THE ROLE OF ADMINISTRATOR LOOPING:

CONNECTING STUDENTS TO CARING ADULTS IN

HIGH SCHOOL

By

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Abstract: School connectedness is positively related to student motivation and academic achievement; therefore, fostering positive relationships with caring and supportive adults in school is intended to influence student success, and ultimately increase high school graduation for at-risk students. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how looping administrators at a large urban high school in the Midwest influence the decisions of at-risk students to persist and complete high school graduation requirements. This study used purposeful sampling to select at-risk students who were not expected to complete graduation requirements. Data were collected through interviews of six at-risk students and four looping administrators, observations, and documents. The theoretical framework of connectedness espoused by Waters, Cross, and Runions (2009) provided a lens through which to view and analyze the data collected. Using the framework of connectedness to view the findings, four overarching themes emerged: accountability, relatedness, perception of a shared value of education, and consistency. Findings confirm that the responsive "person-environment fit" established with the supportive relationships of the looping administrators contributed to the decisions of the at-risk students to persist and complete the necessary requirements for high school graduation.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

At a time when completion of a high school degree is no longer sufficient to offer assurance of financial stability to support one's family, educators, parents, and concerned citizens are asking, "How do we prepare our students for a bright future?" In her article "The Global Achievement Gap: Why America's Students are Falling Behind," Donaldson (2010) reported, "[With] growing competition from around the world, students must work harder than ever to stand out from the crowd." Additionally, the contention of the contributors of *Curriculum 21 Essential Education for a Changing World* is that schools in the United States need to completely re-conceptualize their curriculum and vividly change the presentation of schools to model what global education should look like (Jacobs, 2010). Efforts to improve the educational system in the United States will be limited if educators and the communities that support them do not recognize their professional and moral obligation to explore every opportunity to improve and refine the practices of educating and preparing students for a successful future.

As early as 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education cautioned the nation and the Secretary of Education through the publication of *A Nation at Risk* with the following avowal:

> If only to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in world markets, we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our educational system for the benefit of all-- old and young alike, affluent and poor, majority and minority. Learning is the indispensable investment required for success in the "information age" we are entering.

Desimone (2002) reflected on the many reform efforts that emerged as gradual accretions to the standardized organizational practices of the American public educational system. In her article, she categorized the educational reforms through three distinct waves of effects on public education. According to Desimone, the effects of the first wave of educational reforms, in response to *A Nation at Risk* (1983), were predominantly systematic changes as illustrated through increased standards and regulations resulting in teacher salary increases, additional core requirements for graduation, and additional time to the school day and year. With a focus on strengthening the relationship between schools and families, the second wave of reform initiatives, as seen by Desimone, sought strategies to eliminate barriers encountered by particular groups of students to enhancing education. This wave of reforms also suggested changes in education as a profession to attract and retain effective teachers, to enhance teacher certification, and to rebrand the image of a teacher as a professional (Desimone, 2002). The third wave of school reform focused on "improvement for entire schools rather than on particular populations of students within schools; and… [was] not limited to particular subjects, programs, or instructional methods" (Desimone, 2002, p. 434).

Through changes in legislation and allocation of funds, the federal government and private corporations demonstrated support for comprehensive school reform

(Desimone, 2002). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 represented a historical commitment of the federal government to provide an equal educational opportunity for all young people ("What is ESEA?." n.d.). The purpose of this act was to provide federal grants to districts serving low-income students to ensure that disadvantaged students received a quality education ("What is ESEA?," n.d.). The reauthorizations made in 1988 and again in 1994 to the Title I legislation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provided additional funds for school wide program changes. Enacted in 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) disclosed the disparity in academic performance between groups of students in public schools, and specified mandates for comprehensive school changes. In 2015, President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replacing the No Child Left Behind Act (2002). This new bill empowered states and school districts to consider the specific needs of their students to create and implement strategies that ensure all students graduate with the requisite skills for college and future careers. The financial influence on public education is not restricted to government agencies. In her book *Reign of Error,* Diane Ravitch (2014) critically discussed the permeating influence of the private sector through the evasive corporate reform movements. The pervasive goal of improving student learning has challenged many to get involved and also created a competitive market for others to transform into an entrepreneurial opportunity.

Background

Marzano (2003) likened public education to a quotation from Charles Dicken's *A Tale of Two Cities,* "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" (p. 1). In fact, during the twentieth century, a recurrent theme for the entire edifice of public education

in the United States was the rampant criticism of K-12 education and the many reform efforts during this century. Reflecting on a series of reform initiatives, Fullan (2007) asserted, "Large-scale reform failed in the 1960s because it focused primarily on the development of innovations and paid scant attention to the culture of schools and districts in which innovations would reside" (p. 9). The fierce global competition increased during the 1980s, placing an enormous degree of pressure on educational systems worldwide to implement accountability measures with the goal to improve education and, thus, the competitive edge. In fact, Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) referenced an "overload…of too many different innovations" that were accepted with little scrutiny or examination of the effectiveness of the educational change. Further, Elmore (1996) criticized the changes in educational practice of this time as nebulous efforts that were weakly linked to modifying the practice of teaching and learning.

Ten years after Elmores' comments, Gordon (2006) added to the criticisms with a reprimand of outdated assumptions and a lack of clarity on the basic goals of America's schools. Gordon (2006) identified six outdated assumptions which interfere with efforts to improve educational practices in schools as follows:

1. Higher expectations and accountability testing are the keys to ensuring that students are learning what they need in order to be successful in life.
2. Focusing on and improving areas of weakness for students and teachers is the key to making them more successful.
3. Selecting and developing teachers and principals on the basis of their knowledge and skills is the most reliable way to promote student success.

4. There exists a perfect curriculum that can help solve student achievement problems in a way that works for all students and teachers.
5. Differences in workplace culture are largely irrelevant to schools, because a teachers' working environment does not make much difference in the classroom.
6. Though greater involvement in America's schools is needed, schools can do little to improve parents' commitment to their children's education (pp. 18-20).

Thus, the emerging interest in modifying the fragmented practices of the educational system seems to lack a focus on the individual students and their intrinsic needs and barriers to achieving academic and life-long success.

Statement of the Problem

One need of students noted in the literature (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Kirkpatrick Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001; Osterman, 2000; Ryan & Patrick, 2001) is student connectedness with school. School connectedness promotes student learning in important ways. According to findings reported in the literature, school connectedness is positively related to students' motivation, classroom engagement, academic achievement, and improved school attendance (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Kirkpatrick Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001; Osterman, 2000; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). These factors in turn, have positive influences on academic achievement ("Wingspread Declaration on School," 2004, p. 233). For example, Furrer and Skinner (2003) suggest that students' feelings of relatedness [connectedness] to school have been linked to their academic motivation and performance. Additionally, Klem and Connell (2004) found that students who experience caring and supportive relationships with adults in school report more positive academic attitudes and values. Connecting with adults is especially important during the adolescent

years (Blum, 2005). Fundamentally, the influence of school connectedness on student's academic success is intended to increase high school graduation rates.

While fostering relationships with students to develop school connectedness is intended to influence student success, and ultimately increase high school graduation rates, research indicates these expectations were met in some instances (Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson, 2004; Crespo, Jose, Kielpikowski, & Pryor, 2013; Jose, Ryan, Pryor, 2012; Klem & Connell, 2004; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002), but were not met in other instances (Blum, 2005; Bower, van Kraayenoord, & Carroll, 2015; Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg, & Schellinger, 2011).

One possible reason students feel connected to school in some instances and not in others may be due to the types of relationships students develop with adults in the school (Bower, Carroll, & Ashman, 2012; Crespo, Jose, Kielpikowski, & Pryor, 2013; Klem & Connell, 2004). Teacher looping, for example is a technique that has been implemented to enhance student success by connecting students to a specific teacher over multiple years (Sterling, 2011; Thompson, Pomykal Franz, & Miller, 2009).

More recently, administrator looping has been introduced as a means to connect students with schools. Looping administrator programs are used primarily at the secondary level when students are identified as "at-risk" for insufficient progress toward graduation requirements. In these looping programs, administrators are paired with at-risk students to create relationships that will help motivate the student toward success. While little research is available on the effects looping teachers have on the academic performance of students (Pomykal Franz et al., 2010), even less is known about the

influence of administrator looping and its effect on high school students' academic success and, ultimately, their choices to persevere in fulfilling graduation requirements.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding, through student perspectives, of the influence of high school administrator looping on student decisions to complete graduation requirements.

Research Questions

Primary question

How does the looping administrator program influence decisions of at-risk students to complete the necessary requirements for high school graduation?

Sub-questions

1. How does the student's relationship with the looping administrator influence student's connections with the school?
2. How does the student's relationship with the looping administrator influence student's perceptions of the value of completing high school graduation requirements?
3. How does the looping administrator influence student persistence to meet educational goals?

Significance of the Study

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that positive relationships with caring adults in school may influence the decision making of students as it pertains to attendance in school, behavior in and out of school, school engagement, and academic

success (Blum, 2005; Whitlock, 2006). Therefore, understanding what promotes school connectedness has profound implications as educators and researchers develop policy and practices aimed to promote positive learning environments. As suggested by the literature, a point of paramount significance to looping is the positive bond that develops between the teacher and the students which is the impetus for the student to succeed academically (Burke, 1997; Gilliam, 2005).

School districts and the teachers, administrators, and school board members who assume the responsibility to prepare and educate students are accountable for the academic success of each student; therefore, this study is important to help stakeholders understand the looping administrator program as a means to influence students to have the grit, the determination, and the persistence to successfully complete their high school graduation requirements. Developing interests about the need for school connectedness and the benefits of teacher looping on student success have directed educators and researchers to redesign schools to better serve students and their families; however, no research was found to suggest the benefits and role of administrator looping as associated with students' academic success and persistence to meet educational goals. This study will add to the body of research on school connectedness and looping, specifically, as it relates to administrator looping as a practice that fosters (a) a sense of belonging in students, (b) increased graduation rates in high schools, and (c) profound implications for the role of the school administrator.

Limitations

Indigenous to case study is the limitation of the investigator as the primary research instrument. Although this limitation is addressed comprehensively in the

methods chapter, it warrants discussion at this point in the study. As the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, the researcher must be aware of the inherent biases which stem from previous employment in the context setting of this study and with established relationships within this school community. Admittedly, I have four years of past experience with administrator looping within the setting of the study. My familiarity and my previous experience within the setting could change my perceptions of the context for this study and, thus, could interfere with the interpretation of the data; however, I will endeavor to hear the voices of the participants in data collection, analysis, and reporting of findings. As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) the writer "of a case…ought to be someone who is intimately familiar with the case certainly, someone who was an active participant in gathering and processing the data and preferably someone in a leadership position in the inquiry" (p. 364). The investment of a thirty-year career and advancement opportunities within this school district speaks to the mutual respect as well as my dedication as an administrator and a researcher within this school district.

Another limitation of this case study is the issue of generalizability. As with all case studies, the potential to understand the phenomenon lies within the context of the investigation. This case study, anchored in a real-life setting, is based on a single case. Erickson (as cited in Merriam, 2009) argued, "What we learn in a particular case can be transferred to similar situations" (p. 51). Although the findings of this single case cannot be generalized, the findings of this study are valuable to the advancement of the body of research literature because they provide understandings of student perceptions of this looping administrator program.

A third limitation involves the previously established relationship the researcher has with the administrator participants. I will ask school administrators to purposefully select student participants for this study. It is possible the school administrators, when interviewed, felt a need to respond in a manner they felt was expected. Likewise, it is possible the school administrators influenced student participants to respond in a certain manner. In regard to this limitation, care was be taken to encourage transparent responses to interview questions. Participants were reminded that their identities are confidential and only aggregated findings will be reported.

Additionally, another potential limitation is the variety and scope of relationships between students and the administrators. Each relationship between the student and his/her administrator could be influenced by administrators' personality, temperament, and charisma. Personality characteristics of administrators such as friendliness, willfulness, discernment, and emotional stability could influence or impair students' confidence in their ability to succeed. This study does not seek to compare the relationships; however, it does seek to gain a better understanding of how connectedness to adults in school can influence the decision making of students. Differences in personalities may actually inform findings of this study as students explain their connections with the looping administrator.

Definition of Terms

1. At-risk Students – Students who are considered to have a high probability of failing academically or dropping out of school (Abbott, 2014).
2. School Connectedness – Refers to a school setting in which students feel the adults in the school care about their learning and their well-being (Blum, 2005).

3. Large school – High schools with student enrollment of 1000 students or more ("School Size," 2009).
4. Small school – Typically small schools are in a non-urban location with enrollments of 200 students or less (Halsey, 2011).
5. Looping
    a. Teacher Looping – The practice of teachers keeping the same students over two or more years to enhance student learning through developed relationships.
    b. Administrator Looping – The practice of school administrator supervising the same group of students as they progress through high school.

Chapter One Summary and Organization of the Study

This study is organized in five chapters. Chapter One begins with an introduction to the study and a brief overview of the background of the problem. The statement of the problem is established with the purpose statement and research questions identified. This study utilized a case study methodology to understand the influence of the looping administrator on the decisions of at-risk high school students. The significance of the study with its limitations are addressed, and a list of definitions for various terms is given. Chapter Two includes a discussion of the literature regarding concerns associated with high school dropouts, reform efforts to promote success in high school, school connectedness, and looping as a practice to influence academic achievement. Chapter Two also contains an explanation of the theoretical framework used in this study. Chapter Three describes the methodology utilized in this study, study population, sampling, data collection, and methods of analysis. Chapter Four presents the research findings through

the lens of the connectedness model by Waters, Cross and Runions (2009). Chapter Five concludes the study with conclusions, implications, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review of literature is organized according to the subtopics that are a part of the study. First, a comprehensive overview of the literature pertaining to the concerns of high school dropouts is offered. This includes current literature on the influence of poverty, challenges associated, trends in dropout rates, and prevention. Second, detailed information and background of the influence of high school size on student participation, satisfaction, and success in school is provided. Third, relevant literature on school connectedness is presented with a discussion of the building blocks, the importance, and the benefits of connectedness is reviewed. Fourth, a review of the literature on the concept of looping as practiced in public schools across the United States and the relationship between looping and a student's academic achievement is discussed. Finally, current literature on the theoretical framework surrounding this study is presented.

Concerns Associated with High School Dropouts

Many critical issues are noted in the literature as clouding the public's perception of American schools. However, the egregious number of students in the United States who make a decision every day to drop out of high school is a concern that cannot be denied. Despite the fact that education reform has been on the public agenda for several

decades, the catastrophic dropout cycle continues, and the number of students who make the decision to drop out of school near the end of their high school career is reaching epidemic proportions especially for Black, Hispanic, and Native American students (Rumberger, 2013).

Poverty and High School Dropouts

The inextricable connection between poverty and high school dropouts is established in the literature (Rumberger, 2013). Studies suggest that poverty has a negative influence on child and adolescent development through the dearth of resources (Rumberger, 2013). For many years, researchers (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Evans, 2004), have explored the harmful effects of poverty on children and their families. Bradley and Corwyn (2002) illustrated the connection of a family's socio-economic status (SES) to financial, human, and social capital with the following statement:

> Capital (resources [and] assets) has become a favored way of thinking about SES because access to financial capital (material resources), human capital (nonmaterial resources such as education), and social capital (resources achieved through social connections) are readily connectible to processes that directly affect well-being. (p. 372).

Building on previous research by Weikart and his colleagues in the 1960s, Schweinhart (2007) added to the research with a focus on preschool education as a means to address the proliferating concern of school failure among students living in poverty. From the research presented, Schweinhart (2007) concluded that "high-quality preschool programs for young children in poverty contribute to their intellectual and social development in childhood and their school success, economic performance and reduced

commission of crime in adulthood" (Schweinhart, 2007, p. 158). Families living in poverty and near poverty battle stresses of economic instability caused by the uncertainty of steady income, faltering health issues, oscillations in housing, and fluctuations in a fulfilling nutritional diet (Hokayem & Heggeness, 2013). As such, the culmination of numerous risk factors is harmful to the physical, socio-emotional, and cognitive well-being of children and adolescents.

Research has suggested that chronic episodes of adversity, such as parental unemployment and substandard housing conditions often experienced by children in high poverty situations, may have long-term damaging effects with lasting impact on learning, behavior, and health through a student's lifespan (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005/2014). Evans (2004) purported, "The frequency and intensity of stressful life events and daily hassles are greater among low-income children" (p. 86). As the stress response system of a young child enveloped with supportive adult relationships is triggered, the exposure to the stress is buffered, and the opportunity to emulate "healthy, adaptive responses to adverse experiences" (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012, p. e235) is an undeniable life-lesson. On the contrary, when young children are exposed to extreme, chronic adversity, as seen in children of poverty, without the protection from supportive, caring adults, the potential for toxic stress responses ensues. The overlapping disparity of childhood adversity and poverty experienced by many families contribute to the challenges of academically supporting students of a lower socio-economic status.

Toxic stress can lead to potentially permanent changes in a student's learning (linguistic, cognitive, and social-emotional skills), behavior, and physiology (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). As "students continue to be exposed to the adverse settings of poor

families, poor schools, and poor communities" (Rumberger, 2013, p. 2), this crippling force of poverty contaminates innocent, young bystanders with "toxic stressors" (p. 2). Shonkoff and Garner (2012) and The Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health (2010-2011) proposed eco-biodevelopmental (EBD) framework that provides a scientifically-based approach for the understanding of "how early childhood adversity can lead to lifelong impairments in learning behavior and, consequently, both physical and mental health" (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012, p. e234). Based on the viewpoint that persistent adversity early in life is disruptive to the developing brain, Shonkoff and Garner (2012) emphasized the practice of innovative strategies to enhance the educational development of all students.

Evidence in the literature addresses three aspects of poverty that are often experienced by students in high poverty situations. The impact of poverty in these three settings, families, schools, and communities, affect child and adolescent development in important ways.

Family poverty is associated with a number of adverse conditions such as – high mobility and homelessness; hunger and food insecurity; parents who are in jail or absent; domestic violence; drug abuse and other problems (Rumberger, 2013).

School poverty is seen when a majority of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. Additionally, as noted by Rumberger and Palardy, "The Coleman report was the first major national study to demonstrate that a student's achievement is highly related to characteristics of other students in the school" (Rumberger & Palardy, 2002, p. 2).

Community poverty is exhibited in communities with high concentration of disadvantaged families with notably high levels of joblessness, family instability, poor health, substance abuse, poverty, welfare dependency and crime (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002).

While the issue of poverty is important to the health and well-being of young children and adolescents, the disparities inherent with low socio-economic status are equally alarming with regard to the academic achievement and educational attainment of youth, particularly urban minority youth (Basch, 2011; Haas & Fosse, 2008; Crosnoe, 2006; Haas, 2006). Emerging literature alerts educators and policy makers to studies implicating "children's health factors as causal mechanisms through which low socio-economic status influences academic achievement and educational attainment" (Basch, 2011, p. 594). The model by Basch (2011) in Figure 1 depicts the reciprocal, causal relationship between health, academic achievement, and poverty (p. 594).

Figure 1

Reciprocal Causal Relationship Between Poverty, Health, and Education

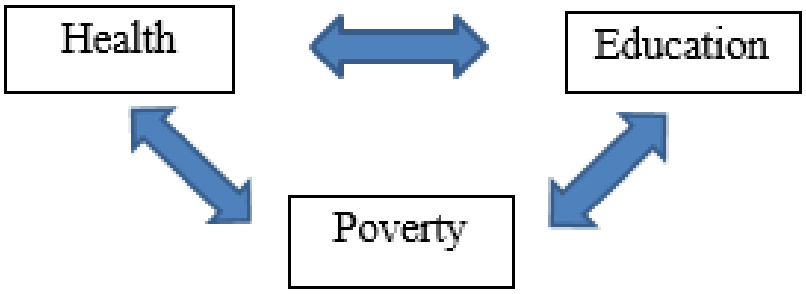


Figure 1. Association between health factors, socio-economic status, and academic achievement of students as a reciprocal, causal relationship.

Note. The model is from Basch (2011).

As one might assume, many obstinate social problems apparent in communities have a reciprocal relationship to poverty, disadvantage, and the denial of opportunity (Adamson, 2005). Poverty is preventing the opportunity for equality of education for all students. Evidence suggests, as stated by Adamson (2005), that children who grow up in poverty experience significant disadvantages as compared to children not living in poverty. Alarmingly, the percentage of children living in low-income families has increased from 39 percent in 2008 to 44 percent in 2014 (Jiang, Ekono, & Skinner, 2016). According to the National Center for Children living in Poverty (2016), there are nearly 72 million children under the age of 18 years old in the United States; of these children, 46.8 million children live in low-income or poor families (Jiang, Ekono, & Skinner, 2016). Guarding children from the stifling confines of poverty during their child and adolescent developmental years is essential to sustain a influential shift to further progress towards the equality of opportunity in education and the collaborative effort to keep students in school. Further, the strength of the economy relies on an educational system that is able to develop a strong workforce of students with a diverse range of skills and learning capacities.

Challenges Faced by High School Dropouts

In a dropout report published by U.S. Department of Education entitled *No More Excuses*, the authors warned, "What troubles us and adds to our collective impatience in submitting this report is precisely that so much of this has appeared so often in the research literature…Yet the nation has failed to put this knowledge to work…" (Secada et al., 1998, p. 10). Concerned about the future lives and unfulfilled dreams of the students who had left school, the authors of the study agonized over the abbreviated

education received by the students who indicated they left school because no one had communicated high expectations to them, and no one had provided them with relevant opportunities to achieve those expectations. In essence, no one had established meaningful individual relationships with them (Secada et al., 1998).

Dropping out of high school is the antecedent to a multitude of challenges and obstacles that often interfere with a satisfying lifestyle. When comparing average incomes in 2012, researchers found that individuals ages 18 through 67 who had not completed high school earned approximately $25,000; on the other hand, individuals ages 18 through 67 who completed their education with a high school degree or the equivalent earned approximately $46,000 (Stark, Noel, & McFarland, 2015). Once dropouts reach adulthood, fewer dropouts are in the work force when compared with adults who completed high school or the equivalent credential (Chapman, Laird, & Kewal Ramani, 2010). Although data from the Current Population Survey released in October, 2014, indicated a drop in the unemployment rate from the previous year, the unemployment rate for workers with less than a high school diploma is still greater at 7.9 percent than the unemployment rate of 5.7 percent for workers of the same age with at least a high school diploma (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). In a study of unemployment rates and educational attainment, Daly, Osborne, and Valetta (2007) revealed a pronounced increase in unemployment rates from 1970 to 2005 for individuals without a high school diploma; whereas, the unemployment rate for individuals with at least a high school diploma remained constant during this same period.

Additionally, dropouts older than 24 years of age reported more health related issues than did adults who earned high school credentials (Chapman et al., 2010;

Muennig, 2005). In a report by the U.S. Department of Health (2013), the authors relate disparities in education to unhealthy behaviors such as "smoking, obesity, lack of physical activity, and excessive drinking of alcohol" (p. 76). Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) noted a greater expenditure of public funds on health insurance for dropouts than on high school graduates.

According to a report from the U.S. Department of Justice, "About 75 percent of State prison inmates and 59 percent of Federal inmates did not receive a high school diploma" (Wolf Harlow, 2003, p. 3). Interested in the benefits of education, Lochner and Moretti (2004) sought to determine if there existed benefits to education beyond individual betterment. Results of this study suggest that each year of schooling leading up to high school completion reduces an individual's propensity to be involved in criminal behavior. More specifically, violent crimes such as murder and assault are reduced when high school graduation rates are increased. In addition, Lochner and Moretti (2004) concluded, "A 1-percent increase of high school completion rate of all men ages 20 – 60 would save the United States as much as $1.4 billion per year in reduced costs from crime incurred by victims and society at large" (p. 183).

Dropping out of high school is a precursor to numerous other problems for the individual, the school, the community, and the nation as a whole. Researchers made the following statement:

> Dropping out of school has been associated with a host of broader negative outcomes, including (a) forgone national income, (b) forgone tax revenues for the support of government services, (c) increased demand for social services, (d) increased crime and antisocial behavior, (e) reduced political participation, (f)

reduced intergenerational mobility, and (g) poorer levels of health (Hayes, Nelson, Tabin, Pearson, & Worthy, 2002, p. 87).

Reviewing the existing literature, Rouse (2005) sought to disentangle the opposing propositions conjectured by other researchers in an effort to contemplate the effect of completing high school on one's income. Rouse focused on understanding if the local economy valued the tenacious efforts of an individual and the skills earned through a high school education, and as such, was willing to pay higher wages to high school graduates. On the other hand, were the individuals who completed high school requirements more skilled and better prepared than dropouts, and therefore, recipients of higher wages as compensation for their knowledge and preparedness? The study conducted by Rouse (2005) endeavored to establish convincing evidence to predict the causal effect of education on labor market outcome, or simply stated, the effect of completing high school on one's income. An analysis of the data indicated a 53 percent employment rate for dropouts, a 69 percent employment rate for those with a high school diploma, and a 74 percent employment rate for those who have continued education beyond high school (Rouse, 2005).

Although dropping out of high school is an individual decision with negative consequences for the individual, the economic impact of this decision is felt by the community. "Over a lifetime, an 18-year-old who does not complete high school earns approximately $260,000 less than an individual with a high school diploma and contributes about $60,000 less in lifetime federal and state income taxes" (Rouse, 2005, p. 24). Sanchez (2011) revealed the staggering cost of high school dropouts to taxpayers is 320 to 350 billion dollars in "lost wages taxable income, health, welfare, and

incarceration costs" (para. 1). Reporting on the cost of dropping out of high school in the NPR series, Johnston (2011) found "only 7 percent of dropouts [ages] 25 and older have ever made more than $40,000 a year" (para. 13).

Trends in High School Dropout Rates and Completion Rates

Clearly, it is essential for researchers and educators alike to analyze the data regarding the trends in high school dropout and high school completion in order to improve educational practices and elicit a positive impact on students, schools, communities, and society at large. Since 1988, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) has been reporting high school dropout and high school completion rates.

To give a more detailed picture of the situation, researchers (Stark, Noel, & McFarland, 2015) analyzed the data for high school dropouts and high school completion from four different angles:

- The event dropout rate estimates the percentage of both private and public high school students who left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or its equivalent (e.g. GED).
- The status dropout rate reports the percentage of individuals in a given age range who are not in school and have not earned a high school diploma or equivalency credential, irrespective of when they dropped out.
- The status completion rate indicates the percentage of individuals in a given age range who are not in high school and who have earned a high school diploma or equivalency credential, irrespective of when the credential was earned.

- The adjusted cohort graduate rate (ACGR) estimates the proportion of public high school freshmen who graduate with the regular diploma four years after starting ninth grade (Stark, Noel, & McFarland, 2015).

In October 2012, the national event dropout rate was reported as 3.4 percent (Stark, Noel, McFarland, 2015). This finding indicates that of 100 students ages 15 through 24 who were enrolled in grades 10 through 12 from a public or private school in October 2011, approximately four left school before October 2012 without completing a high school degree or its equivalent. During the same year, the event dropout rates of high school students by race/ethnicity were: Black 6.8 percent, Hispanic 5.4 percent, White 1.6 percent, and Asian/Pacific Islander 1.6 percent (Stark, Noel, & McFarland, 2015). Not surprisingly, the event dropout rates increased in value the older the students were while they were in high school. For example, during the 1-year time period, 2.2 percent of 15- and 16-year-olds dropped out of high school, 8.2 percent of 19-year-olds dropped out of high school, and 14.9 percent of 20- to 24-year-olds dropped out of high school (Stark, Noel, & McFarland, 2015).

The status dropout rate, known as the percentage of individuals in a particular age range who are not enrolled in high school and have not earned high school credentials is typically higher than the even dropout rate. Because the status dropout rate looks at all dropouts regardless of when and where they last attended school, it is not particularly useful as an indicator for the performance of schools. Simply stated, this measure gives an indication of how many young people, when surveyed, do not have a high school education. In October 2012, the status dropout rate for 16- to 24-year-olds in the United States was 6.6 percent (Stark, Noel, & McFarland, 2015). The ethnic breakdown of this

group is Asian/Pacific Islanders 3.3 percent, White 4.3 percent, Black 7.5 percent, Hispanic 12.7 percent, American Indian/Alaskan Native 14.6 percent (Stark, Noel, McFarland, 2015).

Another source of data, the status completion rate, is helpful in understanding the critical issue related to high school dropouts. The status completion rate is reported from the Current Population Survey (CPS) on the percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds who have left high school and who have earned high school credentials. During the last 30 years, the status completion rate has increased slightly from 83.9 percent in 1980 to 91.3 percent in 2012 (Stark, Noel, & McFarland, 2015). In the United States, Asian/Pacific Islanders had the highest status completion rate of 94.9 percent compared to other ethnic groups, Native American/Alaskan Natives 79.0 percent, Hispanic 82.8 percent, Black 90.0 percent, and White 94.6 percent. In addition, the status completion rate of foreign-born Hispanics is 69.3 percent; however, the status completion rate of Hispanics born in the United States is 87.5 to 88.3 percent depending on if the individual is first generation or second generation born of the United States (Stark, Noel, & McFarland, 2015).

In recent years, the adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) has slightly improved. In 2008, Rumberger and Lim (2008) concluded that 25.0 percent of all students fail to earn a diploma within four years of starting their ninth grade year (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). By 2015, Stark, Noel, and McFarland calculated that the percentage of public high school students who would graduate within four years of starting their ninth grade year was 80.0 percent within the nation for the class of 2011-2012 with individual state rates ranging from 59.0 percent to 89.0 percent (Stark, Noel, McFarland, 2015).

Preventing Future High School Dropouts

In order to prevent future high school dropout, educators, researchers and policy makers must understand factors that lead to increased student dropout. Additionally, as aptly stated by Christenson and Thurlow (2004), "Given these individual and societal consequences, facilitating school completion for all students must be a critical concern for researchers, policymakers, and educators across the country" (p. 36). Preventing school dropout and promoting successful graduation for all students is a national concern that requires the focus and support of all members of American society. The commanding need for accurate and reliable measures of high school dropout and completion rates without discrepancies among the sources of data is a handicap that often interferes the analyses of the data (Hauser & Anderson Koenig, 2011).

The current national reform efforts set in motion with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and pointedly suggested in Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) clearly speak to the seriousness of the school-dropout problem in the United States as a federal priority. An improvement of graduation rates, and thus a reduction in the high school dropout rate, necessitates action steps to improve policy and action in education. The Committee for Improved Measurement of High School Dropout and Completion Rates endorses the efforts of individual states to develop comprehensive longitudinal data systems not only to assess and report accurate and valid data, but also to identify factors associated with dropping out (Hauser & Anderson Koenig, 2011). Likewise, NCLB demands educational accountability by setting high academic standards monitored through test performance of students, graduation rates of schools, and the percentage of ninth grader students receiving a high school diploma in four years. Recognizing that the requirements of

NCLB were inconceivable, the Obama administration, in a bipartisan effort, established ESSA, empowering states and school districts to set high standards of graduating from high school all students college and career ready with a focus of resources on developing and implementing rigorous interventions that meet the individual needs of all students. Despite the nation's substantial investment in educational reform to increase high school graduation rates and conversely reduce dropout rates since the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the graduation rates have virtually remained stagnant the last 25 years and only recently have begun to decline (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Darling-Hammond & Wood, 2008).

In an extensive review of 203 published studies, Rumberger and Lim (2008) analyzed national, state, and local data to pinpoint statistically significant predictors of high school dropout and graduation. Rumberger and Lim revealed two types of factors that predict whether students stay in school or dropout: individual predictors and institutional predictors. The individual student predictors include educational performance, engagement in school, educational expectations, and background characteristics (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). The institutional predictors identified by Rumberger and Lim as influencing a student's decision to drop out or graduate high school are factors within the student's family, school, and community.

Although students drop out of school for a variety of reasons, it is the responsibility of the school district and the school to develop and implement interventions to identify and monitor students at risk for school failure. Christenson and Thurlow (2004) agreed that "early and sustained intervention is integral to the success of students because the decision to leave school without graduating is not an instantaneous

one, but rather a process that occurs over many years" (p. 37). However, school efforts to help students succeed are not always successful. According to Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, and Godber (2001), helping students to meet rigorous demands of the academic standards must incorporate initiatives addressing social and behavioral standards. Research indicates there is little evidence to suggest that interventions seeking to remediate poor attendance and poor academic performance have an impact on dropout rates (Christenson et al., 2001). Researchers, policymakers, and educators are responsible for initiating and implementing policies and interventions that keep students in school for the purpose of academic success leading to high school completion.

Students themselves report a variety of reasons for leaving high school. Reasons given by students for dropping out of school have been categorized as "push" effects and "pull" effects (Jordan, McPartland, & Lara, 1999). Push effects are situations within the school environment that drive a student to make a decision to drop out, and pull effects are experiences or situations outside of school that pull a student away from the priorities of high school graduation (Jordan et al., 1999). Many studies have been completed to analyze why students drop out of school; however, few studies have been conducted on the reasons many at-risk students make the decision every day to stay in school.

Federal Efforts to Promote Success in High Schools

A Race to the Top

In the late 1950s, the battle between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. continued when the Americans were caught off-guard as the Soviet Union successfully launched Sputnik I, the first unmanned satellite. Americans were both frightened and furious that the Soviets were so far ahead of the superior technology of the United States ("Soviet Union

launches Sputnik I," 2009). This single event triggered the space race between the U.S. and the Soviets which brought new political, military, technology and scientific objectives into focus for the United States.

Furthermore, during this era, as mentioned at The High School Leadership Summit in Washington, DC, "The economic rise of Germany and Japan highlighted the academic failings of American schools" (U.S. Department of Education, 2003, p. 3). Congress sought to spawn future scientists by passing a bill to increase math and science in American schools (Hounshell, 1976). This quest to find excellence in education and to dominate in the areas of math, science, and engineering continues.

The heightened focus in the areas of math, science, technology and engineering embarked the establishment of the STEM Education Coalition developing a central mission to "inform federal and state policymakers on the critical role that STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] education plays in the U.S. competiveness and future prosperity" (Resources, 2011, para.1). In 2009, President Obama declared, "Reaffirming and strengthening America's role as the world's engine of scientific discovery and technological innovation is essential to meeting the challenges of the century" (Gibbs, 2009, p. 1), as he launched his "Educate to Innovate" campaign to the nation.

Through an audacious effort to incite state and local educators to espouse novel and ambitious methods to educate students, in 2009 the Obama Administration introduced Race to the Top, a competitive grant expected to reform America's public schools. Fueled by fervent partnerships and enormous financial commitments from leading companies, foundations, and other organizations affiliated with science and

engineering, this nationwide enterprise was powered with a historic investment of $4.35 billion (Office of the Press Secretary, 2009). Motivating and inspiring young people to excel in math and science became the catalyst that would accelerate a movement to assist America in regaining the leading role in scientific discovery and innovative technology.

Declaring that education is central to the success and competitiveness in the global economy, President Obama reminded Americans that the status of an economic leader lies within the nation that can best educate its students (Obama at the Department of Education, 2009). In a bold and charismatic statement, President Obama made a plea to the nation for each person to do his/her part to provide better opportunities for America's young people.

> The reason I'm here is to make sure that we are giving… all our children the pathways they need to make the most of their abilities; to make the most of their opportunities; to make the most of their lives. I am absolutely confident that if I do my part, if [Secretary] Arne [Duncan] does his part, if our teachers do their part, if you do yours, if the American people do theirs, then we will not only strengthen our economy over the long run, and we will not only make America's entire education system the envy of the world, but we will launch a Race to the Top that will prepare every child, everywhere in America, for the challenges of the 21st century. (Obama at the Department of Education, 2009. para. 20)

Essential to meeting the challenges of the Educate to Innovate campaign, the Obama Administration identified three overarching priorities for STEM education:

- Increase STEM literacy so all students can think critically in science, math, engineering and technology.

- Improve the quality of math and science teaching so American students are no longer outperformed by those in other nations.
- Expand STEM education and career opportunities for underrepresented groups, including women and minorities. (Obama Educate to Innovate Briefing, 2009, para. 6)

As President Obama has emphatically stated, "It is our generation's task… to reignite the true engine of America's economic growth – a rising, thriving middle class" ("Briefing Room," 2013). Consequently, challenging schools to analyze data became a focus in society that would shape education reform. In his 2013 State of the Union address, President Obama further elaborated his vision for education by stating, "It is our unfinished task to restore the basic bargain that built this country – the idea that if you work hard and meet your responsibilities, you can get ahead, no matter where you come from" (2013). These initiatives impressed upon the American public that an increased sense of ownership for student outcomes and a heightened sense of efficacy from educators at the state and local level were vital.

Planning for Success

There was a time when only intellectually gifted students were expected to enroll and excel in rigorous college preparatory curriculum. However, apparent shifts in the structure of American society as a whole began to illicit the necessary challenges to the assumptions schools had come to know (Schlechty, 2001). Wood (2010) presented the views of Bottoms (2003), demanding schools to tenaciously agree that all students have the potential to learn, to eagerly provide them the exposure to experience the challenges of rigorous coursework, and to adamantly expect their success with the safety net of

supportive relationships with adults in school. Subsequently, this shift to assert that all students have the potential to learn at higher academic levels when given the opportunity to participate in high-quality academic programs stimulated schools to utilize S.M.A.R.T. goals when planning and preparing engaging lessons for all students. Goals are considered effective and S.M.A.R.T. if they are written in manner that is strategic and specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, and time bound (Haughey, 2015, para. 1).

S.M.A.R.T. goals have been used by motivational speakers, corporate trainers, and management planners for many years to assist individuals and corporations to attain their identified career dreams and to enhance financial security. Only in the last twenty years has this process for goal-setting been used in schools and school communities. Many school administrators and teams of teachers began developing a strong infrastructure of teams within their school districts focused on improving student learning by strategically aligning their resources and attention on an expectation that all students will meet or exceed established standards. Schmoker advised, "Learning goals give meaning to and act as a healthy check on the traditionally untethered tendency for public institutions to be satisfied with processes, regardless of outcomes (Schmoker, 1999, p. 30).

As American philanthropist Elbert Hubbard once commented, "Many people fail in life, not for lack of ability or brains or even courage, but simply because they have never organized their energies around a goal" (as cited in Haughey, 2015, para. 6). Katzenbach and Smith (1993) offered "the attainability of specific performance goals helps teams maintain their focus on getting results" (p. 54). Additionally, Conzemius and O'Neill (2006) advised, "Schools in which administrators, staff, students, and parents are

engaged in goal-setting reap rewards more quickly and are able to sustain continued improvement of results over time" (p. 4). With the absence of clear and specific learning goals for instruction in America's classrooms, institutions have accepted a legacy of disillusionment to argue that academic learning is not for all students. Further, Schmoker (1999) lamented, "In the absence of goals, entropy and aimlessness rush in" (p. 23).

Large Schools vs. Small Schools

Another seismic shift in education that has resulted in challenges for success leading to high school graduation is the assumption that standardization in the delivery of education is most efficient. Standardization in schools refers to the idea that schools are structured to meet the needs of a group of students. Schlechty (2001) argued that "such standardization does little to address the academic needs of those outside the majority, such as children from non-academically oriented families" (p. 18). He suggested that what is needed are educational leaders who are willing to create unique and quality educational experiences through mass customization. (Schlechty, 2001). The mission of schools must be to address the demands and issues associated with the diverse culture we have grown into as a nation. In his book *Shaking Up the Schoolhouse*, renowned educator Phillip Schlechty (2001) called for educational leaders, legislators, and policymakers to recognize the need for transformation in an effort to improve decisions regarding instruction and effective approaches, thereby, increasing student achievement and, ultimately, high school graduation.

In a study of American secondary education, Harvard's James Conant (1959) was the first to suggest that the financial considerations of the small public high schools oftentimes placed unfavorable restrictions on a promising diversified curriculum. Pittman

and Haughwout (1987) explained that Conant "believed that bigger is better" and as such, "consolidating smaller schools into large units offered students greater academic opportunity and was more economical" (p. 337). During this period, school consolidation proponents persuaded the American public that "students in small schools and small school districts would be measurably enhanced" (Guthrie, 1979, p. 18) when small schools collapsed into larger schools.

Supporters of large schools agreed with Conant that in order to have a viable curriculum for advanced learning and high performance students, secondary schools would need to have enrollments which exceeded one thousand students (Duke, De Roberto, & Trautvetter, 2001). Haller, Monk, Spotted Bear, Griffith, and Moss (1990) summarized the fundamental belief that small and (sometimes) rural high schools could not offer comprehensive academic programs to benefit all students as could the large, urban high schools, and thus, denied an equality of educational opportunity to their students. This assumption stemmed from the lack of financial support in the less robust economy of small, oftentimes, rural communities. Large schools continued in their popularity during the 1960s when the idea of desegregation was introduced to the schools. Small communities were not as eager to accept the new idea of desegregation in their schools; however, the larger schools were open to a more diverse student body (Duke, DeRoberto, & Trautvetter, 2001).

Lee and Smith (1995) argued that despite the continuous efforts of numerous reforms to meet educational goals as well as the substantial restructuring of American education, "Many would agree that our schools are not working" (p. 242). Shum and Myers (2002) supported the argument by Lee and Smith and stated, "Today's large high

schools are not working; let's rethink what is best for kids" (p. 2). With support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and education organization, took an in-depth look at the perspective of public high school teachers and parents on reorganizing large high schools into smaller schools (Johnson, 2002). In a summary of research, Kathleen Cotton (1996) maintained the advantages of small schools outweigh the opportunities of large schools. Cotton identified the following benefits of small schools:

- Student achievement in small schools is at least equal—and often superior—to student achievement in large schools.
- Student attitudes toward school in general and toward particular school subjects are more positive in small schools.
- Student social behavior—as measured by truancy, discipline problems, violence, theft, substance abuse, and gang participation—is much higher and more positive in small schools.
- Students have a greater sense of belonging in small schools than in large ones.
- Interpersonal relations between and among students. Teachers and administrators are more positive in small schools than in large ones.
- Adults and students in the school know and care about one another to a greater degree than is possible in large schools. (Cotton, 1996)

As evidenced in the literature, Ayers, Bracey, and Smith (2000) reinforced, "There is growing interest in returning to small schools and mounting research that small schools function better than big ones" (p. 2). Despite the recognition by researchers and

policy makers that large, consolidated high schools fail to meet the needs of students in most cases (Ayers, Bracey, & Smith), little effort has been made in the United States to reduce the size of high schools throughout the country.

School Connectedness

Relationships – The Building Blocks

Notwithstanding the evidence to return to small schools, Cotton (2001) suggested not all small school initiatives could boast of improving education with authentic achievement. Clarifying what the movement to small schools can and cannot do, Visher, Teitelbaum, and Emanuel (1999) warned,

> Researchers who have studied small schools have stressed that reducing school size alone does not necessarily lead to improved student outcomes. Instead they have concluded that school size should be seen as having an indirect effect on student learning…school size acts as a facilitating factor for other desirable practices. In other words, school characteristics that tend to promote increased student learning-such as…personalized…relationships-are simply easier to implement in small schools. (p. 21)

These statements made in 1999 support the work of John Dewey (1958) who counseled educators to recognize that education is a social process, one in which the effectiveness is realized in the degree in which individuals form a group. Osterman (2000) postulated two perspectives to understanding the shared emotional connection of a group. The reciprocal value between an individual and the community creates a sense of connection, a feeling of belonging, and a belief that needs will be met through the commitment to each other within the group. Schaps (2003) later offered, "A school's

social environment has a pronounced influence on students' learning and growth, including major aspects of their social, emotional, and ethical development" (p. 40). Feelings of social connection and a sense of belonging to the school community have a compelling force over the academic achievement and lifelong success of students (Sulkowski, Demaray, & Lazarus, 2012).

Motivation to Learn

A substantial body of research has examined the question of how a school community influences students' motivation to learn, goal setting, academic achievement, and ultimately, their decisions to stay in school and graduate. Baker conjectured thatrelationships with significant adults at school enhance a student's motivation to learn (Baker, 1999). Through meaningful connections with adults at school, the attitudes and beliefs of students regarding school related values begin to align with those who have consistently shown their encouragement and support (Baker, 1999).

Promoting community in school has been seen to have a broad effect on students' volitional involvement in their educational journey. Seeking to better understand the phenomenon of social contexts within education, researchers (Baker, 1999; Davis, 2003; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991) studied the influence of relationships on students' motivation to learn. At the same time, Baker (1999) developed a multiple methods study to inform educators on the supporting elements of fostering a school environment in which at-risk students could be successful. Davis (2003) synthesized the available research on teacher-student relationships with emphases on attachment, motivation, and sociocultural perspectives. Ryan and Deci (2000) highlighted students' needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy to nourish and sustain a genuine

enthusiasm for learning, a regard for the value of education, and a portrayal of confidence in their own abilities. Helping students to discover within themselves "a greater sense of choice, more self-initiation of behavior, and greater personal responsibility are important developmental goals ...which lead to outcomes that are beneficial both to individuals and to society" (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991, p. 342). Hardre and Reeve (2003) asserted, "As self-determination and competence [in students] are enhanced, these motivational resources in turn promote achievement and persistence" (p. 355).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) reminded educators that "the existence of a need to belong is a familiar point of theory and speculation" (p. 497). Widely accepted is Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs illustrating his theory of human motivation. Central to Maslow's hierarchy is his unique framework that describes the stages of human growth and the patterns associated with human motivation. Desautels (2014) depicted Maslow's model as "a theory of basic, psychological and self-fulfillment needs that motivate individuals to move consciously or subconsciously through levels or tiers based on [one's] inner and outer satisfaction of those met or unmet needs" (para. 1). According to Maslow's hierarchy, the need for love and belonging cannot be actualized before one's physiological needs and safety needs have been met; however, the need to belong must be reasonably satisfied before one can feel the sense of accomplishment and a sense of reaching one's potential (Maslow, 1970).

Additional Theories Supporting the Need to Belong

One theory attempting to explain and predict behavior and performance was identified by McClelland (1961). The basis for McClelland's Achievement Motivation Theory (as cited in Moore, Grabsch, & Rotter, 2010) is a person's need for achievement,

power, and affiliation. McClelland's theory, according to Moore, Grabsch, and Rotter (2010) explained the depth of an individual's motivation as it relates to the need for achievement in a competitive fashion, the need for power to influence through a leadership role, and the need for affiliation as seen in the development and maintaining of close relationships. The invariant component of each theory mentioned is bonding and relatedness. This underlying current implies that the feelings of belonging and school connectedness are paramount for the emotional well-being and the academic success of students.

Prior to Maslow's theory, Alderfer (1969) presented a theory of human needs: Existence, Relatedness and Growth (ERG). The framework for his ERG theory is "obtaining material existence needs, maintaining interpersonal relatedness with significant other people, and seeking opportunities for unique personal development and growth" (p. 145). According to Alderfer, these factors provide the basic elements in motivation. Similarly, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), when applied to education, captures the perspective of students' intrinsic motivation and the confidence in their own aptitude and attributes (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). SDT begins with the assumption that the affinities of individuals to experience new circumstances and accomplish new challenges emerge organically through natural development. However, just as physical bodies require the nutrients of food and water for growth and development, the psychological needs for personality development and self-motivation rely on the nutriments and conditions fostering an individual's need of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in order to facilitate a "volitional propensity towards motivation and engagement" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68).

Researchers in a variety of disciplines such as education, health, psychology, and sociology have been captivated for over a decade with the concept of school connectedness and the many inter-related terms such as student engagement, school attachment, and school bonding (Blum, 2005). Defining school connectedness, Blum and Libbey (2004) stated school connectedness is "the belief by students that adults in school care about their learning and about them as individuals" (p. 231). The Center for School Mental Health Analysis and Action described school connectedness as "feeling positively about education, a sense of belonging in the school environment, and having positive relationships with school staff and other students" (Weiss, Cunningham, Lewis, & Clark, 2005, p.1). Fostering positive adult-student relationships is at the heart of school connectedness.

Scholarly interest in school connectedness has prompted researchers to explore and examine possible roadmaps to guide educators in America in this pursuit to improving social and educational outcomes for students (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004). O'Malley and Amarillas (2011) agreed, when educational environments are personalized and meaningful, students respond and perform more favorably. Lin, Dean and Ensel (1986) identified three types of social relations articulating the social support relevant to students in schools: the sense of belongingness, the sense of bonding, and the sense of binding. Researchers (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Osterman, 2000) continued to study empirical evidence suggesting an individual's fundamental need for is the sense of belongingness, which is preeminent to motivation. Baumeister and Leary (1995) construed belongingness as an inescapable need to form and maintain encouraging and meaningful relationships within a community. Catalano et

al., (2004) depicted the sense of bonding as an attachment and commitment through an investment of close relationships in a community such as a school. Libbey (2004) likened attachment as "an emotional link to school" and commitment as an "investment in a group" (p. 274). Finally, the sense of binding contributes to one's social support through intimate relations with others (Lin, Dean, & Ensel, 1986). An increased involvement in positive behaviors among students is the effect of binding relationships that encircle the student with support and encouragement. In a later study, Lin, Ye, and Ensel (1999) rendered the structural elements of belonging, bonding, and binding as layers of a support structure which mediate the effects of stressful life events and help individuals make healthy choices.

Connectedness and Health and Risk Factors

Relationships and the feeling of connectedness are notably related to health and risk factors. Researchers have uncovered a growing body of evidence to support the position of school connectedness as not only an antidote to deter adolescents from engaging in health-compromising behaviors, but also an organic nutrient that promotes the likelihood of academic success in students (Furlong, O'Brennan, & You, 2011; Blum & Libbey, 2004). The positive relationships with adults in school encourage connectedness through consistent communication, monitoring of risky behaviors, teaching problem-solving skills, and persistent reinforcement of appropriate behaviors (Sharkey, Quirk, & Mayworm, 2014). Bernat and Resnick (2009) decidedly believe the "connections that young people have to adults, the schools they attend, and the communities in which they live are key determinants of the health and well-being of adolescents" (p. 376). Commenting on research by Baskin, Wampold, Quintana, and

Enright (2010), Roffey (2011) warned "one of the causes of depression is loneliness and... “acceptance or rejection...at school" and further offered that a vital element to the mental health of students is connectedness (p. 18).

The enhancement of protective factors in a student’s environment, specifically the school environment, is a necessary antidote to stifle the sultry effects of adolescent risk factors (Coie et al., 1993; Wheaton, 1985). Using data collected through the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Resnick et al., 1997), researchers of the study aimed to understand how some students at risk for health compromising behaviors were able to by-pass the entanglement of destructive behaviors associated with adolescence. During this study, researchers specified the following eight risk behaviors indicative of at-risk students in grades seven through twelve: "emotional distress, suicide attempt, violence perpetration, smoke cigarettes, alcohol use, marijuana use, sex, and pregnancy history" (Resnick et al., 1997, p.827).

Also significant to the longitudinal study and of particular interest to the current study is the impact of protective factors, such as relatedness and connectedness, as measured in the three contexts presented: family, school, and individual characteristics. Through an analysis of the data, researchers found that perceived school connectedness, in addition to parent-family connectedness, is a protective factor against each of the health-risk behaviors measured in the study, except pregnancy history (Resnick et al., 1997). Adding to the literature review, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declared “school connectedness was found to be the strongest protective factor for both boys and girls to decrease substance use, school absenteeism, early sexual initiation, violence, and risk of unintentional injury” (U.S. Department of Health and Human

Services, 2009, p. 7). Also cited by Resnick et al. (1997), school connectedness was the second most influencing factor associated with lower levels of emotional distress, eating disorders, and suicidal involvement among adolescents.

As noted in the literature, school connectedness has been shown to be a mitigating factor to a multitude of threatening behaviors surrounding adolescents. Resnick, Harris, and Blum (1993) emphasized the importance of schools as a primary source of connectedness with adults:

> With school connectedness superseding family connectedness as a protective factor against the acting out behaviors, we infer that schools can and do play a vital role in reducing the likelihood of health-jeopardizing behaviors among girls and boys by providing a sense of belonging that may not also be provided by other sources such as family or peers (p. S6-S7).

Student Connectedness to School

The terms connectedness, belongingness, relatedness, and community refer to students' sense of being in close, respectful relationships with peers and adults in schools (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Schaps, 2003). A student's attitude towards school, which encompasses a sense of belonging in the school environment and a commitment related to school, is also known as school connectedness (Weiss et al., 2005). The Center for School Mental Health Analysis and Action (CSMHA) (Weiss et al., 2005) described school connectedness as the student's motivation to attend school, persistence in academic work, belief in the importance of educational efforts, perceptions of support and caring, feelings of inclusion and acknowledgement, and positive relationships with school staff and other students. Robert Blum (2005) referred to school connectedness as

"an academic environment in which students believe that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals" (p. 16).

Similar terms are also apparent in the literature: school attachment, school bonding, school climate, and school engagement (Blum, 2005). Mouton and colleagues revealed students whose school attachment was minimal perceived their lives at school as lonely and isolated with low levels of support and encouragement from adults in school (Mouton, Hawkins, McPherson & Copley, 1996). Catalano et al. (2004) noted two fundamental and symbiotic components of school bonding: "attachment, characterized by close affective relationships with those at school; and commitments, characterized by an investment in school and doing well in school" (p. 252).

Libbey (2004) expressed that school climate is the extent to which students feel teachers would help them, school rules are enforced fairly, teachers are supportive, and there is a presence of school spirit within the school community. The functional measure of school engagement has been analyzed to assess students' academic motivation (Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003; Manlove, 1998), self-regulated learning and disruptive behavior (Ryan & Patrick, 2001), a student's sense of alienation from school (Kalil & Ziol-Guest, 2008), and academic participation and identification with school (Finn, 1993).

When Students Feel Connected to School

Evidence suggests that when students feel connected to school, they show higher levels of success. In a report of their study aimed at relating teacher support to student engagement and academic achievement, Klem and Connell (2004) contended that students need to sense the teachers within the school know and care about them. Klem

and Connell (2004) further added that "students who perceive teachers as creating a caring, well-structured learning environment… are more likely to report engagement in school, which in turn is associated with higher attendance and test scores (p. 270). Additionally, researchers agree that, when students feel connected to school, they are less likely to engage in disruptive behavior such as bullying, fighting, skipping school, substance abuse, and vandalism (Blum, 2005; Schaps, 2003; Wilson & Elliott, 2003).

Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, and Schaps (1995) suggested that "a caring school community" might just be the impetus to motivate students to embrace the work ethics and behaviors encouraged by teachers and school staff (p. 650). In a report entitled *School Connectedness: Improving Students' Lives*, Blum (2005) emphasized that "increased student connection to school decreases absenteeism, fighting, bullying and vandalism while promoting educational motivation, classroom engagement, academic performance, school attendance, and completion rates" (p. 1). However, Blum (2005) suggests that the students' positive connection to school is influenced by the following qualities:

- Having a sense of belonging and being part of a school
- Liking school
- Perceiving that teachers are supportive and caring
- Having good friends within school
- Being engaged in their own current and future academic progress
- Believing that discipline is fair and effective
- Participating in extracurricular activities (p. 1)

Educators and stake-holders may dispute that schools should focus only on strategies aimed for the acquisition of student knowledge for the purpose of demonstrating mastery on state testing. However, research indicates that the affective facet of a student's well-being and success is significantly influenced by the student's connectedness to school.

Looping

The Early Beginnings of Looping

In the early 1900s, the U.S. Department of Education considered the benefits of looping programs where students continued with the same teacher for multiple years. This interest is evidenced through a memo cited in a 1913 report from the U.S. Department of Education. The memo posed the following question:

> Shall teachers in graded city schools be advanced from grade to grade with their pupils through a series of two, three, four, or more years, so that they may come to know the children they teach and be able to build the work of the latter years on that of the earlier years? (U.S. Department, 1997, p. 4)

Grant, Johnson, and Richardson (1996) pointed out the parallels of the looping classroom structure noted in the previously mentioned memo with the apparent advantages of looping as found in current practices. The predominant advantages noted are a result of the relationships formed through the looping experience (Grant, Johnson, & Richardson, 1996).

Also in the early 1900s, the Waldorf Schools emerged weaving the educational components of academic inquiry, artistic excellence, and social engagement in a unique effort in which teachers are encouraged to actively explore their own imagination and

creativity as they provide a comprehensive and rigorous education ("School Mission," n.d.). The Waldorf Schools started in Germany and were founded on the philosophy and pedagogical perspective of Rudolf Steiner who believed, "The relationship between the teacher and student is fundamental to the unfolding of the student's unique identity" ("School Mission," n.d.). In traditional Waldorf educational settings, each teacher and the same group of students continue together from grade one through grade eight.

The additional time captured through looping provides the foundation to construct strong, positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and students which increases student motivation and, ultimately, academic achievement. Although many are attracted to the unique philosophy and pedagogy of imagination and creativity presented by the Waldorf education ("School Mission," n.d.), the continuity of a caring relationship with an adult in school experienced by students is equally paramount to the philosophy undergirding this model of education, and it is valued by parents ("Educating the Whole Child," n.d.). Highlighting a study by Babineaux (2000), Monks (2001) credited the Waldorf educational model for "the nurturing atmosphere of the school...as all-important change agents leading to students' improved attitudes toward learning, better social interaction, and 'excellent' academic progress" (p. 53).

A Throw-back to Looping

It was not until 1974 that looping was first introduced in the United States when Anthony Alvarado, District Four Superintendent of New York City, commissioned an experienced classroom teacher, Deborah Meier, to start an elementary school in an area where the students who were largely poor qualified for free lunches. The student population was mostly Black and Hispanic, and many were classified as qualifying for

special education services (Goldberg, 1990). Superintendent Alvarado empowered Meier to "think outside the box" with her commitment to alter the way schools operate. Rethinking the practice of education, Meier set out "to destroy the stultifying status quo and to create a terrifically exciting school" (Goldberg, 1990, p. 27).

Meier recruited a team of committed elementary teachers who believed in her vision to create a culture within the school that promoted genuine, meaningful relationships between teachers and students. Her vision of an intellectually challenging academic setting supported by healthy, comforting relationships between faculty and students communicated to students that educational professionals within the school genuinely cared about their well-being. Meier later founded two additional elementary schools and one secondary school in New York's Central Park East area. By organizing her schools so that students stayed with the same teacher(s) for two consecutive years, Meier introduced looping to American schools, and Central Park East was able to boast an impressive 3.1 percent dropout rate compared to the overall rate for New York City which exceeded 50 percent. These results were especially important for Hispanic and Black students whose dropout rates were 78 percent and 72 percent respectively (Goldberg, 1990).

Benefits of Looping

The benefits of looping are well documented. Daniel Burke (1997) concluded "the essence of looping is the promotion of strong, extended, meaningful, positive interpersonal relationships between teachers and students that foster increased student motivation and in turn, stimulate improved learning outcomes for students" (p. 360). Students benefit academically when they are able to remain with the same teacher for a

second year, as there is less time needed to learn routines and expectations of a new teacher and more time to focus on the new curriculum (Yamauchi, 2003). Yamauchi (2003) reported the "extra time is particularly beneficial for low-performing students, as looping provides more time for teachers to bring students up to grade-level standards" (p. 388).

A study by Kelly et al. (1998) supports the benefits of teacher looping. In their study, the researchers sought to understand the effectiveness of teacher looping at an elementary school located in Maryland. This school established the goals of creating a learning environment that fostered the development of the whole child and had a positive impact on the academic achievement of students. In sum, the educators at Langley Park-McCormick Elementary sought to create an ambiance in which students and parents sensed the care and concern of the staff and faculty (Kelly et al., 1998). The school adopted a promising looping practice in which fourth through sixth grade teachers looped with their students for three years. In a three-year study of Langley Park-McCormick Elementary School, researchers Kelly et al. (1998) found student attendance rates increased from 92.6 percent to 97.2 percent after the implementation of student-teaching looping.

Similarly, another school district using the same looping ideas experienced additional positive findings. George, Spreul, and Moorefield (as cited in Burke, 1996) found that 70 percent of the teachers reported they were able to use more positive approaches to classroom management when the same students remained with them for three years. With a closer look at the same organizational setting, researchers found that "ninety-two percent of the teachers said they knew more about their students, 84 percent

reported more positive relationships with parents, 69 percent described their students as more willing to participate voluntarily in class, and 85 percent of the teachers reported that their students were better able to see themselves as important members of a group, to feel pride in that group, and to feel pride in the school" (p. 360).

In a more recent study, Sterling (2011) examined the effect looping teachers had on the academic achievement of students who participated in a three-year looping experience. A recurrent theme of increased academic achievement in both math and English/language arts for the looping group was found in an analysis of the data. Through a phenomenological case study, Brown (2011), reached similar conclusions. "The students with learning disabilities found support, held a sense of connectedness and security with their teacher and classmates, frequently participated in class discussions, and volunteered to answer questions, even when their answers were not correct" (p. 116). In Feighery's (2012) study, although challenges involved in the middle school setting prevented an accurate quantitative analysis of the academic benefits of looping, the researcher found that "the statements, attitudes, and opinions of the parents, teachers, and students involved in the looping process provide qualitative proof that positive interpersonal relationships that result from looping can assist in students' academic gains" (p. 32).

Parent's Perspective of Looping

In the looping classroom, students are not the only ones who feel more at ease talking to teachers. Rasmussen (1998) found, after interviewing a classroom teacher in Cincinnati, Ohio, that cultivating an amicable relationship between parents and the teacher was one of the benefits of the looping process. Rassmussen (1998) stated,

"Because parents are comfortable with the teacher, the teacher learns how to help parents, and parents learn how to help the teacher" (p. 3). In the Nichols and Nichols (2002) study, the data analysis suggested that parents of looping students had a significantly more positive perception of their child's school experience.

Chirichello and Chirichello (2001) showed similar results in their study. Parents of Clifton E. Lawrence School in Sussex County, New Jersey, had an opportunity to comment on their child's looping experience. Parents of Mrs. C's students speculated that, although they did not believe their child's grades would improve because of the looping classroom, "They consistently believed that looping would enable the teacher to know their child's strengths and weaknesses better" (p. 4).

Introduction of Looping counselors

The concept and role of the school counselor has evolved from the structure of a vocational counselor who utilized a scientific approach with students for the purpose of choosing an occupation. This practice resulted in the emergence of a service model with the full implementation of comprehensive guidance and counseling consultations (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). The American School Counselor Association describes an effective school counseling program as the collaborative efforts of the school counselor, students, parents, and other educators to provide a setting in which the academic achievement and career planning are individually focused for each student (Anonymous, 2003).

Akos, Schuldt, and Walendin (2009) conducted a preliminary study to explore the advantages and challenges of school counselor assignment in secondary schools. The results of this preliminary study suggest three advantages to counselors looping with their

students as they progress through high school: the ability form relationships, the stability of counseling the same students throughout their high school years, and the ability to advocate for students (Akos et al., 2009). Replicating the work of Akos et al., Williamson (2011) studied 213 secondary school counselors in middle school and high school with a majority assigned to the same students from year to year. Evident in the findings of this study was that school counselors who kept the same students from year to year "had more positive perceptions of building relationships with their students and of the effectiveness on student success" (Williamson, 2011, p. 68).

Summary of Looping

The adverse effects of poverty in families, schools, and communities have a crippling effect on the academic achievement and lifelong success of the students. Commissioned to advocate policies that will boost the economic and social well-being of individuals around the world, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) invites governments of various nations to discuss their experiences of existing domestic and environmental inadequacies and to seek solutions to critical global issues ("About the OECD," n.d.). Through this amicable collaboration, the organization analyzes data to extrapolate trends and issues forthcoming. Murnane and Hoffman (2013) delineated the ranking of U.S. high school graduation rates as compared to the graduation rates of the other countries within the OECD since the birth of the organization. On the measure of educational attainment, the U.S. fell from the top ranked country in the late 1960s to thirteenth out of the nineteen countries examined by year 2000 (Murnane & Hoffman, 2013). Hence, despite continuous efforts and numerous reforms in education, a crisis in the American education system still exists.

During these challenging times, educators and various stakeholders must collaborate to identify the deficiencies students possess and the barriers the students encounter that keep them from maximizing their potential. Students' sense of school connectedness is imperative to their academic motivation and success. When students believe that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals, students feel connected to school (Blum, 2005). It is the interpersonal connections among students and school staff, which positively influence the academic achievement and lifelong success of students.

Theoretical Framework

The use of theory in qualitative research helps to establish a perspective to direct and focus the researcher on the issues of importance and individuals that need to be studied (Creswell, 2003). As an anchor for the study, the conceptual framework keeps the researcher grounded to the stated purpose of the study. Miles and Huberman (as cited in Baxter & Jack, 2008) explained the purpose of the conceptual framework: to construe the main concepts to be studied, to clarify who will and will not be in the study, and to render descriptions of any presumed relationships that may exist (p. 553). As the study continues, so too, the framework continues to develop, and the themes and relationships emerge through data analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

The theoretical framework provides the researcher with a lens through which to view the data collected (Creswell, 2003). Often in qualitative case study research, the theoretical framework is applied "ex post facto," depending upon the meaning that emerges from analysis of the data. From this study, because looping is a program that is designed to facilitate relationships between the student and the school, the theoretical

framework of "connectedness" was applied ex post facto to explain student perceptions of the influence of administrator looping on their motivation to fulfill graduation requirements.

In their study of school connection among diverse student population, Brown and Evans (2002) conceptualized four overarching elements measuring school connectedness: commitment, power, belonging, and belief. The purpose of the study by Brown and Evans (2002) was to speak to the importance of extracurricular activity participation (EAP) in the predictive nature of student connection to school on the student's academic success and student behavior inside and outside of school. However, the researchers acutely noted, "Positive school-related experiences, and a sense of belonging…contribute to greater school connectivity and retention" (Brown & Evans, 2002, p. 49).

Researchers (Brown & Evans, 2002; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Hendrix, Sederberg, & Miller, 1990) have established that a student's understanding of his/her connection to social contexts, such as schools, greatly influences social behavior and success in school. As suggested by Lohmeier and Lee (2011), a student's sense of belonging to a social network, of relational support from adults in school, and of value perceived through school involvement contribute to school connectedness. Goodenow and Grady (1993) found additional evidence to support the *identification-participation* model established by Finn (1989) which essentially states that when students do not feel welcomed, admired, and cared for by those at school, the decline in engagement and eventual dropping out of school will ensue.

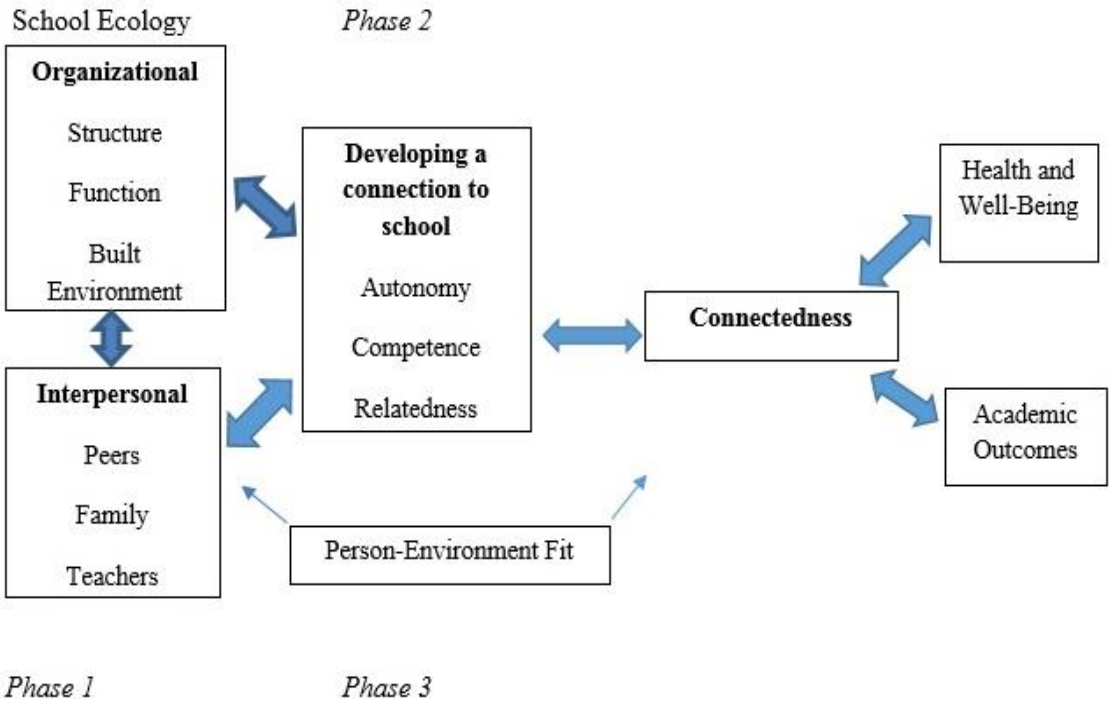
Further, Waters, Cross, and Runions (2009) noted, "Significant relationships between a student's self-reported feelings of connectedness to school and improved health

and academic outcomes" are consistently being reported (p. 517). Understanding the theoretical framework of school connectedness may help to isolate and replicate the elements of a school environment/school ecology that support student connections and thereby, enhance academic outcomes of adolescents. Waters et al. (2009) proposed a comprehensive theoretical framework identifying social and ecological structures supporting adolescent connectedness to schools. This model describes the positive and direct effects of school ecology on developing students' connections to school. This approach may influence educators and policy makers to rethink current school policies and daily practices that inhibit rather than enhance positive student connections to school.

The model found in Figure 2, conceptualized by Waters et al. (2009), captures the relationship between developing connections to school and school ecology. The model depicts the essence of social and ecological structures of school by illustrating the influence environmental components of a school, both physical and interpersonal, have on developing student connections to school by meeting their psychological needs. Completing this cycle of influence is the "person-to-environment" fit which provides a responsive support system for students, thereby increasing a sense of connectedness which ultimately influences health and academic outcomes of students (p. 519).

Figure 2

Social and Ecological School Model



Note. The model is from Waters et al. (2009).

The theoretical model proposed by Waters et al. (2009) details three phases of the structures and opportunities tailored to offer developmentally appropriate support to meet the changing needs of adolescents. The first phase is School Social Ecology. According to Sallis, Owen and Fisher (2008), a fundamental belief of ecological models is their reliance on the influence of multiple levels for interventions. Waters et al. (2009) referenced the application of Bronfenbrenner's socioecological model to a school setting by asserting that both organizational components of the environment and the interpersonal components of the organization (school setting) establish the school social

ecology. To further illustrate this phase, as shown in Table 1, Waters et al. (2009) illustrate the Interpersonal and Organizational components contributing to the school climate.

Table 1

Empirically Grounded Components of a School Ecology with Improved Connectedness, Health, and Academic Outcomes

Organizational Structural	**Functional**	**Built Environment**	**Interpersonal Caring and Supportive Interventions**
Small school size	Clear and fair discipline expectations	Well-maintained school facilities	Positive relationships among students
Middle school structures providing tailored support	Student involvement in decision making	Interesting and pleasing architecture	Positive relationships between staff and students
Small class sizes	High expectations for learning		Positive relationships among staff
Less departmentalization	Pastoral systems		
	Increased parental involvement Participation in extracurricular activities		

Note. Table 1 is from Waters et al. (2009).

The table outlines four distinct components of a school's social ecology providing the foundation for the current framework. The Organizational component draws on three characteristics: Structural, Functional, and Built Environment often found to be associated with student's connectedness to school. The Structural characteristics include

the number of students in the school, the configuration of the various grades, and the organization of leadership among administrators and staff. The Functional characteristics include clear, fair discipline expectations and consistent follow through of these expectations with students. In addition, student and parental involvement in decision making and in communicating high expectations for learning speak to the functional characteristics of a school. The Built Environment characteristics suggest the architecture of the well-maintained school facilities and the building design centered on the needs and interests of students, create an amiable environment eliciting a sense of pride among the students and staff. The characteristics of the Interpersonal component are seen through caring and supportive interactions among students, between staff and students, and among staff. The current study will focus on interpersonal components through caring and supportive interactions between staff and students to gain a better understanding of how this relationship influences the student's relatedness and enhances their school connectedness.

The second phase, Developing a Connection to School, addresses the needs of children by subscribing to the work of Maslow (1970) and the work of Deci and Ryan (2000). As previously discussed, Maslow felt the need for belongingness is as basic and paramount for an individual to experience self-motivation as food and safety for the health and well-being of the individual (Maslow, 1970). Connell and Wellborn (as cited in Waters, Cross & Runions, 2009), applied the needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness to the school setting in the following:

- The students' feelings of competency are enhanced by providing clear expectations for behavior and consequences for misbehavior.

- The students' autonomy is promoted through involvement of decision making such as individual goal setting and through recognizing the achievement of such goals.
- The students' relatedness is fostered through caring and supportive interactions with adults in school. (p. 520)

The third phase, Person-Environment Fit, stresses the importance of tailoring school ecology to meet the individual needs of students. Adolescence is a journey marked with numerous developmental changes along the way. Waters et al. (2009) suggest schools must be responsive to the needs of their students and committed to create an environment which is supportive in nature, transparent regarding boundaries, and committed to the academic success of its students. The final phase, Health and Well-Being and Academic Outcomes, is the comprehensive explanation of how the social and ecological environment of the school ultimately influences student's connectedness to school. Simply stated, Waters et al. (2009) suggested, "Connectedness to school is...the extent to which students feel autonomous yet supported, competent in all they attempt and related to adults and peers" (p. 521). Though Waters et al. (2009) highlight the organizational and interpersonal influences of schools, the focus of this study is to consider the relationships between students and administrators at school that are developed through the looping administrator program.

The theoretical model of connectedness, developed by Waters et al. (2009), was utilized as the theoretical framework of this study as a means to understand how students reciprocally interact with the school's ecology and social environment to establish school connectedness and, in turn, achieve academic success in completing graduation

requirements. Additionally, this model established a framework to explain how the phases of school ecology, organizational, interpersonal, and developing a connection to school, work in harmony to compose the responsive person-environment fit ideal for each student.

Although the model depicts three phases of school ecology, this study focused on developing a connection to school as related to the person-environment fit, phases two and three. Woven into the fabric of connectedness and the lens through which the findings of this study will be viewed are the four overarching themes: accountability, relatedness, shared perception of the value of education, and consistency. The integration of each of these concepts has the potential to establish a social context within schools that enhance learning and the development of students.

Summary

Chapter two provided an extensive review of the literature further establishing the need for the current study. This literature review provides an in-depth look at the concerns associated with high school dropouts. The undeniable connection between poverty and high school dropouts is explored, as well as the causal relationship between poverty, education, and health. The disparities in education inherent with students living in or near poverty not only interfere with the health and academic well-being of students while in school, but also establish a pathway from which it is difficult deviate. Next, a look at the pervasive efforts of policy makers and educators to strengthen America's education system is explored. This push for reform efforts to lead our students to academic excellence has involved more than K – 12 educators and parents. Included in this pursuit are elected officials and governing bodies at the state and federal levels,

researchers and educators at the higher education level, and private and corporate financial contributors with a stake in the academic outcomes of our students. Research regarding various reform efforts suggested by stakeholders and attempted by schools are provided. Further, this literature review examines the school environment as an influence on students' social connections to their health and academic well-being. In a report entitled *School Connectedness: Improving Students' Lives,* Blum (2005) offered that the connections students have with caring adults in school can decrease students' negative behaviours contributing to their decisions to drop out of high school and yet, increase students' sense of belonging which increases student motivation, academic performance, and thus graduation rates. In response to the need for developing connections with caring adults in school, the primary method of looping with students to establish supportive relationships was explored through in the literature. This chapter concluded with additional research on students developing connections with school, as well as the theoretical model of connectedness developed by Waters, Cross, and Runions (2009).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative case study uses a constructivist epistemology to understand students' perceptions of how their decisions to complete the necessary requirements for high school graduation are influenced by the relationships with the looping administrator. The constructivist perspective holds the assumption that "individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live… and [the] meaning of their experiences" (Creswell, 2003, p. 8). As Merriam (1998) elaborated on qualitative case studies, "The key concern is [to understand] the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspectives, not the researcher's" (p.6). In this study, I am concerned with the knowledge constructed by students through the experience of interactions with their administrator. The current research was conducted in the natural setting of a large, urban high school in a Midwestern state, bounded by space and time. This richly descriptive study included data from interviews, school artifacts and document analyses, and observations to give consideration to the purpose of the study and the research questions that follow.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding, through student perspectives, of the influence of high school administrator looping on student decisions to complete high school graduation requirements.

Research Questions

Primary question

How does the looping administrator program influence decisions of at-risk students to complete the necessary requirements for high school graduation?

Sub-questions

1. How does the student's relationship with the looping administrator influence student's connections with the school?
2. How does the student's relationship with the looping administrator influence student's perceptions of the value of completing high school graduation requirements?
3. How does the looping administrator influence student persistence to meet educational goals?

Research Design

Strauss and Corbin (as cited in Amedy, 1999) determined qualitative research to be "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (p. 19). Cresswell (2003) distinguished qualitative research from quantitative research as he stated, "Although the processes are similar, qualitative procedures rely on text and image data, have unique steps in data analysis, and draw on diverse strategies of inquiry" (p. 179). In this study, I selected the qualitative case study research design to explore the complexities of high school students' decisions to complete requirements for graduation as influenced by the looping administrator.

The strengths and benefits of qualitative research can be understood through the characteristics of this type of study. With little disruption to the natural setting and a reliance on various forms of inquiry to understand and explain the meaning of a social phenomenon, the key philosophical assumption for all qualitative research lies in the understanding that reality is constructed through the eyes of the participants interacting in their own worlds (Merriam, 1998). Although many variations of qualitative research exist, several characteristics are common to all types of qualitative studies. Notwithstanding the critics, the following characteristics listed by Merriam (1998) are common in generally all qualitative research:

1. The focus of qualitative research is to understand the meaning people have constructed of the world in which they live and the experiences they have.
2. The research seeks to understand the world and perceptions of reality from the participant's perspective, not from the perspective of the researcher.
3. The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis with obvious benefits of a human instrument such as: "responsive to the context, ability to adapt to the circumstances, immediate data processing is possible, can clarify and summarize as the study evolves, and can explore inconsistent responses" (as cited in Guba & Lincoln, 1981).
4. Qualitative study takes the researcher to the site spending immanent time with the participants in their context to understand their perspectives while exploring their human behaviors.
5. Qualitative research primarily employs an inductive research strategy. Researchers collect as many detailed specifics from the research setting as

possible to process and to identify patterns of relationships among the specifics (Hatch, 2002).

6. The product of the research is richly descriptive with direct quotes from participants and direct citations from documents.
7. The design of the study is emergent and flexible in response to the various changes as the study progresses.
8. The sample selection is typically nonrandom, purposeful and small. (Merriam, 1998).

Seeking to understand the influences of high school administrators on their students, I utilized case study methodology for this study. As one of the more frequently used methods of qualitative research, there continues to be a sense of ambiguity on the methods of case studies and the determination of a case (Baxter & Jack, 2008). According to Yin (1993), the value of using the case study is when the investigator is equally focused on the phenomenon and the context within which the phenomenon occurs. To explore a phenomenon within its own context with a variety of sources is an advantage to this approach.

Two key and different perspectives to case study methodology are apparent in the literature. Robert Stake (1995) and Robert Yin (1994), both proponents of case study research, offer two divergent approaches to guide case study design for a constructivist inquiry. As Appleton (2002) clarified, "Yin (1993, 1994) favors both qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection within case study, whereas Stake (1995) offers an approach which…focuses purely on qualitative aspects" (p. 83). For the purposes of this study, using a constructivist framework, I align with the perspectives of Stake (1995)

in the following areas: “definition of case, type of case study design, rationale for method, paradigmatic orientation, sampling strategy, and use/location of theory and time” (as cited in Appleton, 2002, p. 80).

A number of researchers (Stake, 1995; Woods, 1997; Yin, 1993, 1994) have articulated the definition of case study through a variety of terms. Yin (1994) defined case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (p. 13) with obscure boundaries between the phenomenon and the context. On the other hand, Stake (1995) regarded each case as “a specific, complex, functioning thing” with “a boundary and working parts” (p. 2). Expanding on viewpoints of Stake as they pertain to the unit of study (the case), Merriam (1998) added, “If there is no end, actually or theoretically, to the number of people who could be interviewed or to observations that could be conducted, then the phenomenon is not bounded enough to qualify as a case” (p. 28). Although the definitions and methods may vary, researchers seem to agree that a case study is an intense analysis using multiple sources to understand the specific phenomena within its own context. The use of multiple sources of data ensures the phenomenon is explored and understood through a variety of lenses (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Case studies can also be understood in terms of the overall intent of the study. The approach of the study should be adjusted to accommodate the intentions of the researcher. Stake (1994, 1995) offered three different case study designs. They are intrinsic case study, instrumental case study, and collective case study (Stake, 1995). The intrinsic design is used when the researcher is particularly interested in a unique situation and wishes to better understand the subject (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The instrumental design is

used to facilitate an understanding of a particular situation or phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Often, researchers incorporate more than one case in a study. Collecting and analyzing data from several cases is referred to as collective case studies, cross-case, multicase, or comparative case studies. Merriam (1998) attributed the use of multiple cases in a study to the enhancement of the validity or the generalizability of findings.

The design elements of the "instrumental case study" are such that "a particular case is examined to provide insight into an issue or refinement of theory" (Stake, 1994, p. 237). Appleton (2002) stated, "In this type of design the case is not the primary focus instead the case is used to explore and comprehend another issue" (p. 86). For the purposes of this study, I am attempting to further the knowledge and understanding of the decisions made by high school students as they pertain to completing graduation requirements; therefore, this study follows the instrumental case study design outlined by Stake (1994) and Appleton (2002).

Epistemology

I will utilize a case study approach based on the constructivist paradigm to study the situation from the perception of the participants. Achieving some understanding of the nature of a student's decision-making is a complex and evolving realization; therefore, in order to gain insight to the influences of the decisions made by high school students as they pertain to completing graduation requirements, it was crucial to study the participants in their own setting. The constructivist researcher believes that "realities are wholes which cannot be understood in isolation from their contexts" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 39). Hence, I embraced a constructivist approach to the current study of inquiry. As mentioned by Creswell (2003), "Assumptions identified in these works hold that

individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work" (p. 8). To better understand the historical and cultural influences of a setting on a participant, the constructivist researcher must focus on participants within the specific contexts in which they live and work.

Another important consideration to the constructivists' claim is that truth is relative to the perception of each individual. To facilitate the process of capturing the perspective of each individual, according to Creswell (2003), research should center on the participants' perceptions of the situation being studied. This goal is accomplished through the close collaboration of the researcher and the participants which enables the participants to share their stories (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). The researcher is better able to discern the inciting behaviors prompting the actions of the participants, as the participants share their interpretation of reality in the form of life stories told during this intimate collaboration.

Context of the Study

The context of this study was a large urban public high school in the Midwest section of the United States. Centerville Public Schools serves over 16,000 students, pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade, and is ranked in the top ten largest public school districts within the state where it resides. Over the last fifteen years Centerville Public School district has seen a 17 percent increase in student enrollment. As the enrollment increased at Centerville, so did the diversity of the students. The following information was accessible from annual reports on the district website:

> In 2000 the student enrollment was 13,054 and student enrollment in 2015 was 15,823. In 2000, student ethnic composition was 5.2 percent Asian, 7.1 percent

Hispanic, 9.0 percent African American, 8.0 percent American Indian, and 70 percent White. In 2015, the student ethnic composition was 7.2 percent Asian, 29.1 percent Hispanic, 15.1 percent African American, 5.5 percent American Indian, and 63.8 percent White. In addition, 8.4 percent indicated they were multi-racial. (District website, 2016).

Reportedly, the number of English language learner (ELL) students throughout the district who are bilingual or live in a home where a language other than English is spoken has more than doubled. In 2000, the district reported 1,224 bilingual students, and in 2015, the district reported 2,815 bilingual students.

As the district enrollment has multiplied, so have the number of school sites, which currently include five secondary schools, thirteen elementary schools, and the fourteenth elementary school now under construction. In addition, the district's early childhood center welcomes 260 children ages birth to three years old. Specifically targeting the challenges of students with poverty, eight elementary schools and one secondary school serve as community schools within the district (District website, 2016). Two of the elementary sites offer full-service health care clinics to all students and families of their school regardless of the family's insurance status or their ability to pay for the services (District website, 2016). Centrally located within four square miles of each other are the district enrollment center, the district administrative offices, and each of the five secondary schools.

In addition to the robust corporate tax base that supplements school funding, patrons have consistently funded, through the passage of bond issues, the district's state-of-the-art facilities. The elaborate facilities include a high tech Performing Arts Center

seating nearly 2,000, three health clinics – an employee clinic and school-based clinics at two of the elementary school sites, and a Multi-Purpose Activities Center housing the 6,000 seat arena, the sports and wellness center, and the school spirit store that are accessible to the community (District website, 2016). Additional facilities of the district include a football stadium with a seating capacity of 10,000, a newly renovated soccer complex, a modern baseball/softball complex, a newly constructed tennis center, an indoor three-meter swimming pool with a seating capacity of 400, and a Central Park complex functioning as an outdoor community center with youth athletic fields, an outdoor classroom/amphitheater, and a walking trail (District website, 2016).

Throughout Centerville's history, growth has been a constant factor, and the district has taken on tremendous changes to accommodate the expansion to one of the largest 6A school districts in the state. In conjunction with the funds available through private grants and the backing of community partners, the growth of the commercial tax base of the district and the increase in student enrollment allowed for an increase in the general fund revenues. Financial reports accessible on the district website, indicate a 45 percent increase in general funds in the last fifteen years. In 2000 the general fund revenues and expenditures were approximately 60.2 million dollars, and in 2015 the general fund revenues and expenditures were over 110.0 million dollars (District website, 2016).

According to the Centerville website, the marketing department of the district has been purposeful "in promoting partnerships and sponsorship opportunities between [Centerville Public Schools] and the business community" (District website, 2015). Perhaps the most esteemed endeavor through bond funds is the Collegiate Academy

centered on the campus of the high school. The college-like facility with "tiered lecture halls, advanced science labs, student lounges, and specialty food shops" brings collegiate instructors and courses to the high school campus for an opportunity that is virtually tuition-free (District website, 2015). Through a partnership with the local community college, qualifying students are able to earn high school credit while at the same time earning college credit.

Despite the escalating resources available through bond dollars which enable the district to fund state-of-the-art capital improvement projects throughout the district, many parents in the school district are experiencing diminished salaries and paychecks making it difficult to provide the basic needs of food, shelter, healthcare, and clothing for their children. In fact, the percentage of student population on the Free/Reduced Lunch (FRL) program increased nearly 50 percent in the last fifteen years (District website, 2016). In 2000, the percent of Centerville students qualifying for FRL was 15.3 percent, and in 2015, 66.7 percent of the Centerville students qualified for FRL (District website, 2016). Additionally, the poverty rate rose from 7 percent in 2004 to 12 percent in 2014, and likewise, the unemployment rate in the community rose from 4 percent in 2004 to 6 percent in 2014 (District website, 2015).

With a persistent achievement gap facing students of poverty, Centerville began exploring programs and strategies with a campaign to mitigate the challenges encountered by their own students in poverty. One such intervention was the "Community School" initiative which began in 2006. As stated on the website, "the initiative was an effort to bring in community and agency partners to lower socio-economic level students to provide greater equity" (District website, 2015). The district's

conviction to provide essential, supportive opportunities for students and families is illustrated through the following statement:

> Community Schools serve as neighborhood centers, improving the quality of life for students, families, and surrounding areas. Centerville believes that students, whose families have access to proper health care, counseling services and other programs, will be much more successful in their educational endeavors (District website, 2015).

The mission and goal of Centerville Public Schools is to graduate *100 percent College and/or Career Ready* all students (District website, 2015). In an effort to create a school environment that was developmentally responsive to the needs of all students, more specifically, at-risk adolescents and to forge ahead with the goal to graduate 100 percent of their students, Centerville implemented the administrator looping program in 2011.

The essence of the administrator looping program is such that as students entered high school in tenth grade, they would be assigned to an administrator who would follow them through their remaining years of high school. During these three school years, the administrator with the support of his/her school counselor and attendance secretary, would monitor each student's attendance, semester grades, weekly progress reports, graduation assessments (end-of-instruction exams), credits earned, and general progress towards graduation. Additionally, as incidents warranted, behavior intervention plans were implemented by the administrator oftentimes with the support of parents and teachers. The looping administrator, with the support of the school counselor and attendance secretary, would identify barriers and obstacles impeding the student's path towards his/her her educational goals.

The administrator looping program has been in effect at Centerville High School only since the Fall of 2011. The fourth class of students to experience the administrator looping program will graduate the Spring of 2017. Although no studies have been done on the success of the administrator looping program, the expectation of the district administrators and school board members was clearly established from the onset (District website, 2015). If a student was met with barriers or challenges to meet graduation requirements, the high school administrator must know each student and the interferences that could hinder his/her academic achievement and success in school.

Methodological Procedures

Participant Selection

Researchers in qualitative studies often utilize nonprobability sampling to discover incidents of interest to the researcher and to understand the connections that influence the events. The benefit of nonprobability sampling is further explained by Patton (1990), "The logic and power of probability sampling derive from its purpose: generalization; [however], the logic and power of purposeful [nonprobability] sampling derive from the emphasis on in-depth understanding" (p. 46). Chein (as cited in Merriam, 1998) stated that a nonprobability sampling strategy is most appropriate for qualitative studies, and the most common of which is purposeful. Merriam (1998) characterized purposeful sampling as "based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 62). As conveyed by Merriam (2009), it is necessary to establish the criteria of the purposeful sampling to accurately reflect the intent of the study and provide information-rich experiences as heard through the voices of the students.

To explore this phenomenon, I first met with looping administrators at Centerville High School to explain the purpose of the research and to describe the nature of the study. I asked each administrator for recommendations of potential student participants who at some time were identified as at-risk to not graduate from high school due to lack of progress toward meeting graduation requirements and apparent barriers impeding their success.

After I received the recommendations from each looping administrator, I sent to the potential student participants a letter detailing the study and asking for their participation. In the letter I asked students to contact me if they were willing to participate. When I received notification regarding their agreement to participate, I scheduled and conducted individual interviews with each student participant. Each of the six student participants looped with their administrator for two or more years. Of the six at-risk students who participated, four completed their graduation requirements on time with their graduating class or within two months of graduation. Two of the at-risk students who participated continued on the looping administrator's watch and completed their graduation requirements two years after the expected graduation date.

In addition to interviewing the student participants, I also interviewed four different administrators who looped with their students were. All participants signed consent forms before participation in the study.

Data Collection

Data collection for this qualitative case study utilized multiple sources-including participant interviews, observations, a review of documents and other audiovisual materials. As noted by Patton (1990), the use of direct quotations from participant

interviews and excerpts from collected documents take the reader back to the time and place of the actual conversations to allow the reader to sense what it was like to have been there. The attempt to gain an understanding of how meaning was derived from the surroundings and how this meaning influenced the behaviors of the student participants is the goal of this qualitative study.

Interviews. Stake (1995) asserted interviews are the main avenue to obtain the descriptions and interpretations of others in a case study. Inherent to a qualitative case study, is dialogue from multiple views of a case (Stake, 1995). The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the student perspectives; therefore, it was important to hear the voices of the students. Of the fourteen students referred by the looping administrators, seven students responded favorably when solicited to participate in the study. However, over the course of collecting the data, one student-participant's schedule continued to interfere with the scheduled interviews. Therefore, I only interviewed six student participants.

Of the sixteen administrators who have experience in looping at Centerville High School, four participated in this study. Two administrators were not available due to their transition to other roles in the school district, and one administrator currently is working at another school district in another part of the state. Additionally, as one of the looping administrators with experience and the researcher of this study, I was not able to participate. Three administrators currently serving as looping administrators moved into this role when other administrators took other positions. As such, the new looping administrator and their students have not completely experienced the full effects of two or three years of looping together. Of the remaining administrators, I interviewed three

assistant principals and one class principal each having at least five years' experience of looping with students. The assistant principals brought the perspective of the intimate relationship with his/her students. The class principal had the vantage point of carrying out the expectations of the looping model while looping with the students and the assistant principals.

All interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participants to accommodate their personal, school, and work schedules. When communicating with student participants to schedule the interviews, I was sensitive to each of their schedules while considering the time involved and the location to meet. Arrangements were made to interview the students at Centerville High School; however, I met two students individually at another school site in the school district where their former administrator is now working.

In most cases, I audio-recorded the interviews of the participants in a one-to-one format. However, in two instances the student participants chose to have the looping administrator in the interview with us. In another instance, the student participant chose to have her parent in the interview with us. These interviews were audio-recorded as well.

As directed by Stake (1995), a "short list of issue-oriented questions" (p. 65) was prepared in advance for all interviews. Further, the format of each interview included "unstructured and generally open-ended questions that [were] few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants (Cresswell, 2003, p. 188). Although the prepared issue-oriented questions did steer the interview, some of the unique responses of the students evoked other questions to ask during the interview. The advance questions for student interviews can be found in Appendix A.

As a means of building justification for the emerging themes, I gathered information from administrators who experienced looping with the student participants. Stake (1995) and Yin (2012) both stated that data source triangulation, multiple sources of data, is necessary to verify or corroborate the description, facts, or events reported by a study. As I interviewed the looping administrators, I heard their stories confirming many of the unique experiences told to me by the student participants. I interviewed each administrator individually in his/her office. During each interview I made every effort to ensure participants were comfortable and at ease with the interview process. As with the student interview questions, the advance questions to guide the interview can be found in Appendix B.

Observations. To further triangulate the data, I observed student and administrator interactions. Modifying a list of strengths of observational data identified by Patton (1990), Hatch (2002) presented strengths for the role of observations in qualitative research:

- Direct observation of social phenomena permits better understanding of the contexts.
- Firsthand experience allows the researcher to be open to discovering inductively how the participants understand the setting.
- The researcher has the opportunity to see things that are taken for granted by the participants and might not become apparent during an interview or through an investigation of documents.
- The researcher may learn sensitive information from being in the setting that participants may be reluctant to discuss in interviews (p. 72).

I vigilantly recorded field notes while observing the interaction and communication between the school administrators and the students. Observations occurred during scheduled meetings between the students and administrators in the administrator's office. I made additional observations throughout the school day as students and administrators came in contact, informally, with each other. The use of observation as a data collection strategy is "to make a careful record of what people say and do, and to make sense of how the participants make sense within [their] setting" (Hatch, 2002, p. 73).

Documents. Although the primary method of data collection was through interviews, I also collected and reviewed additional evidence from a variety of documents adding to the rich descriptions presented in case studies (Creswell, 2003). I reviewed the following documents as collected from administrators:

1. Individual Graduation Check Sheets – These sheets were completed for each student by assistant principals and counselors. The completion of all graduation requirements is noted on a sheet for each student.
2. At-risk Reports – The reports are created by assistant principals in an excel spreadsheets to share with class principals on students who have not fulfilled graduation requirements.
3. Attendance Reports – These reports are created by administrators to monitor and hold students accountable for absences. The number of absences and actions taken by administrator are noted.

4. D/F Grade Reports – These reports are sent weekly to administrators and counselors. The document reports any cumulative grade of a D or an F in any class for all students.
5. Power Points Presentations – The information was presented to students and parents to communicate the goals and expectations for learning and behavior.

Data Analysis

Electing the design of the qualitative study defines numerous processes within the study, including data analysis. Data collection and data analysis are ongoing, synchronous activities. Simply stated, during the qualitative study, there is not a specific time when the data collection ceases and the data analysis begins. The emergent nature of the qualitative study requires a process of continued and recursive data collection. As stated by Merriam (2009), "Without ongoing analysis, the data can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needs to be processed" (p. 171). A key aspect of undertaking the qualitative case study is examining and reexamining the purpose of the study and the research questions continually throughout the study. Reflecting on the opinions of Rossman and Rallis (1998), Cresswell (2003) defined the process of data analysis:

> It is an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data, asking analytic questions, and writing memos throughout the study. It is not sharply divided from the other activities in the process, such as collecting data or formulating research questions (p. 190).

The qualitative study is continually influenced by the analytical decision made based on the judgments of the researcher. This ongoing analysis involves "organizing and

interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, [and] make interpretations…" (Hatch, 2002, p. 148). Data are organized and analyzed through a coding process to generate categories and themes for analysis. As much as possible, the actual vocabulary of the participant is used when labeling the categories.

Organization of data. Subscribing to Stake's (1995) viewpoints on case study research, I found myself noticing data in the most unexpected places and situations. Stake (1995) reported, "A considerable proportion of all data is impressionistic, picked up informally as the researcher first becomes acquainted with the case" (p. 49). In some instances, I requested transcripts of a presentation given or took photos of symbols in the high school that impressed upon me the stories being told from the student participants. Listening to the recordings of the interviews to prepare the transcripts allowed additional time to reflect on the perspectives of the students. The recordings and transcripts were stored electronically on my computer, and a physical copy of the transcripts were also made for frequent review. These data were gathered and sorted within color coded file folders according to the type of data enabling me to visually and physically sort the numerous data retrieved.

Coding of data. As Stake (1995) withstood, "There is no particular moment when data gathering begins" (p. 49), he added, "there is no particular moment when data analysis begins" (p. 71). I found his word to be true. After a few interviews had taken place, I began to notice common thoughts or themes shared by the participants. Even though the interviews were being recorded, I took sparse notes and indicated when these themes were brought up in the conversations. Looking through the multiple sources of

data, the documents and transcripts were coded. To help sort the various codes mentally, I identified each code with a different color. Each document and transcript was then "marked-up" with colors by underlining the place on the document that alluded to the color-code. In the margins of the document, I wrote the two-letter initials that also signified to me visually which code had emerged.

Generating themes around the data. A search for meaning in qualitative research is a search for patterns. Stake (1995) advocated, "With instrumental case studies, where the case serves to help us understand phenomena or relationships within, the need for categorical data and measurements is greater" (p. 77). After each source of data was coded, I needed to visualize the big picture on one graphic depiction much like a spreadsheet. Each time a code was noted on a source, I charted it on the spreadsheet. This process of aggregating categorically allowed me to visualize and identify the emerging themes found from the data sources.

Conveying findings and interpreting meanings. Findings for the study are presented in Chapter four. The findings from this qualitative case study seek to explain how the student's relationship with the looping administrator contributes to satisfying the student's need to "feel autonomous yet supported, [and] competent in all they attempt" (Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009, p. 521). The findings seek to explain the relationship with the looping administrator and how the connectedness established contributes to the crucial "person-environment fit" essential in a "responsive and developmentally appropriate school ecology" as presented in the theoretical model by Waters, Cross, and Runions (2009, p. 521). While the findings presented are through the perspective of the

students, multiple sources including administrator interviews were used to verify an understanding of student perspectives.

Issues of Validity and Ethical Considerations

Creswell (2003) asserted that "reliability and generalizability play a minor role in qualitative inquiry" (p. 195); however, the strength of qualitative research lies in its validity. Creswell and Miller (2000) defined validity "as how accurately the account represents participants' realities of the social phenomena and is credible to them" (p. 124). Hammersley and Atkinson (as cited by Creswell and Miller, 2000) suggested that validity refers to the inferences drawn from the data, as opposed to validity in the data itself.

As suggested by Creswell and Miller (2000), the validity procedures employed by individuals embracing the constructivist viewpoint in a qualitative study suggest benchmark criteria such as trustworthiness rather than transferability, and authenticity rather than fairness. Within the lens and paradigm of the constructivist viewpoint, Creswell and Miller (2000) further added three types of validity procedures for researchers to consider: 1) disconfirming evidence 2) prolonged engagement in the field, and 3) thick, rich description.

The key to "disconfirming evidence" is when, after establishing themes or categories from the data, the researcher begins to peruse the data for evidence to disconfirm the identified themes and categories (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). The second noted procedure is "prolonged engagement in the field" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). Fetterman (as cited in Creswell and Miller, 2000), argued that "working with people day in and day out for long periods of time is what gives… [qualitative] research

its validity and vitality" (p. 46). It is during this time the researcher is able to establish rapport and build trust with participants leading to open disclosure of the participants' perspectives. The final validity procedure to mention is that of "thick, rich description" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128). This procedure involves a process of reporting with as much detail as possible as it pertains to the setting, the participants, the themes, and the perspective of each. Through the deeply detailed accounts of the setting, participants, and themes, the reader is able to sense the feelings of the participants.

Guba (as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985) suggested a "better fit" for naturalistic studies is to establish the trustworthiness of findings through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (p. 219). The techniques utilized in this qualitative case study to ensure the trustworthiness of findings are illustrated in the following table.

Table 2

Trustworthiness Table

Credibility		
Technique	***Results***	***Examples***
Prolonged engagement	*Learn the culture* *Orient to the situation* *Build trust*	*In the context of the study collecting data from June 2016 to November 2016*
Persistent observation	*Determine relevant elements* *Detailed, in-depth data*	*Observations of participants interacting with looping administrator; observation of school culture*
Triangulation	*Verify data*	*Multiple and different sources of data—interviews, observations, documents, district website*

Member checking	*Verify accurate interpretation and conclusions of data*	*Participants verified the transcripts to check for interpretation and/or missing information*

Transferability		
Criteria/Technique	***Result***	***Examples***
Rich, thick description	*Enable readers to make transferability judgements*	*Use of descriptive data in the language of the participants to provide the reader the opportunity to experience and to make judgements on transferability*

Dependability/Conformability		
Criteria/Technique	***Result***	***Examples***
Audit trail	*Authenticate the process* *Examine the data*	*Interview and meeting notes, transcripts, and documents are available for an audit*

District Demographics and Background of the Researcher

Although I am the researcher in this study, I am also familiar with this school as I have worked in this district for nearly thirty years; two of my children have graduated from this high school; and I have one child currently in the high school of this study. During my career, I have taught math at the seventh and eighth grade levels, served as the school counselor at the district's alternative high school, worked as a counselor for sixth and seventh graders, served as the Academic Assistant Principal for ninth and tenth graders, and worked as an Assistant Principal at the secondary level. I currently am the Director for the district's adult learning center.

In the course of my first two years as an assistant principal, I worked in the Intermediate High School with ninth and tenth grade students. During this time in the school district, every one or two years, students switched buildings, school administrators, and school counselors resulting in a total of four transitions from sixth through twelfth grade. When students started ninth grade, they were divided randomly among four different assistant principals. The students remained under the supervision of this administrator for two years while at the Intermediate High school, but when the students started their eleventh grade, they moved to the high school and were assigned to a new assistant principal in eleventh grade and yet another different assistant principal in twelfth grade. To further complicate the staffing assignments, although the Intermediate High school and the high school each had four assistant principals serving the two grade levels in the two buildings, the counseling assignments for the two grade levels were divided among three counselors in each building. Additionally, the school counselors all shared a common office area rather than being located in close proximity of the school administrators working with the students. This arrangement did not encourage administrator-counselor collaboration in the supervision and guidance of each student.

After my second year as an assistant principal, the district administrators led the charge of a new district-wide focus and mission in which all teachers, counselors, attendance secretaries, and administrators embraced the notion of personalization for all students. It was at this juncture that assistant principals began to loop with their assigned group of students from the start of the students' tenth grade year through the end of the students' senior year of high school. As previously mentioned, prior to my first year as an assistant principal of tenth grade students, I served as the assistant principal for students

in ninth grade. As a result, through this transition, I was actually afforded the opportunity to serve as the assistant principal for some of the students for all four years, ninth through twelfth grades.

As I prepared for my dissertation, I reflected on my previous role as a high school assistant principal. In a school district with a mission to graduate 100 percent of students in each graduating class, we often sought out knowledge and professional experiences of other school districts successful in helping students achieve academic success. Although I found a common theme in the success of students to the caring relationships with adults in school who show their concern, I found no other school or research with administrators who loop with their students through the high school years. I realized the importance of conducting a study in this area. The reasons for writing a dissertation on this topic are both personal and professional.

As a former high school administrator and a parent of high school students, I understand that significant relationships with key personnel can be vital for students identified as at risk. However, an understanding of the influence of the looping administrator from the perspective of participating students is absent in the literature. This understanding is important because student perspectives are important in addressing the concerns and issues surrounding the growing number of high school dropouts and the declining graduation rates. My goal, as the instrument of data collection in this study, was to gather evidence on the perspectives of students and administrators concerning the influence of administrator looping on the at risk students' decisions to complete the graduation requirements necessary. Although my own experiences in the district served as a limitation to better understand the data, I made an arduous effort to separate my own

experiences with the program from those of the student and administrator participants in order to hear and report their voices and stories.

Summary

Chapter three outlined the theoretical and epistemological basis of this study. The rationale for the decision to follow the constructivist paradigm was explained as an effort to understand the perceptions of the participants. This Chapter also provided a discussion on the rationale and the essential components regarding the methodology of this study.

CHAPTER IV

DATA PRESENTATION AND FINDINGS

Researchers have established that students' connectedness to school and the supportive relationships with caring adults in school are relevant to student motivation and academic success (Walters, Cross, & Runions, 2009; Blum 2005; Klem & Connell, 2004; Osterman, 2000). Three school characteristics identified as influencing the connections students have with school and their academic success are: an expectation of high academic standards, an environment in which students feel physically and emotionally safe, and an environment in which students feel the support of adults in school through positive and respectful relationships (Blum, 2005). Therefore, educators and policymakers are challenged to increase school connectedness by identifying and implementing effective research-based strategies (Rowe, Stewart, and Patterson, 2007). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain a better understanding, through student perspectives, of the influence of high school administrator looping on student decisions to complete graduation requirements. The findings for one school district are presented in this chapter in an effort to answer the research questions.

The chapter continues with a description of the high school in which the study took place and a profile of each student and administrator participant. Finally, excerpts from interviews and quotes from documents are presented as evidence to the findings.

Looking at Centerville High School

Structure of the Building

If growth has been a constant factor of Centerville Public Schools, the same can be said of the high school. In the Fall of 2011, the administrator looping program and Centerville Collegiate Academy (CCA) became the result of long-range planning discussions to accommodate the growing student enrollment. The CCA expansion added thirty-nine classrooms to the existing eighty-six classrooms within the 500,000 square-foot high school building.

The high school staff is comprised of 153 teachers, eight counselors, ten administrative assistants, and additional support staff providing a multitude of services for students. To accommodate nearly 3,300 high school students, Centerville High School operates with three class principals and six assistant principals serving as looping administrators. One additional administrator serves in other capacities.

With the looping administrator program, each grade level of nearly 1,100 students has a class principal and two assistant principals. The students are split by alphabet with each assistant principal serving approximately 550 students. Each assistant principal collaborates with a counselor and an attendance secretary in their same office suite to meet the needs of their students. Beginning the students' tenth grade year, the class principal, assistant principal, counselor, and attendance secretary each stay with the same group of students through the students' senior year of high school. If any student did not complete his/her graduation requirements by the end of his/her senior year, the administrator continues to work with the student to ensure graduation requirements are met. A key element of the looping administrator program is the collaborative work of the

class principal, the assistant principal, the counselor, and the attendance secretary to identify and eliminate barriers keeping their students from demonstrating success during the students' three years of high school.

Centerville High School's mission is "to provide our community of learners with educational opportunities to acquire and develop the best possible academic, vocational, recreational, social, and participatory skills, enabling them to become valued, contributing members of a changing global society" (District website, 2016). Also on the website, is the philosophy of the high school:

> We believe that Centerville High School has the responsibility to assist each student to develop his/her intellectual, physical, and moral potential as fully as possible so that he may be a productive member of society and lead a personally satisfying life. We believe that education is a continuing lifelong process, encouraging curiosity and creativity, and that the results of the learning process may not be immediate or measurable but of enduring value (District website, 2016).

Although the school mission statement and philosophy are positioned on the high school website, it is the district's motto, *Together We Make a Difference,* and the district's goal, *100 percent College and/or Career Ready* all students, that are prominently displayed throughout the building, offices, and classrooms.

Demographics of Centerville High School

Student statistical data in this section provides a glimpse of the student diversity of Centerville High School. The enrollment figures in Table 3 are based on student enrollment, as of October, 2015 (District website, 2016).

Table 3

Centerville High School Student Enrollment 2015-2016

Students Enrolled	Number of Students
Total student enrollment	3489
10th grade students	1205
11th grade students	1213
12th grade students	1071
Female students	1735
Male students	1754

In 2015, the student ethnic composition of the 3,489 high school students was 7.1 percent Asian, 25.4 percent Hispanic, 15.2 percent African American, 5.4 percent American Indian, 63.7 percent White, 0.2 percent Pacific Islander, and 8.5 percent Multi-racial (District website, 2016). Also in 2015, more than half of the high school student population, 54.5 percent, qualified for free and reduced lunch status (District Federal Programs, 2016).

Sample Population of the Study

Participants of this study were chosen in a deliberate manner using purposeful sampling to generate information-rich data. The power of utilizing purposeful sampling is selecting participants who will illuminate, in-depth, the research questions in which the study seeks to understand (Patton, 1990). After receiving permission to conduct the study at Centerville High School from Dr. Emrick (pseudonym), Associate Superintendent of

Teaching and Learning, I conducted a meeting with six high school administrators to explain the details of the study. The administrators selected for this study each worked in the district as a looping administrator for at least five years. In addition to requesting their participation, I asked the administrators to consider and provide the names of prospective student participants based on the purpose of the study. As requested administrators identified students from the looping program who were at least eighteen years old, and were considered at-risk, not likely to graduate from high school due to attendance, behavior, and academic performance. Student participants could have been former students or current seniors in high school.

After receiving the names of fourteen prospective student participants from the looping administrators, I sent letters to the students requesting their participation in this study to assess the value of student connections to high school administrators. Although seven students responded favorably to the request, the coordination of schedules to participate was not possible for one student, and the study was conducted with six student participants. I scheduled and conducted individual interviews with each student participant. Two student participants chose to have their looping administrator present during the interview, and one student chose to have her mom present during the interview.

The six student participants included four females and two males. Four student participants were seniors of Centerville High School from the graduating class of 2014, and two students were seniors of Centerville High School from the graduating class of 2015. Of the six students in the sample, three are Hispanic, two are white, and one is multi-racial. Student participants vary in ages—one is twenty-one years old, three are

twenty years old, one is nineteen years old, and one is eighteen years old. Each student participant received his/her high school diploma between 2014 and 2016 either at the conclusion of his/her senior year or afterwards through continued work with his/her administrator and counselor. Of the four administrators interviewed, three served as assistant principals and one served as a class principal in the looping administrator program. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to provide anonymity in their responses.

Participant Profiles

Student Participant Profiles

Jared. Jared looped with Mr. Otto for three years, but before Jared's sophomore year, Mr. Otto was one of his teachers. Jared grew up in the Centerville district actively involved in sports each year. When asked about his participation in high school football, he said although he had scholarship offers to play football in college, he quit during his senior year of high school because he and the high school coaches did not see "eye-to-eye." Jared went on to play Lacrosse and Rugby on the high school teams.

Jared shared that his challenges to complete graduation requirements were not related to his academic abilities. His challenges in school began as he lost the motivation to do what was expected, and he did not have the parental support to impress upon him to make decisions that would lead to high school graduation. Jared was raised by his mom without a father in his life. As Jared lost respect for his football coaches and playing football, he also lost the motivation to stay eligible to play each week. Without the accountability to eligibility requirements and the connection to a team, Jared turned to deviant behaviors of drugs. Soon Jared was using drugs every day and even going to

school under the influence. Jared shared that at one point during high school, he had lost hope of graduating or even leading a clean and sober life. He admitted that he believed he would soon be dead or in jail, but not graduated. Although Jared daily made decisions to skip class or school or even go to school under the influence of drugs, Mr. Otto consistently reached out to Jared to provide the guidance and influence he needed. Jared is currently twenty years old.

Luke. Luke's relationship with Mr. Otto started his sophomore year when Mr. Otto was his administrator and continued all through his senior year. Before the interview started, Mr. Otto and Luke talked about when the connection began with the two of them. Mr. Otto's first child was a toddler, the same age as Luke's younger sibling. There appeared to be an immediate bond that still connects the two of them together.

Luke quit playing athletics by the time he was in eighth grade. This is when he found a new interest, Air Force Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). As I heard him talk of his excitement to participate in the training and events, I was unsure of why he lacked the motivation to succeed academically. As with the high school sports teams and the fine arts programs, participation in ROTC required academic eligibility each week. If Luke wanted to participate, he need to maintain passing grades, but he struggled to keep passing grades. Luke explained the classes were not difficult. He just was not motivated, and he did not see the point of studying and doing homework. Luke had the support of both parents, and his grandpa was consistently encouraging him to keep up with his academics. Each semester Luke failed one or two classes putting him behind in his credits to graduate. His temper would escalate, and he often disappeared from school after a confrontation with Mr. Otto. The cycle continued of missing classes,

failing grades, and attempts to make up lost credits. Mr. Otto also continued to be a voice of reason and continued to require Luke to meet expectations or to expect consequences. With Mr. Otto's support Luke was able to graduate with his classmates in the Spring of 2014. Luke who is twenty years old, still seems passionate about this interest and still considers pursuing a career in the military.

Brittni. Brittni was in the looping program with Mr. Braden for three years. Many of their early encounters came about as a result of Brittni's decisions to get into physical altercations while at school or during school activities. Brittni displayed a great deal of anger at school with other students and with Mr. Braden. During the first year and a half of high school, Brittni was involved in numerous fights and was suspended from classes many days. During this time, she received her academic instruction either in the In-School Suspension classroom, or she was sent home to work on her coursework. With the guidance of Mr. Braden and the school counselor working in his office area, Brittni found an interest and was accepted into a program of the local technology school. During her junior and senior years of high school, she attended school half day at Centerville High School and half day at the technology school. Eventually her position in the vo-tech program was in jeopardy because of her actions at school and the consequences of multiple suspensions. Through the supportive relationship with Mr. Braden and her desire to complete the vo-tech program, completion of high school graduation requirements became an educational goal that she worked to complete. Brittni completed her graduation requirements on time in the Spring of 2015. She is currently nineteen years old and in college with the goal of becoming a dentist.

Sierra. Sierra began with Mrs. Gray as her administrator. However, Mrs. Gray was transferred to another site after Sierra's sophomore year. At that time, Mrs. Woods became her administrator for her remaining two years of high school. Sierra is a bilingual student whose mom was present during the interview. Although Sierra did not speak of her experiences at home during the interview, I later learned that many of Sierra's struggles focused around the abuse she endured at home. Because of the verbal abuse that Sierra endured at home, she was often distracted at school and not able to focus her the instruction in class. Sierra was quiet and withdrawn in class and lacked the confidence to engage in classroom conversations and activities. Sierra mentioned that although she had friends at school, she felt alone and unsupported, until she began talking with her looping administrator. Sierra is currently eighteen years old and completed her graduation requirements during the summer of 2015 following her expected May graduation.

Brianna. Brianna moved to Centerville from out of state during her junior year of high school and was in the looping program with Mrs. Austin, her assistant principal and Mr. Parker, her class principal, for her last two years of high school. Brianna is from Mexico where her mom and younger brother still reside. Without the support of Brianna's dad, her mom tried to provide for the small family. While Brianna was still in high school, Brianna's mom forced her to leave their home in Mexico and to live with another individual who would send money back to Brianna's mom in Mexico each month to provide for Brianna's mom and her younger brother. Eventually, Brianna found herself in the United States of America in a living arrangement that was not supportive of her continuing her high school education. As a seventeen-year-old who should be focused on completing high school graduation requirements, Brianna spent most of her time truant

from school and partying with alcohol and other drugs. Although Brianna wanted a different life for herself, she felt trapped with the expectation to provide monthly support to her mom and younger brother who still remained in Mexico. Eventually Brianna escaped the living arrangement and found the support of a caring family to take her in their home. By the time Brianna enrolled in school at Centerville High School, she was behind in credits needed to graduate and behind in the required End-of-Instruction exams necessary to graduate. Although Brianna did not complete her graduation requirements by the end of her senior year, she continued to work with Mrs. Austin and the school counselor, for two years before the graduation requirements were met. Recently, Brianna was honored before all of Centerville Public Schools' staff for her determination and persistence to complete her high school graduation requirements. She received a standing ovation by the entire staff of nearly 2,000 employees. Brianna received her high school diploma just before she turned twenty-one.

Paige. Paige was in the looping program for three years with Mrs. Austin; however, Mrs. Austin worked with Paige the year before the looping program began. During Paige's ninth and tenth grades of high school, she missed numerous days due to truancy and suspensions as a result of fighting at school. As a bilingual student, Paige was also in multiple English as Second Language classes to help meet her academic needs; however, when she was suspended from classes, she did not receive the instructions needed to accommodate her needs. The cycle of disruptive behavior, consequences, and missing classes continued, and Paige fell further behind. Soon Paige was also skipping classes and school all day. Paige's parents were also limited English speaking and often at work or not available to reach. With little academic support from

home, Paige got further behind in completing her academic credits needed for graduation. Paige also struggled to meet the graduation requirements of passing end-of-instruction (EOI) exams. After multiple failed test attempts, Paige finally passed some exams and completed a project for another exam which fulfilled her graduation requirements. The graduation requirements were not met until two years after her senior year and after she was married and gave birth to her first child. Paige is twenty years old.

Administrator Participant Profiles

Mr. Otto. Mr. Otto started his educational career as a secondary teacher in another at-risk program of Centerville Public Schools. He taught only four years before the school district recruited him into administration. As a secondary administrator, Mr. Otto looped with students three years at the high school before he was promoted to serve as the lead administrator of the district's alternative school. For two years, Mr. Otto has continued the looping practice with 170 alternative high school students.

Mr. Braden. After earning his college degree, Mr. Braden began his high school teaching career in another country. When he returned to the United States, he taught foreign language and business in a neighboring school district of Centerville. Mr. Braden began his administration career at Centerville where he has worked at the high school in the looping program for five years.

Mrs. Woods. A native of the Centerville area, Mrs. Woods attended one of the state universities and taught in neighboring school districts. With a heart for helping students, she moved into school counseling at the secondary level for Centerville Public Schools. During her five years of counseling, she continued with her graduate studies to earn an administration certificate. In 2012, Mrs. Woods began as a looping administrator

and continues to work in the administrator looping program at Centerville High School. This is her fifth year in the program.

Mr. Parker. Mr. Parker first moved to this Midwestern state and community while playing athletics in college. After graduating from college he began teaching and coaching at Centerville Public Schools. After teaching at various secondary sites and coaching multiple sports, he began his administration career. He is currently looping with his second group of students as a class principal.

Data Analysis

I collected multiple sources of data for this study including transcripts of interviews, notes from observations, documents, excerpts from narrative text, and information from the school website. To allow each participant to verify the accuracy of the transcribed interview, I emailed each participant a copy of the transcript to review and report any errors. This member checking verifies accurate interpretation of the participants' stories. The theoretical framework employed for this study is connectedness in schools through the social and ecological model of schools developed by Waters, Cross, and Runions (2009). Emerging from the data collected and accounted for in the theoretical model are the following four themes: accountability, relatedness, shared perception of value of education, and consistency. Therefore, in this chapter the four themes inherent in the connectedness model allow for an analysis of the data to answer the research questions previously listed.

Organization of data. Subscribing to Stake's viewpoints on case study research, I found myself noticing data in the most unexpected places and situations. Stake (1995) reported, "A considerable proportion of all data is impressionistic, picked up informally

as the researcher first becomes acquainted with the case" (p. 49). In some instances, I requested transcripts of a presentation given by administrators, or took notes while conducting observations in the high school each of which impressed upon me the stories told by the student participants and were essential to this study. Listening to the recordings of the interviews to prepare the transcripts allowed additional time to reflect on the perspectives of the students. Although I stored the recordings and transcripts electronically on my computer, I also made a physical copy of the transcripts for frequent review. These data were gathered and sorted within color-coded file folders according to data type, enabling me to visually and physically sort the numerous data retrieved.

Generating themes around the data. A search for meaning in qualitative research is a search for patterns. Stake (1995) advocated, "With instrumental case studies, where the case serves to help us understand phenomena or relationships within, the need for categorical data and measurements is greater" (p. 77). After each source of data was coded, I needed to visualize the "big picture" on one graphic depiction much like a spreadsheet. After I coded the transcripts and documents, I charted each occurrence of the codes on a spreadsheet. This process of aggregating categorically allowed me to visualize and identify four emerging themes found from the data sources. The emerging themes identified were: accountability, relatedness, shared perceptions of the value of education, and consistency.

Conveying findings and interpreting meanings. The findings from this qualitative case study seek to explain how the student's relationship with the looping administrator contributes to satisfying the student's need to "feel autonomous yet supported, [and] competent in all they attempt" (Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009, p.

521). The findings which follow seek to explain the relationship with the looping administrator and how the connectedness established contributes to the crucial "person-environment fit" essential in a "responsive and developmentally appropriate school ecology" as presented in the theoretical model by Waters, Cross, and Runions (2009, p. 521). While the findings presented are through the perspective of the students, multiple sources including administrator interviews were used to verify an understanding of the stories.

Study Findings

From the data analysis four themes emerged out of the stories told by the student participants. The emanating themes were mentioned by all participants; however, some student participants elaborated more completely on each theme. In essence, the voices and views of all participants are revealed in this study. Thus, the themes emerging from the data on the influences of the looping administrator on the decisions of at-risk students to complete the necessary graduation requirements are accountability, relatedness, shared perception of the value of education, and consistency. These themes are more fully discussed in the following section.

Influence of the looping administrator on student's connections with the school.

In their responses to interview questions, participant responses reflected two themes related with meeting student needs, and meeting of these needs, ultimately, led to engagement or connection to school. The two emerging themes are accountability and relatedness.

Accountability

The first emerging theme influencing the student's connection to school is accountability. This section describes the role of accountability in administrator/student relationships and how administrator action is perceived by the students. Narrative reports on the student reactions to being held accountable are given.

When asked about their relationship with their looping administrator in high school, some talked about the numerous conversations they encountered, some talked about receiving consequences for decisions made, and each of the participants talked about the care and concern felt when being held accountable for behaviors.

In general, student participants reported they were often called to the office, sometimes weekly or even daily, by their looping administrator regarding the choices and behaviors they had made that interfered with their academic success in school. Five of the six participants indicated they were making poor decisions regarding their behavior in and out of school. Jared summed up the effect of being held accountable for his actions, "I think if it wasn't for me going to the office, I would not have graduated."

Jared further explained that being called to the office to speak with Mr. Otto, his administrator, about his behavior also meant Mr. Otto would share with Jared how this behavior was impeding his academic success and hindering his plans to graduate high school. Several other students shared stories of their encounters with their administrator in reaction to misbehavior or poor choices. Perhaps not at the time of each incident, but now reflecting on this time, the students recognized the relevance of the accountability for behavior and the influence of this accountability on their success in graduating from high school.

Luke shared the same gratitude as Jared regarding his administrator, "I guess, he kind of influenced me…without him I don't think I would have graduated, honestly." Luke continued describing a time when he felt school was not important; and that school was not a priority he needed to consider. During this time, Luke recalled the nagging advice he received from parents, grandparents, teachers, and even other administrators, but he explained that he "never really listened." Admittedly, Luke had one passion while in high school; the one thing he enjoyed was ROTC, Air Force Junior Officer Training Corps. Luke, devotedly recalled waking up every morning at four o'clock for physical training that began at five in the morning and then participating in more training after school. If there were any weekend activities with ROTC, he was eager and ready to participate. Although Luke was an active participant in ROTC all through high school and truly enjoyed the discipline and structure associated with the program, at the time, he did not understand the relevance or connection to successfully completing high school in order to create options for a possible career with this interest.

Luke's administrator, however, recognized the compelling interest Luke had for participating in ROTC. Knowing this was Luke's favorite class and an elective class, his administrator would regularly pull Luke from this class to remediate other subjects in which Luke had received failing grades. Being pulled from his favorite class angered Luke, but Mr. Otto continued to hold Luke accountable and continued to pull him from his ROTC class as a consequence for behaviors and decisions made by Luke that were interfering with successful completion of graduation requirements.

Other students also recalled a period in high school when their looping administrator had to intervene when the student's behavior was not encouraging his/her

academic success in school. The students' responses in the following narrative section reveal the gratitude felt for discipline received and the redirection given.

Brittni's administrator, Mr. Braden, earned her respect when he recognized her potential and explained that he "would not give up on her." Brittni proclaimed she was a trouble maker in school. In her view, if Mr. Braden could continue to deal with her, she concluded that he must be a decent person. As Mr. Braden recalled, Brittni struggled with anger management and had tendencies to fight at school. After one such fight, Brittni fled the scene and left school property. Mr. Braden called Brittni on her cell phone and convinced her that leaving school after a fight was not in her best interest. He explained that regardless of whatever happened between Brittni and the other person, Brittni needed to own up to her behavior and accept the consequences. Amazingly, she did just as he suggested; Brittni returned to school. As a result, in addition to accepting consequences for her behavior, she agreed to attend Anger Management classes. Through all the fights in which Brittni was involved and through all the consequences Brittni received from Mr. Braden, the message she remembered, to this day, from Mr. Braden was, "Brittni, no matter what you do, I'm going to get you across that stage your senior year."

Paige's story is similar to Brittni's in that the influence of the looping administrator during times when she was disciplined encouraged her to persevere in her academic efforts. When asked about the influence of her administrator, Paige explained that her administrator, Mrs. Austin, did more than issue consequences for misbehavior. Paige would often skip classes or even miss classes all day. The circumstances which demanded consequences were also the opportunities for multiple conversations about the direction of her life and her potential.

Paige shared her perception about the influences of peers on her decision-making while in high school. She confessed that when friends did not want to go to school, she followed their lead. As a result, she said, "I didn't go to all my classes. I wasn't making enough credits to graduate." Through the influence of her looping administrator, Paige began to listen to the advice of her looping administrator rather than the suggestions of her peers. Through the numerous visits to the office for consequences received, the message that Paige received from her looping administrator is the same message Paige said she would give to other students who are struggling in school, "Stay in school; don't skip class. Come every day, study, and be dedicated."

Apparent from the testimonies given by each student, each situation was handled by the looping administrator in a unique manner. In addition, each administrator interviewed spoke to the value of extended time to "get to know" their students. Mrs. Woods summed up the consensus among the administrators on holding students accountable,

> You [get to] know who they are. You know what works and what doesn't work…You can predict how they're going to react. So getting to know what works for them and what doesn't or what sets them off… [Enables you to] just know how to approach them.

This response supports the thoughts of Jared who shared his administrator knew his history and his past. Jared remembered "being called into the office for anything and everything," and he emphasized that Mr. Otto guided him to make better decisions.

In speaking with the looping administrator of each student participant regarding clear expectations of behavior, although the structure for holding students accountable

and the identified consequences for not meeting the expectations is outlined for the administrators and students in school policy, administrators explained that there is a certain degree of leniency that is tolerable without compromising what is fair to all students. Administrators explained that they seek to find the balance between being fair and holding students accountable while doing what is in the best interest of the student at any given moment.

Accountability was further enhanced when looping administrators required students to monitor their attendance and grades. Keeping in line with the era of technology, Centerville encourages students and parents to connect to the on-line student management system to monitor attendance and grades. This is a web-based program which also offers an app for many cellphones. Looping administrators encouraged these students to monitor and keep track of their daily grades and attendance records for each class by logging into the system regularly. Administrators reported that, oftentimes, when students log into their grade book, they notice they forgot to turn in an assignment, and the familiarity of their current grade influences decisions concerning how to apportion their time. However, looping administrators were well aware that this self-monitoring, for these students, could not be effective in isolation. These looping administrators required students to report to them regularly concerning the progress they were making in classes. The relational aspect of this system of monitoring encouraged students to "take ownership" of their progress, and it encouraged them to remain persistent in meeting the goal of high school completion.

Relatedness

The second emerging theme regarding student perceptions of the influence of the looping administrator on student's connection to school is relatedness. This section reports a wide range of relational experiences of the student participants with their looping administrator.

Among the student participants, the relational experiences with the looping administrator varied with each student and his/her administrator. From casual conversations in the hallways of the school to confrontational discussions in the office, each opportunity allowed the student to feel related to his/her administrator as the looping administrator encouraged the student to persevere in his/her academic goals. Each student noted a sense of genuine care and support from the administrator; however, some student participants recounted a deeper, unconditional emotional support from their administrator. Findings from this study suggest that the influence of the looping administrator program "helped out a lot" with the at-risk students' ability to develop connections with school. The supportive relationships and the bonds developed between the students and their looping administrator encouraged the decisions of students daily as participants indicated "it was normal to see [my administrator] every day." Student participants affectionately considered their administrators "kind of like family" as they began to sense their looping administrator "must really care about me."

Brianna talked about the closeness she felt with her administrator right after moving from another school district. Centerville was the third high school she had attended in two years. Moving from school to school and having to work while going to school did not allow Brianna to develop relationships at school, but she spoke about a

different feeling while at Centerville High School. With tears in her eyes, she spoke about the support and the encouragement she received from her administrator immediately as a new student. Brianna shared that she was forced by her mom to leave her home and family in Mexico. Living with strangers and moving from one living arrangement to another was something she generally kept to herself and did not share with others. Despite her shame, Brianna opened up to her administrator and counselor and shared her story. Reflecting back on a visit to the office, Brianna recalled the comfort she experienced from feeling accepted,

> I just opened up my heart; I just let her know everything…so since that day, I know I can trust them because they know this [and] they're not going to judge me. Since that day, I [thought] that's my new family. I can talk with them.

Estranged from her parents, Brianna did not speak of her dad but shared she did not have a good relationship with her mom who still resides in Mexico. Despite the miles between them and forced communication over the phone, Brianna appeared disheartened over the lack of encouragement and support from her mom. Remembering the frustration and discouragement, Brianna shared her feelings about the criticisms and judgments from her mom, "It's kind of sad because it's your mom, [she] makes you feel worse. When you hear that stuff from your mom, it hurts more."

Although Brianna's behavior at school was not defiant, she was considered at-risk due to her lack of academic credits and test requirements necessary for graduation. Brianna spoke of the stifling fear of not being successful. She explained that her fear was a suppressive power to overcome. With each requirement to make up in Credit Recovery, she doubted her abilities to get the coursework completed, and struggled with thoughts of

giving up. It was during these moments her administrator's belief in her "kept her going." Brianna recalled, "When I was scared, but she told me, 'Hey Brianna, you can do this. I know you can do this!'" When the day finally arrived, when she completed her requirements and received her diploma, she remembered the feeling, "You feel like you're not going to do it, but you have amazing people around you. I thought, 'I have to do this for me and for them because they trust in me!'"

Similarly, Sierra mentioned the importance of trust and being valued by others in a relationship before she is willing to open up, exposing her challenges and sharing her story. In other words, if she feels that another person pays attention to her and talks with her, that person has earned her trust. In her own words, Sierra exclaimed, "If you feel like they are listening to you, then you feel like you matter to them."

Each student participating in the study recognized the value of the relationship between the looping administrator and their students each year from sophomore to senior year. Additionally, administrators reported the primary benefit is the relationships that they are able to build with their students. In regard to the relationship he had with Mr. Otto, Luke provided,

> Honestly…I would have rather had [Mr. Otto] follow me like he did rather than somebody else, because…he knew me more than any of the other principals. And he knew how I acted and what-not and ways to try and help [me].

Luke felt the established relationship with his administrator enabled each of them to know and understand the actions of the other one. Although Luke often received consequences for his behavior, he felt Mr. Otto "understood his issues and challenges."

The trust he had in Mr. Otto, whom he believed was looking out for his best interest, allowed Luke to accept redirection and consequences from Mr. Otto.

Brittni's comments echoed the opinions of the other student participants interviewed. They each shared a common belief in the value of the relationship developed with their administrator through the looping program. In spite of the number of times Brittni was called to Mr. Braden's office for discipline issues, she contends,

> We bumped heads so many times…There were days that I would be so mad at him, and there were days that I would love him so much…for being my principal and for being there for me. So he was my motivation, the reason why I graduated.

The two themes outlined in this section, as impacting student's decisions to remain in school through the student's relationship with the looping administrator, are accountability and relatedness. Student participants indicated behavioral changes were made and motivation was increased, in part because of the compelling expectations from the looping administrator and the unavoidable consequences when the expectations were not met. Additionally, student participants indicated the engaging interactions and the emotional support the students received from their looping administrator enhanced the students' motivation to stay engaged in school and complete their academic requirements.

Influence of the looping administrator on student perceptions of the value of completing high school graduation requirements.

Findings from this study suggest that the looping administrator program positively influenced student perceptions of the value of completing high school. The two themes that emerged, accountability and relatedness that influenced students to connect with the school and persist in their educational efforts also influenced student perceptions

regarding the value of completing high school graduation requirements. In this section, the influence of the looping administrator on student perceptions of the value of earning a high school diploma is discussed. Because they are so closely linked, the two themes of accountability and relatedness are intermingled within the discussion.

Students participating in the study described varying degrees of confidence and doubt regarding their own abilities to successfully complete graduation requirements. While multiple factors can interfere with students' success in school, each of the student participants was considered by his/her administrator to be at-risk for not meeting graduation requirements by the end of his/her senior year of high school. In other words, interventions were necessary to assist the students in successfully completing the requirements for credits and state testing.

Two of the six participants did not have supportive parents encouraging their efforts in school. In fact, both students endured verbal criticisms from a parent who seemed to hinder their perceptions of the value of completing high school. Brianna described not having a good relationship with her mom as evidenced by the numerous fights and arguments she had with her mom. The fractured relationship she had with her mom resulted in Brianna moving out of the house away from parent supervision. However, as Brianna felt more secure in her relationship with her administrator, she was able to share her story and her struggles. Her administrator was then able to provide her with the guidance and direction she was lacking from supportive parents at home, including instilling in Brianna the value of a high school education.

Sierra shared her experiences of going to her principal with similar problems. She expressed that she felt supported and received the help she needed through the

relationship she developed with her administrator. When asked if she felt there was value in administrator looping with their students, she agreed, "Yes, because they know you… [They] know what you are going through and they help you." The confidence that Sierra's looping administrator had in her helped her to persevere, and it also helped her embrace the value of a high school education because graduating from high school became an achievable goal.

Oftentimes, at-risk students feel restrained by the despair and discouragement of life circumstances that interfere with their success in school. Student participants shared that during these troubling times they grew accepting of "repeating the same grade again and again" and "not [being] able to make it [earning each requirement]" needed to graduate from high school. As Sierra recalled, the value of completing high school was communicated by her looping administrator when she went to the office because she "had a problem" interfering with her abilities to demonstrate success in school. During these visits, her administrator shared "a little about [her]" own experiences and challenged Sierra to consider her interests while setting educational goals to achieve her dreams. In many instances, the student's perceptions of the value of high school education mirror the educational values of their looping administrator with whom the student has grown to trust and respect through conversations during the looping experience. The genuine dialogue which occurred with the looping experience encouraged students not only to openly discuss their personal struggles and challenges, but also boldly set educational goals, and to confidently believe that graduating from high school is an achievable goal.

Based on the stories shared in the interviews, one can conclude that four of the six students struggled in school largely due to decision making and behavior issues. Paige

acknowledged that her failing grades were related to her behavior. Without thinking through the consequences or the impact a decision might have on her education, Paige had a tendency to make irrational choices that did not promote her academic success. With each instance of disruptive behavior, her looping administrator had an opportunity to discuss with Paige her natural skills, her goals for her future, and the interference of the recent behavior to successful attainment of her educational goals. The looping administrator program provided the platform for her administrator began to share with Paige alternatives in her decision making that would align with the goal of her successfully completing high school. Paige began to embrace the educational values shared by her looping administrator allowing her to focus more on future goals rather than responding to her immediate situation.

Brittni shared the positive values she learned from her administrator. When asked if there was ever a time when she thought she might not graduate from high school, she replied, "Always." Many times after getting in trouble for misbehavior, she was extremely upset. As she was confronted regarding the inappropriateness of her behavior, Brittni often announced that she would leave school and drop out. However, during each instance the communication of positive values reflected through the expectation of appropriate behavior and the pursuit of educational goals was shared by her looping administrator. As Brittni conveyed, eventually, the expectations of Mr. Braden and the shared value of education began to resonate in her mind. As she recalled, "Mr. Braden always told me to keep getting on with my life." The standard he set and the goals they discussed kept her from making the irrational decision to drop out of school. The "person-environment fit" established through the administrator looping program enabled

looping administrators personalize a responsive approach to meeting the needs of each at-risk student and allows looping administrators to influence student perceptions of the value of completing high school to attain educational goals.

Jared acknowledged that the many conversations he had with Mr. Otto "helped a lot." Through these conversations, Jared realized the mistakes he was making. He began to visualize his potential future with his current destructive patterns of behavior. Mr. Otto's influence began to enlighten Jared on the options he had with a high school diploma, and the limitations he had without a high school diploma. Eventually, Jared made the decision to pay attention to what Mr. Otto was saying and to start applying the words to his own life. Jared wholeheartedly believes Mr. Otto guided him through these difficult times, encouraging him to make the necessary decisions for completing high school and leading to a more successful future.

Although Luke reports having supportive parents, family support was not enough to motivate him towards success in school. He was passionate about his participation in ROTC, but nothing else. He did not even understand the need of planning for a career in something he enjoyed like the structure and the activities found with ROTC. Luke shared he was not concerned about the consequences of not graduating high school. Luke's parents encouraged him academically to succeed in school by completing the requirements for high school graduation; however, Luke "didn't feel it [graduating] was important." He "didn't think it was a need" that would benefit him or limit his future plans. In spite of Luke's outlook on education, Mr. Otto kept emphasizing the value of a high school education. Mr. Otto explained that Luke was limiting his opportunities in the military if he did not complete high school, and he continued to push Luke to make better

choices through his decision making. Finally, Luke realized, "You know what? He's right. I'm going to [mess] up my future if I don't get this diploma." The relationship with Mr. Otto encouraged Luke to embrace the value of completing high school.

As shared by the student participants, the messages that they received of making good decisions and planning for success by planning for the future was heard and received through supportive and encouraging relationships. Because these students developed respect and affection for their looping administrator, they were able to embrace the value that the administrator conveyed, such as the value of completing high school. Often, as evidenced in findings from this study, at-risk students have supportive parents helping them plan for their future. However, the message between the parent and child may be distorted in some instances because of the conflict in the relationship. Findings from this study suggest that administrators who develop quality relationships with students may be able to influence student perceptions of the value of completing high school graduation requirements. In these moments, Mr. Braden indicted that he asks himself, "How do I still be a voice that can direct [students] and guide them but not be their mom's voice or their dad's voice?"

As looping administrators required students to monitor their attendance and grades, students developed the shared perception regarding the value of education. Keeping in line with the era of technology, Centerville encourages students and parents to connect to the on-line student management system to monitor attendance and grades. This web-based program also offers an app for many cellphones to encourage easy access to student grades and attendance. Looping administrators encouraged these students to take an active role in monitoring and keeping track of their daily grades and attendance

records for each class by logging into the system regularly. Administrators reported that, in most cases, when students log into their grade book, they may notice they forgot to turn in an assignment, and the familiarity of their current grade influences decisions concerning how to apportion their time. However, looping administrators were well aware that this self-monitoring, for these students, could not be effective in isolation. These looping administrators required students to report to them regularly concerning the progress they were making in classes. In addition, looping administrators counseled their at-risk students to develop a plan to make positive changes in their study habits that would enable them to meet their educational goals. The relational aspect of this system of monitoring encouraged students to "take ownership" of their progress, and it encouraged them to remain persistent in meeting the goal of high school completion. Student persistence to meet educational goals is further discussed in the section that follows.

Influence of the looping administrator on student persistence to meet educational goals.

Regarding the influence of the looping administrator on student persistence to meet educational goals, students primarily identified consistency of the looping administrator as the primary motivator.

A fundamental component of the looping administrator program is the consistent interaction of the administrator with the students. Administrators emphasized that knowing their students and understanding their challenges are vital components to the success of the program. Likewise, students identified the consistent intervening support of the administrator as a motivator to pursue educational goals. When the looping

administrator and the student worked together consistently, the emphasis was on the shared goal of successful completion of graduation requirements.

For example, Mr. Braden explained his practice of disclosing to his students even the first time they were in his office,

> You and I have the same goal and that's to see you graduate. Anything that you do that keeps you from graduating, we're going to be talking about it. It's never personal. It's just about trying to help you reach your goal to graduate.

Brittni shared that because of the support she felt, she eventually accepted the advice from Mr. Braden. Not only did she graduate, but she also decided to "keep getting on with her life." The result of Mr. Braden's influence on Brittni's life is evidenced in the fact that, not only did she graduate from high school, she is currently enrolled in college studying to be a dentist.

Consistency in the looping administrator's efforts was evidenced in Jared's responses also. Throughout Jared's interview he mentioned the manner in which Mr. Otto modeled the persistence needed to meet educational goals. Mr. Otto recognized the need to intervene right away because Jared remembered Mr. Otto stopping by his history class every day to see how he was doing. Every day, Jared would hear Mr. Otto, "How's it going? You doing good? Alright, I'm coming back to check on you." Five years later, Jared is still impressed by Mr. Otto's persistence to see Jared succeed. As the years go by, Jared explained that Mr. Otto "kept showing up and showing up." Jared explained that he "couldn't get away." Jared explained that he was called in to the office "for anything and everything." However, Jared said it really "clicked for him" when Mr. Otto knocked on the front door of his home one morning. When Jared woke up to answer the

door, he was shocked to see his principal there asking why he was not in school. As Jared explained,

> It [Mr. Otto's persistence] was one of those things; it was a constant, every day. When something is a constant like that, you have to stop and think, "Why is it so constant? What are you doing in order to have to hear this [message] every day?" Alright, he's talking to me; I'm not listening. Maybe I need to listen one time. And that one time I listened, I was like, hum, [that] makes sense.

Similarly, in spite of the numerous times she was called into the office to discuss her tardiness to class, her truancies, or her failing grades, Paige shared her perception of feeling supported at school because her assistant principal kept calling her into the office for conversations about her future and her education. Paige recalled the consistent intervening actions of Mrs. Austin, as an influence impressing upon Paige to rethink her behavior as it contributes to her pursuit to accomplish her educational goals. As Paige remembered, "She, [Mrs. Austin] talked to me [many] times...She helped me a lot with my behavior. I was doing badly in school, and she was giving me advice [on making better choices]." The consistency of this administrator's contact with Paige positively influenced her persistence to meet educational goals.

Luke talked about Mr. Otto having him on "a close radar." Luke indicated Mr. Otto was consistently present in his experiences at school. When asked if he was okay with that, Luke replied,

> At first…no, I hated it. I tried to get away from him so much, but after a while, I was just like "man, I can't really skip no more. He's always going to find me. He's

always going [to] find out who or where or whom I'm with, so I was just like, I'm just gonna try; I'm gonna start trying to stay in class."

Interestingly, student participants did not seem to object to persistent administrator efforts to confront them about the behaviors which interfered with their academic success. For each instance, when the relentless, persistent monitoring of the student was coupled with the encouraging support from the administrator, the student demonstrated respect for the administrator and responded favorably. Each student interviewed was asked if he or she felt there was a benefit of the administrator looping program in helping students succeed in high school. Without question, each student felt the program was beneficial to their success. In addition, each administrator interviewed, when asked the same question, explained complete support for the intent of the program and recognized the value of establishing relationships with students to meet the diverse needs of each of these at-risk students.

Summary

In Chapter four, I presented the findings of the study. A description of the school district and the high school within the district are presented. The findings are based primarily on analysis of interview transcripts, and are supported by reviewed documents and observations made within the context of the study. The stories of six at-risk students are presented to explain the culture and interactions experienced with the looping administrator. Chapter five presents a discussion of the findings of this study, the implications for research and practice, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

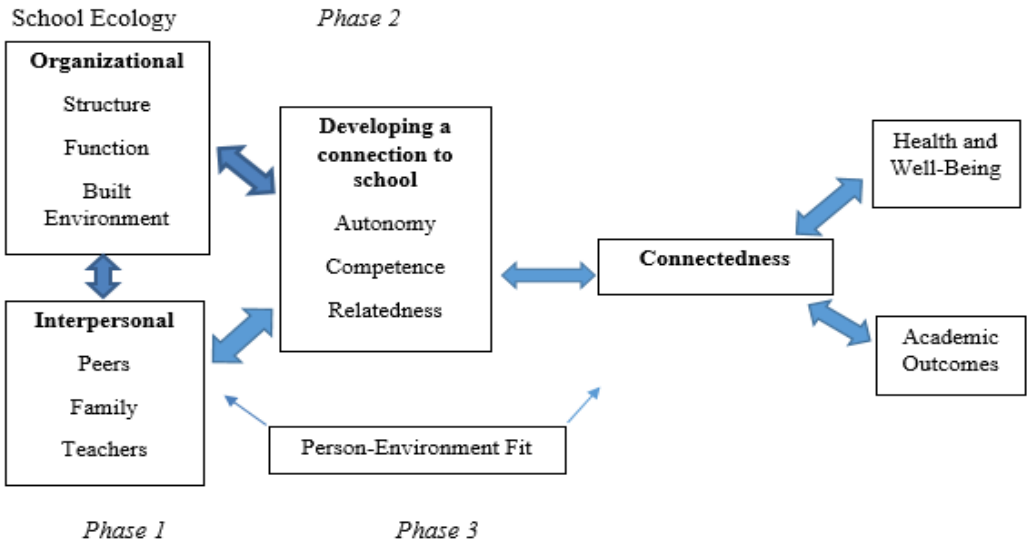
With the publication of *A Nation at Risk,* the Secretary of Education reminded the nation that our educational system and the learning that takes place is an investment from which we all benefit. The issue of high school dropouts is a concern that not only impacts the individual who is a dropout, but also each of us, as society is economically affected. Higher rates of unemployment and lower earnings among high school dropouts equate to reduced taxable income for society (Rumberger, 2001). An increase in social costs is prone to occur for these individuals who do not complete a high school education because they are more likely to have health issues, participate in criminal behavior, and require financial support through welfare and other government funded programs (Rumberger, 2001). Consequently, states, schools, and educators must navigate the roadblocks facing schools and students in order to provide for all students the opportunity to excel academically while preparing for a successful future.

The insistent urgency felt by educators and policy makers to "close the achievement gap" between minority and nonminority students for the purpose of improving the performance of all students is evident with nationwide legislation such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (20 U.S.C. 6301) and school wide interventions such as the looping administrator program in this study. With the responsibility placed on

schools to educate all students, educators and policy-makers must explore programs and structures to implement within schools and districts to support students in achieving their educational goals. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain a better understanding, through student perspectives, of the influence of high school administrator looping on student decisions to complete graduation requirements.

This chapter continues with a discussion of the findings drawn from this case study built on the theoretical framework of connectedness. The Social and Ecological School Model found in Figure 3, conceptualized by Waters, Cross, and Runions (2009), is a useful framework to better understand how the looping administrator influences school connectedness for students while promoting academic achievement toward educational goals of students. Additionally, this chapter outlines the implications of the findings for research and practice. This chapter also provides recommendations for future research.

Figure 3 Social and Ecological School Model



Note. This model is from Waters, Cross, Runions (2009).

Discussion

The theoretical model by Waters, Cross, and Runions (2009) provides a lens to further explain the findings of this study. Emerging from the data, findings surrounding the influence of the looping administrator on student's connections with school were the themes: accountability, relatedness, shared perception of the value of completing a high school education, and consistency. The themes, autonomy and relatedness, are relevant constructs recognized in the theoretical model by Waters, Cross, and Runions (2009) as contributing to phase two of the model. According to Waters et al. (2009), meeting student psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness contribute to students' ability to develop connections to school. Additionally, the third and fourth findings of the study, developing shared perceptions regarding the value of completing high school, consistency in efforts to meet individual goals are themes that can be more fully explained in phase three of Waters et al. (2009) model, person-environment fit. The explication of the theoretical relationship relating to the findings surrounding the looping administrator's influence on the decisions of at-risk students to complete the necessary graduation requirements is explained in the following sections which are outlined by the four themes that emerged from the data.

Theme one: Accountability

Findings from this study suggest that the looping administrator influenced at-risk students to remain in school and complete graduation requirements because of a heightened sense of personal accountability. The theme, accountability, is conceptualized within phase two of the theoretical model rendered by Waters, Cross, and Runions (2009). The focus of this phase is the manner in which the social context of the school,

including the ecological environment of school, influences and meets the psychological needs of students, thereby, enhancing their school connectedness. Waters et al. (2009) built upon the work of Deci and Ryan (2000) by including the concepts of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their theoretical model as a predictor of student connectedness to school. As previously established in Chapter Two, through Maslow's hierarchy, an individual's need to belong must be satisfied before he or she can feel a sense of accomplishment and a sense of reaching his/her potential (Maslow, 1970). Building on Maslow's hierarchy, Deci and Ryan (2000) postulated that inherent to the human nature of individuals are the needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Connell and Wellborn (as cited in Waters & Cross, 2010) established the Self-System Process model to explain, within the context of schools, the influences of the innate needs of students for autonomy, competence, and relatedness leading to student engagement and academic achievement. As explained in the Waters et al. (2009) model, the three constructs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, contribute to developing a connection to school because they represent the meeting of student psychological needs.

In this study, the theme of accountability emerged as a means to enhance students' feelings of competence. Participants in this study reported multiple instances of being held accountable for their behavior by their looping administrator. When the expectations for appropriate behavior were established, the consequences for misbehavior were known, and administrators consistently addressed the misbehavior of the students in a supportive manner, students began to believe that they possessed the needed skills to achieve academic goals. This belief, then, enhanced student feelings of competence to meet educational goals. The relationship that the student had with the looping

administrator, therefore, served as a catalyst for persistence in educational endeavors, even when the student met challenges and "road blocks" along the way. In this study, the effect of the "administrator believing in the student" also led to student feelings of competence. Students began to believe in their own abilities as a result of the belief that looping administrators expressed. When student began to understand that they, indeed, possessed the skills and abilities needed to complete high school graduation requirements, they began to feel connected to school, and student persistence was reinforced to complete necessary requirements for graduation.

Additionally, the relationships developed between students and the looping administrator enhanced the academic outcome of these students in several ways. For example, relationships with looping administrators encouraged positive social behavior. Many of these at-risk students had a history of behavior that was detrimental to their academic success. Examples include excessive tardiness, truancies, and consequences for behavior that resulted in separation from the school environment (suspension). Before developing a relationship with the looping administrator, students did not have healthy relationships connecting them to the school. However, the relationship with the looping administrator helped the student to stay "connected" to the school environment. As Jared stated, "If wasn't for me going to the office, [and meeting with the looping administrator] I would not have graduated." Because of the decisions Jared made and the defiant behavior in which he was involved, Jared assumed his destiny was set as he explained, "I knew I wasn't going to graduate; I was probably going to end up in jail or dead." However, the relationship that Jared established with Mr. Otto, his looping administrator,

helped to connect him to the school, and eventually Jared fulfilled all requirements for graduation.

Another way that relationships advanced student success was the opportunity for administrators to "truly know" their students. As one administrator shared of his message to students,

> I'm never going to try to say that I know exactly how you're feeling, but I know that there's a better way [than with the choices you are making]. I [may not] understand what you're going through, but help me understand. [If you] help me understand, I'll help you to try to say "Okay, now if I were faced with this particular decision, this is what I would do." Always know that there's always hope; there's always something you can do.

The findings of this study suggest the intentional actions and focus of the looping administrators to develop relationships with students, contributed to better understanding the at-risk students' challenges to more effectively guide students to make decisions that promote the achievement of their academic goals. As a result, when students truly felt understood in these relationships, they developed a feeling of connection with the school. Even though students may have developed a relationship with only one adult in the school, the looping administrator, the relationship met their psychological need of relatedness, furthering their connection to the school. This relatedness allowed the looping administrators to openly discussed, with their students, the behavioral and academic expectations and the consequences which might ensue with behaviors which disrupt the pursuit of students reaching their academic goals.

Findings of this study suggest that as the administrators looped with students through their high school years, the administrator gained a better understanding of the students' actions and, often, was able to prevent or intervene to minimize disruptive behavior by the students. The looping administrators spoke about situations encountered with students and learning to "predict how they [at-risk students] were going to react" in different circumstances. Additionally, the looping administrators agreed, that as they "learned a little more about their [student's] stories and the challenges they are going through," they were enabled "to know what works for [the students] and what doesn't work" and "[to] know how to approach them." Likewise, the findings suggest when students did not meet the expectations established, they were more readily accepting of the redirection and consequences from the looping administrator due to the confidence and trust established through the relationship with the looping administrator. This connection, then, allowed for greater influence of the looping administrator on student decisions that influenced the ability of the student to graduate.

Theme two: Relatedness.

In addition to the accountability imposed upon students to redirect their behavior towards academic achievements, findings from this study suggest that it is important to recognize the need for relatedness as a necessary component to ensuring students develop a connection to school. This finding can be explained as illustrated in phase two of Waters, Cross, and Runions' (2009) theoretical model of connectedness. According to the model presented by Waters et al. (2009), the psychological health and well-being of individuals are incumbent upon their ability to relate to others in their social environments (Deci & Ryan, 2000). As noted by Waters, Cross, and Runions (2009), the

functionality of autonomy, competence, and relatedness contribute to students' connectedness to school. In this study, student relationships with looping administrators supported the student psychological need of relatedness, leading to student connection with the school.

Relatedness as a construct was first noted in Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs, which identifies the fundamental need of an individual to feel he or she belongs in social situations. Self Determination Theory, subsequently, established that this satisfaction is met through three innate psychological needs of individuals: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Applying this research to a school setting, Connell and Wellborn (as cited in Waters & Cross, 2010) presented the Self-System Process model to describe students' connectedness to school which is established as the innate needs of students are met within the context of the school environment. Phase two of Waters, Cross, and Runions' (2009) theoretical model explains the fulfillment of students' needs for relatedness as contributing to developing a connection to school. Student participants, in this study, spoke of the encouragement they received from their looping administrator each time they were "called into the office for anything and everything." The findings of this study indicate that through trusting relationships with administrators, students were able "to share their stories" and the obstacles and challenges that interfered with their success in school. As a result, student participants became receptive to the looping administrator "giving advice" concerning making a decision either to do "what is right" or to "follow their peers." The findings suggest that the looping administrators many times offered an alternative perspective to what the student had grown accustomed to believing:

> You've got a great future ahead of you. [Although] there's a certain percentage of your life that you have no control over, there's a certain percentage of your life that you do have control over. The only thing that anyone's asking you to do is take ownership over the things that you do have control over.

This statement supports the findings of this study that the looping administrators engaged with students to meet their diverse needs and provided the emotional support contributing to the students' sense of relatedness and ultimately their connectedness to school. Additional evidence in the literature undergirds the importance of student relatedness to school as a means to encourage student academic success. For example, Osterman (2000) postulated "the need for relatedness is the need to experience belongingness or the sense of community" (p. 325). Osterman (2000) further contended that this sense of relatedness or community is possible when its members share an emotional connection or trust in others within the community that includes "membership, influence, integration, and fulfillment of needs" (p. 324).

Findings from this study indicate that the students' need of relatedness was met as student participants spoke of their looping administrator as a "member of the family" even a "father figure" guiding students through their influence while sharing positive values and a commitment to education. Findings from this study further suggest that the looping administrator program, even though the relationship was with only one adult in the school, provided the platform for developing the kinds of relationships with students that helped them to feel like they "belonged" to the school community.

Sharing their stories and histories, especially when those stories included their frustration with the educational process or their perceptions of their inability to fulfill

academic expectations, helped these students to gain a better understanding of the challenges that they faced. In some instances, the students even recognized that their own actions were contributing to the difficulties that they were experiencing. Alternatively, the looping administrators spoke to the value of knowing the stories of their students to better address their needs and challenges. The findings of this study suggest the engaging interactions and the emotional support received from the looping administrator enhanced the students' need for relatedness, and these relationships provided student motivation to meet their educational goals.

In general, the looping administrator program enabled administrators to focus their efforts on generally the same group of students for three years of high school. During this time, the looping administrator established relationships and gathered information critical to meeting the needs of the at-risk students. Phase three of the theoretical model of connectedness by Waters, Cross, and Runions (2009) is the "person-environment fit."

Theme three: Perception of the Value of Completing a High School Education

Findings from this study further suggest that relationships developed through the looping administrator program provided a platform for enhancing student perceptions of the value of earning a high school diploma. This finding can be further explained through Person-Environment (PE) Fit theory, a component of the Waters et al. (2009) model. According to PE Fit theory, individuals are successful in organizations when they embrace that organization's goals. Before involvement in the looping administrator program, each of these at-risk students did not openly accept or recognize the value of completing a high school education. For example, student participants in this study

indicated prior to the influence of the looping administrator, they "didn't feel [a high school education] was important" and "didn't really think it was a need" for a satisfying future. However, the relationship with the looping administrator helped these students to understand that completing high school graduation requirements was actually beneficial to their future success. The development of a shared value of completing high school education was evident as one student conveyed about the influence of his looping administrator, "He made me realize how important it was to actually get the credits I needed to graduate, and what good outcomes [a high school diploma] had and what bad [outcomes] if I didn't graduate." In turn, students began to embrace the value of completing high school, and several of these students even continued their education in college. The shared perception of the value of completing graduation requirements helped these students to feel connected to school, and it encouraged them to persist in their academic efforts. The looping administrator program, therefore, served as a means for these students to feel like they "fit" into the educational environment.

These findings align with the Waters et al. (2009) model, in that "fitting" into the educational environment helped to produced connectedness that led to academic success for these students. Student participants agreed the numerous conversations with their looping administrator regarding the expectations of behavior provided the structure and the support necessary for the students to recognize the value of completing high school graduation requirements. The findings of this study further indicate that, although many of the conversations between the students and the looping administrator were initiated as a result of student misbehavior, the students began to understand the value of a high

school education through the encouragement and advice they received from their administrator as he or she was "pushing them" to excel in their behavior and academics.

Theme four: Consistency

Findings from this study suggest consistent, responsive support provided to at-risk students from the looping administrator enhanced student connectedness with school. This finding can be explained within phase two and phase three of the theoretical model by Waters, Cross, and Runions (2009). Phase two of the theoretical model of connectedness, rendered by Waters et al. (2009), built upon Self-Determined Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) to further explain the importance of satisfying inherent needs of students to developing connections to school. In this study, the theme of consistency emerged as an ancillary trait of accountability and relatedness contributing to developing a connection to school because it represents the perpetual involvement of the looping administrator to establish a relationship with the student.

Phase three of the theoretical model of connectedness by Waters, Cross, and Runions (2009) is the "person-environment fit." This phase establishes that, during adolescence, the developing student's needs are changing as the student is becoming less dependent on parents while striving for independence (Waters et al. 2009). During this phase, it is critical for the impressionable student to experience "caring and supportive relationships" in an environment with "clear and consistent boundaries" promoting "positive values" and a "commitment to education" (Waters et al. 2009, p. 521).

According to phase two of the Waters et al. (2009) model, meeting of student psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness leads to student connections with school. In this study, administrator persistence influenced student

relationships with their looping administrator as students began to realize that the administrator "would not give up on [the student]." Administrator persistence helped to break down some of the barriers that students had developed, such as hopelessness, defensiveness, or negative perceptions of school environments. This persistence encouraged the development of healthy relationships between students and administrators, and, ultimately, between students and the school for enhanced connectedness to school. Specifically, persistent efforts by the looping administrator enhanced the health and well-being of students by fulfilling the psychological need of relatedness, promoting student connectedness to school.

This finding, the persistence of the looping administrator, can be explained further through phase three of the Waters et al. (2009) model. According to the model presented by Waters et al. (2009), phase three, the "person-environment fit" encourages schools to establish an environment which is characterized with "supportive relationships" focused and responsive to the diverse needs of students. The findings of this study suggest, as the administrators looped with their at-risk students through their high school years, persistence provided the platform for the looping administrator to "build on the relationship" with the student, "consistently advocating" for a "commitment to education" and the achievement of academic goals. Student participants spoke of the "relentless" efforts of their looping administrator and the comfort and encouragement they experienced as the looping administrator shared "No matter what you do, I'm going to get you across that stage your senior year" by fulfilling the requirements for high school graduation.

Findings of this study suggest persistence in the message sent from the looping administrator to the at-risk student regarding the value of education and the confidence in the students' abilities, positively influenced student persistence to complete the necessary requirements for high school graduation. The looping administrators spoke to the importance of "clearly and consistently" communicating to students their intent to "never give up on helping the students" meet their educational goals. Student participants acknowledged that the persistent actions of the looping administrator "showing up" to check on the student in class day after day and "the unexpected, showing up at the [student's] house" asking why the student is not in school, is when "it really clicked in." This persistence influenced student understandings about their ability to "fit" into the school environment. Relentless efforts by the looping administrators communicated to students that they, indeed, "had a place" in the school and they could be successful in meeting educational goals.

Specifically, participants in this study reported "being kept on a close radar" by looping administrators as a means of closely monitoring students' behaviors and academic progress towards educational goals. Findings of this study suggest the consistent intervening actions of the looping administrator contributed to the influence of decisions of the at-risk students to emulate an understanding of the positive values and commitment to education shared by the looping administrator. Findings suggest through the consistent influence of the looping administrator, students created a "fit" between the student and the school as students grew to accept and appreciate the value of completing their high school graduation requirements.

Additionally, student participants identified the consistency of the looping administrator as a primary motivator for the student to alter disruptive behavior and to pursue educational goals. Findings suggest, during this adolescent period as students are exerting their independence from a reliance on their parents, it is helpful for schools to create for students a responsive environment which will engender supportive relationships, convey positive values, promote a commitment to education, and in general, seek to meet the varied needs of each student (Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009). Participants in this study shared that students oftentimes ignored the redirection and standards set by parents; however, through the looping administrator's consistent intervening support, students began to recognize the self-destructive behavior was actually interfering with their success. As students accepted the goal of graduating from high school for themselves, they adjusted their behavior to more accurately "fit" the expectations of the school environment. This adjustment enhanced their ability to meet their educational goals to complete high school.

Implications

Implications for Theory

The theoretical model offered by Waters, Cross, and Runions (2009) was used to understand the necessary influences within a school that are needed to engender student connectedness to school. Although this study did not focus on phase one of the connectedness model, it is noteworthy to mention that the components of school ecology, the interpersonal components and the organizational components, illustrated in phase one work in harmony with developing a connection to school for students by creating a "responsive" environment characterized by supportive relationships.

This study exemplified the students desire to be in control of their decision-making, and yet their need for competence by providing clear expectations of behavior in which to abide and their need for emotional support to enhance the students' feelings of relatedness. This study contributed to the connectedness theory by focusing on how the supportive relationships offered by the looping administrators influences the decisions of at-risk students.

Adolescence is a period of changing developmental needs for student which often go unrecognized or noticed by schools. Although the looping administrator program has never been applied to this theory, this study demonstrated the benefit of the administrator looping with the at-risk students for several years and the benefits of knowing their challenges and barriers. This study showed how the theory of connectedness can be useful in explaining the "person-environment fit" which is responsive to meeting the needs of adolescent students and crucial for promoting positive values and a commitment to education. The responsive "person-environment fit" established through the looping administrator program provides the support for students to "feel like they belong" and "respected and valued by others" which in turn leads to academic achievement.

As noted by Waters, Cross, and Runions (2009), Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs and Deci and Ryan's (2000) innate needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are crucial to understanding the connectedness model. In addition, each of these theories finds practical application through the looping administrator model. The positive academic outcomes and health and well-being outcomes of students are made possible as the adolescents benefit from the shared values and a commitment to education consistently communicated by caring and supportive looping administrators.

A significant component of the comprehensive model of connectedness by Waters et al. (2009) is also a limitation. The theoretical model recognizes relationships/relatedness as a necessary component influencing each phase of the model. As such, if connectedness to school is not established for the student, pinpointing which phase is restricting the student's connectedness to school is an apparent limitation of this theory.

Implications for Research

The purpose of this study was to understand the influence of the administrator looping program on the at-risk students' decisions to complete the necessary requirements for graduation. Specifically, this study sought to understand the influence of the looping administrator on students' connections to school, on the students' perceptions of the value of education, and on students' persistence to complete graduation requirements. Findings from this study confirmed findings from previous research regarding the benefit of responsive and supportive relationships of caring adults at school for the decision-making and academic success of at-risk students at school (Blum, 2005; Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009).

The achievement gap between minority and nonminority students illustrates the disparities in education inherent within many communities. Although graduation rates have improved for some, the graduation rates for minority, low-income, ELL, and special education students are still lower than white and higher income students (DePaoli et al., 2015). For many years, educators and policy makers have sought strategies to eliminate the barriers encountered by particular groups of students to enhance education. Findings from this study suggest that the connections established through the looping administrator

program, enabled the administrator to meet the diverse needs of at-risk students allowing for higher academic achievement. Although findings from qualitative studies cannot be generalized to districts with differing demographics, these findings suggest that healthy relationships between at-risk students and at least one adult in the school may provide the support needed to enhance educational outcomes. Further research is needed to understand the influence of looping administrator programs on student decisions to complete graduation requirements in differing educational contexts.

This same study could be conducted in other school districts with varying size, demographics, and settings. Centerville Public Schools is a large, urban school district with a large influence of lower SES conditions and a growing minority population. Various school districts could be studied to gain a broader understanding of the influence of administrator looping on the decisions of at-risk students. In addition, a future study could be conducted to include student participants from each ethnic background to gather additional student perspectives.

As this study was a qualitative case study built on the interview responses of six students, a future study could follow a mixed method or a quantitative approach to include a survey of a larger group of students to allow for a more exhaustive view of the influence of looping administrators on specific student academic outcomes, such as student test scores, college entrance exams, and college admission/acceptance rates. Additionally, the interview format of questioning student participants could prevent students from speaking freely out of nervousness or fear of exposing the negative actions of their looping administrator. An anonymous, open-ended survey might allow student participants to speak more freely.

Implications for Practice

District Leaders. Findings from this study underscore the need for school district leaders to take notice of potential programs, such as the looping administrator program, that may influence the decisions of at-risk students to complete the necessary graduation requirements for high school. According to findings from this study, supportive relationships developed through the looping administrator program supported student decisions to complete graduation requirements. These findings are further explained by the theoretical model of Waters, Cross, and Runions, (2009) that suggests that supportive relationships that fulfill student psychological needs of competence and relatedness and that encourage students to feel that they "fit" into the school environment may enhance student outcomes. These findings suggest that school district leaders who purposefully structure their schools to allow for students to develop connections with caring adults in school (i.e. those who will hold students accountable to behavioral and academic high expectations and become deeply invested in their success) may lead to enhanced graduation rates for at-risk students (Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009). In addition, finding from this study further suggest the need for district leaders to prepare administrators and other adults within the school for the responsibility of fostering a responsive school environment to meet the diverse needs of the students while sharing positive values and promoting a commitment to education (Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009). The school district in this study has placed an emphasis on the district goal to "graduate 100 percent of students, college and/or career ready." This expectation permeates throughout district decision-making in regard to policies and practices; the looping administrator program was established to positively influence the ability of the

district to meet this challenging goal. These findings suggest that promoting healthy relationships between adults in the school and at-risk students may facilitate the goals of increased graduation rates.

Building Leaders. Findings from this study further suggest that administrators are in a unique position to establish and maintain supportive and caring relationships with at-risk students in their schools. Building administrators, often, feel less connected to students that classroom teachers, as building administrators are typically responsible for building oversight. However, building administrators have the opportunity to establish a comprehensive understanding of individual at-risk student needs primarily because they do have an overarching perspective of student progress. Administrator connectedness with students may be exactly what at-risk students need to overcome the challenges they experience that influencing every aspect of their school experiences. Additionally, building level leaders have the opportunity to enhance and provide school environments tailored to "person-environment fit" to meet the developing needs of the adolescent students (Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009). Administrators who truly "know" their students can provide the supportive environments that further connect students to schools. The findings of this study indicate the persistent attempts of administrators to "know the stories" and the challenges of their at-risk students coupled with supportive relationships which seek to help students feel "respected and valued by others" often mitigate the oppressive barriers encountered by at-risk students (Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009, p. 521). Building administrators are encouraged to help students establish their educational goals and create a pathway leading to their aspirations. Additionally, administrators are encouraged to consistently and respectfully identify student behaviors which interfere

with students meeting their educational goals. The mediating role of the looping administrator to influence students' decision-making is powerful to school connectedness and students' academic achievement.

Limitations

As with all research designs, this case study is not without obvious limitations. The following sections includes an explanation of the limitations of this study.

Each student participant of this study completed graduation requirements prior to participation in the study and as such was extremely appreciative of this accomplishment. This same study could be conducted with a combination of students who have recently earned their high school diploma and students who are currently seeking to complete graduation requirements and with students who experienced the administrator looping program who did not successfully complete graduation requirements. The inclusion of only students who have graduated from high school is a limitation of this study. The perspectives of students who are still in high school and have not yet completed the journey or who were not successful in the administrator looping program may vary significantly from the student perspectives of the current study. A look at the perceptions of students who were unsuccessful in completing graduation requirements by the end of their twelfth grade year may provide insightful perspectives.

Additionally, this qualitative case study methodology offered rich, detailed descriptions of student perspectives. Future research could add to the literature on connectedness from the perspectives of administrators and parents or primary care givers. Considering the dynamics interactions of administrators and parents to influence at-risk

students in their pursuit of educational goals, could offer a deeper understanding of providing the emotional and supportive environment needed.

Mentioned in a previous chapter, as the primary researcher of this study, I also hold an administrator position within the school district of this study. Additionally, two years prior to the gathering of data, I worked as a looping administrator at the high school in which the study was done. Each administrator interviewed was a former colleague while working at the high school. In spite of my experience in the looping administrator program and my experience of seeing students benefit from the relationships, I truly endeavored to remain neutral to hear and share the perspectives of the students. As an educator of thirty years, I have learned to value criticisms of programs and failed attempts as opportunities to grow. Therefore, I was prepared to hear that the looping administrator program did not meet the intended expectations. Further, having worked in this school district for thirty years, I have an extensive perspective of the culture of the district; however, this experience may have clouded my interpretations of the culture of the district.

Although case studies provide value in the hearing the perspectives of the participants, it is incumbent upon the researcher gathering the data to hear the stories of the participants and to report the views of the participants accordingly. The issue of generalizability is also a limitation. This qualitative case study sought to understand the perspectives of six at-risk students of one high school. The demographics, backgrounds, and experiences of these students are unique to each of them and their own situations; therefore, the findings are not generalizable to other districts and other students. In fact,

the experiences of each student may be different within the school as the high school employs several different looping administrators.

Another limitation might come from the perspective of the student participants themselves. Each student participant of this study successfully completed the graduation requirements to earn a high school degree. Therefore, the view of participants who successfully achieved their academic goals might differ from the viewpoints of students who were unsuccessful in their attempts. As previously mentioned in the recommendations, future research might look at the perspective of students who are still in school working to complete graduation requirements and/or students who were unsuccessful in their attempts to complete the graduation requirements.

Summary

The decisions of students to drop out of high school have been a concern for decades. Students are faced with many challenges that keep them from completing the necessary requirements for high school graduation. These challenges oftentimes mimic "roadblocks" that, ultimately, prevent students from successfully navigating the pathway leading to graduation. Although the barriers encountered by students are as varied as the individuals, findings from this study suggest that the supportive relationship of the looping administrator, for students in this study, served as a mechanism to meet the diverse needs of at-risk students in order to overcome the challenges they experience.

Inherent to the human nature of individuals, established by Deci and Ryan (2000) are the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. During the adolescent period, at-risk students often struggle with the ramifications of their inadequate decision making while establishing their independence from parental support. Although adolescent

students are seeking their independence during their high school years, findings from this study indicate that students responded favorably to the supportive relationships with the looping administrator.

This study is important because it offers insight to student perspectives of the influence of administrator looping on their decisions to remain in school and on their persistence to meet educational goals. As high schools across the nation are striving to increase graduation rates, this study can inform both educational leaders and policy makers about practices, such as administrator looping, that can promote the success of at-risk students.

Reflection

I was surprised to find how articulate the student participants were of their appreciation of their looping administrator. Several of the students experienced numerous consequences for the repeated misbehaviors while in high school. Students unabashedly explained, without mediating efforts of their looping administrator, they would not have graduated from high school. After hearing these stories of the students, I found myself wishing that administrators could hear these types of stories to validate their efforts and encourage the administrators to keep pursuing the best interests of their students and to never give up on influencing their at-risk students.

I also found myself relating the findings of this study in another manner unrelated to student decisions. Stepping back and looking at the big picture, I feel that the manner in which individuals are valued and respected by others can influence their behavior. As an administrator, I have the potential to influence members of my staff in a positive manner by being clear and consistent with expectations and by providing a caring and supportive work environment. As with parables and fables, oftentimes results of research can be applied to settings outside the scope of the study. In this case study, the value and benefit of connectedness could find relevance in many areas of life.

Finally, as a novice researcher, much was to be learned from the first experience of conducting a qualitative research study. Certainly the process of planning, conducting, and writing the case study has been written about in text books; however, a great deal can be learned from reading examples of dissertations similar to one's study. I found it helpful to look at the sequence of chapters, the sequence of sections within the chapters, and to notice the vocabulary and terminology of the different studies. In addition, I am certain there is a skill to interviewing that I have yet to perfect. Perhaps another qualitative study will allow me to perfect these skills.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Student Interview Questions

1. Have you already graduated high school?
    a. If yes, what influenced your decision to persist to meet your graduation requirements?
    b. Also, if yes, have you continued with education beyond high school?
        i. If yes, what are you studying now?
        ii. Also if yes, what influenced your decision to continue with your education beyond high school?
    c. If no, do you expect to graduate?
2. Was there a time when you did not believe that you would graduate from high school?
    a. What was that like?
    b. How did you feel about school at that time?
3. What are feelings about school now?
4. How confident are you in your academic abilities?
5. What challenges did/do you have while in high school?
    a. Did/do you feel your administrator understood/understands the challenges that interfered with you completing graduation requirements?

    b. What did/does your administrator do to help you overcome these challenges?

6. How connected did/do you feel to your high school?
7. How did you feel about school before you entered high school?
8. What influence if any did/does your high school administrator have on your success in high school?
9. Did/do you feel there is a benefit to having the same assistant principal each year in high school?
10. What advice would you give to students who are struggling in school?

Appendix B

Administrator Interview Questions

1. How many years have you worked in the administrator looping program?
2. How many years did/have you looped with (Student's name)?
    a. How connected did/do you feel you were/are to (Student's name)?
    b. How did the experience of looping influence your abilities to interact with (Student's name)?
3. Did/do you feel you understood/understand the challenges (Student's name) had in completing high school graduation requirements?
4. How were you able to address these challenges?
5. Do you feel there is a benefit in looping with your students through their high school years?
6. What influence, if any, do high school administrators have on the success of their high school students?

VITA

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