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THE AT-RISK STUDENT'S JOURNEY TO ONLINE COURSE CREDIT:

LOOKING AT PERCEPTIONS OF CARE

AND THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCE

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LOOKING AT PERCEPTIONS OF CARE
AND THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCE

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
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STUDIES

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Dedication

At any given moment you have the power to say this is

not how the story will end.—Anonymous

To Him who gives me the words and wisdom to write my story.

To the girls in this study who let me hear their stories—may they remember they

are strong women and survivors, achieving their dreams

through writing their journey.

To my grandmothers, Mary and Eloise—

I know you are smiling at me from a better place.

I miss you.

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Abstract

To date, primary research studies have focused on examining the characteristics of successful online credit recovery programs and virtual high schools in the United States. Other research interests have investigated data regarding K-12 virtual schooling and explored effective instructional design curriculum. One manner of recognizing students in education is for "his or her story to be told" (Bingham, 2001, p. 36). However, studies addressing at-risk students' perceptions of valuable caring relationships within their unique online environment are rare. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to explore at-risk high school students' insights regarding their experience with online education, which they undertook in order to meet high school graduation requirements. More specifically, it is the intent of this study to examine the presence of care through the voices of those who journey into the virtual high school classroom.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Vignette

Julie turned on the computer to begin her online class. As she waited for the monitor to turn blue, she thought, "I have only two more sessions to go before the final."

Seeing her face shadowed through the mirror of her desktop monitor, she wondered if her life was just about schoolwork. What about all the life "stuff" she was dealing with? How could she concentrate on schoolwork when she felt so lonely and so afraid of the future? How was she going to read everything tonight and not be late for work tomorrow? Her stomach was tied in knots as she typed in her user id.

As Julie started looking for her graded midterm, she said to herself, "Looks like it hasn't been graded yet." She sighed deeply, not really looking forward to going to the online lab because no one ever talked to her there. Instead, everyone was in their own little world, reading assignments and taking notes.

"My life is so stressful," she thought. "What's the point, anyway?" Feeling anger, along with her frustrations, Julie said out loud, "Who cares if I graduate? No one understands what I'm going through."

However, despite her frustration, Julie wanted a high school diploma. Motivated by this, she picked up her keys and headed for the high school online lab.

Background of the Study

In his book, *Schools of Recognition: Identity, Politics and Classroom Practices*, Bingham (2001) describes the importance of mirrors in an educational setting by suggesting, "…when I enter the public sphere, I need someone, or something that will mirror back to me who I am" (p. 34). Additionally, Bingham suggests that "mirroring" in educational settings is not only vital to giving a sense of self, it is also important to giving "a sense of self that is new" (p. 34).

Today, the "information superhighway" is profoundly influencing educational mirrors. As rising new technology interfaces with the demands of academic accountability, the Internet has become the virtual looking glass of solutions for educational leaders. Building on the foundation of web-based access, educators have positioned online education as an alternative to traditional schools (Abel, 2005; Ally, 2004; Dykam & Davis, 2008; Schrum, 2005; Velasquez, Graham & West, 2013).

The innovation of the virtual learning environment is described as "e-learning," "distance education," and "online learning." According to Ally (2004), "The use of the Internet is to access learning materials, to interact with the content, instructor and other learners; and to obtain support during the learning process, in order to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning and to grow from the learning experience" (p. 5). For the purpose of this research, Ally's interpretation fits best with defining online learning.

Educators are modifying online education to combine face-to-face instruction and the virtual classroom. This type of "blended learning" model is often seen with districts serving their own students. In these cases, there is no need to bridge long distances, and districts can provide an online class within a local school, while allowing students to access resources such as a computer lab, facilitator, or other on-site resources, which may define the course as blended instead of fully online (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2011).

The growing enrollment trend for both online and blended models of online pedagogy will continue to become an integral part of the nationwide educational system (e.g. Archambault et al., 2010; Peterson, 1997, Watson et al., 2011; Zucker & Kozma, 2003). As of 2009-2010, an estimated 1,816,400 enrollments filled online-education courses in K-12 school districts, and 74% of the enrollments were in high schools (Queen & Lewis, 2011). Christensen, Horn, and Johnson (2008) forecast that by 2019, online curriculum could conceivably reach 50 percent of high school enrollments.

Budget shortfalls and economic pressures create the need for a new image of the classroom within the landscape of educational reform (Christensen et al., 2008). The financial numbers of educational budgets reflect a true picture of school districts struggling to meet mandated requirements amidst constraints of the current economy situation. Seeking creative solutions, online learning gains momentum as an effective framework to meet educational standards while stretching the fiscal school-year dollar.

Currently, the cost of educating students under the brick and mortar classroom averages $10,000 per pupil (Battaglino, Haldeman, Laurans, & Fordham, 2012). However, according to a report by the Thomas Ford Institute, a full online model costs $6,400 per student or a blended-learning model is $8,900 per pupil (Battaglino et al., 2012). These cost-cutting statistics potentially create a new design of educational learning and assessment that will meet state and federal academic requirements.

In addition to reducing costs, educators and policymakers are pursuing virtual education curriculum as a means to adapt to problems, to increase course offerings, and to rethink traditional teaching methods (Battaglino et al., 2012). At the state level, educational leadership is evaluating and expanding within state online schools and virtual charter programs in an effort to tailor a new direction in learning for various student populations. As of 2011, the significance of opening up web-based education to students has resulted in online and blended opportunities for at least some students in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia (Watson et al., 2011). Additionally, this report states that online and blended learning programs appear to be the fastest and largest category of online and blended learning.

The rapid progress of web-based education implies that each state—on both state and district levels—is evaluating online learning programs to meet educational demands among various populations. Examples of student populations logging on to the online classroom include students who seek advanced courses, students in home school environments, and students in rural

communities (e.g. Bakia, 2013; Delacruz, 2009; Watson, 2008). Moreover; a specific demographic group of high school students—those who are unable or unwilling to attend school—are seeking education through the virtual classroom. Such a student is known as the online "at-risk"[1] student (e.g. Watson & Gemin, 2008; Churchill, 2010).

The Problem

A report from the *U.S. Department of Education* (2009) states that approximately 1.2 million students will leave high school without obtaining a diploma every year. This student population can be described as at-risk. This includes students who have dropped out, or have the potential to drop out of school, or who have repeated a course or grade (Archambault, et al., 2010; Rapp, Eckes, & Plurker, 2006). Research indicates that caring is one essential quality for success in education, especially for the at-risk population (e.g. Kessler, 2000; Noddings, 1984; Sykes, 1990).

To combat graduation challenges, online and blended learning programs have developed into a virtual resource for at-risk youth to achieve a high school

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[1] The label "at-risk" is a conventional term used in the literature of vernacular education to denote students who are unlikely to graduate and who are unable to succeed in the regular classroom. However, it is important to note the term is not absolute. While the literature uses "at-risk" as acceptable language when discussing a wide variety of student problems, the expression has multiple meanings within educational contexts and often fails to capture the complexity of a student's reality. When educators label a student "at-risk," such identification may discourage any further efforts at finding a possible cause for a student's behavior. Instead, educators may seek to find solutions under this label alone or may not attempt to look beyond the label itself. This research uses the term "at-risk" in the conventional sense of the literature. However, it is the intent of this dissertation to help the reader understand that many phrases, expressions, and labels in education have multiple nuances and using such a conventional term is sometimes problematic.

diploma (e.g., Watson & Gemin, 2008). However, studies that examine this reality from an online student perspective, using a lens of caring pedagogy, are rare or non-existent. Therefore, this hermeneutic phenomenological study examines the perceptions of caring in the educational journey of seven at-risk high school students who successfully completed online course credit.

By definition, the word *caring* has broad meanings and encompasses many implications (e.g. Groenhout, 1988; Noddings, 1984/2003; Stizman & Leners, 2006). In the context of education, caring can be conveyed through active teacher/student relationships (Stizman & Leners, 2006). Although unclearly defined, care in its essence includes the concepts of one person "mindfully and appropriately attending to the unspoken needs of another" (Stizman & Leners, 2006, p. 254). Using in-depth phenomenological inquiries, this study aims to uncover experiences of at-risk adolescents and their views of caring educational relationships. Specifically, this research asks: "How do online at-risk youth view the term "care" as it relates to their education, before and after online learning?"

The At-Risk High School Student

Students who are at at-risk are historically characterized in a variety of ways. In the report, *A Nation at Risk,* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), the term at-risk was first used to describe a United States society that was culturally and economically endangered (Placier, 1993). From reports that followed, (e.g. National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985 & National Research Council, 1993), new definitions of at-risk arose and

focused on students that had a high probability of dropping out or were failing school (Placier, 1993).

The U.S. Department of Education (1992) expanded at-risk students to mean not only those students who were likely to fail school, but also those students who did not reach a proficiency in key subjects such as math and reading. Comer (2004) contends that at-risk students are educationally disadvantaged, and their exposure to educational experiences has been inadequate or inappropriate. In a more recent study, Watson and Gemin (2008) note K-12 education lacks a single definition for the term "at-risk."

Some might argue that all high school students are at risk in various ways, while others emphasize that certain high school students face much higher risks than do other students (Churchill, 2010; Geminario, Cervalli & Ogden, 1992; Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Dew, 2007). Indicators that are typically associated with at-risk students "fall into one more categories: individual, family, school, and community" (Watson & Gemin, 2008, p. 4). Research by Parr, Richardson & Scott (2008) explains that in education, the term "at risk" refers to students "that are not meeting the minimum academic experiences to succeed and graduate from school" (p. 281). In particular, "the term *at-risk* . . . applies to young people whose prospects for becoming productive members of society look dim" (Hepburn & White, 1990 p. 5).

General Characteristics

As Watson and Gemin (2008) imply, it is important to note there are a variety of reasons for academic failure that go beyond the scope of cognitive

ability and competence. In 1993, the National Research Council released a report entitled *Losing Generations: Adolescents in high-risk settings,* by the Panel on High Risk Youth. This report indicates a challenging and growing problem of at-risk youth in the United States. Additionally, the report specifically describes the social foundations of the family, school, and community as seemingly deteriorating for these students (National Research Council, 1993).

Druian and Butler (1987) point to research correlating specific conditions in high school students that provide identifiable characteristics of being at-risk. These elements include:

Living in high growth states, living in unstable school districts, being a member of a low-income family, having low-academic skills, having parents who are not high school graduates, speaking English as a second language, being single-parent children, having negative self-perceptions, being bored or alienated, having low-self-esteem or pursuing alternatives (para. 15).

A review of the literature reveals multiple factors and defining characteristics that capture the impact and nature of the at-risk student (Alfassi, 2003; Churchill, 2010; Geminario, et al, 1992; Martin, 2006; Watson & Gemin, 2008). For example, if a student has one or more of the following characteristics; then the student is considered at-risk. These characteristics include: low socio-economic status, from a single parent family, and older sibling dropping out of school, has changed schools two or more times, has had

average grades of a "C" or lower from sixth to eighth grade or repeated a grade (Bulger & Watson, 2006, p.25).

The literature demonstrates multiple external variables that contribute to a student being at-risk, and such factors are used in a myriad of references to define at-risk factors that impact students (e.g. Archambault et.al, 2010; Barbour, 2012; Churchill, 2010; Watson & Gemin, 2008 & Comer, 2004). The influences of these general factors contribute to the at-risk condition for students. Waterhouse (2007) notes that defining at-risk is imprecise, but such a definition shows that when humans and the multiple systems in their environment interact, the outcome for some will be alienation, disconnect, and a lack of opportunity for success" (p. 37).

Individual/Internal Characteristics

Parr, et al, (2008) make clear that many students have the potential to do well in school, but social, emotional, or psychological needs hinder these students from reaching full potential. Internal characteristics such as self-concept and lack of self-confidence influence the at-risk student's success rate in school (Bulger & Watson, 2006; Fulk, 2003; Martin, 2006). The historical *Coleman* report (Coleman et al., 1966) notes that the term "locus of control" (i.e. individual belief concerning how they can control their life) relates to successful school experiences. Furthermore, the report cites that a sense of "external locus of control" (i.e. individual belief that uncontrollable external factors control their destiny) is linked to lower achieving students and the dropout education rate (Nowicki, Duke, Sisney, Stricker, & Tyler, 2004).

For example, Eckstrom, Goertz, Pollack & Rock (1996) find in their longitudinal study of high school dropout students that a sense of *external* locus of control attributes to school retention rates. The authors state, "On most of the locus of control items, dropouts responded with a significantly more externalized sense of control, indicating that they are more likely than stayers to feel their destiny is out of their hands" (p. 362). Past research dictates that the factor of "locus of control" is often associated with other significant at-risk traits such as interest in school, lower socio-economic status, and self-esteem (Nowicki et al., 2004),

A student's self-concept and a high self-confidence directly correlate between strong perseverance and academic achievement (Alfassi, 2003; Finn & Rock, 1997; Martin, 2006). In their investigation of minority students from lower income homes who were academically successful, Finn & Rock (1997) state:

> If a student holds a positive self-view and routinely exhibits these behaviors in their positive forms—for example, attends school regularly, participates in extracurricular activities, completes required work in school and out—these may serve as protective mechanisms that improve a student's chances of school success despite being a member of an at-risk group. (p. 222).

In contrast, at-risk students, who have a weak self-concept and a disbelief in his or her potential, may travel down a path of a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure (Bulger, 2006; Roueche, J. & Roueche, S., 1993).

Furthermore, a sense of failure can directly affect an at-risk student's motivation to learn; thus leading to a disengagement of academics (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Nigg 2008) and a sense of learned helplessness (Bulger, 2006; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Nigg 2008). The barrier of a weak self-identity and a lack of role models or family support can lead to the at-risk student feeling powerless in challenging situations (Alfassi, 2003; Lan & Lathier, 2003).

Family Support Characteristics

The absence of parental support and effective role modeling are crucial contributing factors to the consequences of academic failure for at-risk students. The research dictates that parental engagement in a student's academics and school environment plays a more significant role than a family's income level (e.g. Martin, 2006; Taylor-Dunlop, 1997). For example, Riley (1993) states, "The beginning place of a child's education is a parent's expectations of a child's ability" (p. 7). Additionally, past literature stipulates that parental involvement must be submersed into the structure of student learning in order to support the child (e.g. Taylor-Dunlop, 1997).

Caution should be taken regarding myths correlating the lack of parental support and low-socioeconomic status. Barriers such as poverty and low educational levels may impede parental involvement in at-risk learners. Boger (1989) reports that many parents find barriers in their circumstances that prevent involvement in traditional home to school activities. These barriers can include: school practices that do not accommodate the growing diversity of families they serve; parent time and child care constraints; negative experience with

schooling; lack of support for cultural diversity; and primacy of basic survival needs (Bulger & Watson, 2006; Taylor-Dunlop & Norton, 1997).

Beyond demographics, research indicates that once students reach high school, parental involvement decreases and is not as influential (Anderson & Keith, 1997; Nigg, 2008). In addition, drug addictions, pregnancies, and other problems can prevent at-risk students from being successful in school (Archambault, et al., 2010).

School and Community Characteristics

A common perception with educators is that the at-risk student experiences cultural deprivation (Valencia & Black, 2002). Likewise, research maintains that at-risk students report a perception of being treated differently from peers, and such treatment has an impact on their achievement and school success (Roderick, 1993; Tompkins & Deloney, 1994). In a study of teachers' beliefs concerning at-risk students, Rice (2001) finds teachers' opinions of students being at-risk were likely to change over a course of time. In the beginning of the study, teachers' perception of at-risk students originated from a socio-cultural perspective. However, towards the end of the relationship, the teachers became focused on the student's learning ability (Rice, 2001). The effects of a teacher's treatment on at-risk students can include: less feedback, teacher conflict with interruptions of learning, rewards for disruptive behavior and nonverbal communication of inattention and unresponsiveness (Tompkins & Deloney, 1994).

When looking at the student-school relationship, Kelly (1993) states that a student and an institution become engaged with each other in the areas of academics, peer relations, extracurricular activities, and graduation. However, when a student "disengages," he or she no longer connects with the school norms. A student's disengagement of school participation and sense of belonging can happen over time as a reaction to teacher feedback, school values, and school culture (Loutzenheiser, 2002). Research shows that a student's "disengagement" may manifest itself by withdrawing from class participation and alienating themselves from school, thus undermining a sense of belonging (Kelly, 1993; Lan & Lanthier; 2003).

The progression of at-risk students becoming disengaged with school can be compounded by sociological and community influence factors, such as living in a family of a single parent, having a low income status, or residing in a poverty-stricken neighborhood (e.g. Churchill, 2010; Martin, 2006; Watson & Gemin, 2008). In her book, *Divided We Fail: Issues of Equity in American Schools,* England (2005) stipulates that perceptions in the current educational system stem from a viewpoint of at-risk students lacking cultural capital and not finding success within the school setting. Furthermore, students, who live in homes of minimal educational levels or as a member of cultural groups that do not value education, are potentially impacted by underachievement and failure at school (England, 2005).

Studies of at-risk students and the influences which impact them appear widely in research and in numerous disciplines such as human services,

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psychology, anthropology, government reports, and education (Dryfoos, 1998; Gullotta, Adams, & Markstrom, 1999; Loutzenheiser, 2002; National Research Council, 1993). The notion of at-risk students and the layers of construct become multi-faceted in the understanding of its definition. Issues of at-risk students are often studied separately, thus causing a "divorce of student struggles from political, economic, and historical contexts" (Loutzenheiser, 2002, p. 442). Furthermore, examining at-risk students by framing individual issues leads to "carving up adolescents into many disconnected pieces, often losing sight of the real people we are claiming to care about" (Dryfoos, 1998, p. 25). As current research focuses on the deficits of an at-risk learner, researchers, school administrators, and teachers tend to abandon an appreciative inquiry centering on a student's assets and learning opportunities (Calabrese, Hummel, & San Martin, 2007; Schonert-Reichl, 2000).

Effective Strategies for the At-Risk Learner

To meet the needs of at-risk students, effective schooling practice must accompany the response to a student's personal and socio-economic conditions (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). When defining effective schooling practices for the at-risk learner, it is first easier to examine what it is not. Druian and Butler (1987) summarize contributing in-effective schooling factors for at-risk youth as," separate low expectations, lack of consistent discipline, no teacher involvement, lack of attention to the needs of individuals, and lack of engagement of learning" (p.1). Additionally, at-risk learners lack

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support for a deficiency in academic skills, which are essential in order to complete their degree (Parr, et al, 2008).

Compounding the in-effectiveness of the traditional school environment, the measure and pressure of required standardized testing leaves little room for cultural capital or caring practices. England (2005) expresses concern for measurements of standardized testing stating:

> It is the cultural knowledge (language, meanings, and experiences) of the upper economic class that is assessed by the tests that drive school report rankings. The tests and the school report cards sort children by economic class and subsequently rank the effectiveness of the educators who school them by assessing the knowledge kids have constructed from their particular lived experience." (p. 35)

Although educational practice cannot control socioeconomic factors, Wehlage and Rutter (1986) stipulate that school administration and teachers have power over the determinants caused by these influences. Examples of necessary factors for at-risk learners include educational engagement, sense of school membership, and a perception of a caring atmosphere (Wehlage et al.,1989; Wehalge & Rutter, 1986).

Educational Engagement

Research on successful practices with at-risk high school learners produces modest results of educational practitioners sharing common framework practices (Druian & Butler, 1987; Green & Baker, 1986; Hamilton, 1986). Green and Baker (1986) and Hamilton (1986) find that although programs to

address at-risk learner's needs are in place, educators are not sharing essential descriptions and conclusions of data. In his review of the literature, Hamilton (1986) finds summaries of effective programs for at-risk students share commonalities. These include out of classroom learning, low student-teacher ratio, small and individualized instruction, and counseling opportunities. Wehlage et al., (1989) research provide an example of such programs by their study of 12 dropout prevention programs. In their findings, the authors conclude that effective dropout prevention programs combine key elements of beneficial community support with strong support of educational engagement and caring for students.

The concept of educational engagement is a complex activity that involves more than motivation (Finn & Rock, 1997; Nowicki & Duke, 2004; Wehlage et al., 1989). Wehlage et al. (1989) describe "educational engagement and school membership" as key concepts in dropout prevention and retention of at-risk high school students (p. 192). When looking at achievement variables in secondary schools, Newmann, Wehlage, and Lamborn (1992) detail the process of engagement as the contrary meaning to a perception of alienation of the school community. Drawing on the theory of student research with participatory behaviors, Finn and Rock (1997) studied 1,800 minority low-income students and found that the higher variables of student engagement influenced lower dropout rates and academic success. In addition to educational engagement impacting at-risk students, the forces of perception of care and supportive

connections significantly influence at-risk adolescents (Kennedy, J. & Kennedy, C., 2004; Taylor & Dunlop, 1997).

Perceptions of Caring

The concept of building trust and the premise of an educational caring foundation is coined by several notable pedagogues such as Socrates, Dewey, and Montessori (Velasquez, 2012). Building on these conceptualizations, researchers and practitioners continue to focus inquiry on the merit of "caring" as it correlates to the effects of educational practice (e.g. Noddings 1984, 1992, 2002, 2005). When looking at the equation of factors influencing educational engagement and motivation, the impression of "caring" is linked to increases in student learning activity (Kessler, 2000; Rice 2001; Taylor & Dunlop, 1997). For example, in their in-depth ethnographic study of 11 at-risk young women, Taylor and Dunlop (1997) find that the students' engagement in school directly correlates to the results of "appreciated institutional caring" and direct interaction between students and teachers (p. 10). Additionally, in her research of recognizing students' developmental milestones, Kessler (2000) highlights the need for student connectedness with relationships. In her book, *Soul for Education*, Kessler indicates that students are more likely to persevere who feel there exist a relationship that "is a profound respect, a deep caring, and a quality of being that honors the truth" (Kessler, 2000, p. 19).

According to researchers and practicing educators, perceptions of adult caring and support are integral components for successful academic outcomes for an at-risk student (e.g. Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004; Martin, 2006;

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Waterhouse, 2007). Examining teachers' level of care, Rice (1999, 2001) indicates that students who participate in classrooms with high levels of caring and belonging will increase in their academic achievement. Additionally, the relevance of the personal attributes of the "carer" is an important component to the structural context between student and educational relationships. For instance, Sykes (1990) stresses the significance of teachers' personalities impacting successful strategies for students. He suggest that the human characteristics of "personality and style, passion and caring, and even their (teacher's) eccentricities" are the qualities that a student remembers more than a technique or knowledge (p. 79-80).

Furthermore, an at-risk student's perception of "sensing" and feeling "personally accepted" impacts their academic achievement (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80). Although a teacher may care for a student, if a student does not perceive a sense of belonging, then the act of caring is diminished in the relationship (Finn, 1989; Goodenow, 1991; Rice, 2001).

The Disengagement of the At-Risk Student

Viewing schools as uncaring and unwelcoming places are barriers hindering students from completing school and transitioning into adulthood (Finn, 1997; Goodenow, 1993). A report by Hixson and Tinzmann (1990) suggest that at-risk students are at a higher risk than their peers for having experiences that interfere with their ability to complete academic work. As an at-risk student becomes disengaged in the school environment, a gradual means of detachment emerges, thus setting in motion student behaviors of deviation

from social norms and school values (Dryfoos, 1990; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Waterhouse, 2007). Once a student disconnects from school, isolation and alienation become the next steps which lead to a student dropping out of school (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Nigg 2008). Society and school face the challenges of dropout rates with student failure. An income gap increases every year with "dropouts earn(ing) $9,200 less per year than high school graduates and more than $1 million less over a lifetime than college graduates" (Center for Labor Market Studies, 2007).

Watson and Gemin (2008) state that with the reauthorization process of NCLB (No Child Left Behind) and the requirements of meeting AYP (Annual Yearly Progress), many schools are pursuing alternatives to finding the "right instructional mix" and programs for at-risk students. These alternatives are aimed at increasing graduation rates and preventing the rise of dropout rates (Watson & Gemin, 2008). The research suggests customized strategies are needed for at-risk students that should include distinctive curriculum and instructional methods (Archambault et al., 2010; Churchill, 2010; Wehlage, 1989). As changes in the K-12 learning environment have taken place, online and blended instructional methods have become "critical go-to models" for educators. ("Credit Recovery," 2009, p. 7). The acceptance of online pedagogy has become a viable option of opportunity for at-risk learners to complete academic requirements (Archambault et al., 2010; Jones, 2011; Watson & Gemin, 2008).

The Landscape of Online Learning

Many communication-based innovations have expanded into the educational scene with a promise of change and betterment of pedagogy (Zucker & Kozma, 2003). Educators find themselves exposed to the latest communication technology, such as broadcasting lectures, two-way video, and distance education (Farrell, 1999; Morabito, 1997; Zucker & Kozma, 2003). Although some novel technologies fall by the wayside, online technology maintains its rapid growth and appeal in the K-12 educational community (e.g., Barbour & Siko, 2012; Churchill, 2010; Watson & Gemin, 2008).

It is through its extensive uses in higher education that much of the literature regarding the critical building blocks for successful online education surfaces. Buerck, Mamstrom & Peppers (2003) state many college and universities find online education " an affordable interactive means of overcoming the constraints of time and distance to reach learners, thus creating new learning environments for students as well as instructors" (p. 137-138). Uhlig (2002) conversely agrees that distance education is not a novel approach. He adds that the rise of Internet usage, affordability of personal technology, and accreditation agencies considering options other than brick and mortar education encourage the rise of online education. According to Burke (1996), a major strength of higher education online learning is the convenience and flexibility of access to a classroom. Furthermore, online learning accommodates working students and other students dealing with life's difficulties without their having to wait for assistance or restrictive hours.

When looking at the enrollment increases of the K-12 online learning classroom, Picciano and Seamon (2009) state that the K-12 virtual learning environment has increased in visibility over the past eight years. Additionally, the authors predict "it is conceivable by 2016 online enrollments could reach between 5 and 6 million K-12 (mostly high school) students" (p. 22). In a report for the *National Center for Education Statistics*, Queen and Lewis (2011) find that public school districts in 2009-10 estimated 1,816,400 enrollments in distance education courses. Of those enrollments, seventy-four percent were in high schools. Additionally, the report emphasizes one of the highest levels of enrollment was the provision of credit recovery (62%), and an opportunity for students to recover course credits (p. 3).

Distance education is a new educational environment in which students, teachers, administrators, and policy makers find themselves in unfamiliar territory, especially regarding norms and expectations of educational activity (Lally & Barrett, 1999). In their book, *Virtual Schools: Planning for Success,* Berge and Clark (2005) state K-12 online learning has many possible benefits, such as higher levels of student motivation, student educational choice and improving student skills. Likewise, the authors caution the challenges of K-12 online learning, which include student access to technology (the digital divide) and student readiness of online curriculum demands.

The Digital Divide

Originating in the mid-1990's, the term *digital divide* refers to the gap between individuals or communities that have access to digital and information

technology and those who do not (e.g. Wicks, 2010). Despite increasing computer usage and broadband internet access, disparities among low income and minority students show a 'digital divide' among certain demographics (U. S. Department of Commerce, 2011; Wicks, 2011).

In an effort to understand current media use, Rideout (2011) states there exists a "substantial digital divide with both computers and mobile devices" (p. 10). When researching home computer access and mobile media access, Rideout (2011) reports, "nearly three out of four (72%) 0-to 8-year olds have a computer at home" (p. 10). However, he further notes that access ranges from 48% among those from low-income families to 91% among higher-income families. Although schools strive to help bridge the 'digital divide' by loaning computers and giving students access to the Internet, Wicks (2011) predicts that "the digital divide is likely to persist and online programs must remain aware of and focused on solutions to these issues" (p. 36).

Predictors of Student Success with Online Learning

When looking at the online learning process and the skills required, DiMaggio and Hargittai (2001) maintain that a new question is rising from the gaps of the "digital divide," and a growing concern is emerging for "digital inequality" (p. 8). The authors' state:

> The pressing question will be *not* who can find a network connection at home, work, or in a library or community center from which to log on, but instead what are people doing, and what are they able to do, when they go online. (p. 4)

As distance learning experiences major growth, Uhlig (2002) warns that due to its autonomous learning environment, online learning is not for everybody. In addition, Uhlig (2002) suggests that the future of distance learning should take into consideration the characteristics and types of students who will be suited for online learning.

Time, place, and support of relationships make up the necessary elements that contribute to a learner's success in the online environment (Boyd, 2004). There is also literature explaining predictors for student success and characteristics suited for the online environment (e.g., Boyd, 2004; Uhlig, 2002; Wang & Newlin 2002; Watson, 2007, 2008). Additionally, Schrum and Hong (2002) indicate that a forecast regarding online success relies on student discipline, motivation, and time commitment. When looking at psychological predictors, a student's internal locus of control (e.g. "The success I have is largely a matter of my own doing"), self-efficacy in understanding course content and self-efficacy in meeting technological demands are crucial to successful online performance (Rosser & Nelson, 2012; Wang & Newlin, 2002, p. 3).

The research also indicates a key ingredient for student online competence is a heightened "social presence" in the online classroom (Wang & Newlin 2002, p. 5). Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) define social presence as "the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships" (p. 65). Perceptions of social presence aid in building trust and enlisting high levels of satisfaction for online

students (Guanawardena et al., 2001; Gunarwardena and Zittle, 1997). For example, in a study of South Dakota higher education online students, Reisetter and Boris (2004) find an important element of student success is a connection to the teacher's persona, accessibility, and understanding. One particular participant in the study acknowledged the sensitivity and presence of the instructor stating, "My life was chaotic, but with the professor's flexibility and understanding it was not an issue" (p. 287). As with the previous example, most of the current research focusing on predictors of online success stem from *adult* learners in post-secondary settings such as higher education, military and business. Research regarding *adolescents*, especially *at-risk adolescents*, is sparse.

<center>**Online Learning and the At-Risk Learner**</center>

In the book, *Disrupting Class,* authors Christensen, et al., (2008) discuss a revolution of learning and imply that online curriculum will lead to a "disruptive" innovation in K-12 educational reform. Disruptive innovation implies a shift in a dramatic fashion. One possible offshoot of this disruptive innovation progression is the online credit recovery program for high school students. Watson and Gemin (2008) report that educators across the United States are finding online and blended learning programs as valuable alternatives to impact students who are at-risk and could potentially drop out of high school.

The curriculum intent of these distance education programs is to reach students who have failed courses, have become disengaged in the classroom, or seek an alternative to the traditional high school classroom (Watson & Gemin,

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2008). A recent report on online learning, *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning,* states that of the 2130 districts respondents in a 2011 survey, "sixty-two percent of districts reported having high school students enrolled in credit recovery distance education courses" (Watson et al., 2012, p. 20).

The Online Credit Recovery Program

The intent of the online credit recovery program is to provide high school students with another option to meet graduation requirements. Many districts use online credit recovery programs because they offer an alternative way to encourage students who have failed classes or who have become disengaged in the brick and mortar educational setting (Dessoff, 2009). The overall objective of these online instruction programs is to give at-risk youth and potential drop outs, "a chance to move on to the next grade and ultimately graduate" (p.44). The objective of most credit recovery curriculum is to pinpoint academic deficiencies and to help the student catch up in order to graduate on time (Watson, Gemin, & Ryan, 2008). Online curricula and length can vary from district to district and state to state. The curriculum can be provided through software from the "district or school, state-run virtual schools, charter schools, non-profit consultants, or for-profit consultants (McCabe & Andrie, 2012).

Credit recovery programs are growing rapidly in K-12 online learning (Watson et al., 2009). What is unknown is the number of nationwide district-initiated online programs; however, "credit recovery appears to be the leading driver" (Wicks, 2011). One specific aspect of online programs is the ability for

students to work at their own pace. Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morrison, (2006) implies that self-paced options are appealing to students who believe they missed too much instruction and cannot catch up or feel they have already failed the curriculum. In a typical online credit recovery design, students do work at home or in a school lab with little supervision. Additionally, a high school diploma is given by the specific school district instead of a third party provider. However, the determined effectiveness and research on best practices is largely deficit in educational data. Furthermore, skeptics question "if credit recovery programs are really helping students learn, or greasing a pipeline for graduation" (McCabe & Andrie, 2012).

As school districts see the potential for improving graduation rates, decisions to implement online credit recovery programs will be driven by school budget financial restraints as well. State funding is at stake when a district loses students to drop out statistics or if students go to alternative programs outside the district (Trotter, 2008). Because online learning does not require a "dramatic budget increase," approaches to enrolling students in online environments allow school officials to "keep funding associated with those students" (Credit Recovery, 2009, p. 7).

Since districts lose state funding when students drop out of school, some educational leaders are concerned that "part of the push toward credit recovery may be financial" (McCabe and Andrie, 2012, p. 3). The growth of high school online credit recovery within the past two decades is far outpacing the research in regards to the best practices for student success, care, and experience.

Moreover, according to Sawyers (2010), credit recovery curriculum now consists of $500 million out of a $2 billion digital educational market.

Types of Online Credit Recovery Models

Blended/Hybrid Model

School administrators may opt for different sources to initiate online credit recovery curriculum. Such options include national online education companies, state virtual schools, or district/school course content (Credit Recovery, 2010). One such model is a "hybrid" program or "blended" model. Blended models in credit recovery offer a mix of face-to-face- and online learning instruction (McCabe & Andrie, 2012; Picciano & Seaman, 2009). In a blended/hybrid online environment, a student sees the content delivered online and uses online discussion; however, "real-time" instruction may be offered with teachers (McCabe & Andrie, 2012, p. 2).

When predicting the future growth of online learning and the practice of online credit recovery, Dr. Anthony Picciano (2009, 2010) states:

> The nature of online credit recovery will expand to make greater use of blended learning techniques, rather than the fully online model. The reason for this is that students who struggle in courses tend to need more individualized attention and the blended environment may be more conducive to individualization than the fully online face-to face models. (Credit Recovery, 2010, p. 3)

In blended programs, students have the option of taking traditional courses while online or online courses that shift into face-to-face interactions

with teachers for individualized needs (Twigg, 2003; Wicks 2010). For example, Wicks (2010) highlights the Cincinnati Public Virtual High School:

> Students work on their online courses via a computer lab with two highly qualified teachers in the subject area. The program is designed to serve students who require credit recovery or for those who have had difficulty in a regular classroom setting. (p. 43)

Not only can high school students recover classes through the blended model, benefits can be accessible through a fully online program as well.

Fully Online Model

In a fully developed online model, students can access credits through online software and online participation (Credit Recovery, 2010; McCabe & Andrie, 2012; Picciano & Seaman, 2010). Options for online models include districts loading content to software providers or national online providers being used as resources for access, software, and curriculum. Usually this setting provides "no face-to-face meetings or opportunities for real-time instruction; work is done at home or in school labs with little or no supervision" (McCabe & Andrie, 2012, p. 2). There are two options for online communication within the fully online model. These options include instructional practices of a "synchronous" or "asynchronous" method (Green, 2009). In the online synchronous design, teachers use instructional methods of instant messaging, phone conferencing, and live discussion to communicate with students (Green, 2009). In contrast, in the asynchronous method, students work on their own with self-guided lessons, and students and teachers do not interact in real time

(Andrade, 2005). The table below outlines the differences between the characteristics of the two methods.

Table 1

Fully Online Communication Methods

Asynchronous	Synchronous
Self-Guided Curriculum	Curriculum in Live Time
Email	Phone Conferences
Non-Instantaneous Communication	Instantaneous Web Chat
Independent	Less Independent

(Andrade, 2005; Green, 2009)

When looking at the design and implementation of web-based learning environments, Sadik and Reisman (2004) note that the majority of web-based learning programs consist of learner requirements that include good typing skills, grammar mechanics, and vocabulary (p. 164). There is a wide array of implementation models for fully online instructional approaches that include options of vendor staffing, professional development, and technology support (Bakia et al., 2013). Commercial online providers also add to their e-learning environments by including the use of multimedia elements that include audio, video, and interactive games (Bakia et al., 2013).

As the demand for online credit recovery expands, for-profit entities; such as *Plato, Pearson, Apex,* and *Kaplan*, are competing for a share of multimillion-dollar contracts with large school districts across the United States. Butrymowicz (2010) states course providers can invoice districts $175 to $1,200

per student per credit hour. Although critics may view the cost as high per student, Butrymowicz (2010) states "districts have defended such expenditures by saying credit recovery programs are a bargain compared to the costs associated with students who drop out of school" (Online learning section, para. 5).

The recent trend in credit recovery online models, such as Apex Learning and Plato Courseware, varies among leading software providers in their approaches to marketing solutions for students (Bakia et al., 2013). One such marketing interest is the at-risk student and the supports needed for this population. For example, in a 2013 Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation report, Bakia et al. (2013) review six online providers for an online Algebra 1 course and examine the instructional approaches and implementation towards at-risk students. In their key findings, the authors suggest that the online medium presents "opportunities to embed practices that encourage broader participation of underrepresented minorities" (Bakia et al., 2013, p. 3). Additionally, the report proposes that online providers "build in more supports" to improve student confidence, resilience, and time-management.

Challenges of Supporting At-Risk Youth with Online Methods

When looking at the intervention strategies of the online model for at-risk students, a key challenge is motivation and persistence. Online course providers suggest "there is a mismatch between student expectations in an online course and the actual course requirements that may also affect motivation" (Bakia et al., 2013, p. 13). Although online providers are searching

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for ways to improve coursework and support for at-risk learners, considerations of learner characteristics and self-direction are emergent themes. Robyler (2008) states, "Not all students have the skills and dispositions required to take advantage of the relatively freewheeling, flexible formats of virtual classrooms" (p. 34). Barbour and Siko (2012) add there is scarcity in the research evidence for K-12 online environments regarding student persistence in online courses. Furthermore "the area related to the success of at-risk students in K-12 online learning environments is where more research is needed" (p. 3).

Significance of the Study

Research shows that states and school districts continue to implement virtual education programs, thus maintaining the ongoing rise of online K-12 education (Christiansen, 2008; Picciano and Seaman, 2009; Watson,Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2012). In *Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning,* Watson et al. (2012) report that of the 2130 districts respondents in a 2011 survey, "sixty-two percent of districts reported having high school students enrolled in credit recovery distance education courses" (p.20). Additionally, a report from iNACOL, International Association for K-12 Online Learning, (2013) points out that one of the main purposes of school districts offering online learning courses is to provide students an alternative opportunity to graduate.

To date, primary research studies have focused on the implications of online credit recovery programs for school districts and its effectiveness. Watson and Gemin (2008) maintain that motivation of the at-risk learner is a vital component to the success of credit recovery programs. However, historical

studies of at-risk youth with online credit recovery programs, such as Archambault et al. (2010) and Watson et al. (2009), rely on objective research to measure issues and policies related to at-risk and distance education. While educators seek the Internet as a cost-effective alternative to increase high school graduation rates, there still lingers questions among educators on the quality of online courses in relation to individual learner needs, perceptions, feelings, or attitudes (Bakia et al., 2013; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999).

In the present climate of standardized educational accountability, Phipps and Merisotis (1999) question whether "distance education may bar students from the crucial element of interchange with teachers, researchers, and other students that prepare students for a lifetime as knowledge workers?" (p. 6). Barbour and Reeves (2009) state, "there [had] been a deficit of rigorous reviews of the literature related to virtual schools" (p. 402), and that "much of the research [was] only available in unpublished Master's theses and Doctoral dissertations" (p.403). Changes within education are often brought about from the interests of policy makers and administrators, and the voices of children and adolescents are often disregarded in a quest to improve educational process. Cook-Sather (2002) states "it is time that we count students among those with authority to participate both in the critique and in the reform of education" (p. 3). Currently in the research, there exists a lack of examination of the voices within sub groups of the online environment. Specifically, there is a lack of willingness to listen to the at-risk student's perception of the online environment.

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One manner of recognizing students in education is for "his or her story to be told." (Bingham, 2001, p. 36) A qualitative approach, rooted in a tradition of phenomenological inquiry, emphasizes the voice of students and deepens our understanding of their lives at school (van Manen, 1990). The purpose of this study is to add to the needed research regarding at-risk high school students' perception of care in their journey from the traditional classroom to their participation in the online education environment.

Conclusion

Bingham (2001) suggests students need a "mirror" reflecting back to them a sense of who they are. The online classroom is one such mirror. However, it may be confusing when the voice of "interpersonal mirroring" and dialogue intersects in student learning. Bingham (2001) addresses the misrecognition of the "mirror experience" found in education by stating, "The psyche has the ability to maintain a double register in which there may be incongruence between how one is recognized in public and how one is recognized in private" (p.45).

For example, in the introductory vignette, Julie carries labels from her educational past. The vignette continues:

As Julie got out of her car at the high school, she realized she missed seeing Mrs. Jones, her tenth grade math teacher, every day. Mrs. Jones had shown an interest in her, often inquiring about her family and how she was doing in her other classes, and Julie felt Mrs. Jones cared about her.

Julie took a deep breath and opened the door to the online resource room. As she turned on the computer, she thought, "I really want to graduate with my class."

By identifying reflections regarding the phenomenon of care from the voices of at-risk online students such as Julie, this study offers insight into the implications of the growing popularity of alternative online education. More importantly, this study will effectively provide an understanding into the "mirrors" of the online alternative environment and the power of its "reflection" in relating to at-risk high school students with their perception of care and connectedness.

CHAPTER TWO

An Interpretive Framework Using Ethic of Care

Introduction

A student's academic effort, classroom performance, and success or failure is influenced by whether the student senses a feeling of belonging and perceives an attitude of caring by teachers (Goodenow, 1993). The concept of caring and belonging is a viable lens that frames the "mirrors" of a student's recognition (Bingham, 2001). Additionally, Noddings (1984/2003) challenges educators to understand the phenomenon of educational care and its relevance in educational settings.

The word "care" is deeply embedded in our everyday language (Tronto, 1993, p. 103) and goes beyond educational environments. It is a concept which solicits emotions of human experience. Caring is an act which involves self and "other" (Noddings, 1984/2003). The "other" can be a person, an object, an idea, or an animal. Caring is a core value of the student-teacher relationship in learning (e.g. Furman, 2002; Goodenow, 1993; Rice, 1999). However, a clear conceptualization of integrating care into the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of the educational environment is missing (Engster, 2004).

Using an interpretive lens, Chapter Two provides the reader with a concept of care surrounding educational relationships. To build a framework of understanding regarding caring pedagogy, the historical foundations of theorists such as Gilligan (1982, 1993) and Noddings (1984, 2005) are examined. Additionally, the contexts of caring are discussed, including the unique context

of technology and the at-risk student. Finally, this chapter looks at possible

conceptual frameworks using the ethic of care model and other care theory as an

interpretive lens for this study.

Defining Care

Largely studied under a label of "ethic of care," the term "care" is part of

the social science and humanities vocabulary. The word "care" is used with

"great power" and its past usage is "long, rich, and sometimes tired…often

trivialized, and thus marginalized in the important business of considering

relationships and larger systems of social interactions" (Rauner, 2000, p. 4).

The concept of "care" has deep roots in the areas of philosophy, social

science, and ethics. At the center of his philosophical thought, Martin Heidegger

(1926, 1962), a German philosopher, sees care as the basic human structure of

Being. Others have followed in their conceptualization of care by noting the

relevance to psychological development and relationships (e.g. Erikson, 1963;

Gordon, Benner and Noddings 1996; Maslow, 1970;).

The perception of care has become an increasingly significant concern

for educational practice. Osterman (2002) indicates that a student's sense of

belonging and acceptance strongly correlates to academic engagement. Baker,

Terry, Bridger, and Winsor (1997) identify care as important to a student's well

being, as well as a prerequisite for academic learning. With multiple meanings,

historical and present scholarly research focuses on caring and its many aspects

to education and development (e.g. Mayerhoff, 1987; Noddings, 1984/2003;

Tronto, 1993). Understanding there are various aspects of care, Beck and

Newman (1996) encourage researchers to recognize the possibility that "care takes many forms and faces" (p. 172). To unravel the concept of care, it is first necessary to outline its development.

The Conception of Ethic of Care

Throughout history, the concept of caring pedagogies is linked to many philosophers and pedagogues such as Socrates, Dewey and Montessori. The actions of listening, dialogue and the care of well-being are prevalent constructs that make up theories and philosophies leading to a caring environment. Developed in the second half of the 20th century, the ethic of care model emerged from theoretical literature in moral education. Social scientists, such as Freud, Erickson, Maslow, and Kohlberg, advance a theory of ethic of care revolving around the progressive stages of moral development and awareness.

Moral Education

Looking at the development of ethic of care through a historical lens results in a direct challenge from Kohlberg's (1958, 1973) theory of justice. Based on his research from posing moral dilemmas to students at a private boys' school, Kohlberg (1958, 1973) developed his six-stage hierarchical framework that places individuals in a first stage of moral reasoning where they seek to avoid punishment. An individual rises up the stages of moral development and arrives at the sixth stage that is marked by commitment to comprehensive understanding (McLeod, 2011). Fundamentally, Kohlberg's objective identified a development of universal rules for all situations. Adding to his theory, Kohlberg concluded that a notable sense of justice is actualized on the basis of

universal principles. This universal justice leads to fair and equitable treatment among all fellow citizens (Botes, 2000).

Although Kohlberg's ideas were influential in the development of care theory, the critics of Kohlberg's theory find his philosophy quite problematic in the area of social science. Botes (2000) views Kolberg's theory as built on the "dominant model in western cultural history for decades" (p. 1073). Arguing that Kohlberg's ideas have only to do with power structure and little to do with social science, Tronto (1993) states:

> Kohlberg's theory yields the result that some of the most educated are the most moral. From the standpoint of those within the academy, it is not an untoward assumption to place exalted cognitive morality . . . Kohlberg's theory of moral development risks nothing in the current configurations of power in posting his stages of moral development. (p. 76)

Disagreeing with Kohlberg's hierarchy of moral development, Gilligan (1982, 1993) claims Kohlberg's theory is flawed with being "andocentric" (male bias) in his sample of a private boys' school. She asserts that women approach moral issues from a perspective of "ethics of care" and not "ethics of justice" (Gilligan, 1982, 1993; McLeod, 2011).

Gilligan's Work

Addressing Kohlberg's theory, (1982, 1993) examines real-life cases of women facing decisions regarding abortion. She argues that when women discuss moral choices, they often use a viewpoint of caring and relationship

(Singer, 2002). In her criticism of Kohlberg, Gilligan concludes that women and men in a contemporary society desire different moral paradigms. Her moral progression model leads from selfishness to an interconnection with relationships (1982, 1993). In her suggestions for ethic of care, Gilligan (1982, 1993) places a relationship within the roles of social, political, and philosophical theory. To exalt autonomy over connection signifies a "disconnection from emotion and blindness to relationships which set the stage for psychological and political trouble" (p. 122). The foremost aim of the agent is to seek to fulfill the needs of others, and, as a result, keep harmony, thus making Kohlberg's rule application null.

Focusing on a construct of care with a feminist presence, Gilligan contends that a woman's moral responsibility is motivated by her relationship with others. The results of her research stipulate that a woman's morality revolves around an ethic of care for others as opposed to universal codes of behavior (Gilligan, 1982, 1993). Although noting problems with Kohlberg's moral stage theory, Gilligan's posits that the ethic of care *"was not designed to replace Kohlberg's theory of morality, but rather to complement it"* (Ball, 2010, para. 3).

The dividing points of view of Gilligan (1982, 1993) and Kolhberg (1958) between care and justice have led these two ethics to set up different camps of thought. Each ethic focuses on one dimension of the human relationship without including the other. Clement (1996) discusses how this shift has led to the belief that justice is uncaring and care is unjust. She asserts,

"ethics are not merely reflections of gender, but of fundamental dimensions of human relationships, and thus their relationships to one another is of great importance for morality in general, as well as for questions of gender" (p. 2).

The heated debate of care also surrounds Gilligan with critics. Clement (1996) claims that Gilligan, like Kohlberg, is guilty of false universalism:

> While Kohlberg posited the moral experiences of men as human moral experience, those defending the ethic of care as feminine ethic seem to posit the experience of a specific, non-representative group of women, as women's moral experience. (p. 3)

Other critics of Gilligan argue that she is operating on a private and personal level, while Kohlberg is referencing a more public level (Tronto, 1993). The challenge, according to Hankivsky (2004), is to merge the notions of justice and care in such a way that care is not seen as theoretically inferior and becomes more assimilated into justice ethics (Waterhouse, 2007). Hankivsky adds that second generation theorists (e.g. Tronto, 1993) find a "centrality of care to all human life and activities" (p. 27).

As we refer to ethic of care presently, it is believed to encompass all the activities we do equitably in our world (Hankivsky, 2004; Waterhouse, 2007). In addition, men and women may reflect ethics of care, justice, or both (Vogt, 2002). Gilligan's research brings the discourse of ethic of care to the forefront of philosophy; however, Noddings' (1984, 1992) challenge of caring in schools extends the theoretical practice within the educational setting (Bergman, 2004).

Noddings' Ethic of Care

Noddings' (1984, 2003, 2005) expansion of Gilligan's original ideas has led to her recognition as one of the most influential care theorists in education. Noddings (1992) argues that many educational reforms make the relationship between teachers and students irrelevant to the success of intervention. Noddings (1992) criticizes these major reform efforts by saying, "curriculum, instruction, and classroom management, are movements misguided by ideology of control and dominated by a search for a method" (p. 10). Drawing on Heidegger's (1962) philosophical emphasis that care is the "ultimate reality in life," Noddings (1992) echoes his notion of care and challenges a need for educators to look past moral situations. It is noteworthy that Heidegger's vision of care was in direct contrast to his life experiences with Nazi sympathies and philosophy (Faye, 2010). Looking at the context of care, Noddings (1992, 2005) accentuates Heidegger's philosophy of care as relational and fundamental human need.

Noddings' vision of care theory notes that caring is largely dependent on motives and is difficult to observe (1984, 2008). From Noddings' perspective, care requires "different behaviors from situation to situation and person to person. It sometimes calls for toughness, sometimes tenderness. Some situations require only a few minutes of attentive care; others require continuous effort over long periods of time" (Noddings, 1992, p. xi-xii).

There are common components and principles that surround a caring relationship which involve *reciprocity, receptivity, engrossment,* and

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motivational displacement (Noddings, 1984/2003). *Reciprocity*, according to

Noddings, occurs when true relationships are in place and neither the giver nor

receiver feels neglected (Noddings, 1993). *Receptivity* is central for a caring

relationship to form. Willingness must be present—both for the one caring and

for the one receiving care—or there is no room for growth in the relationship

(Noddings, 1984/2003, 2007).

When reciprocity and receptivity merge, engrossment comes to be.

Noddings advocates that engrossment is the part of what transforms the "caring

about" attitude into the "caring for" action (Noddings, 1984, 2007). Finally, a

shift occurs, known as *motivational displacement* that forms at the moment of

choice and compels our understanding of the needs of others which can be

turned into action. Noddings (1984) summarizes this idea by suggesting a

"something must be done" attitude is acted upon when sentiment and obligation

is something larger or more important to us. With the outline of caring

components at the forefront, Noddings (1992) challenges "the deadly notion that

the school's first priority should be intellectual development" (p. 12). In

developing an ethic of care educational model, Noddings (1992) stipulates that

the "main aim of education should be to produce competent, caring, loving and

lovable people" (p. 174).

The Ethic of Care Model

In establishing an ethic of care model, Noddings (2002) asserts it is the

duty of education to apply ethic of care to moral education. With care as a

starting point, Noddings (2002) suggests four core components that exemplify

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care in teaching. These principles include: *modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation.*

Noddings (2002) considers the first constructed principle in ethic of care pedagogy is *modeling*. This concept calls for the demonstration of teaching students how to care and how to receive care from others. Noddings stipulates that this teacher disposition results in exemplifying a caring relationship and further validates her challenge to educators that "we have to show what it means to care" (Noddings, 2002, p. 16).

A second principle to the ethic care model involves the process of providing a relational exchange and open negotiation of ideas (Noddings, 1992). Using the context of ethic of care, to *dialogue* is to encourage teachers and students to connect and allow the student to have a voice (Noddings, 1992). In a dialogical relationship, Noddings supports the idea that:

> We are led by the particular feelings accompanying our own deeply held values, and beyond the beliefs to which these feelings are attached, to a realization that other—who feels about that which I do not believe—is still one to be received. (Noddings, 1984/2003, p. 186)

Additionally, the common relational understanding in dialogue enhances a connection that can provide opportunity for experience.

Within Noddings' ethic of care model, there is a need to create opportunities for students to care for others and to *practice* ways of viewing the world. Signifying the importance of carrying out a response of caring, Noddings (2002) believes, "The closer we are to the intimate needs of life, the more likely

we are to understand the fragility and to feel the pangs of the inner "I must"—

that stirring of the heart that move us to respond to one another"(p. 20). Through

the constituent of *practice*, an engagement of care-giving activities is

encouraged for students to learn how to care (Noddings, 1992, 2002).

The last component in the ethic of care model is the aspect of

acknowledging a relational exchange known as *confirmation.* Using Buber's

(1958) description, Noddings (2002) views the importance of confirmation and

states: "to confirm others is to bring out the best in them" (p. 20). Trust is a key

building block for teachers in acknowledging and confirming students

(Noddings, 1992, 1996). Noddings' ethic of care model demands the importance

of placing a priority on the nurturing of a student's needs and the student-teacher

relationship. Trust and confirmation develop over time as a teacher's

characteristics shift within a lateral framework of receptiveness, engrossment

and motivational displacement (Noddings 1992). Confirmation in ethic of care

does not occur uniformly, and *flexibility* in the curriculum is also a practical

aspect that is needed to address individual needs (Noddings, 2008).

Concerns about Ethic of Care Theory

Through the ethic of care model, Noddings advocates for teachers and

students to care for all who are around them. Critics debate the limitations of her

work in receptivity and proximity (Clement 1996, Groenhout, 1998),

overlooking justice (Noddings and Strike, 1999), and marginalizing a woman's

point of view (Hankivsky, 2004; Hoagland, 1991).

In her book, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An alternative approach to education*, Noddings (2005) addresses the requirement for receptivity and proximity and writes:

[W]e can locate at least two great difficulties in caring at a distance: First we cannot be present to those we would care for, and thus we cannot be sure that caring is completed…Second, we plunge into attempts to care without building a relation; we must depend on a form of abstract or inert knowledge. Thus, we often fail to treat the recipients of our care as individuals. (pp. 115-116)

Critics (e.g. Clement, 1996; Groenhout, 1998; Tronto, 1993) address the initial narrow scope of caring for others at a distance and its limiting effect on the concept of ethic of care.

Clement (1996) expresses concern on the restricted borders of Noddings' model, stating that Noddings "limits the scope of caring when she writes that because caring requires personal encounters with individuals, we cannot care for everyone" (p. 67). Adding to the concern of limiting the proximity of caring, Groenhout (1998) stipulates that limiting the focus of care to people at close distance is "problematic…as it would allow blindness to the needs of those who are at a distance from oneself, socially, physically, or culturally (p. 67).

In response to the criticisms of caring for more distant others, Noddings (2010) refines her original idea and stipulates the possibility of caring for others at a distance. However, she warns of the breakdown of "motivational displacement" in caring at a distance. Noddings (2010) points out that "When

we attend and receive expressions of pain or need, we feel something akin to that pain (we empathize or sympathize), and then we experience motivational displacement; we are moved to help" (p. 12).

Replying to the critics of ethic of care and its application of feminine perspective, Noddings (1990) states that caring is not gender-specific and is relevant to both females and males. Additionally, Noddings (2002) explains how justice is an extension of ethic of care when "justice itself is dependent on 'caring about', and caring about is in turn dependent of caring-for" (p. 6). While addressing the critics, Noddings' vision of ethic of care challenges educators, parents, and citizens to rethink the purpose of education and consider educational alternatives. Moreover, scholars identify various dimensions around similar concepts of care and attributes that comprise care as fundamental aspects of education (Bowlby, 1969; Maslow, 1970; Mayeroff, 1971; Mehrabian, 1967).

Other Contributors to Care Theory

Care, according to Noddings (1984), is more complex than just "being nice to others," but, instead, consists of how individuals relate to themselves, others, objects, and their environment. The ethic of care is a comparatively new discipline in education, and its framework is understood and advocated from various positions (Owens & Ennis, 2005). To understand ethic of care, it is important to examine the similarities of other theorists (Bowlby, 1969; Maslow, 1970; Mayeroff, 1971) who closely link concepts of care using other contexts.

A concept of *belonging* is generated from Abraham Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs theory. Through his hierarchies of importance, Maslow

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indicates that the need to be loved and belonging affects other needs, such as
self-actualization and esteem (Nolan, 2007, p. 12). When looking at Maslow's
perspective of love and belonging, other theorists, (e.g. Bulach, Brown and
Potter, 1998) view Maslow's concept of motivation directly correlating to caring
behaviors. Additionally, philosophers, such as Milton Mayeroff (1970), evolve
Maslow's theory using the topic of caring relationships.

Noddings' philosophy on caring for others relies on underpinnings by the
core concepts in Mayeroff's (1971) caring *virtues*—trust, honesty, humility,
hope, and courage. Mayeroff's works examine caring in alternative schools and
conclude care is a *process*. "To care for another person, in the most significant
sense, is to help him grow and actualize himself" (Mayeroff, 1971, p. 1).
According to Mayeroff, practicing the virtues of care adds order to the rest of
one's life (1971, p. 2). By examining the works and theories of Maslow,
Mayeroff, and Noddings, there are significant links between care theory and
Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory.

When looking at care-giving relationships, Bowlby (1969, 1999) implies
that *attachment* is a vital part of human drive. He also contends that a child's
attachment in early relationships serves as a working model that can shape
present and future behavior (Berman, 2004; Waterhouse, 2007). With Bowlby's
principles in mind, Baker, Terry, Bridger, and Winsor (1997) state that positive
caring relationships are required for children to develop capabilities of success
in school settings. Dimensions of care can be seen as key ingredients in the

works of those, such as Bowlby (1969, 1999), that argue for the importance of nurturing and caring environments.

Ethic of Care in Education

Despite controversies surrounding definition and implication, the notion of ethic of care has substantial impact on educational practice (Noddings, 1984/2003, 2003, 2005; Rauner, 2000). Rauner (2000) suggests there is a tendency to see these institutions as "value-neutral product providers with no care-giving role or responsibility" (p. 3). A growing body of research is evolving that examines the possibilities for developing ethic of care in educational practice. Furman (2002) states the popularity of ethic of care arises out of a need for schools to rectify the "crumbling" sense of community (p. 9). Additionally, Furman notes educational research demonstrates a need for a communitarian climate with positive trends in student achievement, motivation, and attendance.

Research validates Noddings' approach from the perspective of the student. For example, when studying interrelationships between students' family, peer groups, and school, Phelan, Davidson, and Cao (1991) find students attribute the success of transitioning between contexts of their world to teachers who recognize them and care. When students think their teachers care, motivation rises for academic performance. An early advocate for examining the affective responses in education and development, Pestalozzi (1827, 1959) argues for the fostering of love and affection for intellectual development. He further explains that the actions of love form a motivational force for a child to learn. With framing care as a context, Noddings (1984), draws on Pestalozzi's

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(1827, 1959) philosophy of love to focus on the forces of belonging and engagement in education. In his research, Rice (2001) shows that students are impacted with regards to effort if a sense of belonging is felt from the instructor. If the instructor does not communicate effectively a sense of caring for the student, caring is incomplete and learning can be lessened.

By using an ethic of care framework in educational settings, Noddings (1992, 2005) suggests that students find connection and meaningful relationships. Additionally, Noddings (1996) notes the importance of the teacher's role in the caring process using the ethic of care model. Looking at teacher education programs, Rogers and Web (1991), describe a need for caring pedagogy within the curriculum. Their research finds that "good teachers care, and good teaching is inextricably linked to specific acts of caring" (p. 174). Noddings' (2002) vision of the ethic of care model proposes an engagement of teachers to connect with students. Noddings (1995) challenges educational leadership to build a sense of community by stating:

> Care must be taken seriously as a major purpose of schools…Caring for students is fundamental in teaching and developing people with a strong capacity for care is a major objective, recognizing that the ethic of care should be powerful in guiding policy (p. 678).

Comer (1992), a child psychiatrist at the Child Development Center at Yale University, states that emotional needs of children and education cannot be separated. He adds that educators must provide an environment where "children feel wanted, valued, and accepted and one that allows them to accept you" (p.

4). The endeavors of Noddings' ethic of care model and other contributors to care theory span throughout social contexts and settings within a student's educational paradigm.

Contexts of Educational Care

Noddings' (2002) view on caring maintains that the "main educational aim should be to encourage growth of competent, caring, and moral people" (p. 92). In her research with secondary students at a magnet school, Maurer (2005) states, "the ethic of care is not primarily a set of rules or sets of rules that can be applied in all situations. The ethic of care is driven by the promotion of positive relationships" (p. 31). Relationships are framed in different contexts and meanings take form through these contexts.

In their research with 54 high school students, Phelan, Locke, and Cao (1991) find that students receive information from "multiple worlds" and derive meanings and understanding from these worlds. The movement between "worlds" or contexts of constructed reality influences a student's performance and a student's learning ability (p. 25). To better understand caring from a student's voice, it is first essential to look closely at examples of contexts within a student's world.

Caring Teacher/Student Relationships

The premise of Noddings' ethic of care theory is the reciprocal relationship of "the one-caring" and "the one-cared for (Owens and Ennis, 2005, p. 293). When looking at teacher-student relationships, Pomeroy (1999) asserts that a student's perception of a caring teacher directly correlates to a student's

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engagement in school. For example, in a longitudinal study examining resilience in high-risk ethnically diverse adults, Werner and Smith (1992) emphasize the participants report their favorite teacher made an impact on their lives. Further, participants voice their preferred teacher was not just an expert in academics, but was a confident and influencing role model.

In their research regarding homeless families, Moore, McArthur, and Carr (2008) state the child's voice should be "taken seriously as they experience their lives here and now" (2008, p. 78). When looking at a student's perspective of caring teachers, Banks (2009) finds that teachers must meet a student's needs. An example of the impact of students' voices about caring is reflected in Mauer's (2005) study of students at a magnet high school. One student indicates the importance of a student-teacher relationship. "It makes a big difference if people care about you at school. It gives us (students) a reason to come to school" (p. 101).

The complexity of adolescent development and the interrelationships of an adolescent's "multiple worlds" leads to the possibility of students feeling vulnerable and disengaged (Erikson, 1963; Mauer, 2005; Phelan, Davidson, and Cao, 1991). The research of Hair, Jager, and Garrett (2002) indicates the need for mentors for students to establish positive outcomes and psychological adjustment. Additionally, their research stipulates, "perhaps one of the most important roles played by other adults is that they are additional figures in the teen's life with whom he or she can establish a secure emotional bond" (p. 2).

For at-risk students, the need for relational care is a recurring theme in research (e.g. Waterhouse, 2007; Watson and Gemin, 2008). Furthermore, without relational care from adults, the challenges that at-risk students face create a sense of being lost and overwhelmed (Greene, 2008). For these at-risk students, an organization, such as a school, that conceptualizes a community of care and caring culture is essential to defend isolation (Gilligan, 1982, 1993; Noddings, 2008).

Caring School Community

Noddings (2002) maintains that in order for teachers and students to develop relationships, there must be an environment that practices and engages in the act of caring. Looking at effective nurturing practice in schools, Green (1997) finds that a teacher/student relationship is only one aspect of a caring community. Other areas of importance, according to Green (1997), include the professionalism of staff and the school environment. In the context of Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory, thus Colwell and Connor's (2003) work encourages providing "nurture groups" in a school environment. The implications of nurturing within a school's setting allow development of security and a sense of caring with teachers (p. 119).

Challenging educators to build a sense of community in schools, Sergiovanni (1994) argues that a community type culture helps meet the needs of all students. Furthermore, in his research, Sergiovanni defines a community approach as:

The tie that binds students and teachers together in special ways, to

something more significant than themselves: shared values and ideals. It

lifts both teachers and students to higher levels of self-understanding,

commitment and performance-beyond the reaches of shortcomings and

difficulties they face in their everyday lives. Community can help

teachers and students be transformed from a collection of "I's" to a

collective "we" thus providing them with a unique and enduring sense of

identity, belonging and place. (p. xii)

Recommending that a school represent a safe community for students,

researchers in *A Guide for Managing Threatening Situations and To Create Safe*

School Climates (2002), maintain that students need to find a connection with

adults. Positive relationships within the school community are "the critical

emotional glue among students and between students and adults" (Fein et al.,

2002, p. 12).

The "critical emotional glue" for caring with at-risk students is the

perception that a school community is responsively empathic to their needs

(Fein et al., 2002; Watson and Gemin, 2008, Waterhouse, 2007). When relating

with "underrepresented or disenfranchised populations," Owens and Ennis

(2005) note the importance of a school community "caring for different

members of the school" (P. 404). Leroy & Symes (2001) also stress the pivotal

importance of community relationships to the at-risk student population.

Investigating the dropout rate of at-risk students, the authors find that "once

these students realize they are accepted for who they are, that they are perceived

as valuable and valued, and they are welcomed to the classroom, many of their behavioral, emotional, and academic issues seemed to become manageable" (Leroy & Symes, 2001, p.11).

The research indicates that caring teacher relationships and caring school environments are critical perspectives in the at-risk student's viewpoint (Hair, Jagger, & Garrett, 2002; Phelan, et al., 1991; Pomeroy, 1999; Waterhouse, 2007). However, policy makers and educators are reshaping curriculum and classroom management to meet specific academic attainment with very little consideration of a caring, relational school culture (Baker et al., 1997). Additionally, research is scarce investigating the caring environments within the unique context of online education and at-risk students.

Caring in the Online Classroom

Interactions within a community depend on the interrelationships within that environment (Rovai, 2002; Ford, 2009). Little empirical research has examined educational care and relationships within the online classroom community. With the growing phenomenon of K-12 online education, the need to investigate caring in the online context is noted by researchers (Velasquez, Graham, & West, 2013). To date, researchers have focused on student interactions with an emphasis on autonomy and content of instruction. Few studies exist that cross contexts of online education and center on the focal point of care (e.g. Goldstein & Freedman, 2005; Velasquez, Graham, & West, 2013). Rovai (2002) challenges the belief that a community is bounded by classroom walls and extends the learning community to include the virtual classroom.

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Transactional Distance, Presence & Immediacy

When looking at technology-mediated instruction, Rovai (2002) emphasizes the importance of decreasing transactional distance and increasing social presence with immediacy as a foundational building block to form community in online courses. Transactional distance theory derives from Moore's (1993) work that asserts within the virtual classroom there is " a psychological and communications space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner" (p. 22). Research with online students states perceptions of great transactional distance correlates to low interaction in the online course and negative learning experiences (Sargeant, Curran, Allen, Jarvis-Selinger & Ho; Steinman, 2007; Vonderwell, 2003). A perception of transactional distance varies among learners; however, an increase of dialogue and presence in virtual classrooms can reduce transactional distance for online students (Rovai, 2002).

In the pedagogy of an online course, Rovai (2002) indicates a need to address *proximal presence* that increases a learner's interaction. In order for relationships not to whither within the online community, Rovai(2002) implies a "heightened awareness of social presence" must enhance the online course environment (p. 8). Defining the essence of "presence" or "sense of being in a place or belonging to a group" is a current debate among researchers (Picciano, 2002, p. 22). Within the context of online learning, *presence* is defined as a "student's sense of being in and belonging in a course and the ability to interact with other students and an instructor, although physical contact is not available"

(Piccano, 2002, p. 22). Often used synonymously with social presence theory, *immediacy* describes the similar needs of student/teacher online interactions (T. Anderson, P. Anderson & Jensen, 1979; Mehrabian, 1971; Velasquez, Graham & West, 2013).

Mehrabian (1967, 1971) distinguishes immediacy as communicative behaviors that heighten physical and psychological space in interpersonal communication. The cues of immediacy develop in both non-verbal and verbal forms. Non-verbal behaviors in immediacy are often established with facial expression, posture and touch (Mehrabian, 1967, 1971; Woods & Baker, 2004). In online instructional communication, verbal immediacy is comprised of teacher linguistic interactions with students that directly impact student's learning (Gorham, 1988; Picciano, 2002; Schutt, 2007; Woods & Baker, 2004). Looking at the psychological sense of closeness in the online environment, Woods and Baker (2004) state that a teacher's immediacy is demonstrated with "asking question, using humor, addressing individuals by name, initiating discussion and sharing personal examples which produce immediacy" (p. 4).

A perception of belonging in the online classroom and feeling comfortable to interact with others is closely linked to the concept of educational care (Crim, 2006; Picciano, 2002; Rovai, 2002). The literature K-12 and higher education regarding student and instructor perceptions of the online environment imply intersecting themes needed to increase student interaction and community. These include: dialogue, presence, belonging, and immediacy (e.g. Ford, 2009; Rovai, 2002; Velasquez, Graham & West, 2013).

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Intersecting Conceptual Frames of Caring

Waterhouse (2007) states that the idea of care "frames the ways in which people see themselves, their relationships, their institutions and their society" (p. 12). It is essential to recognize that these frames of care filter through all discussions of ethic of care and should be viewed as active and dynamic. Furthermore, each frame potentially serves as a "frame of reference" for care as it is interpreted and studied simultaneously with others as a multidimensional process (Hecht et al., 2003; Orbe, 2004). When examining the more recent literature of at-risk students and the concept of caring, a developing picture of the impact of care on this student population takes form.

Frames of Care from High School Students

Within an educational society that focuses on standardization of curriculum and accountability of education, there is critical research that centers on the need for caring of students in pedagogical practice (e.g. Adler & Moulton, 1998; Noddings, 2003, 2005; Rice, 1999). For instance, Maurer (2005) examines perceptions of caring relations within a unique magnet high school. The study considers the high school's curriculum which focuses on international relations and cultural aspects. The high school's mission statement emphasizes students' finding "collaborative relationships" within the classroom environment (p. 58). In her investigation of how caring practices are maintained by teachers and students' perceptions of care, Maurer identifies major themes of respect, help, and effective teaching in a school community. Going deeper into the phenomenon of caring with secondary students, Banks (2009) listened to

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recently graduated high school students and their perceptions of educational

care. His findings suggest teacher care emerges for students in the forms

"pedagogical caring and nurturing caring" (p. 86). Furthermore, Banks suggests:

> The typical student is influenced by caring or uncaring teachers, then
>
> those same experiences for the at-risk student, the student with special
>
> needs, or the average child at an at-risk time during their life; would be
>
> even more profound or exaggerated. One cannot separate self-esteem and
>
> student well being from academics and the ability to learn. (p. 95)

Research on prevention programs and intervention suggest successful

strategies that promote retention rates and student connectedness for the at-risk

student (Bridgeland, et al., 2006; Burger, 2009; Jerald, 2006; Taylor-Dunlop,

1995; Rumberger, 2001). For example, Waterhouse (2007) describes care as

both a "collaborative action and personal attribute" in his research regarding at-

risk students in a high school alternative school setting. Waterhouse investigates

at-risk students' experiences by giving them a "voice" within a

phenomenological approach. In the analysis of student perceptions, Waterhouse

states, "The participants (at-risk students) describe care as a complex,

interwoven process of collaborative actions and personal attributes" (p. 96).

Additionally, Burger (2009) researched a prevention program of graduation

coaches in response to Georgia's high school dropout rate. Using Maslow's

hierarchy of needs model; Burger evaluated influences of a graduation coach's

ethic of care on at-risk high school seniors. Through the use of case studies in an

alternative school, Burger suggests "unconditional positive regard" and "a sense

of belonging" are critical themes for at-risk students to perceive caring from the graduation coach (p. 80). As today's at-risk students voice their perceptions from the traditional high school classroom, there is little research examining affective traits within the growing educational K-12 online environment (Archambault et al., 2010; Barbour, 2009; Watson, 2008).

Building Frames of an At-Risk Student's Virtual Experience

When addressing the at-risk population and drop out crisis, Watson and Gemin (2008) indicate online course offerings and programs provide an alternative prevention program to address at-risk students' learning needs. In their research examining effective online learning and credit recovery practices, the authors maintain that a well-designed online course "based on pace and performance" allows a student to feel connected to the online environment (p. 16). Attempting to set an agenda for further research, the iNACOL Research Committee (2010) released a report on at-risk learners and online education which showed that current literature focuses on higher achieving students. The authors indicate a need for research to assist students at the "other end of spectrum" in the online environment (p. 19). Results of their survey caution practitioners, who use online programs to assist at-risk student, there is a pivotal contrast "between what is required to be successful in an online course and the traits most at-risk student possess" (p. 18).

Expanding on iNACOL's call for research of at-risk students and online education, Barbour and Siko (2012) conducted a case study of one at-risk student in a rural school who enrolled in a K-12 virtual school in order to

graduate on time. Analyzing the at-risk student's experience, the authors observed the student taking the "path of least effort to solve problems and doing assignments" (p. 6.) Additionally, the authors noted the at-risk student experienced difficulty with the demands of online productivity, and experienced limitations in accessing technology. Barbour and Siko's research study ultimately notes an absence in the literature meeting the needs of low performing students in K-12 online education.

Most recently, there has been noted research concerning effective online instructional design and implementation to meet the needs of online students (Bakia et al., 2013; Velasquez, Graham, and West, 2013). To support the growing trend on online education, Bakia et al. (2013) examined various online Algebra One courses available to high schools for graduation credit. The report focuses on instructional design and course characteristics to support student learning online. In their review of course providers, the researchers also note particulars of addressing struggling students. Addressed in their findings, Bakia et al. state that to support "at-risk student's success in online courses may require special consideration and instructional adjustment" (p. 2). Recognizing that online learning can seem impersonal to adolescent learners, Velasquez, Graham and West (2013) explore technology choices by teachers to create caring relationships with students. Using Noddings' (1984) ethic of care model, the researchers interviewed teachers and students of an online high school to examine how they foster caring interactions and their technology preferences to facilitate care in the virtual classroom. Their findings indicate that students felt

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"understood and cared-for when they perceived that teachers jointly experienced the learning process with them by working together with the student towards a specific project" (p. 291).

In the literature of care theory and research, it is evident that care matters to both teachers and students in education (e.g. Maurer, 2005; Noddings, 2003, 2005; Rice, 1999; Waterhouse, 2007). As opportunities and accountability for online classrooms increase for K-12 students, there is little literature on student voices regarding their perceptions within a new era of distance learning. Velasquez, Graham, and West (2013) suggest future research is needed in online education to initiate additional exploration of their study and apply concepts to diverse populations—such as the at-risk learner. Bakia et al. (2013) note that many at-risk students seem to be lacking in service and support within the online environment. Furthermore, the researchers indicate, "while more research is needed regarding the needs and performance of at-risk students, the immediate concern is that online learning could become a tool that inadvertently widens the achievement gap" (p. 9). More significantly, there is a deficit of literature focusing on the phenomenon of care as it relates to at-risk students and their plight to graduate using online credit recovery programs.

Conclusion

There is an abundant body of research regarding ethic of care and care theory as it applies to educational contexts (e.g. Maurer, 2005; McKenna, 2010; Waterhouse, 2007). However, against the backdrop of distance education, few studies examine educational care from the voices of the online high school

student (Barbour & Siko, 2012). Moreover, the literature is non-existent regarding the at-risk high school student's perception of care as it correlates and moves into the virtual classroom. Adding context to existing literature, this study listens to students' stories in order to examine perceived care of at-risk students who access credit recovery courses in the online environment.

Although education serves a population of children and adolescents, their voices and perceptions are often ignored and overlooked in decisions regarding pedagogical practices (McKenna, 2010). Acknowledging the importance of a student's perspective, Ruddock, Chaplain and Wallace (1996) state "children are capable of producing analytical and constructive observations and react responsively to the task of identifying the factors which impede (or support) their learning" (p. 60). Additionally, through the meaningful opportunity of listening to student voices, Mitra's (2004) research indicates that a student's unique perceptions aid in identifying problems and creating solutions for school practice.

Using student narratives provides this research critical insight into the influence of educational care on the at-risk student. By looking in depth at students' responses, this study focuses on the conception of care and the at-risk student's relationship to the online environment. Through the lens of Noddings' ethic of care model and interpretive constructs of care, this framework speaks to the research question. Additionally, an interpretive care context provides guidance in interview questions and analysis of data. More importantly, this study adds to the research using a phenomenological perspective to examine at-

risk students' experiences and stories of care within their educational paradigm

of traditional and online environments.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Introduction

To understand perceptions of student care and virtual education, it is critical for this particular at-risk population to tell their stories and examine their perceptions of problems and support. A qualitative research, with a framework of phenomenology, allows the interpretation of the central concept of care through the voices of at-risk students. Additionally, the philosophical root of phenomenology deepens the understanding of students' lives in education. In particular, this study examines at-risk high school students' stories lived experiences in everyday existence; thus requiring a human science methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology. Recognizing that every story is unique in lived experience, each student's perspective generates contextualization of the data regarding the phenomenon of care. The intention of the hermeneutic design is to seek understanding of the participants' stories and to examine "a textual expression of its essence…the essential nature and meaning of their experiences" (van Manen, 1990, p. 36). This chapter describes a brief historical view of phenomenology philosophy while highlighting van Manen's (1990) four lifeworld themes to guide this investigation. Subsequent sections in this chapter address the particulars of the study; such as, the setting, participants, and data analysis.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology develops an understanding of how others experience specific events. Historically, Edmond Husserl (1859-1938), known as the father of phenomenology, intended the methodology of examining phenomena to influence the study of philosophy and offer new possibilities. The intention of this descriptive method seeks to relate the "meaning of lived experience for several individuals about a concept or phenomena…the structures of consciousness in human experience" (Cresswell, 1998, p.51). The emphasis of phenomenology aims to provide understanding of human perception of reality (Palys, 1997). Under the origins of Husserl's work, the philosophy of phenomenology traces presiding notions on the origin and nature of truth of the time.

Primarily descriptive in nature, Husserlian phenomenology raises awareness of knowledge and consciousness (Thompson, 1990). Focusing on a strong belief that experience is the fundamental source of meaning, Husserl's studies are epistemological in nature. His opposition towards the bias of objective existence led to the study of transcendental phenomenology. This approach describes a phenomenon where crucial constructs are left in pure consciousness without the consideration of their cause (Kockelmans, 1999; Racher & Robinson, 2003).

Three foundational aspects of Husserlian theory include: "essences, intentionality, and phenomenological reduction (bracketing)" (Racher & Robinson, 2003, p. 471). Keys to understanding Husserl's phenomenology

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approach rely on underlining features of a phenomenon that is exempt from perceivable cultural context. Husserl defines the attempt to put all of one's assumptions about matter being studied into a state of suspension, to "bracket" them (van Manen, p.47). To further explain "bracketing," also known as "reduction," Schultz (1970) describes this process for the researcher as "the given processes of human consciousness and their 'intended objects'" (p. 6).

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Like Husserl's philosophy, Martin Heidegger's (1889-1976) hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the lived experience. A colleague of Husserl's at Freiberg in Germany, Heidegger finds commonality with Husserl's philosophy of looking at the world as life and human lived experience (Heidegger, 1962). However, Heidegger differs with Husserl regarding the exploration of the lived experience. Pronounced differences exist between Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology (Heidegger, 1962; Laverty, 2003; Racher & Robinson, 2003). Laverty marks the contrast by stating their "distinction is important as it reflects the view that phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology, and our understandings of them, are not stationary, but rather dynamic and evolving, even today" (p. 3).

Heidegger maintains that a lived experience is an ontological foundation of interpretation reached through "being in the world" (Racer and Robinson, 2003, p. 472). In his work, *Being in Time,* Heidegger (1962) argues that consciousness is part of human existence and should not be separated to interpret human experience. To allow for an interpretation of existence, human

life must be observed as a state of *being* (Harman, 2007). Hermeneutic

phenomenology uses an interpretive level to understand human beings are

constantly relating to the people and things in the world (Parson, 2010). A

Heideggerian phenomenological approach intends to create meaning on the

context of relationships and aspects within experience that may become

overlooked in ordinary life (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). Throughout the

remainder of this study, it is noteworthy to mention that the terms

"phenomenology" and "hermeneutic phenomenology" are used interchangeably,

with the recognition of hermeneutic phenomenology best fitting the

interpretation of at-risk students' lived experiences.

Gadamer's Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Continuing the philosophy of "hermeneutics," Heidegger's pupil, Han-

Georg Gadamer (1900/2002), sought to uncover the nature of human

understanding. Gadamer's (1975) written work, *Truth and Method,* attempts to

rethink the previous work of Heidegger. Dowling (2007) notes two primary

conditions in Gadamer's work are prejudgment and universality. Additionally,

Grondin (1999) regards Gadamer's focus on human condition as striving "to

understand because, at a basic level, we do not fully understand at all" (Grondin,

1999, p. 224). Gadamer explains the beginning process of understanding with

his theory of fusion of horizons. According to Gadamer, the 'historical' (author)

horizon is nothing but what is formulated in the comprehension of the reader,

"being treated by the reader as different from his own horizon" (Pan, 2009).

Therefore, when a historical horizon is created, it imparts into the reader's

present horizon. Laverty (2003) summarizes Gadamer's interpretation "as a fusion of horizons, a dialectical interaction between the expectation of the interpreter and the meaning of the text" (p. 10).

In contrast to individual phenomenology, Gardmerian hermeneutics is a type of dialogue (Koch, 1999). This type of inquiry requires the researcher to consider social, gender, and cultural significance. Similar to Heidegger (1962), Gadamer (1975) finds no value expanding a set of rules to describe or control the methodological procedure of the human sciences (Annells, 1996; Gadamer, 1975). Outlined in his book, *Truth and Methods*, Gadamer argues that hermeneutics is not just perceptions, but it is an endeavor to "clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 263). In agreement with Heidegger (1962), Gadamer believes interpretation is a change process without the possibility of an ultimate interpretation (Annells, 1996).

Hermeneutic Strategies: The Hermeneutic Circle

Hermeneutic phenomenology "attempts to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the life-world, and yet to remain aware that life is always more complex than an explication of meaning can reveal" (van Manen, 1990 p. 18). Within Heidegger's theory is the *hermeneutic circle* that suggests making sense of the whole by evaluating the parts (Heidegger, 1962). Gadamer (1975) indicates that the hermeneutic circle expands with developing ideas and understanding of thought. Ajjawi and Higgs (2007) states the strategy of the hermeneutic circle "is a metaphor for understanding and interpretation, which is viewed as a movement between parts

(data) and whole (evolving understanding of the phenomenon), each giving meaning to the other such that understanding is circular and iterative (pp. 622-624).

By moving between part and whole of the text, the researcher, and even the reader, can share a negotiated whole which is greater than the sum of the parts. This new negotiation may provide a new outlook on the subject matter, and goes beyond what was before assumed (Bennett, 2002). Dowling (2007) emphasizes this process as a "dialogical method whereby the horizon of the interpreter and the phenomenon being studied are combined together" (p. 134). Phenomenologist, Max van Manen (1970), offers an approach initiating six elements to examine lived experiences and dialogical horizons (Gadamer, 2006; van Manen, 1990).

Max van Manen's Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Considering phenomenology as an appropriate direction to explore phenomena, van Manen (1990) indicates the methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology espouses understanding of lived experiences and its essence of hidden meanings (Kafle, 2011; van Manen; 1990). Important to note in van Manen's design is a research methodology with guiding principle, and not a research method. van Manen defines a *method* as a "set of investigative procedures that one can master relatively quickly" (van Manen, 1990, p. 29). In contrast, a *methodology* acknowledges "the philosophic framework, the fundamental assumptions and characteristics of a human science perspective (van Manen, 1990, p. 27).

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Through hermeneutic phenomenology, van Manen's human science approach describes six research activities that offer a general guide for the researcher. In contrast to a linear method, van Manen (1990) describes these six undertakings as a process that intertwines and builds on each other. To reach best practices in hermeneutic phenomenological research, van Manen's themes serve as supports within this study. The six actions of van Manen's research design (1990, pp. 30-34) include:

1. Turning to the nature of the live experience;

2. Investigating experience as we live it, rather than as we conceptualize it;

3. Reflecting on essential themes that characterize the phenomenon;

4. Describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting;

5. Maintaining a strong and oriented relation;

6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.

In *turning to the nature of the lived experience,* van Manen (1990) describes a need to study the researcher points toward the phenomenon. It is critical within this contextual frame for the researcher to recognize his or her own preconceptions and assumptions of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1984).

A second theme within van Manen's hermeneutic design is *investigating experiences as we live it, rather than as we conceptualize it* (van Manen, 1990). For example, using a hermeneutic approach to understanding illness, Robertson-Malt (1999) notes the wisdom of a researcher seeking understanding of "human experience by treating the people who are actually living the experience as experts" (p. 294). Instead of reading and theorizing about the experience, the

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researcher seeks to make sense of those who live and are part of "their being-in-the-world" (Roberston-Malt, 1999, p. 294).

The third theme of van Manen's (1990) research design requires phenomenological *reflecting on essential themes that characterize the phenomenon.* Van Manen describes themes "as a means to get at the notion of something" (p. 88), and may be "understood as the structures of experience" (p. 79). Thematic analysis determines structures and layers of the experience. To grasp the commonalities among the data, the researcher reflects on what constitutes the nature of the experience and gleans themes or subthemes within the textual stories from the participant's experience (van Manen, 1990). Reflective practice entails "a thoughtful, reflective grasping of what it is that renders this or that particular experience its special significance" (van Manen, 1990, p. 32).

Describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting is the fourth phenomenological approach in van Manen's guide (1990). Because he believes writing is the tool of phenomenological research, van Manen (1990) states that "phenomenology is the application of logos (language and thoughtfulness) to a phenomenon (as an aspect of lived experience), to what shows itself precisely as it shows itself" (p. 33). The art of rewriting is the activity of moving back and forth, to think and rethink the phenomenon until the actual picture is confident.

The fifth construct of van Manen's model is *maintaining a strong and oriented relation.* Remaining dedicated to the phenomenon and true to the question in phenomenon is essential for upholding the textual analysis of the

data. In this step, choices are important when deciding what is relative to the interpretation within parts of the text to the context of the phenomenon.

The final element of van Manen's six actions requires *balancing the research by considering parts and whole.* This activity requires the researcher to stop several times during the study to reconsider the big picture. Refocusing on the commonalities of the phenomenon provides opportunity to gain direction for the researcher and reach finality. Outcomes of van Manen's stages in this research assist in describing and interpreting the lived experiences of at-risk students and their journey of care involving an online credit recovery course.

Research Study Design

The use of in-depth interviewing, detailed transcriptions, and field notes supply the specifics and analysis of how at-risk students view care and their perception of the online credit recovery experience. Seidman (2006) notes the value of interviewing participants for research by stating, "at the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals' stories because they are of worth" (p. 9). To assume the uniqueness approach to the topic of care, the design of this study is flexible and fluid in nature and provides a venue for participants to tell their stories. Furthermore, van Manen (1990) adds that the purpose of the interview process in hermeneutic phenomenology is to explore and gather narrative material and develop a relational conversation about the lived experience with the participant. When interviewing the participants, it will remain essential to refer back to the research question while unearthing the meaning and relevance of their experience.

Context and Sample Selection

Participants in this study were selected from a school district in the Mid-South United States. The school district consists of two high schools and one alternative high school focusing on at-risk students. The district serves over 14,000 students and has an overall teacher to student ratio of 15.82 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010-2011). In an effort to promote high school resources and graduation rates, this particular district's program allows high school students to take online credit courses during the school day, or in a computer lab at their home high school, or independently after school. In its last year of a three-year high school online pilot program, the district's expenditures receive funding by America's Promise Alliance for the online education courses. Founded by General Colin Powell, America's Promise Alliance sees opportunities to expand resources for student success (American's Promise Alliance, 2013). As part of the program, the district uses online curriculum provided by Apex Learning, Inc., a Seattle based-digital learning provider for secondary education (Apex, 2013; Bakia et al., 2013).

District Use of Apex Learning, Inc.

Apex Learning, Inc., is a large provider of online and blended programs that serves all 50 states and 72 countries (Apex, 2013). When looking at Apex's clientele, Bakia et al. (2013) states "in the 2011-12 school years, the company worked with 1,260 public schools and districts across the United States and enrolled 395,000 students in about 1.35 million course segments" (p.53).

In a review of the Apex Learning, Inc. provider profile, Bakia et al.

(2013) report the provider addresses supports for at-risk students by providing

teachers a best practices guide outlining strategies for struggling students.

Additional supports include a course calendar to help a student track course

completion and the provider recommends at-risk student to have a mentor/or

coach while taking courses online (Bakia et al., 2013). The online course

provider correlates its course objectives to meet state standards. It allows

students to work at their own pace, using a fully online asynchronous model as

described in Chapter One. The school district in this study employs a

coordinator to enroll students, work with district counselors, and monitor student

progress with the Apex online software. Additionally, the district provides

support to students using paraprofessionals to monitor the lab setting and makes

specific teachers, depending on their subject areas, available one night a week.

Participants in this study were chosen based on their lived experience of

completing an online asynchronous course offered by the district.

Sample Size

The study's criteria required the at-risk participants to have successfully

completed an online course and to be 18 years of age or over. The sample size

was generated from a pool of fourteen online students within a school year, who

were identified as at-risk and were in a "dropout prevention" category. This list

of students was gathered not only by data, but also by interviews with the

district online coordinator and high school district counselors. The researcher

then conducted in-depth interviews with seven of these at-risk high school

students in order to gather their perceptions of the phenomenon of care and their experience with traditional and online education. The seven participants were students who had fallen behind academically and then successfully completed an online course toward their high school's graduation requirements.

Ethical Conduct

Prior to participant recruitment, the researcher applied and received permission from The University of Oklahoma Institutional Review Board (IRB) to approve the study. Measures in the application process outlined the goals and research processes of this study to ensure ethical considerations of possible risks and sacrifices are articulated to the participants. To ensure ethical considerations with participants, all subjects are informed that the study is voluntary and any participant may leave the study at any time.

In adherence with the IRB approval guidelines, researchers must make certain that social research does not pose harm to the participants--voluntary or otherwise. All participants in this study were briefed with the study and provided an informed consent document to understand possible risk. This study is considered minimal risk; however, due to sensitive personal issues that may arise in the interview, the possibility of harm always exists (Fisher & Wallace, 2000). To minimize harm to participants, participants were advised of full confidentiality and their responses anonymous. Pseudonyms were created in order for participant's names to be unidentifiable on transcripts.

van Manen (1990) cautions researchers to ensure the interviews are not conducted "badly" and to guard against participants feeling "anger, disgust,

defeat, intolerance, insensitivity, etc." (p. 163). To alleviate harm, the researcher ensured that school counselors within the district were aware of the study and were able to provide student support and resources in case problems or concerns manifested themselves in the interviews.

Method of Data Collection

The primary source of data was individual interviews with participants. Seidman (1991) suggests that if the goal in education is to make meaning of people's experience, then "interviewing provides a necessary, if not always completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry (p.4). The interview process opened with general questions about the participant and their educational experience. However, true to hermeneutic phenomenology design, the remainder of the interviews became fluid in nature. The researcher did not have preconceived conclusions or predictions and allowed the participants to share glimpses of personal experience with care in their own words and recount their story with online education.

Consistent with exploring the phenomenology interview method, Morse and Richards (2002) state phenomenological designs of study are descriptive in nature and allow a participant to experience the event. Each interview was conducted face-to-face at the student's home high school, and lasted approximately sixty-seventy minutes, recorded on a digital audio device, and then transcribed. The researcher's objective in the interview process is to allow the interview process to flow and trust that van Manen's (1990) thematic categories will emerge within the means of interpreting the hermeneutic circle.

Trustworthiness

To add to the interpretation of the study, careful consideration took place of the elements of trustworthiness and the researcher's reflexivity within the research. This qualitative research design is a flexible study, and its findings are from participants with individual perspectives regarding a specialized setting. The study is not replicable. Nevertheless, Lincoln and Guba (1985) state the credibility of the study needs to answer the question" How can the inquirer persuade his or her audience that research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?" (p. 290). Within this study, several strategies were implemented to add to the validity of this research.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggest the hallmark of reaching goals in qualitative research is achieved by reaching credibility, dependability, and transferability. After achieving these elements of qualitative research, then the criteria of confirmation is met (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Credibility was distinguished in the study by the researcher providing truth in the depiction of participant's meanings. The researcher used techniques during the interview process that included clarification, focused attention, and recounting to the participant their lived experience perception. Additionally, data triangulation occurred with a review of other sources regarding the literature of at-risk students and their perceptions of care. In addition, the researcher included verbatim quotes directly from data collection to ensure the essence of meaning within the study.

To help another researcher grasp the key implications of the study, the elements of dependability must ensure the stability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Within this study, an audit trail of transcripts, coding, findings, and conclusion are shared with the researcher's dissertation chair. Additionally, notes were used in the interview process to help establish any need for follow-up interviews and new questions that might arise. Transferability refers to the degree to which results of qualitative finds may be transferred to other populations or settings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). To ensure transferability in this study, the researcher provided rich descriptions of the participant's experience, context, and assumptions central to the study. To understand the full aspect of confirmation in qualitative research, it is critical to recognize the researcher is the primary tool of data collection and analysis.

Researcher Reflexivity

The endeavors of hermeneutic phenomenology require the researcher to engage in a process of self-reflection. Understanding one's core values and positions provides the researcher "with clues for orienting oneself to the phenomenon and thus to all other stages of phenomenological research" (van Manen, 1990, p. 57). Additionally, Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) recognize that in a hermeneutic study some preconceptions of the researcher will manifest in the process of conducting research. The researcher's reflectivity is a continuous process of the researcher living in the moment and interpreting the experience (Hertz, 1997).

Personal Interpretation and Bias

Reflection of my personal interest in the study begins with my childhood. I was an only child and grew up in a home where the concept of care was central to my upbringing. My two loving parents affirmed my zest for doing well and excelling in school and extracurricular activities. After high school, I pursued higher education and graduated with honors with a master's degree in human relations and started my first job as a school counselor.

After working twenty years as a school counselor in various settings, I have witnessed the lives of children impacted by divorce, poverty, bullying, verbal and physical abuse, and the pressures of academic standards. While working with these students, it is hard not to wonder if he or she "will make it and graduate" and what will become of them if they do graduate. Through the years, the difficulty of working to find care for these students in the form of mentors and teachers has dominated my school counselor responsibilities.

Additionally, after receiving my master's degree, I taught lower level courses in psychology for a university. Thus, within this context, I bring conceptions of working with students in the online environment and attempting to bridge the gap of transactional distance and engagement (e.g. Moore, 1993; Werner & Smith, 1992). Years of experience listening to students' stories are a continuous emotional experience for me. My interpretation of their story is vital to understanding their emotional and social well-being. I acknowledge that my own transformation occurs about a particular subject as I listen to each participant. Additionally, I must avoid the "fixed signposts" and discover the

"responses to the question at hand" (van Manen, 1990, p. 29). In doing this, I will grasp the descriptive language and uncover layered themes of experience (van Manen, 1990).

Phenomenological Reflection and Thematic Analysis

For the purpose of phenomenological writing and documenting emerging themes, van Manen clarifies that developing themes or subthemes are not categorical or formulaic (van Manen, 1990). It is a process of "insightful invention, discovery, disclosure" that is "given" to the researcher from within the lived experience of the phenomenon being studied (van Manen, 1990, p. 88). The process of uncovering thematic aspects within the study began with the highlighting approach of transcriptions. The criteria for annotating a theme stems from listening and reading transcripts of participants while noting dialogue relevant to the phenomenon (Smith, et al., 2009, van Manen, 1990). Although a researcher can engage in interpretation of the data, ultimately it must be substantiated by the words from the text (Smith, et al., 2009).

The means for capturing themes and subthemes for this study derives from van Manen's philosophy that certain fundamental existentials pervade all human beings, regardless of their particular situation in life (van Manen, 1990). As a guide for this research study, van Manen's four existentials reflect the hermeneutic phenomenological research process as:

- *Lived time,* known as temporal reflection, is a subjective time that
  reflects a participant's time while being in the experience. It is temporal

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dimensions of past, present, and future that make up a person's world

(van Manen, p. 1990, p. 104).

- *Lived space* is the way we experience day-to-day existence of spatial

  dimension (van Manen, 1990). It refers to a world or landscape in

  which humans move in their world. To understand a human's world, "it

  is helpful to inquire into the nature of the lived space that renders that

  particular experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 103).

- *Lived body* refers to corporeal reflection. The principal of this context is

  humans are always in the world, and our bodily presence reveals or

  conceals something about ourselves (p. 104).

- *Lived other* is the approach of relational reflection. It is the course of

  how humans relate with others as we share the world. Defining lived

  space, van Manen (1990) describes the existential "as we meet the

  other, we are able to develop a conversational relation with them which

  allows us to transcend ourselves" (p. 105);

By using the existential dimension of these themes, van Manen (1990)

points out, "These four existentials of lived body, lived space, lived time and

lived relation to the other can be differentiated, but not separated. They form an

intricate unity which we call the lifeworld-our lived world (p. 105).

The final element in the thematic analysis of the study is to determine

which themes are essential to the phenomenon. Looking at the

phenomenological description of each theme requires van Manen's (1997) guide

to "make a phenomenon what it is and without which it cannot be what it is" (p.

10). After peeling back the layers of reflection within the responses, the researcher also felt it was crucial to determine incidental themes from essential ones.

Conclusion

Sociologist Fuchs (1993) suggests that when a field accompanies high uncertainty and a weak resource base, then the mode of intellectual dialogue and inquiry is that of hermeneutics. As a method, hermeneutic phenomenology necessitates a means of understanding in philosophy and methodology (Glesne, 2010; Smith, 2011). A clean design, methodology and data analysis strategy is essential for conducting successful research (Glesne, 2006). Investigations on the present state of the "field" of at-risk online credit recovery programs and care for these students closely fit with Fuch's criteria. The scope of van Manen's (1990) four existentials provides this researcher a methodology and means to generate a presentation of findings in narratives. Emerging themes connect to the current literature of at-risk students, care and online learning. Data collection and analysis present themes and subthemes that bridge theoretical constructs. Using a hermeneutic focus, this study generates a looking glass into at-risk students' perceptions of care and online learning that adds to the literature.

CHAPTER FOUR

Phenomenological Narratives of the Lifeworlds

Introduction

Seven at-risk students responded to open-ended interviews designed to investigate their lived experiences of care relating to their journey in education and online learning. After transcribing the interviews and reviewing the participants' reflections, I devised a means of finding and interpreting the threads of dialogue related to the phenomenon of care by journaling interpretive comments. Deep within the text of lived experience is the phenomenon, and their stories reflect on "essential themes that characterize the phenomenon" (van Manen, 1990, p. 30). To reflect on the participants' perception of the phenomenon, van Manen's four existential lifeworlds of *lived time* (temporality), *lived space* (spatiality), *lived body* (corporeality), and *lived other* (relationality) guided the analysis of each participant's responses. The descriptions of these four existentials, as discussed in Chapter Three, are outlined in Table 2.

Through interpretation, concept threads emerged connecting the participants' perceptions of care as it related to their experience in traditional education and in their online learning experience. These themes include belonging/isolation, unconditional positive regard/judgment, and the concept of help /not enough help. This chapter presents the essence of the participants' lifeworlds in their perception of care in both the traditional and online educational settings. Participants provided a definition of care in order to explain

how they personally perceived the meaning of care. This denotation of care follows each of their names. Additionally, examples of word symbols and phrases of the study's thematic aspects are italicized as they occur in the transcriptions.

Table 2

The Four Existentials in Human Experience

Existential	Description
Lived Time (temporality)	A temporal reflection of being in the world. Includes a person's temporal landscape where time is subjective. It includes concepts of past, present, and future.
Lived Space (spatiality)	The way a person experiences day-to-day existence. It is the felt space and includes the way a person moves in that space.
Lived Body (corporeality)	A person's experience of being in the world. It is the essence of what is happening on the inside of a person, but not always revealed to the outside world.
Lived Other	A relational reflection. It is how humans relate with others in the interpersonal spaces shared.

(van Manen, 1990)

Phenomenological Narratives: Their Journey

Participant One: Jill

You know, I think care is people who would really help me out and make

sure I understood what they were doing and what they were teaching.

They would do all that they could for you.

Jill is a nineteen-year-old woman living with her older brother. After successfully completing some online courses, Jill decided to finish her last semester of high school at the district's alternative school. She graduated high school, and she is currently enrolled in an online community college while living with her older brother. Jill began the interview in a quiet, somewhat shy manner; however, as the interview progressed, Jill began to open up and articulate in detail her educational journey.

Traditional—Lived Time: (temporality)

Jill began talking about her life in elementary school, and she noted that "schoolwork comes pretty easy." As she talked about her transition to middle school, Jill described how her *father's death* had impacted her past and future education. She explained that her father had passed away the summer before her seventh grade year.

Middle school was kind of a bad era for me because my dad died. *I didn't really care about attendance.* It just didn't seem to matter that I didn't go to school. My grades didn't' suffer because *I passed every year.* There were obviously bigger consequences later, because my GPA went down. And now that hinders me when *I want to go to college.*

Traditional—Lived Space: (spatiality)

As we visited about Jill's early years in school, she gradually opened up about her educational experience within the walls of a traditional classroom. Music became an interest for Jill in elementary school and continued on into high school.

> *I was still in band and orchestra, and I even joined choir.* If I did care about school in anyway, it was a just about music. For instance, I would spend three days a week practicing orchestra.

Jill seemed frustrated when discussing her thoughts of the high school classroom.

> The teacher would write stuff on the board, and then she'd make us talk about it. I didn't see the point. I really liked the independent stuff. *I like working by myself. I didn't enjoy it* (high school). I just didn't want to go. I even failed a class.

Traditional—Lived Body: (corporeality)

Throughout the interview, Jill constantly referred back to her father's death. She recounted how her immediate family suddenly consisted of only her mother and older brother. While not making eye contact with me, Jill remembered the emotional turmoil she endured in middle school because of her father's death.

> I do remember *feeling really confused*. I'm sure *I mattered*. I just remember feeling confused, and not really understanding how the world works. I guess I was angry at the world for a while. Yeah, it was really

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rough. I really had a depressed time during middle school. *I was a bit of a depressed preteen.*

As we talked, I could sense Jill's shyness. She affirmed my perception of her personality when she talked about her self-image in school.

To most of my teachers, *I think I was just another student*. Maybe I stood out more in English, because I was good at English. I never disrupted class. I was pretty quiet, and I'm just naturally introverted. *I didn't draw a lot of attention to myself.*

Traditional—Lived Other: (relationality)

While telling her story of educational experiences and relationships in school, Jill emphasized how her lack of attendance impacted others perception of her.

I wasn't viewed as the perfect student anymore in middle school, because I didn't go to school.

When talking about her transition from middle school to high school, Jill emphasized the friendships she had made in orchestra and band. She said that *all of her friends* were "instrument people." However, *she dropped out of band* after her freshman year due to the demands of the band schedule. Describing her relationships at the end of her traditional high experience, Jill indicated she no longer wanted to attend school.

I just didn't like school. My teachers were okay; they were just teachers. But there were *kids there I just didn't like.* I was just done with going to

school. *My mom* seemed *very understanding* about me not wanting to go back to school, and *she thought maybe I could also do the online school.*

Online—Lived Space: (spatiality)

After gaining access to the online courses, Jill said she primarily did her coursework at home. She recounted a typical week of online school.

It took a while for me to get enrolled in an online school. *I felt like I wasn't even in school for about a month***.** *My mom actually did it all for me* up at the school. I could go after 4 o'clock to the high school computer lab and do my work every day. They told me I would have to go up to the lab to take my test as well. *I did all my work at home, and just went up to the lab to take tests.*

Online—Lived Body: (corporeality)

When Jill described her experience of online classes, she indicated how *"easy"* she found the *online environment.* In fact, currently, she is continuing with an online format in higher education.

You just have to know how to read. You have to read all of it too. And you have to do those paper notes they give you. They give you a note sheet, that's like a fill in the blank. If you actually do fill that out, I discovered that was very *helpful.* I didn't do it all the time, but *I got it done just enough to get by.*

Online—Lived Other: (relationality)

Jill indicated she knew only a few students in the online lab from her high school. Overall, Jill said *that interaction with others in the online lab was*

sparse. She compared her high school experience to the online lab by indicating how teachers *helped* online.

> They (online lab) had a teacher there each day. But, each teacher knew a different subject. So *if you wanted help in math*, you had to go on a certain day. That was okay, but I had to make sure *I went on that exact day if I needed help*. If I needed help with math, and the English teacher was there, then *I was out of luck.*

Online—Lived Time: (temporality)

Jill's experience in the online environment ended after one semester. After reviewing her course needs and visiting the district's alternative school, Jill decided to finish her last semester in alternative school. Jill acknowledged the online school *helped her graduate* from high school.

> I probably would have not graduated without the online learning classes. I think people should put money into it. *It helped me avoid my GED*. I just felt that *I would not have made it through* high school if I was forced to go to the actual high school.

Participant Two: Diane

> *Care really means someone who takes time out of themselves, to help you better yourself. They really want things better for you.*

Diane is nineteen and works two jobs while attending classes at the community college. She graduated with her high school class and lives at home with her family. We met at a local McDonalds after she got off work late one

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night, and, although she seemed a bit nervous at first, Diane relaxed as she ate her dinner.

Traditional—Lived Time: (temporality)

Early in the interview, Diane explained that she attended two elementary schools. She stressed to me how *she had a hard time learning to read* from an early age. Additionally, she often found herself falling asleep in class.

> The first school called DHS on my mom, because *they thought I wasn't being taken care of.* We found out later that *I have an autoimmune disorder*. That was what was really making me sleepy. I moved to a different elementary school when I was in fourth grade, and that was my second elementary school. When we moved schools, things got a little better. It seemed like that they were more *willing to help me*.

Traditional—Lived Space: (spatiality)

Diane described her middle school years as uneventful. Although she maintained several friendships, continued to struggle with academics. She described her classes as "seeming pretty normal" until her eighth grade year.

> The second half of my eighth grade year, *I was put in a special class, where I had* to do this kind of online reading program. The program was really easy, and I felt like *I wasn't all that stupid*. *I just needed a little bit of help*.

Traditional—Lived Body: (corporeality)

Diane stressed the emotional and physical struggles she had with reading dating back to her time in elementary school. Diane's responses during the

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interview made it evident she had experienced reading difficulties throughout her education.

Whenever I got a bad grade on a paper, *I felt really stupid*. It really started with the spelling test in elementary school. I remember how sometimes teachers would *draw frowny faces or smiley faces on your paper. I don't want a frowny face on my paper, I know I did bad*. If someone reads me the book, then I can understand it. But if I read it myself, the words get all jumbled in my brain.

Diane gave insights into her personality and highlighted how difficult it was for her to ask questions in front of her peers.

I'm *super shy* until I get to know that person. I'm not that opinionated until I get to know you. And then, when I get to know you, I will tell you what I think. I'm quiet until I get to know you.

Not only did Diane *struggle with reading*, she said she experienced major bouts of sickness during elementary and middle school. In high school, the illnesses increased. During her junior year, she was *diagnosed with Lupus* (an autoimmune disorder), and her attendance in high school decreased.

Traditional—Lived Other: (relationality)

During the interview, Diane detailed descriptions of interactions she had with her teachers in the traditional school experience. She talked of her *discontent* when she looked around the room at others who did well in school.

Some of my teachers *I don't think cared about me*. Like in first grade I was horrible on spelling test. So instead of 'it's okay you can try again

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later'…*they would just be like too bad*. The kids that did well on their

spelling test would get a reward. *I never got a reward. I always felt*

really sad. I think kids should get a reward that they did good, but *it's so*

hard if you never do good. It's not because I didn't want to do good on

my spelling test because my mother would make me study every single

night. I would repeat my spelling words over and over, and *I just*

couldn't do it.

Our discussion of others in school turned to teachers whom *she viewed*

*as caring about her in schoo*l. She mentioned her fourth and fifth grade teachers,

who stayed after school with her, and also her seventh grade teacher.

I could tell they really cared about me. They would take time to explain

things that I didn't get. They waited until I could get it. Sometimes they

would stay each day after school and *help* me.

Before her senior year, *Diane was diagnosed with Lupus,* an autoimmune

disease where the body's immune system becomes hyperactive and attacks

normal, healthy tissue. She explained how *her mother suggested* she try online

school and how she went to the high school to "*set up everything for me*."

Online—Lived Space: (spatiality)

Diane's account of how she dealt with the online classroom provided

insights into her online-lived space. She said she figured out *how to help herself*

pass the online quizzes.

I would do the classes at home and then I had to put in so many hours a

week in the lab. *I actually would've rather gone into a regular*

classroom. I didn't see any point in the lab. I thought that that

requirement was kind of obnoxious. To be honest, it's *super easy to*

cheat off of (online software). You could basically log in to the

classroom in one place, and then login again somewhere else. So you

could have the quiz in front of you, and then you could look up the

answers on the other screen. It was kind of like an open textbook

concept.

Online—Lived Body: (corporeality)

Her explanation of working online also led to a discussion of her

frustration with the ambiguity in the online environment.

It's all reading online, and, since I have a hard time comprehending stuff

that I read, then reading it online was probably not a good idea. *You*

really have to dedicate yourself to getting on and doing your work. It

takes about two hours a day.

It wasn't a caring environment, but *I didn't expect it to be either.* It's not

that I wanted to ask questions a lot in the online class, I just didn't know

who was grading my stuff. So if I got something wrong, I just felt like *I*

couldn't ask anybody how to do it right. I never got to understand who

was looking at my work.

Online—Lived Other: (relationality)

Diane stressed the importance of *wanting help* even though she expected

she was going to be doing *independent work*.

No one would really talk to you, the lab people who were there were kind of *rude* as well. But I wasn't expecting the same kind of environment that I get in a regular school. *I wasn't expecting too much interaction.* But if I'm doing something online, and I had a question, I wish there had been *someone there to answer my questions*.

Online—Lived Time: (temporality)

Diane wrapped up her experience with online learning and her perceptions of care by explaining that, although she completed two of her three classes, she struggled with the English class. A *school counselor advised her* she could finish the English course requirement in a two-week intense online lab environment. She commented on how she was given options to graduate and was able to succeed online.

> They enrolled me in the Day lab. It was same teacher every day. She was *super nice*. If she didn't know the answer to something, she *would try to look at or find some other way to help me*. She was so *helpful* to me.
>
> I also don't know how I would've graduated if I didn't have online as an option. I really just started to *hang out more at home* when I was in high school. The second time I took the English class online with the same lab teacher for two hours a day, I really think that was a *caring environment. Having a teacher there, and the same teacher, made all the difference.*

Participant Three: Kory

> *In general, I think it means a support system. Just having people be there for you. That shows that they care to me.*

As Kory drank her Starbucks coffee, she told me she had recently moved out of her childhood home and into her own place, sharing the space with a couple of roommates. She indicated she was just "figuring out what to do" after quitting her job. Kory is nineteen years old and was able to graduate with her high school class. She spoke freely about her educational experience.

Traditional—Lived Time: (temporality)

Kory detailed the events of her childhood after her parents divorced, and she was living with her mother and brother. She described her early elementary years as very "active."

I remember all the activities they used to have it elementary school. They had Super Kids Day, and they would have us run to raise money for our school. In fourth and fifth grade, I was in music group in school, kind of like an honor choir. That was a lot of fun for me. *I always felt included.*

Kory's voice lowered when she started talking about her fifth grade school year. That was the year *her mother died.* Her dad moved back into the home to take care of her and her brother. She emphasized that her mother had been her "best friend," and her *mother's passing caused her to start to "struggle" in her life.*

Traditional—Lived Space: (spatiality)

Kory admitted that the whole family began to go to counseling to deal with the *adjustment of death and a new family dynamic.*

My parents had divorced before I could remember. My mom was the one who took care of us, even though my parents shared custody. When my mom passed away, my dad moved in our house so he could take care of us. He moved into her room, and even moved the furniture around. He continued to raise us. *It was a big change*. I really struggled with it.

She indicated that life became hard, but she felt "safe" returning to her elementary school.

The first memory, that *I felt cared about*, was my fifth grade year when

my mom died. I missed a little of school that year. When I came back,

everyone was so nice to me. And *they kept asking me how I was doing

and checking on me*. I had a hard time staying focused. *But my teachers

worked with me, and the counselor saw about me.*

Traditional—Lived Body: (corporeality)

Kory said her mother's death caused an impact in middle school where

things were "kind of a blur for me."

Grades were really easy for me. I was in the gifted and talented in

elementary school. I was always really good at math. I always got really

good grades up till eighth grade year…that is when things started to get

rocky. In eighth grade, I started to develop *depression*. I started to go to a

therapist. I don't think I realized that I was actually depressed. But I

started to struggle with some self-harm issues.

I was really active in a lot of stuff like Girl Scouts, and I just started

losing interest in stuff. I stopped going to school activities. I remember

feeling really tired and *not motivated*.

Her depression continued in high school, and, during her freshman year,

she suffered her first *anxiety attack.* She spoke in softer tones as she recounted

what happened when one of her best friends committed suicide in her

sophomore year.

I feel like my depression just kept getting worse. Then, my sophomore

year, one of my best friends, he was older, shot himself. That *incident*

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really impacted me. I'm still struggling with this. He was the *kind of*

friend that was always there for you.

As we discussed the impact of her friend's suicide, Kory revealed a time she tried taking her own life when she was a junior.

I was put in a children's hospital for ten days and I missed quite a bit of

school. I missed finals week. I was exempted from my finals for that

though. It seemed the *school system understood during that time. I tried*

to continue on and go to school dealing with my stuff.

Traditional—Lived Other: (relationality)

Kory described her eighth grade teacher as someone who *showed*

concern towards her.

My English teacher *was always there* for me. Most of the time during my

recess time, I would go to her class. I formed a *great bond with her*. She

really *made me feel like that she cared about me.*

After her best friend's suicide, Kory suffered frequent anxiety attacks.

Her counselor put her on a *504 plan* (American Disabilities Act), giving her

accommodations for schoolwork and allowing her to leave her the classroom for

breaks.

She (school counselor) always *made herself available to me and I know*

she really cared about me.

Kory explained how she *built a relationship* with her high school French

teacher.

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When I met my French teacher, we didn't get along at first. I got to go on

the French club trip to France. I got to know her really well, and she

started to be there for me. My French teacher actually came to see me in

the hospital (suicide attempt).

While battling depression and the emotionality of death, Kory struggled

with other relationships in high school.

There were upper classmen in my class that were not nice. The teacher

would get on to me for being noisy when it was actually those students. I

would ask her, 'who am I talking to? *I don't know anyone.'* My friend

told me that the one of my teachers pulled her aside three days into class,

and told her that he didn't think she should be friends with me. He said

he had compared our transcripts, and *I was going to be a bad influence*

on her. So, for the rest of the semester, *I felt very targeted* taking this

class.

Kory shared with me that one of the reasons she made the decision to

move to the online classroom was that she had no friends.

I suddenly realized that the people I was hanging out with were very

judgmental of others. I just refused to put up with that. My friend

committed suicide for things like that. I started class (senior year), but it

just seemed like *no one would talk to me*. I felt kind of like an *outcast*.

Not by my teachers, but by my peers. I just *wasn't connecting with*

anyone. I was real *lonely* at school.

During the fall semester of her senior year school, a trigger for her anxiety and depression was simply going to school, so she *gradually stopped going to school*. She said her *school counselor suggested* she explore the possibility of enrolling in online school in order to graduate.

Online—Lived Space: (spatiality)

Kory described her enrollment process in the online classroom. Since she needed one and half credits to graduate with her class, she enrolled in Art Appreciation and English. However, in an effort to help her graduate on time, Kory said her *school counselor helped her* gain credit for the elective by documenting work with her French teacher. She noted she only had two months before graduation when she enrolled online. She described her experience doing her work in the online resource lab.

> *There weren't a whole lot of people up there* when I would go. It was really *quiet in there*. The teacher in there was *more like a monitor and not a teacher*. I always felt a lot closer and *well connected than in an actual classroom*. The online class was the best option for me at the time, and I could do it mostly at home. Online relieved a lot of stress for me. You don't have a lot of people talking and being noisy. People just do their thing.

Online—Lived Body: (corporeality)

When reflecting upon her experience of completing the online English course, Kory mentioned her inner voice.

I usually did pretty good on assignments. I'm kind of a perfectionist.

That is one reason why it is hard to find my motivation. It can be

exhausting when I need to start something, because I would want it to be

perfect. I didn't really start to working on the program until about three

weeks before graduation. I procrastinated with it. Once *I applied myself,*

I got it done. But it was hard to get started and motivated. It wasn't too

stressful when I was doing it.

Online—Lived Other: (relationality)

Kory said relationships in the online classroom setting did not exist.

However, she was able *to keep in touch with her school counselor and French*

teacher. Recounting her experience of the online lab, Kory's shared her thoughts

about the importance of care and help in online learning.

I think it (care) does need to be there. For instance, I don't know who the

person was in the room where you go to the lab. I never understood if

she was a teacher or a monitor. I always felt *she was impatient with me*.

Anytime I wanted to ask her something, she always just shrugged her

shoulders and *seemed irritated that I was asking a question.* It seemed

like *I was a bother*. That was a little frustrating. Whenever you needed to

take the test, you had to ask the teacher to unlock the test. I would have

to *remind her of my name a couple of times.*

I think *it would be useful to have a chat room to ask questions*. I know

there is online schools where you can send messages if you have

question. *It would have been nice to have that kind of relationship.*

Online—Lived Time: (temporality)

Kory seemed happy when she talked about finishing high school and completing her online English course. She said she considered getting her GED before the online school option.

> I didn't think I was going to be able to graduate because I missed so much school. And once they put me in online school, *I did have to apply myself* and *work towards the goal of graduating.* I was able to graduate and that was fantastic. *It probably had to a lot with my motivation.*
>
> I finally felt like I was applying myself to get something done. This was probably the first time I had applied myself to something and it was pretty rewarding experience to do that. I felt that if *I couldn't walk and graduate with my class, my self-esteem would have taken a nosedive. I did it for myself.* I think *I'm a survivor.* I get that from my mom.

Participant Four: Michelle

> *Those people who would go the extra mile. They would answer your questions and try to help you out.*

I met with Michelle, who was *seven months pregnant,* in the conference room at the local Vo-Tech. Although she had successfully completed online courses the spring semester of her junior year, she explained that she had not yet completed high school. However, she was considering taking her GED, and she also expressed a desire to obtain her Vo-Tech certificate in graphic design.

Traditional—Lived Time: (temporality)

Michelle was cheerful as she told me about her years in elementary school. She said her early school years were mobile because her mother became *a single working mother* and had to change jobs often as she tried to provide for the family.

> I moved around a lot in elementary school. *My parents got divorced when I was six,* and we had a *hard time financially*. *I went to four different elementary schools*. My mom got remarried when I was ten, and I ended up staying in the same school my 4th and 5th grade year. I seemed to start having a *harder time* then.

Traditional—Lived Space: (spatiality)

Michelle blamed her "harder time" on the environment in her new school. She said she was frustrated as she tried to do her school work in her fifth grade classroom.

> The fifth grade teacher *would be really on my case*. Then, my mom would come up to school concerned, and the teacher would act like there was nothing wrong. She (fifth grade teacher) would be very back and forth. I did not like her.

She recounted her struggles in math and shared that her life in school was always very "confusing" as to *where she belonged in the placement of classes*.

> Sometimes, *I struggled in math*. No matter what teacher I had, math was hard. For some reason in sixth grade, they put me in an advanced class. I

didn't need to be in that class and I didn't do very well. So seventh grade year, they put me in regular math. *I just needed a slower pace*.

Traditional—Lived Body: (corporeality)

Michelle had a noticeable nervous laugh, and, during the interview, we talked about her personality. She described herself as *an introvert and quite shy*. She mentioned she had very few friends in middle school.

I liked middle school for the most part, but *nothing was very personable*. I *didn't have a ton of friends*. But I did *like my teachers in sixth grade*. There were a couple of teachers that were funny *and helpful*.

Michelle's smile disappeared when she talked about her transition to high school. She suggested that the work became harder *as she grew less interested in school.*

I had passing grades my freshmen year, but my sophomore year, I got more distracted. *I started to go to school less and less my junior year.*

Michelle felt "pressure" in high school. She began having *anxiety when she attended high school*.

I felt the pressure from other people. Other people being smarter than you or there was always the drama among your friends. I just didn't feel like I was getting anything from my classes. *I didn't feel like I was learning.*

Traditional—Lived Other: (relationality)

Michelle explained *her dislike of high school* and her preferred learning style.

You know, I really like smaller groups. I like a smaller environment. I feel like I learn better that way, and I can focus on stuff when there is a small group of people.

She expressed the disappointment she felt when she actually began attending high school.

I was happy to start high school. When I got to high school though, I didn't really like it. I hated how crowded it was, and it seemed like it changed a lot. It was such a big place. *I started out with only a few friends* anyway, and those friends would know other people and *things just started to drift away.*

Michelle recalled asking her parents and her high school counselor if she could try online classes the second semester of her junior year. She said she wanted to use the online school *to graduate early; however, talking with her school counselor became a difficult experience.*

She told me that she didn't recommend this for me. She said most people don't pass those courses. She tried her hardest to talk me out of it. *I felt like she didn't care about what I wanted and didn't know anything about me. She acted like she didn't care about what I had to say.* I just kept telling her that I wanted to do it. She finally let me talk to the coordinator.

Online—Lived Space: (spatiality)

Michelle's journey of education turned to her online experience. Expressing frustration, she explained she did not start her online classes immediately.

> They said it would only take two weeks max to get enrolled, but it took almost four weeks. *No one called me or check on me*. They told me that I didn't have to attend classes. It was like '*hey, did you forget about me*?' I feel like a lot of the school stuff they do is unorganized. Eventually, *my mom called someone* to tell them I hadn't been enrolled, and they sent me something like the next day.

Online—Lived Body: (corporeality)

Michelle reflected on her first days in the online environment and going to the lab classroom. She admitted she had a "love/hate" relationship with the online classroom and it did not meet her expectations with the amount of waiting it took "*getting in*" and being "*locked out*."

> I was really happy to get to do online. I had wanted to do it for years. I just didn't want to be in high school anymore. *I didn't want to go that building*. I thought online would *help me get freedom and be able to handle school*. When I started doing online, I thought it was kind of boring. *It was boring being all by yourself.* It is very different from a classroom. If you talk in the lab, somebody will definitely tell you to stop and get to work. My anxiety did go away and I didn't feel anxious in that class.

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Online—Lived Other: (relationality)

Michelle stated she went to the lab and completed the requirements of taking tests and working on her class. She said she did not meet other students in the online lab, but she did talk to the day lab teacher who monitored the lab.

> There was a lady, but she was not like a teacher. She was just a monitor and she couldn't really help you. I think she got paid. She really didn't know about the subjects. She would clarify stuff, and sometimes that would help, but *usually didn't help*. Even though she couldn't help, I did build a relationship with her. *She was just kind of funny*.

> It definitely helped me that I liked somebody in that situation. *I did connect with that person*. I didn't always talk to her, but it was *nice to have someone that I did get along with and knew who I was.*

> In the online classroom, it's all up you to understand and do the work by yourself. *There is definitely not a social aspect in online*. You can't talk a lot. *I wanted to get it done.* I was pretty done with high school in my mind and I wanted out.

> Sometimes it *is more difficult though to get help in an online classroom* if you need it than in a regular classroom. If you want to ask questions, *it is difficult to find answers in the online classroom*. Every lab time doesn't have the same person in it, and *it's hard to build a relationship with people.*

Online—Lived Time: (temporality)

After Michelle completed one semester of online courses, she returned in the fall, expecting to enroll for her senior year in online classes. However, after finding out she had a new high school counselor, she also discovered she had been enrolled in traditional high school classes, and not online classes.

I went to see my counselor, and I asked to be enrolled online. She told me that some of the online classes were already filled. I was having a lot of problems with friends and stuff. It was like the stuff where your friends start turning against you. It was like middle school drama. I just stop going to class. *I did not want to go to school.*

I went in and talked to my new counselor, and explained to her that I was having all this anxiety. I told her that I didn't think I was going to pass that year because *I couldn't make myself go to the class.* She sent me to the vice principal to talk to about it. He told me that I would have to a medical reason and a doctor's note. Basically, *it seemed really confusing* why they took me out of online to begin with, and it was such an *overwhelming process to get me back into online.* I was really upset about it.

A couple of months into my senior year, I found out that I was pregnant. I got really confused because I didn't know what to do about school. They had already told me that I couldn't do online, but I knew that I was going to need some more income. I ended up dropping out and I'm going to take my GED. *I just didn't know what else to do.*

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Participant Five: Betty

> *I think care means someone who will stay by your side through thick and*
>
> *thin. For me, it also means someone I can go to after I self-injure.*

Betty met me for the interview in the conference room at the vocational technology school where she is taking accounting courses. She had graduated with her high school class after completing online coursework. Before the interview began, she told me she often has panic attacks.

Traditional—Lived Time: (temporality)

Betty emphasized that *she was able to read at an early age*.

> I went to the same elementary school all my life. I did fairly well in
>
> school. I know I was reading before the first grade. Math and science
>
> came easy because I was interested in it. I made fairly good grades. *I was*
>
> *in the gifted and talented program in school.*

Although she appeared *quite shy*, Betty openly discussed her first panic attack and needing to see a counselor during seventh grade. In addition, Betty revealed several emotional struggles during her educational journey.

> My grades were starting to slip. *I started to get feelings of panic* more
>
> and it would set in. I started suffering panic attacks around seventh
>
> grade, and then my mom figured out *I was doing self-injury*. By tenth
>
> grade, things got worse. I started to not care about anything, and *I*
>
> *attempted suicide* in tenth grade. After that, I got diagnosed with
>
> depression.

Traditional—Lived Space: (spatiality)

When Betty talked about her life in elementary school, she said that *school was a lonely place* and she did not have many friends in the classroom or in the neighborhood. She explained how her school life took a definite turn for the worse in eighth grade. *She was suspended* for throwing rocks. A month later, *several girls "jumped" Betty after school.*

> I really had some issues in middle school. I got grades that were all over the place …you know A's, B's and C's. *I had two friends and they moved away after seventh grade*. I felt that I had to start over in eighth grade, and it just didn't work out well. *Eighth grade year was pretty lonely*. I would go home after school and just sit around and do homework. I took piano and it was an outlet for me.

Traditional—Lived Body: (corporeality)

Talking about her emotional reactions, she mentioned she was adopted and constantly felt "*a feeling of rejection.*" It was evident, as her story unfolded, that Betty's struggles of depression and panic followed her to high school. Beginning her senior year, her panic attacks became unbearable.

> My panic attacks got so bad that I could not sit through a class without having one. That was the second week of school. I would ask to go to the bathroom and I would call my mom and ask her to come get me.

Traditional—Lived Other: (relationality)

I asked Betty if she had any support in high school. She laughed and said, "My parents and grandma have always supported me *when I feel rejected*."

She elaborated by expressing she was very "*lonely with no support.*" She told of her experience with her high school counselor.

> *I didn't have teachers or counselors that cared about me.* I hated my high school counselor. I expect a counselor to be supportive and be there for you. One day, I went into her office and told her that I had 'self-injured', and she yelled at me and told me not to do that anymore. I really thought that was not how a counselor should act. *She was always too busy to talk to me and sent me away. I just felt like she never wanted to talk to me.* I did not have a good relationship with her.

She added her mother sought out another high school counselor because her panic attacks became more frequent.

> They offered me the online class as an option. They said it would be like being in a classroom without all the people. They said I could go at my own pace. It would be really helpful with my depression, because some days with depression, you don't want to do anything. I was hoping that I could finish high school in online classes.

Online—Lived Space: (spatiality)

Transitioning her story to the online experience, Betty said the school enrolled her in one online class for a thirty-day trial period. *She quickly became successful in the class,* and her trial period was cut short. Then, she was allowed to enroll in two other classes. She described her experience of going to the lab.

> You would have to go up to school four days a week. It was in a separate lab though, and only about 12 online students would be in there. I had to

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go the lab to take tests. I get that, because they don't want you to cheat. But, *my dad literally stayed up with me to help me understand* my hard courses.

Online—Lived Body: (corporeality)

She described her schedule while taking online school. She admitted she would sleep a little late and do housework before beginning classes. The tone of her voice was irritated when she talked about having to drive to the online lab at the high school.

I still had my panic attacks in the lab. *I hated going to that school.* I think *I had panic attacks* still because of all *the fear at being in that school.* I had a lot of trauma in high school and I would get those feelings again. *I just wanted to get done and get my diploma.*

Online—Lived Other: (relationality)

Betty explained there was *limited help* in the lab classroom. During the day, there was a monitoring teacher with only specific course teachers at night to help with subjects. According to Betty, *she relied heavily on her father to help her* with harder courses.

When I only had three or more classes to complete, my depression really got bad. I didn't want to do anything. I just told myself that I wouldn't finish and I would just go to summer school. But *my dad was not going to let that happen.* He would come home from work, and sit with me by the computer and work with me to get it done. Sometimes *he would stay up with me until one in the morning and would help me study.*

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Online—Lived Time: (temporality)

When she concluded her story, she proudly said she had graduated and had never failed any of her classes. Additionally, she noted *she had never wanted to get her GED*.

> I took online classes because that was the *only way I was going to be able to graduate*. I couldn't sit through a high school class. *A high school diploma was a big deal to me. I still look back at my diploma and think, "wow, I was able to make it."*

Participant Six: Christy

> *You know, care is when someone has respect for you, so you have respect for them. You can go to them about anything and they will listen and probably try to help you. You feel that you can ask questions if you need to and it just feels more open.*

Christy is 19 years old and has successfully taken online school for three semesters. She is behind her graduating class, but *she plans to finish high school soon* and would like to attend college while continuing to help her family. We met at a local school, and, as I went over several aspects of the interview with her, she said she really wanted "to help others out with this online school stuff."

Traditional—Lived Time: (temporality)

Christy explained that her *parents divorced before her ninth grade year*. After the divorce, her mother worked part-time, but she also went back to school. During the interview, Christy shared with me *she was raped* while attending a party during her sophomore year.

I went to a party with this friend and I was raped. I tried to keep going to

school like nothing happened. It was awful. I had to go to the police

station, and I filed charges and went through a trial.

Of course, I didn't talk about it, but people started to find out. One day

second semester (high school), I'm sitting in English class, and this girl

just turned around and asked me if I had been raped? I was in shock and

couldn't believe that you would ask someone that, and so I ran to the

teacher and said "I need to leave, I need to go to the office." My

principal knew about what had happened to me. I ran to her office, and

told her that I needed to go home, and she let me. *I just didn't come back*

to school after that. I couldn't.

Currently, she does not have a job. She told me she spends her time helping her

mother take care of *her teenage autistic brother* while her mother works and

attends school.

Traditional—Lived Space: (spatiality)

She reflected on her educational journey. She said she felt teachers from

elementary and middle school *cared for her*, and she believed her teachers

"made sure that I understood everything. She said, "*Teachers act like they want*

to help you." She admitted she did not have to work hard in school.

Learning was easy for me and I got good grades. I mean, I learn to read

when I was four. In third grade, I remember these Multiplication Pizza

Tables and I was the first to finish.

After her parents' divorce in the summer of her freshmen year, Christy said that high school became difficult for her. She made the freshmen high school cheerleading squad. She noted the "girls in high school are different, and they *made me feel out of place*."

Traditional—Lived Body: (corporeality)

Christy's responses took on a sad note when she told me about the events of her freshmen year and being a cheerleader.

They were really mean to me. They would make me feel like I didn't have any friends. I did not actually have a good freshmen year. *I just didn't feel like I belonged. I quit cheerleading. I didn't have any friends towards the end of my freshmen year.* In fact, I started eating lunch every day in one of my teacher's rooms. She was a young teacher and you know, sometimes *you just connect with teachers.* I started to tell her about the cheerleader problems. *She would listen.*

She conveyed that her sophomore year started positive because she had gained some friends over the summer. However, this soon changed after the trauma of her rape, and she was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

I started counseling, and *I was diagnosed with PTSD.* I didn't really want people to know my circumstances. I didn't tell my teachers. I wasn't really into school because I couldn't focus. *School has always been really important to me*. I was frustrated because I couldn't do my work at school. *I was disappointed in myself.*

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Christy's high school principal told her she qualified for homebound tutoring to finish her sophomore year, since she had PTSD and couldn't attend school.

> I keep telling myself that I would be okay and different once the homebound tutors would start. Then, I was disappointed because homebound services did not start right away. That was so frustrating. I got anxious and mad. I thought I would not finish my courses, and I felt like a failure. *I felt no one at the school was taking my situation seriously. I really felt like no one cared.*

Traditional—Lived Other: (relationality)

She sounded frustrated when I asked her about her academics in high school.

> *I was in advanced classes*. My Geometry teacher was the worse. He would get up and teach a lesson, and then he would go play games on his computer. He would give us our homework assignment and say "work on it." He would not control his class. I felt that like he wasn't into it. I mean I would go up and ask a question, and he would just explain it like the lesson and it would just be a half way attempt.

She related how her high school principal was crucial to her assistance and keeping her secret of being raped.

> She was really nice about things. I would call her and tell her that I couldn't get out of bed and she would excuse my absence. *She was caring and understanding about my situation.*

Because they didn't know her secret, Christy said many teachers *judged her by her lack of work and coming to school.*

> They treated me like the other students who slacked off. I mean they were rude, and they said, 'Your grades are slipping and you need to do your work'. They would tell me that I was not to going to pass and they would be rude if I didn't have my homework.

When she returned to high school for her junior year, however, she still had difficulty. Christy confessed she did not look forward to the year, but *she wanted to graduate.* She continued to build relationships with her principal and her chemistry teacher.

> My principal still cared about me. She was always really sweet and *she would check on me*. My Chemistry teacher was really nice. *I was good at chemistry*. I finished my work really early because I got it, and she would have me help other students.

Math was still a difficult subject for her, and she claimed her math teacher was not helpful.

> She would do the lesson, and then *instead of helping other students, she would ask this one student to go around and help people.* That was fine, but this student did not really like people I think. No one would really want to approach that student, and he would never go around the room either. When you would go up to that teacher's desk and bypass that kid, she would tell you to ask the student she said could help everyone. I hated that. It's not that student's job to help me. I eventually stopped

going to that class, because I didn't see the point. That teacher was not doing her job. I failed the math class.

Starting her senior year, Christy's younger brother became more violent and her ability to take care of him became difficult. She explained that she went to her counselor and tried to get help for her situations. The high school counselor offered her online school.

My mother works early in the morning, and my brother would not get up to come to school. He would fight with me that he didn't want to get out of bed. He is really much bigger than me, and I couldn't fight with him. I would have to wait until almost noon when I could get him to go to school. So I started to lose credit my first 3 hours. I would call the school and let them know what he was doing, and they would say it was not an excused absence. I would try to tell them that I couldn't leave my brother alone. *I don't think anybody cared. They really didn't care that I was having a hard time with something.* They were actually kind of snotty when I called.

Online—Lived Space: (spatiality)

Christy's journey with the online school began when her counselor handed her the paperwork to begin the process of getting enrolled.

It was like a business transaction. She didn't explain much and seemed very neutral about the whole thing. Looking back, she really needed to go over my transcript with me. I left thinking I was almost done, and I didn't know how far behind I really was at that time.

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She further explained her initial experience with a story of being enrolled in the wrong class.

> I was half way done with my Algebra 2 class, and I got an email that I was enrolled in the wrong class. I was in the wrong semester. I argued and the coordinator told me that I should have said something. *I did not understand how I was supposed to know that I was in the wrong class.*

Online—Lived Body: (corporeality)

When Christy told about being in the online classroom, she commented on the *ease of learning with the software program*. She also mentioned her frustration with teachers in the traditional classroom.

> I actually like the software program. I feel like I do learn a lot more. It might be how my brain works. I think I can work it out and I like to learn on my own. The coordinator is now letting me take three classes. *I get A's in the classes*.

> I prefer online settings because it's quieter than high school. And *I can go at my own pace*. The system is frustrating though. I would make sure there was someone who could really guide a way for you. *You just feel lost.*

Online—Lived Other: (relationality)

Christy acknowledged that she faithfully attends the online lab resource room, but *she is unhappy with the help* she receives in the lab environment.

> I like going to the lab, but the teachers are not that great. The person in the math lab does not help me at all. I mean the *people there don't seem*

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to care. They treat you like you are in a dropout program. I mean I email people and I just don't get help from people. The lab teachers rotate, so if you find a teacher you like; you have to go on a night when they are there.

I would find out that I need a class to graduate, and then the coordinator would tell that they didn't have a teacher for that class, and then they would say, "I don't know what to tell you." *No one cared and didn't try to help me.*

Near the end of her senior year, she said that the counselor gave her news that she would not graduate with her senior class.

I am so embarrassed and upset that I didn't get to graduate with my class. I knew that people that were in school with me would know that I didn't graduate, and my family would know. *My mom told me that it didn't matter when, it just mattered that I did.* It has almost taken me a whole year to graduate after my original class graduated. The problem is only being able to take two classes, and *no one really went over with me what credits I needed.* I would get these surprises that I wasn't done, and it would be upsetting. *It just seems no one mapped out a plan.*

Online—Lived Time: (temporality)

The effects of not graduating with her class have not swayed Christy in her push to graduate. She told me she is still passing her classes and plans to finish one year later than her senior year.

I mean they tried to get me to enroll in alternative school. *I did not want that because I wanted my high school diploma to have the name of my high school on it*. When you go to the alternative school, they just put the school district name on the diploma. I wanted my diploma to say my high school name. It *will just look better*. I don't want people to think I just got my GED. What gets to me is that when I started going to high school, my goal was to actually graduate early. And now, I am a year late.

Participant Seven: Amy

It means that people worry about how you are, and wonder how you are doing.

Amy has been out of school for almost year and graduated a semester early by completing online courses. She is currently enrolled in higher education online. When she arrived at my school for our interview, her husband and toddler were with her, but, while Amy and I talked, he took the child to a nearby playground.

Traditional—Lived Time: (temporality)

She seemed eager to talk about her educational experiences when we sat down in the conference room of my school. I commented on her daughter's likeness to her husband. She said she became *pregnant the summer before her senior year of high school.* She needed to graduate early before the birth of her baby.

I was really scared once I learned that I was pregnant. That's why I got

involved in online classes. I talked to the counselor about my situation

and she told me that I could take the extra classes online and graduate

before I would have my baby.

My parents were supportive once they got over the initial shock. We all

just decided we were going to move on and deal with it. My *boyfriend*

and I decided we were going to get married before I had the baby.

Traditional—Lived Space: (spatiality)

Amy noted she grew up with eight brothers and sisters and was in the

middle of the birth order. All her siblings attended the same elementary school,

where "everyone knew everybody's name." She said her life was full of

activities, such as horseback riding, Girl Scouts, and swimming. She was also

identified for the *gifted and talented* program. When she entered middle school,

her mother decided to homeschool her for one semester.

In seventh grade, I actually started homeschooling with my mom. I had

so many outside activities and our family was really busy. My mom

decided it would be best if she tried homeschooling with us. It didn't

work out because I missed seeing my friends. I went back to public

school the spring semester of my seventh grade year. It was hard coming

back to school because I was behind academically. Most of the teachers

were helpful to me. My math teacher was not helpful. *I mean I was*

behind and he just didn't really put an effort to help me.

Traditional—Lived Body: (corporeality)

She recalled being "ready for middle school to be over," because she was looking forward to the freedom of high school. Once in high school, she said she became more of an "extrovert" in school activities. She reflected on her high school life with enthusiasm.

> *I do like to be with people*. I got really involved in FFA (Future Farmers of America). *I got really involved in that group.* I really liked both of the teachers, and I met a group of friends as well. I got to be an officer in FFA. I spent a lot of time riding horses and showing pigs.

While telling her story, Amy implied that learning came easy for her in the subjects of English and writing. Math was her least favorite subject. Amy admitted she is "*shy and quiet*" in the classroom and does not ask a lot of questions. Her junior year, *she was put in AP classes* and was on the "*advanced track" with her high school credits*.

> *I was really happy in school up till when I got pregnant*. Then I got very stressed out. It was a hard time for me.

Traditional—Lived Other: (relationality)

She continued her educational story by talking about her FFA sponsors and other high school teachers.

> My FFA teachers were really caring. *They would check on our grades and find out how we were doing.* They took time to help us get ready for competitions. They would let us come in during lunch and help with our projects.

Once she found out she was pregnant, *Amy sought out her high school counselor* prior to enrolling in her senior year of high school.

> *My mom and my boyfriend* went to the counselor's office. *My school counselor was really caring.* I mean she took care of everything to make sure that I would graduate

> I did feel uncared for by a lot of my friends. *They stopped talking to me once I became pregnant.* That was pretty hurtful.

Online—Lived Space: (spatiality)

When she enrolled in online courses for her fall semester of senior year, Amy *took seven hours of traditional classes while also taking four online classes.* Additionally, she worked part-time at a local pizza parlor during her pregnancy. She looked back at her schedule during that time.

> I took classes all day, and then I went home at night and took four extra classes. It was weird because I was enrolled in English 1 during the day, and then I was taking English 2 at night.

> I actually could go to the online lab during my third hour, and then sometimes I could work on it during other classes if we weren't doing anything. And at night, *I would go to the night lab if I was falling behind or needed help.* I took my tests mainly during the day during third hour. You have to take really good notes. It was a lot of memorizing facts than regular classes. *You had to be good at memorizing things.*

Online—Lived Body: (corporeality)

As she continued to reflect on taking numerous classes to graduate early, she expressed her feelings toward that time of her life, and she noted a surprise as she ended her time with online courses.

It was a lot of stress. Not to mention that I was working part time to make money as well. I wanted to be home with my baby when it was born, and *I didn't want to have to go back to regular high school. I would work really hard at night after I got home from work.*

I did those online classes in like three months, and I was just going to concrete on finishing the classes that I had to attend. But then, my counselor told me that she miscounted and I did have to take one more online class. *I wanted to quit because it was going to be such a rush to finish. But I just did it. It was very hard though and I needed my family and my counselor to motivate me.*

Online—Lived Other: (relationality)

Discussing her online experience, Amy pointed out she was enrolled in English 1 and English 2 at the same time. Her English 1 teachers assisted her with the English 2 class.

We had to read *Frankenstein* online. I didn't have that book, and online doesn't supply you with the books, so *my English teacher let me borrow a copy from class. She helped me find all the books when I needed them, and she would answer questions.*

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Other than her English 1 teacher, she emphasized that communication with teachers was difficult and individualized help was sparse in the online lab.

It was hard to get in touch with teachers if you needed help. During the day lab, it is just a person who watches the lab. She is not an expert in the classes that are being taught. There is a lot of waiting in the online classroom. *It was just harder to get assistance in online.*

Online—Lived Time: (temporality)

Near the end of our interview, Amy's husband and little girl tapped at the door. She gave them a hand signal and began to end our time together talking about her online experience.

When I actually realized I was going to graduate on time and I did it…*then I got happy again.* I'm actually taking online college community courses. I want to set a good example for my child.

Aggregate Analysis of Existential Lifeworlds

The four existentials of time, space, body and relation may be distinguished in the lived experience, but they cannot be separated (van Manen, 1990). In this final section, the fundamental structures of the lifeworld serve as guides for reflection to understand the participant's perception of care and their educational journey towards online course credit. "Themes are not generalizations but are, metaphorically speaking, more like knots in the webs of our experiences around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful whole" (van Manen, 1990, p. 90).

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Temporality (lived time)

Our temporal way of being in the world involves the dimensions of past, present and future (van Manen, 1990). When the participants were asked to trace their educational journey and their perception of care, all of the participants noted specific life crisis or difficulties. Life events and emotional complications, such as parental death, divorce, attempted suicide, learning difficulties, family responsibilities and pregnancy, were experienced by the participants during their educational years. These events *impacted the participants' existence in time*.

Within the context of time, the participants' past can change the interpretation of who they are as compared to what they once were. More importantly, temporality is forever shifting and the participants' lived experience will forever change (van Manen, 1990). In their evolving story, each participant openly discussed not only the past influencing their present and future, but also the struggles associated with the pressures of lived time.

Spatiality (lived space)

Each of the participants gave detailed and varied responses concerning the spaces of their educational past. The felt space around us largely impacts how we experience the day-to-day affairs of life (van Manen, 1990). The participants were connected by descriptions of their feelings in both the traditional and online settings. Several participants felt a "*sense of belonging*" in traditional school; however some did not. All participants shared "*feelings of isolation*" within the traditional and online environment. As each participant shared their struggle with lived time, they become connected with the different

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ways they sought alternatives from the spatiality of the traditional classroom. Online learning was a resource to avoid the requirements of their existing lived space. The online lived space provided a sense of hope and *motivation to overcome* the struggles of their temporality.

Corporeality (lived body)

As each participant reflected on the influence of space in their educational journey, they also expressed awareness of the influence of their mind, body and spirit. To be bodily present in the world will affect the way he/she interprets the world (van Manen, 1990, 1997). The seven women participants characterized their perceptions of caring relationships as "*unconditional positive regard*" toward them and their circumstances. These relationships included teachers, counselors, and parents; however, these relationships were exceptions to the participants' norm. The feeling of "*being judged*" was detailed with each participant's story regarding her experience in the traditional classroom; however, some participants also expressed a *sense of judgment* regarding their circumstances in the online environment as well.

Relationality (lived relation)

Within relationality, van Manen (1990) suggests there is a dimension of influence of others and it can be altered with interactions of others. Interpersonal relationships, or the noticeable lack thereof, had a profound impact on the participants when it came to defining their views of care. When describing relationships, the participants provided a context in which they met specific people, but they also reflected on the feelings they experienced in that

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relationship. The participants shared their stories of discontent with those *who did not care because* they "*did not help them*" in both their traditional and online educational journeys. Furthermore, the participants described *caring teachers or others who helped them with their individual circumstances.* Their perceptions of these interactions are congruent with van Manen's (1990) description of lived relationships that humans maintain with others in the interpersonal space they share with them.

Conclusion

When beginning each interview, I was cautioned by district staff that these at-risk participants would not "talk much" and probably "did not have a lot to say." However, during the interviews, each participant openly discussed their feelings and seemed to have a genuine desire to convey all aspects of their educational journey. The participants' vivid descriptions generated specific themes encompassing their lifeworlds. Each of the participants' stories plays a critical role in understanding the research question. Their responses and recollections add to the overall analysis of the study findings. Additionally, their perceptions shed light on at-risk youth and views of care in educational practices and relationships.

In the interpretative analysis of the participants' stories in their lifeworld, themes and subthemes emerged (see Table 3). A more in-depth study of the participants' scope of perception and relationship to care is discussed in Chapter Five.

Table 3

Participants' Lifeworld Themes

Lived Time	Lived Space	Lived Body	Lived Other
Specific Crisis or Difficulty	Belonging and/or Isolation	Unconditional Positive Regard and/or Judgment	Help and/or No Help

CHAPTER FIVE

Findings of Care

Introduction

Thematic analysis serves as an interpretative lens to uncover the shared meanings of care with the at-risk student's journey to online course credit (van Manen, 1990/1997). It is not the intent of this study to find the one precise definition of care, but rather to examine and inquire of its meaning and value. van Manen (1990) indicates this practice in phenomenology is not intended to find "theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world, but rather it offers the possibility of plausible insights that bring us into more direct contact with the world" (p. 9). The study's descriptive narratives, provided by at-risk youth's views of care in their traditional and online educational experience, offer a wealth of data addressing the research question. By listening to the participants' voices regarding the significance of care, two contextual themes are revealed. These themes are detailed under the framework of care and non-care (Waterhouse, 2007).

Further interpretation uncovers subthemes relating to care. In both the traditional and online setting, these subthemes revolve around the care concepts of *unconditional positive regard* and *getting help.* Sadly, the participants also make known the impact of non-care in both the traditional and online classroom. Feelings of *isolation, judgment, and lacking help* emerge as subthemes in both of these educational environments. This chapter discusses the participants' context of care and non-care and outlines the findings related to the research

question. After considering each theme, the emotional subthemes, relating to each participant's experience, are illustrated under the context of care and non-care. Finally, this chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings, and then moves forward into Chapter Six with a deeper analysis of the study's results.

The Context of Care

Examining at-risk eighth grade students and their perceptions of school connectedness, Rigby (2009) notes the "dynamic and fluid quality to their lives at school, and how their academic and emotional needs were connected to each other" (p. 77). Within this study, the participants shared perceptions of care were exhibited by others in individualized forms of *unconditional positive regard* and a *sense of help*. Specifically, participants noted the descriptions of meaningful teachers that correlated to the elements of care during their educational journey. As cited from a previous chapter, the traditional relationship between student and teacher are central elements to ethic of care in education (Maurer, 2005; Noddings, 2002; Pomeroy; 1999; Werner & Smith, 1992). Based on Noddings' supposition of ethic of care in educational relationships, the student-teacher relationship influences interactions that depend on a student's engagement (Noddings, 1984/2003; Pomeroy, 1999).

In addition to contextual teacher relationships, participants noted significant caring relationships with school counselors and one principal. A responsive school community that cares for a diverse student population decreases the likelihood of dropout rates of at-risk students (Owens and Ennis, 2005; Leroy & Symes, 2001). A growing literature foundation finds connections

between pedagogical caring and a student's engagement and performance (Hair, Jagger & Garrett, 2002; Noddings 1984/2006; Phelan, et al., 1991; Pomeroy, 1999; Waterhouse, 2007). Lan and Lanthier (2003) emphasize preventing student disengagement and dropout rates; schools need "friendly and supportive environments that pay close attention to the students' needs" (p. 327). Relating to the phenomenon of care, the participants' stories singled out themes in their educational experience that impacted their recognitions of care. In their traditional educational experience, they evaluated their context of care in reference to teachers and other school community members. In their perceptions of care in the online environment, they carried forward these care-forming observations with them, thus forming the basis of the overall influence of care in their educational experience.

Unconditional Positive Regard

Based on the premise of Maslow's (1970) ideas of human needs for self-actualization and belonging, Carol Rogers, a humanistic psychologist, coined the term "unconditional positive regard" (UPR) (Rogers, 1980, p. 271). Rogers (1965,1980,1983) emphasizes UPR as one of three facilitative conditions that promote a human well-being and growth. Rogers (1980) defines UPR "as an acceptance of this other individual as a separate person, a respect for the other as having worth in his or her own right. It is a basic trust—a belief that this other person is somehow fundamentally trustworthy" (p.271).

Traditional—Unconditional Positive Regard

The research studies findings in Nolan (2007) and Burger (2009) conclude UPR in student-teacher relationships directly impacts the overall bearing of student behavior and success in school. Furthermore, a growing body of evidence supports a fervent interpersonal communication and relationship between a teacher and a student are pivotal in order to advance student personal and academic growth (Furman, 2002; Goodenow, 1993; Noddings, 1994, 2005; Rice, 1999). In her story, Jill described encounters with "caring" teachers, such as her orchestra teacher, who demonstrated attributes of UPR.

> They showed a genuine interest in me. They would talk to me like I was a human being and equal. They would actually try to get to know me. At some point, it would seem like that they weren't an authority figure. I felt like I was actually having a conversation with someone.

Care is seen as an element of UPR that is interwoven as "the self" accepts the "other" (Noddings, 1984/2003) unconditionally. Additionally, the act of UPR (Rogers, 1980) demonstrates "acceptance, respect, trust, care for, and valuing of the student in a total rather than a conditional way (Nolan, 2007, p. 22). Mentioning significant teachers in her education, Diane illustrated her thoughts on care by describing her high school history teacher. She said she looked forward to going to his class.

> I thought he cared about the kids. He seemed interested in what you did outside of school, not just inside. You could tell him stuff, and he

wouldn't think that you are a bad person. And he wouldn't make you feel

stupid. He was really easy to get along with.

Other participants indicated a strong sense of care from others in the

school community outside the walls of the traditional classroom. Michelle and

Betty discussed their relationships with teachers in the vocational technology

center versus high school teachers. Each mentioned how the vocational

technology teachers were "understanding" and "caring" compared to regular

education teachers. In her interview, Betty highlighted why she enjoyed

vocational technology and the "caring" environment.

No one judges you and they try to understand you. Your teachers

 are really open and you have help when you need it.

Online—Unconditional Positive Regard

Although caring interactions are possible in the online context

(Velasquez, Graham & West (2013), the participants did not mention UPR, nor

state a lack thereof, in their online experience regarding teacher-student

relationships. Their perception of non-care is discussed further in the chapter.

Looking at the involvement of care and response to needs, Noddings (1995)

states that it is necessary for students "to participate in caring with adult models

who show them care, talk with them about their difficulties and rewards of such

work, and demonstrate in their own work that (the ethical idea of) caring is

important" (p. 191).

It is noteworthy to recognize how some participants highlighted

important interactions with UPR from counselors and parents while they took

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online course credits. Kory mentions her high school French teacher checking

on her while she took online courses. She would often go "hang out" in this

teacher's classroom after school when she was not working on her online

assignments. Participants also emphasized the existence of UPR through their

immediate family while they took online course credit. Amy highlighted the role

her boyfriend and parents played as support systems during her time online.

Adding to the importance of outside care, Christy noted her mom's

encouragement while she took online courses.

> My mom is a real caring person. My mom was paying to go to school,
>
> and she was trying to make a better life for us. I was so upset about not
>
> graduating on time. She continues to tell me that it doesn't matter when I
>
> graduate, it just matters that I do it for my future and me as a person.

Understanding the roles of others in the online environment is a

challenging task. After studying The Online Academy, a virtual high school in

Virginia, Sanders (2008) finds that students usually perceive the task of online

curriculum as being fairly independent; however, students still express a need

for mentors and desire the availability of help in their educational studies.

A Sense of Help

In Noddings' description of educational care, the need for a teacher to

acknowledge a student's best self and give the student help to actualize that self

is emphasized (Noddings, 1995). Competence in subject areas are more likely to

develop when students feels a sense of caring in the classroom and an

involvement of teacher participation in their ability to learn curriculum (Dovey,

2004). Noddings (1992) ethic of care model requires a priority of cultivating awareness of students' needs and enhancing the student-teacher relationship. Caring and support from good teaching practices give specific benefits to at-risk students (e.g. Maurer, 2005; Rice, 2001; Werner & Smith, 1992). The at-risk participants in this study regarded care as the act of "helping" with the difficulties in the educational curriculum and with their life circumstances. If teachers were willing to assume a role of help and guidance when they needed it, the participants voiced the perception of a "caring" person.

Traditional—Sense of Help

Descriptions of care were identified when the study participants highlighted caring teaching practices related to help with schoolwork, school requirements, and personal problems. Langlois and Zales (1991) find students characterize an act of care when teachers are sensitive to a student's capabilities and when they help students with different rates of learning. Reflecting on her experiences in middle school, Diane stated she had a sense of help through the efforts of her seventh grade math teacher.

> I remember a seventh grade math teacher that I liked. She would teach the lesson, and then she would walk around the room and help us individually. I wasn't scared to ask a question when it was just her and I. She would even let me stay after class and answer my questions. So if I didn't have a teacher like that, I would not ask questions in the class.

In the ethic of care model, Noddings (2005) addresses needs of "receptivity" and "proximity" and stresses the importance of relationship and

knowledge of others. She adds a note of concern by stating, "We often fail to treat the recipient of our care as individuals" (p. 116). In this study, participants expressed caring existed as a sense of help and individualization. Michelle, in her overall reflection of care and school, said care existed for her when "teachers reached out to me" and "cared about what was going on with my school." Looking at the fostering of resilience in inner city schools, Wang, Haertal and Walberg (1997) regard the act of teacher "concern" as a protective factor to reduce student dropout rates and assist students in strenuous circumstances. After her father's death, Jill emphasized the meaningful relationship of care expressed by her middle school science teacher.

> She was pretty cool. I think she was always willing to work with you. *She would always explain things again.* If you said, "Hey can I get this in tomorrow?" then she would not freak out if you explained why.

Looking at the effectiveness of "help" towards students, Finn's (1989) participation-identification model categorizes teachers who represent quality instruction as those who influence a student's engagement and school identification. Furthermore, students responding to the interaction of others tend to have positive and behavioral engagement in school and are also prone to finish school (Finn, 1989; Vieira, 2013).

Online—Sense of Help

During each interview, participants described their daily routine of taking online course credit and their sense of engagement in the process. Participants explained logging on to the website, selecting a class, and working

through tutorials. Although the participants enjoyed the convenience of online learning, they voiced a strong dislike towards a perceived lack of help in the online environment. In their study of dropout students, Bridgeland et al. (2006) find adolescents desire attention from others in the school setting and "a teacher who cares about their school success" (p. 13). As they dealt with a lack of assistance in the online setting, a few of the participants found help and care elsewhere. By accessing her school counselor for help, Amy found someone who understood and took time to "know" the reality her circumstances and her school struggles (Noddings, 1984/2003).

> She would check on me and I would email her when I was done with a class. There was a project for the art class where you had to take a picture and talk about it. I couldn't get a hold of teacher to ask about the project. I mean I didn't have a real camera or anything to take a picture. I emailed a couple of times and never got responses from a teacher. She (counselor) helped me get in touch with the teacher and helped me out a lot.

As previously discussed in Chapter Four, Betty, as well as others, found either parental or teacher support helpful in their successful completion of courses. Diane noted a distinct difference when she was given access to a daily resource teacher in order to complete the online English course.

> It was so nice to have a teacher to help me finish. I could tell she was trying to help me. I could work at my own pace, but if I ran into a problem she was right there. She would also explain to me stuff that they

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were trying to teach me online. I really like doing online with the teacher

there at the same time. She was also the one that graded my papers, and

could tell me what I did wrong.

Research states at-risk students characterize learning environments as

caring when teachers and a school community give academic assistance, offer

support, understand the learner, and provide encouragement (Dovey, 2004;

Goodenow, 1993; Lan & Lathier, 2003; Noddings, 1984/2003; Taylor-Dunlop,

1997; Wentzel, 1997).

Noteworthy Significance of Care in Individuals

In sharing their journey, each participant identified individuals in their

educational experience who cared about them. They voiced how the act of

caring was an important component to their enjoyment and willingness to learn

and become engaged in school. Each participant expressed how care

characteristics seemed individualized for their circumstances and its unique

significance in their perception of care.

Jill expressed how her orchestra teacher shaped her desire to continue

with her love of music and was a supportive outlet for her interest.

My orchestra teacher was my favorite teacher. He was probably why I

liked orchestra so much. He was pretty understanding and patient.

Thinking about the impact of care, Diane told of her experience with her

middle school math teacher.

I liked my math teacher. In middle school, I did have kind of an attitude

problem. My math teacher seemed to still respect me. She made me not

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want to have an attitude in her class. She just was really caring. She used

to tell me that I was smart, and she knew I could do it. She told me I

needed to try, and I needed to put my effort into it. She didn't make me

feel belittled. She made me feel like I could do it.

Kory related how her relationship with an English teacher helped her

gain assistance in finding counseling resources and help with personal crisis.

My eighth grade English teacher caught on to my issues. She reached out

to my counselors and I started to going to therapy and stuff. My English

teacher was always there for me. Most of the time during my recess time,

I would go to her class. I formed a great bond with her.

Finding a connection with vocational technology teachers, Michelle

explained her decision to stay at the vocational school.

I love going to class at Vo-Tech. My teacher always tries to help you. I

just feel that she strives to see the best in you and understands the

situations that you are dealing with.

In her story, Betty recounted a painful experience of being harmed by

middle school students. She emphasized a male teacher that took time to care for

her situation.

It was a big deal that my eighth grade social studies teacher was caring.

One afternoon, I got 'jumped' by a group of girls, and when I told him

the next day, he walked me out to my car so I would feel safe. He wanted

to make sure those girls would not be there.

Struggling with acceptance from her high school peers, Christy said care existed from a teacher who began letting her eat lunch in her classroom.

> One day in the cafeteria, some kids started calling me fat and they were making "mooing" noises. I just never went back to the cafeteria after that. I told my teacher, and she tried to help and told the principal. Nothing really happened, but she did let me eat lunch in her room from then on.

Amy attributes her success in graduating before her pregnancy due date was because of the acts of caring by teachers and counselors who knew her situation.

> We had a lot of outside projects in one of my classes, and that teacher would always be flexible with my work because she knew my situation. I was working and my schedule was hard. The school counselor just took care of everything for me so I could graduate.

The Context of Non-Care

Each participant described relationships and experiences of care in both the traditional and online setting. However, their perceptions of "uncaring" and "non-caring" occurred more often. A sense of *isolation, judgment,* and *lacking help* is evident in their stories. Through their interpretation of these themes, I realized the kind of impact their antithesis of care had in their education, and I recognized how it highlighted the influence of non-care in their stories.

The uncovering of these themes is congruent with the literature concerning at-risk youth and the effects of uncaring relationships and

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environments. Numerous factors contribute to schools potentially diminishing the positive development of at-risk students (Cummins, 1986). These features include: impersonal and distant relationships (Noddings, 1984/2003, 1992/2005), large class sizes that reduce students to a passive role (Cummins, 1986), and atmospheres of pressure and constraint (Fine, 1991; Noddings, 1984/2003, 1992/2005).

Furthermore, MacLeod (1995) suggests schools intensify the disadvantages faced by marginalized youth by failing to respond positively to the difficulties and challenges in students' lives. Within the school environment, research also states teachers often disengage themselves from students who carry a stigma of deficiency, and this attitude serves as a contagion to others, such as peers, in the form of isolation (Cameron & Shephard, 2006; Wehlage et al., 1989; Wotherspoon & Shissel, 2001). At some point in each participant's journey in the traditional classroom, a sense of non-care manifested itself with relationships within the school community. Upon entering the online environment, participants carried with them the memories and experiences of non-care from their past.

Isolation

The risks factors contributing to a young person disengaging with others and with the school spans dimensions of family, personal, and school- related components (Washor & Mojkowski, 2013). These aspects can include: breakdown of a family, parental unemployment, low financial status, mental health issues, pregnancy, disabilities, and an unsupportive school culture. The

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impact of these risk factors for children and adolescents often "varies depending on when it occurs in life" (Balfanz, Herzog, & Iver, 2007). Washor and Mojkowksi (2013) note life events are challenging for students because "schools typically do not control the resources to address them, and the necessary links to appropriate agencies are difficult to establish and sustain" (p. 9).

The participants verbalized a sense of *isolation* during their time in both the traditional and online environment. Evidence supports that a school environment strongly affects a student's outlook on belonging and participation in school (Finn and Rock, 1997; Goodenow, 1993; Wehlage et al., 1989; Wilms, 2000). At-risk students often encounter the obstacles of balancing school expectations with the circumstances of their personal lives, and, as a result, they sense alienation from school culture (Fine, 1986).

During their interviews, participants indicated their feeling of isolation stemmed from a slow withdraw from school and from others. Some participants also suggested their "introverted" personality or a personal temperament of being "shy" or "quiet" contributed to their disengagement from school and the traditional environment. While each participant discussed a sense of aloneness at various times in her education journey, Kory voiced her solution for combating this sense of isolation. During her interview, she described her ideal learning environment.

It needs to be welcoming and accepting, I just think you need to feel like

you belong somewhere. I think that is why some students stop going to

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school because they don't feel like they belong there. You need a sense of belonging in school.

Traditional—Isolation

When the participants described their school relationships, they each mentioned their relationship circle grew smaller as they entered middle school or high school. There, they began to disengage from environments that were welcoming in early education. Kory expressed her struggles of friendship around the time her mother passed away.

I was very quiet, and I didn't have a lot of friends. In middle school, it is like people start to break off from people and form their own group. As high school went on, it seemed like my group or circle of friends just got smaller and smaller. Until my junior year…I only had 3 friends. And that summer, it seemed like they just stopped talking to me.

Talking about her experience in high school, Michelle emphasized her sense of being alone and her struggles with the school staff.

My junior year, I went a lot less. I hated going to school, I would be so unhappy. I think teachers and other staff at the school need to try and connect with you. They just don't try.

Christy also verbalized that when her life crisis of being rape was in danger of being revealed, her disengagement from school went to a different level.

I just stopped trying to connect with people. I mean in high school, people are just kind of crappy.

Students may also feel a sense of isolation when struggling with low cognitive deficiencies. Rowe and Rowe (1992) state children who struggle in reading will potentially have disaffection with school and have poor peer relations. In addition to her battle with Lupus, Diane highlighted her battle with reading difficulties and going to class.

> I remember feeling really stupid in eighth grade. It was really belittling to go into that reading class. I mean, some of those kids in that class you could tell just didn't care about school, or would even try. I would try, but I couldn't do it. I had a lot of friends, but as I got more in high school I didn't have a lot of friends.

Amy recounted, "losing her friends" after she made known her pregnancy. As she struggled to balance both her traditional and online responsibilities, she said her "outside" relationships became nonexistent.

Online—Isolation

Moving into online learning, the participants used words such as "alone" and "isolating" to describe their time online and meeting the requirement of going to the online resource room. Betty, who suffered panic attacks in high school, made note of her feelings in the online lab.

> You feel very isolated in the online classroom. I actually like traditional school better. When I went online, I lost the few friends that I had.

The APEX software program, used as the participants' online curriculum, is primarily an "asynchronous" distance education program. Characteristics of this program use self-guided lessons, computer graded

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quizzes, and screencasts (Bakia et al., 2013). There is a potential for any student who uses asynchronous distance education programs to "experience a feeling of isolation . . . students have to work mostly on their own, with little contact with other students and instructors" (Green, 2009, p.31). Diane talked about her everyday routine in the online lab.

> You don't talk to anybody online. When you go into the lab, you sign your name, and they have to come unlock your test. When the class was online, I was already prepared that it was going to be independent, and I was going to be by myself. What I didn't like, was going until lab, and the person that was in the lab just didn't seem to care that I was there.

When talking about the online lab, Michelle added the students sit at individual computer monitors.

> It wasn't what I expected. I felt alone. You definitely don't have friends in there. You eventually may say "hi" to someone, but you don't make friends in the lab. You can't because you can't talk a lot and everybody has on headphones.

Judgment

A youth's relationship with others strongly influences a sense of wellbeing, belonging, and success in school (Cameron, 2006). Furthermore, research demonstrates how the effects of teacher-student relationships and teacher behaviors are associated with an adolescent's emotional adjustment and academic success (Demaray & Malecki, 2002; Hughes, Cavell, & Jackson, 1999; Kohler, 1993; Moses, 2010). Throughout their experiences in school, the

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participants highlighted being treated differently in a negative way by teachers or school staff. Cameron & Shepard (2006) state students who perceive alienation from teachers are in danger of blocking quality instruction and more likely to disregard the value of academics and relationships at school. More importantly, the authors note, "Behavioral confirmation theory, also known as labeling theory or self-fulfilling prophecy, has been used to explain how teacher's negative expectations for and interactions with students can have a profound impact on students' behaviors and their identities" (p. 16).

In the participants' account of their educational path, the phrase "judged" or "not wanting to be judged" referred to their impressions of relating to peers and teachers in the traditional school setting. Although not as prevalent in the online classroom, feelings of "being judged" and peer stigmatization influenced their decision to begin online course credit.

Traditional—Judgment

Looking at at-risk students' conflicts, Delpit (1995) suggests teachers have a narrow view of students' lives beyond the classroom and often evaluate a student's strengths in paper and pencil only. In her description of performing in class, Jill pointed out feelings of frustration when giving an example of one teacher's assumptions.

> I feel like I did get judged a lot in school. Yeah, I remember in the
> Algebra 2 class that I failed. That teacher asked me one day after I did
> well on a test, if I cheated. I don't think she liked me, and I did not cheat.

Kory's perceptions of her appearance in high school describe how she felt "judged."

> I felt targeted in high school by some teachers, and I think they judged me. I felt that I was judged by my appearance or how I looked and dressed. I have piercings and I don't dress like the other kids. At the time in high school, I felt the teachers that weren't nice just didn't want to take the time to get to know me and figure out the person I really was.

Reactions of at-risk youth to teacher feedback and connection correlate to a student's engagement in the classroom (Kelly, 1993, Loutzenheiser, 2002). An unwelcoming classroom environment or a student's perceived sense of an uncaring teacher may compound a student's willingness to participate in academics or peer relations (Kelly, 1993; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Diane emphasized her impressions of working with teachers throughout her education.

> Well, I know that when teachers care about me, I go into class with a better attitude. If I knew that teachers really didn't care about me, and did want to try to help me, then it really made me not want to try in their class. I would dread their class.

In pointing out the problems at-risk youth face in schools, Delpit (1995) asserts teacher education "indoctrinates" prospective teachers with research on the failure of students. Thus, she states, "when teachers receive that kind of education, there is a tendency to assume deficits in students rather than to locate and teach to strengths" (p. 172). When talking about her struggles in high

school, Christy expressed the difficulty of not sharing with anyone that she was a victim of rape. However, while she kept her secret, the perception of teachers towards her was difficult as well.

> A lot of what my teachers' saw was the perception of someone slacking off in their class. I just don't think teachers realize that kids go through stuff. I mean I wasn't the only one going through some stuff.

> Christy's notation of "going through some stuff" is consistent with *all* the participants' decisions to find alternatives to the traditional classroom. Issues of anxiety, lack of interest, illness and pregnancy created negative experiences and stigmatization of peers and teachers within the traditional school walls.

Online—Judgment

There is a general sense, from the participants' accounts, that choosing to access online learning led to hope of protection from judgment of others and help for an alternative to graduate. Once in the online setting, the participants voiced frustration navigating through nonverbal communication. Working online to finish her high school credits, Christy indicated she felt the non-verbal communication of others was responsible for her receiving a "drop-out" label.

> I don't like being put in that category. I'm in here because I have circumstances that are out of my control.

Lack of Help

Research agrees with Christy's and other participants' feelings of frustration regarding nonverbal communication in online settings (e.g. Dabaj, 2009; Green, 2009; Viera, 2013). However, the study participants noted their

perceptions of nonverbal communication and help from others began before

online learning. Noddings' (1984) description of the ideal ethic of care in

schools calls for the "carer" and "one cared for" to participate in open and

ongoing dialogue. Connell, Halpem-Felsher, Clifford, Crichlow, and Usinger

(1995) find teacher support and dialogue with students correlate to active

student engagement. The authors add the "converse of this 'rich get richer'

effect" finds teacher support is "withdrawn from those who need it most" thus,

leaving at-risk students gradually losing support in their education (p. 59). As

noted in Chapter One of this study, educational engagement and the "feeling of

being cared for" are key factors in building trusting relationships with potential

dropout students (Wehlage et al., 1989). While battling their personal

challenges, the at-risk participants noted problems of interpersonal relationships

and "getting help" in both the traditional school and online education.

Traditional—Lack of Help

In her study of student motivation in middle school, Wentzel (1997)

notes the relationship between caring teachers and students' efforts "raise

important issues concerning the role of social factors in explaining students'

motivation to achieve (p. 416). Michelle emphasized a "lack of help" from

school staff when she tried to find help in the classroom and explore alternatives

to graduate.

> If I had seen more people like teachers or counselor putting in an effort
>
> to help me, I would have probably put in effort as well.

Teachers addressing a student's behavior and attitude confront a tension between caring for the student and controlling the classroom environment and students' actions (Dempsey, 1994). In their analysis of over 700 research papers, Langlois and Zales (1991) suggest an effective teacher will create a "caring and nonthreatening" environment in their "voices, facial expressions, gestures and choices of words" (p. 33).

In her time during middle school, Diane explained teachers did not understand her learning difficulties, and she noted discontent with the teachers' tactics.

I just don't feel like that they took the time to help me. They would say, "In high school you won't get a second chance." I did find out that they give you second chances in high school. If you're trying to teach me something, don't lie to me or scare me.

Fine (1991, 1996) states potential dropouts are challenged by a school climate of indifference to students' needs, and often at-risk youth will experience frustration within the school environment. After the trauma of her rape, Christy found hope in being allowed to go on a homebound tutoring program. However, she emphasized her irritation at no communication while she waited for her tutoring to take place.

I didn't get any calls or people would check up on me. I got discouraged and kept calling. My mom finally started calling the high school every day to talk to someone and find out what was going on with my tutoring. She finally had to call the school administration. I finally got one tutor.

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Online—Lack of Help

Feeling a sense of non-care also transcended into the participants'

experience of working in the online setting. Analyzing students' perceptions

towards online education in a Turkish vocational high school, Dabaj (2009)

finds students view the asynchronous online environment as "mechanical" in

nature and "experienced difficulty in nonverbal communication (p. 123).

Research also emphasizes the significance of interaction or social presence in

distance education for effective student learning, especially for online at-risk

populations (Green, 2009; Viera, 2013; Guanawardena et al., 2001;

Gunarwardena and Zittle, 1997; Watson & Gemin, 2008).

Several of the participants complained of becoming "locked out" of the

software after wrongly answering questions or getting "stuck" during

assignments. They indicated their need for human interaction to provide answers

and help getting "unstuck" from their course problem. Consider the following:

> There seems to be a lot of waiting in class. I feel like the idea of an
>
> online class is to help you just get it done. To make you wait for help or
>
> other stuff is really frustrating. It doesn't make it sense. Just getting into
>
> the online class there was a lot of waiting. And if you get locked out
>
> because you did something wrong, it was still waiting around. (Michelle)
>
> It (online class) won't let you move forward if you get stuck. You have
>
> to wait to find help. It would have been nice to have a connection with
>
> someone online. (Kory)

I would say a downside of online school is nobody helps you. Email

doesn't really work. It's a lot easier to get help when someone is

standing right there. (Jill)

Although the study participants anticipated an independent atmosphere

in online learning, they expressed their surprise at having to seek out help with

assignments and with questions. The amount of interactivity or social presence

in an online program influences the amount of time students need to seek

answers and to have contact with instructors (Sherry, 1996). Often participants

described a comparison of traditional methods with their online classroom and

pointed out the deficits of online "help" with their work. While her dad was a

helpful tutor, Betty still noted specific struggles with questions.

I would have to go back to the night lab when my specific teacher would

be there. In the regular classroom, I was use to getting help when I

needed it. The lab monitor didn't know anything about my courses.

Amy's story of tracking down a specific teacher adds to the participants'

annoyance of searching for help while completing online classes.

There was a project for the art class where you had to take a picture and

talk about it. I couldn't get a hold of teacher to ask about project. I mean

I didn't have a real camera or anything to take a picture. I emailed my

questions a couple of times and never got responses from a teacher. It

was just hard to get a hold of people. I needed someone to help me.

The participants' examples of non-care experiences with *isolation,*

judgment, and *lack of help* expressed problems in their navigation of academic

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issues and social dynamics. Impassioned responses of frustration and anger were evident in their voices as they recounted a lack of support in meeting their social and emotional needs during their educational journey.

Conclusion

The study's at-risk participants described care in terms consistent with the literature of ethic of care and care-giving traits (Groenhout, 1988; Noddings, 1984/2003, 2005; Pomeroy, 1999; Stizman & Leners, 2006; Waterhouse, 2007; Watson & Gemin, 2008). As discussed in Chapter Two, the literature also points to a need for relational care for at-risk students in both online and traditional settings (Waterhouse, 2007; Watson & Gemin, 2008; Velasquez, 2012). True to this study's definition of care, the participants described incidences of care that were "mindfully and appropriately attending to the unspoken needs of another" (Stizman & Leners, 2006, p. 254). Unfortunately, the participants pointed out their non-care experiences were more prevalent and "easier to remember" in their struggles to achieve academic success. In both the online and traditional settings, it is evident these at-risk students perceived experiences of *isolation*, *judgment*, and *lack of help*.

Further examination of the participants' responses reveals the critical issue of how these at-risk adolescents were able to successfully complete their online courses despite their perception of non-care. The factors governing their success are explored in the following chapter. Additionally, Chapter Six notes discussion and recommendations for at-risk youth, online learning, and care as it relates to this study and the implications in future research.

CHAPTER SIX

Discussion of Findings and Implications

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to inquire and question the meaning of care for the on-line at-risk youth. As previously outlined in the literature, defining care is a difficult task. However, Rauner (2000) notes the importance of understanding students' care relationships and how "these experiences relate to the overall context of their lives" (p. 61). Based on an interpretative framework, this study's design was to hear the voices of at-risk students and their perceptions of care in their journey toward online learning. As should be clear, the study's at-risk participants perceived care and non-care as components to their success in school and to the survival of their circumstances.

However, while interpreting the descriptive accounts of the participants' experiences, a deeper question emerged as to how these students were successful in the online classroom, despite having a perception of non-care. Moving beyond their descriptive awareness of care, I uncovered interwoven influences, such as personal attributes, intense motivation, and a capacity to seek and desire help from others, which contributed to their success in online learning. This chapter outlines the factors instrumental to these aspects within their experience. Additionally, this chapter examines the assumptions and challenges to the relationship of at-risk students, online learning, and care. The chapter concludes by offering reflections and participants' suggestions for implications and future study.

Overcoming Non-Care—Understanding Their Lifelines

Non-care was a predominant factor in the participants' school experience and resulted in their leaving the traditional high school classroom. Nevertheless, these students overcame barriers of non-care and successfully completed courses in an asynchronous online environment. Despite obstacles of *isolation, judgment,* and *lack of help*, each at-risk participant defied adversity and obtained credit from an online course. Research explains the study's at-risk participants' success as a component of "resilience" or a development of "protective factors" (Benard, 1993; Finn & Rock, 1997; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Werner & Smith, 1992).

The term "lifelines" refers to "supports within the individual and in the environment that promotes success in living, despite the odds against it" (Cairns, R.B. & Cairns, B.D., 1994, p. 258). These lifelines can include protective factors of family and neighbors, socioeconomic status, opportunities, and individual characteristics. One such "lifeline" in the participants' "lifeworld" was individual qualities contributing to their success of online credits (Cairns, R.B. & Cairns, B.D., 1994; van Manen, 1990). Such personal qualities of introversion and high academic self efficacy were seemingly present in the participants' descriptions of their educational journey.

Personal Attributes

Current literature shows successful online students demonstrate a preference towards an autonomous style of learning and higher academic self-efficacy (Boyd, 2004; Green, 2009; Reisetter, 2004; Rosser & Nelson, 2012;

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Vonderwell, 2003). Furthermore, Santo (2001) states students who prefer online learning have a lower level of extraversion than others. In her book, *Quiet, The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking*, Cain (2012) indicates "one out of every two or three people you know" are introverts. Cain also implies the word introvert, coined from Jung's (1921) research on personality types, is associated with various definitions. However, most psychologists agree introversion is linked to personalities requiring less stimulation, working more slowly and deliberately, and preferring small groups and independence (Cain, 2012).

As they talked about themselves in Chapter Four, many of the study's participants used various personality descriptors such as "quiet" and "shy" to illustrate their persona in the traditional classroom. Such participant examples include:

> I think I'm just kind of quiet. I wasn't in a lot of outside activities either. I am just kind of shy, and I didn't ask a lot of questions. (Michelle)
> I didn't hang out with people from the cool crowd. I was shy and never talked in class. I would always get laughed at, so I was the shy girl. (Betty)

Cain (2012) states the traditional school environment "can be a highly unnatural, especially for an introverted child who loves to work intensely on projects he cares about, and hang out with one or two friends as at time" (p.253).

In addition to introverted descriptors, several participants indicated they were identified as gifted and talented in early education. Bandura (1993)

maintains students hold various beliefs about their ability to handle tasks. For example, a student with high academic self-efficacy will pursue through challenges; whereas a student with low self-efficacy will shy away and retreat. Roblyer and Marshall (2002) find students with high academic self-efficacy have favorable success with online learning. Several of the participants indicated successful grades were important to them and easy to achieve when they made an effort. Consider the following:

> I have trouble finding motivation because I want things to be perfect. When I do work, I always make A's. And I take tests really easy and nail it. (Kory)

> People don't consider a C failing, but I do. I like to make A's and B's. Learning is easy for me and I get good grades. I learned how to read when I was four. (Christy)

> I was always good at writing and English. Schoolwork was pretty easy for me. Reading was my best subject. (Jill)

When discussing the online environment, participants indicated high levels of reading and taking notes were required in their asynchronous online curriculum. Current research points outs online content is heavily text based and lends itself to learners who excel in vocabulary, reading comprehension, fluency, and writing (Herdandez, 2011; Jones, 2011; Palisoc, 2013; Sadik and Reisman, 2004; Zucker, 2003). Like others in the study, Kory emphasized her ability to combat these reading and writing challenges by stating:

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I'm fairly smart once I put my mind to it. I think it helped that I was

good at reading, writing and comprehending stuff. It just comes naturally

for me. In regular class, I would get bored in English because I thought I

was learning the same stuff over and over again. In the online class, I

think I learned some new things. That was pretty neat.

Concurring with Bandura's (1993) views of high self-efficacy, research

indicates that an online learner's high self efficacy correlates to persistence and

student intrinsic motivation (Bong, 2004, Huckabee, 2010; Rosser & Nelson,

2012; Zimmerman, 2002). While the "lifeline" of individual traits was a

common protective factor with study participants, the participants also focused

on a motivation to graduate from high school (Cairns, R.B. & Cairns, B.D.,

1994).

Motivation

Referenced in Chapter One, the Coleman report (Coleman et.al, 1996),

states students with a greater internal locus of control are less vulnerable to

dropout rates and lower achievement. Additionally, a central motivating factor

in completing online course work is a student's *locus of control* and self-efficacy

(Huckabee, 2010; Schrum & Hong, 2002; Wang & Newllin, 2002; Zimmerman,

2002). Rotter (1966) refers to locus of control as "the degree to which a person

expects that reinforcement, or an outcome of their behavior, is contingent on

their own behavior or personal characteristics (p. 489). Despite their negative

experiences in the traditional environment, the study's participants entered the

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online setting with both a will and a desire to fulfill course requirements and a determination to graduate. A few examples are the following:

> I could've chosen not to even try at the online thing, but I was motivated to do it. I just wanted to knock it out. It started to sink in that high school really does matter, and if you got a bad GPA, then colleges will not even look at you. (Jill)

> I did it to graduate. I knew that if I didn't go to online courses, then I wouldn't graduate, and I would really feel stupid if I didn't graduate. And I know that I couldn't go to college without my diploma. (Diane)

> I realized that I was about to graduate, and I needed to kick it in high gear. If I didn't, I knew that I was not going to graduate on time. (Kory)

In addition to being comfortable with small settings and having the motivation to graduate, several participants indicated they sought out help to have success in the online environment.

Self-Regulation—Finding Care

In interpreting their stories, it is apparent these at-risk participants view care as a form of support and help in their education. Current literature concludes at-risk learners need prudent academic support and help in the online environment (Archambault et al., 2010; Barbour, 2012; Huckabee, 2012; Passey, 2000; Watson & Gemin, 2008). Despite the asynchronous online environments having little face to face contact, an attribute of several study participants was a strategy to seek out help from others during their online experience. As they struggle with content in the curriculum, students with high self-regulation will

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possess "self awareness and strategic knowledge to take corrective action" (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 2).

Evaluating the use of Apex curriculum with students in a blended learning environment, Huckabee (2012) finds successful students with high self-regulation strategies regularly seek help from teachers, peers, and academic coaches. Although inconvenient, participants went to the online computer lab on nights when teachers, who were knowledgeable in their course content, were in attendance to help them. For example, Jill explained her annoyance of devising a strategy for completing assignments. She further notes:

> I got really frustrated when there wasn't a teacher available to help with certain subjects. I had to wait until a certain day to go ask the math teacher for help. If it was Monday, and I was having trouble with math, I would have to wait for the math teacher to come in one Thursday night to help me complete the assignment.

Participants also sought assistance elsewhere in order to gain course credit. As indicated in previous chapters, Betty found help through her dad's assistance with her online curriculum. Additionally, Kory and Amy accessed school counselors and favorite teachers for support and assistance in their online classes. Diane also found a favorable alternative by moving from the fully online lab to a mediated online setting for two weeks to finish her English course. She stated:

> When I went into that room with the English teacher to complete the online course, I would tell myself that I could do this and it would be

fine. It made all the difference that the teacher was there, and she was so
nice. She would help me, and it was always a positive experience for me,
while I was finishing that course online.

Zimmerman (2002) finds a component of self-regulation is the
resourcefulness of students understanding their learning environment and
learning needs. Furthermore, students with high self-regulation will alter their
physical learning setting to meet their preferences for learning (Huckabee, 2012;
Roblyer and Marshall, 2002; Zimmerman, 2002). Desiring to graduate, but
having no success in the regular classroom, these participants moved to the
online setting. Using personal attributes to assist them, or their "lifelines," they
successfully completed an online alternative for high school credit (Cairns, R.D.
& Cairns B. D., 1994).

Through the interpretation of participant interviews, this study addressed
the question regarding perceptions of care for at-risk students in their stories of
moving into the online classroom. Although this study was a small sample of at-
risk student voices, it underlined presumptions and challenges surrounding
online learning and the care received by at-risk students. The following section
will explore the prevalent inferences and difficulties addressing the successful
congruence of at-risk learners, online learning, and care.

Assumptions and Challenges of At-Risk Students,

Online Learning, and Care

By examining the literature and interpreting the participants' interviews, the findings in this study highlight several factors about the inferences and viewpoints of defining at-risk learners. Additionally, the educational practice of offering online alternatives to at-risk students varies in its viable forms and structures. While the stigmatizing effects of non-care are frequent with at-risk learners, such as the participants in this study, the challenge to find a precise, core definition of care is impacted by the perceptions of the "one cared for" (Noddings, 1984/2003). Phenomenology attempts to maintain a full interpretation of meaning and keep the phenomenon open for possibility (van Manen, 1990). In order to determine a deeper meaning from this study, I explore assumptions from the study and literature. Furthermore, I propose challenges that provide a path to uncovering new interpretation and possibilities (van Manen, 1990).

The Assumption of the At-Risk Student

Using the term "at-risk," educators categorize students in order to provide resources and to meet student needs (e.g. Archambault et al., 2010; Comer, 2004; Rapp, Eckes, & Plurker, 2006; Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009; Watson & Gemin, 2008). At the beginning of my study, I set out to interview at-risk students as defined by school district personnel. However, in the course of this study, the label of at-risk and "drop-out prevention" came into question as being too imprecise a definition, when applied to these students.

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The Challenge

As mentioned in Chapter One, Dryfoos (1998) cautions educators from using "at risk" to frame individuals and to "carve up adolescents into many disconnected pieces" (p. 25). Ironically, in defining students as "at-risk," there is the potential risk of losing sight of the student and their individualized issues (Calabrese et al., 2007; Dryfoos, 1998; Sconert-Reichel, 2000). A challenge for educators is to avoid making quick assumptions when defining students, because a pure and precise definition does not exist for the term at-risk (Watson & Gemin, 2005). Often students who disengage from school are struggling with personality styles and navigating the culture of a traditional school amidst life challenges (Waterhouse, 2007). The study participants indicated they were shy, quiet, and prone to participate in small groups. Cain (2012) states we live in a society that profoundly elicits a social bias toward extraversion and criticizes or attempts to change introverts. She also affirms, in a recent interview, many introverted or withdrawn students feel uncomfortable by their teachers' actions in traditional classrooms. She explains:

> I hear too many stories of children that are given the message by very well meaning teachers that there is something wrong with who they are. I think well-meaning teachers see their role as being to turn introverts into extroverts. We really need to understand that an introvert is a totally normal personality type (Cutler, 2013, para. 7).

In addition to personality types, life challenges and human experience will also move students into a category of at-risk. Although participants in this study wanted to do well in school, the "at risk" component they encountered was

the ability to cope with a harsh life experience. There is a need in the educational environment to acknowledge the difficult, unexpected, and sometimes cruel events in a student's life without passing judgment, isolating, or placing labels on an individual. A difficult task for educators is to create a school community where adolescents and children feel a sense of belonging and safety (Bulger, 2009; Calabrese et al., 2007; Couillard et al., 2006; Martin, 2006). Recognizing their challenges, but also their need to finish school, the study participants chose online learning as an alternative to traditional school and as a means of combating their elusive dropout prevention label.

The Assumption of the Online Alternative

Online courses present a solution to high school graduation in the form of online course credit and credit recovery (Archambault et al.,2010; Huckabee, 2010; Waston & Gemin, 2008). Students see the self-pace options of the online setting as an appealing alternative to accomplish schoolwork in their homes or in a school lab. With budget constraints and demanding graduation rates, online curriculum for at-risk students presents an answer to district concerns and assists in retention rates (Desoff, 2009, Watson et al., 2009). Although online learning can be beneficial for some students, it is dangerous to generalize for all of the student population (Vieira, 2013). As previously noted in Chapter One, critics are concerned about educators paying too little attention to students' needs and using online graduation as merely an alternative to combat low graduation rates (McCabe & Andrie, 2012).

The Challenge

By choosing online learning, participants in this study found a successful alternative to complete the courses they needed to graduate. However, after evaluating their experience, they believed their satisfaction with online courses would have been better with a synchronous or a more assistive type of environment. While it is the student's decision to choose online courses, it is the educators' task and responsibility to produce quality learning experiences in the online classroom (Chen & Hirumi, 2004). Research with credit recovery programs for at-risk learners shows a preference for using a "mediated" or "blended" online environment, allowing time for face-to-face teacher support and individualized instruction (Huckabee, 2010; Watson et al., 2008). As the literature notes, online programs are not for everyone, and online environments also have dropout rates (Bakia et al., 2013; Barbour, 2012; Palisoc, 2013; Uhlig, 2002; Watson & Gemin, 2008).

Looking at the influences of student high reading proficiency in online credit recovery, Palisoc (2013) concludes high reading ability matters in the online environment due to the required comprehension and pace of learning. An educators' task in placing students in asynchronous online courses is to evaluate their readiness in technology efficacy and academic ability in order to handle independent curriculum (Abel, 2005; Archambault et al., 2010; Bakia et al., 2013 Churchill, 2010; Green; 2009; Huckabee, 2010; Jones, 2011; Palisoc, 2013; Velasquez, 2012). Taking time to understand the need for student support is also significant in determining appropriate alternatives for at-risk students and

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graduation (Bakia et al., 2013; Churchill, 2010; Huckabee, 2010; Piccano, 2011; Uhlig, 2002; Watson & Gemin, 2008).

The Assumption of Care

Noddings (1984) encourages educational practitioners to exert effort with students in the "maintenance and enhancement of caring" (p. 172). Just as the case for the term "at-risk," the term "care" is also vague and hard to define (e.g. Stizman & Leners, 2006; Tronto, 1993). To students, the picture of caring or non-caring can be perceived differently within their relationships to the school community (Waterhouse, 2007). In other words, different acts of caring are interpreted as more valuable depending on a student's lived experience (van Manen, 1990). Within this study, participants found caring took the form of unconditional positive regard from others and a sense of help. A strong lack of human help and contact was noted as non-care in their online experience. As Christy noted, "there is no Help button" in the online classroom.

The Challenge

Although it provides an alternative to graduation requirements, the online classroom offers its own decision-making tasks for educators, such as choosing lab resources and content providers. The choice of having a fully online or blended learning lab dictates how students will access care, in the form of help, and how they will be successful in a specific online environment and must be carefully monitored and evaluated. Strategies that encompass face-to-face curriculum support and provide navigation of online environments are often needed to increase at-risk learners' online performance (Huckabee, 2012;

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Passey, 2000; Picciano & Seaman, 2007). In their study of care in a synchronous online charter high school, Graham, Velasquez, & West (2013) assert online students perceive care when a teacher takes time to know a student and understands the student's perspective. Furthermore, the study suggests perceptions of caring depend on the "attentive intentions behind a teacher's actions that help students perceive caring" (p. 9). Their findings imply that students appreciate the sense of caring from a human influence, despite a district's choice of an asynchronous or synchronous environment.

As the use of online learning perseveres, educational decision-making and rigorous research continues to examine the effectiveness of online learning with the K-12 student populations (e.g. Archambault et al., 2010; Barbour & Siko, 2012; Churchill, 2010; Huckabee, 2010; Jones, 2011; Palisoc, 2013, Sanders, 2008; Velasquez, 2012; Watson et al., 2012). Evaluating the data of proficient online learning will lead to more informed choices by K-12 educators. However, the perceptions of those choosing the online environment are vital in considering the student engagement experience (Barbour & Siko, 2012; Churchill, 2010; Huckabee, 2010; Jones, 2011; Velasquez, 2012). Listening to students dialogue, as they voice their perceptions of care in educational practice and when they express their ideal of care in a school setting, is also important (Fusell, 2007; McKenna, 2010).

Shedding light on the challenge of providing care for at-risk online students, the participants in this study suggest teacher availability and support must be in place for care to exist and matter. Additionally, participants voiced a

desire for someone to care about their plight to graduate and to understand their sense of powerlessness in the traditional high school setting. They highlighted a need for school staff to offer consistent assistance and timely communication regarding required graduation credits, enrollment changes, and procedures. In other words, when at-risk students choose an online alternative journey to complete graduation requirements, they don't want to be forgotten by the school community. When reflecting on this concept, I also experienced my own transformative learning consequence by my interactions with the at-risk youth in this study.

My Own Reflection of the Study

Phenomenological research often leads to its own transformative effect and to a "heightened perceptiveness, increased thoughtfulness and tact" (van Manen, 1990, p. 163). Both the implications of this study, and my own elusive attempt to define at-risk youth, revealed a personal revelation of sorts. Spending time with these participants, I discovered that I share personal attributes and a commonality with their motivation to graduate. After speaking with each interviewee, it was clear to me that these girls had a desire not to be defined by their problems. Care was important. However, more importantly, they internalized a different definition of themselves and became extremely resourceful in reaching their goal. Their at-risk label closely paralleled my own efforts to complete my doctoral graduate work.

During the course of graduate school and while writing this dissertation, I experienced barriers to graduating. While working as a full-time school

counselor, I also took on adjunct teaching in both the traditional and online higher education settings in order to pay for graduate school costs. Along with my husband, who also works full-time, I was raising our two minor children, with all the ups and downs of their lives. After reading Cain's (2012) book and evaluating my personality, I uncovered a close personality link to a "closet introvert" who "passes undetected" in an extroverted society (p.4). In essence, from the viewpoint of others and the literature, circumstances and personal attributes put me at-risk for not finishing graduate school.

While weary and wanting to quit, I realized my high sense of *self-regulation* battled my ongoing isolation and *motivated* me to complete this study and receive my doctoral degree. However, like most people, the awareness of a human touch and personal encouragement made the process less stressful. Acts of care toward me impacted my faith in the art of care. Through my relationship with others, I heard phrases such as, "you can do it" and "let me help you" that conveyed a sense of warmth and non-judgment, while I walked the graduate school journey. However, I do not want to understate the traumatic events in the participants' lives, which caused them to disengage from the traditional educational environment and precipitated their negative care experience. Each of them had individual characteristics and circumstances, not only hindering, but also leading to their acquisition of online course credit.

All of us are complex individuals, but the participants and I share a common thread in expressing how care matters in all the diversified settings of the educational journey. Ultimately, the practice and importance of educational

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care will continue to evolve as educational leaders and practitioners change the design of both traditional and online settings. Even if new procedures are instituted to encourage student engagement, caring strategies are needed to consider the challenges and issues of at-risk learners who access the online setting. The findings of this descriptive study propose several recommendations and suggested study for future practice and research working with at-risk youth and online settings.

Recommendations and Implications for Future Research

As online learning expands in the K-12 level, current literature and the study results illustrate the enormous influence educational leaders have when considering student population needs and assistance in the online environment. Based on the analysis of this study and current literature, several recommendations are put forth to enhance the perceptions of care for at-risk students when they venture into online education. Also noted, applying some of these strategies would be effective in the traditional classroom for at-risk youth. It is important to consider the following when offering and enrolling at-risk youth in educational online courses:

- Initiate a more in-depth investigation of a student's psychological and environmental circumstances before using such factors to label a student at-risk and offer specific individual supports under the at-risk definition (e.g. Couillard et al., 2006).

- Promote an engaging, non-judging, school community by supporting
  student life issues, while offering timely alternatives to traditional high
  school classrooms (Furman, 2002; Nolan, 2007; Martin, 2006).

- Provide more personal contact with personnel, such as a graduation
  coach or mentor, to give immediate help in the navigation of online
  courses, course credits, and challenges facing graduation (Burger, 2009).

- Offer technology choices to assess and evaluate student proficiency in
  study skills, technology, and reading before enrolling students in online
  courses (Bakia et al. 2013; Churchill, 2010; Palisoc, 2013; Velasquez,
  2012).

- Consider a more blended approach to online environments for at-risk
  students. Literature and this study suggest effective approaches use the
  online asynchronous curriculum as a supplement to a mediated online
  program. Effective caring acts focus on immediate face-to-face
  interaction of teacher feedback and help (Huckabee, 2010; Vieira, 2013).

Finding the right method or system to define students will not enhance
care in a student's life. Instead, barriers need to be removed and supports put in
place in order for students to achieve success in their educational endeavors.
Additionally, it is vital to recognize and listen to student voices as they seek to
influence educational improvements.

Recommendations from Participants

The intent of this research was to focus on the student voice.
Consequently, during the interviews, I asked each participant to describe their

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ideal learning environment and, if they wanted, to give recommendations for online learning. Their suggestions for care and help reinforce the findings of this study. For example, Michelle highlighted the importance of individual attention in the classroom.

> It's important to have a teacher that could come to you and check on you as an individual. I think it is important that if you do badly, you need to have a teacher come to you and help you. Not everyone is willing to come to a teacher and ask for help. So having that teacher come to you and help you is very important.

Understanding her need to work independently, Jill made recommendations for the traditional classroom setting.

> For me there would only be a few kids in the classroom, maybe an area where you could go do your work by yourself, if you wanted to. The kids that would want to work together could, and they should be allowed to do that. But I feel like if you don't want to work with people, you shouldn't be made to. I think people need to encourage independent work, if you want to work that way.

> Both Kory and Betty described their ideal learning environments as "welcoming" and "accepting". Kory mentioned she felt an online classroom could create this effect with chat rooms to ask questions.

> I know there are online schools where you can send messages, if you have question. It would have been nice to have that relationship.

Talking about the need for online relationships, Diane voiced her opinion that online high schools should model the online course of her current higher education class.

I like college online better than high school. For one thing, you have an assigned professor for your class. There's actually a whole class that like online, so you're not having to do it all by yourself. There is discussion going on as well, and the professor talks to the class online. You have access to email and chat to both the professor, and even the people in your class.

In their comments about online learning, Amy and Christy specifically outlined a recommendation for teacher interaction in the online classroom. In her suggestion, Amy highlighted a specific recommendation; also noted by other participants, to enhance care in the online classroom.

I think offering online is a caring thing to do. I mean it offers another way. Sometimes you just can't come to school, and this is another way. It offers more flexibility. I mean in the online classroom, kids are doing it for different reasons, and it is very self-paced, so I think the teachers need to be more understanding. I mean if someone is caring about you and wants you to accomplish something, it motivates you. It makes you think you can do it, and you will accomplish something and be proud of it.

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Implications for Future Research

Key issues in this study, regarding care, at-risk youth, and online education, highlight the need for additional research activity. A number of scholarly endeavors could provide starting points for additional research. These suggestions include:

- Evaluating alternative methods used for high school graduation and its benefits with the use of experimental, quantitative design.

- Using the foundation of this study, examine the underlying perceptions of at-risk youth in the school community and the criteria used to recommend students for online credit recovery programs.

- Designing future qualitative research that focuses on the at-risk youth and personality temperament, more specifically noting the introverted personality type in education.

- Embarking on a research endeavor to evaluate perceptions of online care from those who do not successfully complete or withdraw from online high school courses.

As student enrollment increases with online course opportunity, recommendations for future research will assist school leaders make effective research-based decisions. A summary of suggested future study is shown below.

Figure 1

Implication for Future Research
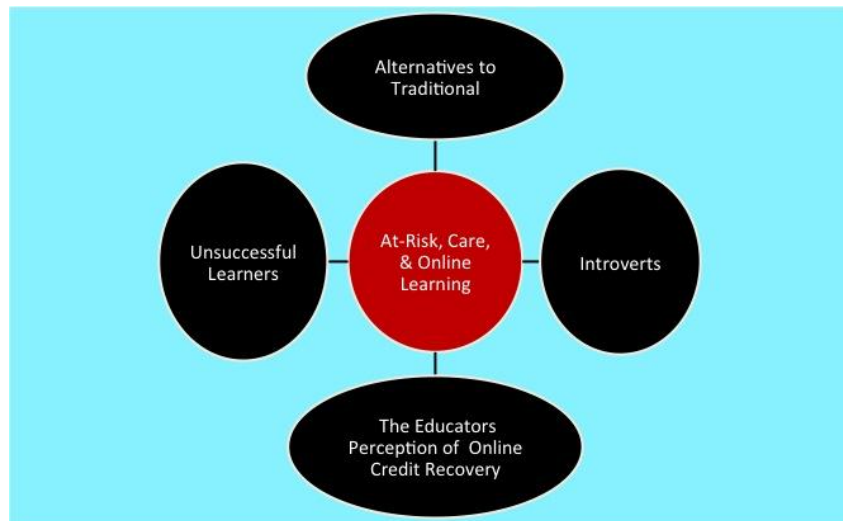
Conclusion

The phenomenon of educational care is more than a relationship with a teacher or school staff member. The acceptance of Noddings (1984) thoughtful tone of ethic of care considers the potential for increased student engagement in all learning environments. As the study's participants aptly described their journey and their perception of care, it is now the burden and distinctive reminder to educators to understand the impact of student problems. Additionally, at the core of care, is the willingness to offer support and help for all students by providing caring alternatives in education.

This research shows that some at-risk students care about school. Understandably, there are challenges of defining needs within a student population. However, educators should consider program choices in online learning that reflect a caring environment for students. Furthermore, if educators

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focus on creating a school community that validates students and their life

problems, then the act of caring will empower students to learn and feel a sense

of belonging as they move towards graduation.

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