high school, I would say. A lot less drama. At the continuation school, everybody was friends with everybody. I think I saw one person argue in a serious way that let us know he was not clowning around. It was a much more close-knit friend network, I would say. (PM4)
- Everyone got along with each other for the most part. The continuation high school was more laid back. It was more relaxed. I felt more comfortable. (PM5)
- But at the continuation school it was smaller, more like a family, the whole school in general. (PM5)

- [The continuation high school] was where you could be more of yourself and not worry about what others think of you. That was a big one. The ability to go to school and be yourself and not worry about being labeled something like at [the comprehensive high school]. That was a big one. That was a big difference. (PM5)
- It was important because it was small and there are only a few of us and there was no cliques. We kind of cliqued as a family, and the teachers helped us by understanding. They sat with us. They talked with us. They got to know us, instead of just thinking we're just a student. (PF5)

Sample statements from participants illustrating the second property of this category—small class sizes and small school campus—included the following:

- I think they liked it too because they did not have big classes. It was more of a one-on-one thing. They were able to see students that they personally know graduate, and that was a good feeling for them. (PM1)
- It was a smaller environment where I can interact with everyone. I did not feel as motivated as I did at the continuation high school. (PF1)
- The continuation high school was completely different. It helped me a lot more being here, because there is less people and it wasn't so crowded, and teachers actually call you by your name and know who you are. It was easier for me to understand and learn with less people around me. The size was a big difference. It is more close knit here. (PF2)
- It was smaller classrooms. (PM4)
- The continuation school was smaller. (PF4)

- But at the continuation school it was smaller, more like a family, the whole school in general. Everyone got along with each other for the most part. And the classes were smaller. (PM5)
- The continuation high school was smaller. There is just a group of us. Everyone got along with each other for the most part. And the classes were smaller. (PF5)

Literature theoretically related to Category 2. Theoretical sensitivity existed with this theme, as evidenced by the existing research literature:

- The 1989 Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development report, *Turning Points*, placed an emphasized on small learning communities and success for all students.
- Usually, at-risk students do not fit into the traditional high school and transition to an alternative program because they are more comfortable in a smaller learning environment (Hoy & DiPaola, 2009).
- Kratzert and Kratzert (1991) explained, “The continuation high school is concerned with helping students find some measure of educational success, which has eluded them in their previous school placement” (p. 13).
- Continuation schools were designed to better support at-risk students through a smaller, more personal learning environment with greater flexibility than a traditional high school (Hoy & DiPaola, 2009; Knoepfel, 2002, 2007; Kratzert & Kratzert, 1991).

Category 3: Effectiveness of instruction at the comprehensive high school.

Participants articulated concerns regarding the effectiveness of the instruction that was offered at the comprehensive high school. Overall, they did not feel supported and they felt that there was not sufficient feedback on their academic progress.

Overview of properties of Category 3. Concerns regarding the effectiveness of the instruction at the comprehensive high school are summarized in the numbered list that follows and are described more in detail in the paragraphs that follow:

1. Participants used the terms *did not get it* and *did not get help* to describe the instruction at the comprehensive high school.

Did not get it and did not get help. The property involved the lack of academic support participants received while taking various courses at the comprehensive high school.

Statements from participants around Category 3. Sample statements from participants illustrating the property of this category—the terms *did not get it* and *did not get help* to describe the instruction at the comprehensive high school—included the following:

- The incident with [the comprehensive high school] teacher was a turning point for me. I asked her for help because I was having trouble. I told her I had my rough draft done and I wanted to rewrite the paper so that it was good. She was letting other students turn in the paper the next day. I asked her if I could turn the paper in the next day, I just need to rewrite it, and she said no, it was too late. Being labeled as that student was not a good thing; it doesn't help you at all. (PM1)
- When I asked that teacher for help so that I could understand, the teacher dismissed me and told me I had to do the work on my own without help. This led me to feel like I was pushed away and shut down. But I just couldn't do the work at school. I didn't get it. (PF1)

- I was labeled as an at-risk student and they were not willing to help out. They were thinking, “Why help the student?” that “they’re an at-risk student; they’re going to fail anyway, what’s the point of helping them?” (PF1)
- The teachers I felt wouldn’t have the time to give me one-on-one time to help me with my homework. When I would ask a question, I felt they knew that I was struggling but would not take the time to respond to my asking for help. I felt like an outcast being in a position that I felt lower than anyone else. (PF1)
- The teachers singled you out and put you aside if you don’t understand, kicked you out of class if you ask someone for help. (PM2)
- He gave us work packets of duplicated materials and we were supposed to complete the work by using the book. Instead of helping us, he said that everything was in the book. I just was unable to go home and read a book by myself. I could read books for fun, but I hated reading school books. I just don’t get it. He would just give us all these pamphlets every week and all this homework. I totally just didn’t understand it. It would confuse me. It was really hard. I just don’t like reading out of the book by myself. I would rather do it in class or something. The teacher would help us after we already turned it in for a grade, but it was too late. I did not like that. (PF2)
- I think everything they teach us was a little one-sided. Teachers taught in the same way by telling you what you were supposed to remember. Everything they teach you, they teach you in one way. Every teacher taught in the same way of simply telling you what you were supposed to remember. Honestly, I never thought that any the teachers cared that much. None of the teachers

would try to go at a personal level with you and try to figure it out. They never planned something for you if . . . for example, if you were ahead of the class, they didn't care; you would get the same work as everyone else. There was nothing personal about it. I think teachers need to be more personal with their students and be able to work with their students better. When you asked them that I would not understand and they would tell you that this is just the way it is. They would never help you understand what it was. (PF3)

- [A comprehensive high school] teacher didn't talk to his students at all. He would end up putting the work on the board and just tell us to do it. And that would be it. He would not help any of the students. He always seemed more concerned with his own thing. He talked about himself for about 30 minutes in the class. And that doesn't help anybody at all. (PF3)
- A [comprehensive high school] teacher only believed in writing down definitions of every term, and we sat there having to recite them. He basically gave us the [specific subject] homework and we sat there and worked on it, then he would add more on top of that although there was no real definition to it. When we did ask for help, he sat there and tried to help you, except he would go back to the definition that we wrote down. The teacher was not too helpful. The teacher was at the comprehensive high school. (PM3)
- The teachers seemed like they didn't really care to help me with things. The only one that helped was a substitute teacher. (PF4)
- If you really had a hard time feeling needed or wanted or anything, you don't get there. If you go, you go; if you don't, you don't. They didn't really care

too much. Some of the teachers cared. Most of them don't; they were worried about getting paid. They worried about giving education to other kids. And if you're falling behind, they really don't follow up with you. (PF4)

- At [the comprehensive high school], I don't remember his name. I would get some of the stuff but I would have questions and I would ask him and he would try to answer them, but someone else had a question, and without finishing to help me, he went to help the other student. So I got left behind and I did not understand the material just yet. So I couldn't do my homework. I would get the questions wrong and he would mark them wrong, and I started failing that class. The teacher was not helpful. The teacher wasn't flexible. He would say, "We are falling behind so today we have to double the work." And I would tell him that I barely got the stuff from last week, how am I supposed to double the work this week, and I'm not going to get it. He said it is up to me what I would get it or not. (PM4)
- The school, the teachers would not really help. They didn't care. So it didn't exactly give me the help that I needed to keep my credits up, because they would never explain anything. (PF5)
- I would change the way teachers and students communicate at the high school. I want teachers to talk about my failing and help me in ways that resulted in my success. Teachers did not seem to try to help students understand what was not being done correctly. These teachers were unable to just put themselves in our shoes instead of their shoes, and this would have helped them realize that everyone was different and needed different types of

support. These teachers needed to be more lenient and flexible in working with diverse students. (PF5)

- At the comprehensive high school, she was my [specific subject] teacher. She never really actually sat down with us as a class and helped us. If we had a question, she would just kind of blow it off and not explain it to us. (PF5)

Literature theoretically related to Category 3. Theoretical sensitivity existed with this theme, as evidenced by the existing research literature:

- Paul (1992) wrote, “Most instructional practice in most academic institutions around the world presupposes a didactic theory of knowledge, learning, and literacy, ill-suited to the development of critical minds and literate persons” (p. 35).
- Key factors that lead students to fail academic classes at the comprehensive high school include inflexibility and lack of support from their teachers (Poplin & Weeres, 1992). In such school settings, at-risk students have fallen behind, have had little opportunity to retake failed classes, and have been unable to recover lost credit (Berliner & Barrat, 2009).

Category 4: Effectiveness of instruction at the continuation high school.

Participants shared their experiences regarding the effectiveness of the instruction at the continuation high school. They articulated that the teachers were supportive and helpful toward them and were willing to help. One-on-one teacher attention was also a significant factor in the success of the participants.

Overview of properties of Category 4. Statements regarding the effectiveness of instruction at the continuation high school are summarized in the numbered list that follows and are described more in detail in the paragraphs that follow:

1. Participants used the terms *one-on-one*, *individualized*, *helpful*, and *willing to work* with them to describe the instruction at the continuation high school.

One-on-one, individualized, helpful, and willing to work with them. The main properties of one-on-one support and the teachers' willingness to work with the participants were extremely important and positive to the success of the participants.

Statements from participants around Category 4. Sample statements from participants illustrating the property of this category—the terms *one-on-one*, *individualized*, *helpful*, and *willing to work* with them to describe the instruction at the continuation high school—included the following:

- They sit down with the students; it was more of a one-on-one type of thing. And I think doing that, it was nobody's fault except theirs if they failed it; if they didn't want to do the work, that is their fault. Teachers do whatever they can to help you pass, and everybody sits down with you and tries to get you to succeed in school. But if you don't, then it's your own fault. For the school's sake, for the education sake, to make so there's no longer students that are labeled at risk, I think what [the continuation high school] is doing is perfect. They sit down with their students and discuss with their students everything that needs to be done. (PM1)
- My biggest teacher that helped me out a lot was [a specific teacher] at the continuation high school. He worked with me one on one. He was the one that helped me graduate. All the teachers here, they helped me graduate. [A specific teacher] did something cool to help students. Of course he had his normal class and he also had this table where he sat. He said, "If you

understand the work, you can do it; for those who need help, come over here to this table and I will help all of you.” Sometimes all the students would go up there, and the ones that did do it did their work at their desk. And that’s why they were sitting away from everybody. For the students who needed help, he’s the one who invited them in. It was nothing embarrassing; there were a whole bunch of students that did that. And sometimes it would just be with him one on one. He’s the only one that actually sat down with me and explained what certain things mean and how certain things work; that was a big thing for me. And I remember when [a specific staff member] was a teacher and she was a counselor. She had a personal relationship with each student and she knew how students get along with each other. That was a big thing too. All the teachers were genuinely interested in helping you graduate. I was not pushed away from any of them. They were all willing to help. I think they liked it too because they did not have big classes. It was more of a one-on-one thing. They were able to see students that they personally know graduate, and that was a good feeling for them. (PM1)

- The teachers paid attention to who you are more. They feel like if you need help with something, they would go out of the way and look at the paper with you. I remember my English teacher sat with me and told me there was something wrong with my paper so you have to look through it. (PF1)
- In continuation high school, you wanted to get it done. There were teachers that would help you. There was a little class. There was more one on one. You know what I mean? There were more teachers that realized what their

students wanted to become. There were teachers that would say you should look into this. At a continuation high school, they had seen it and other students have seen it. You're able to see more. I like going to continuation school because we would be all together. (PF1)

- The real big difference is from the continuation high school to the comprehensive high school that teachers at the continuation high school seem to be more actually focused on their work and helping everybody get somewhere. They were not just working the clock from point A to point B and getting each student in every period; they sat there, took time and talked during breaks, and figured out everything they could do, while the comprehensive high school would say, "This is just how much time we have; try again the next day." (PM3)
- It was important because the teachers actually showed interest in each student and they work with you to figure out what you needed and what it was that you did. And they sat and figured out what they could do to help you actually get further and get interested in what you are working on. (PM3)
- I was always in English class, and that was my favorite thing to do. I love English, I love writing. I have been writing for years. None of the teachers at the comprehensive high school would understand that. I would be ahead of the class. Most of their projects would end up boring me. It was stuff that I already knew and I already learned. All the other students needed to know, but I didn't. They would expect me to do it all. We would spend a week on the same thing, on that thing that I already knew about. When I went to the

other school, for example, the English teacher quickly learned that I was already ahead of most the class. We ended up coming up with our own plan on how to get the rest of my English credits and do my English work. I ended up reading certain books that were higher in my level, and she tested me on those higher level books. They were with me on a personal level. We would work through things. We discussed what I needed to do and worked with me that way. (PF3)

- The continuation high school was more individualized. If I was ever falling behind, I can always go to the teacher and say that I really didn't get that and it would help me. (PM4)
- He sat down with me. He taught me everything. That's how I passed my class. He talked to me, he showed me how to do it and how to do it on a calculator. It was at the continuation high school. He would sit there and talk to you about everything. He would work through every single problem with me. He worked with me one on one. The teacher cared about me and he fed me. (PF4)
- The teachers, when you're falling behind, will sit with you and work with you. If you need help with certain things, you could go to them. Even if you need help with your personal life, you could talk to them, they were there. You can get through more I think. It makes your education and your high school memories a lot better too. (PF4)
- When I went to the continuation high school, it was a completely different experience. I started . . . people started actually help me with my stuff. They

would say, “You don’t get that, try this; if that doesn’t work for you, try this.”

They try to help me get it and understand the material and understand this, that. I was actually starting to pass my classes and learn something, I would say. So it did start to become important to me. I wanted to go to school; my mother wasn’t making me. I wanted to go to school. So that was a big difference. I was doing it for me. If I was ever falling behind, I can always go to the teacher and say that I really didn’t get that and they would help me. (PM4)

- If I needed help, I could always go to [a specific teacher]. If I needed extra time, I could ask her questions. It was smaller classrooms. If you had a question, you can ask her and she would answer it to the best of her ability. And that helped. I had a lot more access to the teacher. (PM4)
- If you have problems, you could go and the teacher would teach with you and help you understand the curriculum stuff so that you would get it. The continuation high school was more laid back. (PM5)
- My math teacher broke down the questions and he worked with me one on one on every step to math. And he sat with me and talked to me about the terms of mathematical problems and helped me understand everything. The teacher was at the continuation school. (PF5)

Literature theoretically related to Category 4. Theoretical sensitivity existed with this theme, as evidenced by the existing research literature:

- The overarching focus was on the students themselves and how they learned most effectively, rather than an emphasis on efficiency that was based on the running of factories (Washburne, 1952).
- Two central components of Dewey's theory were continuity and interaction. Continuity pertained to the idea that people's life experiences contributed to their futures. Interaction referred to the situational influence on one's experiences. In other words, one's present experience is a function of the interaction between one's past experiences and the present situation. Dewey (1956) believed that learning occurred within the context of transacting meaning through discourse between students and their teachers. Dewey argued that educators were responsible for providing students with experiences that necessitated thinking and problem solving within real-life contexts.
- Continuation schools can adapt and modify how the curriculum is delivered to students. Teachers are able to implement a plethora of instructional strategies to best meet the needs of at-risk students (Hoy & DiPaola, 2009; Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008).
- Knoeppel (2002) explained, "Because of their flexibility, continuation school teachers often reach the most difficult students" (p. 4).

Category 5: Teacher-student relationship at the comprehensive high school.

Participants described their relationship with their teachers at the comprehensive high school. They expressed concerns regarding being labeled at risk and the lack of care and concern their former teachers had for them.

Overview of properties of Category 5. Participants' concerns regarding being labeled and lack of care from their teachers are summarized in the numbered list that follows and are described more in detail in the paragraphs that follow:

1. Participants used the terms *labeled* and *did not care* when they referred to interactions with their teachers and how they were treated.

Labeled and did not care. The main property of being labeled and having teachers who did not care involved the understanding that the teacher-student relationship at the comprehensive high school negatively impacted the success of the participants.

Statements from participants around Category 5. Sample statements from participants illustrating the main property of this category—being labeled and having teachers who did not care at the comprehensive high school—included the following:

- Being labeled as that kind of student, it's stopped the teachers and everybody from, you know, trying to help me with the things. That pushed me away from my own personal goals with school. And when the teachers aren't willing to sit out with you or anything, it's just if you don't . . . basically being labeled as an at-risk student is not going to motivate me to pass my classes.
(PM1)
- I had a teacher at [the comprehensive high school] and I was writing a paper and I asked her about it, and I think because I was labeled as a student that was failing, she was not interested in helping me out. I felt like why even try if I'm not going to be given a chance to . . . and even when I tried, I got pushed away. (PM1)

- I needed help mainly because of my lack of homework, I felt as though I wasn't as motivated. I thought because I was labeled at risk with some teachers I felt I couldn't meet their standards in passing the course. (PF1)
- I felt like I was probably not going to make it because the school doesn't have your back and they don't tell you the options, and that is not many. To be labeled at risk is a major thing over there. They really don't support you in the ways of helping you reach . . . there's really no options, it is straightforward. And that is it. They wouldn't give you the time of day to help you understand what they were teaching. (PM2)
- I never felt different or was never treated differently because of being labeled at risk. My teachers would sometimes make me do things aloud just because they knew I wasn't good at it. So they thought that making me do it out loud would embarrass me, but in reality it totally didn't. It made me want stop trying even more. (PF2)
- Honestly I never thought that any the teachers cared that much. None of the teachers would try to go at a personal level with you and try to figure it out. There was nothing personal about it. I think teachers need to be more personal with their students and be able to work with their students better. (PF3)
- The comprehensive school, their teachers really didn't care. Some did, but most of them did not. At the comprehensive school, they did not really care. That's just how it's going to be; if you're not going to graduate, too bad, we

have like one million other students that we have to work with to make sure they do. (PF3)

- If you really had a hard time feeling needed or wanted or anything, you don't get there. If you go, you go; if you don't, you don't. They didn't really care too much. Some of the teachers cared. Most of them don't; they were worried about getting paid. They worried about giving education to other kids. And if you're falling behind, they really don't follow up with you. The comprehensive school, their teachers really didn't care. Some did, but most of them did not. (PF4)
- Once I was labeled at risk, they were telling me I was messing up. I kind of got discouraged. The only reason why I went to school was because I had to go, not because I wanted to. Then I just kept doing worse and worse. I started failing more classes. I would show up for the classes, but I would not get the material and not do anything and sit there, basically. It was not important to me. But it was important to my mother, actually, to go. So I went. What am I going to do? I guess I'll go. I didn't really have a choice, I guess. So to me it was really not important at all. (PM4)
- They didn't seem like they cared about you individually. It seemed to me like all they cared about was their paychecks. Every student is different, and I think that maybe if they took the time to understand us. I would think that they were so hostile. Especially when my Mom died. I felt no sympathy. (PF5)
- The school, the teachers would not really help. They didn't care. So it didn't

exactly give me the help that I needed to keep my credits up, because they would never explain anything. I think that in reality they just didn't care about anyone. Not just me, but all the students. I don't think they helped anyone. (PF5)

- Because of my label, they [the teachers] decided since I was at risk, I was less important. (PM5)

Literature theoretically related to Category 5. Theoretical sensitivity existed with this theme, as evidenced by the existing research literature:

- Many students are at risk of failure due to a lack of connectedness or a lack of positive, caring student-teacher relationships (Poplin & Weeres, 1992).

Category 6: Teacher-student relationship at the continuation high school.

Participants communicated their experiences at the continuation high school in regard to the relationship they had with their teachers.

Overview of properties of Category 6. Statements regarding the teacher-student relationship at the continuation high school are summarized in the numbered list that follows and are described more in detail in the paragraphs that follow:

1. Participants used the terms *not labeled* and *teachers cared* when they referred to interactions with their teachers and how they were treated.

Not labeled and teachers cared. The key property of not being labeled and having caring teachers involved the understanding that the teacher-student relationship was an important aspect to the success of the participants at the continuation high school.

Statements from participants around Category 6. Sample statements from participants illustrating the key property of this category—not being labeled and having teachers who cared at the continuation high school—included the following:

- I think because they are genuinely interested in what's going on in your life and they're willing to see where you're coming from other than the teachers at the comprehensive high school. At the continuation high school, they know what's going on with your life; they are willing to help you through things. Not all high schools are like that. Everybody needs help. Here the teachers genuinely care. (PM1)
- For the school's sake, for the education sake, to make so there's no longer students that are labeled at risk, I think what [the continuation high school] is doing is perfect. They sit down with their students and discuss with their students everything that needs to be done. (PM1)
- [The continuation high school] was where you could be more of yourself and not worry about what others think of you. That was a big one. The ability to go to school and be yourself and not worry about being labeled something like at [the comprehensive high school]. That was a big one. That was a big difference. (PM5)
- The continuation school was very important to me because I knew that I had to graduate. But more so than that, the teachers and everybody that was there cared more about you as a person, as a student; they care more about your life. You were not just another name or another number. They actually cared to know who you were. And they actually worked to help you graduate. That

was important to them. And that kind of help was just amazing. It was exactly what some people needed was that kind of support, and they gave it. When I was at the continuation school, that was completely different. You were important and I try to work with you. They were concerned about you graduating. (PF3)

- They were with me on a personal level. We would work through things. We discussed what I needed to do and worked with me that way. (PF3)
- If you need help with certain things, you could go to them. Even if you need help with your personal life, you could talk to them, they were there. (PF4)
- At the continuation high school, all the teachers cared. They cared about us personally. (PF5)

Literature theoretically related to Category 6. Theoretical sensitivity existed with this theme, as evidenced by the existing research literature:

- Other, less obvious risk factors for students have included lack of connectedness or lack of positive, caring student-teacher relationships (Poplin & Weeres, 1992).
- Knoeppel (2002) wrote, “One of the very best things we do in continuation education is come to know our students” (p. 3). As a result, students’ academic and personal needs are better met (Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008).
- It is important for teachers to improve their relationship with their students. A caring relationship and a sense of belonging are critical for student success (Scott & Marshall, 2005).

Category 7: Participants' beliefs and feelings about themselves while at the comprehensive high school. Participants articulated concerns regarding their beliefs and feelings about themselves while they were enrolled at the comprehensive high school.

Overview of properties of Category 7. Concerns regarding the participants' beliefs and feelings about themselves are summarized in the numbered list that follows and are described more in detail in the paragraphs that follow:

1. Participants used the terms *shut-out*, *no goals*, *low*, and *no hope* as they described their feelings while at the comprehensive high school.

No future, no goals, low, and no hope. The main property of having no future or goals and feeling low is how the participants expressed their feelings and beliefs about themselves while they attended the comprehensive high school.

Statements from participants around Category 7. Sample statements from participants illustrating the key property of this category described participants' beliefs and feelings using terms like *no future*, *no goals*, *low*, and *no hope*. Students recognized this attitude and practice on the part of many teachers at the comprehensive high school. The following are statements that emerged from the single property of the theme:

- It made me feel like I was shut out, you know, from other students and all that. I had my friends and all that, but I think being labeled as that, it stopped me from succeeding, from what I wanted to do. Being known as that kid that was failing high school in school and all that, it didn't really feel good; it doesn't really motivate you. With some other people, it motivates them, but I guess with me, just being brought down like that, I don't think it's really a

good thing. That's what drove me to not even pass my classes and being labeled as an at-risk student. (PM1)

- So in a way in class I did feel kind of almost alone, so I had to try to do everything on my own and I didn't. . . . I felt like why even try if I'm not going to be given a chance to . . . and even when I tried, I got pushed away. (PM1)
- I felt low thinking that other people were going to graduate and I did not know if I was going to graduate. . . . Being at risk put me in the low self-esteem category. (PF1)
- My goal at the time was to graduate, but I did not think of anything because I felt low and didn't think I could do it. I thought that I did not have the potential; that's what I meant by feeling low. . . . I felt like an outcast being in a position that I felt lower than anyone else. (PF1)
- When I was at [the comprehensive high school], I felt like I didn't want to be there. The vibe is not there. . . . I really felt like I had no future and I was falling behind. (PM2)
- Not to be rude, but I hated the comprehensive high school. They are not looked at as students, they are looked at as a number. And whether you passed or failed, they would not care, in my opinion. (PF2)
- I didn't really care about graduating while I was there. . . . I did not see a lot of hope. Ninety percent of the time I was frustrated. And I did not think that college was an option. (PF2)

- I felt really disappointed in myself. I knew that I could do everything that they are giving me, but it was just monotonous, over and over again with the same thing for a week. So I was so disappointed that I was failing everything. There is no way to progress since I fell so far behind. . . . The only thing that I discovered was being part of the lower track at the big high school. So I would have to be able to conform to just make it by for the rest of my life. (PM3)
- At the time when they told me that I was at risk, I didn't really think about college or anything. I was hoping that I would get a job somewhere and see what I wanted to do. But at that time it was not really in my head. What was in my head at the time was just trying to graduate. And when they told me that I felt, "Well what am I going to do now?" I felt discouraged. If there is no point of me graduating, why am I going to put forth more effort if there is no possibility? . . . But that's kind of what the school was telling me: "If you don't get this, you will not progress in life, and now you cannot even get a job at McDonald's without a high school diploma." It was looking pretty bleak. I thought, "What am I going to do with my life?" There's nothing that I could do, I guess. (PM3)
- It was scary being labeled at risk because it was my future that was at risk. It's not just that I was an at-risk student, it was my future that was at risk, because if you don't graduate there'll be issues about going to another school, trying to get a job, and everything. My whole future was at stake because of

it. It was scary. I was anxious. I was a little bummed out, but not too much.

(PF3)

- My future beyond school was not very bright. In reality, I would have to graduate from school in order to be anything successful in real life. I did not think that I had much of a future. (PF3)
- I felt pretty bad. I felt like I messed up. I felt like I was being put in this group that I didn't belong in. But I got labeled that way, I guess. It's how I felt at the time when they told me. (PM4)
- When I found out that I wasn't going to graduate, I actually cried. I cried a lot. . . . I was also really depressed about not graduating. (PF4)
- I felt like I couldn't do it. I didn't have very strong self-esteem. . . . I felt like I could not reach my goals because I was failing. I was not getting help that I needed, and I got into the way of me believe in myself. I was discouraged. (PF5)
- I felt like I was being separated and put in a different category. And not really being paid attention to as much as I was supposed to be doing. So I was put in a trashcan basically. . . . I was just trying to get through it. I felt that it was hopeless. (PM5)
- I felt like I couldn't do it. I didn't have strong self-esteem. (PF5)

Literature theoretically related to Category 7. Theoretical sensitivity existed with this theme, as evidenced by the existing research literature:

- Anyon (1997) found that at-risk students tended to internalize the negative perception of being labeled at risk. This perception has often led to students feeling disappointed and believing they are failures.
- Giroux and Schmidt (2004) expressed that high-stakes testing and large schools exacerbate the achievement gap and leave a lot more students behind than they help.
- At-risk students' experiences and failures at large comprehensive high schools contribute to low self-efficacy and limit their aspirations and hopes about their future (Kerka, 2003).
- A lack of a personalized learning environment leads to lower student academic performance. Students are most successful in a caring and respectful learning environment (Zvoch, 2006).

Category 8: Participants' beliefs and feelings about themselves while at the continuation high school. Participants shared their beliefs and feelings about themselves while at the continuation high school.

Overview of properties of Category 8. Statements regarding the participants' beliefs and feelings about themselves while at the continuation high school are summarized in the numbered list that follows and are described more in detail in the paragraphs that follow:

1. Participants expressed their feelings of confidence, motivation, and relevancy as they described their experience at the continuation high school.

Confidence arising from connecting learning to relevance that led to motivation.

The key property was the experience of feeling confident as learners because students saw relevance in what they were learning and this led to intrinsic motivation such that

students attained competence. Thus, it involved the participants' internal beliefs and feelings about themselves while they were at the continuation high school.

Statements from participants around Category 8. Sample statements from participants illustrating the key property of confidence arising from relevancy and internal motivation were as follows:

- Teachers at the continuation high school made sure that they connected what we were learning to our lives so we could understand the relevance of what we were learning. I was able to make more real-life connections. The continuation school taught me to be more open and not afraid to ask questions. They helped them feel like they were not alone either. And I think that's what are the reasons why students fail classes. Everybody needs help. Here the teachers genuinely cared. Students are willing to help each other. (PM1)
- I did not feel as motivated as I did at the continuation high school. At the continuation high school, there was more people that wanted to do something. (PF1)
- When you go to [the continuation high school], the vibe was there. And I was real comfortable with everything. It was a positive vibe, and I felt wanted and needed to be there. That was a good thing; my confidence built up a lot. (PM2)
- I was actually starting to pass my classes and learn something, I would say. So it did start to become important to me. I wanted to go to school; my mother wasn't making me. I wanted to go to school. So that was a big difference. I was doing it for me. (PM4)

Literature theoretically related to Category 8. Theoretical sensitivity existed with this theme, as evidenced by the existing research literature:

- Students' academic and personal needs are better met in smaller and more personalized learning environments (Ruiz de Velasco et al., 2008).
- Freire (2008) believed that meeting the needs of the students should be the central focus of education. Students must be viewed as individual people with unique needs.
- Critical theory viewed the student as the most important element in education (Paul, 1992).
- Kerka (2003) stated, "Treating individuals holistically may provide sufficient protective factors to overcome a variety of risk factors, such as lack of attachment to a caring adult, health needs, and violence in the communities" (p. 3).
- Lan and Lanthier (2003) discovered in their research that a caring teacher-student relationship is vital for student success. Students want to be treated with respect. A caring relationship leads to increased student performance. Lan and Lanthier noted that academic factors cannot be separated from student affective factors. The teacher-student relationship determines a student's academic success or failure.

Category 9: Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) tests. Participants articulated concerns regarding entrenchment of the current content-standards and assessment-driven model of education, a model of education designed more for an industrial era than the 21st century.

Overview of properties of Category 9. Concerns regarding current assessment practices are summarized in the numbered list that follows and are described more in detail in the paragraphs that follow.

1. Participants indicated that the STAR tests were a “waste of time” and something they “had to do.”

Waste of time and something they had to do. The key property of the tests being a “waste of time” and something students “had to do” involved the understanding that the STAR assessments were mandatory under the law and the students did not find any value in the state assessments.

Statements from participants around Category 9. Sample statements from participants illustrating the key property in this category—STAR tests being a waste of time and something they had to do—included the following:

- It’s not graded towards you, so why would I even try? (PF2)
- I felt that they were very . . . I guess they’re trying to make people competitive and want to do good on them, but since there is no actual reward for doing well on them or even finishing it, it was just another test and a whole day for testing and it was further benefit [to the school] but there is no point to them. They were a waste of time. (PM3)
- I just bubbled and smiley faces. I did not really take them. I would just bubble them in to get done faster than everyone else. I didn’t think they meant anything. I just thought that it was a way for the school to get money. I made cool little bubble patterns. (PF4)
- I do not like it because it was pointless to me. We learned everything anyways so . . . I guess I get it. They want to see what we know to be able to change courses or anything in school. I do not really try on them. I don’t like tests. It was a good way to get out of school early. (PM5)

- We were not graded on it so it wouldn't fail us, but it would help us look back and see what we missed, what we needed help on, even though it was a waste of time, because we were not exactly getting graded on it. It was not a big part of us. (PF5)

Literature theoretically related to Category 9. Theoretical sensitivity existed with this theme, as evidenced by the existing research literature:

- The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS, 1991) report recommended the development of standards assessments that would ensure students would be proficient in key academic areas. This influenced the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that led to the current standardize assessment model in education (Winfield, 2007).
- With the passage of NCLB, states were mandated to implement annual standardized assessments to monitor students' and schools' progress (U.S. Department of Education, 2005).
- The results of the NCLB were to reinforce a curriculum-centered (didactic/banking/transmissive) model of education to the exclusion of a thinking-centered and learner-centered model (Ravitch, 2000).
- In the assessments-driven environment created by NCLB, students who did not perform well on standardized tests were viewed as "deficient" and at risk (England, 2005).

Summary of the Categories and Their Properties

Nine categories and 11 properties enabled the researcher to create thick descriptions of the experiences of participants at both the large comprehensive high

school they attended and at the continuation school they attended. Table 3 summarizes the nine categories and their properties.

Students perceived distinct differences between attending the same comprehensive high school and attending the same continuation high school. Table 4 describes those differences.

Summary

This chapter reported the findings from interviews conducted with participants. The first finding was that the participants were concerned about the school culture at the comprehensive high school. There were two properties in this category: (a) Participants expressed a lack of sense of belonging, and they described this using the terms *not connected* and *drama*, and (b) participants indicated that both the school itself and the class sizes of the courses they took were too large.

The second finding was that the participants' experiences with the school culture at the continuation high school were positive. There were two properties in this category: (a) Participants used the terms *family-like*, *friendly*, and *no drama* to describe the culture of the continuation high school, and (b) participants indicated that both the school itself and the class sizes of the courses they took were small and manageable.

The third finding was that the participants were concerned about the effectiveness of the instruction they received at the comprehensive high school. The one property in this category was that participants used the terms *did not get it* and *did not get help* to describe instruction at the comprehensive high school.

Table 3

Summary of the Categories and Their Properties

Category	Properties
Category 1: School culture at the comprehensive high school	Property 1: Participants expressed a lack of sense of belonging and they described this using the following terms: <i>not connected</i> and <i>drama</i> . Property 2: Participants indicated that both the school itself and the class sizes of the courses they took were too large.
Category 2: School culture at the continuation high school	Property 1: Participants used the terms <i>family-like</i> and <i>friendly</i> , and <i>no drama</i> to describe the culture of the continuation high school. Property 2: Participants indicated that both the school itself and the class sizes of the courses they took were small and manageable.
Category 3: Effectiveness of instruction at the comprehensive high school	Property 1: Participants used the terms <i>did not get it</i> and <i>did not get help</i> to describe instruction at the comprehensive high school.
Category 4: Effectiveness of instruction at the continuation high school	Property 1: Participants used the terms <i>one-on-one</i> , <i>individualized</i> , <i>helpful</i> , and <i>willing to work with them</i> to describe instruction at the continuation high school.
Category 5: Teacher-student relationship at the comprehensive high school	Property 1: Participants used the terms <i>labeled</i> and <i>did not care</i> when they referred to interactions with their teachers and how they were treated at the comprehensive high school.
Category 6: Teacher-student relationship at the continuation high school	Property 1: Participants used the terms <i>not labeled</i> and <i>teachers cared</i> when they referred to interactions with their teachers and how they were treated at the continuation high school.
Category 7: Participants' beliefs and feelings about themselves while at the comprehensive high school	Property 1: Participants used the terms <i>shut-out</i> , <i>no goals</i> , <i>low</i> , and <i>no hope</i> as they described their feelings while at the comprehensive high school.
Category 8: Participants' beliefs and feelings about themselves while at the continuation high school	Property 1: Participants expressed their feelings of confidence, motivation, and relevancy as they described their experience at the continuation high school.
Category 9: Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) tests	Property 1: Participants indicated that the tests were a "waste of time" and something they "had to do."

Table 4

Category Comparisons

Category	Comprehensive high school	Continuation high school
School culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students did not experience a sense of belonging. They felt disconnected from the instruction in the classroom, mastering academic subjects, and participation in extracurricular activities. • They indicated that the culture was impersonal but that there was drama around interpersonal relationships. The definition of drama was interactions of students designed to promote peer-to-peer emotional reactivity resulting in microaggressions verbally and/or physically. Spreading of rumors exacerbated the drama. • Drama constituted exclusionary practices in the form of cliques, whereby those who belonged were considered to be superior to those who were not. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students experienced a strong sense of belonging. This was modeled by school personnel in terms of interacting with students in a friendly way that conveyed an interest in them as human beings. • The support teachers provided in classrooms conveyed a culture of wanting students to succeed socially, emotionally, intellectually, and ethically. • There was little or no drama at school because of the interpersonal relationships established, both peer-to-peer as well as student to teacher. • There was the expectation that the school was inclusive in accepting all students. This eliminated the formation of cliques, as both students and staff shared the common goal of wanting students to attain academic mastery and graduate high school.
Effectiveness of instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students shared that they did not get enough feedback and support from their teachers. They believed that they were “shut-out” and the teachers turned their backs on them largely due to the at-risk label that they were given. • The harder the students tried to do the classwork, the more frustrated they became. • Students also expressed that they were not provided any flexibility with their individual learning styles and that the teachers mainly utilized a whole-class-direction instructional strategy. • Students were often denied help largely due to large class sizes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students felt that they received more one-on-one support and help from their teachers. • Teachers were flexible and created personalized learning experiences for the students. • The teachers were approachable and willing to work with the students. • Students found academic success when they had the necessary time to understand the concepts and standards that were taught. • All the students’ questions were fully answered by the teachers.

(continued)

Table 4 (*continued*)

Category	Comprehensive high school	Continuation high school
Teacher-student relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students expressed that more emphasis was placed on the curriculum and classwork and less on the students. • The lack of a caring and positive teacher-student relationship led to student disengagement. • The students stated that their teachers remained distant and formal with their relationship with them and rarely connected with them on a personal level. • An at-risk label led students to not connect with their teachers and give up hope of graduating from high school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students believed that the teachers cared about them as human beings. • Teachers understood the students' life circumstances and gave them the support necessary for them to be successful and graduate from high school. • Students were not labeled, and they were accepted and respected as people. • Students felt they were not a number but an important person in the family.
Participants' beliefs and feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students expressed feelings of disappointment, sadness, and hopelessness. • Poor self-esteem and self-image led students to believe they would not have a successful future after high school. • Students were not motivated to pass their classes and graduate from high school. • Some students thought about dropping out of high school because they considered themselves failures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students stated that their experiences were more relevant to their lives. Teachers made real-life connections in their instruction that made learning more meaningful to the students. • Students felt positive about their experiences, which increased their confidence and success. • Students expressed that they had hope of graduating.
STAR testing	Overall, students believed that standardize testing was a waste of time and was not relevant to them. They put forth little effort toward doing well on the tests. Students would go through the motions and pencil in multiple-choice answers without reading the questions.	

The fourth finding was related to the participants' statements regarding the effectiveness of the instruction they received at the continuation high school. The one property in this category was that participants used the terms *one-on-one*, *individualized*, *helpful*, and *willing to work* with them to describe instruction at the continuation high school.

The fifth finding was related to the teacher-student relationship at the comprehensive high school. The property in this category was that participants used the terms *labeled* and *did not care* when they referred to interactions with their teachers and how they were treated at the comprehensive high school.

The sixth finding was related to the teacher-student relationship at the continuation high school. The property in this category was that participants used the terms *not labeled* and *teachers cared* when they referred to interactions with their teachers and how they were treated at the continuation high school.

The seventh finding was related to the participants' beliefs and feelings about themselves while at the comprehensive high school. The one property in this category was that participants used the terms *shut-out*, *no goals*, *low*, and *no hope* as they described their feelings while at the comprehensive high school.

The eighth finding was related to the participants' beliefs and feelings about themselves while at the continuation high school. The one property in this category was that participants expressed their feelings of confidence, motivation, and relevancy as they described their experience at the continuation high school.

The ninth and final finding was related to the participants' concerns regarding the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) tests. The property in this category was that participants indicated that the tests were a "waste of time" and something they "had to do."

The categories and their properties were described using statements from the participants. To increase the credibility of the findings, a process called creating *theoretical sensitivity* was utilized. This is defined as studying the collective meaning of

the responses that constitute the category identified and then returning to the review of the literature to ascertain what similarities existed. In the next chapter, the conclusions and recommendations for further research are shared.

Chapter Five: Summary of Findings, Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Summary of the Study

The researcher conducted a phenomenological study because of his interest in the phenomenon that constituted the following problem statement: Comprehensive high schools have been unable to meet the needs of all students (Cotton, 2004). Various reform efforts have been implemented. One such effort has been the restructuring of large high schools into smaller learning communities. The Gates Foundation, for example, awarded millions of dollars in the form of federal grants to support such restructuring. However, the leaders of the foundation found that once the money was expended, schools tended to revert back to previous structures and ways of operating. This reform did not lead to change at the systems level, and schools operated according to a design based on the needs of an industrial society.

The failure of students to succeed in school is a critical problem. This is because the needs of an information-based society require people to possess informational and technological literacy so they can be involved in work requiring knowledge generation (SCANS, 1991). The difficulty is meeting the needs of all students. Studying the perceptions of students regarding their experiences of attending large comprehensive high schools before transferring to alternative high schools provided a way of examining the problem in this qualitative study.

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of at-risk students at a large comprehensive high school who transferred to an alternative high school. The perceptions of at-risk students were examined and described in terms of how the

comprehensive high school either supported or failed to address their academic, personal, and emotional needs. Insights were attained from the results of this study that may help teachers, counselors, and site and district administrators more effectively support at-risk students in comprehensive and alternative high schools. The 10 at-risk students who participated in this study consisted of five females and five males. All 10 students graduated from an alternative school. Students were interviewed regarding their perceptions of their experiences at a large comprehensive high school. Over the course of one month, participants were interviewed three times. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed immediately after each interview so that the data could inform the future interviews scheduled.

The following overarching research question was used to focus and organize the researcher's work throughout the dissertation process: What are the perceptions of 10 students regarding their experiences of not progressing in a large comprehensive high school, which put their graduation in jeopardy, but progressing and graduating in an alternative high school?

The theoretical orientation of this study was critical theory. Critical theory of education has reflected the progressivism of Dewey. Critical theory viewed the student as the most important element in education (Paul, 1992). It is a broad approach to challenge and destabilize established knowledge. It derives from the German Frankfurt School, which emphasizes that all knowledge is historically biased (Paul, 1992). Paul wrote, "Most instructional practice in most academic institutions around the world presupposes a didactic theory of knowledge, learning, and literacy, ill-suited to the development of critical minds and literate persons" (p. 35). School reform efforts have

essentially reinforced the banking or didactic model (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Ravitch, 1983).

Semistructured Questions

The 10 semistructured interview questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How did you feel about yourself, others, and the school as a result of being labeled at risk while you were going to a large comprehensive high school?
2. How did being an at-risk student relate to your intentions, goals, and values about your future in school?
3. How did being an at-risk student relate to your intentions, goals, and values about your future in life beyond school?
4. There seems to be a growing criticism that large comprehensive high schools are outdated given this technological (or advanced) world. How would you change education so that students no longer were labeled at risk?
5. Describe a teacher who helped you in terms of the way he or she taught, the way he or she interacted with you, and the ways he or she worked with you. Was this person teaching at the comprehensive high school or continuation school?
6. Describe a teacher whose teaching and interactions with you made learning more difficult for you. Was this person teaching at the comprehensive high school or continuation school?
7. How did you feel about the STAR (standardized) tests that you were required to take?
8. There is concern about the need for schools to be relevant (or important) to the lives of students. In what ways was the comprehensive high school relevant (or important) or not relevant (or important) to you?

9. In what ways was the continuation high school relevant (or important) or not relevant (or important) to you?
10. What were the differences between the comprehensive high school and the continuation high school?

Summary of Findings

Nine categories emerged, and each had one or more properties that enabled the researcher to develop thick descriptions of each category. The first finding was that the participants were concerned about the school culture at the comprehensive high school. There were two properties in this category: (a) Participants expressed a lack of sense of belonging, and they described this using the terms *not connected* and *drama*, and (b) participants indicated that both the school itself and the class sizes of the courses they took were too large.

The second finding was that the participants' experiences with the school culture at the continuation high school were positive. There were two properties in this category: (a) Participants used the terms *family-like*, *friendly*, and *no drama* to describe the culture of the continuation high school, and (b) participants indicated that both the school itself and the class sizes of the courses they took were small and manageable.

The third finding was that the participants were concerned about the effectiveness of the instruction they received at the comprehensive high school. The one property in this category was that participants used the terms *did not get it* and *did not get help* to describe instruction at the comprehensive high school.

The fourth finding was related to the participants' statements regarding the effectiveness of the instruction they received at the continuation high school. The one

property in this category was that participants used the terms *one-on-one*, *individualized*, *helpful*, and *willing to work* with them to describe instruction at the continuation high school.

The fifth finding was related to the teacher-student relationship at the comprehensive high school. The property in this category was that participants used the terms *labeled* and *did not care* when they referred to interactions with their teachers and how they were treated at the comprehensive high school.

The sixth finding was related to the teacher-student relationship at the continuation high school. The property in this category was that participants used the terms *not labeled* and *teachers cared* when they referred to interactions with their teachers and how they were treated at the continuation high school.

The seventh finding was related to the participants' beliefs and feelings about themselves while at the comprehensive high school. The one property in this category was that participants used the terms *shut-out*, *no goals*, *low*, and *no hope* as they described their feelings while at the comprehensive high school.

The eighth finding was related to the participants' beliefs and feelings about themselves while at the continuation high school. The one property in this category was that participants expressed their feelings of confidence, motivation, and relevancy as they described their experience at the continuation high school.

The ninth and final finding was related to the participants' concerns regarding the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) tests. The property in this category was that participants indicated that the tests were a "waste of time" and something they "had to do."

Discussion

Table 4 (repeated here for ease of reference) contains a comparison regarding participants' perceptions of their experiences while attending the same comprehensive high school and the same continuation high school from which they ultimately graduated.

An overall analysis of the content of Table 4 aligns with the findings from the major study conducted by Poplin and Weeres (1992). Students in the present study believed the instruction at their comprehensive high school was one-dimensional and mainly whole-class, direct instruction. Poplin and Weeres stated,

Many of their [the students'] classes require them to learn or memorize irrelevant things they perceive are not connected to their lives. . . . [S]tudents who do not do well in school or for whom schools hold low expectations often experience even more routine and boring activities. (p. 32)

Poplin and Weeres suggested that the more standardized and one-dimensional the delivery of the curriculum, the more disconnected students become.

Another significant resource, Miller's (1985) book, *Curriculum Perspectives and Practices*, clearly outlined two opposing viewpoints of pedagogy. Similar to Paul's (1992) comparison of critical theory and didactic theory of education, Miller (1985) also compared and contrasted these two opposing theories. Within Miller's didactic theory, content knowledge was defined as a fixed and unchangeable body of knowledge. Within this model, the role of the teacher was covering the curriculum or textbook and the role of students was passive acceptance of information transmitted, memorization, and recall of information on tests. The teacher, consistent with the theories of essentialism and perennialism, was viewed as the authority whose voice was the only one that mattered.

Table 4

Category Comparison

Category	Comprehensive high school	Continuation high school
School culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students did not experience a sense of belonging. They felt disconnected from the instruction in the classroom, mastering academic subjects, and participation in extracurricular activities. • They indicated that the culture was impersonal but that there was drama around interpersonal relationships. The definition of drama was interactions of students designed to promote peer-to-peer emotional reactivity resulting in microaggressions verbally and/or physically. Spreading of rumors exacerbated the drama. • Drama constituted exclusionary practices in the form of cliques, whereby those who belonged were considered to be superior to those who were not. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students experienced a strong sense of belonging. This was modeled by school personnel in terms of interacting with students in a friendly way that conveyed an interest in them as human beings. • The support teachers provided in classrooms conveyed a culture of wanting students to succeed socially, emotionally, intellectually, and ethically. • There was little or no drama at school because of the interpersonal relationships established, both peer-to-peer as well as student to teacher. • There was the expectation that the school was inclusive in accepting all students. This eliminated the formation of cliques, as both students and staff shared the common goal of wanting students to attain academic mastery and graduate high school.
Effectiveness of instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students shared that they did not get enough feedback and support from their teachers. They believed that they were “shut-out” and the teachers turned their backs on them largely due to the at-risk label that they were given. • The harder the students tried to do the classwork, the more frustrated they became. • Students also expressed that they were not provided any flexibility with their individual learning styles and that the teachers mainly utilized a whole-class-direction instructional strategy. • Students were often denied help largely due to large class sizes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students felt that they received more one-on-one support and help from their teachers. • Teachers were flexible and created personalized learning experiences for the students. • The teachers were approachable and willing to work with the students. • Students found academic success when they had the necessary time to understand the concepts and standards that were taught. • All the students’ questions were fully answered by the teachers.

(continued)

Table 4 (*continued*)

Category	Comprehensive high school	Continuation high school
Teacher-student relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students expressed that more emphasis was placed on the curriculum and classwork and less on the students. • The lack of a caring and positive teacher-student relationship led to student disengagement. • The students stated that their teachers remained distant and formal with their relationship with them and rarely connected with them on a personal level. • An at-risk label led students to not connect with their teachers and give up hope of graduating from high school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students believed that the teachers cared about them as human beings. • Teachers understood the students' life circumstances and gave them the support necessary for them to be successful and graduate from high school. • Students were not labeled, and they were accepted and respected as people. • Students felt they were not a number but an important person in the family.
Participants' beliefs and feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students expressed feelings of disappointment, sadness, and hopelessness. • Poor self-esteem and self-image led students to believe they would not have a successful future after high school. • Students were not motivated to pass their classes and graduate from high school. • Some students thought about dropping out of high school because they considered themselves failures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students stated that their experiences were more relevant to their lives. Teachers made real-life connections in their instruction that made learning more meaningful to the students. • Students felt positive about their experiences, which increased their confidence and success. • Students expressed that they had hope of graduating.
STAR testing	Overall, students believed that standardize testing was a waste of time and was not relevant to them. They put forth little effort toward doing well on the tests. Students would go through the motions and pencil in multiple-choice answers without reading the questions.	

The role of the teacher included being a strict disciplinarian capable of controlling a class while transmitting information that usually was irrelevant to the life of the student.

The perceptions expressed by the participants within this study also implied a poor or nonexistent student-teacher relationship. Poplin and Weeres (1992) discovered in their research that students were ignored, not cared for, and were treated negatively.

They shared, “Negative relationships were mentioned more frequently as students became older and more frequently by students of color” (p. 19). Miller (1985) suggested that teachers take a limited view of students. Students are not viewed as whole people, and their role is to accept and memorize the curriculum. Teachers keep their distance and do not meddle with students’ personal lives.

Participants’ self-perceptions while they attended the comprehensive high school were negative. They believed that they were failures and that they would not have a positive or productive future after high school. Participants expressed depression, sadness, and hopelessness. Poplin and Weeres (1992) indicated that students in the comprehensive high school felt a sense of despair and discouragement. They shared, “Teachers and staff have a sense that some students do not perform because they feel hopeless” (p. 37). Students translated their experiences and beliefs to larger societal issues, such as racism, poverty, and unemployment.

Implications

There were two implications from this study, and these arose in conjunction with research shared in this dissertation. The first was that the school consolidation movement that began as society transitioned from an agrarian era to an industrial era enabled students to experience schooling that socialized a majority for factory or manual labor jobs (Church, 1976; Reese, 2005). Large comprehensive high schools today continue to reflect the results of the school consolidation. As illustrated in this study, large comprehensive high schools do not serve the needs of all students. In a society impacted by a global economy driven by the knowledge industries, there is a need for a literate workforce. Given the knowledge that has developed regarding learning as the

construction of knowledge and that virtually all students can learn, in contrast to the previous assumption that innate intelligence governed capacity to learn that was used to justify the transmission of information to large groups of students with failure being the result of deficiencies in the student, school facilities and classroom sizes need to become smaller and more personal. Based on the findings in this study, when students attended a smaller school with a culture that supported interpersonal communication and inclusive relationships, students were able to succeed in mastering their learning, resulting in their graduation from high school. This revealed the power of personalized learning environments for students and how such environments transformed the beliefs of reluctant learners such that they became confident and competent learners.

The second implication was the teacher-student relationship. Participants shared that the supportive, personal relationships they had with their teachers were a vital part of their success at the continuation high school. The findings indicated that the participants sought help and support from their teachers at the comprehensive high school and most often were ignored. The students became discouraged and disconnected. The participants' academic and personal needs were met through a caring, positive relationship with their teachers at the continuation high school. Ultimately, it was this personal, caring relationship coupled with one-on-one academic support that led to the students' success. The participants expressed positive self-esteem and increased confidence while at the continuation high school. The participants had a renewed sense of hope of not only obtaining a high school diploma, but also about their future after high school.

Recommendations

There are three recommendations based on the findings of this research. The first recommendation is to study smaller, more personalized learning environments. The second recommendation is to study effective models, clearly based on philosophies such as progressivism and social reconstructionism, with a shared understanding of constructivist learning theory, such as the Metropolitan Engineering and Technology (MET) schools. The third and final recommendation is to study the importance of an increased emphasis on the teacher-student relationship.

The first recommendation is for research regarding smaller, more personalized learning environments. Thus, the research of Kathleen Cotton (2004) on optimum school size should be given serious consideration, and future research should examine differences between large high schools and smaller, more personalized ones.

The second recommendation is that successful smaller schools, such as the MET schools, should be studied as possible models in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, school size, and student success. The key philosophies of the MET schools are progressivism and social reconstructionism, and all staff members know how to teach according to the tenets of constructivism. These schools not only serve their students, but also their families and the community. The program's mission is to provide children the greatest breadth of academic and social diversity. They believe that the greatest array of educational experiences introduced to a child will yield the greatest set of interests in the future adult (Metropolitan Engineering and Technology Schools, 2011).

The MET schools clearly are based strongly on the philosophies of progressivism and social reconstructionism. Progressivism is the belief that (a) children learn best in experiences in which they have a vital interest and (b) children learn by transacting

meaning with others in the context of learning experiences. The overarching focus is on the students themselves and how they learn most effectively, rather than an emphasis on efficiency (Washburne, 1952). Social reconstructionism is a philosophy that emphasizes the addressing of social questions and a quest to create a better society and worldwide democracy. Reconstructionist educators focus on a curriculum that highlights social reform as the aim of education. Furthermore, these schools were developed by leaders who understood the importance of constructivist learning.

The third and final recommendation is to increase the emphasis on caring, supportive teacher-student relationships. Based on the findings of this research and the literature review on at-risk students, it is clear that a more personal, caring teacher-student relationship can lead to higher student achievement and a greater connection to school (Bradshaw et al., 2008; Calabrese et al., 2007; Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009; Stuht, 2008; Zvoch, 2006). Brown and Skinner (2007) developed an effective model of building trust with at-risk students that teachers and administrators need to consider.

Caring teacher-student relationships constitute a moral imperative that must drive the selection of educational philosophy and the theory of learning used in interacting with students. Without that foundation of trust and support, students will be less engaged and successful. The Brown-Skinner Model for Building Trust with At-Risk Students outlines five key recommendations. A summary of the recommendations are listed below:

1. *Listen*: “Listening is the first step in building a trusting relationship with at-risk students” (Brown & Skinner, 2007, p. 2). Heavy emphasis is needed by the teacher to be an empathetic and active listener. Before teachers try to prescribe advice, it is important that a trusting relationship is developed.

2. *Validate*: At-risk students' feelings should be respected and validated. One simple way to accomplish validation is for the teachers to summarize and clarify their understanding of the students' feelings. Teachers must refrain from passing judgment of students; however, there must be a balance of guiding students to make healthy and positive decisions.
3. *Problem solve*: When students present a dilemma, teachers should ask questions in order to create a problem-solving discussion. This allows the students to take time to think through the dilemma and create viable solutions. "Guiding at-risk students to take an active role in solving their problems provides life-long skills" (Brown & Skinner, 2007, p. 3).
4. *Positive*: "Showing at-risk students positive regard, unconditional caring, is the best way to create a trusting environment" (Brown & Skinner, 2007, p. 3). Educators must consistently show students how much they care, even in difficult times.
5. *Hope*: Hope is an intangible factor that can create a positive, caring relationship or push a student away in discouragement and sadness. Students need teachers and educators to believe in and encourage them. Students want to know that their teachers care about them and want them to succeed. "Educators are put in powerful positions to nurture an at-risk student's dream of a better life" (Brown & Skinner, 2007, p. 4).

Summary

The results, discussion, and implications drawn from this research reveal the need for a new paradigm of education. This paradigm would need to redefine what constitutes curriculum, the roles of teachers and students, instructional methodologies, the development of technological and information literacy, and family involvement. This

paradigm would need to evidence an ethic of care, because learning is relational and the expectations of adults for learners impact the success or failure of students. Learning within this paradigm would need to be relevant and based on real-world experiences. Finally, students would need to graduate with the knowledge necessary to give them the option of entering college or the workforce. This shift may occur if an increasing number of people conclude that the education system as we know it is obsolete.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Differences Between Didactic and Critical Theory

Table A1

Differences Between Didactic and Critical Theory

Subject	Didactic theory	Critical theory
Needs of the students	Students are taught <i>what</i> to think. Students are given information, facts, and details to memorize.	Students are taught <i>how</i> to think. Significant content should be taught through current life issues that stimulate students' interests.
Model of educated people	People are repositories of content and information. They are data banks that believe their understanding and knowledge is the truth.	People understand and can utilize problem solving strategies. They are fundamentally a seeker and questioner and are cautious in claiming absolute knowledge.
The nature of knowledge	Knowledge, truth and understanding can be transmitted from one person to another by lectures or verbal statements.	Knowledge and truth can rarely be transmitted from one person to another through verbal statements alone. Teachers can only facilitate the conditions in which students can understand and learn through thinking things through.
The desirable classroom environment	An emphasis is place on a quiet classroom with little classroom discussions. Students cannot effectively learn in classrooms where there is talking.	Quiet classrooms with little conversation are typically environments in which learning is <i>not</i> taking place. A classroom with focused student discussions on current issues is an example of where learning is taking place.
Depth versus breadth	It is more important to cover a great deal of knowledge or information verses a small amount in depth.	It is more important to cover a small amount of information in great depth. An emphasis is placed on critical thinking. Students must justify their conclusions.
Status of personal experiences	There is no place for personal experiences in education.	Personal experiences are a crucial part of the learning experience.

(continued)

Table A1 (*continued*)

Subject	Didactic theory	Critical theory
Assessment of knowledge acquisition	Students learn through drills of information and definitions. Students who effectively memorize and recite the facts and definitions prove their understanding and knowledge of those facts.	Students can often repeat definitions and provide correct answers, yet fail to fully understand the process of how the answer is derived. True understanding is demonstrated by students explaining their answers in their own words and the significance of the information.

Note. Adapted from *Critical Thinking: What Every Person Needs to Survive in a Rapidly Changing World*, by E. Paul, 1992, Dillion Beach, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking.

Appendix B
Gatekeeper E-mail

RE: students for research

Loomis, Corey

Sent: Wednesday, March 09, 2011 12:56 PM**To:** [REDACTED]**Attachments:** Approved.IRB.docx (38 KB)

Hello Mrs. [REDACTED],

My name is Corey Loomis and I am a doctoral student at the University of Redlands. I am emailing you to ask for your help in identifying ten "at-risk" students for my doctoral study. If possible, I would like the group to consist of five females and five males with a blend of ethnicities and backgrounds. I have attached my IRB that outlines the scope of the study.

Please contact me at your earliest convenience. I look forward to discussing this with you.

Sincerely,

Corey Loomis

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

FOR PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH STUDY INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

I would like to ask you to participate in a study I am doing. A critical problem is that traditional high schools are not meeting the needs of all students. When this happens, student can be labeled as “at risk” and be encouraged to transfer to an alternative program. I want to understand the experiences of students who transferred from a large traditional high school to a continuation school. I am interested in doing the study because research indicates that traditional high schools have not served the needs of all students. My reason for wanting to understand people’s experiences is to gain knowledge regarding how schools can be improved to serve students better.

I want to learn from graduates about their experiences. The experiences I want to understand are how the large traditional high school supported or failed to address your academic, personal, and emotional needs. Your involvement in my study could prove very helpful. Your insights may lead to the results of my study that reveal how teachers, counselors, and site and district administrators can do a better job of helping students in traditional and alternative high schools.

I want you to be able to make an informed decision as to whether or not you are willing to participate in my study. I want to assure you that I am not using any deception in my study. My main research question is: What were the experiences of students who transferred from a large traditional high school to a continuation school and graduated from this school?

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you meet the following criteria: (1) You attended the same large comprehensive high school, (2) You were labeled “at-risk of failing as either juniors or seniors at that school, (3) You transferred to a continuation school where you persevered and graduated high school.

If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed at the continuation school where you graduated. I will tape record the interviews. This is necessary so that I accurately record exactly what you say. I will then transcribe the taped interviews. I will analyze the transcriptions looking for commonalities and differences in people’s experiences. The interview should take between 45 – 60 minutes. You may be asked additional questions in the follow up meeting to be sure I verify my findings with you. Every effort will be made to respect your time and avoid inconveniences to you. There are no guarantees that you will receive any benefits from this study.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

Your decision whether or not to participate in the study will not prejudice your future relations with the schools included in this study.

If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

The Institutional Review Board at the University of Redlands has reviewed and approved the present research.

If you have any questions or additional questions at a later time, you can contact me, Mr. Corey Loomis, using my office phone number: (909) 790-8580. You may also contact me through

email: corey_loomis@redlands.edu. You also may choose to contact Dr. Philip Mirci who is overseeing my study. His office number is (909) 748-8795 and his email address is: philip_mirci@redlands.edu .

Questions regarding the rights of research subjects may be directed to the University of Redlands Institutional Review Board, Dr. Catherine Salmon at (909) 748-8672 or Catherine_salmon@redlands.edu

If you are willing to be interviewed for my study and understand all the information shared in this informed consent form, please sign in the space provided below. I will give you a copy of this form for you to keep.

Please Print Name

Date

Signature

Appendix D

Study Participant Pseudonyms

Table D1

Study Participant Pseudonyms

Participant pseudonym	Description
1. PM1	19-year-old Hispanic male
2. PF1	18-year-old Hispanic female
3. PF2	19-year-old White female
4. PM2	19-year-old Black male
5. PF3	19-year-old White female
6. PM3	19-year-old Hispanic male
7. PF4	19-year-old Hispanic female
8. PF5	18-year-old White female
9. PM4	19-year-old Hispanic male
10. PM5	18-year-old White male

Appendix E

Semistructured Interview Questions

1. How did you feel about yourself, others, and the school as a result of being labeled at risk while you were going to a large comprehensive high school?
2. How did being an at-risk student relate to your intentions, goals, and values about your future in school?
3. How did being an at-risk student relate to your intentions, goals, and values about your future in life beyond school?
4. There seems to be a growing criticism that large comprehensive high schools are outdated given this technological (or advanced) world. How would you change education so that students no longer were labeled at risk?
5. Describe a teacher who helped you in terms of the way he or she taught, the way he or she interacted with you, and the ways he or she worked with you. Was this person teaching at the comprehensive high school or continuation school?
6. Describe a teacher whose teaching and interactions with you made learning more difficult for you. Was this person teaching at the comprehensive high school or continuation school?
7. How did you feel about the STAR (standardized) tests that you were required to take?
8. There is concern about the need for schools to be relevant (or important) to the lives of students. In what ways was the comprehensive high school relevant (or important) or not relevant (or important) to you?
9. In what ways was the continuation high school relevant (or important) or not relevant (or important) to you?
10. What were the differences between the comprehensive high school and the continuation high school?

Appendix F

Summary of the Categories and Their Properties

Table F1

Summary of the Categories and Their Properties

Category	Properties
Category 1: School culture at the comprehensive high school	Property 1: Participants expressed a lack of sense of belonging and they described this using the following terms: <i>not connected</i> and <i>drama</i> . Property 2: Participants indicated that both the school itself and the class sizes of the courses they took were too large.
Category 2: School culture at the continuation high school	Property 1: Participants used the terms <i>family-like</i> and <i>friendly</i> , and <i>no drama</i> to describe the culture of the continuation high school. Property 2: Participants indicated that both the school itself and the class sizes of the courses they took were small and manageable.
Category 3: Effectiveness of instruction at the comprehensive high school	Property 1: Participants used the terms <i>did not get it</i> and <i>did not get help</i> to describe instruction at the comprehensive high school.
Category 4: Effectiveness of instruction at the continuation high school	Property 1: Participants used the terms <i>one-on-one</i> , <i>individualized</i> , <i>helpful</i> , and <i>willing to work with them</i> to describe instruction at the continuation high school.
Category 5: Teacher-student relationship at the comprehensive high school	Property 1: Participants used the terms <i>labeled</i> and <i>did not care</i> when they referred to interactions with their teachers and how they were treated at the comprehensive high school.
Category 6: Teacher-student relationship at the continuation high school	Property 1: Participants used the terms <i>not labeled</i> and <i>teachers cared</i> when they referred to interactions with their teachers and how they were treated at the continuation high school.
Category 7: Participants' beliefs and feelings about themselves while at the comprehensive high school	Property 1: Participants used the terms <i>shut-out</i> , <i>no goals</i> , <i>low</i> , and <i>no hope</i> as they described their feelings while at the comprehensive high school.
Category 8: Participants' beliefs and feelings about themselves while at the continuation high school	Property 1: Participants expressed their feelings of confidence, motivation, and relevancy as they described their experience at the continuation high school.
Category 9: Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) tests	Property 1: Participants indicated that the tests were a "waste of time" and something they "had to do."

Appendix G
Category Comparison

Table G1

Category Comparisons

Category	Comprehensive high school	Continuation high school
School culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students did not experience a sense of belonging. They felt disconnected from the instruction in the classroom, mastering academic subjects, and participation in extracurricular activities. • They indicated that the culture was impersonal but that there was drama around interpersonal relationships. The definition of drama was interactions of students designed to promote peer-to-peer emotional reactivity resulting in microaggressions verbally and/or physically. Spreading of rumors exacerbated the drama. • Drama constituted exclusionary practices in the form of cliques, whereby those who belonged were considered to be superior to those who were not. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students experienced a strong sense of belonging. This was modeled by school personnel in terms of interacting with students in a friendly way that conveyed an interest in them as human beings. • The support teachers provided in classrooms conveyed a culture of wanting students to succeed socially, emotionally, intellectually, and ethically. • There was little or no drama at school because of the interpersonal relationships established, both peer-to-peer as well as student to teacher. • There was the expectation that the school was inclusive in accepting all students. This eliminated the formation of cliques, as both students and staff shared the common goal of wanting students to attain academic mastery and graduate high school.
Effectiveness of instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students shared that they did not get enough feedback and support from their teachers. They believed that they were “shut-out” and the teachers turned their backs on them largely due to the at-risk label that they were given. • The harder the students tried to do the classwork, the more frustrated they became. • Students also expressed that they were not provided any flexibility with their individual learning styles and that the teachers mainly utilized a whole-class-direction instructional strategy. • Students were often denied help largely due to large class sizes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students felt that they received more one-on-one support and help from their teachers. • Teachers were flexible and created personalized learning experiences for the students. • The teachers were approachable and willing to work with the students. • Students found academic success when they had the necessary time to understand the concepts and standards that were taught. • All the students’ questions were fully answered by the teachers.

(continued)

Table G1 (*continued*)

Category	Comprehensive high school	Continuation high school
Teacher-student relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students expressed that more emphasis was placed on the curriculum and classwork and less on the students. • The lack of a caring and positive teacher-student relationship led to student disengagement. • The students stated that their teachers remained distant and formal with their relationship with them and rarely connected with them on a personal level. • An at-risk label led students to not connect with their teachers and give up hope of graduating from high school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students believed that the teachers cared about them as human beings. • Teachers understood the students' life circumstances and gave them the support necessary for them to be successful and graduate from high school. • Students were not labeled, and they were accepted and respected as people. • Students felt they were not a number but an important person in the family.
Participants' beliefs and feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students expressed feelings of disappointment, sadness, and hopelessness. • Poor self-esteem and self-image led students to believe they would not have a successful future after high school. • Students were not motivated to pass their classes and graduate from high school. • Some students thought about dropping out of high school because they considered themselves failures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students stated that their experiences were more relevant to their lives. Teachers made real-life connections in their instruction that made learning more meaningful to the students. • Students felt positive about their experiences, which increased their confidence and success. • Students expressed that they had hope of graduating.
STAR testing	<p>Overall, students believed that standardize testing was a waste of time and was not relevant to them. They put forth little effort toward doing well on the tests. Students would go through the motions and pencil in multiple-choice answers without reading the questions.</p>	