

The Journal

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The Journal OF AT-RISK ISSUES

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Manuscripts should be original works not previously published nor concurrently submitted for publication to other journals. Manuscripts should be written clearly and concisely for a diverse audience, especially educational professionals in K-12 and higher education. Topics appropriate for *The Journal of At-Risk Issues* include, but are not limited to, research and practice, dropout prevention strategies, school restructuring, social and cultural reform, family issues, tracking, youth in at-risk situations, literacy, school violence, alternative education, cooperative learning, learning styles, community involvement in education, and dropout recovery.

Research reports describe original studies that have applied applications. Group designs, single-subject designs, qualitative methods, mixed methods design, and other appropriate strategies are welcome. Review articles provide qualitative and/or quantitative syntheses of published and unpublished research and other

information that yields important perspectives about at-risk populations. Such articles should stress applied implications.

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Manuscripts should follow the guidelines of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed.). Manuscripts should not exceed 25 typed, double-spaced, consecutively numbered pages, including all cited references. Submitted manuscripts which do not follow APA referencing will be returned to the author without editorial review. Charts and figures should be clearly labeled and sent as separate jpeg documents, at least 300 dpi resolution.

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Submit electronically in Microsoft Word, including an abstract, and send to the editor at edu_rar@shsu.edu for editorial review. Manuscripts should also include a cover page with the following information: the full manuscript title; the author's full name, title, department, institution or professional

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Submit Manuscripts to

Dr. Rebecca A. Robles-Piña,
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Challenges in Educating Students With Highly Disruptive Behavior in a Large, High-Poverty Elementary School

Jeff L. Cochran, Melinda M. Gibbons, Shawn Spurgeon, Nancy H. Cochran

Abstract: *This article describes the experiences of teachers in educating students with highly disruptive behavior at a large, urban, high-poverty elementary school. All teachers of the school responded to a survey on their experiences, feelings, thoughts, and opinions of their work and context in educating students with highly disruptive behavior. Results are seen as evidencing teachers' high rates of frustration with the work, along with dedication to the students and reasons for frustration. Implications for counselors and related professionals for understanding teachers' experiences, partnering, and helping with teacher frustration and success in educating students with highly disruptive behavior is discussed.*

Disruptive behavior at school often results in problems both educationally and personally, and presents likely risk factors for school failure. Educators and researchers continually report the high levels of disruptive behavior in today's classroom (e.g., Finn, Fish, & Scott, 2008; McCurdy, Kunsch, & Reibstein, 2007; Thomas, Bierman, Thompson, & Powers, 2008). According to a recent survey, teachers believe they would be much more effective in the classroom if they did not have to spend significant amounts of time dealing with disruptive students (Public Agenda, 2004). Administrators report spending considerable time disciplining and documenting misbehavior (Achilles, 2002; Borelli, 1997; Kingery & Coggeshall, 2001). In a statewide survey, Cochran and Cochran (2004) found elementary school counselors spent 19% of their time with the 2% of their school's students with highly disruptive behaviors, and the majority of respondents saw their work as only somewhat or not very effective with those students.

Highly disruptive behavior affects everyone in the classroom, along with other teachers and administration (Finn et al., 2008). The time spent by teachers focusing on those few disruptive students leads to less attention to behaving students, less focus on academics, and an overall feeling of unease in the classroom (Thomas et al., 2008). Large, urban school districts and those with large numbers of students in poverty are most impacted by these disruptions, since they tend to have higher numbers of disruptive students in the classroom (Public Agenda, 2004). This article describes the results of a study conducted in one of these larger, urban schools. The study offers a view into how teachers are affected by disruption in the classroom and discusses implications for counselors and related professionals helping teachers to help students in need.

The Poor Prognosis of Disruptive Behavior

Disruptive behavior in the school affects both personal and educational issues in children. Classroom misbehavior is associated with low grades and later dropping out of school (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Pannozzo, 2005; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). In an examination of high school misbehavior, Finn et al. (2008) confirmed that higher levels of misbehavior related to grades, test scores, dropout rates, and postsecondary program entry and completion. Disruptive behavior appears to have both short- and long-term effects on students.

Aggressive behavior in children tends to persist or increase across time without effective intervention (Cummings, Iannotti, & Zahn-Waxler, 1989; Olweus, 1979) and longitudinal studies indicate that young children with high levels of externalizing behaviors are at risk for future social and emotional problems (Olson, Bates, Sandy, & Lantheir, 2000; Valdez, Lambert, & Ialongo, 2011). Hester, Baldano, Hendrickson, Tonelson, Conroy, and Gable (2004) found that preschool students with behavior issues were more likely to engage in substance abuse and delinquency as adolescents. Valdez et al. (2011) noted that first graders with aggressive behavior and lowered academic achievement were, in adolescence, 10 times more likely to meet the criteria for Conduct Disorder than were their peers identified as well-adjusted in first grade. Early aggressive behavior is particularly predictive of later antisocial behaviors that increase in severity and become emotionally and materially costly to society in numerous ways (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Finn et al., 2008; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992).

The Significance of Disruptive Behaviors in Schools

Disruptive behavior also appears to be a major concern for teachers. DuPaul and Stoner (2003) found impairments in behavioral control to be among top reasons for referral to school and clinical psychologists. Abidin & Robinson (2002) reported that impairments in behavioral control were the most common reasons for referral from elementary school teachers for psychoeducational assessment of children. Greene, Beszterczey, Katzenstein, Park, and Goring (2002) noted that students with behaviors such as inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity caused higher levels of stress in teachers than did students without these difficulties. Algozzine, Christian, Marr, McClanahan, and White (2008) conveyed that less than 5 % of students accounted for nearly half of all discipline referrals. The effects of disruptive behavior by a single student may have far reaching implications for other students and the school in general.

There may be common themes to teachers' experiences in educating students with highly disruptive behavior. Algozzine et al. (2008) reported that the most common problem behaviors referred by elementary teachers were disruption, disrespect, and fighting. Spilt and Koomen (2009) found that kindergarten teachers reported more feelings of anger and hopelessness related to highly disruptive students than for non-disruptive children, but reported similar levels of closeness to both types of students. Keat (2008) noted teachers were less comfortable with considering students' need for control and power when making decisions about their reaction to child misbehavior and suggested teachers need to focus on shared control in the classroom.

The Special Case of Urban, High-Poverty, Highly Challenged Schools

Although misbehavior in school is a pervasive problem for educators (Finn et al., 2008), some schools include more students with more risk factors. Tang and Sable (2009) reported the characteristics of the largest 100 public school districts in the United States. These schools represent less than 1 % of all school districts but serve 22 % of all public school students. They tend to have larger than average school enrollments and higher student-teacher ratios. More than half of students attending these schools qualify for free or reduced lunch, an indicator of low-income status. Sixty percent of the students in these districts attend a Title 1 school, another indicator of low-income households. The majority of students in these districts are Hispanic or African American, unlike schools overall, where the number drops to 38 % (Tang & Sable, 2009). Because students from low-income families (Finn et al., 2008), African American students in particular (Thomas et al., 2008), and students in low-quality classrooms (Thomas et al., 2008) are more at-risk for demonstrating behavior problems, students from these large school districts may be more at-risk of demonstrating highly disruptive behavior. Consequently, more teachers working in these schools will be affected by this misbehavior in the classroom.

Similar to and overlapping with the 100 largest school districts, Lippman, Burns, and McArthur (1996) noted urban schools overall have challenges leading to higher levels of student misbehavior. Their research on urban schools found urban school students were twice as likely to live in poverty than suburban students. Urban students also

change schools more frequently, have more behavior problems related to absenteeism and classroom discipline, feel less safe in school, score lower on achievement tests, and have higher unemployment rates later in life than their peers from nonurban schools (Lippman et al., 1996). Students in urban schools face more obstacles than those in suburban or rural schools.

Urban schools, along with large school districts, have additional challenges related to student misbehavior. To better understand teachers' experiences with these challenges and potential counselor responses, the current study takes an in-depth look at teachers' perceptions and opinions regarding educating students with highly disruptive behavior at one large, urban, high-poverty elementary school that is within the top 100 largest school districts.

Methods Participants

The school in our study is in many ways representative of a school with increased student behavior issues. It is an urban school within a large school district (one of the top 100 largest), with 676 students in the school and a student-teacher ratio of 13.8 to 1. The district has an overall average school size of 782 students and average student-teacher ratio of 18.3 to 1. Teachers in the study reported an average of 17 students in their classes, with a range of 8-23 students. These statistics are well above the average of 518 total students and 15.2 to 1 teacher ratio for all public schools (Tang & Sable, 2009). Over 90 % of the students at the school received free or reduced lunch. The school is also ethnically diverse, with 69 % Caucasian, 25 % African American, and 5 % Hispanic students. It has a mobility rate over 40 %, similar to the rates of urban schools in general. It has been identified as a persistently lowest-achieving school. At the time of this study, the school was in the early stages of a larger grant-funded project to provide child-centered play therapy (Cochran, Nordling, & Cochran, 2010) to at least a relatively small number of students with highly disruptive behavior or serious mental health issues, as well as related support for the teachers.

Respondents were all 49 teachers. The vast majority of respondents (84 %) have master's degrees, while 16 % have bachelor's degrees, and none have doctoral degrees. Respondents have an average of nine years teaching experience ($SD = 7.98$), ranging from 1-27, with a median of six years experience. Most, 94 %, are women; 92 % are White; two are Hispanic; one is African-American; and one is Asian-American.

Instrument

The survey was created by the first author for the purposes of this study. Items were drafted from the first author's experience in working closely with teachers in similar schools (three years as a teacher and three years as a counselor), plus educating and supervising counselors in similar work (12 years as a counselor educator). This draft was then reviewed by five counselor educators who also have backgrounds of work with teachers in similar schools, plus the principal of the school in this study. The revised draft was then pilot tested with two school counselors serving in similar schools and three teachers with experience in similar schools. At each stage of review, feedback and revisions addressed: (a) the adequacy of survey items

to address important areas of teacher experience with the topic, (b) the clarity of the meaning and intent of the items, and (c) the clarity of the population description to help respondents keep in mind the intended population of students for their responses.

To differentiate the behavior of students regarded in the survey from normal range misbehavior, teachers were given a one-page, single-spaced description of the kinds of students that survey items were meant to address. The description began with a bulleted list of characteristics falling under the definition of conduct disorder found in the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association* and continued with other research-based descriptors, including approximate national incidence, the relationship of these behaviors to special education, the social and academic impairments that may result from misbehavior, and that this type of disruptive behavior pattern persists across time without improvement from normal disciplinary actions (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Additionally, a case vignette was provided to illustrate what the behaviors and classroom situation for such a child in elementary school might look like. While the diagnostic descriptors were used to clarify the types of students of concern in the survey, it was made clear to the teachers that the survey was not a diagnostic tool. Because of this, we use the descriptive term, highly disruptive behavior (HDB), vs. the diagnostic term, conduct disorder.

Teacher reports of class size and estimates of students with highly disruptive behavior by gender were used to calculate proportions of students with HDB by gender in regular education classes. Five questions ask participants to use Likert-type ratings to describe their feelings about teaching students with problem behaviors. The next question includes nine statements about opinions related to services for students with HDB. Each statement asks for a four-point Likert-type rating (strongly agree to strongly disagree). One item asks teachers to name the top three things needed to more effectively educate students with behaviors seeming to fit the focus population, two ask them to rate teacher preparation, and two inquire of time and energy devoted to the survey focus population. The remaining items are demographic for a total of 26 items.

Procedures

The survey was administered in late fall achieving a return rate of 75%. A follow-up survey was conducted in early winter to achieve a 100% return rate (all 49 teachers). In each case, teachers were given a copy of the survey at the end of a faculty meeting and asked to return it the following week. The return rate may be high due to teacher interest in the topic, administrative encouragement of teacher participation, and because two of the researchers at times work with the school administration and faculty in providing counseling services for at-risk students. The anonymity of all survey respondents was carefully protected. All procedures were approved by the institutional review board for research with human subjects of the first author's university.

Results

Classroom Information

The teachers estimated an average of two students with HDB in their classrooms, with estimates ranging from zero to five students.

As the average class size was 17, teachers estimated the percentage of students with HDB per class was about 12%, ranging from 0-29%. The vast majority of teacher-identified students with HDB (75%) were boys. Averaged teacher estimates were that 40% of their time per day and 44% of their energy was spent each day in their efforts toward educating the students in their class with HDB.

Frustration Level, Self-Perceptions of Effectiveness and Preparation

Teachers rated frustration level, effectiveness, and preparation as reflected in Table 1. Of frustration level, most teachers (73%) reported being significantly (57%) or highly (17%) frustrated, and none reported no frustration (with 1 "not frustrated" and 4 "highly frustrated," $M = 2.9$, $SD = .66$). To a question of teaching effectiveness with students with HDB, most (62%) saw themselves as somewhat effective, whereas 28% saw themselves as not very or minimally effective, and 10% as highly effective (with 1 "highly effective" and 4 "not very effective," $M = 2.21$, $SD = .68$). The vast majority (75%) rated themselves as more (31%) or much more (44%) effective educationally with non-HDB students vs. HDB students (with 1 "much more effective" and 4 "less effective," $M = 1.93$, $SD = .9$); 63% saw themselves as more (37%) or much more (26%) effective with students identified with special education needs than students with HDB (with the 4-point scale of this item, 1 "much more effective" and 4 "as effective," $M = 2.11$, $SD = .8$).

Teachers also were asked to describe their preparation for working with students with HDB. In rating their teacher education programs of origin regarding preparation for educating students with HDB, almost half (47%) rated this preparation as inadequate or nonexistent, while 39% noted it their preparation was adequate (with 1 "excellent" and 4 "nonexistent," $M = 2.53$, $SD = .97$). Regarding professional workshops on HDB, 37% indicated that none were available, but 43% rated those that were available as adequate and 11% as excellent; 9% responded that such workshops were "not of interest."

Opinions of the Status Quo

Participants were posed a series of statements about their opinions regarding services for students with HDB. The results are detailed in Table 2. Most (56%) agreed or strongly agreed that public schools lack the resources to provide an education to students with HDB ($M = 2.31$, $SD = .76$). A huge majority (84%) agreed or strongly agreed that public schools should be required to educate students with HDB ($M = 2.04$, $SD = .60$). However, a majority (55%) agreed or strongly agreed that students with HDB are unreasonable hindrances to the education of their peers ($M = 2.39$, $SD = .69$).

Nearly all participants believed counselors should provide direct counseling (93%) and/or consultation (98%) for students with HDB ($M = 1.60$, $SD = .69$; $M = 1.62$, $SD = .53$, respectively). And while participants' views were somewhat mixed on the question of if public schools lack the resources to provide an education to students with HDB (16% strongly agree, 40% agree, 42% disagree), a vast majority, 89%, agreed (27% strongly agree, 62% agree) that students with HDB need more counseling and related services than the school is able to provide ($M = 1.84$, $SD = .60$). Most (66%) agreed or strongly agreed that other demands of their jobs as teachers make it impossible to adequately provide an education for students with HDB ($M = 2.27$, $SD = .58$).

Table 1

Opinions Related to Services to Students Whose Behavior Seems to Fit the Description Given for Conduct Disorder (CD)

Statements		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean/ SD
a)	Public schools lack the resources to provide an education to students with CD.	16 %	40 %	42 %	2 %	2.31/ .76
b)	Public schools should be required to educate children with CD.	13 %	71 %	13 %	2 %	2.04/ .60
c)	Students with CD are unreasonable hindrances to the education of their schoolmates.	9 %	46 %	43 %	2 %	2.39/ .69
d)	School counselors or mental health counselors serving in schools should provide direct counseling services to students with CD.	49 %	44 %	4 %	2 %	1.60/ .69
e)	School counselors or mental health counselors serving in schools should provide parent, teacher, and school consultation services for students with CD.	40 %	58 %	2 %	0	1.62/ .53
f)	Other demands of our jobs make it impossible for us to adequately provide an education for students with CD.	7 %	59 %	34 %	0	2.27/ .58
g)	Students with CD in my classes need more counseling and related noncounseling services than the school is able to provide.	27 %	62 %	11 %	0	1.84/ .60
h)	The teaching services that I provide meet the needs of students with CD at my school.	2 %	49 %	49 %	0	2.47/ .54
i)	I would prefer to give more time to the education of students with CD, if it were possible.	2 %	61 %	29 %	7 %	2.41/ .66

Table 2

Frustration Level, Self-Perceptions of Effectiveness, and Preparation

Rating Areas/Rating Instruction	Rating Choices	Percentage of Choice	Mean/SD of Rating Area
Rate your level of frustration at educating students who seem to fit the description given for conduct disordered behaviors (check 1):	Not frustrated Only mildly frustrated Significantly frustrated Highly frustrated	0 27 % 57 % 17 %	2.9/.66
Please rate the effectiveness of the teaching services you provide in the education of students who seem to fit the description given for conduct disordered behaviors:	Highly effective Somewhat effective Only minimally effective Not very effective	10 % 62 % 24 % 4 %	2.21/.68
Comparatively rate your teaching effectiveness vs. students from more normal populations:	Much more effective than for those with conduct disorder like behavior More effective than for students with conduct disorder like behavior About as effective as for students with conduct disorder like behavior Less effective than for students with conduct disorder like behavior	44 % 31 % 16 % 9 %	1.93/.9
Comparatively rate your teaching effectiveness for students that are in special education programs, but who do not have conduct disorder like behavior:	Much more effective than for students with CD More effective than for students with CD As effective as for students with CD Less effective than for students with CD	26 % 37 % 33 % 4 %	2.11/.8
Teacher Education Program:	Excellent Adequate Existent, but inadequate Nonexistent	14 % 39 % 28 % 18 %	2.53/.97
Professional Workshops:	Excellent Adequate None available closely related to the topic Not of interest	11 % 43 % 37 % 9 %	This item is not a Likert scale.

Finally, the last two items asked about teaching services and time provided by the teachers themselves for students with HDB. There was a nearly even split regarding teachers endorsing, "The teaching services that I provide meet the needs of students with HDB at my school" (49 % agree, 49 % disagree, 2 % strongly agree, 0 % strongly disagree; $M = 2.41$, $SD = .66$). A strong majority (63 %) agreed or strongly agreed that they would prefer to give more time to the education of students with HDB ($M = 2.41$, $SD = .66$).

Suggestions for Improvement

For the item asking the top three things needed by self or school to more effectively educate students with HDB, there were three blank spaces in which to respond and responses totaled 113. The top three response need areas encompassed 66 % of the responses and were very close in frequency. Those top three areas are: training (27 responses, 24 %), classroom assistants or other means to lower teacher-student ratios (26 responses, 23 %), and increased administrative support (usually meaning disciplinary support – 22 responses, 19 %). The next largest and only other code encompassing over 10 % was counseling services (12 responses, 11 %).

Discussion

This study examined teacher responses about highly disruptive students. Although all participants were from a single school, the school demographic can be seen as representative of a large, urban, high-poverty school. Through a 100 % response rate, the results provide a picture of the effects of highly disruptive students on the classroom and the teacher in charge. Several themes are worth examining in detail.

Students With Highly Disruptive Behavior

The estimated percentage of students with HDB within the school's student population (12 %) and the estimated gender proportion of students with HDB at the school (75-25 %, boys to girls) would seem fitting with expectations from the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association* (APA, 2013). For conduct disorder, the DSM-IV reports occurrence rates as ranging from less than 1 % to more than 10 %, suggests that rates may be higher in urban than rural populations, and reports that rates are much higher among boys and girls, especially within rates of the childhood-onset type. Most recently, McIntosh, Reinke, Kelm and Sadler (2012) found similar gender differences in their research on problem behaviors in children.

High Frustration and Understandable Reasons Why

High frustration is evident among respondents in educating students with HDB, with most reporting at least significant frustration. This frustration seems understandable given the pressure that teachers may be under to increase test scores and successfully educate all children (Anagnostopoulos, 2003; Ikeler, 2010; McNeil, 2000; Valenzuela, 2004). This finding of high frustration is in line with other studies that found increased levels of teacher stress (Greene et al., 2002) and feelings of unease (Thomas et al., 2008) when working with disruptive students. High frustration is underscored by a strong majority endorsing the notion that other job demands make it impossible to

adequately provide education for students with HDB. Additionally, this high frustration could logically be considered to result from most seeing themselves as only minimally to somewhat effective in educating students with HDB; and most seeing themselves as less effective than with students without HDB and also less effective than with students in special education programs without HDB. And, this frustration can be seen as still more understandable considering that teachers perceive themselves as committing almost half their time and energy for a relatively small proportion of students.

Possibly adding to frustration levels, respondent views toward educating students with HDB would seem to suggest internal conflicts, with strong majorities endorsing a lack of resources to educate students with HDB, and endorsing that the behavior of students with HDB as unreasonable hindrances to the education of their peers. Yet a huge majority also strongly endorsed that public schools should be required to educate students with HDB. Along with these endorsements, there appeared to be ambivalence in perceptions of being able to personally meet the classroom needs of students with HDB with only about half agreeing that their teaching services can meet the needs and a very strong majority preferring to do more to meet the needs. In summary, it would seem that respondents are quite concerned with their ability to educate students with HDB, while seeing effective education for these students as quite important.

What Is Needed to Improve

The participants noted the need for improvement in services provided for students with HDB. Previous research makes it evident that students with HDB who do not receive intervention services tend to fare poorly, with lower grades (Finn et al., 2008), higher dropout rates (Pannozzo, 2005), and higher levels of substance abuse and delinquency rates (Hester et al., 2004). The participants in this study noted two needs in particular that they believed would best help these students, support services and additional training for teachers.

Support services. Teacher responses suggest very strong support for counseling services with huge majorities endorsing counseling services for students with HDB, as well as counselor consultation services for parents and teachers. Counseling services were also among the notable areas of needed services identified by teachers for the education of students with HDB. It is possible that responses endorsing counseling services may be shaped in the school of this study by the fact that the school was beginning to house a small special program providing long-term and intensive child-centered play therapy (Cochran, Nordling, et al., 2010) for students who were at-high-risk of juvenile delinquency, in addition to having a part-time school counselor serving the school.

Additional training. There would seem to be strong rationales for additional training within responses suggesting teachers feel unprepared to teach students with HDB. Additional training was the most frequently identified need. Nearly half rated their degree-based preparation as inadequate or nonexistent for the task, even though the vast majority had master's degrees. Only 43 % rated professional workshops on the topic as adequate, while 37 % indicated that such workshops were not available. These suggestions of shortfalls are alarming considering the amount of focus on students with HDB that respondents see as needed within their time and energy at

work and the pervasive nature of the problem (APA, 2013; Finn et al., 2008). Elements of support for counselor services, combined with the perceived deficits in training, suggest that the respondents would be open to more consultation and training about how to work effectively with these students.

Implications For Counselors, Counselor Educators, Those in Related Professions

For counselors and all who support teachers in similar settings, it may be important to keep in mind critical aspects of teachers' experience: (a) the very understandable frustration in feeling one's self morally obligated and wanting to succeed, but unable to succeed with a set of students; (b) living daily with this lack of success with a set of students in need, who may be small in number, but require significant portions of time and energy; and (c) living daily with the additional awareness that without success these students are a detriment to themselves *and* to peers. With these elements of teacher experience in mind, counselors can redouble their efforts to support teachers and provide effective counseling services for students with HDB, all while remaining patient with teachers who seem to be set up for burnout. For example, consider the teacher who cares and wants to help. The teacher may think, "I should help," yet the teacher believes perhaps beneath awareness, "I should help, but I have very limited ability to help." The caring teacher would perceive this to be a very bad, even impossible, situation. The urge to give up versus the urge to work harder would understandably and consequentially be very strong.

The counseling field can take heart in knowing that in similarly troubled schools there may be great support among teachers for counseling and psychotherapeutic interventions, such as the intensive child-centered play therapy (CCPT) provided in at least a small way at the school of this study. CCPT can be seen as effective with at-high-risk students through helping students change self- and world expectations through therapeutic experience (Cochran, Cochran, Fuss, & Nordling, 2010; Cochran, Cochran, Nordling, McAdam, and Miller, 2010; Cochran, Fauth, Cochran, Spurgeon, & Pierce, 2010) and has been evidenced as effective in numerous and varied outcome studies (see meta-analysis Bratton, Ray, Rhine, & Jones, 2005).

Based on the case of the school in this study, counselors and others sharing from their experience to assist and encourage teachers with training for educating students with HDB can expect that the training is needed and would be well-received. Yet, counselors and related professionals meaning to help should also expect to encounter teachers who have moved beyond frustration and perceived ineffectiveness to burnout.

It would seem that any training should have a strong element of emotional support, given the internal conflicts and emotional reactions that teachers seem likely to experience. Further, it may be important to focus training in skills for close, supportive relationships with students with HDB. Hamre and Pianta (2005) evidenced the value of emotionally supportive teacher-child relationships in bringing at-risk students within range of the academic success of low-risk students. Additionally, Cochran and Cochran (1999, 2004) illustrated the importance of relationships in changing behavior for students with HDB.

For Teachers and Teacher Educators

From the responses of this study, it would seem that teachers and teacher educators may need to prepare for a relatively high focus within their work on meeting the needs of students with HDB, especially if serving urban schools similar to the one of this study. We know from other studies of urban schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1996), that urban teachers believe they have fewer resources and less control over their curriculum. They also demonstrate higher levels of absenteeism than other teachers, possibly as a result of high frustration levels such as those described in our study. Teacher educators can be proactive by involving experts in working with students with HDB in the training of future teachers, especially those planning to work in urban schools.

Additionally, teachers and teacher educators may need to prepare carefully to manage the burnout that can result from seeing the needs and caring deeply to help a populations of students that may be very difficult to reach. Learning the importance of self-care habits could be extremely important for teachers. For example, teacher educators might teach students about deep breathing exercises, mindfulness training, and the importance of hobbies or interests outside work. They might also provide students with lists of warning signs of burnout so that future teachers are proactively aware of the possible behaviors that indicate teaching fatigue.

For School Administrators

School administrators working in large, public school districts may already well understand the challenges facing students with HDB and their teachers and peers. In these schools, the average dropout rate is 5.1 % and the average freshman graduation rate is 65 % (Sable, Plotts, & Mitchell, 2010). The results of this study might help administrators lobby for additional counselors and other support positions in their schools, especially knowing that teachers, at least in this study, appear to want additional support and training when working with students with HDB.

Principals and other school administrators may also benefit from keeping in mind the lessons from this study of teacher frustration and potential burnout in educating students with HDB. Administrators may help in being mindful to fill potential needs for ongoing training to meet the needs of students with HDB, for effective counseling services provided in schools, and for additional classroom support for teachers educating students with HDB.

For Researchers

A final implication is that while the work of teachers in educating students with HDB includes huge challenges and frustrations, teachers' desire to reach their troubled students may remain quite strong and provide a foundation for growth. Further research of teachers' experiences in similar settings is needed. Research into effective teacher training and emotional support may be an important next step. And finally, more research into effective counseling for students with HDB is needed, especially into opportunities and difficulties of providing the interventions within schools, with full connection and partnership with caring teachers.

Conclusion

As with all studies, limitations to generalizability exist. Although the school demographics mirror those of other urban, high-poverty schools, the results are only from one school, so caution must be taken when generalizing. In addition, the survey was created specifically for this study, so there is limited information about the validity of the instrument. Also, no control group exists to determine if the responses from this school are indeed different from those at nonurban, nonpoverty schools. Finally, responses are self-report, so that must be considered when reading the results. Nonetheless the 100 % response rate strongly suggests that the results represent the views and experiences of the faculty and the overall demographics suggest the ability to consider these results beyond the scope of the participating school.

This article highlights teacher frustration in educating students with highly disruptive behavior in a large urban, high-poverty elementary school. The teachers' frustration is seen as highly understandable, born of caring to help while perceiving self as ineffective in helping, at least with existing resources. An assertion for more and more effective counseling services provided within the school emerges from the results as well as opportunities for counselors to serve as more effective consultants supporting frustrated teachers of students with highly disruptive behavior.

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The Educational Experience of Youth in Foster Care

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Abstract: *The perception of youth in foster care regarding their educational experience is not well understood, particularly outside of child welfare. Research on these youths' experiences in school has typically focused on their educational performance as well as professionals' views of their educational barriers without consideration of the youths' perspectives. This qualitative, exploratory study used focus groups to explore foster youths' school experiences including challenges and supports as seen through their eyes. Themes that emerged related to foster care identity and impact at school, school commitment and progress, placement/school change, and other barriers to success. As teachers and school administrators seek to improve educational outcomes for at-risk youth and build partnerships with child welfare professionals, it is critical that these professionals understand and incorporate the unique perspective of youth in foster care.*

Children and youth in foster care represent a unique group at significantly increased risk for educational difficulties, relative to the general school population. In 2010, 754,000 children were confirmed to be victims of maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Barring further tragedy, all of these children will wend their way through the educational systems in their states. Many of these young people struggle to meet academic standards and achieve outcomes necessary for success in both school and adult life. The profound effects of maltreatment and trauma on children and youth involved in the child welfare system often interfere with how these youth develop, learn, process information, behave, and form relationships (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2013; Martin & Jackson, 2002; Putnam, 2006). In 2010, 271,147 school-age children and youth (5-18 years of age) were removed from their homes and placed into child welfare custody; a disproportionate number of these children and youth were minorities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Students in foster care represent approximately .5% of the projected 55 million students enrolled in K-12 educational settings nationwide (U.S. Department of Education, 2012), and constitute a consistent population of students for whom educational success and well-being remains elusive. As schools nationwide seek to address the achievement gap for students identified as at risk, this population of vulnerable students and their school experience warrants the attention of educators, researchers, and policymakers.

There is ample evidence to suggest that children and youth in foster care often struggle with educational attainment. Children in out-of-home placement were found to perform below grade level and experience high rates of grade retention, suspension, and school dropout (Trout, Hagaman,

Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008). In a study of youth preparing to leave foster care, respondents (age 17-18) were reading on average at a seventh-grade level (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004). Nearly 40% of youth aging out of foster care repeated one or more grades (Dworsky, 2010). Foster youth were twice as likely to be suspended and almost four times as likely to be expelled as a national sample (Courtney et al., 2004). Approximately 30-50% of children in care qualify for special education compared with a rate of 11.5% for children not in foster care (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012).

Given these outcomes, it is not surprising that youth in foster care are less likely than their peers to graduate from high school. In a national study, graduation rates for youth who age out of foster care were around 50% (Cook, 1994). A more recent study found that only 30 to 40% of youth who had any contact with child welfare during their childhood graduated from high school (Walker & Smithgall, 2009).

School Stability and Foster Care Involvement

School instability poses a particular challenge in the education of foster children and youth. Foster care typically results in out-of-home placement, which more often than not, due to a limited pool of foster homes, coincides with an immediate transfer to a new school. The number of children in foster care who transfer schools as a result of entering care is unknown but presumably high. In the state where this study took place, only 20% of children in foster care attended the same school as prior to their removal from home (State of Kansas, 2013). Furthermore, once in care, a significant number of children and youth experience placement disruption, often a consequence of unmet emotional needs, behavioral problems, and a paucity of foster

homes equipped to deal with the challenges. On average, children and youth in out-of-home care experience 3.1 placement changes (Casey Family Programs, 2011). Assuming that even a fraction of these placement changes are accompanied by a change in school, it is easy to see how school instability can be a significant factor for children and youth in foster care.

Frequent school transfers negatively impact the educational outcomes for youth in care, in part due to enrollment delays, barriers to locating and accessing school records, credit transfer problems, and lost credits when transferring midsemester (Bruskas, 2008; Eckenrode, Rowe, Laird, & Brathwaite, 1995; Sullivan, Jones, & Mathiesen, 2010). In addition, each time youth transfer to another school, they must adjust to new classmates, teachers, curricula, and expectations (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006). A recent meta-analysis found that experiencing more school transfers was related to negative performance effects in reading and math achievement as well as an increased risk of dropping out (Reynolds, Chen, & Herbers, 2009). A 2003 study found that youth in foster care with one fewer placement per year were almost twice as likely to graduate from high school (Pecora et al., 2003). In contrast, Sullivan et al. (2010) found no significant relationship between school changes and academic progress though they did find correlation with increased behavior problems.

In addition to challenges related to placement and school changes, other factors linked to poor educational outcomes for children in foster care include the impact of maltreatment, inconsistent social/caregiver support, absenteeism, low educational expectations, poor quality education, deficient information sharing, little accountability for poor school performance and inadequate interagency collaboration (Merding, Hines, Osterling, & Wyatt, 2005; Stone, 2006; Zetlin et al., 2006). Taken together, foster care youth face an uphill battle in acquiring and maintaining the kinds of internal and external supports needed to succeed in school. As educators encounter children and youth in foster care on a daily basis, understanding how their experiences inside and outside of the school setting can affect their classroom behavior, social relations, and school achievement becomes paramount.

School Experiences of Foster Youth

Prior studies on academic challenges for foster youth have explored the differences and similarities in perspectives between child welfare and education system stakeholders (Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, & Courtney, 2004; Stone, D'andrade, & Austin, 2007; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea 2010). Rarely does research on educational success examine the experience of current foster youths from their perspectives. Only a few studies have used a qualitative approach to examining the viewpoints of this unique at-risk population. Such insights can help inform educators on how foster children and youth perceive their school experiences and help identify factors that can facilitate academic success and positive well-being in this vulnerable population.

Zetlin et al. (2006) included current and former foster youth in focus groups on barriers to educating foster youths. However, a limited number of youth participated ($n = 9$) and findings were integrated with those of other stakeholders (such as caregivers, education and child welfare agency representatives, researchers, and policymakers),

making it difficult to identify the youths' potentially unique views. Similarly, a study conducted by Burrell (2003) identifying educational barriers comingled perspectives of youth involved with juvenile justice and/or child welfare systems and their parents thereby providing limited insight into the specific experience of youth in foster care.

Two other studies differentiate the perspectives of youth in care but may not be representative of typical foster youth. Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, and Fogarty (2012) recorded the retrospective testimony of foster youth already pursuing higher education or identified by their caseworkers as likely to pursue higher education. Findings from this study showed the most frequently cited barrier to high school completion was a lack of support from caring adults. In another study, Finkelstein, Wamsley, and Miranda (2002) collected extensive narratives on the educational experiences of 25 middle school aged children in foster care and inferred that these children had unique problems that stemmed from their foster care involvement. All of these children participated in a program offering intensive support to foster children that may have significantly impacted their perspectives and experiences.

The intent of this study was to examine the perceptions of youth in foster care with a particular focus on how foster care has an impact on their schooling and educational outcomes. Understanding the experiences of foster youth from their perspective provides insight into the day-to-day barriers, challenges, and supports they encounter during their school experience. As schools seek to improve outcomes for at-risk students, it is critical that they understand and incorporate the youth perspective of this small but vulnerable population of students.

Methods

In winter 2012, focus group sessions were conducted with youth as part of a larger exploratory study to develop an understanding of barriers and supports to educational and placement stability for foster children. Previously, there was little information about the experiences of youth as they navigate placement changes and disruptions in school stability. Two focus groups were conducted. One group occurred during an existing meeting of a state youth advocacy group. This group, including youth currently or previously in foster care, meets several times a year to solicit youth advice and recommendations concerning the state child welfare system. The other focus group was convened specifically for the purposes of this exploratory study.

Participants

The final sample consisted of 18 youth currently or previously in foster care. The youth ranged in age from 8 to 26. The mean age was 17.5 years. The youth included 11 females and 7 males. The majority of youth (39%) self-identified as White/Caucasian ($n = 7$). Others self-identified as African American ($n = 3$, 17%), American Indian ($n = 3$, 17%), Hispanic ($n = 2$, 11%), Filipino ($n = 1$, 6%), Asian ($n = 1$, 6%). Ten youth (56%) reported a length of stay in foster care from 1-3 years; three youth reported 4-6 years in foster care (17%), two youth (11%) reported 7-9 years in foster care, and three youth (17%) reported more than 10 years in foster care.

Procedures

Focus group sessions lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Youth or their legal representatives provided informed consent. Questions encompassed five primary areas of inquiry that focused on school and foster care, school participation and progress, and challenges and successes at school. A standardized set of questions were used with both groups. Both focus groups were conducted by the same facilitator. The sessions were audiotaped and the tapes were transcribed as needed for analysis. In addition, detailed notes were taken by a researcher who attended the sessions.

Analysis

Using the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984), discrete participant responses from notes and transcriptions were reviewed and analyzed with a search for themes, patterns, and commonalities across responses. Thematic categories were created when multiple coded responses captured the same concept, idea, or content. Within these categories, key words were identified and the observed valence (positive, neutral, negative) of the response was coded. For each thematic category, one or more representative quotes were selected to convey the concept or idea in the youths' own words. Notes, transcriptions, and coding schemes were read independently by two researchers, one who led the focus groups and one who was not present to provide internal and external validity to the analysis and coding. Researchers revised and refined the themes until no new thematic categories emerged and any coding disagreements were settled.

Results

Foster youth identified both individual level and system level supports and barriers related to their educational experience. Guided by the focus group questions, main areas of discussion included (a) foster care identity, (b) the impact of that identity at school, (c) school commitment and progress, (d) how foster care placements and school changes affect educational and social experiences, and (e) other barriers to success in school facing foster youth. Table 1 displays the categorical themes that emerged.

Eleven thematic categories emerged across the five primary areas of inquiry. These themes may be best understood through the lens of individual experiences in which the foci of action rests with the youth and adults who interact with the youth or with the child welfare or educational systems in which those youth must navigate. The five overarching areas of inquiry are presented below with verbatim quotes to exemplify the youth's perceptions.

Foster Care Identity

Youth in this study reported that teachers, principals, counselors, and peers generally knew they were in foster care. Sometimes this information was shared by a foster parent or caseworker (particularly in the case of school personnel) but youth also reported a variety of ways in which school personnel and peers became aware of their involvement in foster care. Some felt forced to disclose their foster care status in order to explain why they were unable to do certain things, such as participate in school sports or hang out with their friends. Youth, particularly in rural schools, felt as if everyone knew

their foster care status given the familiarity of people in those small communities. In other cases, however, youth reported control over revealing their status and were able to determine when or if they self-disclosed information about their identity. Often, when they would choose to do so, it was only with trusted adults such as a favorite teacher or school staff member or close peers. For example,

I told teachers that I cared about. They would ask why I wasn't doing well in school because I was so smart. I told them I was in foster care because I trusted them.

Impact at School

Foster youth described both positive and negative perceptions around school personnel understanding their experience in foster care and how that might impact them at school. Youth shared experiences in which teachers or school administrators made negative assumptions about the youths' abilities and behavior based on their involvement in the child welfare system. For example,

The other kids in the foster home I was in like to get in trouble so they treated me like I was trouble.

On the other hand, foster youth also reported that school staff was empathic and supportive. For example:

The librarian was like a mom to me. I hung out with her after school. She was compassionate and she cared.

The teacher told me, "I understand, and I know you are kind of stressed out right now."

School Commitment and Progress

Youth expressed how self-determination and self-motivation played a large role in their commitment to their education. Youth discussed how they began to realize that if they were going to succeed in school, they would have to rely upon themselves in order to improve their lives. Several youth talked about the desire to avoid the mistakes of their parents and realizing that high school graduation was an important step in having a better life as exemplified in the following comment:

I failed freshman year and didn't care. Once I was in foster care, I realized I didn't want to end up like my mom and brother who didn't graduate. I wanted to graduate.

Many of the youth described a particular person who they perceived as supporting their schooling. Youth identified a foster parent, teacher, Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), caseworker, guidance counselor and others as this particular person. This person provided encouragement and typically helped the youth in some tangible way progress towards graduation. Examples of support included assisting youth to keep copies of transcripts, advocating for youth to get credit for courses taken in previous schools, and promoting educational achievement, such as holding the youth accountable for getting good grades. While youth primarily spoke positively about

Table 1

Themes From Foster Youth Focus Groups

Category	Thematic Category	Observed Valence	Key Terms	Representative Quote(s)
<i>Q1. Do your teachers, principal, school counselor or other kids typically know that you are in foster care? How do they find out?</i>				
Foster Care Identity				
FCI1	Forced Explanations	Negative	I told OR permission OR couldn't	"I told people because people would ask why I couldn't hang out...why I couldn't do certain things."
FCI2	Privacy or Unwanted Disclosure	Negative/Neutral	They know OR they told OR heard	"Everyone in the school knows the family, know foster family. Figured it out." "Everyone knows. Kids are labeled."
FCI3	Self-Disclosure	Neutral/Positive	I told OR I cared OR trust	"Told teachers that cared about me." "I only told people that I truly cared about."
<i>Q2. Does your school (teacher/principal/counselor) seem to understand what it's like to be in foster care and how that might impact you at school? How do you think you are perceived by your school (teachers/principal/counselor) when they know you are in foster care?</i>				
Impact at School				
SI1	Judgment and Stereotyping	Negative	Trouble OR gossip OR nosy	"My teacher didn't know I was in care. When he found out, he wanted to know 'what I had done.' I think he assumed foster kids were trouble. I had to explain that not all kids in care are trouble." "Always compared to mom and expected to behave like mom."
SI2	Empathy and Understanding	Positive	Helped OR good	"Teacher was a former foster parent that was really good to me. He understood my experience." "Coming into foster care helped me get on track in school. I had people who cared and were behind me and helped me."
<i>Q3. Tell me about what your school day looks like? How much do you know about your progress in school? Has anyone ever talked to you about what you need to do to move on to the next grade or graduate from high school?</i>				
School Commitment and Progress				
SP1	Self-Motivation/Aspirations	Positive	Tried OR change OR wanted	"I didn't want to be like my mom and dad so I straightened up."
SP2	Social/Concrete Support or Disengagement	Positive/Negative	[professional] OR foster parent	"Guidance counselor helped with a plan." "I don't even know if my foster parents knew my grades or not...they didn't like push our grades."
SP3	Educational Environment	Positive/Negative	Fit OR right	"They had to find school that was right for me, found a GED program that worked for me to graduate." "The school's Army ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps) structure helped to make sure that I got good grades." "My placement was in a small town and there were no gifted courses. I was so bored and didn't want to do school."

Table 1. (Continued)

Category	Thematic Category	Observed Valence	Key Terms	Representative Quote(s)
<i>Q4. Since you've been placed in care, how many times have you changed schools? What happens when you change schools? What is the hardest thing about this?</i>				
Placement/School Changes				
PC1	School Disruption	Neutral/ Negative		"I've been in 8 different high schools but I didn't lose any credits." "I've moved twice—once I was in school for just the last two weeks. I had to take the tests and didn't do well because it was a different curriculum." "I had Algebra 1 four times. I passed the class but they kept throwing me in it."
PC2	Loss of Relationships	Negative	Lost OR hard OR leave	"Hard to say goodbye to all my friends...the next thing you know your mom or your foster parents are saying you're going to go to another school. Don't get to say goodbye." "That was the hardest part. There was a time when I only went to school to socialize. I wanted to get out of my house...moving was really hard because I lost like every single friend I had."
<i>Q5. What are some of the other things that get in the way of you doing well in school? When things go well for you at school what does that mean?</i>				
Barriers to Success				
B1	System or Policy Issues	Neutral/ Negative	Can't OR don't OR allowed	"Court ordered therapy two times a week. I was there more than in school sometimes." "I think it would help if there could be some standard curriculum...it's the same class, but kids can't get credit for the class because this school won't accept this name." "Restrictions [child welfare agency] put on kids makes it more difficult, certain things you can't do, used to hearing 'you can't' because [child welfare agency] don't allow it. Like sports."

adult support, they also share some instances where adults were perceived as a barrier toward school progress and timely graduation. For instance, youth noted that some foster parents were uninvolved with the school such as never attending a parent-teacher conference.

The educational environment was also perceived in both a positive and negative manner by youth. Youth talked about experimenting with different types of school programs, such as residential schooling and General Education Diploma (GED) programs, to find the right fit.

Placement/school changes. Many youth talked about how multiple foster care placements typically meant repeated changes in their schools. All youth had attended multiple schools and several had discussed difficulties with enrollment delays and transfer of credits. Frequent school changes also meant that some youth had to take the same class over and over again and that there was little coordination between school systems. This also had an impact on the continuity of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and sometimes resulted in a delay in moving from a less restrictive classroom. The frequent moves, both in the foster family and in the school, resulted in losses of course credits, friendships, and support systems as well as delayed or disrupted graduation for these youth:

I've been in like 13 different schools and every time I try to go in, I have to wait a month or month and a half to get enrolled. It pretty much puts me back like a month of not working and not being in school.

Foster youth discussed how the discontinuity and instability in their foster care and educational experiences not only affected their progress in school, but also negatively affected important social relationships. Many youth talked about how abrupt removals, new placements, and school changes often meant that they lost their peer friendships and trusted school staff with little notice. This was clearly a painful and difficult experience for many youth who were also trying to keep on grade level and learn. Most youth identified disruptions in social relationships and school placements due to involvement in the child welfare system as an important and negative factor in their educational well-being and progress.

Other Barriers to Success

Lost class time was an issue for some youth. Often therapy and other appointments were purposely scheduled after school, during lunch, or during elective classes but for a number of youth there was frequent absenteeism to attend court, therapy, and other foster-care related appointments. Youth also described outright activity restrictions by child welfare agencies and foster parents such as not allowing youth to go to school dances or participate in sports deemed risky such as football. Youth also shared that school experiences were taken away as disciplinary measures and resulted in them not feeling like a “regular” kid. Sometimes participation in activities was limited due to disagreement about whose responsibility it was to pay for school-related needs and activities:

Kids want to do activities but the foster parents won't pay for it... things like prom dresses, class rings, cap and gown, graduation announcements.

Youth reported that they were often uncertain about who was responsible for making decisions regarding their education such as approval to participate in school activities. They noted that there was a lack of clarity around school transportation, parent-teacher conferences, signing forms, and communication. For example:

The foster parents told me that I could walk to school; it's not part of their job.

While some foster parents and other adults in the youths' lives provided concrete educational support (such as help with homework), more often the role and responsibilities of adults in supporting the education of the foster youth was unclear.

Discussion

This study presents the perspectives of foster youth on their school experience as a way of providing context around an increasingly important issue in child welfare services at the federal and state level: ensuring educational success and well-being for children and youth in state custody. To date, few studies included the viewpoints of foster youth as a distinct group of at-risk students. Without understanding the school experiences of foster youth, educators and other professionals may not have the right tools or information about how best to support these youth in achieving school success.

Responses from foster youth also illuminated both the struggles and achievements these youth experience in their educational journey. The perspectives of youth in care regarding their educational experiences corroborated challenges and recommendations identified by education and child welfare system stakeholders reported in previous research (Garstka, Lieberman, Biggs, Thompson, & Levy, 2013). In particular, foster youth discussed personal and interpersonal barriers and supports adding to previous research which has focused more heavily on systemic barriers (e.g., Cox, 2013; Pecora, 2012).

The Role of Educators in Supporting Foster Youth

Several of the findings are particularly relevant for educators. Abuse, neglect, and out-of-home placement are potentially traumatic experiences that often influence foster youths' learning, behavior, and development. Thus, educators are on the daily frontline of responding to the impact of trauma. Youth in this study reported that school personnel generally know they are in foster care and that there are a variety of ways, including self-disclosure, by which teachers and others learned of their status. This finding confirms research done with teachers who report no formal means for informing them that a child in their classroom is in foster care (Zetlin et al., 2012). What this means is that educational systems often lack a structured process to effectively recognize and respond to foster youth in their schools and classes in a trauma-informed manner (Stewart, Leschied, den Dunnen, Zalmanowitz, & Baiden, 2013). Educators who know which of their students are in foster care and understand the potential effects of trauma will be better equipped to work with child welfare professionals to mitigate behavioral issues and facilitate positive emotional, social, developmental, and educational well-being in these youth (Wells, 2006).

This study also found that being identified within school as a “foster child” impacts youth either positively or negatively. In some cases, this identification helped the youth by providing access to extra attention and assistance from school personnel. Several youth in this study clearly experienced school as a refuge as meaningfully described by one young person who talked about running away to school. However, all too frequently, youth also reported teachers and peers stereotyping them as troublemakers due to their foster care involvement. Such judgments or misunderstandings can have an impact on how foster youth view themselves and how they behave in school (cf. Workman, 2012). Some of this misunderstanding might be attributed to teacher reports that very little information is given to them about foster youth’s background (Zetlin et al., 2012). Lack of knowledge about the foster care experience makes it difficult for teachers to provide the understanding and support likely needed for these students. Day et al., (2012) found that foster youth want teachers to be aware of their personal challenges and available for assistance and support. Given the evidence that shows foster children and youth benefit from the involvement of key adults (Leve et al., 2012), supporting educators in their interactions with foster youth is critical.

Youth reported two critical factors related to their participation and progress in school—self-motivation and a relationship with a caring adult. Several youth described taking responsibility for their education as part of their self-determination for a better life. In addition, having one caring adult, whomever that may be, was a repeated theme and highlights the role that teachers and other school staff can have in supporting foster youth’s educational and social well-being. In a study of former foster youth who achieved academic success and were attending a four-year university, the most frequently cited role models were teachers (Merdinger et al., 2005).

This recurring theme in the foregoing study—the importance of the presence of one caring adult in the lives of at-risk youth—is strongly represented in the resiliency literature (cf. Werner & Smith, 1992; Winfield, 1994; Wolin & Wolin, 1993), and bears repeated emphasis. There is a certain poignancy in the notion that the difference between success and failure may rest on such a strong, but slender thread, and it underscores the tremendous potential contribution of the singular actor—be it a teacher, child welfare social worker, or paraprofessional—to the success of these youth.

The Personal Impact of Policy and Practice

Youth in this study discussed how factors outside of their control, namely policy and practices in the child welfare and education systems, affected their lives and their school progress. Frequently, these barriers involved factors related to placement and school changes, mirroring results from a study of the perceptions of child welfare, education, and court personnel (Garstka et al., 2013). According to Emerson and Lovitt (2003), approximately 50% of foster youth change schools at least four times during their education. Youth in this study shared how these school changes delayed enrollment and resulted in lost credits and severed supports. A lack of communication and collaboration between education and child welfare systems undoubtedly contributes to these problems. Placement instability is an issue that must be addressed in order to stem the tide of recurring

school changes and their consequences. Clearly, there is a role for each system to work on the barriers to success for this population. While a full review of potential solutions is beyond the scope of this paper, it is of note that recent federal legislation has helped to bring increased attention and strategies to address cross-systems barriers. For example, The Uninterrupted Scholars Act (2012) makes changes to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act in an effort to ease information sharing between schools and child welfare agencies.

Finally, systems challenges are exacerbated by the fact that children in foster care often fall into several at-risk categories (e.g., disabilities, 504) but are not recognized federally as a special population on the basis of their foster care status alone (Joftus, 2007). Outcomes for children and youth in foster care clearly indicate that this is an extremely vulnerable group within schools. The voices of these foster children and youth in describing their educational experiences echo these struggles but also point toward potential ways in which schools and child welfare systems can better coordinate their responses in ways that might improve academic achievement and life success in students who experience maltreatment.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this exploratory study. This study represents the views of a small number of youth in foster care therefore results cannot be generalized. Findings are presented with some caveats for potential biases. One source of bias exists in utilizing an existing group of foster youth who are active advocates. Youth participating in this group might differ in their educational experience from youth who do not participate in this group. Despite these limitations, the present study makes a significant contribution to the field though identifying school-related perceptions of youth in foster care and currently attending school.

Implications and Future Directions

Schools remain a potential source of daily stability and support for at-risk children, particularly those in foster care (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012). To better understand and effectively address the academic, developmental, and social needs of foster youth, educators, and other child-serving professionals must identify policies and practices that impede success for youth and focus on solutions. The educational experience of youth in foster care from the youths’ perspective provides critical insight into barriers and supports for this at-risk population. As educators and administrators enhance their understanding of the unique experiences and needs of students involved in the foster care system, their ability to effectively respond to and support this vulnerable population increases. Federal and state efforts are now just beginning to coalesce behind a concerted and collaborative effort to focus upon the educational stability and well-being of children and youth involved in the child welfare system. Communities at the forefront of these efforts enhance their chances of improving educational outcomes and long-term success for these at-risk children and youth.

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Urban African American Single Mothers Using Racial Socialization to Influence Academic Success in Their Young Sons

Lisa Henderson Hubbard, Chance W. Lewis, and Johnitha W. Johnson

Abstract: *This qualitative study explored five African American single mothers who utilize racial socialization to influence academic achievement in their elementary aged sons. The purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to broaden this population's qualitative research base, and (b) to inform stakeholders of factors actuating African American males' academic success. Results indicated these mothers believe: (a) racial socialization is a viable tool for fortifying their son's social and academic well-being; (b) their upbringing influenced their parenting style; and (c) family, church members, and friends play an important role in supporting them and their sons.*

A critical issue facing the United States of America is the plight of African American males born to single mothers (Cartwright & Henricksen, 2012; Hymowitz, 2005; Richardson, 2010; Roberts-Douglas & Curtis-Boles, 2013). Research has consistently shown that single parenting and growing up as an African American male are two potential risk factors generating adverse impacts on children (Cicchetti & Garmenzy, 1994; Dallas, 2013). Few studies focus on African American single-mothered households with successful young sons (Griffin & Allen, 2006; Robinson & Werblow, 2012); consequently, these homes are usually assumed broken and unstable, and said to produce uncontrollable, uneducable African American males (Hill, 1998).

Several million African American children under age 18 live in single-mothered, low-income homes and are more likely to live in poverty (U.S. Census, 2000). The 2000 U.S. Census revealed 3,809,000 African American children were raised by their single mother due to an absent husband, or the mother's status as widowed, divorced, or never married (U.S. Census, 2000). Currently, more than 4,332,000 African American children are reared in single-mothered homes, a 13% increase over the past 10 years (U.S. Census, 2011). Jackson, Brooks-Gunn, Huang, and Glassman (2000) further note a majority of African American males are raised by single mothers.

Previous studies on African American single mothers are interpreted from the dominant culture's worldview, resulting in stereotypes and misconceptions (Choi & Jackson, 2011; Dickerson, 1995). However, to provide effective policy approaches and useful roles for educators and scholars, African American single mothers need representation in their structural and functional context (Dickerson,

1995; Johnson & González y González, 2013). Moreover, to determine factors contributing to their sons' academic achievement, it is imperative to understand supporting influences in overcoming educational struggles (Griffin & Allen, 2006); and examine factors enabling these mothers to fare well in raising their young sons, despite challenging circumstances (Murray, Bynum, Brody, Wilert, & Stephens, 2001). Thus, the need for this study, which focuses on the manifestation of racial socialization in African American single mothers who raise sons.

The definitive purpose of this study is to explore how African American single mothers use racial socialization to influence school readiness and academic achievement in their successful young sons attending an urban school. Most studies exploring racial socialization focus on parents of adolescents, and little is known about whether and how parents of early elementary-aged children engage in racial socialization. The few studies examining this process bare inconsistent findings. Furthermore, the researchers chose elementary-aged African American males given their early educational experiences are the most important indicator of achievement throughout their schooling (Best, 1983; Entwisle, 1993; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 1997; Whiting, 2006).

This study is important because there is a need to understand African American single mothers' life experiences and their young sons. The researchers anticipate the findings will enable educators, school administrators, and policymakers to better assist African American males in garnering academic and life success. Accordingly, the following research question guided the study: How do African American single mothers use racial socialization to influence their son's school readiness and academic achievement?

Sociocultural Context

Racial socialization is a race-relevant experience that seemingly ameliorates the negative impacts racial discrimination experiences impose on African American males' academic outcomes (Neblett Jr., Philip, Cogburn, & Sellers, 2006; Smalls, 2010). For African American single mothers, preparing young sons to function in U.S. society requires one to consider African Americans' unique social position, in addition to the socialization all parents undertake (Caughy, O'Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002). Caughy et al. (2002), assert African American parents routinely engage in racial socialization practices as part of their parenting repertoire.

Racial Socialization

Racial socialization is a complex, multidimensional construct. As such, no single or commonly accepted definition subsists; rather, multiple definitions exist. For example, some researchers define racial socialization simply as the transmittal of values, attitudes, and behaviors that help prepare future generations for possible negative race-related experiences, while others conceptualize it as a process of helping future generations develop a positive racial identity (Barr & Neville, 2008; Demo & Hughes, 1990). Even other researchers combine multiple functions, conceptualizing it as communicating behaviors and messages to African American children to enhance their sense of racial/ethnic identity, partially in preparation for racially hostile encounters (Caughy, Nettles, & Lima, 2011). Fatimilehin (1999) stated most racial socialization definitions include the issue of coping in an oppressive environment, and scarce agreement regarding boundaries, given the definition is reflected in the diversity of ways in which it has been measured. Therefore, it is difficult to precisely compare the few published studies.

Increasing studies support the notion that children show improved socio-emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes when engaged in racial socialization practices (Banerjee, Harrell, & Johnson, 2011). In an effort to unearth the ways in which parents impart racial socialization messages, Hughes et al. (2006) disaggregated previous research studies based upon the study's methodology and findings. Their comprehensive systematic literature review revealed parents impart the following messages: (a) cultural socialization or enculturation, (b) promotion of discrimination awareness and coping strategies, (c) encouragement of caution during interracial interactions, and/or (d) encouragement of egalitarianism or even color-blindness. Lesane-Brown's (2006) systematic literature review found similar characteristics. A smaller scale study whose chosen articles were also a part of Hughes et al. (2006), Lesane-Brown (2006) denoted African American parents' racial socialization messages in three categories: (a) Culture Messages, (b) Minority Experiences, and (c) Mainstream Experiences. Culture Messages, she explained, emphasizes teaching children about their culture and promoting racial pride. Minority Experiences describes messages detailing one's oppressive position in America's hierarchical society. Mainstream Experiences describes messages that highlight one's personal qualities while deemphasizing race. Essentially, to raise physically and emotionally healthy African American males, single mothers must buffer information about race (Murray, Bynum, Brody, Wilert, & Stephens, 2001; Stacey, 2007).

Additionally, they must socialize their sons to understand African American culture, and strategies for (a) interacting with other African Americans, (b) socializing with other racial groups, and (c) handling their oppressed status (Boykin & Toms, 1985). Again, this study's purpose is to explore how African American single mothers utilize racial socialization to influence school readiness and academic achievement in their successful elementary aged sons.

Literature Review

Families and households managed solely by African American mothers have played an integral part of American society since the British colonization days of North America; they reflect the nexus of race, gender, and class within the United States (Moehling, 2007). African American single motherhood first evolved as the manifestation of the slave woman's legal, cultural, and social death. Therefore, the history of African American single motherhood is historically a part of American family life.

African American Single Mothers Raising Sons

A majority of African American males are raised by single mothers whose lifestyle, according to Jackson et al. (2000), may cause inadequate parenting and negatively affect their son's educational outcome. Conversely, African American mothers value their children's education, and support their endeavors to perform well in school (Lee & Kushner, 2008; Stevenson, Chen, & Uttal, 1990). Moreover, African American single mothers value their son's self-reliance, independence, educational achievement, and social well-being (Brody & Flor, 1998; Gantt & Greif, 2009). In fact, most African American mothers value their sons' education and promote positive school outcomes (Brown & Davis, 2000; Cartwright & Henricksen, 2012).

Studies exploring preschoolers from African American, single-parent families evidenced that a mother's increased nurturing and cognitive stimulation influenced children's learning readiness and personal maturity (Lee & Kushner, 2008; McGroder, 2000). Research has also shown that African American males experience greater success when their single mother is directly involved in their academics (Brody & Flor, 1998; Gantt & Greif, 2009); and African American single mothers' responsive behavior toward her son's education is directly correlated with her son's academic performance (Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Seginer, 1986). Moles (1987) asserted single mothers have the same interest as married parents—to help their sons in the educational process.

Early Educational Experiences of African American Males

The early educational experiences of African American males are the most important factor in their achievement throughout school (Best, 1983; Entwisle, et al., 1997; Jackson & Moore III, 2006). To ensure their academic success, curriculum improvement, instruction, and support for teachers should begin in preschool and early elementary before underachievement begins (Davis, 2003b; Whiting, 2006). When elementary-aged African American males have inequitable access to curriculum, achievement disparities in the later grades are not surprising (Davis, 2003a; Whiting, 2006). Little is known about

the processes and experiences elementary-aged African American males have (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 2000); as the focus on their educational problems is usually presented from an archetype of masculine behavior that is either deficient or distorted under the weight of racism, economic marginality, and/or cultural pathology (Hunter & Davis, 1992). Very little is known about the early schooling contexts and experiences that affect achievement outcomes.

Previous literature on African American males in the early grades is comparative in nature and examines their academic experiences and outcomes relative to other students. Slaughter-Defoe and Richards (1994) suggested that as early as kindergarten, African American males are treated differently than other male and female students. Davis and Jordan (1994) found that African American boys' school engagement reflected in study habits and attendance were positively related to achievement and grades. They also found that remediation, grade retention, and suspensions induce academic failure among African American males from their preschool years into late adolescence. A common research finding is the power of a caring parent or cultural relevance to tip the scale from risk to resilience for young African American males considered disadvantaged.

African American Males in Education Today

The current plight of young African American males in schools demands more theoretical and methodological focus. African American males are too often disadvantaged by the perplexing and misunderstood intersection of race and gender. This is due to the sparse data available on African American males' early grade experiences and outcomes. The negative consequences of their poor achievement are more widely known and accepted. When compared to their peers, African American males lag significantly behind on standardized tests, grade point averages, high school graduation rates, postsecondary attendance, and college graduation rates (Kunjufu, 2005; Noguera, 2003). African American males are also disproportionately placed in special education, suspended, or expelled from school, compared to their peers (Holzman, 2012; Strayhorn, 2008). Teachers' perceptions of African American males in the classroom have a direct impact on their achievement (Robinson, 2007), and most feel mistreated and wrongly judged by their teachers (Davis, 2003b; Duncan, 2002). When compared to other students by gender and race, African American males consistently have the lowest academic achievement, and highest suspension, expulsion, retention, and dropout rates.

Various researchers state African American males strongly desire to achieve academically, and discuss factors that motivate African American males' academic success (Carter, 2005; Conchas, 2006; Hale, 2001; Majors & Billson, 1992). These researchers also posit that African American males possess an intrinsic motivation that encourages high self-esteem, more self-worth, and confidence in their academic ability. When family and teachers encourage African American males, they excel despite societal influences and school forces that are typically obstructions (Carter, 2005; Conchas, 2006; Hale, 2001; Hrabowski, Maton, & Grief, 1998; Perry, 2003). This study identifies how racial socialization contributes to the school readiness and academic success of young African American males raised by African American single mothers.

Methodology

This qualitative research effort used a case study methodology, a detailed examination of a subject or population that has been overlooked (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The study explored how resilient African American single mothers utilize racial socialization to influence school readiness and academic achievement in their successful, elementary-aged sons. The researchers utilized the methodology most appropriate for the study.

Research Community

The school district used for this study is located in a large metropolitan suburb, which serves approximately 104,000 ethnically, economically, and academically diverse students. The district's objectives include student growth and development, creating safe schools, and building community relations. A Title 1 elementary school, it houses approximately 890 students. The researchers selected this school because the majority of students are of color and many derive from single-mothered homes. The school comprises 25% African American, 66% Hispanic, 7% White, 2% Asian, 1% Native American, and an 86% economically disadvantaged student population. The community is well established with neighborhoods, apartments, convenience stores, and restaurants.

Purposeful Sample

Merriam (2009) states, "purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that one wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (pg. 77). The researchers acquired a purposeful sampling of five African American single mothers raising young sons. To amass this sample, the researchers mailed a letter and offered a follow-up phone call requesting the mother's voluntary participation. This *modus operandi* sought to guarantee their *voices* were captured regarding how they utilize racial socialization to influence their sons' academic success and school readiness. For this study, successful young African American males were elementary-aged boys who scored "at grade level" on their beginning of year and midyear district benchmark assessment, and have no filed discipline referrals. African American single mothers were defined as an American female of African descent who manages her household and raises her son with no other adult living in the household. Additionally, the father does not live in the home because of separation, divorce, or death (Brown & Davis, 2000; Gantt & Greif, 2009).

Instrumentation

While the researchers served as primary instruments, the mothers provided direct information regarding their interpreted influence on their son's school readiness and academic success. The researchers used an interview guide approach to naturalistic interviews and asked open-ended interview questions to explore each participant's interpretations. Held at neutral sites in the community, the interviews ranged from one to two hours. All interviews were audio-recorded, and transcribed by a professional transcription company. The researchers also reviewed the son's permanent school records to ensure he met the following criteria: (a) African American male, (b) between the

ages of 5 and 10, (c) scored above average on beginning of year and midyear district benchmark assessments, (d) had no discipline referrals on record, and e) raised by an African American single mother.

Research Design

Wimmer and Dominick (1994) described qualitative research as a term including several research strategies such as interviews, field observations, and case studies. This study used a case study design to explore the phenomena through the use of a replication strategy. The researchers defined case as an in-depth interview with the mothers of the successful African American males identified for the study. To protect participants' identities, the researcher assigned each a pseudonym: India, Patricia, Chandra, Shaun, and Joy.

Data Analysis

The research attempts to value the subjective and personal meaning of this population of mothers. The process of building trustworthiness, transferability, dependability, and conformability is critical in naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). They are manifested in this study via triangulated data such as audiotaped interviews, written field notes, and archival data; encouraging participants to engage in member checks; elucidating necessary information for transferability; thorough examination of records for accuracy; and maintaining a record of the inquiry process.

Findings

This data analysis presents five African American single mothers ranging in age from 25-40, and their interpretation of racial socialization experiences that influenced their son's school readiness and academic performance. Each passionate narrative told an endearing concern for a son's educational opportunities. The overarching research question guiding this study is: How do African American single mothers use racial socialization to influence their son's school readiness? Seven themes emerged: Upbringing, Socializing Sons for Success, Academic Success, Positive Self-Image, Positive Male Role Models, Family and Friends, and Church.

Upbringing

Each mother stated her upbringing and education influenced the success she experiences raising her son. Four of the five mothers were raised in a two-parent home; and one by her single mother, although her father played an active role in her life. All felt their parents wanted them to experience academic success, although they did not always provide the necessary support. Despite minimal support, having been raised around people who loved and encouraged them, these mothers want the same for their young sons. Also, all participants believe their parents instilled in them the importance of education, and wanted them to attend college so they could acquire good paying, pleasant jobs unlike them. This was a key component for all participants regarding the academic expectations they have for their sons. They believed that since their parents made education a "must have," they should instill the same sense of educational pride in their sons.

India grew up in a family where she was told, "If you get anything in life, at least get your education, something for you to fall back on and a sense of pride." This still resonates with India, and she repeats

the same phrase to her young son. India said, "My son can't help but to be successful because he comes from a lineage of hard working, successful people." Shaun remembers her parents holding high expectations for her and her siblings, but states they encouraged her very little. She said, "I wish they would have pushed me to do better and work harder." She recalled earning decent grades, but believes she could have earned higher grades had her mother pushed her more. Because of her experience, she also acknowledges pushing her son more. "I tell my son that if he studies hard now, he will be able to get into any college and become anything he wants to become in life."

Chandra asserts that although her parents are not high school graduates, they made certain she did not follow in their footsteps. She remembers them lecturing, "Girl, you are not going to be like me. You will graduate from high school if I have to beat you through." She laughingly reported realizing their seriousness after a couple "beatings," and stated she decided to study and work hard in school. Chandra believes her parent's constant encouragement resulted in her success as a person and parent. She tells her son, "I want you to have more opportunities than I ever had, and I believe you can do anything you put your mind to."

The participants' parents instilled the importance of work. In fact, Patricia, Chandra, and Shaun all worked during their teenage years to help their families. All participants remember performing house chores and helping care for younger siblings. Conversely, Patricia's son has regular chores he must complete before he is allowed playtime. India instills the importance of work in her son by having him care for their pet parakeets. Chandra's son likes to help in the kitchen. He volunteers to clean up whenever Chandra cooks dinner because she required him to pick up after himself from the time he was a toddler. The mothers believe their upbringings shaped the way they raise their sons and it has been a positive experience for mothers and sons.

Socializing Sons for Success

These mothers utilized racial socialization, a tool shown to predict academic achievement, to promote success in their young sons. The single mothers all used racial socialization to shape the beliefs, goals, and behaviors of their young sons. They taught their sons about their ethnic heritage, instilled ethnic pride, prepared them for bias, and emphasized racial equality. All participants stated their parents taught them early in life about race and to embrace their heritage.

All participants acknowledged enjoying talking to their sons about racial and ethnic pride, especially now that an African American male is the President of the United States. Wanting her son to enter the world as a strong, confident Black boy, India began reading books about famous African Americans while still pregnant with her son. Now, she and her son visit culturally themed museums. Chandra said most of her son's cultural socialization is through her church. They attend ethnic-related activities such as plays and concerts held at their church. They all discussed the importance of traditional family meals during birthdays and holidays. Most stated they even allow their sons to help in the kitchen so they learn self-sufficiency.

Many African American parents believe education is the only way their children will have opportunities in a world where they are confronted with racial inequalities. Instilling the value of long-term educational achievement is therefore an important socialization message that single mothers must give their young African American sons

(Hill, 2001; Marshall, 1995). The mothers described education as a major factor in their overall success as an African American female and single mother. India was the only mother holding more than a bachelor's degree. Two of the mothers had associate degrees, and two were currently in school working toward degrees. Each single mother talked about education as a way to break the cycle of poverty and garner a better life.

Each participant discussed affirming her son daily by acknowledging his intelligence and reminding him of his potential to achieve anything. The mothers also stated family members, church members, and friends also relayed the same messages to their sons. Patricia feels self-worth messages are important because they help her son believe in himself when peers tease him. She stated he used to leave school crying because his peers teased him about his large ears. After hearing self-worth messages from his mother and other family members, he now tells his peers that his ears help him hear information that they might miss, and make all As and Bs on his report card. Shaun prays with her son every morning before he gets out of the car and she tells him he will have a great day.

Academic Success

The mothers were excited to describe their sons' academic success. They were very proud of their sons and held high expectations for them. All participants happily reported their sons earned good grades and did not get in trouble at school. Patricia's theory about why she felt her son was successful was this:

My son is being academically successful because I sit with him when he does his homework to show him that I value education. I also place positive male role models in his life who help him to believe in himself and show him what he can become if he continues to do well in school.

Chandra believes her sons are successful because of many factors:

My boys are doing well in school because I have set high expectations for them and I tell them that I know they are going to be smarter than me and have a better job than I have. I also started reading with them when they were very little and teaching them their numbers and letters. I also think because I was smart, they got it honestly.

Joy says, "I tell my son that he can be the next President of the United States if he wants to. We read books about President Obama and Dr. Martin Luther King so that he can see examples of strong Black men. I want him to know that the sky is the limit, and if he studies he will achieve all of his goals in life." Shaun believes, "My son does well in school because he knows that he can't come home with bad grades or conduct because he will be grounded from the things he likes to do." India said, "I think my son is the smartest boy in his class, and I want him to believe that about himself."

All mothers desired their sons to become happy, hard-working members of society. They talked about how their parents wanted them to have more than they, and that is influencing their parenting. Joy tells her son, "You can't play your video games until all of your

homework is done and done right." She said, "I don't play when it comes to his school work." India stated, "I tell my son that if you want the best, you have to be the best." Chandra explained, "I took my son on the streets and showed him what he would become if he didn't work hard in school. I showed him the drug dealers and hustlers and told him that most of them don't ever make it out of the hood once they start." Patricia said, "You are a child of God, and the only thing you can become is great!" Shaun explains to her son, "The more you learn, the more you earn." She hopes this will inspire him to reach his goal of becoming an engineer.

Positive Self-Image

One factor to which the mothers attribute their son's success is boosting their self-esteem and self-image. The participants also credit racial socialization in molding their sons to have a positive self-image. Patricia tells her son, "You are the most handsome, smart, black young man that I know and I am so very proud of you." India explains that every morning she tells her son, "Today you will have a great day and you will be the best that you can be!" Joy has her son look in the mirror and say, "I am Black and I am proud and I will achieve all of my goals." Shaun states, "My brother takes my son to the barber shop and shopping and shows him how to look like a positive Black boy." Chandra says, "I just talk to my son about the importance of believing that he can be as successful as any White child in his class and don't ever let anyone say you can't. I want him to know that sometimes people will try to make him think he is less than because he is Black."

Support Systems and Positive Black Male Role Models

With support in a cohesive, nurturing family and community, African American single mothers can help their sons achieve academic success (Johnson, 1999). Mentoring programs that assign professional Black men to young African American males is essential for enhancing these students' academic and social identity development (Davis, 2003a). A positive male presence is meant to counter negative gender role socialization of African American boys and develop conceptions and expressions of masculinity that match positive behaviors and deportment in school settings, which is the primary goal of these interventions (Davis, 2003a).

The single mothers in this study were fortunate to have wonderful support systems in place. They all spoke highly of their family as a critical component in their son's lives and were grateful to have them around. India said, "Without the support of my parents I probably would have given my son up for adoption because I did not feel that I was mature enough to be a parent." She is grateful to have such a strong support system in place and says that is how she is able to raise her son successfully. Joy described her sister as a "second mother" to her son. Her sister goes to the school with her or in her place to stay informed about her nephew's academic progress. She said, "If it wasn't for my sister helping me out, I think that I would have had a nervous breakdown by now. I am forever grateful for her constant support." Joy also helps her sister with her children. She describes her and her sister as a "tag team" that take turns disciplining and having fun with each other's kids.

One of the greatest challenges single mothers raising boys encounter is teaching them how to become men. Shaun stated that her only real challenge is making sure that he's confident in himself as a young Black male because there are many things that she cannot teach him. She worries about him having a positive male role model so she tries to be the strongest role model possible by being a leader and setting good examples.

Patricia also expressed a genuine concern about teaching her son to be a man. She feels there are times when she cannot give him what he needs because she does not understand what it is like to be a man. Although she believes her son has positive male role models in his life, she still worries that he is missing out on important male life lessons. Patricia has the support of male church members who take her son to sporting events and help him with school work. She said, "The men in our church are wonderful role models for my son, and I thank God everyday for their support." Chandra stated that since her brother has moved to the city, she is more confident that her son will learn the lessons he needs to become a man. She believes quality male bonding takes place when her brother takes her son to the barber shop and the car wash on Saturdays. Chandra's son looks forward to spending time with his uncle and comes home to tell his mom about his adventures. She is joyful when her son says, "Mom I am going to grow up and be like Uncle John and help take care of our family." Chandra says this confirms she is doing a good job helping her son determine his role as a good man.

Each participant was fortunate to provide her son with a positive adult Black male role model within her family and church circle. They were all grateful to have assistance raising their sons, and that God placed good people in their lives. The participants' fathers, brothers, uncles, or men from their church were happy to assist the mothers in raising their sons to become positive young men. Patricia talked about how her dad takes her son fishing and does fun things to bond with him. She said, "My son loves going with his Paw Paw to do manly things." India says, "My brother loves to help my son with his homework, and then they rough house together." Chandra states, "My pastor is really good with my sons and he even goes to their school to check on them and eat lunch with them." Shaun said, "I love when my son comes home from an outing with his uncle and says mom I am going to be just like him when I grow up." Joy says that her dad teaches her son about the importance of having a good work ethic. He takes him to work with him where he is the foreman of a large cooperation.

Family and Friends

All participants mentioned having positive relationships with family and friends, which creates a great support system for their sons. The mothers felt they could rely on family and friends to help with raising their sons and they were thankful to have the variety of help. Some of the support they receive is babysitting while at work or school, financial help in times of need, or simply spending quality time with their sons. Shaun said, "It is only because of my parents that I have been able to go back to college." Joy states, "Not only do my parents provide support for my son, they also provide emotional support for me which keeps me grounded and helps me to keep moving forward." Patricia tells, "If it wasn't for the support of my

family, I don't think my son would be doing as well as he is doing." India says, "My parents told me that they will always help me as long as I am helping myself."

Church

The mothers talked about the importance of God, attending church, and having members of the church assist them with raising their sons. They also mentioned having some form of support from their religious community. For example, some participants discussed receiving financial help and assistance with food and clothing. Chandra felt she depended on her religion for support: "I do depend on going to church because it helps me out a lot. We go to church every Sunday and Bible study every Tuesday." Patricia depended on a male church elder's positive relationship with her son to communicate with him about difficult male issues. She stated, "The men in my church show my son how to be a real man. They help him with homework and answer 'men' questions that I don't know how to answer." Joy believes that going to church teaches her son how to trust in God for everything. She insisted, "My son watches me pray when things get tough and I tell him when God answers my prayers. I also teach him to ask God for whatever he needs help with." Chandra said, "My church has helped me with my bills when I was out of work. They also helped me get clothes for my boys." Shaun said, "Church is the only place that me and my son can go to and have peace and joy and people who love us unconditionally. The older women in the church give me guidance and the men give my son advice on becoming a young man."

Discussion

This study sought to determine how African American single mothers use racial socialization to influence school readiness and academic achievement in their elementary-aged sons. Findings indicate these mothers use racial socialization to define and promote academic success, induce their son's positive self-image, and when considering support systems such as Black role models, family and friends, and church members. Essentially, these mothers utilized their son's African American status for social and academic empowerment to ensue. This is consistent with previous findings that assert cultural relevance is associated with positive academic achievement for African American students, and provides the relevance to which their White counterparts have experienced all along. Findings are also consistent with studies that assert African American single mothers are concerned about their son's social and academic well-being, and therefore directly involve themselves to increase his academic achievement, self-reliance, independence, and social well-being. Consequently, when African American single mothers invest in their son's academia and positively connect his African American status to life situations, academic and social well-being subsists.

These findings raise two questions, the first of which is why, after considering such corroborating information, do educators continue to negate race as an important factor for curriculum development. Schools and teachers must engage in culturally responsive teaching practices and facilitate the home/school connection to improve African American males' academic achievement. Culturally responsive teaching makes learning meaningful, while demonstrating teachers value the contributions of a diverse people. Culturally responsive teaching

is intended to improve students' academic achievement while cultivating their cultural identity. Thus, future research must ascertain teacher and administrator perceptions of culturally relevant curricula, and reasons for not employing its principles in their classroom.

Findings also raise the question when, given the prevalence of African American single-mothered homes, will educational institutions and other political stakeholders involve themselves in socially supporting these households? More service providers should offer support groups, counseling, and other activities that support single mothers raising sons. The reality of single parenting threatens the mother's ability to practice resilience. To facilitate resilience in single-mothered households, educators and service providers should concern themselves with the effects of single mothers raising young sons by developing social outlets in the form of support groups.

Conclusion

This study focused on the following research question: How do African American single mothers use racial socialization to influence the school readiness of their sons? Seven themes emerged: upbringing, socializing sons for success, academic success, positive self-image, Black male role models, family and friends, and church. The research concluded these African American single mothers partially attribute their son's academic readiness to their own parenting style and upbringing. These mothers believed their parents placed a great deal of importance on education, responsibility, and respect when they were growing up, and now that plays a role in how they are successful in raising their sons.

Racial socialization prepares young African American males for potential unfair treatment in society due to their ethnic background. The mothers believe racial socialization builds their sons' self-esteem and self-confidence, while teaching them self-respect. Each mother referenced preparing her son for positive schooling experiences by providing positive messages about self-image as a young African American male. They all reported telling their sons they are smart and should not let anyone tell them differently. These mothers constantly tell their sons they believe in them, and want them to believe in themselves. Most of the mothers told their sons that teachers might treat them unfairly because of their skin color, yet they implored their sons to always be respectful.

The single mothers reported exposing their sons to different cultural events in the community. They wanted to make certain their sons know about prominent African Americans given they seldom learn about them in school. Each mother felt the use of racial socialization played a major role in her son's academic and social well-being. They utilized racial socialization efforts to increase their son's confidence and thereby academic success and school readiness. From inducing their son's self-image to recruiting role models, these mothers connected race with every facet of teaching and raising their sons. All mothers were adamant about instilling in their sons a sense of Black pride to prepare them for impending racial discrimination. Additionally, all mothers told their sons that sometimes people will mistreat them because they are Black; this includes teachers and others in authoritative positions.

Much of the existing research focuses on African American single mothers and sons who are not successful and claim their lifestyle is

inadequate and chaotic; this study aimed to counter those studies by shedding light on those who are successful. The findings provide useful information to teachers, administrators, and researchers concerned with academically successful African American males raised by their single mother. Future research efforts should explore the mothers' and sons' coping strategies or resilience, and address it longitudinally. This would benefit educators to know whether resilience and racial socialization have long-term positive effects on their son's academic success. Future studies could also replicate this study to identify other factors leading to males' academic success from other ethnic backgrounds and family structures.

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An Investigation of the Relationship Between School Failure and At-Risk Students' General Self-Efficacy, Academic Self-Efficacy, and Motivation

Marguerite Ohrtman and Jennifer Preston

Abstract: Students who are considered at risk often struggle throughout their academic careers. This is reflected in students' failing of more than one course or several courses (Alfassi, 2003; Wright, 2006). Understanding the causes for multicourse failure is a critical component to assisting at-risk students. Currently, the literature focuses on the academic causes of course failure, yet there has been no connection made between these failures and students' perceptions of their academic self-efficacy, their general self-efficacy, and their motivation. From this quantitative project, there was no direct connection found between the number of courses failed and the participants' perceptions of general self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy, and motivation. This study is one of the first to directly examine the possible connections between at-risk students.

In the literature, there is an abundance of research about how at-risk students become at risk (Alfassi, 2003; Bruyere, 2010; Christiansen, 1997; Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002; MacMath, Roberts, Wallace, & Chi, 2009). At-risk students have been defined in many ways, from students who are regularly in trouble with the school to students who are struggling academically. While there are many ways to define the term "at-risk student," for the purpose of this study an at-risk student is a student who is in academic jeopardy and is at risk of not graduating high school.

Graduating from high school is an important milestone in students' lives; therefore, school staff seeks to support each student in reaching this goal. However, 24.5% of the students attending public school do not achieve this milestone. Over 1 million students during the 2008–2009 school year failed to graduate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). The status *dropout* represents the students who have not earned a high school diploma, are not attending school, and have not earned an equivalency credential such as the General Educational Development (GED) certificate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

These at-risk students are often not receiving the support and attention they need until they are affecting a school's retention rate (Children's Defense Fund, 2011). For example, in 2011, every 8 seconds a high school student dropped out of school, which totaled 3,312 students a day (Children's Defense Fund, 2011). At the point of dropping out of school, it is frequently too late to help these students develop academically or emotionally.

Even with these startling numbers, the current literature does not adequately address how at-risk students function and remain at risk. There is a lack of research exploring, from the students' perspectives, how they are making their choices, and how they perceive themselves. Having more information about how these students perceive their general self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy, and motivation will help school counselors, teachers, parents, and schools create strategies to support these students' academic success. With this better understanding, counselors can serve these students most appropriately.

To better understand this population, general self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy, and motivation were explored, to provide some insight into the perceptions of at-risk students. One of the primary indicators of students leaving school is their high number of course failures, therefore, this study utilized course failures to compare to the participant's sense of general self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy, and motivation.

Academic self-efficacy is grounded in Bandura's 1977 Self-Efficacy Theory (McGrew, 2008). Academic self-efficacy, as defined by Bandura, is an individual's belief that he or she can successfully achieve or attain a specific academic goal (Bandura, 1994; Schunk & Pajares, 2002; Wang & Sound, 2008). For the purpose of this research, Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory and Deci and Ryan's (1996) Self-Determination Theory were employed to understand the interaction among general self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy and motivation with at-risk students. Self-Efficacy Theory focuses on providing the individual with mastery experiences

that lead to building self-confidence (Alfassi, 2003). According to Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1996) individuals are encouraged to make their own choices and to control their own behaviors. The connection between these two theories in terms of how at-risk students make their academic choices has not been addressed in the literature. If at-risk students are not feeling successful and have a low general self-efficacy and/or academic self-efficacy, it is important to understand how these failures affect their motivation.

Students who are considered at risk often struggle throughout their academic career. This struggle is often reflected in the failing of more than one course and, at times, several courses (Alfassi, 2003; Wright, 2006). Understanding some of the causes for multicourse failure is a critical component to assisting at-risk students. Currently, the literature focuses on the academic causes of course failure, yet there is no currently held connection between these failures and students' perceptions of their general self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy, and motivation. A better understanding of at-risk students' perceptions and academic experiences will enable school professionals to assist these students in academic settings. This quantitative project has begun to close the gap between at-risk students' perceptions of their academic self-efficacy, their motivation, and their general self-efficacy, on one hand, and how these factors may or may not relate to the number of course failures.

Method

In this current study, the general self-efficacy and academic self-efficacy of each participating student was assessed, as was motivation. Motivation is a concept that addresses how individuals choose to take action (Bandura, 1977). Understanding both how to motivate and how students motivate themselves internally will help determine how to provide resources to at-risk students that will allow them to achieve more academically.

Participants

This investigation involved data collection and analysis of students in grades 10 through 12 who are considered at risk due to failing at least two classes during their high school career. Students who participated in the study were in grades 10-12, as data were collected during the fall term, 9th grade students had not had the course experiences to fail a high school course.

There were 450 students that met the criteria for the study in the three schools. Of the 450 participants, 215 surveys were returned for a 47% return rate. The return rate from each school was School One: 30%, School Two: 40%, and School Three: 72%. Number of classes failed ranged from 2 to 28 classes with a mean of 6.4 classes and a standard deviation of 4.8.

Male participants numbered 129 (60%) and females totaled 86 (40%). In regard to grade level, 165 (77%) were seniors and 50 (33%) were in grades 10-11. The sample was moderately diverse in its racial/ethnic identification, with students identifying in the following ways: Caucasian ($n = 99$, 46%), Hispanic ($n = 48$, 21%), and African American ($n = 35$, 16%). Eighteen participants described themselves as Asian (8%), three participants identified as Russian (1%), four participants identified as Native American (1.8%), three participants identified as Somali (1%), and five participants listed other descriptions (2.3%).

Other demographic data included information about whether the participant held a job. One hundred eleven participants (51.6%) reported working during the week and 104 (48.4%) responded that they did not work. Participants were also asked whether any family member had dropped out of high school. One hundred thirty respondents (60.5%) reported no and 85 (39.5%) reported yes, that a family member had dropped out of school. Participants were also asked to identify their adult(s) at home. Ninety-four participants (43.7%) listed both mother and father as adults at home. Eighty-six participants (40%) reported mother as their adult, 20 participants (9%) listed father. Fifteen participants (6.9%) listed other adults such as grandparent, sibling, aunt/uncle, guardian, foster parent(s), and none. The means and standard deviations of classes failed by demographic variables are reported in Table 1.

Instrumentation

This study utilized a predictive quantitative method to examine at-risk students' general self-efficacy, motivation, and academic self-efficacy and the impact of these factors on course failure. After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board at Minnesota State University, Mankato, data collection began. Three questionnaires were utilized to collect data for this study. The first questionnaire was the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995), which is used to measure individuals' general self-efficacy. For this scale, participants provided responses on a 4-point scale, and the sum of the responses to all 10 items yields the final composite score, ranging from 10 to 40. Higher scores indicate higher self-efficacy. The GSE has been used internationally and is a suitable indicator of the quality of life of participants at any point in time (Luszczynska, Scholz, & Schwarzer, 2005; Steese et al., 2006). For the purpose of this research, all 10 questions were asked in the survey.

The second questionnaire was the Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (Hale, 2012; Moilanen, Hemond-Reuman, Crump, & Kenny, 1991). The Academic Self-Efficacy Scale (ASES) is a 24-item self-report instrument that assesses a student's perceived ability in academic skills and strategies (Hale, 2012; Moilanen et al., 1991). Students rate items on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from *no confidence* (1) to *complete confidence* (4). The items are summed to compute a total score that ranges from 24 to 96; higher scores indicate higher levels of academic self-efficacy.

The third questionnaire was the Academic Motivation Scale (Broussard, 2002; Halawah, 2006). The Motivation Survey is a 10-item self-report instrument that assesses an individual's levels of motivation (Broussard, 2002; Halawah, 2006). Participants rate items on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. For the purpose of this study, all 10 questions were used and the score can range from 10 to 50.

Results

A multiple regression analysis was used to predict the value of classes failed (dependent variable) by exploring the students' perceptions of general self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy, and motivation (independent variables). Moderated regressions were run on several of the demographic variables.

The Cronbach's alphas for the three surveys were General Self-Efficacy Scale: .728, Academic Self-Efficacy Scale: .906, and Motiva-

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Classes Failed by Demographic Variables

Variables	Number of Participants	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Gender					
Male	129	7.19	5.632	2	28
Female	86	5.22	2.908	2	15
Grade Level					
Seniors	165	6.53	5.112	2	28
Grades 10–11	50	5.98	3.733	2	17
Ethnic Identification					
Caucasian	99	5.21	3.417	2	20
Hispanic	48	8.21	4.785	2	23
African American	35	7.49	6.590	2	28
Asian	18	6.11	4.071	2	16
Russian	3	11.00	9.165	3	21
Native American	4	3.75	1.258	2	5
Somali	3	2.00	.000	2	2
Ethiopian	2	13.50	14.849	3	24
Pacific Islander	2	5.50	2.121	4	7
Biracial	1	3.00	.000	3	3
Employment Status					
Worked	111	6.36	4.983	2	28
Did Not Work	104	6.45	4.671	2	24
Family Member Dropped Out of School					
No	130	6.12	4.741	2	24
Yes	85	6.84	4.945	2	28
Adult at Home					
Mother and Father	94	6.26	4.781	2	28
Mother	86	6.73	5.084	2	24
Father	20	5.60	3.831	2	15
Aunt/Uncle	5	5.40	3.912	2	12
Grandparent	4	7.75	6.131	2	14
Sibling	2	3.50	2.121	2	5
Stepparents	1	6.00	.000	6	6
Guardian	1	18.00	.000	18	18
Foster Parent	1	6.00	.000	6	6
None	1	3.00	.000	3	3

tion Survey: .641. The General Self-Efficacy Scale's Cronbach's alpha have ranged from .76 to .90 (Scholz, Gutierrez Doza, Sud, & Schwarzer, 2002) and in this study the scale was found to be within this range. There is no found internal consistency reliability for the Academic Self-Efficacy Scale. In addition, the Motivation Survey has been found to have an internal consistency reliability of .52 (Halawah, 2006) and in this study the Cronbach's alpha for this scale was found to be .64, which is under the .7 cutoff value (Nunnally, 1978).

The variables in this study included three independent (i.e., predictor) variables and one dependent (i.e., outcome) variable. The independent variables were the following: general self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy, and motivation. The dependent variable was the number of classes the participant failed. The average amount of courses failed was 6.4, ranging from 2 to 28, with a standard deviation of 4.82.

Overall, there was no significance found with the three scales. In the study, the mean overall scores of the three independent variables were General Self-Efficacy: 31.102 out of 40 possible, Academic Self-Efficacy: 65.67 out of 96 possible, and Motivation: 34.398 out of 50 possible. The standard deviations of the three surveys were General Self-Efficacy: .34693, Academic Self-Efficacy: .48035, and Motivation Survey: .46291. None of the three predictor variables significantly predicted the number of courses failed ($R = .161$, $R^2 = .026$, $R^2_{adj} = .012$, $F = 1.860$, $p = 0.137$).

In general, adjusted R Squared is lower than the R Squared. In this study, $R = .161$, $R^2 = .026$, and $R^2_{adj} = .012$. In the data set using the R^2 value, .026 or 2.6 % of the variation in number of courses failed is accounted for by including general self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy, and motivation in the model, which is a weak relationship. The average number of courses failed decreased by 0.065 for every 1-unit increase in the mean general self-efficacy. The B -values for this study were -.065 for general self-efficacy, -.150 for academic self-efficacy, and -.069 for motivation. Academic self-efficacy was the largest in absolute value ($\beta = -.108$), indicating that it made the strongest unique contribution to the dependent variable. In this study, none of the independent variables made a significant contribution to the prediction/dependent variable, see Table 2.

Moderated regressions were run using grade level, gender, working or nonworking student, and if the student had or did not have a family

who dropped out of school as moderators. The interaction term senior and academic self-efficacy was significant at a .05 significance level ($p = .046$). Because this interaction term was significant and has a coefficient estimate of -.0537, in general, students who are seniors fail fewer classes if they have a higher academic self-efficacy score compared to students who are not seniors. In contrast, gender did not act as a moderator on the relationship between the dependent variable (number of classes failed) and the three independent variables: general self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy, and motivation.

However, the coefficient for the demographic classifier "Have you worked?" was significant at a .05 significance level ($p = .046$) with an estimate of 1.763. It can be interpreted that the average number of classes failed is shifted based on whether the at-risk student worked or not. Students who worked failed more classes than those who have not worked. Additionally, having a family member drop out of school did not act as a moderator on the relationship between the dependent variable (number of classes failed) and the three independent variables: general self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy, and motivation.

Discussion

Implications of the Findings

In the literature, it was assumed that at-risk students would be found to have lower self-perceptions of their general self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy, and motivation. In contrast, this study has added new information in regard to not only how at-risk students perceive themselves, but also how these perceptions may not relate to their academic performance (i.e., number of classes passed/failed). However, this study does contribute to the growing body of literature on at-risk students and what impacts their academic endeavors. In other words, at-risk students' perceptions of general self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy, and motivation were high regardless of how many classes the student had failed. Therefore, there is a need to better understand what else is impacting these students to decrease the amount of course failures as well as educate this population more effectively.

At-risk students may not be impacted by these failures in regard to their self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy, and motivation, as they have been failing for many years and these failures no longer influence

Table 2

Multiple Regression Coefficients

	<i>B</i>	Beta	<i>p</i>	Bivariate <i>r</i>	Partial <i>r</i>	Part <i>r</i>	Tolerance	VIF
General Self-Efficacy	-.065	-.034	.677	-.088	-.004	-.004	.700	1.429
Academic Self-Efficacy	-.150	-.108	.194	-.158	-.107	-.106	.667	1.499
Motivation	-.069	-.048	.575	-.121	-.040	-.039	.632	1.582

Note: None of the independent variables were found to be significant at a $p < .05$ level.

their perceptions of themselves. Some at-risk students may be content and satisfied with their current academic situation. Their academic goals for themselves may be realistic in their perception, although these perceptions may not aid them in finishing high school (Ehrenreich, Reeves, Corley, & Orpinas, 2012). If these at-risk students do not see themselves failing academically, or do not connect these experiences, it is important to explore what other factors can be impacted to positively influence academic changes. There are many factors that may be impacting these students academically in regard to course failures that are unrelated to the individual self-perceptions of these students.

In order to better understand these other factors, moderated regressions were also run on several of the demographic variables. For example, students who worked were found to fail more classes than those who did not work. This finding adds to the literature of students who work in addition to going to school often struggle academically. In the literature, students who work have been found to have less time for school and are less engaged in the school community (Christiansen, 1997). However, for many of the students from low-income families, working is a necessity. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2012), 62% of employed students from low-income families work more than 15 hours a week, and it can be assumed that working for these students is a necessity while school may not be a priority (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Understanding the role of work for at-risk students and the strain it places on the students' academics needs to be explored and examined. Working may negatively impact at-risk students' schooling, thus there is a need for more research on how to help these students and their families to help make school a priority while maintaining their living expenses.

In addition, senior at-risk students were found on average to fail fewer classes than non-seniors when they perceived themselves to have high academic self-efficacy. This finding may be informative when working with at-risk students. Seniors who realize that they have potential and are confident in their academic abilities may be students that will move past the grade failures and feel confident in their future endeavors. Understanding the important role that academic self-efficacy can play for seniors may aid in preventing these students from dropping out of high school. Having this extra confidence as a senior may help these students not only graduate from high school, but also teach them life skills that can help them beyond high school.

There was no significant relationship found between other moderators such as gender or whether a participant had a family member who had dropped out of school. The role of gender had not been explored in detail in the literature thus far and this finding shows that it may not be a significant factor with this population.

The role of family has been found in the literature to be a factor for at-risk students; however, the findings for this study shows that having a family member drop out of school did not impact these students negatively. In addition, at-risk students may not perceive their family members dropping out of high school to influence them academically, as perhaps the family's role may be more than just past academic success. Family support and understanding of the school community may be more impactful than actual graduation from the institution. Having parents who are involved and understand how the

school functions may positively influence at-risk students beyond just having family members who have graduated. Overall, there is a need for more research about the phenomena of why at-risk students fail so many classes.

It had been stressed by Ryan and Deci (2000) that individual goals are only effective when they *mean* something to the individual who is working toward the goal. From the findings, it may be assumed that academic goals, such as passing classes, may not be a goal of at-risk students, or perhaps passing classes does not *mean* something to them. Passing classes may be viewed as a performance goal to at-risk students, a goal where they feel like they are being judged and see each class as a potential for failure. If the students viewed passing classes more as mastery goals, a goal where they determine whether they met it or not, these students may perform better academically. In addition, it is important to note that the goals the school institution have for this population may not be the goals of each individual at-risk student and their families. By treating this population as a group and not individuals, these at-risk students may not be understood to the level that is needed. Further research is needed on how students perceive passing classes as well as what might be some mastery goals that will be effective for this population.

Recommendations for Further Research

Looking to future research on at-risk students, there is a need for qualitative studies of this population to explore their individual perceptions of their repeated academic failures. By providing a voice to these individuals through qualitative research, there may be a more in-depth look not only at how these students perceive themselves but also to some solutions to improve their academic endeavors or more importantly explore their self-determined needs. Exploring their perceptions of themselves and school further may lead to some effective solutions to improving at-risk student achievement.

There is also a need to examine this population through a new lens due to the outcome of the study. If at-risk students have high general self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy, and motivation, then what is contributing to their struggles with their academics? The impact of working while attending school needs to be further explored as it is unclear the level of impact that working may have on students. Exploring other aspects of this population is needed, whether it is school engagement, type of parental or teacher support, the role of working while in school, or the many other factors that may be impacting academic functions of at-risk students.

In addition to exploring at-risk students, it may also be important to research further the millennial culture. The students in the study are part of the millennial generation that have distinct differences from other generations with regard to their views of others, political and social values, and attitudes (Broido, 2004). This generation of students has been characterized as believing that everyone will be successful, they have their choice of career options, and as believing that they can have immediate gratification (Colman & Colman, 2006). This generation is the most diverse in United States history: one in five has immigrant parents, and there are many cultural contexts that influence these students' learning (McGlynn, 2005). In regard to school, this generation of students is typically pushed to perform; to believe in teamwork; and when challenged, they believe they can figure it out or that someone else will do it for them (Atkinson, 2004).

With this type of population, students of today are different than ever before. Learning how to work with this population, specifically each individual at-risk student of this generation, is more complex. With at-risk students perceiving themselves as having academic self-efficacy, general self-efficacy, and motivation, these students may not be realistic in their views due to their generational upbringing. Exploring the impact of the millennial culture further in regard to at-risk students is needed in order to better represent the needs and perceptions of this population.

Limitations of the Study

This study had some limitations worth noting when interpreting the findings. One limitation of this study is that the dependent variable (number of failed classes) had a large range, from 2 to 28. Participants who failed two classes were considered in the same way as students who had failed 28 classes. Analyzing the results further may show that there is a difference between participants who failed significantly fewer or more classes.

Another limitation of the study may be the return rate of the parental or guardian consent forms. Participants were asked to gain parental or guardian signatures to partake in the study. In the literature, at-risk students' parental support can be limited and therefore, the number of parental consent forms returned may have been impacted due to the nature of this group. In addition, the majority of the participants were seniors who were 18 and able to consent to the study without parental permission. Having over half of the participants being from one grade may also have impacted the results. However, the overall return rate for the study was 47 %.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to understand at-risk students' number of courses failed in relation to their perceptions of their general self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy, and motivation. There were several significant findings related to at-risk students and their perceptions of themselves, as well as information about the role of work on at-risk students. The findings of this study provide an empirical base for continued investigation.

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15 Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention

Since 1986, the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N) has conducted and analyzed research; sponsored workshops and national conferences; and collaborated with researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to further the mission of reducing America's dropout rate by meeting the needs of youth in at-risk situations, including students with disabilities.

Students report a variety of reasons for dropping out of school; therefore, the solutions are multidimensional. The NDPC/N has identified 15 Effective Strategies that have the most positive impact on reducing school dropout. These strategies appear to be independent, but actually work well together and frequently overlap. Although they can be implemented as stand-alone strategies (e.g., mentoring or family engagement programs), positive outcomes will result when school districts or other agencies develop a program improvement plan that encompasses most or all of these strategies. These strategies have been successful at all school levels from PK-12 and in rural, suburban, and urban settings. The strategies are listed in alphabetical order, not by effect size.

- ★ Active Learning
- ★ After-School/Out-of-School Opportunities
- ★ Alternative Schooling
- ★ Career and Technical Education (CTE)
- ★ Early Childhood Education
- ★ Early Literacy Development
- ★ Educational Technology
- ★ Family Engagement
- ★ Individualized Instruction
- ★ Mentoring/Tutoring
- ★ Professional Development
- ★ Safe Learning Environments
- ★ School-Community Collaboration
- ★ Service-Learning
- ★ Systemic Renewal



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Effective Strategies Defined

- ★ **Active Learning**—Active learning and student engagement strategies engage and involve students in meaningful ways as partners in their own learning. These strategies include student voice and choice; effective feedback, peer assessment, and goal setting; cooperative learning; thinking critically, creatively, and reflectively; and micro-teaching, discussion, and two-way communication. To be most effective, teachers must provide students with tools and strategies to organize themselves and any new material; techniques to use while reading, writing, and doing math; and systematic steps to follow when working through a task or reflecting upon their own learning.
- ★ **After-School/Out-of-School Opportunities**—Many schools provide after-school, before-school, and/or summer academic/enhancement/enrichment opportunities (e.g., tutoring, credit recovery, acceleration, homework support, etc.) that provide students with opportunities for assistance and recovery as well as high-interest options for discovery and learning. These opportunities often decrease information loss and can inspire interest in arenas otherwise inaccessible. Such experiences are especially important for at-risk students because out-of-school “gap time” is filled with constructive and engaging activities and/or needed academic support.
- ★ **Alternative Schooling**—Alternative schooling options and delivery model options (e.g., alternative times and environments, blended learning, virtual learning, competency-based credit opportunities, etc.) provide alternative avenues to credit earning and graduation, with programs paying special attention to the student’s individual and social needs, career goals, and academic requirements for obtaining a high school diploma and transitioning successfully to life beyond graduation.
- ★ **Career and Technical Education (CTE)**—Quality CTE programs and related career pathways and guidance programs are essential for all students. Work-based learning recognizes that youth need specific skills to prepare them for the increased demands of today’s workplace.
- ★ **Early Childhood Education**—Birth-to-five interventions demonstrate that providing a child additional enrichment can enhance brain development. The most effective way to reduce the number of children who will ultimately drop out is to provide the best possible classroom instruction from the beginning of school through the primary grades.
- ★ **Early Literacy Development**—Early literacy interventions to help low-achieving students improve their reading and writing skills establish the necessary foundation for effective learning in all subjects.
- ★ **Educational Technology**—Instructional Technology can effectively support teaching and learning while engaging students in meaningful, current, and authentic efforts; addressing multiple intelligences; and adapting to students’ learning styles. Educational technology can effectively be used in individualized instruction and can not only help prepare students for the workforce, but can empower students who struggle with self-esteem. Effective use of technologies depends upon the timely response to and application of the rapidly expanding choices and matches to identified student needs.
- ★ **Family Engagement**—Research consistently finds that family engagement has a direct, positive effect on youth’s achievement and is one of the most accurate predictors of a student’s success in school. Critical elements of this type of collaboration rely on effective, ongoing, and multi-dimensional, two-way communication as well as ongoing needs assessments and responsive family supports and interventions.
- ★ **Individualized Instruction**—Learning experiences can be individualized, differentiated, or personalized (combining paced and tailored learning with flexibility in content or theme to fit the interests, preferences, and prior experiences of each learner). In an environment that is fully personalized, the learning objectives and content as well as the method and pace may all vary (so personalization encompasses differentiation and individualization).
- ★ **Mentoring/Tutoring**—Mentoring is a one-to-one caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is based on trust. Mentoring offers a significant support structure for high-risk students. Tutoring, also a one-to-one activity, focuses on academic support and is an effective practice when addressing specific needs in collaboration with the student’s base teacher.
- ★ **Professional Development**—Adults who work with youth at risk of dropping out need to be provided ongoing professional learning opportunities, support, and feedback. The professional learning should align with the agreed upon vision and focus for the school/agency, the agreed upon instructional framework of high leverage research-based practices and strategies, and the identified needs of the population served. The professional learning opportunities provided should be frequently monitored to determine the fidelity of implementation and need for additional support and feedback.
- ★ **Safe Learning Environments**—Safe, orderly, nurturing, inclusive, and inviting learning environments help students realize potential as individuals and as engaged members of society. All students need to be safe, physically and emotionally; to be expected to achieve; to be recognized and celebrated equitably for accomplishments; and to feel genuinely welcomed and supported. A safe and orderly learning environment provides both physical and emotional security as well as daily experiences, at all grade levels, that enhance positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills. A comprehensive discipline plan and violence prevention plan should include conflict resolution strategies and should deal with potential violence as well as crisis management. A safe, nurturing, and responsive learning environment supports all students, teachers, cultures, and subgroups; honors and supports diversity and social justice; treats students equitably; and recognizes the need for feedback, innovation, and second chances.
- ★ **School-Community Collaboration**—This strategy focuses on the power of an educative community where everyone in the community is accountable for the quality of education, resulting in a caring and collaborative environment where youth can thrive and achieve. Critical elements of this type of collaboration rely on effective, ongoing, and multi-dimensional communication so that dropout prevention is a communitywide and ongoing effort.
- ★ **Service-Learning**—Service-learning connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning. This teaching/learning method promotes personal and social growth, career development, and civic responsibility and can be a powerful vehicle for effective school reform at all grade levels.
- ★ **Systemic Renewal**—This strategy calls for a systemic approach and process for ongoing and continuous improvement through a shared and widely communicated vision and focus, tightly focused goals and objectives, selection of targeted research-based strategies and interventions, ongoing monitoring and feedback, and data-based decision making. Systemic renewal requires the alignment of school policies, procedures, practices, and organizational structures and continuous monitoring of effectiveness.

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