AN ANALYSIS OF SECONDARY EDUCATOR AND ADMINISTRATOR ABILITIES TO IDENTIFY YOUTH GANG INDICATORS AND RISK FACTORS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

Liberty University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Kenneth Shane Lancaster

November 2011

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Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA
October, 2011

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study was to examine secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to recognize indicators and risk factors of gang participation in a northeast Georgia school district. The study employed an interpretive phenomenological approach to obtain an understanding of educator and administrator perceptions. The study sample utilized 28 participants consisting of 14 administrators, seven veteran educators, and seven nonveteran educators. Major themes included a lack of gang awareness training as components of teacher preparatory programs, a lack of staff development exercises pertaining to youth gang indicators and risk factors, and the development of indicator awareness through various experiences. Other major themes included the development of youth gang risk factor awareness through personal and professional experiences, the significance of peer groups and youth gang formation, and the presence of gang graffiti within the given school district. Recommendations for future research included replications of this study, the expansion of this study, and the exploration of gang tendencies in relation to cultural, socioeconomic, and academic discrepancies. Recommendations for leadership included the collection of gang data, school-based assessments of indicators and risk factors, and measures designed to develop and enhance relationships among schools, communities, and local agencies.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my two beautiful nieces Alisha and Madison and my incredible children Matthew and Rachel. It is my prayer that God uses this work to open doors for them in ways that I could never imagine. I hope that they may one day find joy and inspiration in this work knowing that they were the motivation behind my desire to excel and my incentive to stay the course. It is for these children, my "babies," that I proudly produced this dissertation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Mark Lamport, the chair of my committee, for the countless hours and continuous support he provided over the course of this dissertation. Words can not express my gratitude for his continuous guidance and encouragement. I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Dr. Ralph Marino and Dr. Carol Morris, for providing me with an exceptional support network that never waivered. Iwould like to thank Dr. Lucinda Spaulding, my research consultant, whose insight and suggestions greatly strengthened my work. In addition, I would like to thank my family for standing behind me as I pursued the degree of Doctor of Education. I know the sacrifices for them were often far greater than they were for me, and these sacrifices did not go unnoticed. Above all, I would like to give thanks and praise to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for His love, mercy, and sacrifice. Without Him, I would be nothing.

"*Every word of God is pure: He is a shield unto them that put their trust in Him."*

Proverbs 30:5

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)

Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS)

Center for Mental Health in Schools (CMHS)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Department of Justice (DOJ)

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

Florida Safe and Drug-Free Schools Project (FSDS)

Georgia Gang Investigators Association (GGIA)

Gang Reduction through Intervention, Prevention, and Education (GRIPE)

Institute for Intergovernmental Research (IIR)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES)

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC)

National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC)

National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC)

National Gang Intelligence Center (NGIC)

National Youth Gang Center (NYGC)

National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS)

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)

Office of the Attorney General of Florida (OAGF)

San Antonio Police Department (SAPD)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Schools serve as one of the most common socialization agents for America's youth (Esbensen, 2000; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Scott, 2000). As such, schools are not immune to the occurrences and impacts of youth gangs (Center for Mental Health in Schools (CMHS), 2007). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2010) reported that 23% of all public school students in the United States attest that youth gangs are active in their respective schools. A recent survey conducted by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (2010) revealed that upwards of 45% of high school students denote the presence of active gangs on their school campuses. Data collected by the NCES (2006) also revealed that gang activity is more prevalent in urban schools, yet gang activity in suburban schools is significantly increasing. Howell (2006) suggested that the statistics and implications of youth gangs in schools are considerably underestimated by educators, policy makers, and researchers. Many researchers attribute this underestimation to the lack of a universally accepted definition or suitable evaluative criteria for what constitutes a youth gang (Borg & Dalla, 2005; Cooper, 2009; Howell, 2000; Miller, 2001; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), 1997). Research suggested that considerable discrepancies exist in terms of gang perceptions among students, educators, and law enforcement personnel (Cooper, 2009; Esbensen, 2000; Fisher, Montgomery, & Gardner, 2008; Henry, 2009; Pitts, 2009; Presley, 1996; Smith, 2011; White, 2007). Others insist that educators and administrators often fail to recognize gang presences and activity due to a lack of formal gang training (Howell, 2010a; Lal, 1996; Sharkey, Shekhtmeyster, Chavez-Lopez, Norris, & Sass, 2011;

White, 2007). Melita (1990), Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) and Lal, Lal, and Achilles (1993) noted that educators and administrators are often reluctant to acknowledge the presences and implications of gangs in schools due to concerns related to public and political perceptions.

Youth gangs pose serious problems for schools, especially in communities where gangs have a substantial presence (Chandler, Chapman, Rand, & Taylor, 1998; Swahn, Bossarte, West, & Topalli, 2010). Lal (1991) reported that for many gang members, schools serve as social arenas that are utilized for recruitment, intimidation, and boasting. Howell and Lynch (2000), as well as Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001), concurred, adding the notion of gang presence creating an atmosphere of apprehension and incompliance that negatively impacts classroom order and educational outcomes for non-gang youth. The existence of gangs in schools yields disruptive learning environments, fear among students, faculty, and staff, and multiplied episodes of violence (CMHS, 2007; Mayer & Furlong, 2010; NCES, 2006; NCES, 2010; OJJDP, 2009a; Swahn et al., 2010). Youth gangs are often linked with episodes of bullying and intimidation (Lal, 1991; White, 2002). The OJJDP (2009a) reported "a strong correlation between gang presence in schools and between both guns and availability of drugs in school[s]" (p. 49). Student reports of weapons in school more than triples when youth gangs are present (Howell & Lynch, 2000; NCES, 2006; OJJDP, 2009a), as does student accounts of illicit drugs being readily available in school (OJJDP, 2009a). Gang presence directly contributes to student victimization rates in schools (Howell & Lynch, 2000; Swahn et al., 2010). The OJJDP (2009a) reported that violent victimization rates more than double in schools containing active youth gangs.

Federal legislation mandated by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001, more commonly known as the No Child Left Behind Act, directs state agencies to assess and address safety concerns in public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). School leaders must, therefore, engage in proactive measures to combat the presences and implications of youth gangs in schools in order to ensure safe and productive learning environments (Essex, 2007; Mayer & Furlong, 2010). Klein (1995) suggested that school leaders generally sidestep gang issues, opting to rely on law enforcement personnel to combat gangs with traditional suppressive strategies. All educational stakeholders must work collaboratively in order to combat youth gangs in schools and ensure safe and orderly learning environments (Curry, Decker, & Egley, 2002; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Huff, 2002; Institute for Intergovernmental Research (IIR), 2006; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Mayer & Furlong, 2010; Ramsey, Rust, & Sobel, 2003; Sharkey et al., 2011). Educators and administrators must develop and employ school-based awareness and intervention strategies in order to accurately assess and counteract the negative byproducts of youth gangs in schools (Essex, 2007; Mayer & Furlong, 2010; Ramsey et al., 2003; Smith, 2011; Willert & Lenhardt, 2003). Consequently, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study will be to examine secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to recognize fundamental indicators (see Appendix A) and risk factors (see Appendix B) associated with youth gang activity in a suburban school district located in northeast Georgia.

Background of the Problem

Youth gang structures are constantly evolving, counteracting stereotypical views of traditional gangs (Bell & Lim, 2005; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Fisher et al., 2008;

Pitts, 2009). Often believed to be confined to urban areas, modern youth gangs are rapidly proliferating into suburban and rural areas (Egley, Howell, & Moore, 2010; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Howell, Egley, & Gleason, 2002; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Starbuck, Howell, & Lindquist, 2001). As socialization agents for American youth, public schools are the primary institutions in which contemporary youth engage in communal interactions (Curry & Decker, 1998; Pai, Adler, & Shadiow, 2005; Kidder, 2007). Youth gangs have a definitive and recognized presence in the vast majority of urban high schools in the United States (Egley et al., 2010; Peterson, 2004; Swahn et al., 2010), indicating that schools are rapidly being permeated by gang trends that originate within local communities (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Esbensen, Tibbetts, & Gaines, 2004; Howell, 2010b). Public schools serve as common recruiting grounds, drug markets, and numerous other components that facilitate gang activity (Chandler et al., 1998; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Howell, 2006; Howell, 2010b; OJJDPa, 2009). Research indicates that the presences and activities of youth gangs in schools directly correlate with academic disruptions, episodes of violence, and general delinquency (Egley et al., 2010; Garza, 1993; Miller, 1982; Struyk, 2006; Swahn et al., 2010). Victimization rates increase significantly on school campuses containing identifiable gang activities, especially if such activities remain unaddressed (Howell & Lynch, 2000; Miller, 1982; Washington State School Safety Center, 2010).

Campus security is compromised when indicators of gang activity remain unrecognized or unacknowledged (Essex, 2007; Stabile, 1991). Educators and administrators are typically disinclined to acknowledge the presences and implications of gangs in their respective schools (Crews & Crews, 2008; Goldson, 2011; Lal, 1996;

Mayer & Furlong, 2010). Research conducted by Escobedo (1993) and Presley (1996) attributed such reluctance to the inability of educators and administrators to readily recognize key indicators and risk factors associated with youth gangs. Research suggests that considerable discrepancies exist among gang perceptions as held by students, educators, administrators, and law enforcement personnel (Cahill et al., 2008; Goldson, 2011; Lee, 1995; Melita, 1990; Presley, 1996). Students and law enforcement personnel are more likely to acknowledge the presence of gangs in schools as compared to teachers and administrators. Students are also more likely to view the presence of gangs in schools as being more problematic and posing greater threats to overall levels of safety as compared to educators and administrators (Duncan, 1995; Escobedo, 1993; Goldson, 2011; Lee, 1995; Rothrock, 1993). Educational leaders and stakeholders must act upon proven methods of identifying, combating, and preventing gang progression in schools (Cahill et al., 2008; Department of Justice, 2006; Essex, 2007; Goldson, 2011; Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 1999; Huff, 2002; Struyk, 2006). In order to do so, schools and local communities must gain insight into the root causes of gang formation (Crews & Crews, 2008; Klein & Maxson, 2006), as well as becoming aware of key indicators and risk factors associated with youth gang participation (Arana, 2005; Huff, 2002).

The core ages for youth gang recruitment span between the ages of 12 and 24 (Duffy & Gillig, 2004; Esbensen et al., 2004; Huff, 2002; O'Donnell, Egley, & Howell, 2009). Research indicates, however, that contemporary recruitment efforts are not exclusive to this particular age range. Current gang tendencies are increasingly becoming inclusive of a vast array of school-age children (Duffy, 2004; Esbensen et al., 2004; Huff,

2002; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Vigil 1988). According to Arana (2005) and the U.S. House of Representatives (2006), gang recruitment commonly targeted kids as young as seven years old; however, such tendencies increase as students advance through the middle and secondary grades. Children of all ages are becoming increasingly susceptible to the magnetism of local youth gangs and gang cultures for a variety of reasons. Huff (2002) noted the manners in which social and economic dynamics often facilitate gang formation and expansion. He asserted that youthful desires for love, security, enhanced social status, and senses of empowerment often contribute to gang development. He also insisted that poverty, employment status, and academic failure, as well as alcohol and drug abuse, also yield inclinations towards joining youth gangs. Howell and Egley (2005), as well as Moore (1998), concurred, adding that "conventional socializing agents, such as families and schools, are largely ineffective and alienating" (Howell & Egley, 2005, p. 1). These researchers suggested that the emergence of youth gangs and gang-related problems are both consequences of and contributors to such economic and social predicaments. Consequently, schools and local communities must recognize and proactively address the allures and root causes of gang development in order to formulate and enact effective anti-gang measures (Howell, 2010a; Klein & Maxson, 2006).

Identifiable characteristics may be utilized in order to distinguish gang-affiliated youth from non-gang adolescents. Gang members typically utilize distinct verbiage, mannerisms, and dress styles in order to signify gang involvement and status (Arciaga, Sakamoto, & Jones, 2010; Curry & Decker, 2003; Howell, 2010b). It is imperative for educators and administrators to recognize such key indicators of gangs within schools, especially in situations involving an overlapping of school campuses and known gang

territories (Huff, 2002). Campus security and student safety is jeopardized when educators and administrators fail to recognize indicators of youth gang activity (DOJ, 2006; Essex, 2007; Hill et al., 1999; Huff, 2002; Struyk, 2006), and the resulting inactivity of school officials may signify opportunity and vulnerability to local youth gangs (Huff, 2002). Stabile (1991) noted the manner in which gang members have tendencies to openly use hand gestures, exhibit gang colors, and display other observable gang symbols while in schools, and such actions frequently remain overlooked by teachers and administrators (Rodriguez, 2005; Thomas, 2006). In order to better identify and combat youth gangs in schools, educators and administrators must continuously seek to learn and recognize fundamental indicators of youth gangs in order to distinguish between gang-affiliated and non-gang youth (Office of the Attorney General of Florida (OAGF), 2009; Struyk, 2006).

Educators and administrators must become knowledgeable of the risk factors that facilitate youth gang formation and development (Curry & Decker, 2002; Smith, 2011). A multitude of cross-sectional, longitudinal, and ethnographic research studies have been employed to identify strategic risk factors that foreshadow gang involvement (Cahill et al., 2008; Egley et al., 2010; Esbensen et al., 2004). Howell (1997) categorized such risk factors into five primary domains: family, school, peer, community, and individual. Research indicates that dysfunctional or nontraditional family settings significantly increase the likelihood of youth joining gangs (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Rossman & Morley, 1996; Sharkey et al., 2010; Sharpe, 2003; White, 2009; Wright & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Adolescent self-reports indicate that disaffection within the home often serves as the initial motivator for a teenager joining a gang (Craig, Vitaro, Gagnon, & Tremblay,

2002; Esbensen, Peterson, Taylor, & Feng, 2010; White, 2009). Alienation within the family, as well as the local community, often drives youth to seek acceptance within peer groups, thereby increasing the appeal of gangs (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Esbensen et al., 2010; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; White 2007). Contemporary research reveals that the majority of gang-affiliated youth exhibit inclinations towards acting upon hostile and antisocial behaviors (Dishion, Neslon, & Yasui, 2005; Krohn & Thornberry, 2008; Mitchell, 2011; Pai et al., 2005). A researched and documented correlation also exists between diminished senses of academic achievement and youth gang tendencies (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Florian-Lacy, Jefferson, & Fleming, 2002; Smith, 2011). Exposure to multiple risk factors, especially from various domains, significantly increases the likelihood of youth succumbing to the allures and pressures of gangs (Esbensen et al., 2010; Mitchell, 2011; OJJDP, 2004).

Problem Statement

Research indicates that the proliferation of youth gangs and gang-affiliated violence in the United States has continuously escalated since the mid-1990s (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Esbensen & Weerman, 2005; Essex, 2007; FBI, 2007; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Levin-Epstein, 2004; Miller & Chandler, 2003; NGIC, 2009; O'Donnell et al., 2009; OJJDP, 2009a; Thornberry et al., 2003). Conservative estimates indicate that the United States contains approximately 30,000 individual youth gangs (Egley et al., 2010; NCES, 2010; Stinchcomb, 2002) consisting of upwards of 800,000 gang members (Egley et al., 2010; FBI, 2007; McGloin, 2005). The National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) (2008) maintained that gang estimates are typically higher than what is reported due to vague and varying definitions of gangs, incarceration of gang members, and other

formalities that distort gang measurements. The NDIC maintained that more realistic gang estimates consist of more than 20,000 individual gangs composed of over 1,000,000 individual members. As youth gangs proliferate and become more geographically dispersed, public schools are not immune to the occurrences and implications of youth gangs (DOJ, 2006; Huff, 2002; Sharkey et al., 2011; Swahn et al., 2010; Thornberry et al., 2003; Wingood, DiClement, Crosby, & Harrington, 2002). The current impact of gangs in schools are unparalleled by any other point in American history (DOJ, 2006; Huff, 2002; Thornberry et al., 2003; Wingood et al., 2002). Public schools frequently serve as a focal point of gang activity (Esbensen et al., 2004; Ramsey et al., 2003; Tozer, Violas, & Senses, 2005), and research indicates that the presence and activity of youth gangs in schools directly correlate with negative consequences such as academic disruption, episodes of violence, and general delinquency (CMHS, 2007; Garza, 1993; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Howell, 2006; NCES, 2006; OJJDP, 2009b; Smith, 2011).

Educators and administrators often fail to adequately recognize and address gang issues within schools (Howell, 2010b; Lal, 1996; Sharkey et al., 2011; White, 2007). They are often reluctant to acknowledge the presence and implication of gangs in schools due to concerns related to public and political perceptions (Lal et al., 1993; Curry & Decker, 2003; Esbensen et al., 2004; Knox, 2006; Manwaring, 2005; Smith, 2011). When gang presences are acknowledged, educators and administrators have a tendency to underestimate the statistics and implications of youth gangs in schools (Howell, 2006). Many attribute such reluctance and misguided perceptions to a lack of formalized gang training during pre-service and in-service professional development exercises (Escobedo,

1993; Knox, 2006; Lal, 1996; Pressley, 1996; Sharkey et al., 2010; Smith, 2011; White, 2007). Research reveals that when youth gang issues remain unrecognized and unaddressed in schools, the consequences are often increased gang activity, unstable learning environments, and ineffective campus security measures (Esbensen et al., 2004; Essex, 2007; Ramsey et al., 2003). Secondary educators and administrators typically fail to recognize fundamental indicators and risk factors of youth gang membership in such a manner necessary to identify, combat, and prevent gang occurrences and implications in modern educational settings (Curry et al., 2002; Esbensen et al., 2004; Huff, 2002; Knox, 2006; Smith, 2011; Struyk, 2006). The problem is that despite the active presence of 11 identified youth gangs in local schools and communities (City of [...ville], 2011), educators and administrators in a suburban northeast Georgia school district often fail to recognize fundamental indicators and risk factors of youth gang membership due to a lack of formalized gang awareness training specifically designed for educational settings (Arciaga et al., 2010; Chaskin, 2010; OAGF, 2009). NDIC (2008) projections indicated an escalation of youth gang episodes in the given area in the near future (NDIC, 2008).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study was to examine secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to recognize fundamental indicators and risk factors of youth gang participation in a suburban northeast Georgia school district. The study utilized a convenience sample of 28 individuals derived from a population of 27 administrators and 464 teachers employed within seven secondary schools located within the same school system ([omitted] County School System, 2011). Fourteen of the participants were administrators, whereas the

remaining 14 were teachers. Of the 14 teachers interviewed during the study, seven were veteran teachers and seven were non-veteran teachers. Investigating a sample of 28 educators and administrators employed within seven secondary institutions located within the same school district extracted shared life experiences that generated relevant insight into common themes (Moustakas, 1994; Vivilaki, 2008), behaviors, and educator and administrator judgment of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors.

Research Plan

Phenomenological research designs yield essential insight into principal issues and occurrences (Moustakas, 1994; Vivilaki, 2008). A phenomenological interview process will be utilized in order to identify and explore themes, actions, and perceptions (Creswell, 2008; Moustakas, 1994; Neuman, 2006) of educators and administrators in terms of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors in educational settings. Based upon the descriptive nature of phenomenological qualitative studies that occur in natural settings (Creswell, 2005; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010; Johnson & Christensen, 2000; Leedy & Ormrod, 2004), the results of this study may be transferable to the educators and administrators throughout the school system.

Communication with school system employees commenced upon obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission to conduct the study (see Appendix C) and receiving permission from the school system to conduct the study utilizing its facilities and personnel. Upon receiving permission from the school system, initial contact with the schools was made via the administration at the individual schools. Once verbal permission to conduct the study was obtained from each of the administrators, two administrators were interviewed at each of the schools. A technique Groenwald (2004)

described as “snowballing” was utilized in order to obtain access to a veteran and non-veteran teacher at each school. Snowballing is a recognized “method of expanding the sample by asking one informant or participant to recommend others for interviewing” (Groenwald, 2004, p. 9). The utilization of a snowballing approach resulted in easier identification of and access to potential research participants. Administrators from each school were asked to recommend a minimum of two veteran and two non-veteran teachers to take part in the study. This approach enhanced access to potential participants following occurrences in which an individual chose to refrain from taking part in the study.

Data was collected through three primary means: face-to-face interviews, participant journals, and quantitative surveys employing a Likert scale format. The use of three differing data collection processes was necessary to establish triangulation in this phenomenological study (Cronin-Davis, Butler, & Mayers, 2009; Denzin, 1970; Denzin, 1978). Participants took part in two interview sessions, an initial interview and a follow-up interview, in order to allow for an exploration of their individual perceptions related to their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors. During the initial interview session, the participants also completed a brief survey designed to assess such perceptions in a quantifiable manner. Prior to the commencement of the data collection phase of the study, two focus group and pilot study sessions were employed in order to validate the data collection instruments, most notably the interview questions and subsequent prompts, as well as the quantitative survey instrument. During the initial interview session, each participant was asked to maintain a personal journal in which he

or she documented any thoughts, reflections, or personal experiences related to the study phenomenon. Participant journals were collected during the follow-up interviews.

Data collection entailed interviewing a sample of 28 subjects comprised of seven veteran teachers, seven non-veteran teachers, and 14 administrators employed within the same northeast Georgia school district. For the purpose of this study, a veteran teacher or administrator was defined as one who had served in the field of education for a period of seven or more years. A non-veteran educator or administrator, therefore, was defined as one with less than seven years of teaching and/or administrative experience. The inclusion and acknowledgment of both veteran and non-veteran educators and administrators during the study was essential to adequately exploring the phenomenon of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of youth gang indicators and risk factors. By distinguishing between veteran and non-veteran educators and administrators, maximum variation sampling was employed in order to utilize a larger selection of participants so that aggregate responses would better reflect the study population (List, 2004). Categorically distinguishing among participants improved upon the focus of the study and further addressed key research questions by acknowledging and exploring the unique and shared experiences of the participants.

Lal (1996), Smith (2011), and Crews and Crews (2008) noted the manners in which teacher preparatory and staff development programs have historically failed to adequately equip teachers and administrators to address episodes of gangs in schools. Egley et al., (2006) maintained that contemporary youth gang phases are more diverse and widespread as compared to any other point in history, and contemporary political mandates require schools to address issues of academic performance and school safety

differently than in previous years (No Child Left Behind, 2001). Distinguishing between veteran and non-veteran educators and administrators enabled the exploration and disclosure of potential discrepancies that existed in terms of practice in the field of education, pre-service and post-service training experiences, and perceptions of abilities to identify indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity.

Employing a sample of 28 educators and administrators from seven secondary institutions located within the same school district elicited shared life experiences that yielded pertinent insight into common themes (Moustakas, 1994; Vivilaki, 2008), behaviors, and educator and administrator discernment of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors. Employing a sample size greater than 10 subjects, which is often considered to be the minimal sample size for a phenomenological study, increased the likelihood of an in-depth analysis from the responses of the participants (Pernecky, 2006). Discovering shared experiences and perceptions of youth gang indicators and risk factors enabled teachers, administrators, and other educational stakeholders to become aware of common behaviors that facilitate or hinder gang occurrences in schools. An understanding of such phenomena may prove to be beneficial in developing and implementing staff development opportunities and other essential measures necessary to combat and prevent youth gang presences in educational settings (Curry et al., 2002; Huff, 2002).

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study was to explore secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to recognize 10 key indicators of youth gang participation based upon an inventory of researched and

documented risk factors and indicators. Escalating youth gang trends and tendencies have sparked public concern related to the consequences of youth gangs permeating schools (Capuzzi & Gross, 2004; Esbensen, 2000; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Howell, 1998b; Mahoney, 2010; Smith, 2011). Research conducted by Huff (2002), Curry et al., (2002), and Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) suggested that formal training exercises may prove to be beneficial in assisting educators and administrators with adequately identifying and addressing issues of youth gangs in educational settings. Although ample resources pertaining to youth gangs within general society are currently available (Arciaga et al., 2010; Chaskin, 2010; Cooper, 2009; Thibault & Maceri, 2009), a review of applicable literature yielded a substantial lack of research pertaining to formal gang awareness training for educators and administrators in the areas of identifying and recognizing youth gang indicators and risk factors (Arciaga et al., 2010; Chaskin, 2010; OAGF, 2009).

The significance of this phenomenological qualitative study was to investigate the potential need for gang awareness training among secondary educators and administrators employed within a suburban northeast Georgia school district located in a geographical area currently experiencing escalating gang problems (NDIC, 2008). Data reported by the NDIC (2008) indicated that the particular area employed within the study will encounter worsening gang conditions in coming years. Porter (2008) examined the abilities of elementary and middle school teachers and administrators to identify key indicators and risk factors of gang participation. Given the locally-based nature of gang culture (GRIPE, n.d.) and the present lack of a comprehensive youth gang study in the school district employed within Porter's study, this study was conducted in the study in the same

suburban northeast Georgia school system utilized within Porter's study. Utilizing the same school system allowed for a deeper exploration and the gaining of a more thorough insight into the perceptions educators and administrators had in relation to their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors. No known gang awareness implementations, curricular modifications, or any other school or system-wide modifications had been made as a result of Porter's findings. This study provided the school system with a more in-depth examination of educator and administrator abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors. As noted by the NDIC (2008), the area employed within this study was experiencing increasing youth gang trends, and projections suggest worsening gang episodes in future years. Given the lack of formalized educator and administrator training regarding youth gang indicators and risk factors (Arciaga et al., 2010; Chaskin, 2010; OAGF, 2009), this study may serve to enlighten the school system as to the need for specific gang awareness training among its faculty and staff.

When examined collectively with the findings of Porter's (2008) study, this study may aid in better equipping the school system in the generation of future staff development exercises or curricular modifications. This study specifically yielded results indicative of a definitive need for formal gang awareness training for secondary educators and administrators. While Porter's study was sufficient in terms of providing a descriptive analysis of elementary and middle school teacher and administrator abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors, the quantitative design of her study restricted the nature of participant responses. The population for her study neglected secondary educators and administrators, who interact more frequently with students that

are targeted for gang recruitment (Egley & O'Donnell, 2009; Howell, 2009; Howell et al., 2002; NGIC, 2009; Starbuck et al., 2001). This study served to highlight the increasing need for all educational stakeholders, including educators, administrators, parents, and law enforcement personnel, to collaboratively undergo informative training sessions related to the risk factors and indicators of youth gang involvement. Considering the natures in which the dynamics of youth gangs have historically varied from one geographical region to another (Bell & Lim, 2005; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Fleisher, 2005; Klein, 2005), this study could serve as a basis for other researchers and school systems to investigate the impacts of youth gangs in schools and to develop and implement future staff development initiatives.

Significance of the Study to the Field of Leadership

This phenomenological study was highly significant to the educational leaders employed within the school district selected for this research study. The school system employed within this study functioned under site-based management practices unique to each school. This approach enabled individual school administrators to largely function autonomously in terms of selecting and allocating human and financial resources (Grauwe, 2005). Educational leaders in each of the schools employed in this study had the capacity to address administrator and educator practices in manners necessary to enhance educational settings and outcomes for all students. According to Cottingham (2008), the effective implementation of necessary changes within schools mandated that leaders recognize issues and concerns of school environments. Public schools frequently serve as a focal point of gang activity (Esbensen et al., 2004; Ramsey et al., 2003; Tozer et al., 2005), and research indicates that the presence and activity of youth gangs in

schools directly correlate with negative consequences such as academic disruption, episodes of violence, and general delinquency (CMHS, 2007; Garza, 1993; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Howell, 2006; NCES, 2006; OJJDP, 2009b; Smith, 2011).

A phenomenological research methodology was applicable to this study, for it revealed the perceptions and lived experiences of secondary educators and administrators related to gang indicators and risk factors. The revelation and exploration of such experiences and perceptions may better enable transformational leaders to influence, formulate, and implement effective teacher and administrator training policies and procedures related to youth gangs in schools. Transformational leaders employ personal empowerment in order to evoke constructive changes within an organizational setting (Al-Mailam, 2004). This phenomenological research study significantly contributed to the capacities educational leaders have in regards to formulating and implementing transformational change by highlighting the perceptions and lived experiences of secondary educators and administrators in terms of youth gang indicators and risk factors. The impacts of gangs in schools are discernible in a variety of forms, including delinquent and non-delinquent acts (Chaskin, 2010; Cooper, 2009; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Goldson, 2011; Howell, 2010a; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Laster, 2011; NCES, 2010; Washington State, 2010). Educational leaders may, therefore, employ the data derived from this study in manners that may further educational practices, improve campus security, and enhance student output.

Situation to Self

At the time of this study, I was employed as a social studies instructor, school safety coordinator, wrestling coach, and administrative assistant within the school system

examined in this study. As a former student of this particular school system, as well as a 12 year veteran employee of the system, I had witnessed many changes within the school district firsthand. Reflecting upon my days as a high school student, I could not recall a single instance of gang violence or any gang occurrences being reported within the system. While I do not dare to assert that such issues did not exist, I must say that gang episodes were minimal and virtually unheard of. The county was largely rural, and gangs were thought to be primarily confined to inner city areas in places such as Atlanta. After my high school graduation, I became a community wrestling coach so that I could continue serving at my alma mater. Upon graduating college, I became a substitute teacher for the school system, which provided me with the opportunity to witness the gang phenomenon outside of my home school. After serving two months as a substitute teacher, I was hired as a full-time teacher at my alma mater.

My first two years of teaching were marked by several incidents involving youth gangs, and I will openly admit that I was in no way prepared to address the entailing the issues. At no point had I received any instruction or training pertaining to how to identify gangs, how to address gang issues, or why youth gangs had formed such a significant presence in the local community in a short period of time. As a new teacher, I found myself working with a student whose fellow gang members had been convicted of raping and murdering a 13-year-old girl, and he openly discussed such issues in a nonchalant manner. Another student had a 15-year-old brother who had been arrested on two counts of felony murder for his participation in a gang-related drive-by shooting. Vivid recollections of her sharing the story of her brother's arrest with other students, while showing virtually no emotion, filled my mind throughout this research process. Yet

another student was arrested for armed robbery, for he held a gun to the back of a cab driver's head as a fellow gang member robbed the driver. It seemed as if each week, and at times what seemed like each day, brought about new reports of gang incidents and violence within the community.

I firmly believed that there had to be more that could be done to counter the rapidly growing effects of youth gangs. I thought that for every violent gang member who could not be reached; there were probably countless others who could be helped if only teachers like me and other school officials knew what they were seeing and exactly what to do about it. Ironically, I had similar thoughts as this phenomenological study was conducted. As a teacher, I always believed that was my job to help those students in need, to teach those believed to be "unteachable," and to open doors of opportunity that would not otherwise exist for students. I strongly believed that if teachers and administrators had even the most basic levels of gang awareness training, we would have been considerably more equipped to address the needs of our students, classrooms, and schools. Despite what I perceived as a dire need for school officials, formalized training pertaining to youth gang indicators and risk factors was not common practice. Sadly, it was the students, both with and without gang affiliation, which must pay the educational, personal, and social price for the inactivity of school officials.

The interest in this interpretive phenomenological research topic was founded upon experienced and witnessed occurrences involving the implications of youth gangs in schools. There was a considerable need for educators and administrators to acknowledge the presence of gangs, as well as to understand the foundational components of gang structures. School officials must develop and utilize a comprehensive gang awareness and

intervention program in order to counteract the effects of youth gangs in schools (Essex, 2007; Mayer & Furlong, 2010; Ramsey et al., 2003; Smith, 2011). My primary goal throughout this interpretive phenomenological research study was to provide an outlet in which educators and administrators could voice their perceptions and experiences in order to highlight and facilitate effective reforms to pre-service teacher training programs and staff development exercises. By employing an interpretive phenomenological approach the essence of educator and administrator perceptions of youth gang indicators and risk factors was explored and defined in a manner relevant to the school system employed within this study. This approach made the reality of educator and administrator perceptions and experiences more recognizable and more thoroughly understood (Adolfsson, 2010).

Research Questions

Research questions are essential features of a study, for they serve to guide research efforts by influencing the overall study design and outlining crucial focal points of the study (Creswell, 2003; Johnson & Christensen, 2000). Qualitative research questions are open-ended, and they entail the collection of an assortment of data that assists in the formation of conclusions (Creswell, 2005). Research questions generally serve to restate the purpose of the study in question format so that the researcher may examine particular data upon which one may formulate conclusions (Creswell, 2003; Johnson & Christensen, 2000). In order to explore the perceptions secondary educators and administrators hold in regard to their abilities to recognize key indicators and risk factors associated with youth gang activity, this study was framed by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the perceptions that secondary educators and administrators have regarding their abilities to identify key indicators of youth gang activity in a suburban northeast Georgia school system?

RQ2: What are the perceptions that secondary educators and administrators have regarding their abilities to identify fundamental risk factors associated with youth gang activity in a suburban northeast Georgia school system?

RQ3: How do educators and administrators perceive their pre-service training and professional development exercises in regard to their abilities to identify indicators and risk factors associated with youth gang activity in a suburban northeast Georgia school system?

RQ4: Based upon personal experiences and observations, what primary indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity do educators and administrators employed within a suburban northeast Georgia school system view as being most influential within their respective schools?

Definitions

The use of operational terms related to this study mandates the disclosure of key definitions for the purpose of clarification and understanding. This section offers the definitions of key terminology that will be consistently employed throughout this phenomenological research study. Youth gang terminology often entails non-uniform meanings among gang researchers (Fisher et al., 2008; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Pitts, 2009), thereby warranting the articulation of explicit definitions used for terms employed within the study. According to Creswell (2003), the disclosure of such definitions may assist readers in formulating an overall understanding of this

phenomenological research study. The following operational definitions depict key terminology consistently used throughout this research study.

Administrator is a term assigned to someone who "administers the affairs of an organization, official body, etcetera" (Dictionary.com, 2011a). For the purpose of this study, the term administrator will refer to one officially designated as a principal or an assistant principal of a school.

Educator: Educator is a term assigned to someone who is "involved in planning or directing education," (Dictionary.com, 2011b) especially a teacher. For the purpose of the study, the term educator will be used synonymously with the term teacher.

Gang tattoos: Gang tattoos are tattoos placed upon the body in order to depict membership in a specific gang (Georgia Gang Investigators, 2001).

Graffiti: Graffiti refers to graphic representations, such as drawings, writings, or paintings, applied to public property without approval (Georgia Gang Investigators, 2001).

Hand signs: Hand signs are and gestures used to express words, signals, or other underlying meanings, and such gestures are often used as a form of communication among gang members (Georgia Gang Investigators, 2001).

Non-veteran educator/administrator: Non-veteran educator/administrator is a term, which for the purpose of this study, denotes one with fewer than seven years of experience within the field of education.

Pre-service training: Pre-service training is a term used to describe the experiences, observations, and training exercises one undergoes in preparation to become a teacher (Virginia Wesleyan College, n.d.).

Professional development: Professional development is a term, for the purpose of the study, used to describe structured programs or training exercises specifically designed to target key issues within educational settings. Professional development entails "comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach[es] to improving teachers' and principals' effectiveness in raising student achievement" (National Staff Development Council, 2011).

Snowballing: Snowballing refers is a "method of expanding the sample by asking one informant or participant to recommend others for interviewing" (Groenwald, 2004, p. 9).

Turf: Turf refers to the specific property or specified boundaries within which a gang declares ownership and control (Georgia Gang Investigators, 2001).

Veteran educator/administrator: Veteran educator/administrator is a term, which for the purpose of this study, denotes one with seven or more years of experience within the field of education.

Youth gang: Youth gang is a term that refers to a "self-formed association of peers having the following characteristics: three or more members,…a name and some sense of identity, . . . some degree of permanence and organization, and an elevated level of involvement in delinquent or criminal activity" (NYGC, 2006, ¶2).

Youth gang indicator: Youth gang indicator is a term used to denote physical signs and visual observations indicative of cooperation with, actions of, and/or the general presence of youth gangs (Howell & Lynch, 2000).

Youth gang risk factor: Youth gang risk factor is a term that refers to one or more interacting factors that contributes to the likelihood of one joining a gang or the expansion of gang issues (National Gang Center, 2010).

Assumptions

An assumption is a reasonable expectation that is believed to be true, yet no sufficient evidence exists to confirm the principle (Johnson & Christensen, 2000). As is common within a phenomenological qualitative research design, there were key assumptions involved in this study. The first underlying assumption was that the interview questions (see Appendix D) and overall interview process was credible and dependable in terms of accurately investigating secondary educator and administrator perceptions of youth gang indicators and risk factors. As noted by Golafshani (2003), concepts of credibility and dependability are not universal and concrete in qualitative studies. Concepts of credibility and dependability in qualitative research hinge upon the precision, trustworthiness, and applicability of the research (Golafshani, 2003; Hoepfl, 1997; Winter, 2000). Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted that researcher neutrality, research confirmability, and the consistency of data sufficiently meet the criteria of establishing credibility in qualitative studies. Credibility and dependability are congruent in qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003); thus, an adequate demonstration of credibility is satisfactory in terms of establishing dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). A pilot study employing teachers and administrators was conducted to ensure the credibility and dependability of the interview questions and overall interview process. I will also bracket his personal views, experiences, and opinions out of the study in order

to ensure neutrality. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and participants were afforded the opportunity to review all recorded data in order to ensure precision.

Other assumptions were formulated by the use of a convenience sample. I assumed that all participants were willing to participate, all questions were answered honestly, and sufficient time was allotted for interview completion. In order to ensure honesty, participation in the study was strictly voluntary, and all individual results remained confidential. To further enhance confidentiality, the names of individual participants were not be collected, reported, or disclosed in any manner. In order to address time constraints and participant availability, the interviews were conducted at a time and location deemed personally convenient by the individual study participants. The final assumption was that the interview results accurately reflected the perceptions secondary educators and administrators from a specific northeast Georgia school district possess in terms their abilities to recognize key indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity. Attempts to ensure the accuracy of participant responses were made by maintaining the voluntary nature of the study, allowing for the conduction of interviews at times and locations personally convenient for the participants, and by allowing participants to review any recorded or transcribed records prior to the analysis of collected data.

Scope

The scope of this study consisted of a phenomenological qualitative research study that was conducted in a suburban northeast Georgia school district. Active secondary educators and administrators employed within the given school district aided in the collection of data. Each of the seven secondary institutions located within the

school system were represented by a group of four participants, with each group consisting of two administrators and two teachers. The data derived from this phenomenological research study was extrapolated to represent the school system as a whole. The primary focus of this phenomenological study involved the shared educational experiences and perceptions that educators and administrators had in relation to youth gang indicators and risk factors within educational settings. This study was designed so that it would be replicable by other researchers, at other educational levels, or within other school districts.

Summary

Gang activity is prevalent in the majority of urban high schools in the United States (Lassiter & Perry, 2009; NCES, 2010; Peterson, 2004), and gang presences and interactions render detrimental consequences for youth (Dishion et al., 2005). As primary social institutions, schools are often centers for youth gang interaction (Kidder, 2007; Pai et al., 2005). Schools are frequently utilized by youth gangs as centers for recruitment, drug trafficking, and numerous other activities that extend from street life (Esbensen et al., 2004). Miller (1982) proclaimed that the presence and activity of youth gangs in educational settings pose considerable threats to the overall levels of physical safety and functional capabilities of schools. Struyk (2006) insisted that gangs foster an environment of intimidation and fear, which adversely impacts student learning. Unrecognized and unaddressed gang activity within schools may also emasculate crucial safety measures (Essex, 2007; Miller, 1982). Consequently, educational leaders must proactively seek to combat youth gang progression by identifying and effectively targeting gang members during the earliest possible phases of gang membership (DOJ, 2006; Essex, 2007; Huff,

2002; Struyk, 2006). In order to do so, school leaders must gain better insight into how and why gangs develop, as well as the key indicators and risk factors associated with gang affiliation (Klein & Maxson, 2006).

Educational settings are increasingly becoming focal points for gang activity (DOJ, 2006; Esbensen et al., 2004; Ramsey et al., 2003; Tozer et al., 2005). Educators and administrators often hesitate to acknowledge and contend with gang issues for a variety of reasons, including a lack of specialized training, potential negative perceptions that could arise concerning the school, and fears of potential parental and community reactions (Curry & Decker, 2003; Esbensen et al., 2004; Manwaring, 2005; Sharkey et al., 2011; White, 2007). Failure to adequately identify and address gang presence and gang-related activity in schools may yield diminished learning environments, proliferation of gang activities, and deteriorated safety measures and capabilities in school settings (Esbensen et al., 2004; Essex, 2007; Ramsey et al., 2003). The problem that was addressed in this study was that secondary educators and administrators were not typically acquainted with key indicators of gang activity (see Appendix A), nor did they generally recognize and acknowledge known risk factors (see Appendix B). The ability to recognize and act upon indicators and risk factors associated with youth gang involvement is essential to developing and implementing vital gang suppression, intervention, and prevention initiatives within public high schools (Curry et al., 2002; Esbensen et al., 2004; Huff, 2002; Struyk, 2006).

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study was to investigate secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to recognize fundamental risk factors and indicators of youth gang affiliation in a suburban

northeast Georgia school district. The study employed a convenience sample derived from a population of 27 administrators and 464 certified staff members employed within seven secondary schools located within the same northeast Georgia school district. This study employed an interpretive phenomenological approach in order to ascertain secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to recognize fundamental indicators (see Appendix A) and risk factors (see Appendix B) affiliated with youth gang involvement. Examining the potential trends, behaviors, and significant differences that may have existed among educator and administrator perceptions related to their abilities to distinguish key risk factors and indicators may be beneficial in developing improved staff development opportunities and awareness initiatives devised to assist in gang identification, intervention, suppression, and prevention measures within secondary educational settings (Curry et al., 2002; Huff, 2002).

Since the 1990s, elevated occurrences of youth gang activities and violence have spurred public concerns pertaining to gang influences in schools (Huff, 2002; Mahoney, 2010). Research suggests that enhanced training for educators and administrators may serve to deter gang-related episodes in schools (Curry et al., 2002; Howell, 1998a; Howell, 2010a; Huff, 2002; Smith, 2011). As noted by Porter (2008), a comprehensive study pertaining to educator and administrator abilities to recognize the key indicators and risk factors of youth gangs in the school system that will be studied is currently lacking. The need for comprehensive gang studies and enhanced educator and administrator training at a system-wide level will be supported on a much larger basis thorough review of pertinent literature.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This study addressed secondary educator and administrator abilities to recognize key indicators and risk factors of youth gang involvement and activity within educational settings. Research indicates that educator and administrator abilities to identify, suppress, and prevent gang initiatives in educational settings is often lacking (Curry et al., 2002; Esbensen et al., 2004; Huff, 2002; Sharkey et al., 2010; Struyk, 2006; White, 2007). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to investigate the perceptions of secondary educators and administrators in relation to their abilities to recognize fundamental indicators and risk factors associated with youth gang involvement in a suburban northeast Georgia school district. Chapter Two will discuss pertinent literature pertaining to the research questions, historical overviews, current findings, and the gaps in literature, as well as address the independent, dependent, and intervening variables. The review of literature will explore multiple developmental theories and perspectives in order to gain better insight into youth gang formation, member involvement, and daily activities. An assortment of data will disclose numerous perspectives on gang involvement, proliferation, and identified risk factors, as well as how leadership accountability and professional development might serve to enhance educator and administrator awareness and overall campus safety within public schools.

Title Searches, Articles, Research Documents, and Journals

A substantial quantity of scholarly information and research data related to youth gang activity, gang proliferation, and school implications is accessible, as is information pertaining to youth gang suppression, intervention, and prevention strategies. Conversely,

current research studies have neglected to definitively address whether increased abilities and perceptions of administrators and educators in relation to key indicators of youth gang activity and involvement might aid in gang intervention efforts in schools. A literature review pertaining to the problem statement, purpose of the study, and research variables was conducted, and the employment of topical studies, most notably gang awareness, risk factors, related theories and models, leadership accountability, and professional development, was utilized to enhance research efforts. The underlying purpose of this study was to explore the present and emerging trends related to youth gangs and to encourage future research studies pertaining to the topic. An enhanced understanding of youth gangs and their impacts on schools may serve to assist in the overall reduction of youth gang presences within educational settings (Porter, 2008).

The key terms associated with topical studies included, but were not limited to, youth gangs, juvenile deviance, deviant peer associations, gang intervention, gang prevention, and gang suppression. Likewise, topical studies also centered on psychological learning theories, school leadership, and professional development for educators. Literature pertaining to school safety and the implications of gang presences within schools were also explored. The search for information related to youth gangs employed numerous sources including peer-reviewed journals from multiple databases, most notably EBSCOHost, ProQuest, ERIC, and Questia. Information was also gathered from a multitude of books, peer-reviewed publications, government reports, and digital copies of dissertations. Research materials were obtained from media services at the University of Georgia, Gainesville State College, Piedmont College, [omitted] County School System media services, and [omitted] County public library services. The study

made use of numerous articles retrieved from industry and governmental Websites including the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Crime Victimization Survey, and the Institute for Intergovernmental Research. Personal contact and interviews conducted with law enforcement personnel and local gang specialists were also conducted in order to gather further information pertaining to youth gang trends and issues at a local level.

What Constitutes a Youth Gang

There is a longstanding tradition of disagreement pertaining to the precise definition of the term *youth gang* (Fisher et al., 2008; Henry, 2009; Pitts, 2009; Smith, 2011; Spergel, 1990). Combating the emergence and existence of local and national youth gangs has, therefore, been complicated by the absence of a universally accepted definition (Borg & Dalla, 2005; Fisher et al., 2008; Henry, 2009; Howell, 1994; Howell, 2000; Miller, 2001; OJJDP, 1997; Pitts, 2009; Smith, 2011). The aforementioned works reference the incessant complications, ranging in nature from identifying to combating the presence of gangs, associated with ambiguous definitions of youth gangs. According to the National Youth Gang Center (NYGC) (2006), the characteristics and specific behaviors of youth gangs typically vary both across and within distinct geographical regions. Egley, Howell, and Major (2006), as well as Klein (1995) and Weisel (2002), concurred with the NYGC, asserting that the majority of communal gang issues are predominantly and inherently byproducts of domestic issues. This yields various characteristics and behaviors that are often unique and innate among and within local gangs. Consequently, “state and local jurisdictions tend to develop their own definitions” of what constitutes a youth gang (Robertson, 2008, p. 13). The viewpoints and concerns

upon which local entities define and describe youth gangs serve to hinder research (Borg & Dalla, 2005; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Fisher et al., 2008; O'Donnell et al., 2009), for as noted by Wyrick (2006), "community members frequently have a very different perspective on gangs than law enforcement and educators and social service providers may still have different perspectives" (p. 57).

Citing numerous prominent gang researchers who have generated individual definitions of a youth gang, Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) outlined the general trends researchers often follow in terms identifying key facets and adolescent groups that constitute a gang. Researchers frequently cite mutual interests, territorial associations, and specific actions of youth groups as being factors that comprise a gang. Spergel and Chance (1993) insisted that gangs are somewhat organized structures that are united by common interests for a considerable duration. According to these researchers, the social statuses, actions, and interests of such factions yield common views of the groups as being gangs among both gang and non-gang individuals. Spergel and Curry (1990) insisted that youth gangs are generally better organized than delinquent groups, and youth gangs often have established traditions and rituals not evident in delinquent peer groups. Miller (1992) and Howell (1997) offered similar definitions, claiming that youth gangs consist of self-formed groups with internal leadership, territorial claims, and continual association based upon common interests. A review of pertinent literature indicated that Howell (1997), Spergel (1995), and Miller (1992) were among the most cited gang researchers; thus, their definitions of youth gangs tend to be foundational components upon which other researchers and agencies typically develop their own functional definitions. While common bonds do exist among the views and definitions of many,

researchers frequently express discrepancies in their views pertaining to the degree of organization youth gangs exhibit (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001).

Given the lack of a common definition, researchers often manipulate the explanation of a youth gang to better suit their research efforts (Fisher et al., 2008; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Pitts, 2009).”In some respects, the definitions of youth gang[s] used in some research appear to be devised so that it is unobjectionable to respondents who may have varying personal and organizational views on what constitutes a gang” (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001, p. 4). In order to better refine the characterization of youth gangs, Moore (1998) offered three criteria that aid in distinguishing youth gangs from other youth groups. According to Moore, gangs possess unique structures and norms that specifically identify those associated with the group. Youth gangs also build and act upon common acculturation factors, resulting in the gang mentality being more persuasive than conventional socialization forces such as schools, families, and other community groups. Gangs also emphasize hierarchical structures that are based upon recruitment of new members, active involvement for all members regardless of status within the gang, and an expression of respect and loyalty to higher ranking constituents within the gang.

Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) asserted that effective research operationally defines youth gangs based upon group organization, identifiable factors such as colors, defined territories, symbols, and the nature and degree of the activities members willingly engage in. For the purpose of this study, the term *youth gang* corresponded with the accepted definition provided by the National Youth Gang Center. According to the

NYGC (2006), a division of the Institute for Governmental Research, a youth gang is defined as the following:

> A self-formed association of peers having the following characteristics: three or more members, generally ages 12 to 24; a name and some sense of identity, generally indicated by such symbols as style of clothing, graffiti, and hand signs; some degree of permanence and organization; and an elevated level of involvement in delinquent or criminal activity. (¶2)

Historical Overview of Youth Gangs in the United States

The origins of youth gangs in the United States are unclear. Spergel (1985) insisted that no one truly knows "how far back the gang problem can be traced in the United States, however, gangs and their problems may be as old as human history" (p. 7). Documentation does exist to support the claim of American youth gangs being active in numerous cities for more than a century (Curry & Decker, 2003; Kinnear, 2009; Miller, 2001; Sullivan, 2005; Thibault et al., 2009). Osman (1992) suggests that American youth gangs have been operational since the 18th century. Numerous researchers support this claim, asserting that the prevalence of youth gangs began escalating during the post-revolutionary period in the 1790s (Howell, 1998a; Sante, 1991; Sheldon, 1898). Many contend that early American youth gangs spawned from those that originated in England and Ireland (Dolan & Finney, 1984). Such gangs relocated to various U. S. cities, primarily New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, as European immigration increased during the Industrial Revolution (Curry & Decker, 1998; Howell, 1998a; Miller, Maxson, & Klein, 2001; Sante, 1991; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2003; Spergel, 1995). Other researchers theorize that initial American youth gangs stemmed from Mexican immigrants fleeing

Mexico during the nation's struggle for independence from Spain (Howell, 1998a; Rodriguez, 2005; Vigil, 1999). Rodriguez (2005) asserted that harsh treatment and discrimination endured by Mexican-Americans during the post-Mexican Revolution era spawned youth organizations that served as forerunners to American youth gangs in the 1950s. According to the NGIC (2009), the predecessors of many modern gangs developed as organizations seeking political and social reforms during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

Despite their possible origins, the existence and specific characteristics of American youth gangs seemingly parallel trends associated with immigration, poverty, and urbanization (Kinnear, 2009; Krohn & Thornberry, 2008; Miller et al., 2001; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2003). Curry and Decker (2003), as well as O'Donnell et al. (2009), indicate that American youth gangs have undergone conspicuous phases of growth (see Table 1) and activity, and such phases have yielded discrepancies related to youth gang patterns, growth, and formation. Prior to the 1970s, gang violence was primarily limited to territorial conflicts; and the use and availability of weaponry among youth gangs was often limited (Fagan, 1990; Howell & Decker, 1999; Klein, 1995). Notable public and political awareness of youth gangs emerged in the 1960s, however, as the nation underwent an upsurge of concern pertaining to violent crime (Miller, 2001). Flourishing markets for illicit drugs during the 1970s and 1980s resulted in significant transformations within youth gangs (Fagan, 1990; Howell & Decker, 1999; Klein, 1995). Research indicates that as entrepreneurial opportunities developed with increased drug sales and trafficking, youth gangs evolved into more organized structures with increased tendencies towards violence compared to youth gangs at any other point in American

history (Fagan, 1993; Howell, 1998a; Howell & Decker, 1999; Miller, 1992; NGIC, 2009; FSDS, 1999; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1991; Taylor, 1989; Weisel, 2002).

Table 1:

Estimated Volume of Gangs in the United States

Researcher/Agency	Year	Number of Gangs	Gang Members
Miller	1975	760-2,700	28,500-81,500
Miller	1982	2,285	97,940
Spergel & Curry	1988	1,439	120,636
Currry, Ball, & Fox	1992	4,881	249,324
NYGS	1996	30,800	846,500
NYGS	1997	30,500	816,000
NYGS	1998	28,700	780,000
NYGS	1999	26,200	840,500
NYGS	2000	24,700	772,500
NYGS	2001	23,500	693,500
NYGS	2002	21,800	731,500
NYGS	2003	20,100	710,500
NYGS	2004	24,000	760,000
NYGS	2005	26,700	789,500
NYGS	2006	27,300	785,000
NYGS	2007	27,300	788,000
NYGS	2008	27,900	774,000

Note. The National Youth Gang Survey (NYGS) originated in 1996. The National Youth Gang Center merged with the National Gang Center in 2009, marking the last publication of NYGS statistics such as individual youth gang and membership numbers.

The historical progression of youth gangs has been marked by significant changes in the structures and criminal patterns exhibited by gang members, especially in recent

decades (Klein, 2005; O'Donnell et al., 2009; Spergel, 1995; Sullivan, 2005). According to Miller (2001), the latter portions of the 20th Century were defined by significant escalations in youth gang proliferation and activity."Most gangs formed in major cities and expanded into neighboring communities during the 1970s, continued their expansion in the 1980s, and launched into a full-scale migration during the 1990s" (NGIC, 2009, p. 4). In the 1970s, 19 states reported gang problems compared to all 50 states and Washington, DC in the late 1990s (Miller, 2001). Miller (2001) maintained that by the late 1990s, 60% of all American cities and 90% of all counties had experienced a significant increase in the presence and activity of youth gangs. Many researchers assert that the surge of youth gangs peaked in the mid to late 1990's, but trends began reversing at the turn of the century (Egley & O'Donnell, 2009; Howell, 2006; Miller, 2001; NGIC, 2009). The decline in reported gang problems is largely credited to enhanced federal, state, and local crackdowns on multi-level gangs and drug cartels (NGIC, 2009). The decline of youth gangs and their associated troubles, however, was short-lived, as gang enrollment and proliferation began escalating once again in 2001 (Egley & O'Donnell, 2007; Krohn & Thornberry, 2008). The NGIC (2009) supported this claim, noting a 13% increase in the number of law enforcement agencies reporting gang activity in their jurisdictions from 2004 to 2008. Research indicates that 32. 4% of all cities contain active youth gangs (NCES, 2010). Egley et al. (2010) asserted that 45% of all cities surveyed report worsening gang problems. Espelage and De La Rue (2011) reported that upwards of 37% of all current gang members are under the age of 18.

Contemporary youth gangs. The dynamics of youth gangs have historically varied from one geographical region to another (Bell & Lim, 2005; Fleisher, 2005; Klein,

2005). Bell and Lim (2005) noted that gang structures are constantly evolving, breaking the stereotypical views of traditional gangs. Often believed to be confined to urban areas, modern youth gangs are proliferating into suburban and rural areas (see Tables 2,3, & 4) (Egley et al., 2010; Henry, 2009; Howell, Egley, & Gleason, 2002; Kinnear, 2009; Starbuck, Howell, & Lindquist, 2001). As youth gangs have expanded their ranges into less populated areas, they have also grown more complex and multicultural (Henry, 2009; Howell et al., 2002; Howell, 2010). Modern youth gangs tend to be less territorial than their traditional predecessors, and youth gangs are becoming increasingly autonomous in the sense that they are not affiliated with larger gang networks (Klein, Weerman, & Thornberry, 2006; Robertson, 2008). Research indicates that youth affiliated with gangs partake in increased levels of delinquent and criminal activity compared to those not affiliated with gangs (Klein, 2005; NYGC, 2006; Swahn et al., 2010), and studies indicate that aggression levels are more likely to increase in youth gang members as compared to non-gang youth (Craig et al., 2002). Borg and Dalla (2005) asserted that contemporary youth gangs constitute the most prevalent adolescent group in terms of criminal activity. According to Klein and Maxson (2006), violent tendencies among youth gang members have escalated in recent decades. Victimization rates among youth affiliated with gangs are also significantly higher than those with no gang affiliation, yet victimization rates for both gang and non-gang youth are expected to increase as a result of modern trends associated with youth gangs (Flores, 2006; Swahn et al., 2010).

Table 2:

Dispersion of Youth Gangs by Area Type

Area Type	Percentage of Youth Gangs
Larger Cities (population > 100,000)	40.7
Smaller Cities (population < 100,000)	33.5
Suburban Counties	19.9
Rural Counties	5.9

Note. Data contained in this table was generated by the NYGC (2009) based upon the 2008 NYGS.

Table 3:

Distribution of Youth Gang Members by Area Type

Area Type	Percentage of Youth Gangs
Larger Cities (population > 100,000)	55.9
Smaller Cities (population < 100,000)	16.8
Suburban Counties	25.0
Rural Counties	2.3

Note. Data contained in this table was generated by the NYGC (2009) based upon the 2008 NYGS.

Table 4:

Percentage of Change in Estimated Numbers of Youth Gang Membership by Area Type (2002-2007)

Area Type	Percentage of Youth Gangs
Larger Cities (population > 100,000)	-0.7
Smaller Cities (population < 100,000)	+34.0
Suburban Counties	+12.2
Rural Counties	+36.2
Overall Estimate in Study Population	+7.7

Note. Data contained in this table was generated by the NYGC (2009) based upon the results of the National Youth Gang Surveys conducted from 2002-2007.

Current youth gang membership in the United States is conservatively estimated at one million members (Egley et al., 2010; NCES, 2010; NGIC, 2009). While figures reported by agencies such as the NYGC are considerably lower, many theorize that gang statistics are much higher than those reported due to vague and varying definitions, incarceration rates of gang members, and other institutional factors that restrict gang assessments (Egley et al., 2010; NCES, 2010; NGIC, 2009). As noted by Weisel (2002), modern youth gangs are adaptive, capable of disseminating leadership and organizational roles in order to maintain a continuous existence. The "current cycle of gang activity is different than in previous eras as it is spread across more cities, is more violent, and is more deeply entrenched than was the case [in] earlier [years]" (Egley et al., 2006, p. 330). Once thought to be primarily an urban phenomenon entailing predominantly minority males, current youth gangs are experiencing a surge in rural areas, and gangs are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of ethnicity and gender (Egley & O'Donnell,

2009; Egley et al., 2006; FSDS, 1999; Howell, 2009; Howell et al., 2002; NGIC, 2009; Starbuck et al., 2001; Weisel, 2002). Contemporary American youth gangs are more likely to consist of middle-class teens than traditional youth gangs, and such gangs are also more likely to incorporate females into various ranks of gang activity (Crews & Crews, 2008; Howell, 2006). Present-day gangs are highly mobile, and they often have substantial access to weaponry (Egley & O'Donnell, 2006; Egley et al., 2006; FSDS, 1999; Howell, 2009; NGIC, 2009; Weisel, 2002). Numerous researchers note direct correlations between gang membership and criminal tendencies, as well as correlations between gang activity and victimization rates (Egley & O'Donnell, 2009; Egley et al., 2006; Flores, 2006; FSDS, 1999; Howell, 2009; NGIC, 2009; Weisel, 2002). The proliferation of gangs and their increasing impacts on society have intensified, especially in the past decade, warranting further demands for research-based prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies (Egley & O'Donnell, 2006; Egley et al., 2006; Esbensen & Weerman, 2005; FSDS, 1999; Gordon, Lahey, Kawai, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Farrinton, 2004; Howell, 2009; NGIC, 2009; Reisman, 2006; Sharpe, 2003; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003; Weisel, 2002).

Gang Trends and Related Legislation in Georgia.

The previous four decades have been characterized by major shifts in the prevalence and patterns of youth gangs in the United States. Miller (2001) and the NCES (2010) noted that all states and the District of Columbia report significant gang problems. Such issues are also notable at the county and city levels, for approximately 90% of all counties and 60% of all major cities in the United States report presences of active youth gangs (Miller, 2001; NYGC, 2008). The NCES (2010) reported that more than 33% of all

jurisdictions within the United States report increasing gang issues. Regionally, the South is experiencing increasing youth gang trends. The South ranks as the second most populous gang region in the United States; the South ranked last in this category in the 1970s (Miller, 2001). NGIC (2009) reports indicate that 68% of all jurisdictions in the Southeast contain a solidified presence of gang activity. Located in the heart of the Southeast, Georgia is not immune to the influences and impacts of youth gangs (DOJ, 2006). In 2001, Georgia ranked second in terms of states with the largest number of counties reporting the presences of active gangs (Miller, 2001). Accurate measures pertaining to definitive gang measures on a state-by-state basis is currently lacking, however, due to varying descriptions and evaluative criteria pertaining to precisely what constitutes a youth gang (Kinnear, 2009; Klein & Maxson, 2006; O' Donnell et al., 2009)

Gang trends in Georgia. Miller (2001) identified seven primary causes of the surge in youth gang activity in Georgia and across the United States. Expanding markets for illicit drugs, immigration trends, gang networks and alliances, and gang migration are identifiable factors in the expansion of youth gangs, as are government policies, the decline of traditional household structures, and gang subcultures being portrayed by popular media. The NGIC (2009) cited lucrative drug markets, increased Hispanic immigration, and the migration of Hispanic gangs as the chief causes of youth gang expansion in the Southeast, including Georgia. Torpy and Visser (2009), as well as the NDIC (2008), argued that the combined effects of socio-cultural shifts due to gentrification in low-income areas and a reduction in public housing units in many parts of Georgia are making gang issues more prevalent. The two contended that gangs have been displaced by the demise of public housing units, and the current presence of

affluence in traditionally poor communities is enhancing the likelihood and allure of criminal activity. The culmination of such factors in Georgia is the expansion and migration of youth gangs (NDIC, 2008; Torpy & Visser, 2009).

The precise number of youth gangs, as well as the number of actual gang members, in Georgia is unknown (Torpy & Visser, 2009). Law enforcement estimates indicate that the Atlanta metropolitan area alone contains at least 58 identifiable gangs (NDIC, 2006), but a lack of comprehensive gang research and the shifting nature of youth gangs are yielding great confusion and difficulty in accurately identifying the presences of gangs (Esbensen, 2000; Kinnear, 2009; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Miller, 2001; O'Donnell et al., 2009; Reed & Decker, 2002; Torpy & Visser, 2009). The Department of Justice (2006a) identified more than 50 individual gangs in the counties surrounding the Atlanta metropolitan area. Hispanic and African-American gangs constitute the bulk of known gangs in Georgia (NDIC, 2003; NDIC, 2008; NGIC, 2009), yet Georgia is undergoing an atypical surge in the emergence of hybrid gangs, or gangs that consist of members from various ethnic origins (NDIC, 2003). Torpy and Visser (2009) contended that the allure of protection, money, and power offered by gangs paired with media glorification of gang culture is increasing the appeal of gangs in Georgia among a wider array of youth. Hispanic youth gangs, however, currently have the largest categorical rate of growth in Georgia relative to all other ethnicities or combinations thereof (State of California, 2009).

The Georgia Gang Investigators Association (GGIA) (2008) maintained that Georgia citizens face increased tendencies of violence, threats, terrorization, and crime as a result of youth gangs. The Department of Justice (2006b) noted that gang violence in

Georgia often includes drive-by shootings and home invasions, and it also referenced a "strong correlation between gangs, drugs, and guns" (p. 1) in Georgia. The NDIC (2008) indicated that while many of Georgia's youth gangs are small and territorial in nature, many gangs are becoming more expansive, organized, and violent in direct support of their drug distribution efforts. Gangs are increasingly migrating to Georgia from other regions in the United States (Georgia Public Broadcasting, 2010). The NDIC (2003) contended that Georgia is experiencing an influx of older and more experienced gang members from other states in attempt to organize smaller, less-structured gangs in order to expand national affiliation. The NGIC (2009) predicted that as gang affiliation spreads, drug operations will expand from retail to whole-sale levels, allowing for direct associations with larger gang networks, more active gang roles, and increased tendencies for violence.

Georgia gang legislation. The Georgia Street Gang Terrorism and Prevention Act was originally passed in 1992 and went into effect as Georgia codes 16-15-1 to 7 (Dudek, 1992). This legislation made it a "misdemeanor offense to actively participate in a criminal street gang and provides for sentence enhancements for crimes committed in connection with membership in a street gang" (Dudek, 1992, p. 219). In 2006, the Georgia General Assembly (2006) amended the Georgia Street Gang Terrorism and Prevention Act according to HB 1302 in order to modify specific gang-related definitions. A criminal street gang is hereby defined in Georgia as being "any organization, association, or group of three or more persons which engages in criminal gang activity…associated by evidence of a common name or common identifying signs, symbols, tattoos, graffiti, or attire or other distinguishing factors" (GGIA, 2006, p. 1).

The passage of HB 1302 also altered admissibility of specified evidence at trials involving gang members, and it enhanced penalties for criminal gang involvement (Georgia General Assembly, 2006; Georgia Public Defenders Standards Council, 2006).

In 2010, the Georgia Street Gang Terrorism and Prevention Act was further amended with the passage of HB 1015. This legislation required that all sentences imposed as a result of criminal gang activity mandate provisions that prohibit contact with gang members or any victim involved in the case, and it forbade future participation in criminal gang activity (Georgia General Assembly, 2010). This amendment also granted the Georgia Bureau of Investigation the authorizations required to institute and maintain a state-wide database pertaining to street gang members (Georgia General Assembly, 2010). The passage of HB 1015 also required that a conviction for violating the Georgia Street Gang Terrorism and Prevention Act carry full probation supervision until the completion of a sentence, and bail for criminal gang offenses may only be set by superior court judges (Georgia General Assembly, 2010).

Related Theories and Models

Numerous researchers have noted key speculative patterns related to gang involvement and specific gang structures (Curry et al., 2002; Franzese, Covey, & Menard, 2006; Howell, 2010a; Shoemaker, 2009; Thibault et al., 2009). Researchers have long noted consistent and multifaceted developmental processes that humans undergo over the courses of their lives, and many researchers and psychologists insist that the behaviors one chooses to engage in during adolescence may influence later transitional phases (Myers, 2004; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004). Pai, Adler, and Shadiow (2005) assert that upon analyzing psychological and educational theories, one may better

comprehend the overall structure of human learning and development. A thorough examination of key psychological and educational theories pertaining to learning and human development may serve to assist one in better understanding, explaining, and predicting human behavior and its contributing mental processes (Myers, 2004; Rathus, 2003). Numerous researchers insist that a comprehensive examination of such theories may also provide theoretical justifications in respect to youth gang membership and corresponding actions (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi, 2004; Kissner & Pyrooz, 2009). Key theories that will be explored during this study will include social learning, ecological systems, and social disorganization, as well as moral development, psychosocial development, and humanistic theories.

Social-learning theory. Observational, or social-learning, theories have frequently been cited to explain developmental changes in youth, accounting for shifts in attitudes, acquired social skills, ethical decision making, and patterns of conduct (Bandura, 1977; Berryman, Ockleford, Howells, Hargreaves, & Wildbur, 2006; Esbensen et al., 2004; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004). Social-learning theories stress "the importance of leaning by observation and the role of cognitive processes that produce individual differences" (Rathus, 2003, p. 333). According to social-learning theorists, one develops social concepts, or schemas, based upon a combination of personal observations and key internal factors such as skills, values, goals, self-efficacy, and expectations (Bandura, 1977; Berryman et al., 2006; Myers, 2004; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004). Such observations and internal variables enable individuals to formulate personal and decisive learning opportunities based upon deliberate actions that may influence one's environment (Bandura, 1977; Rathus, 2003). Consequently, social-learning theorists

support the notion of conscious observational learning, paired with internal traits, enabling one to formulate various responses to common occurrences (Rathus, 2003). Humans are, therefore, capable of rationalizing and acting in particular manners when circumstances deem certain behaviors appropriate (Myers, 2004; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004).

Social-learning theories may assist researchers in better understanding the correlations among youth gang membership, gang tendencies, and participation in behaviors considered as being high-risk (Porter, 2008; White, 2009; Windgood et al., 2002). Scientific studies related to perception and cognition have been conducted in order to examine the relationships between cultural circumstances and self-efficacy based upon personal life experiences (Bandura 1977; Pai et al, 2005; White, 2009). A vast array of research has also been conducted in order to examine gang membership and tendencies towards delinquent behaviors (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Fagan, 1989; Rhodes & Fischer, 1993; Sirpal, 2002; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993; Vigil, 1988). Comparisons of gang and non-gang youth have consistently exposed connections among gang affiliation, delinquency, and various types of crimes (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Deschenes & Esbensen, 1999; Esbensen, Peterson, Freng, & Taylor, 2002; Maxson & Whitlock, 2002; Thornberry et al., 2003; White, 2009). Social-learning theorists hypothesize that such correlations may be directly attributed to conscious reactions to and within one's environment based upon direct experiences or observations of others (Myers, 2004; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004)."Children tend to imitate what a model both does and says, whether the behavior is social or antisocial…Children are especially likely to imitate those they perceive to be

like them, successful, or admirable" (Myers, 2004, p. 340). The appeal of youth gangs, therefore, may be attributed antisocial models portrayed at home, in the media, or in the general community (Franzese et al., 2006; Myers, 2004; White, 2009).

Humanistic theory. Humanistic theories stress the innate desire all humans have pertaining to reaching the state of self-actualization, with a primary emphasis being placed upon the prominence of self-awareness in the decision-making process (Covey, 2004; Maslow, 1970; Myers, 2004; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004). Humanistic psychology argues that "people are motivated by the conscious desire for personal growth and artistic fulfillment" (Rathus, 2003, p. 301). Maslow (1970) maintained that people are innately motivated by personal priorities, and all priorities fall into one of five levels represented by a hierarchy of needs. Maslow insisted that the most basic needs are physiological needs such as food and water. Physiological needs are respectively followed by safety needs and the need to experience love and belongingness. These two needs are subsequently followed by esteem needs and self-actualization needs, which includes the fulfillment of one's unique potential (Maslow, 1970; Maslow & Lowery, 1998; Myers, 2004; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004). According to Rathus (2003), reaching the state of self-actualization is often considered to be as essential to humans as are basic needs. Given the hierarchical structure of these priorities, however, one may not seek the fulfillment of an individual need without first reaching the fulfillment of the preceding need (Maslow, 1970; Myers, 2004; Rathus, 2003; Reiss, 2005; Schunk, 2004).

As noted by Maslow (1970), personal actions and behaviors are often influenced by individual circumstances and personal motives, which are often byproducts of one's particular environment and interactions. Myers (2004) reaffirmed this notion, insisting

that “environmental factors interact with what is physiologically given…[As a result], some motives are more compelling than others” (pp. 458, 459). Noted sociologist Charles Horton Cooley (1902) expressed similar humanistic views, arguing that

> Self-feeling has its chief scope within the general life, not outside of it; the special endeavor or tendency of which it is the emotional aspect finds its principal field of exercise in a world of personal forces, reflected in the mind by a world of personal impressions. As connected with the thought of other persons the self idea is always a consciousness of the peculiar or differentiated aspect of one’s life, because that is the aspect that has to be sustained by purpose and endeavor, and its more aggressive forms tend to attach themselves to whatever one finds to be at once congenial to one’s own tendencies and at variance with those of others with whom one is in mental contact. It is here that they are most needed to serve their function of stimulating characteristic activity, of fostering those personal variations which the general plan of life seems to require. (pp. 179, 180)

Wren (2004) summarized Cooley by asserting that the social aspects of one’s being develop as a result of one’s reactions to the perceived views of others. Thus, the desire to reach self-actualization entails much more than merely satisfying one’s physical needs (Rathus, 2003), as expressed by Maslow (1970) when he hypothesized that physiological and psychological motives may be classified and prioritized differently among individuals.

Youth gangs generally thrive in areas suffering from rampant social conditions such as poverty, drugs, and crime, and such conditions tend to yield personal senses of poor self-efficacy among many youth (Egley & O’Donnell, 2006; Egley et al., 2006;

Esbensen & Weerman, 2005; Gordon et al., 2004; Howell, 2009; Mitchell, 2011; NGIC, 2009; Reisman, 2006; Sharkey et al., 2010; Sharpe, 2003; Thornberry et al., 2003; Thrasher, 1927; Weisel, 2002). Tienda (2002) noted that impoverished and violent conditions are especially damaging for children during their formative years, for such circumstances deny children of basic human needs. Bell and Lim (2005), as well as Dupere, Lacourse, Willms, Vitaro, and Tremblay (2007), noted that youth gangs regularly flourish in given areas because gang activities and mentalities foster notions of satisfying one's physiological and physical needs. White (2009) argues that cultural and social forces play dominant roles in the formation of one's self-identity. According to Percy (2003), children exposed to violent home lives or neighborhoods often report that the perceived security of youth gangs satisfies their basic needs related to safety. Reisman (2006) and Pai et al. (2005) concurred with and expand upon the notions of Percy and White, insisting that adolescents commonly join gangs as a result of their desires for establishing personal identities, meeting emotional and self-esteem needs, and defining their social statuses. Many youth gang members report that gang affiliation typically eclipses basic safety needs, often satisfying members' belongingness, love, and esteem needs (DOJ, 2006; Malec, 2006; Percy, 2003; Reisman, 2006; Thrasher, 1927). Consequently, youth gangs often serve as substitute families for their members (Franzese et al., 2006; Huff, 2002), for they aid in the process of social adjustment and the overall meeting of one's personal needs (Dupere et al., 2007; Franzese et al., 2006; OJJDP, 2004; Sharkey et al., 2010).

Ecological systems theory. Proponents of the ecological systems theory contend that personal development is modified by one's exposures and interactions within a given

environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Myers, 2004; Rathus, 2003; Robertson, 2008; Schunk, 2004; Usta & Farver, 2005). Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued that the substance of personal development, as well as changes in development, is a function of one's environmental exposures and interactions. Robertson (2008) described the ecological systems theory and personal development as "involving progressive and mutual accommodations that take place between an active, constantly growing person and the always changing properties in which the developing person lives" (p. 29). Thus, the ecological systems theory emphasizes the roles and interactions of society and culture in one's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Myers, 2004; Presley & McCormick, 2006; Rathus, 2003; Robertson, 2008; Schunk, 2004).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued that one's social world, or ecological environment, is "a nested arrangement of concentric structures, each contained within the next" (p. 22). According to Bronfenbrenner, the ecological environment consists of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and the macrosystem. The microsystem entails the physical and material characteristics of the settings in which one lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Robertson, 2008; Schunk, 2004). The microsystem, therefore, provides one with the most immediate interactions with key socialization forces such as family members, peers, and community members. Bronfenbrenner (1979) insisted that the varying roles and interpersonal relationships one maintains in the microsystem enables one to help construct his or her personal setting and development. Thus, youth are active participants in the construction of knowledge (Schunk, 2004). The mesosystem consists of the intertwining of and interactions among individual microsystems and the corresponding contexts that emerge (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Robertson, 2008). Robertson (2008) and

Porter (2008) both noted, for example, that the mesosystem for most youth typically includes the combination of familial, school, and community relations, for incidents and perceptions within one of the three may directly alter a child's views of and actions in the others.

The exosystem consists of associations among social settings in which the developing person has no immediate role, yet the events that take place in such settings impact and influence the context of a person's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Robertson, 2008). For example, students may not immediately serve on a school board; however, board decisions directly impact the lives of students. Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that the macrosystem consists of the consistent presence and combination of lower-order systems that yields an overall culture in a given area. Cultural contexts, such as ethnicity and socioeconomic status, are integral components of the macrosystem, for they are directly influenced by views and interactions from within the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Robertson, 2008; Schunk, 2004).

Criminologists, sociologists, and psychologists have long studied the frameworks of youth gangs. Studies have revealed that much like Bronfenbrenner's (1979) concentric structures; gang tendencies and delinquency often entail intertwining aspects of individuals, peer groups, familial interactions, and communities (Dupere et al., 2007; Fisher et al., 2008; Fraser, 2010; Miller, J. et al., 2001). The belief systems, perceptions, and ultimately the actions of children are shaped by their interactions with various socialization agents (Dupere et al., 2007; Fisher et al., 2008; Fraser, 2010; Miller, J. et al., 2001; Porter, 2008; Schunk, 2004; Usta & Farver, 2005). Schunk (2004) asserts that children are at the intersection of three significantly powerful forces: school, peers, and

family. Affiliation with youth gangs may be directly attributed to the influences of such forces. Nofziger and Kurtz (2005), as well as Schwartz & Gorman (2003) noted a vast array of behavioral consequences, including delinquency, insufficient academic performance, and higher tendencies towards violence, that manifest as a response to childhood exposure to violent situations while at home, school, or within the community. A study of youth gangs conducted by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) identified many of these same experiences and characteristics among identified gang members.

Research conducted by Bronfenbrenner (1979), as well as Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998), noted the nature in which many common social occurrences among youth may serve to inadvertently alienate certain children. These occurrences include, but are not limited to, cultural negligence and isolationism, socioeconomic discrepancies, and academic disparities. Alienation during childhood and the resulting consequences is generating what Bronfenbrenner referred to as disruptive forces within modern society. Although Bronfenbrenner neglected to precisely categorize youth gangs as disruptive forces, one may logically assert that youth gangs and their byproducts qualify as such based upon the identified correlations among key social occurrences and gang formation (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; Curry & Decker, 2003; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Fisher et al., 2008; Fraser, 2010; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; W. Miller, 2001; Sullivan, 2005). Adolescents tend to form social connections based on common interests and needs (Fleisher, 2005), and many researchers attest that the desire such social connections may be satisfied by uniting with a youth gang (Egley et al., 2006; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Fisher et al., 2008; Franzese et al., 2006; Fraser, 2010; Klein, 1995; NYGC, 2006; Weisel, 2002; Wyrick, 2006).

Theory of moral development. Building upon the work of noted psychologist Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg sought to examine how moral judgments impact cognitive development in humans. In doing so, Kohlberg (1984) postulated that as humans develop intellectually, they progress through a series of phases in which moral reasoning advances from "simplistic and concrete toward the more abstract and principled" (Myers, 2004, p. 164). Dubbed the theory of moral development, Kohlberg's philosophy of moral evolution is founded upon the notion of one's ability to rationalize and act accordingly occurring in six sequential developmental stages, with each stage dictating how an individual resolves moral dilemmas (Barger, 2000; Berryman et al., 2006; Cherry, 2010; Crain, 1985; Kohlberg, 1984; Myers, 2004; Pai et al., 2005; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004). Kohlberg grouped each stage into one of three basic levels of moral development: preconventional morality, conventional morality, and postconventional morality.

Preconventional morality is composed of stages one and two, and it is commonly observed in children at the elementary school level (Barger, 2000). Myers (2004) and Rathus (2003) insisted that this level is observable in children ages nine and below. The initial phases of preconventional morality are based upon concepts of rules being absolute and uncompromising; thus, strict obedience with known rules is significant because it allows one to avoid punishment and obtain rewards (Barger, 2000; Berryman et al., 2006; Cherry, 2010; Crain, 1985; Kohlberg, 1984; Myers, 2004; Pai et al., 2005; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004). Behavior, therefore, is dictated by conformity with norms and views as directed by an authority figure such as a parent or teacher (Barger, 2000; Cherry, 2010). The later portions of preconventional morality are marked by the onset of actions and

judgments intended to cater to one's individual needs as opposed to compliance with concrete rules (Barger, 2000; Berryman et al., 2006; Cherry, 2010; Crain, 1985; Kohlberg, 1984; Myers, 2004; Pai et al., 2005; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004). This particular phase is "characterized by a view that right behavior means acting in one's own best interest" (Barger, 2000, ¶ 5). Preconventional morality, as a whole, may be described as behavior dictated by perceptions of rules, perceived fairness, and personal concepts of justice (Berryman et al., 2006).

Conventional morality is comprised of stages three and four, and this level is characteristic of the wide-ranging level of moral development found within general society (Barger, 2000; Berryman et al., 2006; Cherry, 2010; Crain, 1985; Kohlberg, 1984; Myers, 2004; Pai et al., 2005; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004). Behavior in the initial phases of conventional morality is driven by social roles and expectations (Cherry, 2010). Consequently, consideration of personal relationships with others, conformity, and perceptions of social status and social approval help determine behavior (Barger, 2000; Berryman et al., 2006; Cherry, 2010; Crain, 1985; Kohlberg, 1984; Myers, 2004; Pai et al., 2005; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004). As people progress through conventional morality, however, they begin to place greater emphasis on society as a whole and maintaining social order (Barger, 2000; Berryman et al., 2006; Cherry, 2010; Crain, 1985; Myers, 2004; Pai et al., 2005; Schunk, 2004). Consequently, as one's moral reasoning evolves into later portions of conventional morality, a culmination of cognitive abilities and moral reasoning skills developed during preconventional morality and conventional morality becomes manifest. This is demonstrated by concrete applications of abstract laws and ideologies intended for the betterment of society as opposed to

strictly the individual (Barger, 2000; Berryman et al., 2006; Cherry, 2010; Crain, 1985; Kohlberg, 1984; Myers, 2004; Pai et al., 2005; Schunk, 2004).

The third level of moral development, as described by Kohlberg (1984), is postconventional morality. Consisting of levels five and six, postconventional morality is not attained by the majority of adults in general society (Barger, 2000). Postconventional morality is characterized by a shift in reasoning ability in which abstract concepts such as universal principles, laws, and ethics surpasses an emphasis on the individual and society (Kohlberg, 1984; Myers, 2004; Rathus, 2003). Postconventional morality is initially marked by an emerging concern for the interests, beliefs, and values of others (Barger, 2000; Berryman et al., 2006; Cherry, 2010; Crain, 1985; Myers, 2004; Pai et al., 2005; Schunk, 2004). The notion of a democratic governance and compliance with rules is based upon the consent of the people (Cherry, 2010). Postconventional morality is ultimately exemplified by an individual consciousness of abstract principles such as equality, justice, and fairness (Barger, 2000; Berryman et al., 2006; Cherry, 2010; Crain, 1985; Kohlberg, 1984; Myers, 2004; Pai et al., 2005; Schunk, 2004). Those at this phase act upon internalized ideologies even in the presence of personal or societal conflict with stated laws or rules (Cherry, 2010).

Kohlberg (1984) asserted that the three levels of moral development form a moral ladder; consequently, individuals may only proceed through one stage at any particular moment, and the stages must be completed in successive order (Barger, 2000; Myers, 2004; Rathus, 2003). According to this model, people may "only come to a comprehension of a moral rationale one stage above their own" (Barger, 2000, ¶ 8). Kohlberg (1984) insists that social interaction determines moral development. As a result,

Kohlberg (1984) maintains that moral dilemmas and subsequent discussions, both of which are present during societal engagement, must be fostered and utilized in order to promote the attainment of moral reasoning skills (Barger, 2000; Cherry, 2010).

According to Schunk (2004), social institutions, most notably schools and homes, play crucial roles in presenting youth with moral dilemmas and discussion opportunities. Research indicates that adolescents in supportive environments with clearly expressed expectations for behavior demonstrate higher levels of moral development (Berryman et al., 2006). Schunk (2004) and Berryman et al. (2006) noted the significance of school structures in terms of influencing the socialization skills, academic achievement, and emotional security of children. Barger (2000) concurred, insisting that formal education is essential to promoting moral development, for schools are primary sources for social interaction. Schools may directly promote or deter moral development through the establishment of supportive or unsupportive environments (Schunk, 2004), and individual educators and administrators may likewise sustain or neglect moral development based upon the practices, beliefs, and values acted upon within a classroom setting.

Bell and Lim (2005) argued that youth typically confront daily challenges that are decidedly different from those of adults. As a result of these challenges, gang affiliation is becoming an increasingly significant socialization agent for many youth (Gordon et al., 2004; Sharkey et al., 2010). Research indicates that key gang recruitment generally peaks between the ages of 11 and 14, but it is widely noted that gang recruitment in schools often targets children much younger (Egley & O'Donnell, 2006; Howell, 2008; Howell et al., 2002; NGIC, 2009; Starbuck et al., 2001). One's behavior and willingness to participate in gang activities may be directly attributed to the social influences of

adolescent peer groups (Franzese et al., 2006; Myers, 2004). Affiliation with youth gangs may result in increased antisocial behaviors due to the specific philosophies and behaviors expressed within gangs (Craig et al., 2002). Craig et al. (2002) asserted that antisocial behaviors among youth increase as gangs provide encouragement and support structures for deviant behavior. Given the intertwining relationships among social interaction, behavior, and moral development (Barger, 2000; Cherry, 2010; Kohlberg, 1984), one may logically assert that gang affiliation and influences often spark destructive cyclical trends that must be counteracted by measures from within local communities, homes, and schools.

Theory of psychosocial development. Erik Erikson believed that personal development is interlaced with societal forces and events (Farzaneh, 2008). Erikson's (1963) theory of psychosocial development is based upon the notion of personality evolving through a series of phases that are influenced by one's social experiences throughout life (Berryman et al., 2006; Myers, 2004; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004). Characterized by eight distinct and sequential phases, Erikson's stages of psychosocial development emphasize how personalities and identity formation are developed and modified as humans confront personal challenges at specific periods throughout their lives (Berryman et al., 2006; Erikson, 1963; Myers, 2004; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004). During each stage, people undergo a crucial moment in which one struggles to realize a psychological quality that is essential to personal development (Berryman et al., 2006; Erikson, 1963; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004). Erikson referred to such occurrences as conflicts, or psychosocial crises. Erikson noted that during times of conflict, individuals may experience periods of vulnerability and strength as they strive to become competent

in some area of life. These periods result in internal struggles that may potentially yield personal growth or failure, thereby altering one's personality (Cherry, 2010). Successive stages of psychosocial development build upon the successful completion of previous stages, and failures in earlier stages manifest as psychosocial crises later in life (Cherry, 2010; Erikson, 1963; Farzaneh, 2008; Malec, 2006; Rathus, 2003).

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development is based upon the establishment of personal identity (Berryman et al., 2006; Cherry, 2010; Erikson, 1963; Myers, 2004; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004). Identity refers to one's self-concept (Myers, 2004) as developed through social interaction (Berryman et al., 2006; Cherry, 2010; Erikson, 1963; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004). Society is thereby viewed as a positive influence that promotes personal growth and development (Farzaneh, 2008). Erikson (1963) asserted that all humans search for their personal identities, and identities continuously evolve as new experiences and resulting conflicts are undergone and processed in each stage of psychosocial development. As humans struggle to establish their identities, they develop perceptions of competency that serve to influence actions and behaviors (Cherry, 2010). If the conflict in a given stage is adequately resolved, one becomes more competent and confident as he or she progresses to the next psychosocial stage (Berryman et al., 2006; Cherry, 2010; Erikson, 1963; Farzaneh, 2008; Myers, 2004; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004). Failure to resolve conflicts, however, results in a sense of inadequacy and maladjustment that hinders personal development and identity formation (Berryman et al., 2006; Cherry, 2010; Erikson, 1963; Farzaneh, 2008; Myers, 2004; Rathus, 2003; Schunk, 2004).

According to Schunk (2004), Erikson's most noted theoretical contribution relates to identity formation in adolescents. Adolescence is the fifth of Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development. Erikson (1968) emphasized adolescence as being a crucial period of establishing self-identity, societal roles, and overall life goals. Myers (2004) characterized this stage as being a search for identity, for adolescents attempt to "synthesize past, present, and future possibilities into a clearer sense of self" (p. 167). Berryman et al. (2006) concurred, arguing that adolescence entails the formation of beliefs and values, as well as perceived adult roles based upon such beliefs and values. Myers also noted that many adolescents forge their identities based upon parental role models, values, and expectations; whereas others may adopt an identity in opposition to the views of their parents. Those identities that reject parental influences often conform to the values and beliefs with distinct peer groups (Myers, 2004; Rathus, 2003). For most youth, adolescence is marked by close relationships with peer groups, making social interaction an essential element in the establishment of one's identity (Myers, 2004; Wood & Huffman, 1999).

Erikson (1963) argued that identity formation entails both intellectual and emotional dimensions. As noted by Rathus (2003), adolescence contains the development of principles, senses of personal conscience, and moral judgments as they relate to identity formation. Research indicates that identified members of youth gangs often lack self-esteem, and they are often experiencing difficulties in establishing their self-identities (Reisman, 2006). Reports by Wood and Huffman (1999) indicated that adolescents with high levels of self-esteem are more likely to reject gang influences as compared to those with low senses of self-esteem. Perceptions of isolation or alienation

further increase the allure of youth gangs, for gangs are generally formed on the basis of unified goals, behaviors, and values (Craig et al., 2002). Malec (2006) argued that increased social instability produces desires for stability and familiarity, which is often satisfied in a group setting such as a youth gang. Fleisher (2005) suggested that the stability of youth gangs is a considerable force that challenges friendships and traditional peer associations. Social discrepancies among family members, peer groups, and the general environment help establish one's lifestyle and future opportunities (Franzese et al., 2006; Fraser, 2010; Hughes, Kroehler, & Vander, 2002; Mitchell, 2011). Such inequalities, paired with the quest for identity formation, may aid the formation, allures, and influences of youth gangs (Porter, 2008).

Social disorganization theory. The social disorganization theory is a criminological theory that attributes delinquency and crime to the absence or collapse of common social institutions, such as families, schools, and churches, paired with community relationships that generally discourage positive interactions and cooperation among people (Jensen, 2003; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; O'Connor, 2006; Shoemaker 2009)."Relationships among people in a given territory are presumed to be especially "organized" when high levels of involvement across age-levels in activities coordinated by representatives of communal institutions" (Jensen, 2003, p. 21) are present. Such communal interactions reciprocate a sense of community and common bonds that serve to unite people within a given area (Jensen, 2003; O'Connor, 2006). In the absence or deterioration of communal institutions, communities are rendered incapable of establishing common goals and are, therefore, unable to adequately address community issues (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Robertson, 2008; Shoemaker, 2009). Such community

issues include, but are not limited to, truancy, crime, delinquency, and poverty (Jensen, 2003; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; O'Connor, 2006; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Shaw & McKay, 1969; Shoemaker, 2009). Primarily focusing on the failures of social institutions and relationships at a micro level, social disorganization may also be utilized to explain criminal and delinquent tendencies at a macro level (O'Connor, 2006).

While social disorganization theorists do examine micro level social aspects such as schools, peer groups, and families, in order to help explain why some youth engage in delinquency and crime, greater emphasis is currently being placed on the influences and byproducts of local communities and larger society (Robertson, 2008). Research indicates that crime and delinquency tend to be greater in urban communities that are economically deprived, experience high rates of residential mobility, and are subjected to increased rates of family disruption due to divorce, single-parent families, and other such means (Chilton & Galvin, 1985; Dupere et al., 2007; Hagan & McCarthy, 1998; Hagan & Peterson, 1995; National Research Council, 1993; Wilson, 1987; Shoemaker, 2009). Social disorganization theorists surmise that such factors diminish the abilities and willingness of local communities in terms of effectively implementing adequate social control measures (Dupere et al., 2007; Franzese et al., 2006; Jensen, 2003; Kinnear, 2009; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; O'Connor, 2006; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Shaw & McKay, 1969; Shoemaker, 2009). The lack of or failure of community resources is further complicated within the households of community residents, for "residents of high crime communities often lack the skills and resources to effectively assist others" (law. jrank. org, 2010, ¶ 4). The members of such communities also tend to portray diminished senses of community attachment (Chilton & Galvin, 1985; Dupere et al., 2007; Franzese

et al., 2006; Hagan & McCarthy, 1998; Hagan & Peterson, 1995; Kinnear, 2009; National Research Council, 1993; Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Wilson, 1987). The resulting trend is for residents to be less supportive of community-based organizations designed to initiate and enhance community improvements (Chilton & Galvin, 1985; Dupere et al., 2007; Franzese et al., 2006; Hagan & McCarthy, 1998; Hagan & Peterson, 1995; Kinnear, 2009; National Research Council, 1993; Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Shoemaker, 2009; Wilson, 1987). Consequently, the social disorganization theory essentially entails a cyclical process in which the community is rendered incapable or unwilling to help the residents and vice versa.

Many criminologists and social disorganization theorists note a present-day surge in the overall number of American communities that exhibit characteristics conducive to crime and delinquency (Chilton & Galvin, 1985; Dupere et al., 2007; Franzese et al., 2006; Hagan & McCarthy, 1998; Hagan & Peterson, 1995; National Research Council, 1993; Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Wilson, 1987; Shoemaker, 2010). Hagan and Peterson (1995) insisted that this trend has persisted since the 1960s. The presence of limited resources and diminished senses of community attachment are yielding great complications in terms of socializing youth against crime and delinquency, as well as presenting youth with a feasible investment in community and social conformity (Kinnear, 2009; Osgood & Anderson, 2004; Patillo, 1998; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Shaw & McKay, 1969). Consequently, the social disorganization theory may be utilized to explain the emergence and development of youth gangs in communities undergoing the aforementioned circumstances. Research indicates that as community structures neglect or fail to meet the socialization needs of youth, gangs increasingly become a viable

option for youth (Osgood & Anderson, 2004; Patillo, 1998; Robertson, 2008; Shaw & McKay, 1969; Shoemaker, 2009). The OJJDP (2002) concurred, for social disorganization philosophies served as foundational components in the development of its youth gang prevention and intervention strategies.

Considering the diverse natures of youth gangs and the member-specific justification for participating in gang activities (Egley et al., 2006; Klein, 1995; NYGC, 2006), no single theory of gang development may be applicable to all situations. Data reported by the NYGC (2006) indicated that gang structures and explicit behaviors often vary based on geographical locations. The NYGC maintained that such variations may also be found within individual geographical regions, yielding various characteristics and behaviors that are unique among and within local youth gangs. The current lack of comprehensive gang research and the diverse nature of youth gang often yields great difficulty in accurately identifying the presences, activities, and theoretical foundations of youth gangs (Esbensen, 2000; Miller, 2001; Kinnear, 2009; Klein & Maxson, 2006; O'Donnell et al., 2009; Reed & Decker, 2002). For the purpose of this study, the assertion was made that youth gang researchers must examine individual theories of gang formation, as well as the various combinations thereof, in order to accurately investigate localized gang issues.

Overview of Risk Factors

Hawkins et al. (2000) identified five key domains concerning acknowledged risk factors of youth violence. The domains are family, individual, school, peer-related, and community and neighborhood risk factors. Researchers in the field of youth gangs have also adopted these domains, as evidenced in the works of the NYGC (2006), Wyrick

(2006), Howell and Egley (2005), the NCPC (2006), and Capuzzi and Gross (2004), as well as a host of other prominent youth gang researchers. Risk factors are "conditions in an individual or environment that predict an increased likelihood of gang membership" (Porter, 2008, p. 65). Select risk factors associated with youth gang tendencies have long been examined by researchers (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Esbensen et al., 2010; Howell, 1998b; Pollard, Catalano, Hawkins, & Arthur, 1997; Thornberry et al., 2003; White, 2007), yet Hill, Howell (et al., 1999) insisted that a lack of sufficient research related to known risk factors of youth gang membership is present in regards to the identified consequences of gang activities.

According to Sharpe (2003) and Klein (2005), researchers have thoroughly measured and documented statistics pertaining to the ages, ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, and familial backgrounds of youth gang members. Likewise, the two indicate that a wide variety of studies have examined general gang membership, participation roles, and departure arrangements. Sharpe identified family structures, peer groups, and school relations, as well as neighborhood characteristics and personal characteristics, as being the fundamental indicators and precursors of gang involvement. Numerous researchers concur, noting direct correlations between and among gang involvement and personal relationships within families, schools, and communities (Capuzzi & Gross, 2004; Center for Youth Policy Research, 2006; Esbensen, 2000; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Esbensen et al., 2010; Hawkins, Herrenkohl, Farington, Brewer, Catalano, Hirachi, & Cothern, 2000; Hill et al., 1999; Hill, Lui, & Hawkins, 2001; Howell & Egley, 2005; NCPC, 2006; NYGC, 2002; OJJDP, 2000; Reed & Decker, 2002; Sharpe, 2003; Spergel & Curry, 1990; Wasserman, Miller, & Cothern, 2000; Wright & Fitzpatrick, 2006;

Wyrick, 2006). A vast array of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have been utilized by researchers to identify and validate each of the five domains as being key risk factors associated with youth gangs (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen, Huizinga, & Weiher, 1993; Howell, 2003). Research conducted by Hill et al. (1999) and Maxson, Whitlock, & Klein (1998) revealed substantial differences between gang and non-gang youth within the contexts of individual, familial, school, peer, and communal characteristics.

Esbensen (2000) maintained that a great deal of attention has been given to communal and societal factors in regards to youth gangs. Examining these two risk factors alone, however, is insufficient in terms of adequately explaining youth gang tendencies."Most youth who reside where gangs exist choose not to join gangs, [supporting the notion that] additional factors are required to explain why youth join gangs" (Esbensen, 2000, p. 3). Consequently, this study will examine family structures, peer groups, and school relations, as well as neighborhood characteristics and individual characteristics, while examining educator and administrator awareness of youth gang risk factors. According to the OJJDP (2004), youth are more likely to succumb to the appeals and pressure of gangs as they are exposed to greater numbers of risk factors. Wyrick (2006) agreed, adding that "no one risk factor rises clearly above the rest, and different configurations of risk factors are likely to be present in different communities for different individuals" (p. 54). Reed and Decker (2002) asserted that the fusion of risk factors significantly heightens the probability for gang involvement. A key task for researchers, policy makers, and community leaders, therefore, is the identification of the most prevalent risk factors, or combinations thereof, in order to adequately examine and

respond to the implications of youth gang risk factors (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Esbensen et al., 2010; Hawkins et al., 2000; Hill et al., 1999; Howell, 2010a; Mitchell, 2011; Wasserman et al., 2000; White; 2007; Wyrick, 2006).

Family domain. Research conducted by Hill et al. (1999) concluded that risk factors for gang involvement commonly span all five key domains. Among the most commonly examined domains of youth gang risk factors is the family unit. Wright and Fitzpatrick (2006) asserted that the home environment has a significant impact on the physical and emotional wellbeing for adolescents. Such impacts are often manifested in the behavioral outcomes expressed by youth (Franzese et al., 2006; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Zhang and Zhang (2005) maintained that a dysfunctional family environment often yields antisocial behaviors. Bell and Lim (2005) and Florian-Lacey et al., (2002) argued that unstable family environments often facilitate the allure of gang lifestyles. Howell and Egley (2005) asserted that for many youth gang members, "conventional socializing agents, such as families and schools, are largely ineffective and alienating" (p. 1). Sharpe (2003) concluded that familial risk factors are among the most statistically significant predictors of youth gang participation.

Hill et al. (1999) concluded that a vast array of familial variables serve as risk factors for joining a youth gang. Among these variables are impoverished conditions, low parental attachment, the presence of drugs and alcohol within the home, and sibling antisocial behaviors. Hill et al. also reported that parental attitudes towards violence, the breaking of traditional family structures, and poor family management are significant risk factors. Howell and Egley (2005), as well as Wyrick (2006) and Reed and Decker (2002), agreed with the findings of Hill et al. Research conducted by the Center for Youth Policy

Research (2006) stressed the significance of considering parental employment status, educational expectations, and ethnic background as being risk factors also affiliated with youth gang membership. The NCPC (2006) noted that an absence of positive support structures within the home, as well as exposure to domestic violence and violent media sources, significantly contributes to youth gang enrollment.

Individual domain. Sharpe (2003) acknowledged individual characteristics as being the primary domain of risk factors for youth gang affiliation. Numerous researchers cite an assortment of personal traits and experiences that facilitate gang membership (Esbensen et al., 2010; Howell, 2010b; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Research conducted by Yablonsky (1962) revealed that youth gang members generally exhibit lower senses of self-esteem, are more socially inept, and portray sociopathic tendencies more often than non-gang youth. Hill et al. (1999) concluded that youth gang members tend to hold and act upon more antisocial ideologies as compared to non-gang youth. A study by Esbensen, Huizinga, and Weiher (1993) described increased tendencies youth gang members have in regards to social isolation, tolerance for deviant behaviors, and senses of commitment to delinquent peers. Research carried out by Maxson et al. (1998) supported the notions of gang members experiencing significantly greater presences of unfavorable circumstances in their personal lives. Maxson et al. also concluded that youth gang members generally possess more criminal self-concepts and have greater tendencies to resolve personal conflicts through the use of violence. Deschenes and Esbensen (1997) reported that gang members tend to be impetuous and more prone to engage in behaviors deemed as being overall precarious.

The aforementioned personal characteristics are exhibited in a variety of manners by individual gang members. While an exhaustive list or description of the precise manifestations of each trait does not exist, numerous researchers suggest that specific risk factors are identifiable (Esbensen et al., 2010; Franzese et al., 2006; Howell, 2010b; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Mitchell, 2011). The Center for Youth Policy Research (2006) cited increased interaction with deviant peers paired with irregular interaction with non-delinquent peers as being a risk factor for youth gang affiliation. Hawkins et al. (2000) and Hill et al. (1999) referenced the influences of physical conditions and psychological disorders. Wyrick (2006) noted the prominence of fighting and other outward expressions of violence and aggression. Hill et al. (1999), as well as Swahn et al. (2010) reported correlations among youth gang membership and drug and alcohol use, sexual activity during adolescence, and low or infrequent attendance at religious services. They also acknowledged the contributions of internalizing behaviors, hyperactivity, and social maladaptation. The OJJDP (2000) reiterated the significance of the risk factors revealed in the works of Hill et al.

The San Antonio Police Department (SAPD) Youth Crime Service Unit (n.d.) expounded upon the notions of obsessions with violent forms of media, frequent confrontations with police, withdrawal from family members, and consistent breaking of parental rules serving as risk factors for gang membership. The SAPD Youth Crime Service Unit also noted the significance of a fascination with firearms and other weapons, a lack of hobbies or interests, and the onset of "an unusual desire for privacy" (p. 4). The NCPC (2006) alluded to low self-esteem, a sense of hopelessness, and poor decision-making and communication skills as being associated risk factors of gang membership.

As Hill, Lui, & Hawkins (2001) and the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (NCIPC) (2009) asserted, the presence of risk factors for youth gangs and youth violence is not indicative of the existence of gang membership; however, study findings suggest that concerted efforts to prevent and combat precursors to gang membership, especially in the individual domain, may be highly beneficial (Hill et al., 2001).

Community domain. The community domain is the most commonly scrutinized category of risk factors associated with the emergence of youth gangs (Esbensen, 2000). Vast arrays of studies reveal strong correlations among social conditions such as poverty, social disorganization, unemployment, and numerous other communal circumstances in conjunction with increased youth gang tendencies (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Curry & Thomas, 1992; Dishion, Andrews, & Crosby, 1995; Esbensen, 2000; Esbensen et al., 2010; Fagan, 1990; Franzese et al., 2006; Hagedorn, 1998; Hill et al., 2001; Howell, 2010a; Huff, 1990; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Lahey, Gordon, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Farrington, 1999; Mitchell, 2011; Sampson & Grove, 1989; Tolan, Gorman-Smith, & Henry, 1999; Vigil 1988). The presences of youth gangs are most common, but are not limited to, urban areas containing economically deprived neighborhoods (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Dishion et al., 1995; Dupere et al., 2007: Esbensen, 2000; Esbensen et al., 2010; Franzese et al., 2006; National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC), 2006; Tolan et al., 2003; Wasserman et al., 2000). As noted by Wilson (1987) and Dupere et al. (2007), residents of such communities are more susceptible to the influences of social and economic conditions due to socioeconomic deprivation. Multiple marginality or the culmination of depressed social conditions such as poverty, segregation, and weakened or absent social controls renders youth more vulnerable to the influences of gangs (Vigil,

1988). Youth gangs, therefore, thrive in communities that neglect or lack economic resources and alternative activities for youth (Bell & Lim, 2005; Dupere et al., 2007: Malec, 2006). Moore (1991) noted that "gangs as youth groups develop among the socially marginal adolescents for whom school and family do not work" (p. 137). As a result, socialization agents within the community become more prominent forces in the lives of youth (Dupere et al., 2007: Esbensen, 2000; Moore, 1991).

As with other risk factor domains, an exhaustive list of individual risk factors for the community domain does not exist; for issues pertaining to youth gangs are often unique for given areas (OJJDP, 2000). A review of pertinent literature did, however, reveal an assortment of common risk factors as reflected within the works of numerous researchers. Esbensen (2000) insisted that youth gang members often experience economic, ethnic, and personal identity struggles. Wasserman et al. (2000) expanded upon such notions, insisting that persistent encounters with violence and racial prejudice are key predictors of youth violence and gang membership. Research also reveals that sexual discrimination and conflicts with traditional gender roles also compound the allure of gangs for some youth (Fishman, 1995; McIlwaine, 1999).

Short (1996) and Dupere et al. (2007) identified reduced educational and employment opportunities as being compelling forces. Exposure to illicit drugs, the availability of firearms, communities with high crime rates, and the presence of established gangs are also key determinants for youth gang enrollment (Hill et al., 2001; NCPC, 2006; Wyrick, 2006). Hill et al. (2001) and the OJJDP (2000) insisted that living in communities in which illicit drugs are readily available is the most imperative risk factor within the community domain. As noted by Fagan (1990), however, while gangs

tend to flourish in areas with diminished opportunities and weakened social controls, "participation in gangs is selective, and most youth avoid gang life" (p. 207). Consequently, researchers must address other domains along with the community domain in order to better postulate and examine the risk factors associated with youth gangs (Esbensen, 2000).

Peer domain. The arrangements and social environments in which youth live and function are essential elements of gang formation (Webber, 2007). Behavior is directly influenced by structural and psychological aspects of peer groups (Battin-Pearson et al., 1997; Menard & Elliott, 1994; Warr & Stafford, 1991; Webber, 2007). Rathus (2003) asserted that adolescent peer groups provide youth with senses of stability and belongingness in the form of peer acceptance. Youth tend to identify and associate with larger groups such as gangs in an attempt to obtain social gratification and acceptance (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Malec, 2006). Youth gang membership, therefore, is heightened by the seeking of acceptance (Craig et al., 2002), as evidenced by compliance with larger groups in terms of behavior, values, and goals (Craig et al., 2002; Howell, 2010b; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Rathus 2003; Sharkey et al., 2010; Sharpe, 2003). Malec (2006) argued that youth associated with gangs often report that gang structures and fellow members are sources of acceptance, understanding, and personal recognition.

Association with delinquent peer groups is considered to be among the strongest of all predictors of youth gang membership (Esbensen, 2000; Thibault et al., 2009; Washington State, 2010). Gang research consistently reveals a direct correlation between the influences of peer groups and adolescent behavior (Battin-Pearson et al., 1997; Dupere et al., 2007; Esbensen, 2000; Menard & Elliott, 1994; OJJDP, 2000; Thibault et

al., 2009; Warr & Stafford, 1991; Washington State, 2010; Wyrick, 2006). Wasserman et al. (2000) and the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (2009) noted increased levels of aggression and violence among youth affiliated with delinquent peer groups. Research conducted by Battin-Pearson et al. (1997) and Swahn et al. (2010) revealed that sustained gang affiliation is higher among youth with increased levels of interaction with antisocial peers. Hill et al. (2001) concluded that interaction with antisocial peers more than doubles the likelihood of youth being actively involved in gangs for extended periods of time. Esbensen (2000) maintained that gang researchers have extensively explored the influences of peer groups from a variety of facets including levels of exposure, attachment, and commitment. Research findings suggest that regardless of the aspect being examined; a direct correlation exists between the influences of peer groups and adolescent behavior (Battin-Pearson et al., 1997; Dupere et al., 2007; Esbensen, 2000; Menard & Elliott, 1994; Mitchell, 2011; OJJDP, 2000; Thibault et al., 2009; Warr & Stafford, 1991; Washington State, 2010; Wyrick,).

School domain. Risk factors associated with the school domain are the least researched predictors of youth gang membership (Esbensen, 2000; Howell, 2010b). Research, however, indicates "that these issues are consistently associated with the risk of joining gangs" (Esbensen, 2000, p. 5). Sharkey et al. (2010) contended that although gang proliferation and the resulting impacts have been significant in schools, contemporary research has failed to adequately examine the potential impacts of school dynamics in relation to facilitating gang membership. Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, and Gottfredson (2005) reported that the general climates of many public secondary schools foster gang membership. At-risk youth are often relegated to isolated positions in public

schools as a result of their inabilities, social maladaptations, and other confining circumstances (Franzese et al., 2006; Malec, 2006; McCarthy, 2007; Washington State, 2010). The resulting trend is for youth to become disillusioned and disassociated with school (Franzese et al., 2006; Malec, 2006; McCarthy, 2007; Washington State, 2010), for the general school environment often exposes one's inabilities and inadequacies (Craig et al., 2002; Porter, 2008; Washington State, 2010). As communal institutions such as schools become less prominent forces, socially disruptive forces such as youth gangs become more appealing and lucrative for many youth (Franzese et al., 2006; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Robertson, 2008).

Wood and Huffman (1999) argued that gangs often hinder schools and other social institutions as individual loyalty shifts from other aspects to the gang. Gang members tend to demonstrate lower levels of commitment to obtaining an education (Bjerregard & Smith, 1993; Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998; Hawkins et al., 2000; Hill et al., 1999; Hill et al., 2001; Maxson et al., 1998; OJJDP, 2000; Washington State, 2010). Youth gang membership may also be attributed to and result in lower levels of attachment to school (Franzese et al., 2006; Hawkins et al., 2000; Hill et al., 1999; NCES, 2010; OJJDP, 2000). Research conducted by Craig et al. (2002) revealed that a disproportionate number of youth gang members perform below grade level on many academic tasks. Research reveals that poor academic performance within a classroom setting increases the likelihood of gang affiliation (Hawkins et al., 2000; Hill et al., 1999; NCIPC, 2009; NCPC, 2006; OJJDP, 2000; SAPD Youth Crime Service Unit, n. d.), as does poor performance on standardized tests (Hill et al., 1999; OJJDP, 2000). The propensity to join a youth gang is also significantly magnified for those students

identified as having a learning disability (Dupere et al., 2007; Hill et al., 1999; OJJDP, 2000; Wyrick, 2006).

Overview of Gang Indicators

Youth gangs employ a wide variety of indicators to display gang affiliation and to differentiate themselves from rival gangs (Howell, 2010b; Kinnear, 2009; NCES, 2010; Scott, 2000; Washington State, 2010). Given the localized nature of youth gangs and the particular approaches communities, policy makers, and law enforcement personnel employ to identify and counter gangs, the specific types and number of indicators that must be present to adequately identify gang activity varies by jurisdiction (Weisheit & Wells, 1996). Numerous researchers and agencies note the traditional physical indicators of gang activity; however, increased emphasis is being placed upon specific actions of individuals that may be indicative of gang affiliation (Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), 1997; Howell, 2010b; Kinnear, 2009; Lawton Police Gang Unit, n.d., National School Safety and Security Services, n.d.; Sandoval, n.d.; Scott, 2000; SDFS, 1999; Weisheit & Wells, 1996). Individual warning signs, when viewed separately, may not necessarily be indicative of gang involvement (Lawton Police Gang Unit, n.d.; Sandoval, n.d.), however, a culmination of indicators may strongly suggest gang affiliation (Howell, 2010b; Lawton Police Gang Unit, n.d.)

Proper classification of gang indicators is often complicated by the shifting nature of youth gangs. The BJA (1997) and Klein and Maxson (2010) asserted that economic circumstances, media influences, and demographic alterations commonly yield modifications in gang actions and indicators. Scott (2000), as well as Klein and Maxson (2010), notes that gang indicators tend to evolve in response to factors such as

prevention, suppression, and intervention efforts within local communities and law enforcement agencies. The National School Safety and Security Services (n.d.) reported that gang indicators become more subtle as public awareness increases; thus, "the key rests with school and community officials quickly recognizing the presence of gang behaviors and activity in a timely manner" (National School Safety and Security Services, n.d., ¶ 14). In order to do so, school and community officials must continuously examine local gang trends in order to properly recognize pertinent indicators of gang involvement (Cahill et al., 2008; Chaskin, 2010; Lassiter & Perry, 2009; White, 2009).

Visual Indicators

Scott (2000) noted that many traditional, and perhaps the most noted, gang indicators are visual in nature. The Institute for Intergovernmental Research (2006) proclaimed that the primary indicators of gang involvement include observable occurrences such as the use of slang, initiation rituals, tattoos, particular hair styles, specific colors, and the use of specialized graffiti. The works of Weisheit and Wells, (1996), Scott (2000), National School Safety and Security Services (n.d.), and Sandoval (n.d.), as well as the Lawton Police Gang Unit (n.d.), BJA, (1997), SDFS, (1999) and a host of other researchers and agencies, reinforced the assertions of the IIR. In addition, bandanas, manners in which clothing is worn and body piercings are also commonly used as gang indicators (Scott, 2000; SAPD Youth Crime Service Unit, n.d.). Other visual indicators include, but are not limited to, tattoos, hand signs, and particular name brands of clothing (BJA, 1997; Howell, 2010b; Laster, 2011; Lawton Police Gang Unit, n.d.; National School Safety and Security Services, n.d.; Sandoval, n.d.; Scott, 2000; SDFS, 1999; Washington State, 2010; Weisheit & Wells, 1996).

Criminal and Deviant Gang Activity

Weisheit and Wells (1996) suggested that many youth gangs are abandoning or limiting the use of traditional visual indicators as a result of increased public and law enforcement awareness. This trend is resulting in researchers and law enforcement personnel scrutinizing the activities of individuals in conjunction with observed visual indicators in order to identify gangs and gang members (Howell, 2010b; Klein & Maxson, 2006; OAGF, 2009). The specific activities some youth choose to engage in may serve as indicators of youth gang affiliation (BJA, 1997; Howell, 2010b; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Lawton Police Gang Unit, n.d.; National School Safety and Security Services, n.d.; OAGF, 2009; Sandoval, n.d.; Scott, 2000; SDFS, 1999; Weisheit & Wells, 1996). Research indicates that criminal activities such as violent acts, drug sales, and vandalism are often attributed to youth gangs (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Howell, 2010b; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Laster, 2011; Scott, 2000; Swahn et al., 2010). Weisheit & Wells expanded upon this notion, stating that other criminal activities ranging from theft to homicide may be associated with gangs. Many gangs are also territorial in nature, resulting in confrontations with other gangs, law enforcement, and community members who are perceived as being invasive (BJA, 1997; Lawton Police Gang Unit, n.d.; National School Safety and Security Services, n.d.; Sandoval, n.d.; Scott, 2000; SDFS, 1999; Weisheit & Wells, 1996).

Individual Behaviors

Just as not all criminal activities are gang related, not all gang activities are criminal in nature. According to Klein (2005), traditional characteristics such as age, clothing styles, ethnicity, and specialized names serve as gang descriptors as opposed to

definitive proof of gang involvement. Bjerregaard (2003) and Klein asserted that in order to accurately identify and target youth gang members, behavior and other factors must be considered in conjunction with common identifiers of gang involvement in order to avoid an overemphasis being placed upon the indicators alone. As a result, the NCPC (2006), Sandoval (n.d.), National School Safety and Security Services (n.d.), and the Lawton Police Gang Unit (n.d.) contended that researchers must also focus on the specific behavior of individuals as indicators of gang affiliation. The Department of Justice (2006) and the Washington State School Safety Center (2010) concured, insisting that traditional characteristics of gang affiliation are often accompanied by other personal factors such as decreased academic performance, shifts in behaviors or attitudes, new peer groups, and misbehavior at home.

Sandoval (n.d.) identified truancy from school, withdrawal from family members, and glamorization of gang lifestyle as possible indicators of youth gang involvement. The NCPC (2006) noted the significance of shifting views towards family, school, and authority figures. The development of a sudden desire for privacy (SAPD Youth Crime Service Unit, n.d.; Washington State, 2010), as well as a rapid increase in terms of money and possessions (NCPC, 2006) may also signify gang involvement. While the exhibition of a single one of the aforementioned behaviors, activities, or visual indicators does not necessarily indicate gang involvement (Sandoval, n.d.), the simultaneous presence of several characteristics is indicative of a possible gang association (Lawton Police Gang Unit, n.d.).

Impacts of Gangs in Schools

Few schools are exempt from the dynamics and behaviors affiliated with youth

gangs (CMHS, 2007). Schools serve as one of the most common socialization agents for America's youth (Esbensen, 2000; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Scott, 2000). Schools are "the main secular institution[s] aside from the family involved with the socialization of the young" (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001, p. 9). Youth gang development and participation in public schools is, therefore, a social phenomenon that is aided by the presence of risk factors within communities and schools (CMHS, 2007; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001). Lal (1996) noted the manners in which many community agencies such as law enforcement actively gather and maintain data related to youth gangs, whereas schools are reluctant to do so. Gathering data is essential to identifying and combating the negative influences of gangs (Chaskin, 2010; Cooper, 2009; Swahn et al., 2010; Washington State, 2010). As within local communities, the impacts of gangs are schools are discernible in a variety of forms, including delinquent and non-delinquent acts (Chaskin, 2010; Cooper, 2009; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Fisher et al., 2008; Goldson, 2011; Howell, 2010b; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Laster, 2011; NCES, 2010; Swahn et al., 2010; Washington State, 2010) .

Delinquent acts. Delinquency by youth gangs is believed to be a result of criminal opportunity (Lasley, 1998), and the nature of many public schools supply gang members with such opportunity. Research indicates that in communities with established youth gangs, public schools endure considerable amounts of delinquent occurrences as a direct result of the presence and activities of gangs (Chandler et al., 1998; Chaskin, 2010; Howell, 2006; NCES 2010; OJJDP, 2009a). Howell and Lynch (2000) proclaimed the existence of youth gangs in schools significantly increases student victimization rates. Howell (2006) declared that "the presence of gangs more than doubles the likelihood of

violent victimization at school" (p. 5). Laub and Lauritsen (1998), Knox (2006), and Lassiter and Perry (2009) asserted that youth gangs intensify the overall levels of violence in schools. Youth gangs significantly increase the likelihood of bullying, vandalism, and intergroup conflicts within schools (CMHS, 2007). The FSDS (1999) denoted increased occurrences of extortion, violence, vandalism, and threats in schools containing identified youth gangs. Research conducted by Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) revealed that students report greater probabilities of fighting, theft, verbal confrontations, and intimidation when youth gangs are present. Gottfredson and Gottfredson's work also indicated that rates of sexual assaults in schools escalate with the presence of youth gangs. Various studies also divulge a strong correlation between the presence of youth gangs and the availability of weapons and drugs at school (BJS, 2008; CMHS, 2007; Howell, 2006; Howell, 2010b; Knox, 2006; NCES, 2002; OJJDP, 2009b).

Non-delinquent acts. Concern related to the delinquent acts of gangs in schools has been paralleled by concern for their non-delinquent acts. Youth gangs "represent barriers to learning and teaching and result in students who disengage from learning at school and who do not achieve academically" (CMHS, 2007, preface). Numerous studies correlate gang membership with diminished academic performance, increased truancy, low commitment to school, and diminished academic aspirations (Arciaga et al., 2010; Chaskin, 2010; Hill et al., 1999; Howell, 2003; Lahey et al., 1999; LeBlanc & Lanctot, 1998; NCES, 2010; Thornberry et al., 2003; Washington State, 2010; Wyrick & Howell, 2004). Lal (1991) reported that for many gang members, schools serve as social arenas that are utilized for recruitment, intimidation, and boasting. Howell and Lynch (2000), as well as Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001), concurred, adding the notion of gang

presence creating an atmosphere of apprehension and incompliance that negatively impacts classroom order and educational outcomes for non-gang youth. Futrell and Powell (1996) declared that in such settings, “teachers are less apt to teach at their full potential, class assignments are less creative and challenging, and the ethos in the school is less motivating” (p. 10).

Leadership Accountability

Research indicates that the presence and activity of youth gangs in schools directly correlates with academic disruptions, episodes of violence, and general delinquency (Arciaga et al., 2010; Franzese et al., 2006; Garza, 1993; Knox, 2006; NCES, 2010). Melita (1990), Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) and Lal, Lal, and Achilles (1993) noted the reluctance of educators and administrators in relation to the acknowledgement of the presences and implications of gangs in schools. Knox (2006) insisted that while gang disturbances in public schools are common occurrences, denial rates among public schools is especially high. Studies conducted by Gottfredson and Gottfredson revealed that the number and percentage of educators and administrators acknowledging the presences of gangs in their respective schools is considerably lower than reports within their communities. While a total of 36% of all educators and administrators report gang problems within their communities, only 5.4 % report gang problems within their respective schools (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001). Research conducted by Escobedo (1993) and Presley (1996) partially attributed such reluctance to the inability of educators and administrators to readily recognize key indicators and risk factors associated with youth gangs. Smith (2011) concurred, insisting that teachers, administrators, and school staff generally lack adequate gang prevention, intervention,

and suppression training. Research suggests that considerable discrepancies exist in terms gang perceptions among students, educators, administrators, and law enforcement personnel (Arciaga et al., 2010; Duncan, 1995; Escobedo, 1993; Knox, 2006; Lee, 1995; Melita, 1990; Presley, 1996; Rathrock, 1993). Students and law enforcement personnel are far more likely to acknowledge the presences of gangs in schools as compared to teachers and administrators (Knox, 2006; NCES, 2010; Smith, 2011). Students are more likely to view the presence of gangs in schools as being more problematic and posing greater threats to overall levels of safety as compared to teachers and administrators (Duncan, 1995; Escobedo, 1993; Knox, 2006; Lee, 1995; NCES, 2010; Rathrock, 1993; Smith, 2011).

The U. S. Department of Justice (2006) avowed that gang activity and violence poses a direct threat to the safety and security of the American public. As leaders of public schools, educators and administrators are charged with the task of protecting students from detrimental acts, both delinquent and non-delinquent, posed by youth gangs within schools (Essex, 2007; LaMorte, 2005). Within the past decade, numerous state and federal administrations have enacted legislation in order to strengthen the abilities of schools and administrators to respond to the detrimental consequences of youth gangs (Cheng, 2003; Decker, 2008). Federal legislation under No Child Left Behind (2001) directed each state to provide students and staff with safe and functioning learning environments. Upwards of 70% of all states have enacted measures to deter and counter gangs (IIR, 2007); however, research indicates that approximately 84% of schools in the U. S. do not provide or require mandatory gang awareness training (Knox, 2006). Cheng (2003) contends that compliance with state and federal mandates requires

educators and administrators to be attuned with the views and knowledge of pertinent elected officials, as well as remaining knowledgeable of local, state, and federal laws regarding youth gangs and education.

Lal (1996) argued that maintaining a safe and secure school environment necessitates the use of specified tactics designed to purposely target the root causes and byproducts of gangs in schools. The FSDS (1999), as well as the OJJDP (2007), established a list of priorities that schools and individual educators and administrators, as well as other community agencies, may follow to counteract the presences of gangs in schools. Administrators and other school personnel must develop and adhere to codes of conduct that designates specified guidelines and consequences for gang activity on campus (Arciaga et al., 2010; FSDS, 1999; Huff, 2002; OJJDP, 2007). The first step in developing effect codes of conduct pertaining to youth gangs is to acknowledge the presences of gangs (FSDS, 1999; OJJDP, 2007; Spergel, 1995; Spergel & Curry, 1993). The applications of rules and regulations must be fair and consistent (FSDS, 1999), and they must facilitate open communication and positive relationships among school personnel, students, parents, and community agencies (Esbensen, 2000; FSDS, 1999; NCPC, 2006; OJJDP, 1994). Educators and administrators must foster a cooperative and nurturing school climate that promotes academic success and the development of social skills (Esbensen, 2000; FSDS, 1999). Schools must also undergo routine formal gang assessments carried out by trained task forces in order to better identify and understand the types and extents of gang activities present on campus (Arciaga et al., 2010; Esbensen, 2000; FSDS, 1999; Lal 1996; NCPC, 2006; OJJDP, 2007; Smith, 2011).

Educators and administrators must also institute environmental changes within schools in order to establish or reestablish a sense of control over gang influences. Among the most commonly employed changes to school environments are dress code policies, random searches, increased school security personnel, and metal detectors (FSDS, 1999). Cheng (2003) contended dress codes are the most commonly utilized methods; for visible expressions of gang culture, such as dress styles, have been determined to distinguish members of rival gangs within schools, thereby threatening school safety (Huff, 2002). The FSDS (1999) concluded that educators and administrators must encourage effective school programming that employs research-based strategies, realistic objectives, and ongoing evaluation. Most notably, however, the FSDS (1999), the OJJDP (2007), and Esbensen (2000), as well as a host of other researchers and agencies, attested that gang-affiliated youth must be held accountable for their actions, and educators and administrators must be afforded opportunities for sufficient gang-related training exercises (Mayer & Furlong, 2010; Sharkey et al., 2010; Smith, 2011; Swahn et al., 2010).

Professional Development and Teacher Training

Professional development. Avillion (2004) identified professional development as a process of educating and training employees within an organizational setting. Murphy (2004) and Porter (2008) maintained that fundamental components of school structures should include the training of "school professionals who work on the forefront of the educational organization" (Porter, 2008, p. 86). Research indicates that effective professional development activities yield potential gains in the teaching and learning capabilities of educators and administrators (Gordon, 2004). Professional development is

vital to enabling educators and administrators to advance their professional skills while developing enhanced senses of empowerment (Short & Greer, 2002). Effectual professional development within the field of education must employ collaborative measures that include input from and consideration of all educational stakeholders (Gordon, 2004). A collaborative approach to professional development is necessary for educators and administrators to adequately meet the needs of diverse student bodies, for such an approach better enables educators and administrators to gain insight into the current state of education (Avillion, 2004).

Teacher training. Administrators report that the employment and advancement of school safety measures should serve as a driving force behind professional development opportunities for teachers (Wood & Huffman, 1999). Lal (1996), Smith (2011), and Crews and Crews (2008) noted the manners in which teacher preparatory programs do not adequately equip teachers and administrators to address episodes of violence in schools. They contend that an unintended consequence of such an absence of training is the inability of educators and administrators to identify and address youth gang activities within public schools. The OJJDP (1994) insisted that "special opportunities should be provided to school administrators, teachers, and staff to increase their knowledge of gangs and community resources in regard to the problem" (p. 19). Gang-related training must address the impacts of gang activities, gang signs, and strategies designed to counteract gang influences (Arciaga et al., 2010; OJJDP, 1994b; Smith, 2011). The Florida Safe and Drug-Free School Project (1999) largely echoed the OJJDP in the sense that it suggests examining reasons for joining gangs, gang recognition

strategies, gang avoidance tactics, and violence response measures as essential training components all school personnel should experience during in-service training.

In-service training is necessary for educators and administrators, for research indicates that the most effective staff development programs primarily employ site-based activities (Guskey, 2003). Youth gang occurrences and activities are localized by nature (Reed & Decker, 2002); thus, training needs must be determined at an institutional level (Scott, 2000; Smith, 2011). Combating youth gangs requires specific knowledge and qualifications that must be obtained and enhanced through firsthand exposure and exercises (Arciaga, 2007). Teacher training exercises must be inclusive of youth gang activities, indicators, and risk factors (Wood & Huffman, 1999), for educators and administrators must be capable of identifying gang activity and enacting appropriate measures at the earliest possible phases in order to diminish the potential impacts of youth gangs in schools (Huff, 2002).

Gaps in Literature

Research pertaining to youth gangs spans more than 100 years in the United States (Curry & Decker, 2003; Esbensen & Weerman, 2005; Kinnear, 2009; Miller, 2001; Sullivan, 2005; Thibault et al., 2009); yet, considerable discrepancies still exist concerning the features and scopes of youth gangs (Esbensen, 2000). Klein (2005) notes that cumulative youth gang research is currently lacking due to discrepancies caused by the localized natures of youth gangs. Klein and Maxson (2006) noted frequent complications researchers experience when comparing gang-related studies due to varying definitions, procedures, and sample types. The majority of contemporary gang-related information centers on aspects of criminology (Klein & Maxson, 2006). The

resulting trend in youth gang research includes an underlying lack of knowledge pertaining to “comprehensive, broad-based interventions involving several agencies” (Decker, 2002, p. 19) such as school and community organizations.

Adequate research is currently lacking in terms of examining recognized risk factors of youth gang membership (Hill et al., 1999; Thornberry et al., 2003). Pertinent research and literature currently neglects a thorough examination of individual youth gang risk factors and the extents to which each contribute to gang membership (Hill et al., 1999; Sharpe, 2003; Thornberry et al., 2003). Individual, familial, and peer domains generally serve as the primary categories of risk factors examined in most gang studies (Klein & Maxson, 2006). This is resulting in a void of sufficient literature and research pertaining to community and school domains, especially the school domain (Sharkey et al., 2011). Mainstream gang research also fails to sufficiently expound upon developmental aspects of youth in relation to identified risk factors of gang membership (Craig et al., 2002). Klein and Maxson (2006) contended that empirical studies have neglected the degrees of disparity between youth gang risk factors in relation to the ages of gang participants.

Contemporary research pertaining to the indicators of youth gang membership and activities is largely anecdotal (Decker, 2002), and the data collection periods for many reported gang studies are yielding considerable gaps in current literature. Future research must thoroughly examine aspects of “the importation and exportation of gang symbols, structure, culture, and behavior” (Decker, 2002, p. 19). This is especially applicable to school personnel.”Gang indicators used by students should be researched further to develop empirical indicators of gangs in schools that school officials and others

could use in developing communitywide anti-gang programs and strategies" (Howell & Lynch, 2000, p. 6). Research by Smith (2011) indicated that educators and administrators commonly lack formalized gang training, and "schools should objectively analyze the need for a gang policy" (p. 19). The 1980s and 1990s marked a surge in youth gang research due to rising epidemics of gang enrollment and activities (Hughes, 2005; Hughes & Short, 2005; Reisman, 2006; Sharpe, 2005; Sullivan, 2005). As youth gang membership declined in the latter portions of the 1990s (Egley & O'Donnell, 2009; NGIC, 2009; Howell, 2006; Miller, 2001), so too did many youth gang research initiatives (Hughes, 2005; Hughes & Short, 2005; Reisman, 2006; Sharpe, 2005; Sullivan, 2005). The decline of youth gangs and their associated troubles, however, was short-lived, as gang enrollment and proliferation began escalating once again in 2001 (Egley & O'Donnell, 2007; NGIC, 2009). Consequently, youth gang research and literature must be updated in order to adequately reflect contemporary trends related to youth gang risk factors and indicators.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Overview

The implications of youth gang activity within the nation's secondary schools warrant the attention of educators and administrators. Studies indicate that the core age for gang recruitment is approximately 14 years of age, whereas the most active and violent gang members are generally in their upper teens (Watkins & Ashby, 2006). A review of pertinent literature suggested that the majority of school-based gang intervention and prevention strategies target elementary and middle school youth (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Smith, 2011). Many secondary educators and administrators lack the formal training and essential skills necessary to identify and counteract the potentially negative consequences of youth gang activity within schools (Shoemaker, 2008). Gang culture and activities vary by region and among particular gangs (Gang Reduction through Intervention, Prevention, & Education (GRIPE), n. d.). The lack of formal research and training pertaining to youth gang activity within secondary schools substantiates further investigation.

In a descriptive quantitative study conducted in a suburban northeast Georgia school system, Porter (2008) examined the capabilities elementary and middle school educators and administrators (N = 188) had in terms of recognizing key indicators and risk factors associated with youth gang involvement. Given the locally-based nature of gang culture (GRIPE, n.d.) and the present lack of a comprehensive youth gang study in the school district employed within Porter's (2008) study, this study was conducted in the same suburban northeast Georgia school system utilized within Porter's study. Paired

with the findings of Porter, this study provided the school system employed within the study with a comprehensive overview of educator and administrator abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors. A phenomenological qualitative design was utilized in order to explore secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors in a suburban northeast Georgia school district. A series of 28 individual face-to-face interviews and follow-up interviews were employed as the primary data collection instrument in the study of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to recognize key indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to further understand the phenomenon, secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors, as experienced by educators and administrators in a suburban northeast Georgia school district. The study utilized a convenience sample consisting of educators and administrators employed within seven public secondary schools, each of which house grades 9 through 12, located within the same suburban northeast Georgia school system. A phenomenological qualitative design was most appropriate for this study, for the non-intervention methodology of a phenomenological model enabled the researcher to observe characteristics of the population being studied from the perspectives of the research participants (Creswell, 2005; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). According to Creswell (2005), as well as Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2010), qualitative research consists of contextualization, interpretation, and understanding of individual perspectives. This naturalistic and inductive approach to

research was essential in the exploration of the phenomenon of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors.

The risk factors and indicators employed within the study were based upon a dual, five-tier inventory derived from a review of pertinent literature. Research suggests that both gang indicators and risk factors are commonly categorized into five distinctive groupings (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Hill et al., 1999; Howell, 1997; IIR, 2006; Maxson et al., 1998; Thornberry et al. 2003; Whitlock; 2004). Common indicators are generally classified as graffiti, dress style, identifiers, communication, and turf; whereas risk factors entail individual, family, community, peer, and school domains (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Hill et al., 1999; Howell, 1997; IIR, 2006; Maxson et al., 1998; Thornberry et al. 2003; Whitlock; 2004). Utilizing a phenomenological qualitative design, this study explored, interpreted, and described the phenomenon (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Creswell, 2007) of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors as dictated by their unique experiences and training. Since this study approached the topic from the perspective of those educators and administrators who had personally experienced the phenomenon, a phenomenological qualitative design was most appropriate for this study (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Creswell, 2005; Creswell, 2007; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010).

Research Questions

This interpretive phenomenological research study sought to answer key questions pertaining to the phenomenon of secondary educator and administrator

perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors in a suburban northeast Georgia school district. This study was primarily concerned with the shared experiences and perceptions as expressed by various administrators, veteran educators, and non-veteran educators employed within the same school district. For the purpose of this study, research was guided by the following qualitative research questions:

RQ1: What are the perceptions that secondary educators and administrators have regarding their abilities to identify key indicators of youth gang activity in a suburban northeast Georgia school system?

RQ2: What are the perceptions that secondary educators and administrators have regarding their abilities to identify fundamental risk factors associated with youth gang activity in a suburban northeast Georgia school system?

RQ3: How do educators and administrators perceive their pre-service training and professional development exercises in regard to their abilities to identify indicators and risk factors associated with youth gang activity in a suburban northeast Georgia school system?

RQ4: Based upon personal experiences and observations, what primary indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity do educators and administrators employed within a suburban northeast Georgia school system view as being most influential within their respective schools?

Research Design

Qualitative research designs enable researchers to explore the significance and meaning individuals attribute to social circumstances and problems (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Qualitative research designs necessitate an objective to explore a precise topic, collection of data by means of interviews and observations, and the generation of hypotheses via inductive reasoning (Creswell, 2007; Greenhalgh & Taylor, 1997). Qualitative research methodologies may consist of ethnographical studies, grounded theories, content analysis, and phenomenological research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Key, 1997). Qualitative methodologies emphasize the significance of investigating variables in their natural settings, as well as the interactions that transpire between variables (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Key, 1997; Moustakas, 1994; Vivilaki, 2008). An emphasis is placed on the merit of inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) as pertinent data is gathered by means of non-leading, open ended questions that yield personal meaning and can be transcribed to allow for direct quotation (Key, 1997). A qualitative research design was most suitable for this study, for such a design enhanced research efforts to explore the phenomenon of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to recognize youth gang indicators and risk factors in a manner necessary to unveil and better understand the shared experiences and corresponding meanings the participants associated with the phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Key, 1997; Moustakas, 1994; Vivilaki, 2008).

The qualitative phenomenological interview method that was employed in this study collected information from secondary educators and administrators in a suburban

northeast Georgia school system. A phenomenological approach was most appropriate, for the process enable the exploration and interpretation of the participants' personal views and experiences, as well as those shared among the participants (Moustakas, 1994; Vivilaki, 2008). Phenomenological research undertakes the task of interpreting phenomena in order to understand the subjective meanings participants' assign to circumstances and events (van Manen, 1997). For the purpose of this study, secondary educators and administrators took part in a phenomenological interview process in order to discover and explore their lived experiences and perceptions regarding their abilities to identify key indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity. The focus of data collection was teachers and administrators employed in seven high schools located in the same school district in northeast Georgia. Data was collected from 28 participants comprised of two administrators and two teachers from each of the seven schools. Data was gathered through a phenomenological interview process, which yielded subjective data because the life experiences of each educator and administrator were unique to the individuals (Vivilaki, 2008). For the purpose of this study, an interpretive phenomenological approach was utilized in the exploration of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors.

Philosophical underpinnings. In order to better understand the use of interpretive phenomenology as a method of inquiry and data analysis, a primary understanding of the philosophical contexts upon which the methodology was established was necessary. The origins of phenomenology was traced to the works of Edmund

Husserl, who argued that traditional approaches to research in the natural sciences could not be properly applied to human issues (Dreyfus, 1982; Giorgi, 2008; Husserl, 1910; Laverty, 2003). The foundational component of Husserl's approach to phenomenology was the composition of human consciousness (Dreyfus, 1982; Giorgi, 2008; Husserl, 1910; Laverty, 2003). According to Husserl (1910), human experiences and the perceptions of such experiences were the fundamental structures of consciousness. Consequently, he developed phenomenology as a form of research in order to allow for the consideration of human experience and perception in order to understand human consciousness in its entirety (Dreyfus, 1982; Giorgi, 2008). Husserl believed that the study of human consciousness mandated the use of bracketing, through which personal judgments pertaining to the natural world were suspended, allowing for "the analysis and description of the content of consciousness" (Korab-Karpowicz, 2009,¶ 5). Consequently, Husserl's view of phenomenology was a descriptive analysis of consciousness (Korab-Karpowicz, 2009).

Captivated by the early works of Husserl, Martin Heidegger studied and reinterpreted Husserl's definition and purpose of phenomenology (Korab-Karpowicz, 2009). Heidegger (1927) first expressed his views towards phenomenology in his text titled *Being and Time*. In this text, he described his views of phenomenology as they relate to existential ontology. Heidegger's approach to phenomenology emphasized a "philosophical understanding of a person's position within time and place" (Conroy, 2003, p. 38). Unlike Husserl, Heidegger believed that a theoretical understanding of consciousness could only be obtained by an exploration of how people exist and

encounter phenomena, thus emphasizing great value on personal observations and judgments (Korab-Karpowicz, 2009). Heidegger maintained that personal meanings were interpreted and assigned based upon the examination of contextual relations with the real-world circumstances (Smith, 2009). Consequently, Heidegger asserted that phenomenology was not a descriptive analysis of consciousness; rather, he asserted that phenomenology is interpretive, for personal life experiences and subsequent meanings can only be analyzed in the context of the totality of past present and future experiences (Adolfsson, 2010; Conroy, 2003). He viewed all elements of an experience as being equally important in interpretation of meaning. Heidegger's work gave rise to the hermeneutical approach to phenomenology, in which structures of experience are studied and interpreted in order to understand and engage everyday occurrences (Adolfsson, 2010; Conroy, 2003; Korab-Karpowicz, 2009; Smith, 2009).

Rooted in the works of Heidegger, interpretive phenomenology is commonly viewed as a subset of hermeneutical phenomenology (Conroy, 2003). Conroy (2003) noted that "the design and pathways [of interpretive phenomenology] draw on Heidegger's philosophical understanding of a person's position within time and place" (p. 38). Interpretive phenomenology studies investigate how a phenomenon is perceived by an individual within a given context (Chan, Brykczynski, Malone, & Benner, 2010). As noted by Smith (2004), such approaches to research are designed to investigate subjective experiences from an individual perspective, for people often have differing experiences related to the same occurrence based upon the unique implications individuals attribute to the occurrence (Willig, 2001). According to Watson (2008), an interpretive

phenomenological approach to research elicits insight into personal meaning and understanding by means of an interactive research process based upon interpersonal engagement among the researcher, participants, and the phenomenon being studied. Smith (2004) noted that the manner in which the researcher engages with the subjects and the resulting data directly influences the interpretation of the participants' experiences. Consequently, researchers involved with interpretive phenomenological studies must disclose pre-existing assumptions and beliefs that may impact the interpretation of data (Watson, 2008).

Appropriateness of the Design

The research problem that was addressed in this phenomenological study was secondary educator and administrator inability to recognize fundamental indicators and risk factors of youth gang membership in a suburban northeast Georgia school district. The inability to do so is commonly attributed to a lack of formalized gang awareness training specifically designed for educational settings (Arciaga, Sakamoto, & Jones, 2010; Chaskin, 2010; OAGF, 2009). The school system examined in this study currently contained a minimum of 11 identified youth gangs that are present in local schools and communities (City of [...ville], 2011). NDIC (2008) projections suggested a strong likelihood of an escalation of youth gang episodes in the given area in the near future (NDIC, 2008). Consequently, this phenomenological research study employed face-to-face interviews in order to explore secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify key indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity within educational settings. A phenomenological approach will be most appropriate, for it

enabled the identification and exploration of common themes, experiences, perceptions, and behaviors related to the participants' interactions with youth gang risk factors and indicators within educational settings (van Manen, 1997). Phenomenological approaches consisting of face-to-face interviews allowed for the ascertainment of the educational and subjective lived experiences of the individual participants, thereby unveiling common themes relevant to this study (Moustakas, 1994; Vivilaki, 2008).

Educational research typically consists of two primary types of research methodology: quantitative and qualitative (Creswell, 2005; Creswell, 2008; Johnson & Christensen, 2000). Quantitative methodologies are most appropriate when a researcher has determined what problem to study, and resulting research questions may be explored and answered through the gathering of quantifiable data and statistical analysis (Creswell, 2005; Creswell, 2008; Johnson & Christensen, 2000). According to Atieno (2009), qualitative methodologies are most appropriate when a researcher seeks to explore and confirm relevant theories by means of inductive or deductive reasoning and processes. Hanley-Maxwell (2007) maintained that such processes enable researchers to interpret data and expose resulting patterns and themes related to the phenomenon being studied. Qualitative methodologies mandate the use of general questioning techniques in order to explore the views of participants, and the data collection techniques of such methodologies entail the use of text or other written formats since the data cannot be expressed in quantifiable measures (Atieno, 2009; Creswell, 2008; Hanley-Maxwell, 2007). Creswell (2008) maintained that qualitative approaches are most effective when exploring research issues that do not warrant specific variables or in situations in which

the researcher is incapable of identifying research variables, thereby, mandating a more thorough exploration of the research phenomenon.

A qualitative approach was most appropriate for this research study, for an examination of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors mandated the use of discovery-based tactics related to the phenomenon due to the lack of specific variables (Creswell, 2008). More specifically, a phenomenological qualitative research methodology enabled the exploration of the phenomenon by means of face-to-face interviews, thereby reflecting the unique perspectives and lived experiences of each participant as framed by the environments, experiences, and cultures of the individual (Hanley-Maxwell, 2007). The experiences of participants are essential components of the phenomenological process (Strawser, 2009). Phenomenological research designs enable researchers to explore and further understand the common lived experiences of research participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lee, 2009). A phenomenological approach entails the interpretation of data or narrative responses as expressed by participants when describing their unique lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lee, 2009; Strawser, 2009). According to Vivilaki (2008), such an approach may yield common themes that allows for the interpretation of the phenomenon.

Research Site

The population sampled from a suburban northeast Georgia school system consisted exclusively of secondary educators and administrators. The school system examined in this study was made up of 33 institutions, including 20 elementary schools,

six middle schools, six secondary schools, and one secondary charter career academy ([omitted] County School System, 2011). During the 2010-2011 academic year, the system employed 1,742 certified employees (The Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2010), whereas the student enrollment totaled 25,845 ([omitted] County School System, 2010). Of the 33 schools, 28 satisfied federal and state requirements outlined under Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards during the 2009-2010 academic year ([omitted] County School System, 2010). Data for the 2010-2011 academic year was not available at the time of this study. In order to satisfy AYP mandates, individual schools and school systems must obtain at least 95% in each of the following categories: participation, academic performance, and second indicator (Georgia Department of Education, 2009). All of the secondary schools sufficiently met AYP standards, with the exception of the career charter academy, during the 2009-2010 academic year. The career charter academy school had too few students to be included in AYP measures ([omitted] County School System, 2010). As a whole, the school system being examined sufficiently met AYP standards for the 2009-2010 academic year (Georgia Department of Education, 2009).

According to The Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2010), the school system contained 59 employees with doctorate degrees, 586 with specialist's degrees, 862 with master's degrees, and 581 with bachelor's degrees. These figures included teachers, administrators, and support staff. The average administrative salary during the 2009-2010 school year was $83,730.20; whereas, the average teacher salary was $62,254.07 (The Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2010). Such data for the

2010-2011 academic year was unavailable. For the 2009-2010 fiscal year, the school system operated on a general budget of $197,917,127 as determined by a millage rate of 16.42% ([omitted] County School System, 2010). System data indicated that the overall percentage of students classified as economically disadvantaged, as identified by free and reduced lunch rates, totaled 57% ([omitted] County School System, 2010). Students classified as English Language Learners comprised 21.9% of the system's student body ([omitted] County School System, 2010).

The study sample was drawn from seven public secondary schools located within the same school system. The participants consisted of educators and administrators employed within seven secondary schools selected based upon their locations. The initial interviews and the follow-up processes occurred at times and locations of the participant's choosing. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from school system officials, as well as the administrators at each of the schools. Verbal permission was sought from the administrators in case the participants chose to conduct the initial or follow-up interviews on a school campus.

Population

The participants for the study consisted of a convenience sample of secondary educators and administrators employed within a suburban northeast Georgia school system. The study was thereby limited to the specific number of teachers and administrators employed within the school district at the time the interviews were conducted. Interviews were conducted with two administrators and two teachers, one veteran teacher and one non-veteran teacher, employed within seven public high schools

within the given district. For the purpose of this study, a veteran educator or administrator was defined as one who had served in a teaching and/or administrative capacity for seven or more years. A non-veteran educator or administrator, therefore, was defined as one with less than seven years of teaching and/or administrative experience. Utilizing a sample size of 28 total participants comprised of 14 educators and 14 administrators (see Table 5) employed within seven secondary institutions located within the same school district elicited shared life experiences that yielded pertinent insight into common themes (Moustakas, 1994; Vivilaki, 2008), behaviors, and educator and administrator discernment of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors. By employing a sample size greater than 10 participants, which is often considered to be the minimal sample size for a phenomenological study, the likelihood for discovery of answers pertaining to the research questions was enhanced (Pernecky, 2006).

Table 5:

Participant Positions and Experience

Participant	Professional Position	Years of Experience
P1	Administrator	15
P2	Administrator	20
P3	Veteran Educator	28
P4	Nonveteran Educator	6
P5	Administrator	15
P6	Administrator	27
P7	Nonveteran Educator	2
P8	Administrator	19
P9	Administrator	30
P10	Veteran Educator	27
P11	Veteran Educator	9
P12	Administrator	24
P13	Veteran Educator	14
P14	Nonveteran Educator	3
P15	Administrator	24
P16	Administrator	26
P17	Administrator	19
P18	Nonveteran Educator	4
P19	Nonveteran Educator	6

Participant Positions and Experience continued

P20	Administrator	22
P21	Nonveteran Educator	5
P22	Veteran Educator	16
P23	Administrator	27
P24	Administrator	19
P25	Veteran Educator	11
P26	Administrator	20
P27	Nonveteran Educator	3
P28	Veteran Educator	27

Note. Years of experiences reflect the total number of years employed within the field of public education.

The interviews commenced upon obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission to conduct the study and receiving permission from the school system to conduct the study utilizing its facilities and personnel. Upon receiving permission from the school system, initial contact with the schools was made via the administration at the individual schools. Once permission had been obtained from each of the principals, two administrators were interviewed at each of the schools. Employing a technique Groenwald (2004) described as "snowballing," access to the veteran and non-veteran teacher at each school was enriched. Snowballing is a recognized "method of expanding the sample by asking one informant or participant to recommend others for interviewing" (Groenwald, 2004, p. 9). Utilizing a snowballing approach resulted in easier

identification of and access to potential research participants. Based upon the descriptive nature of phenomenological qualitative studies that occur in natural settings (Creswell, 2005; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010; Johnson & Christensen, 2000; Leedy & Ormrod, 2004), the results of this study were generalized to the educators and administrators throughout the school system.

Sampling

According to Neuman (2006), qualitative research methodologies seldom allow for a representative sample to be drawn from among a diverse amount of cases. Consequently, qualitative studies often entail nonprobability sampling, thereby enabling the researcher to circumvent the precise definition of a sample size (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Neuman, 2006). Nonprobability sampling was appropriate for this interpretive phenomenological study, for the precise number of participant interviews was based upon the information that was gathered (Pernecky, 2006). Pernecky (2006) maintained that an adequate phenomenological interview process should include at least 10 participants, but the process should not conclude until themes related to the phenomenon are revealed. A total of 28 interviews were conducted in the examination of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify key indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity in a northeast Georgia school district. For the purpose of this study, three forms of nonprobability sampling were employed: snowballing, purposive, and sequential (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Neuman, 2006).

Purposive samples are subsets of larger populations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Neuman, 2006). Purposive of samples are generally constructed when a researcher seeks

to examine a precise phenomenon (Neuman, 2006), yet identifying and gaining access to the study population may be extremely difficult (University of California, n.d.). In many qualitative studies, specifying the exact population to be studied may not be possible due to variables unknown by or unavailable to the researcher (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Neuman, 2006, Pernecky, 2006). Purposive sampling enables a researcher study the target group by means of interviewing those participants that are available and willing to take part in the study (Neuman, 2006; University of California, n.d.). For the purpose of this study, purposive sampling was appropriate, for samples were drawn from among 1,742 certified employees, 502 of which served at the secondary level, employed within the school district utilized in this study (The Governor's Office of Student Achievement, 2010). List (2004) identified maximum variation sampling as a subset of purposive sampling. According to List, maximum variation sampling is especially useful in studies containing a sample size of less than 30 participants. With a sample size of 28 participants, maximum variation sampling was employed in order to utilize a larger selection of participants so that aggregate responses better reflected the study population (List, 2004).

A sampling technique Groenwald (2004) described as "snowballing" was utilized in order to obtain access to a veteran and non-veteran teacher at each of the seven schools employed within this study. According to the University of California (n.d.), snowballing is a subset of purposive sampling. Snowballing is a recognized "method of expanding the sample by asking one informant or participant to recommend others for interviewing" (Groenwald, 2004, p. 9). Utilizing a snowballing approach resulted in easier

identification of and access to potential research participants. The individual principals from each school were asked to recommend a minimum of two veteran and two non-veteran teachers employed within their respective schools to take part in the study. Likewise, each principal was asked to recommend a minimum of two administrators to take part in the study. This process improved access potential participants, especially in instances where individuals chose to refrain from taking part in the study.

As with purposive sampling, sequential sampling is also commonly utilized in exploratory studies (Neuman, 2006). While both purposive and sequential sampling enable researchers to gather data based upon the purpose of the study from as many applicable sources as possible, sequential sampling adds a distinct characteristic to sampling processes (Neuman, 2006). Unlike purposive sampling, sequential sampling enables researchers to conclude participant interviews or the data collection process once data saturation has transpired (Neuman, 2006). Data saturation occurs "as new categories, themes[,] or explanations stop emerging from the data" (Marshall, 1996). Sequential sampling was appropriate for this study based upon purposive nature in which the participants will be selected. The phenomenological interview process concluded as data saturation emerges. As estimated, no more than 28 interviews, consisting of 14 administrator interviews and 14 educator interviews, were needed in order to attain data saturation

Aaker, Kumar, and Day (2007) maintained that while sample framing can be used to adequately represent a large population, it may also reveal biases on behalf of the researcher. In order to control for researcher bias within this phenomenological study,

participant selection was conducted at random. While snowballing was used in order to gain better access to participants, the participants selected to take part in the study were randomly chosen. Participant selection for the phenomenological interview process also contained specified requisites that all participants taking part in the study had to meet. All participants were required to possess valid licensure for teaching or leadership at the secondary level within the state of Georgia. Likewise, participation in the study mandated that all subjects be serving in the capacity of a secondary educator or administrator employed within a specific northeast Georgia school district at the time of the study. Participation in this phenomenological qualitative study was strictly voluntary, and all participants were asked to take part in two face-to-face interview sessions, as well as to read and make comments about written transcriptions of the interview process. Including such requisites within the study enhanced efforts to screen potential study participants. Aaker et al. maintained that screening enables researchers to investigate a vast number of people in search of those possessing specific traits or features. Screening may provide researchers with a cost-effective manner of identifying potential study participants (Aaker et al., 2007).

Informed Consent

Permission was sought from the school system selected for this study prior to the data collection process (see Appendix E). System officials were provided with a written consent form that explained the purpose, general nature, potential risks, and potential benefits of the study (see Appendix F). Once school system permission to conduct the study had been granted, communication commenced with the principals within each of

the seven schools employed within this study. The nature of the study was described along with the school system's approval of the study. Out of respect for the autonomy of each principal and individual school, verbal permission to conduct the study within the respective schools was sought from each of the applicable administrators.

Prior to conducting any individual interviews, all participants were provided with two copies of an informed consent document. The consent form outlined the purpose, general nature, perceived risks, and potential benefits of the study. The forms were verbally read to each participant, and participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and all results would remain confidential. Participants were asked to indicate that they had read and understood the consent form and that permission was granted for their responses to be used for data collection purposes. Each participant was required to sign a consent form prior to taking part in the phenomenological interview process. One copy of the signed informed consent document was collected for documentation purposes, whereas the other copy was given to the individual participants for their personal records.

Minimal risks were anticipated with this study. As with any educational research study, individual privacy and confidentiality may have been compromised if a participant did not take appropriate measures to safeguard his or her responses. These risks were minimized by allowing individual participants to select the time and location for the initial and follow-up interview. Further efforts were taken to minimize risks by employing the school system email network, which required the entry of a user-specific username and password, to distribute the written transcriptions of participant interviews.

By utilizing the school system's e-mail network, participants were capable of reviewing their individual transcriptions at a time and location of their convenience, further enhancing the privacy of the individuals. Since no identifying characteristics were collected during the data collection phase of the research, any concerns pertaining to participants being personally identified and/or subjected to any form of perceived repercussion were minimized. When necessary, pseudonyms were used in place of participant or school names so the individual participants or schools were in no way identified. No physical, psychological, economic, social, or legal risks were anticipated with this study. The need for medical or psychological intervention was not anticipated with this study.

The research results were shared with the school district, individual schools, and other pertinent individuals upon request. All collected data was analyzed and reported in a manner that reflected the general perceptions of educators and administrators at a system-wide level in a suburban northeast Georgia school district. This phenomenological research study did not include the collection of participant names, nor was the names of individual schools indicated in survey responses, field notes, or subsequent reports. All collected data will remain in the possession of the researcher and stored in a secure location for a minimum of three years following the completion of the study. All data will be subsequently destroyed; all paper documents will be shredded, and all digital recordings will be erased. No protected, minor, or disabled classes were employed over the course of this study.

Instrumentation

Currid (2009) maintained that journals, storytelling, reflecting upon life experiences, and in-depth interviews may yield credible data in phenomenological research studies. For the purpose of this study, face-to-face interviews were used to discover the lived experiences of study participants. This phenomenological approach allowed for the exploration of the phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants and for the collection of more detailed data, thereby affording the opportunity to better understand the lived experiences of each individual (Moustakas, 1994; Vivilaki, 2008). This approach also allowed for the audio recording of each interview session, enabling the subsequent transcription of participant responses into Microsoft Word format. By employing face-to-face interviews within this phenomenological research study, an exploration of the phenomenon and the analysis of emergent themes were conducted in greater detail through the use of open-ended questions.

The use of open-ended questions during in-depth phenomenological interview sessions enabled participants to express greater insight pertaining to lived experiences and the overall study phenomenon (Dearnley, 2005). By developing and employing semi-structured interviews, study participants were capable of significantly contributing to the research study (Currid, 2009; Dearnley, 2005). The use of scripted open-ended questions and related prompts enabled participants to supply in-depth details concerning the phenomenon of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors. The use of such questions and prompts (see Appendix D) allowed the participants to supply the study with substantial amounts

of comprehensive details pertaining to the phenomenon to the point of exhausting their description of the phenomenon (Nueman, 2006). For the purpose of this study, semi-structured interviews were used in order to explore the lived experiences of each participant (Currid, 2009).

The interview protocol contained broad, open-ended questions and related prompts in order to explore secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify key indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity in a northeast Georgia school system. The instrument was designed so that it contained a general opening and a demographics section that potentially aided in alleviating participant stress related to the interview process, as well as reducing the quantity of tedious background information commonly collected by educational researchers (Neuman, 2006). As suggested by Neuman (2006), the interview questions were organized and categorized in order to reduce potential confusion and to enhance the participants' abilities to adequately respond to each question. The demographics portion entailed three primary questions designed to reveal basic information such as professional position and years of experience. Participant responses to these questions allowed for data grouping during the data analysis phase. The demographics portion was followed by 17 open-ended questions designed to explore the phenomenon of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify key indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed for an expiration of the participants' shared life experiences related to the phenomenon (Neuman, 2006). As suggested by Neuman (2006), the final question enabled the participants to conclude the interview process in a

relaxed and nonthreatening manner. The last question allowed the participants to make any comments or suggestions related to the interview process, as well as to comment on any pertinent issue not directly covered during the interview process.

The use of researcher-generated questions and prompts mandated the use of a pilot study in order to validate the research tool. In order to validate the research instrument, two focus group and pilot study sessions were employed. As noted by Duma (2009), a pilot study entails a general exploratory study and scrutinizing of the research instrument, as well as to serve as a pretest for the overall research process. A pilot study was used to reveal the practicality of adequately conducting an educational research study related to secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify key indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity in a northeast Georgia school system (Duma, 2009). Pilot study sessions entailed a focus group consisting of four individuals, of which two were active educators whereas the other two were active administrators. Participants in the focus group sessions were excluded from the primary research study.

The purpose of the initial focus group session was to review the original research instrument and to suggest potential modifications to the instrument and overall interview process. The group was charged with the task of reviewing the research instrument in order to ensure that the design examines the appropriate topic, was logically composed, and was clearly aligned with the stated research purpose and research questions (Freeman, 2006; Redmond, 2009). As noted by Merrill (2009), focus groups enhanced efforts to engage in dialogue with a group of content-knowledgeable individuals for the

purpose of fortifying the process of data collection. Selection criteria for focus group members consisted of current professional position, years of experience, and familiarity with the school system employed within the study. The purpose of the second focus group session was to review and provide feedback related to the changes to the research instruments resulting from the initial focus group session. Meticulous and methodical documentation of the phenomenological research process aided in the innate validation of the study by allowing for member checking, interviewer corroboration, auditability, confirmability, and bracketing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Collection

The qualitative research tools that were employed in this study included two focus groups, a series of 28 individual face-to-face interviews with participants, participant journals, participant surveys, and follow-up interviews with each participant. Data collection commenced following approval by the IRB at Liberty University and the appropriate school system officials. Informative data was extracted from surveys, journals, and in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 28 individuals consisting of 14 administrators and 14 teachers. The data was subsequently analyzed in order to explore the phenomenon of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors in a suburban northeast Georgia school district.

Focus groups. Two focus group sessions preceded the collection and analysis of data pertaining to secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors. The initial focus group served as a pilot

study to help validate the testing instruments (see Appendies E & F) that were employed in the process of data collection (Duma, 2009). Participants consisted of two secondary administrators and two secondary teachers that were excluded from the study. The participants were assembled at a time and location deemed appropriate and convenient by the group. The meeting entailed an explanation of the focus group process, obtaining informed consent of participants, and explaining the underlying objectives of the session. The primary objective of the initial focus group was to ensure the survey instruments were understood as written or orally read without the addition or omission of further details (Neuman, 2007).

The second focus group consisted of four face-to-face interviews conducted with two additional secondary educators and administrators who were likewise excluded from the study. The participants were interviewed at a time and location deemed appropriate and convenient by the individuals. The underlying purpose behind these interviews was to further validate the testing instruments as a result of the changes suggested by the initial focus group. This particular series of interviews allowed for the refinement of interview practices and procedures. Upon the conclusion of the focus group sessions, participants were asked to provide feedback related to the interview processes, the clarity of the interview questions, and suggestions for improving the overall process and testing instruments.

Formal data collection began upon the completion of any revisions suggested by the second focus group. Participants were provided with an informed consent form, outlining the purpose of the study, the name of researcher, the supervising agency

(Liberty University), faculty sponsor and researcher contact information, and statements pertaining to the participant's right to withdraw from participation at any time free of penalty or punishment. The informed consent document was explained verbally, and participants were asked to denote that they understood and agreed to comply with the aspects outlined within the form as indicated by their signatures. Preliminary interviews and survey completion were initiated upon the signing of informed consent forms. All interviews were recorded by two digital recorders, and all interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word format in order to allow clarification and verifying the accuracy of participant responses. In order to ensure participant confidentiality and to maintain the accuracy of the transcriptions, the transcribing process was carried out by the researcher. Each participant was provided with a transcribed copy of his or her interview session and asked for verification of the transcriptions in order to ensure that the documented statements accurately reflected the views and experiences of the participants. This process was known a member checking, or informant feedback, which served to enhance the precision, transferability, and overall credibility of the study (Grinnell & Unrau, 2008).

Participant surveys. Phenomenological research mandates the use of triangulation in order to ensure the credibility and dependability of the study (Cronin-Davis et al., 2009; Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2002; Thurmond, 2001). Triangulation also helps eliminate potential biases on behalf of the researcher (Cronin-Davis et al., 2009; Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2001; Thurmond, 2001). Denzin (1978) suggested that utilizing more than one approach in qualitative research enhances confidence in the study findings.

This study contained face-to-face interviews, participant journals, and participant surveys as means of data collection. Upon assenting to take part in the study, participants were asked to complete a brief survey designed to assess their initial perceptions of their abilities to recognize key indicators and risk factors of youth gang activities in their respective schools. Participants were asked to respond to 10 statements by indicating that they “agree,” “disagree,” or have “no opinion” pertaining to a given statement (see Table 6). Each response was assigned a numerical value using a Likert scale format in order to allow for statistical analysis of participant responses. Such analysis was useful in the revelation of the initial perceptions educators and administrators had concerning their abilities to recognize indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity.

Table 6:

Summary of Survey Questions

PARTICIPANT SURVEY
Please respond to the following statements by circling the option that best reflects your beliefs based upon your position as a teacher or administrator.
1. I can identify youth gang graffiti within my school. Agree Disagree No Opinion
2. I am capable of recognizing the dress styles of youth gang members in my school. Agree Disagree No Opinion
3. I can recognize youth gang identifiers and tattoos exhibited by students in a school setting. Agree Disagree No Opinion
4. I am familiar with the specific methods of communication used by gang members while in school. Agree Disagree No Opinion
5. I am capable of locating and identifying areas claimed as turf by youth gang members. Agree Disagree No Opinion
6. As a teacher or administrator, I am aware of individual experiences and personal beliefs that may encourage students to join a youth gang. Agree Disagree No Opinion
7. I am capable of identifying specific dynamics in the communities surrounding my school that may contribute to youth gang formation. Agree Disagree No Opinion
8. I can identify aspects of family life that may encourage my students to join a youth gang. Agree Disagree No Opinion

Participant Survey continued

9. I am confident in my ability to recognize the influences peer groups may have in regards to youth gang formation among the students in my school.

   Agree Disagree No Opinion

10. As a teacher or administrator, I understand and can identify the influences that student perceptions of school culture, the school environment, and academic experiences have in relation to students joining youth gangs.

    Agree Disagree No Opinion

Participant interviews. The phenomenological interviews employed broad opening prompts followed by a series of topic-oriented questions designed to explore the lived experiences of teachers and administrators (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Moustakas 1994, Vivilaki, 2008). Open-ended questions were employed in order to maintain focus and clarity. The use of open-ended questions facilitated the phenomenological research process by enhancing the subjectivity of participant responses so that the true meanings and extents of participant experiences may be ascertained (Becker, 1992; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Moustakas 1994, Vivilaki, 2008). The interview questions were custom designed to elicit the individual and shared life experiences of the participants, and the interview tool was validated by means of two pilot study and focus group sessions.

When needed, a series of follow-up questions and prompts were used in order to provide a framework and focus during the interview process. The primary interview, follow-up questions, and prompts were strictly thematic, and all questions and prompts were prepared in advance (see Appendix D) based upon an investigation of previous

research, a review of pertinent literature, and consideration of the research questions. This particular phenomenological approach allowed for cross-checking so that the participants clearly understood the intended meanings behind the interview questions, as well as to establish clear aspects underlying participant responses (Barbour, 2000). Cross-checking was essential to ensuring rigor and clarification during the interview process and subsequent recounting of participant responses (Barbour, 2000). As noted by Becker (1992), this approach was conducive to the intent and conduction of phenomenological research, for such an approach enabled one to gain a deep understanding of participant experiences and perceptions.

Interview questions. The phenomenological interview questions utilized in this interpretive phenomenological study were custom designed based upon a review of pertinent literature (see Table 7), previous research efforts, and the nature of the research questions employed within this study. The purpose of the questions regarding secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors was to gather information pertaining to the participant's individual and shared perceptions and experiences related to the phenomenon. The establishment of credibility and dependability in this interpretive phenomenological study was aided by the generation of a summary of the underlying purposes of the questions and the corresponding links to applicable research and literature. Content validity was established by having professionals within the field of education review the survey instrument; whereas face validity was addressed by grounding the interview questions in a review of

pertinent literature and research (Creswell, 2007; Johnson & Christensen, 2000; Leedy & Ormrod, 2004).

As aforementioned, the interview questions were grounded in a review of pertinent literature and preceding research (see Table 7). Questions one through three were designed to gather basic demographic data relevant to the study, such as professional position, years of experience, and specific settings in which the participants had work experience. Banda (2003) noted that the collection of specific demographic data provides researchers with pertinent insight related to characteristics and factors related to a social phenomenon. The collection of such data allowed for a more thorough exploration of the study topic and provides for more adequate responses to the study (Banda, 2003). The collection of such data was highly relevant to this study based upon the study design. The collection of basic demographic information allowed for the sorting of responses by administrators and educators, as well as differentiation between veteran and non-veteran educators.

Questions four and five targeted specific training exercises the participants may have undergone related to the phenomenon. More specifically, participant involvement in pre-service and staff development exercises targeting youth gang indicators and risk factors were explored in questions four and five. Numerous youth gang researchers have noted the failure of teacher preparatory and staff development programs in terms of adequately preparing educators and administrators to identify and address issues such as youth gang activities in public schools (Crews & Crews, 2008; Lal, 1996; Smith, 2011). The OJJDP (1994) and FSDS (1999) recommended specialized staff development

opportunities designed to provide educators and administrators with opportunities to increase their knowledge of local youth gangs and available communal resources with which schools may combat the negative influences of gangs. The FSDS (1999) suggested that educators and administrators become knowledgeable about the reasons youth join gangs, gang identification strategies, and gang avoidance techniques. Such skills and abilities are considered to be essential training components all educators and administrators should experience during staff development exercises (FSDS, 1999). Consequently, questions four and five were designed to explore precisely what activities and training, if any, educators and administrators employed within this study had received concerning youth gang indicators and risk factors.

Questions six was designed to investigate the individual and unique experiences the participants may have had with youth gangs in educational settings. The CMHS (2007) asserted that few schools are exempt from the occurrences and influences of youth gangs. Reed and Decker (2002) noted the manners in which youth gang occurrences and activities tend to be unique and localized in nature. Arciaga (2007) argued that in order to effectively combat youth gangs in schools, educators and administrators must possess specific knowledge that may be gained and strengthened by direct exposure to youth gang activities. Huff (2002) maintained that educators and administrators must be capable of identifying youth gang activity in order to minimize potential consequences of youth gangs in schools. Question six was designed to investigate what, if any, known and direct experiences the study participants had with youth gangs in educational settings.

Questions seven, nine, 11, 13, 15, and 17 were designed to investigate the perceptions participants held regarding their abilities to identify youth gang indicators in educational settings. Numerous youth gang researchers have noted the vast array of indicators youth gangs employ in order to display gang affiliation and to differentiate themselves from other gangs (Howell, 2010a; Kinnear, 2009; NCES, 2010; Scott, 2000; Washington State, 2010). Weisheit and Wells (1996) asserted that the specific types of indicators displayed by gang members varied by region, as well as among individual gangs. Klein and Maxson (2010) concurred, arguing that gang indicators had a tendency to evolve as school and community officials developed and implemented gang prevention, suppression, and intervention methods. The National School Safety and Security Services (n.d.) reported that that effective anti-gang measures necessitated the quick and accurate identification of gang indicators on behalf of educators and administrators. Thus, questions seven, nine, 11, 13, 15, and 17 explored the individual perceptions each participant had regarding his or her ability to recognize youth gang indicators within their respective school settings.

Questions eight, 10, 12, 14, 16, and 18 were designed to explore the participants' perceptions of their abilities to recognize key risk factors of youth gang activity within educational settings. The NYGC (2006), Wyrick (2006), Howell and Egley (2005), the NCPC (2006), and Capuzzi and Gross (2004) identified five key domains of recognized risk factors that contributed to the progression of youth gangs. The domains were family, individual, school, peer-related, and community and neighborhood risk factors. Numerous researchers noted direct correlations between youth gang involvement and

personal relationships and interactions with the aspects of each of the five domains (Capuzzi & Gross, 2004; Center for Youth Policy Research, 2006; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Esbensen et al., 2010; Howell & Egley, 2005; NCPC, 2006; Reed & Decker, 2002; Sharpe, 2003; Wright & Fitzpatrick, 2006; Wyrick, 2006). Youth gang occurrences and development within public schools was considered a social phenomenon that spawned from the existence of risk factors from within and outside of school settings (CMHS, 2007; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001). Numerous researchers contended that a primary task for youth gang researchers and educational leaders was the identification of the most ubiquitous risk factors so that adequate responses to youth gangs could be developed and implemented (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Esbensen et al., 2010; Mitchell, 2011; Wasserman et al., 2000; Howell, 2010a; White; 2007; Wyrick, 2006). Consequently, questions eight, 10, 12, 14, 16, and 18 sought to examine the views educators and administrators had related to their abilities to identify youth gang risk factors.

Questions 19 and 20 were designed to probe specific beliefs participants had pertaining to pre-service and staff development exercises targeting youth gangs in schools. Research indicated that effective teacher and administrator training exercises often resulted in considerable gains in teaching and learning capabilities (Gordon, 2004). Short and Greer (2002) noted that adequately structured training exercises were vital to the advancement of professional skills and personal empowerment of educators and administrators. Gordon (2004) asserted that the formulation of effectual training exercises within the field of education exploited collaborative approaches that were inclusive of educator and administrator input. Avillion (2004) argued that collaborative approaches

were necessary to enable educators and administrators to meet the needs of their students while gaining greater insight into educational matters. Educators and administrators often lacked opportunities for sufficient gang-related training exercises (Mayer & Furlong, 2010; Sharkey et al., 2010; Smith, 2011; Swahn et al., 2010). The exploration of participant perceptions related to pre-service and staff development exercises was, therefore, necessitated by the nature of this interpretive phenomenological study.

Question 21 was designed and employed in order to enable the participants to make personalized comments related to aspects that may not have been directly targeted by the preceding interview questions. More specifically, this question enabled the participants to provide feedback related to the study and the interview process. Participant feedback was a vital component of this interpretive phenomenological research study. A phenomenological approach to research allowed for a deeper understanding of the participants' subjective experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Moustakas, 1994; Vivilaki, 2008), and providing opportunities for participant feedback was essential to establishing credibility and dependability in this interpretive phenomenological research study (Grinnell & Unrau, 2008). As noted by Creswell (2008), closing aspects of phenomenological interview sessions should provide for opportunities to address participant concerns and the demonstration of courtesy to the participants. As suggested by Neuman (2006), the final question will enable the participants to conclude the interview process in a relaxed and nonthreatening manner.

Table 7:

Summary of Interview Questions and Literary Foundations

Question(s)	Topic	Literary Source
1, 2, & 3	Demographic Data	Banda, 2003
4, 5, 19, & 20	Pre-service & Staff Development Exercises	Creswell, 2008; Crews & Crews, 2008; FSDS, 1999; Gordon, 2004; Lal, 1996; Mayer & Furlong, 2010; OJJDP, 1994; Sharkey et al., 2010; Short & Greer, 2002; Smith, 2011; Swahn et al., 2010; Wyrick, 2006
6	Professional Experiences	Arciaga, 2007; CMHS, 2007; Decker, 2002; Huff, 2002
8, 10, 12, 14, 16, & 18	Youth Gang Indicators	Capuzzi & Gross, 2004; Center for Youth Policy Research, 2006; Esbensen et al., 2010; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Howell & Egley, 2005; NCPC, 2006; NYGC, 2006; Reed & Decker, 2002; Sharpe, 2003; Wright & Fitzpatrick, 2006; Wyrick, 2006
7, 9, 11, 13, 15, & 17	Youth Gang Risk Factors	Howell, 2010; Kinnear, 2009; Klein & Maxson, 2006; NCES, 2010; Scott, 2000; Washington State, 2010, Weisheit & Wells, 1996
21	Participant Feedback	Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Grinnell & Unrau, 2008; Moustakas, 1994; Neuman, 2006; Vivlanki, 2008

Note: Interview questions were developed based on the review of pertinent literature. Refer to Appendix D for a list of the precise questions.

Reflective journals. Realizing that participants may have been hesitant to respond to particular questions during face-to-face interviews, as well as acknowledging that traditional quantitative surveys may not accurately portray qualitative notions (Moustakas, 1994), reflective journals afforded participants the opportunity to report upon the phenomenon at a time, place, and in a manner of their choosing. Upon the

completion of the initial interview session, participants were asked to maintain a reflective journal related to their lived experiences and perceptions of youth gang indicators and risk factors in school settings. Each participant was provided with a spiral bound notebook and asked to record any recollections not previously disclosed or any new experiences with youth gangs that may have been encountered during the period between the initial and follow-up interview. Each participant was instructed to document any thoughts or experiences he or she deemed relevant. These journals were collected during follow-up interviews with each of the participants. The use of journals aided in the data collection process by enabling participants to provide input that may have been forgotten or not stated during the interview and survey phases of the study. By allowing for maximum amounts of participant feedback and by ensuring triangulation within the study, the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of this interpretive phenomenological study was amplified considerably (Golafshani, 2003).

Follow-up interviews. Upon coding the data and discovering emergent themes, individual follow-up interviews were scheduled with the study participants. The follow-up interviews were utilized to ensure that the data accurately reflected the perceptions and lived experiences as expressed by the individual educators and administrators, as well as to allow for any additional input that may have been provided by the participants. The reflective journals completed by the participants were collected during the follow-up interviews. Each participant was provided with documentation describing the emergent themes at the time of the follow-up interviews. During the follow-up interviews, an explanation of the themes and the addressing of any questions or concerns the

participants had pertaining to the themes or the general study were conducted. Participants were asked to verify the accuracy of the documented themes so that an accurate portrayal of the phenomenon could be analyzed and reported. As noted by Grinnell and Unrau (2008), participant feedback, or member checking, is essential to establishing credibility and dependability in qualitative research studies. By utilizing follow-up interviews to enable participant feedback, the accuracy, transferability, and applicability of this interpretive phenomenological study was improved significantly (Grinnell & Unrau, 2008).

Data Analysis

The phenomenon of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang risk factors and indicators was explored by means of an interpretive phenomenological process. An interpretive phenomenological research method yielded pertinent data related to such perceptions. Research participants consisted of secondary educators and administrators employed within the same northeast Georgia school system, and the study sought to investigate the experiences and perceptions each had concerning their abilities to identify youth gang risk factors and indicators. In order to ensure confidentiality throughout the data analysis process, each participant received a coded identification number upon signing the informed consent document.

NVivo 9. Upon the completion of individual interviews, data was transcribed into Microsoft Word format. Transcription allowed for participant review of the collected data in order to ensure accuracy, as well as to prepare the qualitative data for analysis. The transcription of information into Microsoft Word format enabled the data to be entered

into the NVivo 9 data analysis program. The use of NVivo 9 allowed for computer-assisted organization, coding, and analyzing of unstructured or otherwise subjective information (QSR International, 2007), such as that pertaining to secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang risk factors and indicators. The use of NVivo 9 software also allowed for the further bracketing of researcher subjectivity and bias.

The use of in NVivo 9 provided a vast array of resources that significantly contributed to this phenomenological research study. This data analysis program allows for improved organization of data, more precise categorization of research materials, and improved capabilities of sharing the research results with pertinent officials. Based upon the ability of the program to store and assist with organizing data, as well as the portability it afforded, significantly more opportunities were made available for an in-depth exploration of the data as compared to more traditional document-based phenomenological approaches to research. The features of NVivo 9 allowed for greater opportunities to accurately unveil and report upon the emergent themes. The use of specialized visualization techniques, semantic searches and comparisons, memoing features, and user specified inquiries assisted in revealing faint data patterns and thematic trends relevant to the study. The use of NVivo 9 essentially allowed for a more thorough examination of the phenomenon of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors in a suburban northeast Georgia school district.

Evolving themes originating from the initial interview data were developed into major and minor themes (Creswell, 2005). By employing a thematic analysis method and NVivo 9 software, the organization, coding, and analysis of data revealed developing themes that allowed for the comparison of participants' responses. The organization, coding, and analysis of data enabled the investigation and unveiling of major and minor themes pertaining to secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang risk factors and indicators. Themes were developed based upon the frequency, concentration, tendencies, and intervals revealed by data analysis (Neuman, 2006).

Data transcription and member checking. Along with the use of NVivo 9, a vast array of researcher-based efforts was employed in the analysis of data. Following the completion of the individual interviews, transcriptions of the audio recordings were made into Microsoft Word format so that the participants could review the transcriptions and provide pertinent feedback. Member checking was utilized in order to ensure that the transcribed interviews accurately reflected the perceptions and responses of the participants, which served to enhance the precision, transferability, and overall credibility of the study (Grinnell & Unrau, 2008). Creswell (2007) maintained that the use of member checking is essential to ensuring the precise nature of qualitative data. Smith (2004) noted that in interpretive phenomenological studies, the interpretation of data is subjected to the beliefs, assumptions, and understandings of the researchers. Consequently, the use of transcription and member checking was essential to this study,

for they ensured that the potential biases of the researcher did not yield misinterpretations of participant responses and perceptions related to the phenomenon.

Memoing. Throughout the data collection and data analysis phases, the process of memoing was used frequently in order to explore emergent themes. Creswell (2007) described the process of memoing as a necessary feature of qualitative research, for it enables the researcher to document thoughts and ideas related to emergent themes and related theories at all phases of the research process. Birks, Chapman, and Francis (2008) concurred with Creswell as they asserted that memoing is an effective procedural and analytical tool that may be beneficial at all phases of the research process. The use of memoing was beneficial in the identification and exploration of theoretical links that existed among raw data and the phenomenon (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008; Glaser, 1998) of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to recognize key indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity. Glaser (1998) argued that the process of theoretical memoing allows for the conceptualization of ideas, the refinement of ideas, and the establishment of relationships between emergent themes and the study phenomenon. The process of memoing enables researcher-generated ideas to evolve from personal and abstract notions to those that are more concrete and capable of being articulated in manners relevant to the study phenomenon (Glaser, 1998). The consistent use of reflective memoing in this interpretive phenomenological study served to help disclose and document any personal thoughts and ideas related to the emergent themes as they became manifest. As noted by Creswell, this process serves to help identify

researcher biases and reduce the potential for such biases to influence the results of the study.

Open coding. Sandelowski (1995) argued that the analysis phase of text-based research is often initiated by proofreading the original material, such as interview transcriptions and researcher notes, and highlighting key phrases. Bernard (2000) maintained that multiple reviews of texts enable researchers to make preliminary identification of potential themes. Johnson and Christensen (2000) asserted that these steps are components of open coding, which entailed "examining the data (usually reading transcripts line-by-line) and naming and categorizing discrete elements in the data" (p. 336). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) argued that as lines of text scrutinized, relevant themes begin to emerge. Open coding was an essential component of data analysis in this interpretive phenomenological study. Repeated reviews of audio recordings in text transcriptions helped expose and clarify emergent themes. Data was manually sorted and categorized to facilitate understanding. Categorization helped expose the similarities and differences found among participant responses. The use of open coding allow for the comparison of researcher-generated codes to those generated by the NVivo 9 software package. From a personal standpoint, I felt like this comparison was necessary in order to better examine and report relevant themes, as well as to immerse myself within the research, as is standard protocol for researchers employing an interpretive phenomenological approach.

Rich data. Holloway and Wheeler (2010) maintained that in qualitative research, "the data themselves have primacy, generate new theoretical ideas, and they may help

modify already existing theories or uncover the essence of the phenomena" (p. 5), thereby mandating the collection of rich data. Siegel (2002) described rich data as that which provides thorough descriptions of subjective data that may not be easily manipulated by statistical means. Seamen (2009) emphasized that rich data contains an ample amount of explanatory and contextual detail. Holloway and Wheeler suggested that rich data could be collected in a variety of manners, including observations, listening, and interviews. They also maintained that studies that are voluntary in nature contribute to the collection of rich data, for participants in such studies tend to provide more detailed responses.

For the purpose of this study, rich data was obtained in a variety of manners. The reiteration of the voluntary nature of the study significantly enhanced participant willingness to take part in the study and to articulate in-depth responses (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). All interview sessions were conducted at times and locations as deemed appropriate by the participants, thereby making the study process more comfortable and convenient for the participants. Rich data was obtained through the use of open-ended interview questions and participant journals, providing the participants with two primary methods of supplying detailed phenomenological responses. The use of memoing during the interview sessions allowed for the documentation of participant body language, mannerisms, and other facets that could not be recorded in audio format.

Triangulation. Phenomenological research designs mandate the use of triangulation, for triangulation is essential to ensuring the credibility and dependability of such study designs (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, Cronin-Davis et al., 2009; Denzin, 1978;

Patton, 2002; Thurmond, 2001). Triangulation also aids in the elimination of potential biases on behalf of the researcher (Cronin-Davis et al., 2009; Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2001; Thurmond, 2001). Denzin (1978) maintained that triangulation in qualitative research could be established in multiple forms. For the purpose of this study, three forms of triangulation were utilized: data triangulation, methodological triangulation, and environmental triangulation. The use of multiple forms of data collection and analysis, multiple subject groups (Cronin-Davis et al., 2009; Denzin, 1978; Thurmond, 2001), and various locations and times during the data collection phase assured that a more accurate portrayal of the phenomenon of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors in a suburban northeast Georgia school district was reflected in the study.

Credibility and Dependability

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), credibility and dependability are primary concerns in any research study. Neuman (2006) asserted that attaining absolute dependability and credibility are virtually unfeasible in most research studies; however, exhaustive efforts to ensure substantial levels of dependability and credibility should serve as guiding principles that all researchers strive to attain (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). As noted by Golafshani (2003), concepts of dependability and credibility are not universal and concrete in qualitative studies. Concepts of dependability and credibility in qualitative research hinge upon the precision, integrity, and applicability of the research (Golafshani, 2003; Hoepfl, 1997; Winter, 2000). In qualitative research, the concept of

credibility typically refers to validity, whereas dependability implies dependability (Neuman, 2006).

Miyata (2009) described credibility as the strength of research-based conclusions and inferences. Golafshani (2003) asserted that credibility in phenomenological research is established when the means of measurement are accurate and when such measurements accurately measure the phenomenon that is being studied. Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasized that researcher neutrality, research confirmability, and the consistency of data sufficiently meet the criteria of establishing credibility in qualitative studies. Campbell (1996) reinforced the notions expressed by Golafshani, as well as Lincoln and Guba, while adding an emphasis upon the applicability, transferability, and dependability overall data. Campbell insisted that a thorough examination overall data, the presence of data reproduction reports, and thorough process notes aid in the establishment of credibility in phenomenological studies.

In qualitative research, credibility is viewed as a measure based upon constructs such as integrity, sound content, and the orientation of criteria (Miyata, 2009; Neuman, 2006). Neuman (2006) asserted that recognized qualitative research processes consist of natural historical methods or ecological credibility. A natural history method was employed to ensure credibility throughout this qualitative phenomenological research study, for this method enables one to divulge the trustworthiness of a qualitative study (Neuman, 2006). This approach to ensuring credibility enabled the disclosure of actions and measures precisely as they occurred throughout the study (Neuman, 2006). The use of a natural history method for establishing credibility during this particular study

mandated the use of a pilot study and focus group sessions so that trained professionals not directly associated with the study could determine if the study and associated implements were credible. Meticulous and methodical documentation of the phenomenological research process aided in the natural validation of the study by allowing for member checking, interviewer corroboration, auditability, confirmability, and bracketing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The concept of dependability pertains to the consistency of the results (Miyata, 2009). Golafshani (2003) and Neuman (2006) restated the definition of dependability by claiming that dependability infers dependable results in qualitative studies. Neuman (2006) maintained that dependability is present when credibility has been adequately demonstrated in a qualitative study, yet dependability alone is not sufficient to ensure credibility. Dependability and credibility are congruent in qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003); thus, an adequate demonstration of credibility is satisfactory in terms of establishing dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Neuman, 2006; Patton, 2002). A pilot study employing teachers and administrators was conducted in order to ensure the credibility and dependability of the interview questions and overall interview process. Personal views, experiences, and opinions of the researcher were also bracketed in order to ensure neutrality. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and participants were afforded the opportunity to review all recorded data in order to ensure precision.

The study was dependable based upon the validation of the research tools, the maintenance of sample population criteria, and the use of computer-aided software that was used to sort and categorize data. External threats to dependability may have

cultivated from the individual participant's interpretation of the interview questions, the particular time of day the individual interviews take place, and the potentially varying attitudes and perceptions individual participants may have regarding the study topic and overall process. Potential internal threats to dependability may have consisted of researcher posture and demeanor during the interview process, as well as any perceived reactions that may have been expressed in reaction to participant interview responses. Further threats to dependability may have consisted of altering individual interview questions or delivery modes. In order to account for potential threats to dependability, bracketing was employed throughout the interview and data analysis processes. Bracketing helped alleviate the influences of any acknowledged biases on behalf of the researcher, as well as assisting in adequately mitigating further potentially damaging effects of preconceptions that may not be readily recognizable (Vivilaki, 2008).

Trustworthiness

As noted by Golafshani (2003), the notion of trustworthiness in qualitative studies largely entails the establishment of credibility and dependability. Credibility and dependability in qualitative studies is comparable to reliability and validity in quantitative studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Golafshani, 2003; Neuman, 2006). The establishment of credibility and dependability is made possible by the soundness and rigor of the qualitative model employed within the study (Golafshani, 2003; Miyata, 2009). As noted by Denzin (1978), qualitative studies are often influenced by the viewpoints and biases of the researchers. As a result, qualitative researchers must ensure that biasness is eliminated and truthfulness concerning the study phenomenon is maximized (Denzin, 1978;

Golafshani, 2003). Lincoln and Guba (1985) outlined the criteria for establishing and maintaining trustworthiness in qualitative research. They insisted that trustworthiness is composed of a blend of credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and the genuineness of the research.

Numerous aspects of this interpretive phenomenological study were considered, and precise measures were implemented in order to establish and maintain the credibility, dependability, and the overall level of trustworthiness associated with this study. This study investigated the perceptions that secondary educators and administrators had regarding their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors. Purposive sampling, more specifically maximum variation sampling, was employed so that the sample better reflected the collective study population (List, 2004). Two focus group and pilot study sessions were used to validate the research instruments and to allow for open feedback related to the research design, the research instruments, and the overall study process. Member checking was utilized in order to ensure the accuracy of interview transcriptions and to allow for enhanced participant feedback (Grinnell & Unrau, 2008). As noted by Maxwell (1996), obtaining feedback is essential to eliminating researcher biasness and other threats to research credibility. Birks et al. (2008) maintained that memoing is an effective procedural and analytical tool that may be beneficial at all phases of the research process. Creswell (2007) described the process of memoing as a reflexive procedure in which the researcher documents personal thoughts and ideas related to emergent themes throughout the research process. Doing so generally aides in the establishment of theoretical links that may exist among raw data and explanations of

the research phenomenon (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008). Memoing was used frequently throughout this study in order to document and disclose personal thoughts and ideas related to the themes and phenomenon, as well as to reduce any tendencies of biasness.

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is further enhanced by the use of triangulation (Golafshani, 2003). Creswell and Miller (2000) defined triangulation as a "validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study" (p. 126). When utilized effectively, triangulation enhances confidence in the research results (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Denzin, 1978; Golafshani, 2003; Patton, 2002). Denzin (1978) expanded upon the traditional notion of triangulation in research methods and designs. Denzin noted that four distinct forms of triangulation may be applicable in research studies: data triangulation, theory triangulation, investigator triangulation, and methodological triangulation. For the purpose of this study, three forms of triangulation will apply: data triangulation, methodological triangulation, and environmental triangulation.

Data triangulation entails conducting research at different times, locations, or with different subjects (Cronin-Davis et al., 2009; Denzin, 1978). While investigating the perceptions that secondary educators and administrators have in regard to their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors, three primary groups of participants were utilized. These groups consisted of administrators, veteran teachers, and non-veteran teachers. The use of three subject groups met the requirement for establishing data triangulation as outlined by Cronin-Davis et al. (2009) and Denzin (1978). Thurmond

(2001) justified the use of data triangulation by stating that "variance in events, situations, times, places, and persons add to the study because of the possibility of revealing atypical data or the potential of identifying similar patterns, thus increasing confidence in the findings" (p. 254). Methodological triangulation entails the use of more than one method of collecting data (Cronin-Davis et al., 2009; Denzin, 1978). Methodological triangulation combats the flaws of a single-method approach to research any applications thereof, thereby increasing the potential for enhanced confidence in study results (Cronin-Davis et al., 2009; Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2001; Thurmond, 2001). This study employed face-to-face interviews, participant journals, and participant surveys as means of data collection. By employing three sources of data in this interpretive phenomenological study, the credibility and dependability of the study was enhanced, and efforts to minimize potential biases within the study were improved (Cronin-Davis et al., 2009; Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2002; Thurmond, 2001).

Guion (2002) defined environmental triangulation as "the use of different locations, settings, and other key factors related to the environment in which the study [takes] place, such as time of the day, day of the week, or season of the year" (p. 2). Environmental triangulation is necessary when the findings of the study may be influenced by the environmental factors (Guion, 2002), as would have been the case if all interviews were conducted in a formal school setting. In order to ensure environmental triangulation, participant interviews took place at various times, on various days of the week, and in various locations deemed appropriate by the participants. As noted by Golafshani (2003), effective qualitative studies emphasize and capitalize upon credibility,

dependability, and the use of triangulation in order to reflect truth in the research. Denzin (1978) and Cronin-Davis et al. (2009) asserted that multiple forms of triangulation, such as the use of data triangulation, methodological triangulation, and environmental triangulation, significantly increases the levels of credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness in qualitative studies.

In order to enhance the trustworthiness of this interpretive phenomenological study, permission to conduct the study was sought and granted by the Institutional Review Board at Liberty University, as well as from the school system employed within the study. The individual principals at each school were also be contacted in order to explain the purpose and procedures of the study and to obtain verbal consent for the study to take place within the school buildings if necessary. Informed consent documents outlining the purpose, procedures, and perceived benefits and risks associated with this study were provided for all participants. The informed consent documents were verbally read to each participant, and participants were afforded the opportunity to ask questions related to the study prior to granting consent for participation in the study. Participant confidentiality was maintained throughout the study and beyond, and access to data was restricted at all times. In order to further maintain the trustworthiness of this study, all data will be stored in a safe deposit box for a period of three years following the completion of this study. Upon the completion of the third year, all paper documents will be shredded and all digital recordings will be raced.

Ethical Considerations

Utilizing a phenomenological qualitative design, this study explored, interpreted, and described the phenomenon (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Creswell, 2007) of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors. Creswell (1998) and Brown (2008) proposed that researchers must address the following ethical concerns throughout the research process: maintaining participant anonymity, adequately disclosing the rationale underlying the study, and proper handling of data during and after a study. Careful measures were enacted in order to comply with the suggestions of Creswell and Brown. Institutional Review Board policies and procedures were strictly adhered to throughout and upon completion of the study, as mandated by the utilization of human subjects in the study. Participant confidentiality and anonymity were held in high regard. No identifying features such as participant name or place of employment were disclosed over the course of the study. When appropriate, pseudonyms were substituted for actual participant names. Participants were also afforded the opportunity to examine interview responses to ensure accuracy prior to any data being analyzed and reported.

Fontana and Frey (1994) maintained that careful attention must be given to the proper disclosure of information to participants. They argued that following ethical protocols, researchers must provide participants with informed consent documentation, privacy notifications, and assurance from experiencing physical, emotional, psychological, or any other form of harm. Study participants were made aware, both verbally and in writing, of the purpose, scope, and voluntary nature of the study. An

informed consent form addressed ethical issues by delineating the following information: the purpose of the study, the name of person conducting the study, the supervising agency (Liberty University), faculty sponsor and researcher contact information, and statements pertaining to the participant's right to discontinue participation at any time free of penalty or punishment. The informed consent document functioned as a necessary means of protecting human subjects from any physical, emotional, psychological, or any other form of harm. All details pertaining to the study were disclosed prior to the beginning of the research. All facts were submitted to the university, the selected school district, and individual participants prior to the conduction of any research.

Data was derived from in multiple manners over the course of this study. Email communications with the participants were printed and subsequently deleted. The email account utilized during this study was protected by a user-specific logon and password in order to restrict access to email communications and to ensure participant confidentiality. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Reflective participant journals were also employed. All data, in audion and printed format, will be maintained solely by the researcher and stored in a safe deposit box for a period of three years following the conclusion and publication of the research. Upon the completion of the three year period, all data will be subsequently destroyed.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Based upon the works of Heidegger (1927), an interpretive phenomenological approach was utilized to address the objective of this study: to explore the perceptions secondary educators and administrators had regarding their abilities to recognize key risk factors and indicators of youth gang activity in a suburban northeast Georgia school district. Research data was obtained through a series of structured interviews, participant surveys, participant journals, and follow-up interviews. An interpretive phenomenological research design was essential for gathering data in a manner that accurately portrayed participant perceptions. As a subset of hermeneutical phenomenology, an interpretive phenomenological approach allowed for an exploration of the phenomenon by examining the underlying contexts of verbal expressions (Heidegger, 1927) as they apply to past, present, and future influences of the participants' personal experiences with the phenomenon (Adolfsson, 2010; Heidegger, 1927). By employing open-ended interview questions and interpreting the lived experiences of numerous individuals (Adolfsson, 2010; Heidegger, 1927) who have witnessed youth gang activity in educational settings, one may better comprehend the significance of such activity and the effects it renders upon educators and administrators.

A thematic analysis approach was employed in this interpretive phenomenological study, for such an approach was vital in the discovery of pertinent themes as they related to the phenomenon (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This approach mandated the methodical review of data in order to reveal recurrent information

patterns, which served as topics of investigation (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The investigation of the themes was essential to the grouping and coding of data. The grouping of data was directed by the materialization of major and minor themes (Creswell, 2008), and the process of coding entailed the determination of data frequency, intensity, and direction (Neuman, 2006). The use of thematic analysis provided rigorous and definitive methods in which research data could be gathered and examined in order to generate reliable themes related to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis of data revealed recurrent themes related to the lived experiences of educators and administrators and their perceptions of their abilities to recognize key indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity.

Research Questions

This interpretive phenomenological research study examined the phenomenon of secondary educator and administrator abilities to recognize documented risk factors and indicators of youth gang activity within educational settings. This study sought to answer several prominent questions pertaining to the shared lived experiences of secondary educators and administrators employed within the same northeast Georgia school district. Consequently, this study was framed by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the perceptions that secondary educators and administrators have regarding their abilities to identify key indicators of youth gang activity in a suburban northeast Georgia school system?

RQ2: What are the perceptions that secondary educators and administrators have regarding their abilities to identify fundamental risk factors associated with youth gang activity in a suburban northeast Georgia school system?

RQ3: How do educators and administrators perceive their pre-service training and professional development exercises in regard to their abilities to identify indicators and risk factors associated with youth gang activity in a suburban northeast Georgia school system?

RQ4: Based upon personal experiences and observations, what primary indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity do educators and administrators employed within a suburban northeast Georgia school system view as being most influential within their respective schools?

These research questions were based on a review of pertinent literature and previous research. These questions provided direction and guidance throughout all phases of the study.

Participants

The participants for this interpretive phenomenological study were selected using three forms of nonprobability sampling: snowballing (Groenwald, 2004), purposive, and sequential (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Neuman, 2006). Purposive sampling was employed in order to study the target group by means of interviewing those participants that were available and willing to take part in the study (Neuman, 2006; University of California, n.d.). Snowballing was utilized in order to identify potential study participants, as well as in distinguishing between educators and administrators, as well as veteran and non-veteran educators. Sequential sampling allowed for participant selection to end following data saturation (Neuman, 2006), which occurred with the collection of data provided by the 28th participant. The combination of these three forms of sampling resulted in the selection of the 28 suitable and qualified participants utilized in this study. Four primary

methods of data collection were utilized in order to explore the study phenomenon. These methods included face-to-face interviews, participant surveys, participant journals, and follow-up interviews.

Participant summary. The study participants consisted of secondary educators and administrators employed within the same northeast Georgia school system at the time the study was conducted. The administrators were represented within the study sample by assistant principals and principals employed within seven secondary institutions located within the given school district. The educators were represented by both veteran and non-veteran teachers that were likewise employed within seven secondary institutions located within the school district. Two administrators, one veteran teacher, and one non-veteran teacher from each of the seven schools were selected for participation in this study. The number of years of experience for the administrators ranged from 15 to 30 years, whereas the years of experience for veteran and non-veteran teachers were 11 to 28 and two to six respectively. Some participants in each of the three participant subgroups held experience in diverse educational settings, whereas some participants in each subgroup indicated that they have been employed within the same school system for the entire duration of their careers.

Data Collection Procedures

Informative data was derived from a series of focus group sessions, pilot studies, structured face-to-face interviews, participant surveys, reflective journals, and follow-up interviews. The participants in the focus group sessions and pilot studies were representative of the study sample, but the data obtained from the two were not included in data collection and data analysis portions of this study. Face-to-face interviews,

surveys, journals, and follow-up interviews were conducted with 28 participants, of whom 14 were administrators, seven were veteran educators, and seven were non-veteran educators, employed within the same northeast Georgia school district. Data collection was initiated following approval by the Institutional Review Board at Liberty University. Data collection took place over a five week period that spanned portions of the school system's summer break and the initial two weeks of the 2011-2012 academic year. Data was collected in a variety of settings, including schools, restaurants, and personal homes, as deemed appropriate by the participants. Data was also collected on various days and in various times as deemed appropriate by the participants.

Focus group and pilot study sessions. Formal data collection was preceded by two focus group sessions and pilot studies. The purpose of the initial focus group and pilot study session was to examine the research instrumentation and to provide feedback related to the instruments and interview process. As noted by Duma (2009), such procedures are required in order to validate the researcher-generated testing instruments. The participants were representative of the study sample. The primary objective of the initial focus group and pilot study session was to ensure that the research instruments accurately tested the intended topics and to ensure that the questions or statements contained within the instruments could be easily understood by potential participants (Neuman, 2007). The participants consisted of two administrators, one principal and one assistant principal, one veteran teacher with 12 years of experience, and one non-veteran teacher with four years of experience. Numerous modifications were made to the initial instruments as a result of the feedback provided during the focus group and pilot study session.

A second focus group and pilot study session was held in order to further validate the research instruments. The primary objective was to review the research instruments following modifications suggested by the initial group. Participants in the second focus group and pilot study session were representative of the study sample. The participants consisted of a principal, an assistant principal, a veteran teacher with 21 years of experience, and a non-veteran teacher with six years of experience. The conduction of a second focus group and pilot study session allowing for further practice and refinement of the interview process, as well as providing participants with further opportunities to make suggestions related to the data collection process and the clarity of the research instruments. The primary suggestion that emerge from this group resulted in the rearrangement of the interview questions so that questions pertaining to individual indicators and risk factors did not follow one another on a categorical basis.

Participant surveys. Each participant completed a brief researcher-developed survey (see Appendix G) that was designed to assess the initial perceptions each participant had regarding his or her ability to recognize key indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity in their respective schools. Participants responded to 10 statements by selecting one of three options, “agree,” “disagree,” or “no opinion,” pertaining to each statement. Each response was assigned a numerical value by employing a Likert scale format, allowing for statistical analysis of participant responses (see Table 8). The survey results were beneficial in the unveiling of the initial perceptions educators and administrators have concerning their abilities to recognize indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity.

Table 8:

Summary of Survey Results

Question	Response Frequency	Mean	Standard Deviation
1	Agree 18 Disagree 2 No Opinion 8	2.357	0.911
2	Agree 5 Disagree 14 No Opinion 9	1.857	0.705
3	Agree 15 Disagree 10 No Opinion 3	2.429	0.690
4	Agree 22 Disagree 3 No Opinion 3	2.679	0.607
5	Agree 10 Disagree 12 No Opinion 4	2.143	0.756
6	Agree 18 Disagree 2 No Opinion 8	2.357	0.911
7	Agree 22 Disagree 2 No Opinion 4	2.643	0.731
8	Agree 20 Disagree 2 No Opinion 6	2.500	0.839
9	Agree 23 Disagree 2 No Opinion 3	2.643	0.731
10	Agree 14 Disagree 5 No Opinion 9	2.179	0.905

Note: Mean and standard deviation were calculated based on the following numerical values assigned to participant responses: Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, and No Opinion = 1.

Participant interviews: Initial and follow-up. The phenomenological interviews employed within this study contained broad opening prompts followed by a series of topic-oriented questions designed to explore the lived experiences of teachers and administrators (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Moustakas 1994, Vivilaki, 2008). When needed, a series of follow-up questions and prompts were used in order to provide a framework and focus during the interview process. The average length of the initial interview sessions was approximately one hour, with the shortest being 49 minutes and the longest being one hour and 12 minutes. Each follow-up interview session lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded, and the initial interviews were subsequently transcribed into Microsoft Word format. The decision was made to leave the transcribed interviews unedited so that a more accurate analysis of each response could be made. Following transcription of each interview, participants were provided with a copy of their individual interviews in order to ensure the accuracy of the transcription and to accurately portray the intended responses of each participant. Following participant approval of the transcriptions, the initial interviews were coded in order to reveal emergent themes pertaining to the research phenomenon. Follow-up interviews were subsequently conducted in order to discuss the emergent themes and to allow for additional participant input when applicable.

Reflective journals. Reflective journals afforded the participants the opportunity to document their thoughts or experiences related to the study phenomenon following the conclusion of the initial interview sessions. The journals assisted in the data collection process by enabling participants to provide any input that may have been forgotten or omitted during the previous phases of the study. Participant journals were collected from

each participant during the follow-up interviews, and subsequent analysis of the journals revealed numerous experiences that largely corroborated the information revealed during the initial interviews. Participant journaling provided additional data that provided greater insight pertaining to secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to recognize indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity. The use of participant journals, along with the initial interviews, participant surveys, and follow-up interviews, afforded the participants with ample opportunities to provide feedback while ensuring a triangulated approach to research, thereby enhancing credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of this interpretive phenomenological study.

Data Analysis Procedures

The perceptions secondary educators and administrators have regarding their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors was explored through an analysis of a series of phenomenological interviews, surveys, and reflective journals. In interpretive phenomenological approach unveiled data pertaining to the perceptions and lived experiences of the participants. The participants consisted of secondary educators and administrators employed within a northeast Georgia school district that was experiencing increased encounters with youth gang activity at the time this study was conducted (City of [...ville], 2011; NDIC, 2008). The participants represented a variety of educational content areas, a vast array of professional and personal experiences with the study phenomenon, and an assortment of professional attributes such as years of experience and employment within diverse educational settings. Participation in the study was conducted on a voluntary basis, and participant confidentiality was maintained throughout the study.

Qualitative interview data was transcribed into Microsoft Word format in order to prepare the data for analysis. This transcription allowed for the use of NVivo 9 qualitative data analysis software. NVivo 9 allowed for computer-assisted organization and coding of qualitative research data (QSR, 2007). The use of such software enhanced the accuracy of the study by allowing for the use of features, such as autocoding, word comparison, word and synonym frequency, and idea mapping, which served to fortify manual research efforts. The use of NVivo 9 served to enhance the efficiency of data organization and retrieval due to the use of computer-aided software. The use of NVivo 9 did not supersede the use of personal interpretive analysis, which is a fundamental component of interpretive phenomenology (Bryne, 2001). Initial emergent themes were derived from the manual organization of data, further organization of data in NVivo9, and through thematic analysis. Initial emergent themes resulting from the examination of participant responses and the review of pertinent literature included:

1. Pre-service Experiences: A Lack of Gang Awareness Training
2. Staff Development Exercises: A Lack of Opportunities
3. Gang Indicator Awareness: Development Through Personal and Professional Experience
4. Risk Factor Awareness: The Influences of Personal and Professional Experiences
5. Gang Indicator Prevalence: As Seen from Inside the School System
6. Most Compelling Risk Factors: Outside Forces Manifesting in Schools

Upon the completion of data transcription and organization, the data was reduced and coded in order to categorize information and formulate interpretations based upon the data. As noted by Bryne (2001), qualitative research designs typically yield vast amounts

of contextual and subjective data that must be reduced in order to expose major themes related to the study phenomenon. The reduction and coding of data was consistent with the thematic approach to analysis employed within the study, and the processes of data coding and reduction assisted with conveying the research findings more efficiently (Bryne, 2001). For the purpose of this study, data reduction and coding was accomplished through comparing and contrasting participant responses and by grouping similar responses together (Rabiee, 2004) in order to reveal emergent themes. Subsequent analysis of coded data yielded major themes based upon the frequency, intensity, direction, and space of the data (Neuman, 2006). Major and minor themes evolved from the data following further analysis of the coded data (Creswell, 2005).

Coding Procedures

The effective coding of data allowed for the attainment and examination of rich data related to the phenomenon of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The process of coding entailed the identification of significant participant responses or comments and encoding them accordingly (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Adhering to the recommendations of Boyatzis (1998), the data coding process employed within this study consisted of the following elements: the creation of thematic labels, the delineation of key issues that constituted each theme, the generation of specific qualifications necessary to identify themes, and establishment of descriptors necessary to document the occurrence of each theme. Adhering to such rigid standards for coding data served to enhance the dependability of this interpretive phenomenological study, for the concept of dependability in qualitative studies mandates consistent

observation, labeling, interpretation techniques (Boyatzis, 1998). Such an approach to coding contributed to the establishment of an audit trail, thereby enhancing the credibility of the study (Bryne, 2001). The coding of information assisted in the organization and categorization of data, allowing for the refinement from broad themes to specific major and minor themes (Creswell, 2005).

Themes

During the processes of data collection and analysis, six primary themes emerged from the documentation and systematic coding of data. The materialization of these themes was consistent in all forms of data collection and evident throughout the data analysis process. The themes were as follows:

1. Pre-service Experiences: A Lack of Gang Awareness Training
2. Staff Development Exercises: A Lack of Opportunities
3. Gang Indicator Awareness: Development Through Personal and Professional Experience
4. Risk Factor Awareness: The Influences of Personal and Professional Experiences
5. Gang Indicator Prevalence: As Seen from Inside the School System
6. Most Compelling Risk Factors: Outside Forces Manifesting in Schools

Systematic coding and thematic categorization provided for a deeper investigation into the phenomenon of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors in a suburban northeast Georgia school system. While select participant responses did not specifically adhere to each of the themes listed above, these themes were present and evident in the responses of the overwhelming majority of the participants.

Pre-service experiences: A lack of gang awareness training. Pre-service training is a term used to describe the experiences, observations, and training exercises one undergoes in preparation to become a teacher (Virginia Wesleyan College, n.d.). Research indicates that educators and administrators are often ill-equipped to identify the presence and implications of youth gangs in educational settings due to a lack of formalized gang training during pre-service exercises (Escobedo, 1993; Knox, 2006; Lal, 1996; Presley, 1996; Sharkey et al., 2010; Smith, 2011; White, 2007). An investigation of secondary educator and administrator pre-service experiences revealed that of the 28 participants, only one had received any form of specified training in relation to youth gang indicators and risk factors. The vast majority of the study participants suggested that youth gangs were either neglected or portrayed as a nonissue during their pre-service training. Participant P5's response when questioned about pre-service experiences embodied the bulk of all responses pertaining to such experiences. He stated that "gangs weren't even a thought [in college]. It was also a different place and time, so [he didn't] think gangs were an issue in general for most parts of Georgia back then."

Staff development exercises: A lack of opportunities. Educators and administrators typically fail to acknowledge the implications of youth gangs in educational settings due to senses of hesitation to address such matters and the lack of ability to properly identify gang occurrences (Escobedo, 1993; Knox, 2006; Lal, 1996; Presley, 1996; Sharkey et al., 2010; Smith, 2011; White, 2007). Numerous researchers attribute such reluctance and inability to the lack of prescribed gang awareness training as an integral component of staff development exercises (Knox, 2006; Sharkey et al., 2010; Smith, 2011; White, 2007). Research conducted in a suburban northeast Georgia school

district revealed that the majority of secondary educators and administrators employed within the system had not been exposed to staff development exercises that emphasized the identification of youth gang indicators or risk factors. Several of those interviewed stated that the school system had previously acknowledged the presence and significance of youth gangs within in the local community; however, they also suggested that formal staff development exercises developed and initiated within the school system had neglected to address youth gang indicators and risk factors in the context of the given schools. Of those who indicated that they had undergone staff development exercises related to youth gang indicators and risk factors, only two administrators sufficiently demonstrated a sense of confidence in the training exercises they had taken part in while employed within the school system examined in this study. All others who stated they had taken part in such staff development exercises acknowledged that these experiences had taken place while employed in other school systems or while enrolled in training courses conducted at independent agencies not directly affiliated with the given school system.

Gang indicator awareness: Development through personal and professional experience. Contemporary youth gangs utilize a vast array of indicators in order to display gang affiliation and to differentiate themselves from rival gangs (Howell, 2010b; Kinnear, 2009; NCES, 2010; Scott, 2000; Washington State, 2010). Common indicators are generally classified as graffiti, dress style, identifiers, communication, and turf (Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Hill et al., 1999; Howell, 1997; IIR, 2006; Maxson et al., 1998; Thornberry et al. 2003; Whitlock; 2004). Individual signs, when viewed separately, may not necessarily be indicative of gang involvement (Lawton Police Gang Unit, n.d.;

Sandoval, n.d.), however, a culmination of indicators may strongly suggest the presence of active gangs (Howell, 2010b; Lawton Police Gang Unit, n.d.) Proper classification of gang indicators is often complicated by the shifting nature of youth gangs (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Consequently, school officials must continuously examine local gang trends in to properly recognize pertinent indicators of gang involvement (Cahill et al., 2008; Chaskin, 2010; Lassiter & Perry, 2009; White, 2009).

During phenomenological interview sessions, secondary educators and administrators were asked to describe their individual perceptions of their abilities to recognize youth gang indicators within their respective schools. The participants were asked about their abilities to identify each of the five categorical indicators based upon their personal experiences, observations, and levels of training related to youth gangs. Participant accounts reflected the ideology of personal and professional experiences outside of the individual schools and school system employed within the study as significantly contributing to their abilities to recognize specific youth gang indicators within their respective schools. Numerous participants cited their personal experiences and observations within local communities as being a primary source of knowledge in relation to youth gangs. Participant P11 best summarized the overall sentiments of many participants by stating that many gang indicators observed within the school system "are pretty common in the sense that you see them over and over, like stars, the numbers 13 and 21; this [was] usually what [he saw] in the school and neighborhood graffiti as well." A vast array of participants also noted previous employment sites as being fundamental components of their knowledge related to youth gang indicators. Participant P6 concluded that previous "experience at multiple schools [had] really served [him] well in

the sense that [he had] worked with various types of students, and [had] learned to be observant of what they are doing and popular trends." The value of experiences and observations at previous employment sites was a predominate theme that was echoed in the responses of numerous participants.

Communication. Phenomenological interviews revealed that the overwhelming majority of the study participants had witnessed one or more forms of youth gang communication within their respective schools. Research data suggested that overall, the secondary educators and administrators employed within the study were confident in their abilities to identify various forms of youth gang communication within educational settings. A total of 86% (n = 24) of those interviewed asserted that they were moderately to highly confident in their abilities. The Participants reported witnessing a vast array of communication methods. Participant P15 highlighted the diversity that was common among the identified communication methods by stating she had "seen a lot. [She had] seen flashing, overheard conversations, read text messages, seen graffiti; there's not been a lot that [she had not] seen at one time or another." Other notable forms of youth gang communication, as frequently expressed by the participants, included wearing clothing of a particular color, reading student-generated notes, and the use of slang language that was synonymous with local youth gangs.

Grafitti. Of the 28 participants interviewed during this study, 16 reported that they were confident in terms of identifying youth gang graffiti based upon their personal and professional experiences, observations, and training. Along with those 16, an additional 10 participants indicated that they could adequately identify youth gang graffiti within particular contexts they had previously experienced. Personal experiences and

observations of gang graffiti were key factors that were referenced continuously among those who were thoroughly or somewhat confident in their abilities to identify gang graffiti. Noting the significance of prior experiences and observations, participant P23 suggested that "the styles and symbols of the gang graffiti are unmistakable to someone who has seen them before and knows that they are rooted in gangs." Participant P22 offered similar notions, stating that gang graffiti is often recognizable in schools based upon what has been "seen while driving through other places… If you go to certain parts of the county, gang graffiti [was] a pretty common sight. [She] believe[d] [she'd] seen enough to where [she could] recognize the fact that graffiti may be gang related."

Tattoos and visual indicators. Of those interviewed, 46% (n = 13) of the educators and administrators suggested that they were reasonably confident in their abilities to recognize visual gang indicators such as particular designs for drawings, exhibiting certain colors, and using particular members, especially 13, 18, and 21. Participant P15 noted the vast assortment of gang indicators commonly displayed by local youth gang members. She stated that within the given educational system, gang occurrences typically involve "a lot of the more general identifiers including shoestrings, sketches displayed in notebooks, even colors and shades of lipstick worn by the girls." Participant P8 extended this list to include common designs including a pitchfork, an eight ball, five and six pointed stars, and a range of numbers. When asked specifically about tattoos, however, participant confidence levels had a tendency to decrease. Reflecting the sentiments of numerous participants, participant P8 commented that "tattoos are such a big thing for the kids . . . right now." P15 reinforced this notion by stating that "most students don't necessarily have real tattoos, so a lot of them will draw

them with pens and markers." Research data from this study suggested that the popularity of tattoos as a result of fashion trends had rendered many of the participants incapable or unsure about their abilities to specifically identify gang-related tattoos displayed by students within the schools examined during this study.

Turf. Turf is a term commonly used by gang researchers to refer to specific areas or specified boundaries within which a youth gang functions and declares ownership (Georgia Gang Investigators, 2001). Youth gang turf is commonly characterized by the frequent presence of known gang members (IIR, 2006). Interviews revealed that the majority of secondary educators and administrators were reasonably confident in their abilities to recognize the territorial practices of youth gang members in their respective schools. Of the 28 participants interviewed, 54% (n = 15) signify that they were competent in doing so under normal conditions at their schools. Numerous participants suggested that this particular gang indicator was obvious based upon their experiences and observations of common teenage behaviors and the frequencies of other indicators such as graffiti surfacing in centralized locations. Participant P20 suggested that:

> Territorial practices are common in every school. Think about, the football players have the locker room, the teachers have the teacher's lounge, and every group of students has its own particular lunch table. I'm sure that the students that are in a gang do have their own practices.

Participants P24 stated that personal observations of student groups revealed territorial practices of student groups. Participant P11 noted that gang territories are commonly marked by the concentration of graffiti in specific areas. Similar notions of such

experiences and observations were recounted on numerous occasions throughout multiple interviews.

Dress styles. Secondary educators and administrators maintained that they were considerably less confident in their abilities to recognize particular dress styles of youth gang members as compared to the four aforementioned youth gang indicators. The systematic coding of data revealed that 39% (n = 11) of all participants interviewed indicated that they were at least moderately confident in their abilities to identify this particular category of youth gang indicators. Participant P18 explained the discrepancy among the indicators by suggesting that modern fashion trends and typical teenage behavior made positively identifying dress styles extremely difficult in modern educational settings. Participant P19 largely echoed P18 by offering the statement "who's to say what's gang-related and what's just another popular dress style? [He thought] it would be really hard to tell."

Risk factor awareness: The influences of personal and professional experiences. Porter (2008) defined risk factors as "conditions in an individual or environment that predict an increased likelihood of gang membership" (p. 65). Youth gang researchers have identified five key domains of youth gang formation and tendencies. These domains include family, individual characteristics, school, peer groups, and community factors (Capuzzi & Gross, 2004; Howell and Egley, 2005; NCPC, 2006; NYGC, 2006; Wyrick, 2006). Numerous cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have been conducted by researchers in order to identify and validate each of the five domains as being key risk factors associated with youth gangs (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Esbensen, Huizinga, & Weiher, 1993; Howell, 2003). Wyrick (2006)

concluded that youth gang researchers must examine multiple categories of risk factors in order to ascertain a true understanding of localized gang issues. Consequently, this interpretive phenomenological research study investigated secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify the five categorical risk factors of youth gang activity as experienced in a suburban northeast Georgia school district. The exploration of such issues was essential to understanding the perspectives of the participants as determined by their personal and professional experiences, observations, and training.

Peer. Research findings suggested that a direct correlation existed between the influences of peer groups and adolescent behavior (Battin-Pearson et al., 1997; Dupere et al., 2007; Esbensen, 2000; Menard & Elliott, 1994; Mitchell, 2011; OJJDP, 2000; Thibault & Maceri, 2009; Warr & Stafford, 1991; Washington State, 2010; Wyrick, 2006). Association with delinquent peer groups was considered to be among the strongest of all predictors of youth gang membership (Esbensen, 2000; Thibault & Macer, 2009; Washington State, 2010). Given the implications of youth gangs in educational settings, educators and administrators must be capable of identifying the influences of peer groups in order to adequately address such matters (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Malec, 2006). An investigation into the perceptions of secondary educators and administrators revealed that 96% (n = 27) of those interviewed were confident in their abilities to recognize the influences of peer groups in regards to youth gang tendencies within their respective schools. Research revealed that the personal and professional experiences of the participants, paired with the frequent observations of student groups, played major roles in the participants' abilities to identify the influences of peer groups. Participants P17 and

P20 best summarized the collective responses of the majority of the participants. P17 indicated that "the influences of peer groups [were] definitely something to consider . . . [they have] a lot to do with the gang mentality . . . a lot of the issues [educators and administrators had] to contend with link[ed] back to peer influences in some way." P20 surmised "that peer pressure [was] probably the number one reason that gangs exist[ed] . . . . A lot of students [were] just trying to find their places, and unfortunately, some of them seem[ed] to think that a gang [was] that place."

Community. The community domain was widely regarded as the most commonly examined category of risk factors associated with the emergence of youth gangs (Esbensen, 2000). An examination of a vast array of studies revealed strong correlations among social conditions such as poverty, social disorganization, unemployment, and numerous other communal circumstances with increased youth gang episodes (Esbensen, 2000; Esbensen et al., 2010; Franzese et al., 2006; Hill et al., 2001; Howell, 2010a; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Lahey et al., 1999; Mitchell, 2011; Tolan et al., 2003). An investigation of the perceptions of secondary educators and administrators in a suburban northeast Georgia school district unveiled similar tendencies within the high schools and surrounding communities. Participant interviews revealed that 93% (n = 26) of the educators and administrators felt moderately to highly assured of their abilities to recognize communal influences and their impacts upon gang activity within their respective schools. Common themes found within multiple interviews included socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and crime rates, as well as demographic shifts, national, state, and local economic conditions, and the presence of drugs in the local community.

Participant P16 stated that for students in the given school district, “communities [were] the lifelines of youth activity.” Describing facets of the community that foster gang development, participant P15 noted:

> Most of the students . . . in a gang [came] from economically depressed communities. Most live[d] in small Spanish-speaking pockets scattered throughout mainly the western side of the [name omitted] district. There’s really not a lot of community resources, such as Boys Clubs, libraries, parks and recreation activities, available outside of school; so, for some of the students, there’s not a lot of positive alternatives.

Extending upon the notions of P15, participant P27 indicated that specific signs of economic disparity that was evident within local communities had started surfacing within schools. These signs included an increase in the free and reduced lunch rates among students, a decline in business partnerships with local schools, and reduction in the school system’s budget that had altered the amount of resources available to teachers and students. Explaining the impacts that local communities had upon the student bodies and schools in general, participant P20 argued that “going to school only [took] students out of the community for a short while. There’s no separating the influences the two have on one another.” Noting community dynamics, circumstances within schools, and local gang tendencies, P27 stated that “students [had] fewer options and things to turn to . . . to help keep them out of trouble.”

Family. Wright and Fitzpatrick (2006) asserted that home environments had significant impacts on the physical and emotional wellbeing for adolescents, and such impacts were typically exhibited in the behaviors children engaged in (Franzese et al.,

2006; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Bell and Lim (2005) and Florian-Lacey, Jefferson, and Fleming (2002) asserted that unstable and dysfunctional family environments often facilitated the allure of gang lifestyles. Sharpe (2003) concluded that familial risk factors are among the most statistically significant predictors of youth gang participation. Given the significance of the family domain in relation to gang participation, this study sought to explore the perceptions secondary educators and administrators had regarding their abilities to recognize familial influences and the potential ramifications they may have had in relation to youth gangs.

Data obtained over the course of this phenomenological study revealed that 79% (n = 22) of the study participants were convinced that they could effectively identify the influences of family dynamics in relation to youth gang participation. An additional 18% (n = 5) maintain that they were reasonably confident in their abilities given particular circumstances. Participant P8 noted that "children [were] normally byproducts of their homes." In order to observe the implications family life had upon the students, participant P2 stated:

> The key for teachers or administrators [was] to get to know the student[s] at a personal level. That's how the family aspects [were] uncovered. An experienced teacher [could] usually see family influences, like, academic support, neglect . . . . Kids [were] usually pretty transparent in the classroom. Signs [were] usually there for those who look.

Outlining several of the specific descriptors referenced by numerous participants, participant P23 stated that for the given school district:

> Most of the students that [were] gang members [came] from low income families, and most [were] Hispanic . . . . Most tend[ed] to be immigrants from Mexico or Columbia, mostly Mexico, and they're relatively new to the US. They usually face[d] major challenges because of the different languages, and a lot of times, the parents [were] not active in terms of meeting with school officials because of cultural differences and different views related to respecting authority. Of course, not all gang members [came] from these types of families, but [he] would argue that most . . . [did]."

Individual. Sharpe (2003) acknowledged the influences of individual characteristics as being the primary domain of risk factors associated with youth gang activity. A vast array of youth gang researchers cited extensive lists of personal traits and experiences that contributed to gang affiliation (Esbensen et al., 2010; Howell, 2010a; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Numerous researchers suggest that specific individual characteristics were identifiable (Esbensen et al., 2010; Franzese et al., 2006; Howell, 2010b; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Mitchell, 2011), and research indicated that concerted efforts to address precursors to youth gang activity, especially within the individual domain, was most successful in combating youth gang occurrences (Hill et al., 2001). Consequently, this study sought to explore the perceptions secondary educators and administrators held regarding their abilities to recognize the influences individual characteristics had upon gang activity within their respective schools.

Of those interviewed, 61% (n = 17) indicated that they were confident in their abilities to identify the influences of individual characteristics in terms of gang activity. An additional 36% (n = 10) suggested that they were somewhat confident in doing so as

dictated by particular circumstances. When asked about the individual domain, a reoccurring theme expressed by numerous participants was the similarities between the personal characteristics of suspected gang members and students that were generally categorized as being at-risk. Participant P6 noted that "a lot of gang members typically exhibit[ed] a lot of the traits of an at-risk student. Just knowing the warning signs of an at-risk student . . . scream[ed] caution" when applying such notions to youth gangs. Participant P12 concurred, stating that "most kids who join[ed] gangs [were] just like any other kid who tend[ed] to get in trouble. There's almost always some individual quality that tend[ed] to lead to trouble." Comments made by participant P1 essentially summarized the responses of most participants. He suggested that:

> Some kids have personalities that lean[ed] more towards gangs. Some kids just [had] certain attributes that mesh[ed] very well with gang mindsets**. . .** Some kids [were] natural born leaders, some [were] more inclined towards violence, and some kids just want[ed] to fit in. [He didn't] think [he] could look at such factors and predict whether or not the kid [would] definitely join a gang, but [he did] understand how individual characteristics would play a role.

School. Risk factors associated with the school domain were the least researched predictors of youth gang membership (Esbensen, 2000; Howell, 2010b; Sharkey et al., 2010) despite evidence that suggested that aspects of school was consistently associated with increased gang tendencies (Esbensen, 2000). Gottfredson et al. (2005) suggested that the general climates that dominated many public schools fostered gang development. Numerous researchers insist that the public schools commonly exposed the inabilities and inadequacies of many students (Craig et al., 2002; Franzese et al., 2006; Malec, 2006;

McCarthy, 2007; Washington State, 2010), which resulted in disassociation and disillusionment with school and increased tendencies for you to associate with (Franzese et al., 2006; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Robertson, 2008). Given the implications schools had in regards to gang formation, this study sought to investigate the beliefs secondary educators and administrators had in relation to their abilities to recognize the influences of the school domain.

The analysis of research data revealed that the study participants were the least confident in their abilities to recognize aspects of the school domain as compared to the other four categorical risk factors for gang activity. Of those interviewed, 93% (n = 26) indicated that they were at least reasonably certain that they could recognize the influences schools may have had in terms of youth gang progression. Numerous participants highlighted the manners in which traditional school settings proved to be challenging and isolating for many students. The resulting trend, as reported by the participants, was for students to initially become frustrated and eventually become emotionally detached from school. This detachment rendered students are more susceptible to gang influences. Participant P21 stated that "when teachers fail[ed] to make their classes relevant to the students, attention [went] down and discipline problems [went] up. At least this is what [he] saw at [his] old school, where gangs were more of an issue." Participant P28 explained this trend by stating "some students [had] the mindset that school [was] a lot like prison where they [had] no freedoms . . . . Some [saw] the structure and the rules as being overly bearing." Participant P16 suggested that most gang members had academic, emotional, and psychological struggles which often manifested

as disciplinary issues in a classroom setting. This particular participant explained the resulting consequences by asserting:

> It was a cyclical process where the students gave up on school and the teachers labeled the students as trouble. One always seemed to make the other worse. This caused more trouble and more frustration, which usually led to disciplinary actions and templates for the process all over again.

Numerous participants voices beliefs similar to those of P16. Participant P26 stated that "in an age of high-stakes testing and ever-changing society, some students may [have grown] disillusioned with school." Participant P19 concluded by stating that while certain aspects of school may not be a justifiable excuse for joining a gang, it was feasible to insist that the potentially isolationistic traits of modern schools could contribute to gang development.

Gang indicator prevalence: As seen from inside the school system. Klein and Maxson (2010) maintained that youth gangs had a tendency to modify their behavior patterns in response personal and social stimuli. As their behavior patterns change, so too do the specific indicators exhibited by gang members (BJA, 1997; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Researchers have long noted the manners in which gang indicators evolved in response to gang prevention, suppression, and intervention efforts (Klein & Maxson, 2006; Scott, 2000). The National School Safety and Security Services (2007) asserted that gang indicators had a tendency to become more subtle as public awareness increased; thus, "the key rest[ed] with school and community officials quickly recognizing the presence of gang behaviors and activity in a timely manner" (National School Safety and Security Services, 2007, ¶ 14). Numerous youth gang researchers argued that school and

community officials should examine local gang trends on a regular basis in order to properly identify pertinent indicators of gang activity (Cahill et al., 2008; Chaskin, 2010; Lassiter & Perry, 2009; White, 2009). Thus, this interpretive phenomenological research study sought to explore the perceptions secondary educators and administrators had regarding the presence of youth gang indicators in their respective schools. By employing an interpretive phenomenological approach, the essence of educator and administrator experiences with youth gang indicators was investigated and defined (Heidegger, 1927). Conducting face-to-face interviews and interpreting the responses of multiple people who had experienced the phenomenon allowed for a better understanding of the condition based upon the lived experiences of the participants (Adolfsson, 2010; Heidegger, 1927).

Graffiti. Of the 28 participants interviewed, 68% (n = 19) remarked that gang graffiti was by far the most common youth gang indicator they had experienced within their respective schools. Two participants stated that they perceived the presence of graffiti and youth gang dress styles as being equal; therefore, they had a difficult time distinguishing between the two in terms of which one was more prevalent. In order to accurately reflect perceptions and lived experiences of the participants, both graffiti and dress style were coded as the most prevalent for these particular participants. Numerous participants asserted that the relative ease and convenience of creating graffiti contributed significantly to the portrayal of this particular indicator. "Graffiti [was] by far the most common gang indicator . . . . It [was] the one that [was] the easiest to see and to clearly know" (participant P2, personal communication, July 20, 2011). When asked about the most prevalent gang indicator present on campus, participant P4 noted that "it was graffiti, hands down, it [was] graffiti. It [was] a pretty common site on certain parts of the

campus." Participant P5 noted that graffiti was the easiest indicator for educators and administrators to identify; yet, it was also the easiest indicator for gang members to express due to the locations in which graffiti was commonly placed. Participant P1 elaborated upon this notion by stating that graffiti was "pretty common in the restrooms, especially the boys, and every now and then, [one would] see some drawings on desktops and the likes of that." Numerous participants cited similar observations. The sentiments of the majority of the participants were best summarized by participant P15, who stated that "graffiti [was] the most popular . . . . Graffiti [was] fast and easy, so most never [got] caught. It also [got] the message out, so [teachers and administrators] see more of it."

Dress Style. Participant interviews revealed that youth gang dress styles ranked second in terms of being the most common gang indicator experienced by secondary educators and administrators within the given school district. Twenty-nine percent of all participants (n = 8) noted the significance of youth gang dress styles within their respective schools. As compared to graffiti, participant confidence levels seemed to decrease significantly when asked about their abilities to recognize youth gang dress styles. Participant P8 noted that distinguishing between youth gang dress styles and contemporary fashion trends had been complicated by the overlapping of the two. Participant P15 suggested that "most teachers [had] no clue when it [came] to gang dress styles, and the county dress code [was] such that a lot of what [was] gang related [wasn't] necessarily against the policy**. . .** There [were] probably more issues with gang dress style than anyone probably realize[d]." Despite the confusion, several participants were confident in their abilities to identify youth gang dress styles in their respective schools.

Participant P24 concluded that "if you [knew] what you were looking for, it [was] not too hard to see . . . these on any given day."

Tattoos and Identifiers. Participant accounts of tattoos and other visual identifiers were largely insignificant based upon the responses of the two participants who noted such indicators. Participants P3 and P21 both selected this category as being the most prevalent youth gang indicator within their respective schools; however, their responses were indicative of confusion and uncertainty. Both participants used phrases such as "I really don't know," "I guess," and "probably" in their responses. Their responses were brief as compared to those of the other participants, and no sense of certainty in terms of definitively identifying the most prevalent category of youth gang risk factors could be derived from their responses.

Most compelling risk factors: Outside forces manifesting in schools. Research conducted by Hill et al. (1999) and Maxson & Lowery. (1998) revealed substantial differences between gang and non-gang youth within the contexts of individual, familial, school, peer, and communal characteristics. Research conducted by the OJJDP (2004) and Reed and Decker (2002) concluded that exposure to multiple risk factors significantly increases the likelihood of youth participating in gangs. Wyrick (2006) argued that the diverse nature of gangs warrants further investigation into the configurations of risk factors at a community level, for no single risk factor is inclusive of all individuals affiliated with youth gangs. Thus, the identification of the most prevalent risk factors associated with youth gang activity was necessary in order to adequately examine the implications of youth gang activity (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Esbensen et al., 2010; Hawkins et al., 2000; Hill et al., 1999; Mitchell, 2011; Wasserman et al., 2000;

Howell, 2010a; White; 2007; Wyrick, 2006). An investigation of secondary educator and administrator perceptions of youth gang risk factors was necessary in order to identify the prevailing risk factors that influenced gang activity at school and system levels in a suburban northeast Georgia school district. While some participants were capable of definitively selecting one categorical risk factor, many participants were unable to reduce their selections to just one; thus, their responses were recorded and coded so that the views and experiences of the participants could be accurately reflected within the study.

Peer. Webber (2007) maintained that the arrangements and social environments to which youth were exposed served as essential elements to gang formation. Multiple studies identified the influences of peer groups as being considerable determinants of behavior (Battin-Pearson et al., 1997; Esbensen, 2000; Menard & Elliott, 1994; Thibault & Maceri, 2009; Warr & Stafford, 1991; Washington State, 2010; Webber, 2007). Gang research consistently revealed a direct correlation between the influences of peer groups and adolescent behavior (Battin-Pearson et al., 1997; Dupere et al., 2007; Esbensen, 2000; Menard & Elliott, 1994; OJJDP, 2000; Thibault & Maceri, 2009; Warr & Stafford, 1991; Washington State, 2010; Wyrick, 2006). An examination of secondary educator and administrator accounts supported such claims as they applied to their respective schools.

The peer domain was identified by the participants as being the most compelling risk factor for gang development within the given school system. Fifty-four percent (n = 16) of all participants identified the influences of peer groups as being the most considerable influence among gang-affiliated youth. Participant P27 noted that one should not ignore the significance of peer influences in regards to youth gang

participation among students enrolled within the school system utilized during the study. Participant P3 stated that "peer groups [were] a major source of deviance among high school kids, especially the younger ones." A recurring theme cited by participants when questioned about the peer domain was the notion of external forces manifesting in schools, thereby compelling some students to associate with gangs. Participant P20 summarized many of these views by stating that "the students that join gang here usually [felt] isolated in some way. They may have [had] a physical or mental impairment, family issues, language problems, or things of this nature . . . . A gang is just a coping mechanism that makes them feel like they are part of something special."

Individual. Participant responses revealed that the individual domain was the second most compelling risk factor for youth gang activity within the individual schools and school system utilized in this study. Thirty-two percent (n = 9) of all participants indicated that the individual domain was largely responsible in terms of enticing youth to partake in gang activity. The majority of the participants who selected this particular domain essentially argued that individual characteristics and actions were largely to blame for gang affiliation. Participant P27 expressed this view by stating:

> The individual [was] ultimately responsible for his actions. At one point or another, we have all faced struggles and unfortunate circumstances . . . . At the end of the day, a man [had] no one to blame for what he [had] or [had] not done except for himself.

As with the peer domain, participant accounts of the individual domain revealed considerable influences from forces outside of the school setting. Participant P26 suggested that "there [were] just so many individual factors to consider . . . . It all [came]

down to individual characteristics like ethnicity, language, and simply want to be a part of a larger group." Several participants noted that, according to their experiences and observations, they perceived aspects of the individual domain as being influenced by other risk factor domains such as the community and peer groups. Participant P15 summarized this perspective by stating that the individual, community, and peer domains were equally important in terms of prevalence and influence. She noted that "the three tend[ed] to feed off one another, which [made] it harder for students to resist joining a gang. [She didn't] think you could easily separate the three."

Family. The family domain was the third most commonly cited risk factor expressed by the participants. A total of seven participants, or 25%, referenced the family domain as being among the most compelling categorical risk factor for youth gang activity in their respective schools. Participant P19 declared that considering the ages of high school students, family circumstances could not be ignored when addressing issues such as gang activity. Participants P4 and P18 maintained that children typically behave and make crucial decisions based upon the morals and values stressed in a family setting. Participant P5 stated that quote the home life of a student play[ed] a major role in shaping the individual student." Noting the manners in which the home lives of students affect educational endeavors and other behaviors students engage in while at school, participant P4 stressed that "teachers [dealt] with the fallout from [student] home[s] every single day." The underlying notions expressed by each of the participants that identified the family domain as being highly compelling aligned with such notions.

Community and School Domains. Communal and school forces were the least cited risk factors acknowledged by the secondary educators and administrators employed

within this study. No participant identified the school domain as being the most compelling risk factor, nor did a single participant reference aspects of school as being a fundamental risk factor for gang activity within the school system employed within the study. Three participants, or 11%, noted the influences of local communities in terms of contributing to youth gang formation. Participant P14 argued that for suspected gang members in her school, communal aspects such as "the forces of poverty and things like that [were] just too great for some students to overcome." Two participants noted that based upon their experiences and observations, they viewed the risk factor categories as being intertwined and inseparable. For example, participant P8 stated that "community background [had] a lot to do with the peer groups students form[ed], and this [was] probably more true for gang members. At the same time . . . peer groups influence[d] student behavior . . . . One contribute[d] to the other and vice versa." Participant P16 maintained that the individual, peer, and community domains were relatively equal in terms of influence. The three were inseparable, and the combination of the three significantly decreased a student's likelihood of resisting inclinations to associate with a gang. Such notions aligned with documented research findings that supported the notion of exposure to multiple risk factors increasing the tendencies youth had for joining a gang (Center for Youth Policy Research, 2006; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Esbensen et al., 2010; Hill et al., 1999; Howell & Egley, 2005; NCPC, 2006; Wright & Fitzpatrick, 2006; Wyrick, 2006).

Summary

This chapter explored the perceptions secondary educators and administrators had pertaining to their abilities to recognize fundamental risk factors and indicators associated

with youth gang activity in a suburban northeast Georgia school system. Data was gathered and triangulated by means of phenomenological interviews, reflective journals, and quantitative surveys. A total of 28 participants consisting of 14 administrators, seven veteran educators, and seven non-veteran educators participated in the study by revealing their experiences, observations, levels of training, and perceptions of various youth gang indicators and risk factor domains. Six primary themes emerged from the collection of data and through the process of thematic analysis. Those themes were as follows: Pre-service Experiences: A Lack of Gang Awareness Training; Staff Development Exercises: A Lack of Opportunities; Gang Indicator Awareness: Development Through Personal and Professional Experience; Risk Factor Awareness: The Influences of Personal and Professional Experiences; Gang Indicator Prevalence: As Seen from Inside the School System; and Most Compelling Risk Factors: Outside Forces Manifesting in Schools. The following chapter will discuss the findings of this interpretive phenomenological research study, as well as the limitations and the delimitations of the study. Suggestions for future research will be made, and the theoretical implications of this study will be discussed.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Contemporary youth gangs have a definitive and recognized presence in a vast array of public high schools across the United States (Egley et al., 2010; Peterson, 2004; Swahn et al., 2010). As primary socialization agents for the majority of the nation's youth, schools have been permeated by the occurrences and implications of youth gang activity (CMHS, 2007; Esbensen, 2000; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Scott, 2000). Youth gangs present school officials and other students with serious challenges (Chandler et al., 1998; Swahn et al., 2010). Research indicates that public schools are commonly utilized by gangs as recruiting grounds, drug markets, and numerous other components that facilitate gang activity (Chandler et al., 1998; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Howell, 2006; Howell, 2010a; OJJDP, 2009a). Further research reveals that the presences and activities of youth gangs in schools directly correlate with academic disruptions, episodes of violence, and general delinquency (Egley et al., 2010; Garza, 1993; Miller, 1982; Struyk, 2006; Swahn et al., 2010). Victimization rates increase significantly on school campuses containing identifiable gang activities, especially if such activities remain unaddressed (Howell & Lynch, 2000; Miller, 1982; Washington State School Safety Center, 2010).

Federal legislation mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act charges state agencies with the task of assessing and addressing safety concerns in public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Given the implications of gangs in schools, educational leaders must engage in proven methods of identifying, combating, and preventing gang occurrences within educational settings (Cahill et al., 2008; DOJ, 2006; Essex, 2007; Goldson, 2011; Hill et al., 1999; Huff, 2002; Struyk, 2006). School leaders must be

capable of identifying, combating, and preventing gang occurrences in order to establish and maintain safe and productive learning environments (Essex, 2007; Mayer & Furlong, 2010). Educators and administrators must seek to gain insight into the fundamental causes of gang formation and the primary functions of active gangs within the school setting (Crews & Crews, 2008; Klein & Maxson, 2006). Primary components of identifying and understanding youth gang functions entail the recognition and comprehension of youth gang indicators and the risk factors associated with gang activity (Arana, 2005; Huff, 2002). Consequently, this interpretive phenomenological study sought to explore the perceptions of secondary educators and administrators regarding their abilities to recognize the fundamental indicators (see Appendix A) and risk factors (see Appendix B) associated with youth gang activity in a suburban school district located in northeast Georgia.

Themes

The themes pertaining to the lived experiences of the secondary educators and administrators that participated in this study were identified during the processes of data collection and analysis. Six primary themes emerged from the documentation and systematic coding of data. The materialization of these themes was consistent in all forms of data collection and evident throughout the data analysis process. The themes were as follows:

1. Pre-service Experiences: A Lack of Gang Awareness Training
2. Staff Development Exercises: A Lack of Opportunities
3. Gang Indicator Awareness: Development through Personal and Professional Experience

4. Risk Factor Awareness: Confidence Based Upon Personal and Professional Experiences
5. Gang Indicator Prevalence: As Seen from Inside the School System
6. Most Compelling Risk Factors: Outside Forces Manifesting in Schools

Pre-service experiences: A lack of gang awareness training. Participants reported a considerable absence of gang-related training and educational opportunities during their pre-service experiences. While the focus of this study primarily explored the pre-service experiences of the participants in relation to youth gang indicators and risk factors, analysis of participant responses indicated that the pre-service experiences of the vast majority of the participants neglected all forms of gang awareness training or related exercises. Several participants noted discussing gangs and similar concepts in particular classes; however, the references were made in terms of identifying and addressing at-risk youth in general. With the exception of one participant, no participants indicated that they had undergone any form of gang awareness training as a part of their pre-service exercises.

Staff development exercises: A lack of opportunities. Analysis of data revealed a significant lack of staff development opportunities for secondary educators and administrators in relation to the identification of youth gang indicators and risk factors. As with pre-service training exercises, participant accounts indicated that the opportunities for structured gang awareness staff development exercises was lacking in the school system employed within the study. While a total of 11 participants indicated that the school system had acknowledged the presence of active youth gangs in local communities, as evidenced by participant accounts of school-level gang awareness

presentations, the participants noted the manners in which no formalized gang training had been made available within the system. This notion was especially true for those participants who were not in an administrative position. Data revealed that no structured gang awareness programs had been made available for educators and the opportunities for administrators to take in such initiatives was highly limited. Of the three participants who stated that they had taken part in staff development exercises designed with the intent of identifying youth gang indicators and risk factors, one stated that such training had taken place while employed another school system; whereas, the other two were administrators who stated that the training was conducted at a central location and access was limited to strictly administrators.

Gang indicator awareness: Development through personal and professional experience. Despite the lack of formalized pre-service and staff development opportunities, the majority of the participants denoted that they were aware of specific youth gang indicators within their respective schools. Previous experiences and observations undertaken while employed within other school systems or within other lines of work were commonly credited for the abilities to recognize the indicators. The vast majority of those who stated that they could confidently recognize specific youth gang indicators justified their responses by crediting their personal observations within their classrooms, schools, and local communities. One stated that his childhood experiences allowed him to recognize youth gang indicators, while others stated that they recognized certain indicators as a result of their experiences and observations while traveling. The significance of personal and professional experiences in relation to the

ability to identify specific youth gang indicators and risk factors was a crucial underlying theme that was present throughout the data collection and data analysis processes.

Risk factor awareness: Confidence based upon personal and professional experiences. The analysis of phenomenological data pertaining to secondary educator and administrator abilities to recognize categorical risk factors of youth gang activity revealed that the participants were highly confident in their overall abilities to recognize such risk factors within educational settings. This study led to the discovery of the sources of such confidence. Numerous participants credited their personal and professional interactions with and observations of individual students and student groups. The notions of time and repeated experiences were critical components of these interactions and observations. The participants also noted that interactions with parents and familiarity with local communities aided in their abilities to recognize youth gang risk factors. Numerous participants cited their professional recollections and overall levels of experience, arguing that the culmination of many years of experience and memories provided them with a sort of "common sense" that enabled them to recognize many of the categorical risk factors.

Gang indicator prevalence: As seen from inside the school system. Klein and Maxson (2010) noted the regional diversity and shifting nature of gang indicators, necessitating gang awareness training and the accurate identification of gang indicators by school officials (National School Safety and Security Services, 2007). Research conducted in a suburban northeast Georgia school district discovered that the presence of graffiti was the definitively the most common youth gang indicator present within the district's seven secondary institutions. Participant accounts of youth gang indicators cited

graffiti more than twice as much as the second leading indicator which was dress style. Tattoos and other visual indicators were a very distant third, being cited approximately one-tenth as much as graffiti.

Most compelling risk factors: Outside forces manifesting in schools. An analysis of secondary educator and administrator views related to the most compelling youth gang risk factors revealed that the peer domain was ultimately the most influential risk factor for gang activity within the given school system. Participant accounts revealed that the significance of peer groups in relation to gang formation was decisively more prominent as compared to the other four risk factor domains. Peer groups were cited by the participants almost twice as much as the second leading indicator which was individual characteristics. Participant responses suggested that forces such as peer pressure and the innate desire for a sense of belonging were largely responsible for gang formation and gang activity within the individual schools in the overall school system.

Summary of the Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors in a suburban northeast Georgia school system. This study sought to discover precisely what indicators and risk factors the participants had experienced, as well as to reveal trends related to pre-service training and staff development exercises relating to youth gang indicators and risk factors. An investigation into the perceptions participants held regarding their experiences with youth gangs in educational settings served to unveil the lived experiences that were shared by the participants. In order to better understand the experiences of the participants and to generate future recommendations, an emphasis was

placed upon identifying and exploring the most prevalent indicators and most compelling risk factors of youth gang activity within the given school system as perceived by the participants.

Literature

The literature review developed over the course of this study was designed to examine and report upon various youth gang risk factors, indicators, and related theories and models. The literature review sought to investigate various perspectives related to the phenomenon of educator and administrator abilities to identify key indicators and risk factors associated with youth gang activity. Primary sources included a multitude of scholarly works that discussed various gang-related issues including the implications of youth gangs in educational settings. Numerous sources cited the reluctance or inabilities of educators and administrators to identify and address such issues in schools; however, a definitive lack of information related to educator and administrator perceptions of the youth gang phenomenon was evident. The overwhelming majority of the articles and other works examined over the course of this study were written from a scholarly, researcher-based perspective with the intent of discussing various aspects of youth gangs from a factual perspective. The individual and collective experiences, observations, and perceptions of educators and administrators were clearly lacking. Consequently, this study was designed to explore the perceptions of a diverse group of educators and administrators. The participants represented a vast array of professional backgrounds, personal experiences, and numerous other aspects that may have influenced their interpretations of their experiences with youth gangs in educational settings.

Relationship with emergent themes. The themes that emerged over the course of this interpretative phenomenological study were largely consistent with reoccurring notions examined during the review of pertinent literature. The meticulous review of applicable literature unearthed a substantial lack of research pertaining to formal gang awareness training for educators and administrators (Arciaga, Sakamoto, & Jones, 2010; Chaskin, 2010; Office of the Attorney General, 2009). Smith (2011) noted that teachers, administrators, and general school staff commonly lack adequate gang prevention, intervention, and suppression training. Lal (1996), Smith (2011), and Crews and Crews (2008) noted the manners in which teacher preparatory programs do not adequately equip teachers and administrators to address common gang issues in schools. They contended that an unintended consequence of such an absence of training is the inability of educators and administrators to identify and address youth gang activities within public schools. Research conducted by Escobedo (1993) and Presley (1996) suggested that a lack of gang awareness training resulted in the inability of educators and administrators to readily recognize key indicators and risk factors associated with youth gangs. Two of the six major themes that emerged over the course of this study reinforced such notions, for the participants indisputably reported a lack of gang awareness training as a component of pre-service training and education. Likewise, the participants consistently reported a lack of opportunities to participate in gang awareness staff development exercises.

The byproducts of the lack of gang awareness training were evident in two additional emergent themes that surfaced over the course of this study. Youth gang structures are constantly evolving, counteracting stereotypical views of traditional gangs (Bell & Lim,

2005; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Fisher et al., 2008; Pitts, 2009). Combating youth gangs, therefore, requires specific knowledge and qualifications that may only be obtained and enhanced through firsthand exposure and exercises (Arciaga, 2007). While the participants noted a definitive lack of pre-service and staff development exercises pertaining to gang awareness training, a reoccurring notion was the significance of personal observations and experiences in relation to indicator and risk factor awareness. Numerous participants credited personal observations and experiences with their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors. While the influences of professional training exercises were not denied when relevant, the overwhelming majority of the participants referenced obtaining knowledge through personal experiences as opposed to professional experiences.

Youth gangs have an established presence in the vast majority of urban high schools throughout the United States (Egley, Howell, & Moore, 2010; Peterson, 2004; Swahn et al., 2010), and modern youth gangs are rapidly proliferating in suburban and rural schools (Egley, Howell, & Moore, 2010; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Howell et al., 2002; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Starbuck et al., 2001). Consequently, educational leaders must engage in proactive and proven measures to identify, combat, and prevent gang progression in schools (Cahill et al., 2008; DOJ, 2006; Essex, 2007; Goldson, 2011; Hill et al., 1999; Huff, 2002; Struyk, 2006). In order to do so, educators and administrators must gain insight into the localized foundations of gang formation (Crews & Crews, 2008; Klein & Maxson, 2006), and they must become aware of the primary indicators and risk factors associated with youth gang activity (Arana, 2005; Huff, 2002). Youth gang occurrences and activities are localized by nature (Reed & Decker, 2002); thus, effective gang

assessments must be conducted and response measures must be determined at an institutional level (Scott, 2000; Smith, 2011). Consequently, this study sought to explore the prevalence of youth gang indicators and the most compelling risk factors within the given school system as experienced by secondary educators and administrators. Data revealed that graffiti and dress styles were the most common indicators within the given school system. The influences of the peer groups, individual characteristics, family structures, and community dynamics were referenced as compelling risk factors, supporting the notion of schools being rapidly being permeated by gang trends that originate within local communities (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Esbensen, Tibbetts, & Gaines, 2004; Howell, 2010b).

Participants

The participants in this study were decisively chosen through the processes of the purposive sampling, sequential sampling, and snowballing. The study sample consisted of 28 participants, all of whom were employed as a secondary educators or administrators within the same northeast Georgia school system at the time of this study. A total of seven non-veteran educators, seven veteran educators, and 14 administrators contributed to this study. The participants' years of experience in the field of education ranged from three to 30 years, and a multitude of professional positions and content areas were represented among the participants. The participants came from a variety of ages and ethnic backgrounds, and both genders were included in the final selection. The participants represented a vast array of personal and professional experiences in relation to youth gangs. Some reported very little exposure to youth gang activity within the given school district, whereas others reported significantly more experience within the school

district employed within the study and elsewhere.

Theoretical Implications

The philosophical underpinnings of this interpretive phenomenological study were rooted in six primary philosophical theories: social learning (Bandura, 1977), ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), social disorganization (Shaw & McKay, 1969), moral development (Kohlberg, 1984), psychosocial development (Erikson, 1963), and humanistic theories (Maslow, 1970). These theories presented six essential implications for secondary educators and administrators experiencing various aspects of youth gang activity:

1. Behavior is motivated by the attainment, or lack thereof, of personal priorities.
2. Exposure and interaction with one's environment impact individual behavior.
3. Students learn behaviors through observations.
4. The development of personality and identity formation are influenced by social experiences.
5. Social interactions influence one's ability to rationalize and act accordingly.
6. Delinquent behavior is accelerated by the absence or failures of vital social institutions and the lack of positive community relationships.

Each of these scenarios held potential for creating disruptive forces within educational settings as a result of external stimuli beyond traditional view and control of most educators and administrators. Research suggested that a thorough examination of key psychological and educational theories pertaining to learning and human development may serve to assist educators and administrators in better understanding, explaining, and predicting human behavior and its contributing mental processes (Myers, 2004; Rathus,

2003). Numerous researchers insisted that a comprehensive examination of such theories may also provide theoretical justifications in respect to youth gang membership and corresponding actions (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi, 2004; Kissner & Pyrooz, 2009). An understanding of these six philosophical theories and their corresponding implications was essential to the exploration and comprehension of the perceptions secondary educators and administrators had pertaining to their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors.

Relationship to emergent themes. Pai et al. (2005) asserted that upon analyzing psychological and educational theories, one may better comprehend patterns of human behavior and the processes associated with knowledge acquisition. Numerous researchers have noted key speculative patterns related to gang involvement and specific gang structures (Curry et al., 2002; Franzese et al., 2006; Howell, 2010a; Shoemaker, 2009; Thibault et al., 2009). Such patterns were evident within the emergent themes, primarily those involving the acquisition of gang-related knowledge, indicator prevalence, and the compelling natures of risk factors, associated with this study. Participants consistently noted the various manners in which their interactions with their unique environments and other individuals influenced their knowledge of youth gangs. Participant responses consistently revealed the predominance of specific risk factors for youth gang activity, as well as the subsequent indicators that were commonly experienced by the participants. Youth gang occurrences and activities are localized by nature (Reed & Decker, 2002), thus no single theoretical justification may be made in order to completely explain youth gang occurrences. Various aspects of participant responses were indicative of numerous theoretical foundations. While no single developmental theory was cited by the

participants, numerous components of social learning (Bandura, 1977), ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), social disorganization (Shaw & McKay, 1969), moral development (Kohlberg, 1984), psychosocial development (Erikson, 1963), and humanistic theories (Maslow, 1970) were evident in participant responses.

Conceptual Framework

The selected research methodology for this study was interpretive phenomenology. As a subset of hermeneutical phenomenology, interpretive phenomenology relates verbal accounts with psychological meaning and human experience (Watson, 2008). According to Heidegger (1927), life experiences and their underlying meanings and can only be deciphered and explained by the meticulous exploration of the entirety of the experiences; thus, interpretive phenomenology provides accounts of participants' experiences, as portrayed by the participants, in order to thoroughly answer specific research questions (Watson, 2008). This study sought to reveal the essence of the experiences secondary educators and administrators had in relation to youth gang indicators and risk factors. By utilizing an interpretive phenomenological approach, a better understanding of the participants' lived experiences was acquired, thereby enabling the use of thematic analysis in exposing the underlying meanings such experiences held for the participants (Smith, 2004). Thus, the conceptual framework of interpretive phenomenology was utilized in the interpretation of participant responses in order to address the research questions that served to guide this study,

Research Questions

This study sought to explore the perceptions, experiences, reflections, and various levels of training held by secondary educators and administrators. A review of pertinent

literature revealed a substantial lack of research emphasis concerning these facets and youth gang indicators and risk factors. Current research studies have neglected to definitively address whether examinations of the perceptions administrators and educators have in relation to identifying key indicators of youth gang activity might aid in gang intervention efforts in schools. Consequently, this study was framed by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the perceptions that secondary educators and administrators have regarding their abilities to identify key indicators of youth gang activity in a suburban northeast Georgia school system?

RQ2: What are the perceptions that secondary educators and administrators have regarding their abilities to identify fundamental risk factors associated with youth gang activity in a suburban northeast Georgia school system?

RQ3: How do educators and administrators perceive their pre-service training and professional development exercises in regard to their abilities to identify indicators and risk factors associated with youth gang activity in a suburban northeast Georgia school system?

RQ4: Based upon personal experiences and observations, what primary indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity do educators and administrators employed within a suburban northeast Georgia school system view as being most influential within their respective schools?

In order to address these research questions, data was collected through a series of systematic phenomenological interviews, quantitative surveys, reflective journals, and follow-up interviews.

Research question one. Participant responses revealed that the perceptions of secondary educators and administrators in relation to identifying key indicators of youth gang activity within educational settings varied greatly among the individual categorical indicators; consequently, participant confidence levels varied greatly in conjunction with individual indicators. Confidence levels peaked at 71% for the identification of communication; however, they tapered to 7% for dress styles. Data suggested that the participants were relatively confident in their abilities to identify youth gang communication and graffiti, with the majority of the participants noting that they were capable of identifying these two particular indicators within their respective schools. The participants were moderately confident in their abilities to identify youth gang tattoos and turf, with approximately one half of the participants indicating that they were capable of definitively identifying such indicators. With only two participants signifying that they could positively identify youth gang dress styles, participant responses revealed that the secondary educators and administrators employed within the given school system had a definitive lack of confidence in their abilities to distinguish between gang and non-gang dress styles.

Research question two. The analysis of data revealed that confidence levels related to participant abilities to recognize established risk factors for youth gang activity were notably higher as compared to those of youth gang indicators. As with individual youth gang indicators, participant confidence levels varied greatly among the individual categorical risk factors. Confidence levels ranged from 57% to 96%, with the ability to recognize peer influences being the highest and the ability to recognize the influences of the school domain being the lowest. The participants were especially confident in their

abilities to identify the influences of the peer, community, and family domains, with each of these domain 79% or more of the participants indicating they could positively identify the influences of these domains. Data suggested that the participants were least confident in their abilities to recognize the influences of the individual and school domains, as noted by participant responses indicating confidence levels of 61% and 57%, respectively.

Research question three. Participant responses indicated that secondary educator and administrator perceptions of pre-service training and professional development exercises regarding the ability to identify indicators and risk factors associated with youth gang activity were largely negative. A definitive lack of pre-service training exercises pertaining to the assessment and addressing of youth gang indicators and risk factors in educational setting was overwhelming evident from participant feedback. Although not to the extent of pre-service training, the participants likewise conveyed notions of staff development exercises pertaining to youth gang indicators and risk factors as being limited and largely restricted. The majority of those who reported undergoing pertinent staff development exercises were primarily administrators or they experienced such training while employed within another school system. A lack of staff development exercises was especially evident in the responses of the educators.

Research question four. Participant accounts revealed that the secondary educators and administrators employed within this study viewed the peer domain as being the most influential risk factor, whereas graffiti was viewed as the most prevalent indicator. A total of 16 out of 28 participants noted the significance of the peer domain within their respective schools. The individual and family domains were also cited in

notable manners, with several participants classifying these domains as being as influential as the peer domain. Graffiti was definitively cited as the most prevailing indicator, with 19 participants noting its prevalence. Dress style was the second most cited indicator, with eight participants noting it commonality.

Study Delimitations

Johnson and Christensen (2000) explained delimitations as boundaries that confine the scope of a study by relaying specifics not examined during a study. The explicit scope of this study was to investigate the perceptions secondary educators and administrators possess in terms of their abilities to identify fundamental indicators and risk factors associated with youth gang participation in a specific northeast Georgia school district. The study was delimitated so that only educators and administrators from the seven public secondary schools located within the chosen county-based school district will be included as participants in the study. Educators and administrators from a vast array of private schools located within the same geographical area were excluded from the study. Likewise, educators and administrators employed within a local, independent city-based school system encapsulated by the district being studied were also excluded. Further delimitations comprised of excluding educational stakeholders, such as parents, students, and community leaders, as well as excluding other members of the faculty and staff employed within the chosen schools. These employees included the likes of clerical staff, counselors, custodial staff, and numerous others who served in capacities other than educators or administrators.

Study Limitations

Johnson and Christensen (2000) described research limitations as deficiencies or conditions that may not be directly controlled by the researcher. Creswell (2005) noted the potential influences limitations may yield within a study, thereby mandating the disclosure of any possible limitations. Several limitations were acknowledged throughout this study. The study employed a convenience sample of secondary educators and administrators from a specific northeast Georgia school district and participation in the study was strictly voluntary. The sample may not, therefore, have reflected the overall population of the school district, nor may the study results have yielded direct implications for other school districts. The nature in which the study was geographically isolated inhibited study results from being generalized to other regions or populations without the conduction of further research. Participation in the study may have been directly influenced by the individual personalities of potential participants, as well as individual interests pertaining to the study topic, individual willingness to participate in the study, and the personal and professional experiences of the participants. Further limitations may have included participant honesty and personal recollection while completing the interview. Influences of popular media, such as television and newspapers, may have also affected participant views and responses. Attempts to reduce bias during the data collection phase were made by maintaining the anonymity of the participants.

Contextualization of the Findings

The analysis of phenomenological data revealed that each of the six major themes exposed during this study directly related to the perceptions that secondary educators and

administrators held regarding their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors. In response to the primary research questions, the six primary themes that emerged from the analysis of participant interviews, surveys, and journals revealed the perceptions of the secondary educators and administrators that chose to partake in the study. The research problem identified within this study was addressed by examining the emergent themes in order to identify the inherent characteristics of the issues, as well as to note the frequencies (see Table 9) of such characteristics (Neu & Stewart, 2009). Participant references to a lack of gang awareness training as a component of pre-service training and education was noted during 27 of the 28 phenomenological interviews, as was participant expressions of confidence in terms of recognizing youth gang risk factors based upon personal and professional experiences. The development of gang indicator awareness through personal and professional experiences was cited by 26 participants, while a lack of staff development opportunities pertaining to youth gang awareness was stressed by 25 participants. The last two major themes were the identification of graffiti as the most prevalent indicator and the peer domain as the most compelling risk factor for youth gang activity within the given school district. Participant responses contributing to these themes numbered 19 and 16, respectively.

Table 9:

Frequency of Emergent Themes

Theme	Frequency
Pre-service Experiences: A Lack of Gang Awareness Training	27
Risk Factor Awareness: Confidence Based upon Personal and Professional Experiences	27
Gang Indicator Awareness: Development through Personal and Professional Experience	26
Staff Development Exercises: A Lack of Opportunities	25
Gang Indicator Prevalence: As Seen from Inside the School System	19
Most Compelling Risk Factors: Outside Forces Manifesting in Schools	16

Note: Data contained in this table was generated based upon the response rates of 28 individual participants.

Conclusions

An interpretive phenomenological research approach yielded sufficient data required for analysis. The analysis of data occurred through the organization of data, systematic bracketing, and by employing thematic analysis. Data analysis led to the discovery of six major themes related to secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors. Major emergent themes included:

1. Pre-service Experiences: A Lack of Gang Awareness Training
2. Staff Development Exercises: A Lack of Opportunities

3. Gang Indicator Awareness: Development through Personal and Professional Experience
4. Risk Factor Awareness: Confidence Based upon Personal and Professional Experiences
5. Gang Indicator Prevalence: As Seen from Inside the School System
6. Most Compelling Risk Factors: Outside Forces Manifesting in Schools

A thorough analysis of the six major themes divulged numerous minor themes which held significant implications for future research opportunities. Likewise, the diverse nature of the major themes held significant implications for future research.

The findings of this interpretive phenomenological research study were aligned with information examined during review of pertinent literature. A vast array of youth gang researchers have noted the failure of teacher preparatory and staff development programs in terms of adequately preparing educators and administrators to identify and address issues such as youth gang activities in public schools (Crews & Crews, 2008; Lal, 1996; Smith, 2011). Numerous researchers noted the lack of formalized gang training initiatives during pre-service teacher preparatory programs (Escobedo, 1993; Knox, 2006; Lal, 1996; Presley, 1996; Sharkey et al., 2010; Smith, 2011; White, 2007). The findings of the study concurred; revealing that the educators and administrators who participated in this study experience little or no gang awareness training is a part of pre-service exercises. Pertinent literature also suggested that educators and administrators often lacked opportunities for sufficient gang-related training exercises as components of staff development exercises (Mayer & Furlong, 2010; Sharkey et al., 2010; Smith, 2011; Swahn et al., 2010). This study revealed that secondary educators and administrators

employed within the given school district had been exposed to very limited opportunities to receive gang awareness training as a component of staff development.

In accordance with the review of pertinent literature, this study also served to highlight the most influential risk factors and most common indicators of youth gang activity present within the individual schools and the school system at the time of the study. Prominent youth gang researchers maintain that a primary task for educational leaders was the identification of the most influential risk factors so that adequate responses to youth gangs could be developed and implemented (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Esbensen et al., 2010; Howell, 2010a; Mitchell, 2011; Wasserman et al., 2000; White; 2007; Wyrick, 2006). Through the use of thematic analysis, this study exposed the peer domain as the most compelling categorical risk factor for youth gang activity within the given school system. Noting the vast array of youth gang indicators, Klein and Maxson (2010) and The National School Safety and Security Services (2007) reported that effective anti-gang measures necessitated the quick and accurate identification of gang indicators on behalf of educators and administrators. Thematic analysis revealed that youth gang graffiti was the most prevalent youth gang indicator present within the school system and the individual schools employed within this study.

Implications of the Findings

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore perceptions that secondary educators and administrators had regarding their abilities to identify key indicators and risk factors for youth gang activity in a suburban northeast Georgia school district. Research findings indicated a substantial lack of pre-service and staff development opportunities that provide formalized training in terms of identifying

such indicators and risk factors. Findings also suggested that personal and professional observations and experiences within multiple realms served as the primary sources of information from which the participants had drawn knowledge of local youth gangs. The analysis of data revealed that secondary educators and administrators employed within the given school system were more accustomed to recognizing gang graffiti as compared to other known indicators of gang activity. Likewise, the research findings supported the notion of the peer domain serving as the most influential categorical risk factor for youth gang activity within the given school system.

This study was significant within schools experiencing increased episodes of youth gang activity. Research suggested that secondary educators and administrators often fail to recognize fundamental indicators and risk factors of youth gang activity due to a lack structured gang awareness training that specifically targeted educational settings (Arciaga et al., 2010; Chaskin, 2010; OAGF, 2009). The findings of the study supported such notions. Despite the knowledge presence of 11 active youth gangs within the school system employed within this study, as well as the corresponding communities (City of [...ville], 2011), opportunities for formalized gang awareness training within the school system was lacking. NDIC (2008) projections indicated an escalation of youth gang episodes within the given area in the near future (NDIC, 2008). Given the impacts of gangs in schools and projections calling for increased gang occurrences within the given area, the findings of this study revealed the urgent need for improved gang awareness initiatives within the school system's secondary institutions.

Implications for leadership. This study was significant to the field of leadership in the sense that it explored whether or not educational leaders within the given system

needed to alter their approaches to youth gang activity within the individual schools and the system as a whole. Cunningham and Corderio (2005) asserted that effective leaders facilitate necessary change based upon first-hand experiences and observations. Gorton and Alston (2009) noted that school leaders are expected to fulfill a host of duties, obligations, and roles, and they are responsible for all occurrences on school grounds. They maintained that effective educational leaders address problematic issues and crises by utilizing personal and professional judgment that seeks the best interest of all educational stakeholders. Short and Greer (2002) concurred, asserting that efforts to restructure public education have facilitated notions of accountability and empowerment among educational leaders. Each of the schools employed within this study operated under a site-based approach to management. This approach enabled the administrators at each school to formulate necessary policies and procedures independent of other schools and the system as a whole (Grauwe, 2005). The findings of the study revealed that educational leaders within the given school system must evaluate and restructure their approaches to youth gang activity in order to combat the implications it may render within educational settings.

Analysis and interpretation of the study findings indicated that the administrators and educators employed within the study lacked opportunities to receive structured gang awareness training. As leaders within the community, educators and administrators must understand and act upon political, social, and economic conditions as they impact educational stakeholders (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2005). Federal legislation enacted under the NCLB requires that state agencies to assess and address safety concerns in public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Research indicated that youth

gangs have a definitive presence in the majority of the secondary schools within the nation (Egley et al., 2010; Swahn et al., 2010). A review of pertinent literature revealed that public schools are commonly used as recruiting grounds, drug markets, and numerous other facets of gang activity (Chandler et al., 1998; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Howell, 2006; Howell, 2010b; OJJDP, 2009a). Research indicated that the presences and activities of youth gangs in educational settings directly correlate with episodes of violence, and delinquency, and academic disruptions (Egley et al., 2010; Garza, 1993; Miller, 1982; Struyk, 2006; Swahn et al., 2010). Educators and administrators must be capable of recognizing the implications of youth gang activity in public schools in order to effectively combat the negative influences they render (Essex, 2007). The analysis and interpretation of the research findings indicated a definitive need for educational leaders within the given school system to develop and implement localized anti-gang measures. The findings of the study yielded foundational knowledge upon which educational leaders could pursue further research pertaining to youth gang matters, enhanced staff development opportunities, and increased gang awareness initiatives within local schools.

Recommendations

The significance of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore the potential need for gang awareness training among secondary educators and administrators employed within a suburban northeast Georgia school district. The geographical area in which the study was conducted is experiencing escalating gang problems (NDIC, 2008). Data reported by the NDIC (2008) indicates that this particular area will encounter worsening gang conditions in coming years. Using a descriptive quantitative study, Porter

(2008) examined the abilities of elementary and middle school teachers and administrators in relation to identifying indicators and risk factors of gang participation. Given the locally-based nature of gang culture (GRIPE, n.d.) and the present lack of a comprehensive youth gang study in the school district, this study was conducted in the study in the same suburban northeast Georgia school system utilized within Porter's study. The utilization of the same school system allowed for a deeper exploration and the gaining a more thorough insight related to the perceptions of educators and administrators. This study provided the school system with a more in-depth examination of educator and administrator abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors. Given the lack of formalized educator and administrator training regarding youth gang indicators and risk factors (Arciaga et al., 2010; Chaskin, 2010; OAGF, 2009), this study may serve to enlighten the school system as to the need for specific gang awareness training among the faculties and staffs employed within secondary institutions.

Recommendations for educational leadership. An initial recommendation is for educational leaders to initiate the process of collecting youth gang data within educational settings. Gathering data is essential to identifying and combating the negative influences of gangs in educational settings (Chaskin, 2010; Cooper, 2009; Swahn et al., 2010; Washington State, 2010). Lal (1996) noted the manners in which schools are often reluctant to record data pertaining to youth gangs, opting instead to rely upon local law enforcement agencies to gather and maintain such information. Achilles (1993) stressed the reluctance educators and administrators commonly expressed in relation to acknowledging the presences and implications of gangs in schools. Knox (2006) maintained that denial rates related to youth gang activity within public schools is

especially high among educational leaders. Research conducted by Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001) indicated that the number and percentage of educators and administrators acknowledging the presences of gangs in their respective schools is considerably lower than reports within surrounding communities. Given the implications of youth gangs in schools, educational leaders must put forth an initiative to collect data pertaining to youth gangs so that an adequate intervention and suppression measures may be designed and implemented.

A second recommendation is for educational leaders to conduct school-level assessments of the most influential youth gang indicators and risk factors within individual school settings. Contemporary research pertaining to the indicators and risk factors of youth gang membership and activity is largely anecdotal (Decker, 2002). This has resulted in the lack of empirical data pertaining to the most influential youth gang indicators and risk factors in most educational settings. Future research must thoroughly examine all aspects of "the importation and exportation of gang symbols, structure, culture, and behavior" (Decker, 2002, p. 19). This is especially applicable to educational settings. Schools serve as one of the most common socialization agents for youth (Esbensen, 2000; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Scott, 2000). Consequently, schools are not immune to the occurrences and impacts of youth gangs (CMHS, 2007). "Gang indicators used by students should be researched further to develop empirical indicators of gangs in schools that school officials and others could use in developing communitywide anti-gang programs and strategies" (Howell & Lynch, 2000, p. 6). Research by Smith (2011) indicated that educators and administrators commonly lack formalized gang training, and "schools should objectively analyze the need for a gang

policy" (p. 19). Such policies should include assessments of the most influential youth gang indicators and risk factors at an institutional level.

A third recommendation for educational leaders is to develop and enhance relationships among schools, communities, and local agencies such as law enforcement. Youth gang dynamics typically vary from one geographical region to another (Bell & Lim, 2005; Fleisher, 2005; Klein, 2005). The structures of youth gangs are constantly evolving in manners that are making the identification and combating of youth gangs more difficult (Bell & Lim, 2005). Youth gang configurations are growing more diverse and more complex (Henry, 2009; Howell et al., 2002; Howell, 2010b). Educational settings are increasingly becoming focal points for gang activity (DOJ, 2006; Esbensen et al., 2004; Ramsey et al., 2003; Tozer et al., 2005). Educators and administrators often hesitate to acknowledge and contend with gang issues for a variety of reasons, including a lack of specialized training, potential negative perceptions that could arise concerning the school, and fears of potential parental and community reactions (Curry & Decker, 2003; Esbensen et al., 2004; Manwaring, 2005; Sharkey et al., 2011; White, 2007). Research suggests that considerable discrepancies exist in terms of gang perceptions among educators, members of the community, and law enforcement personnel (Cooper, 2009; Esbensen, 2000; Fisher et al., 2008; Henry, 2009; Pitts, 2009; Smith, 2011; White, 2007). Educational leaders and other stakeholders must work collaboratively in order to act upon proven methods of identifying, combating, and preventing gang progression in schools (Cahill et al., 2008; DOJ, 2006; Essex, 2007; Goldson, 2011; Hill et al., 1999; Huff, 2002; Struyk, 2006). Consequently, educational leaders must put forth the initiative to establish and foster common bonds among the schools, communities, and local

agencies in order to combat the influences of youth gangs and promote safe and productive learning environments.

Recommendations for future research. The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study was to explore perceptions secondary educators and administrators had regarding their abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors in a suburban northeast Georgia school system. Research indicated that youth gang structures are constantly evolving and counteracting stereotypical views of traditional gangs (Bell & Lim, 2005; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Fisher et al., 2008; Pitts, 2009). Modern youth gangs are rapidly proliferating into all areas of the nation, including suburban and rural areas (Egley et al., 2010; Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Starbuck et al., 2001). Public schools are the primary institutions in which contemporary youth engage in communal interactions; thus, schools are not immune to gang occurrences (Curry & Decker, 1998; Pai et al., 2005; Kidder, 2007). Studies revealed that youth gangs have a definitive and recognized presence in the vast majority of secondary schools in the United States (Egley et al., 2010; Swahn et al., 2010), indicating that schools are rapidly being permeated by gang trends that originate within local communities (Howell, 2010a). As a result, an initial recommendation is that replications of this study take place in other school districts experiencing increased episodes of youth gang activity. Replications of the study are essential to determining if the findings of the study may be generalized to other geographical areas.

The primary ages for youth gang recruitment typically span between the ages of 12 and 24 (Duffy, 2004; Esbensen et al., 2004; Huff, 2002; O'Donnell et al., 2009). Research indicated that contemporary recruitment efforts are not unique to this particular

age range. Gang tendencies are increasingly becoming inclusive of a vast array of school-age children (Duffy, 2004; Esbensen et al., 2004; Huff, 2002; Klein & Maxson, 2006; Vigil 1988). According to Arana (2005) and the U.S. House of Representatives (2006), gang recruitment commonly targets kids as young as seven years old. Thus, a second recommendation is for this study to be replicated at a system-wide level including all schools regardless of level. This broader sample would be more inclusive of the demographic, academic, and socioeconomic differences that are present within the schools throughout the system. A larger interpretive phenomenological research study would potentially yield more in-depth data that portrays a more reflective view of the study phenomenon at a system-wide level.

A third recommendation includes the exploration of youth gang tendencies and the cultural, socioeconomic, academic discrepancies of the individual institutions employed within this study. Throughout this study, a primary emphasis was placed upon revealing trends that were common throughout the system. The schools represented in the study contained differing student demographics, socio-economic statuses, and levels of academic achievement. By employing a site-based approach to this study, influential factors that are unique to the individual schools may be exposed and act upon in manners not possible in larger scale studies. Short and Greer (2002) noted the manners in which empowering educational leaders often employ a site-based approach to management and instituting effective change. A school-level phenomenological study of this nature could potentially reveal essential data necessary for combating the implications of youth gangs while fostering a more effective process of educational change.

Summary

The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological research study was to explore secondary educator and administrator perceptions of their abilities to recognize fundamental indicators and risk factors for youth gang activity in a suburban northeast Georgia school district. Chapter 5 provided a comprehensive breakdown of the interpretive phenomenological research procedures employed within this study. Analysis phenomenological data revealed six major themes and numerous minor themes. Major themes that emerged from the research process included a lack of gang awareness training as components of teacher preparatory programs, a lack of staff development exercises pertaining to the identification of youth gang indicators and risk factors, and the development of gang indicator awareness through personal and professional experiences. Other major themes included the development of youth gang risk factor awareness through personal and professional experiences, the significance of peer groups and youth gang formation, and the presence of gang graffiti within the given school district. Recommendations for future research included replications of this study in other geographical regions, the expansion of this study within the given school district so that all schools are included, and the exploration of youth gang tendencies as they relate to the cultural, socioeconomic, and academic discrepancies of the individual schools employed within the study. Recommendations for educational leadership included the collection of localized gang information at the school level, the conduction of school-based assessments of youth gang indicators and risk factors, and the implementation of measures designed to promote the development and enhancement of relationships among schools, communities, and local agencies.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: GANG INDICATORS

Gang Indicators

Indicators	Descriptors
Graffiti	Newspaper of the streets
	Used to mark turf
	Declares allegiance to the gang
	Advertises the gang's power or status
	Challenge to rivals: by crossing out rival gang
	Used to pay respect to fallen gang members
Dress	Color of clothing
	Sport jerseys
	Hat worn to one side
	One pant leg up
	One shirt rolled sleeve up
	One overall strap unsnapped
	Name brand of the shoes/color of the shoelaces.
Identifiers/Tattoos	Show allegiance to the gang
	Usually contains name of the gang
	Members' street names
	Three dot tattoos: Mi Vida Loco/My Crazy Life
	Thespian faces: Smile Now, Cry Later
	Tattoos drawn on the body
Communication	Cryptic messages
	Usually in the form of a letter
	Used to tell a story, challenge rival gangs, and brag
	Identifies which gang a gang member belongs to
	Carrying weapons
	Speaking in gang-style slang
	Uses gang style hand signs
	Gang slang
Turf	Gangs claim a particular area as their turf
	Gang territory/hangs with known members

Note. Developed by Porter (2008) using data from *Gang Awareness Handbook*, 2001; Institute for Intergovernmental, 2006.

APPENDIX B: RISK FACTORS LEADING TO YOUTH GANG MEMBERSHIP

Risk Factors Leading to Youth Gang Membership

Domain	Risk Factors
Individual	Negative life events Self-esteem Internalizing behaviors Isolation
Community	Area crime measures Criminogenic neighborhood indicators
Family	Social and economic barriers Structure (single parent) Lack of positive role models Parenting style/hostile family environment Family deviance Lack of parental supervision
Peers	Characteristics of peer networks Affective dimensions of networks Commitment to negative peers Loyalty
School	Academic Failure Low educational aspirations Negative labeling by teachers Trouble at school Few teacher role models Educational frustration Commitment/educational aspirations Low school attachment High levels of antisocial behavior in school Low achievement test scores Identification as being learning disabled

Note. Developed by Porter (2008) using data from Bjerregaard & Smith, 1993; Eitle et al., 2004; Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998; Esbensen et al., 1993; Hill et al., 1999; Howell, 1997; Maxson et al., 1998; Maxson & Whitlock, 2002; Sharpe, 2003; Thornberry et al., 2003; & Whitlock, 2004.

APPENDIX C: IRB EXPEDITED REVIEW FORM

LIBERTY
UNIVERSITY

The Graduate School at Liberty University

July 19, 2011

Kenneth Lancaster
IRB Approval 1106.071911: An Analysis of Secondary Educator Abilities to Identify Risk Factors and Indicators of Youth Gang Activity

Dear Kenneth,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
IRB Chair, Associate Professor
Center for Counseling & Family Studies

(434) 592-5054

LIBERTY
UNIVERSITY.
40 Years of Training Champions for Christ: 1971-2011

APPENDIX D: GANG AWARENESS INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(Primary interview questions are in bold; prompts are in italics)

1. **What is your current professional position?**
2. **How many years of experience do you have in the field of education?**
3. **Describe the various settings in which you have taught.**
    a. *Examples may include a description of school or class demographics, school culture, geographical regions, courses taught, and so forth.*
4. **Tell me about any pre-service training you underwent involving youth gang indicators and risk factors.**
    a. *Pre-service training may include any formalized training undergone prior to entering the field of education.*
        i. *Pre-service training may include college courses, training during other professions, and so forth.*
5. **Reflect upon the staff development exercises you have participated in after entering the field of education. Tell me about any staff development exercises you have taken part in which youth gang indicators and risk factors were focal points of training.**
6. **Describe your experiences with youth gangs while serving in the capacity as a teacher or administrator.**
7. **Given the specific circumstances of your school and your personal levels of training and experience as a teacher or administrator, are you capable of recognizing and identifying specific aspects of school that may foster youth gang development? Please elaborate.**

a. *Would you say that conditions in your school might increase the likelihood of some students to join a youth gang? Please elaborate.*

b. *How would you describe the general school experience for students in your school?*

c. *Does the school atmosphere promote social engagement or isolationism? How/why? Please elaborate.*

d. *Does the school climate foster academic achievement for all students? How/why? Please elaborate*

8. Do you feel confident in your ability to recognize and identify specific youth gang dress styles within your particular school? Please elaborate.

a. *Based upon your training and personal experiences with youth gangs in schools, please describe the extent of your knowledge related to youth gang dress styles.*

i. *How do you distinguish between the dress styles that are specifically gang-related and those of current fashion trends?*

9. Based upon your personal experiences and training, please describe the extent of your knowledge related to community dynamics and tendencies for students in your school to join youth gangs.

a. *Do you feel confident in your ability to recognize the influences of community dynamics within your school? Please explain.*

b. *Can you identify specific communal influences that may result in youth gang activity manifesting in schools? Please elaborate.*

10. **Tell me about any methods of communication you have personally witnessed gang members use in your school.**
    a. *How did you know these forms of communication were gang-related?*
    b. *Are you confident in your ability to recognize various forms of youth gang communication within your school? Please elaborate.*
11. **Based upon your personal experiences and training as a teacher or administrator, are you capable of identifying the influences family dynamics have in relation to gang activity within your school? Please elaborate.**
    a. *How would you describe the role(s) family structures and settings play in relation to students in your school forming peer groups?*
12. **Please describe the extent of your knowledge related to local youth gang tattoos or other identifiers exhibited by students within your school.**
    a. *Please elaborate on your confidence in your ability to recognize youth gang tattoos or other identifiers based upon your personal experiences as an educator.*
13. **Reflecting upon your experiences and training as a teacher or administrator, how would you describe your ability to recognize the influences peer groups have in relation to youth gang tendencies in your school? Please elaborate.**
    a. *In regard to peer groups, are you confident in your ability to recognize the influences that peer groups have upon the actions and beliefs of youth gang members?*

14. **Based upon your personal experiences, training, and observations as a teacher or administrator, can you distinguish between gang and non-gang graffiti within your school? Please elaborate.**
    - **a.** *What distinguishes gang-related graffiti from non-gang graffiti?*
15. **Given your personal experiences, training, and observations as a teacher or administrator, are you capable of recognizing specific individual student behaviors, mannerisms, and so forth that may increase the likelihood of gang affiliation? Please explain your response.**
16. **Considering your personal experiences, observations, and training, how would you describe your capability to identify territorial practices of youth gangs in your specific school?**
    - *a. Based upon your personal experiences and observations as a teacher or administrator, do you believe that groups of students in your school display territorial tendencies in manners that are directly gang related?*
        - *i. If so, how?*
        - *ii. If not, why?*
17. **Based upon your personal experiences, training, and observations, what is/are the most influential risk factor(s) that compel students in your school to associate with youth gangs? Please explain why these factors are so compelling.**
18. **Based upon your personal experiences, training, and observations, what is/are the most common gang indicator(s) students in your school and to**

display? Please explain why you stated that this/these indicator(s) is/are the most exhibited within your school.

19. **Given the opportunity, what specific advice would you give those responsible for developing pre-service education and training exercises in relation to youth gangs in schools?**
    a. *How could this advice have helped you within your particular classroom or school?*
    b. *How could training modifications based upon your advice benefit the students, faculty, and staff at your school?*
20. **Given the opportunity, what specific advice would you give those responsible for developing staff development exercises in relation to youth gangs in schools?**
    a. *How could this advice have helped you within your particular classroom or school?*
    b. *How could training modifications based upon your advice benefit the students, faculty, and staff at your school?*
21. **Are there any other comments or statements you wish to make regarding the study topic, this study in general, or the interview process? If so, please feel free to speak as you wish.**

APPENDIX E: SCHOOL SYSTEM PERMISSION TO CONDUCT STUDY

[redacted] County Schools
CHARACTER • COMPETENCY • RIGOR FOR ALL

ELOISE T. BARRON, Ph.D.
ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT
FOR TEACHING & LEARNING

[redacted]
Superintendent

Research Proposal Approval/Denial Form
[redacted] County School System

May 10, 2011

Dear Mr. Lancaster:

Your research proposal entitled ***"An Analysis of Secondary Educator Abilities to Identify Youth Gang Indicators and Risk Factors"*** has been reviewed by representatives of the [redacted] County School System. The representatives have agreed on the decision as indicted below. Please contact Gerald Boyd at the [redacted] County Central Office if you have any questions about this decision.

__X__ Proposal Approved

_____ Proposal Denied

_____ Proposal Approved with Stipulations

Gerald A. Boyd

Gerald Boyd
School Improvement Specialist
[redacted] Schools
[redacted]
[redacted] GA 30501

Accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

APPENDIX F: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

An Analysis of Secondary Educator Abilities to Identify Youth Gang Indicators and Risk Factors: A Phenomenological Study

Kenneth Shane Lancaster

Liberty University

School of Education

You are invited to participate in a research study pertaining to secondary teacher and administrator abilities to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors in their respective schools. You were selected as a potential participant based upon your experiences as a secondary educator. You are respectfully asked to carefully read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study. This study is being conducted by: Kenneth Shane Lancaster, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University

Background Information:

The purpose of this phenomenological research study is to analyze secondary administrator and teacher abilities to recognize key indicators and risk factors of youth gang involvement in a suburban northeast Georgia school district. Specifically, this study seeks to discover the perceptions secondary teachers and administrators have related to their ability to identify youth gang indicators and risk factors based upon their personal experiences, observations, and training. In order to collect as much valid data as possible, a qualitative research design will be employed. A phenomenological approach will allow for the exploration of the study topic from the perspectives of the subjects.

This study will employ a convenience sample derived from the teachers and administrators employed within seven secondary institutions located within the same school district. Participation in the study will take place on a voluntary basis. Participation in the study will not entail any financial costs or compensation for the individual participants, schools, or the school system employed within the study. Data will be collected by means of face-to-face interviews. No data that may be indicative of the individual participants or the individual schools they represent will be collected, stored, or disclosed during the study. The results of this study may be instrumental in guiding staff development opportunities related to identifying and combating gang influences in a suburban northeast Georgia school district.

Procedures:

This study will entail two interviews consisting of a primary interview that should last approximately one hour and a follow-up interview that should last no longer than 30 minutes.

The initial interview will employ a prepared set of open-ended questions and corresponding prompts related to the study topic. These questions and prompts will serve direct the course and maintain the topic of the interview. The researcher reserves the right to probe when necessary in order to ensure clarity and understanding of participant responses. The initial interview will be recorded using two digital audio recorders. Each interview will transcribed, word-for-word, by the interviewer. Participants will be provided with a copy of the transcriptions in order to ensure accuracy and clarity of responses. Upon reviewing the transcriptions, participants will be afforded the

opportunity to issue commentary, ask pertinent questions, discuss the intent of the study, and/or clarify any comments.

Participants will also be asked to participate in a follow-up interview lasting approximately thirty minutes. The follow-up interview will be based upon major and minor themes that emerge while coding data obtained from the initial interviews. The purpose of the follow-up interviews is to ensure that the experiences, views, and responses of the participants are accurately portrayed. Participants will be afforded the opportunity to issue commentary, ask pertinent questions related to the emergent themes, and/or clarify any comments.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The anticipated risks associated with this study are minimal. The study includes two interviews consisting of a primary interview that should last approximately one hour and a follow-up interview that should last no longer than 30 minutes. The benefits of participation in this study include the opportunity to be involved in a study that may provide information for future staff development and pre-service teacher training exercises. The results of the research may be used for presentations and publications; however, individual participants, schools, and the school system will remain anonymous. There are no other agreements, written or verbal, related to this study beyond those expressed in this consent and confidentiality form.

Confidentiality:

Any information obtained during this study will be kept confidential. Strict standards of confidentiality will be maintained, and procedures will be established to ensure participant anonymity. Any publications that may be generated as a result of the study

will not include any information that may be used to identify the individual study participants, the individual schools they represent, or the school system in which the participants are employed. Upon the completion of the study, all research records will be securely stored in a safe deposit box for a period of three years. The safe deposit box and its contents will be accessible only to the primary researcher. Upon the conclusion of three years, all research data, including taped interviews and all field notes, will be subsequently destroyed. Participant confidentiality will be maintained at all times during the study and upon its completion.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and participants may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Any decision as to whether or not to participate in the study will not affect a subject's current or future relations with the Liberty University.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Kenneth Shane Lancaster. Please feel free to ask any questions you may at this time. Should you have questions at a later point, you are strongly encouraged to contact Shane Lancaster at the information listed below.

Shane Lancaster

6603 Spout Springs Road

Flowery Branch, GA 30542

(770) 967-8000 X 225

shane. lancaster@hallco. org

The faculty advisor of this research study is Dr. Mark Lamport, malamport@liberty. edu.

Should you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and wish to speak with someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1582, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at fgarzon@liberty. edu or irb@liberty. edu.

A copy of this information will be provided for all participants to keep for their records.

Statement of Consent:

By signing below, you are indicating that you have read and understand the above statements and herby give consent for your responses to be used in the study. By signing below, you acknowledge that you have asked questions and have satisfactorily received answers. Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX G: PARTICIPANT SURVEY

Please respond to the following statements by circling the option that best reflects your beliefs based upon your position as a teacher or administrator.

1. I can identify youth gang graffiti within my school.

Agree Disagree No Opinion

2. I am capable of recognizing the dress styles of youth gang members in my school.

Agree Disagree No Opinion

3. I can recognize youth gang identifiers and tattoos exhibited by students in a school setting.

Agree Disagree No Opinion

4. I am familiar with the specific methods of communication used by gang members while in school.

Agree Disagree No Opinion

5. I am capable of locating and identifying areas claimed as turf by youth gang members.

Agree Disagree No Opinion

6. As a teacher or administrator, I am aware of individual experiences and personal beliefs that may encourage students to join a youth gang.

Agree Disagree No Opinion

7. I am capable of identifying specific dynamics in the communities surrounding my school that may contribute to youth gang formation.

Agree Disagree No Opinion

8. I can identify aspects of family life that may encourage my students to join a youth gang.

Agree Disagree No Opinion

9. I am confident in my ability to recognize the influences peer groups may have in regards to youth gang formation among the students in my school.

Agree Disagree No Opinion

10. As a teacher or administrator, I understand and can identify the influences that student perceptions of school culture, the school environment, and academic experiences have in relation to students joining youth gangs.

Agree Disagree No Opinion

APPENDIX H: DEFINITION OF TERMS FOR PARTICIPANTS

Key definitions associated with the study are:

***Gang tattoos*:** Gang tattoos are tattoos placed upon the body in order to depict membership in a specific gang (Georgia Gang Investigators, 2001).

Graffiti: Graffiti refers to graphic representations, such as drawings, writings, or paintings, applied to public property without approval (Georgia Gang Investigators, 2001).

***Hand signs*:** Hand signs are and gestures used to express words, signals, or other underlying meanings, and such gestures are often used as a form of communication among gang members (Georgia Gang Investigators, 2001).

***Pre-service training*:** Pre-service training is a term used to describe the experiences, observations, and training exercises one undergoes in preparation to become a teacher (Virginia Wesleyan College, n.d.).

Professional development: Professional development is a term, for the purpose of the study, used to describe structured programs or training exercises specifically designed to target key issues within educational settings. Professional development entails "comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach[es] to improving teachers' and principals' effectiveness in raising student achievement" (National Staff Development Council, 2011).

***Turf*:** Turf refers to the specific property or specified boundaries within which a gang declares ownership and control (Georgia Gang Investigators, 2001).

Youth gang: Youth gang is a term that refers to a "self-formed association of peers having the following characteristics: three or more members, . . . a name and some

sense of identity, . . . some degree of permanence and organization, and an elevated level of involvement in delinquent or criminal activity" (NYGC, 2006, ¶2).

Youth gang indicator: Youth gang indicator is a term used to denote physical signs and visual observations indicative of cooperation with, actions of, and/or the general presence of youth gangs (Howell & Lynch, 2000).

Youth gang risk factor: Youth gang risk factor is a term that refers to one or more interacting factors that contributes to the likelihood of one joining a gang or the expansion of gang issues (National Gang Center, 2010).

APPENDIX I: PERMISSION TO DUPLICATE COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

Permission to Utilize, Duplicate, and Modify Copyrighted Materials

I, Dr. Mitzi Porter, Ed.D., hereby grant permission for Kenneth Shane Lancaster to utilize, duplicate, and modify copyrighted materials from my work titled "An Analysis of Elementary and Middle School Educator Awareness of Youth Gang Indicators." I grant permission for the work therein to be used, duplicated, and modified for non-compensated educational research purposes. I understand that any utilized, duplicated, and modified work will be employed by Kenneth Shane Lancaster as components of doctoral candidate research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Education at Liberty University.

Mitzi A. Porter — 3-8-11

Dr. Mitzi Porter, Ed. D. — Date

Kenneth Shane Lancaster — 03/08/11

Kenneth Shane Lancaster — Date

APPENDIX J: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

Interview with P1.

Q1. What is your current professional position?

"I'm the assistant principal in charge of boys' discipline and facilities maintenance."

Q2. How many years of experience do you have in the field of education?

"Including my years teaching, I just finished my 15th year."

Q3. Describe the various settings in which you have taught or served as an administrator.

"I taught for three years at an alternative school in Savannah (Georgia). I then taught for three years at a very small mountain school, well, small compared to the one I currently work at anyways, in Rabun County (Georgia). I moved to [name omitted for confidentiality purposes] County nine years ago, and I taught at [name omitted] for five years before transferring to [name omitted]. I've been an assistant principal at [name omitted] for four years now."

Q4. Tell me about any pre-service training you underwent involving youth gang indicators and risk factors.

"You know, I don't even remember talking gangs or anything related to gangs during my college courses. So, I didn't have any gang-related training before becoming a teacher."

Q5. Reflect upon the staff development exercises you have participated in after entering the field of education. Tell me about any staff development exercises you have taken part in which youth gang indicators and risk factors were focal points of training.

"Um, I remember a couple of training sessions from when I worked in Savannah. Being an alternative school, the school housed about every type of at-risk student you can imagine (laughter). I wouldn't say that gangs were huge problem, but they were a concern based on the types of students that we worked with. We had the local sheriff's department conduct some basic gang identification training mostly so that we could cut off any issues before they became serious. Most of the training dealt with identifying gang graffiti, drawings, and things like that.

The only other time I can remember even discussing gangs as a part of staff development was after I moved to [name omitted]. The teachers had to watch a short PowerPoint presentation about gangs. I think the purpose was to make us more aware of gangs, but I wouldn't really call this training. It was something the superintendent wanted the teachers to see. It really wasn't detailed, and to be honest, I thought it was more entertaining, you know, from an entertainment standpoint (laughter). I wouldn't call it training, even though I'm sure that was the purpose."

Q6. Describe your experiences with youth gangs while serving in the capacity as a teacher or administrator.

"When I was teaching, I don't think I really had any major issues. I remember seeing basic signs like graffiti in the bathroom and things like that, but I never really had any major issues with gang members in my classes. I remember one gang-related fight when I was teaching in Savannah. Two kids jumped another kid in the bathroom and beat him up pretty good. None of my students were involved, and I didn't see the fight, but it was pretty big news for a couple of days.

I'd say that the school I am at now probably has more gang issues than anywhere else I've taught. We have large Hispanic population, and I think gangs tend to be more of an issue here than at the other schools in the county. The SRO (school resource officer) is pretty good when it comes to keeping administrators informed and vice versa. Even though it's not widely known, at one time, the lead SRO in the county was stationed in our school primarily to investigate and help deter gang activity. I think this is done a lot to help curb gangs in our school. In the past four years, we've had a couple of fights that I've had to deal with from an administrative standpoint. We had one issue where three suspected gang members were caught trespassing on campus trying to fight with one of our students, but we were able to locate them and isolate them before they entered the building. We've had our basic issues with things like graffiti, flashing [hand signs], and things like that, but as far as huge problems, I think things could be a lot worse."

Q7. Given the specific circumstances of your school and your personal levels of training and experience as a teacher or administrator, are you capable of recognizing and identifying specific aspects of school that may foster youth gang development? Please elaborate.

"You know, uh….I guess I can see how school could push some kids towards gangs. I think I saw this more when I worked in Savannah in a school where virtually every kid was considered at–risk. You know, I get it…school is stressful for some, some just don't like it, and some just don't fit in. Personally, I see this more as an excuse, but I guess it could be true for some.

You can tell that most of our students that are believed to be in gangs tend to be lower class Hispanic students. Most of them have parents that don't speak English very well or

at all. In some cases, the students don't either. The lack of academic success many of these students face simply makes school unappealing for them, so, yeah, I guess some part of school could possibly push kids towards gangs."

Q8. Do you feel confident in your ability to recognize and identify specific youth gang dress styles within your particular school? Please elaborate.

"Hmmm. I think so, or at least I think I could recognize them…the basics like bandannas, certain colors, and things like that anyways. (Laughter)… You know, this day and time, we have students dressing just about any way you can imagine, so I think it would be really hard for anyone to tell exactly what is or isn't gang-related."

Q9. Based upon your personal experiences and training, please describe the extent of your knowledge related to community dynamics and tendencies for students in your school to join youth gangs.

"We have such a diverse student body, and you can really see the impacts of the community among the students. Like I said a minute ago, a lot of our students have parents that struggle financially, don't speak English very well, and are simply struggling. With recent economic situations, I think we are seeing this little more than usual. I can see the economic strains among all of the students, regardless of ethnicity, gangs, or anything like that. I also know that other factors come into play, such as neighborhood, friends, and things like that."

Q10. Tell me about any methods of communication you have personally witnessed gang members use in your school.

"It's been pretty basic forms like hand signs and graffiti. I don't know of any others, or at least that I can recall at the moment."

Q11. Based upon your personal experiences and training as a teacher or administrator, are you capable of identifying the influences family dynamics have in relation to gang activity within your school? Please elaborate.

"Oh, I'm sure family dynamics play a big role. I think I have mentioned a couple of ways that family influences link to gangs…like financial status, ethnicity, and things like that. As an administrator, I often get to work with parents in ways that teachers don't, so I think I see a little more detail about family situations compared to teachers. A lot of times, we (the administrators) deal with kids that come from single-parent homes, or a lot of them come from abusive situations. So, yeah, I believe I can identify a lot of the ways that family life could help determine whether or not the kid joins a gang."

Q12. Please describe the extent of your knowledge related to local youth gang tattoos or other identifiers exhibited by students within your school.

"I know some of the basics like the numbers 13, 18, and 21. I also know some the basic symbols from working with the school SRO. I've seen several markings like five and six pointed stars, teardrops, three dots in a triangle pattern, and several more basics. Your question about tattoos is a good one, because, you know, tattoos are such a fad right now, I never know if a tattoo is simply a bad reminder from spring break or if it has some other meaning (laughter). A lot of our students have tattoos, but I'm sure most are not gang-related. Other than the basic symbols, names, and things like that though, I'm not sure that I could identify gang tattoos.

Q13. Reflecting upon your experiences and training as a teacher or administrator, how would you describe your ability to recognize the influences peer groups have in relation to youth gang tendencies in your school? Please elaborate.

"I think this is probably the biggest thing to consider. I think peer groups have a lot to do with kids joining gangs. Think about it, when you walk in a room, the first thing you do is look for the people most like you. It's like joining a club. You find something that interests you, you join the group, and then you do what the group wants. I think the peer factor is probably the most obvious when it comes to gangs."

Q14. Based upon your personal experiences, training, and observations as a teacher or administrator, can you distinguish between gang and non-gang graffiti within your school? Please elaborate.

"This is kind of like the question about tattoos. I'm pretty confident I could identify basic gang graffiti like numbers and symbols, but the larger pictures or whatever, I don't know. What I usually do is look for certain aspects that I do know, or I'll call in the SRO if I am unsure. It's standard procedure for us to call the SRO to document suspected gang activity like graffiti, so instead of determining if graffiti on campus is gang-related, I usually focus more on determining if it is not gang-related. Anytime I know or I am unsure about graffiti being gang-related, I call in the SRO. He is usually pretty good about letting me know if something is gang-related or not."

Q15. Given your personal experiences, training, and observations as a teacher or administrator, are you capable of recognizing specific individual student behaviors, mannerisms, and so forth that may increase the likelihood of gang affiliation? Please explain your response.

"I think so. You know, I can see how some kids have personalities that lean more towards gangs. Some kids just have certain attributes that mesh very well with a gang mindset. Think about it, some kids are natural born leaders, some are more inclined

towards violence, and some kids just want to fit in. I don't think I could look at such factors and predict whether or not the kid would definitely join a gang, but I do understand how individual characteristics would play a role."

Q16. Considering your personal experiences, observations, and training, how would you describe your capability to identify territorial practices of youth gangs in your specific school?

"I think it all comes down to knowing your students. Just about all students hang out in groups and congregate in certain spots. I don't think this, well,…uh, this doesn't necessarily determine whether or not a kid is in a gang. I understand that gangs are territorial, and I'm very aware that this could also be true in schools. Like I said, it all comes down to knowing your students, and I am fairly confident that I could determine whether or not gangs are claiming territory in my school."

Q17. Based upon your personal experiences, training, and observations, what is the most influential risk factor(s) that compel students in your school to associate with youth gangs? Please explain why these factors are so compelling.

"I think the most influential one would have to be the peer group a student hangs out with. From my experience with gang members, most of them are just trying to fit in, and gangs give them a way to do so. I'd have to say a close second would be the family influences, because like I said earlier, you know, we have a lot of kids that come from low income or, uh, broken home situations, and we have a lot of students that struggle with a language barrier. So, I think peer groups and families are the two big ones for students at [name omitted].

Q18. Based upon your personal experiences, training, and observations, what are the most common gang indicator(s) students in your school and to display? Please explain why you stated that this/these indicator(s) is/are the most exhibited within your school.

"I'd say we see more graffiti than anything else. It's pretty common in the restrooms, especially the boys, and every now and then you see some drawings on desktops and the likes of that. Graffiti is by far the most common indicator we see at [name omitted]."

Q19. Given the opportunity, what specific advice would you give those responsible for developing pre-service education and training exercises in relation to youth gangs in schools?

"Hmmm, that's a tough question. Well, I think new teachers should have some training or courses when it comes to dealing with difficult or at-risk students. This is something that I could have definitely used as a new teacher, or as an administrator for that matter. I think it would at least be useful to mention gangs as a part of such a course, but I'm not sure I'm the one that could give specific advice as to what should be covered."

Q20. Given the opportunity, what specific advice would you give those responsible for developing staff development exercises in relation to youth gangs in schools?

"I think from an administrative standpoint, more training when it comes to what you called "youth gang indicators" on this list [pointed to definition list provided to participants] would be very useful. I believe the key to fighting any problem is to cut it off early before it's too large. If we knew more about the gang indicators, like the signs, the graffiti,… just the basics, that would be half the battle. I think this would be very useful for a lot of the schools in [name omitted] County. We're just growing so fast and

changing so quickly, we're seeing new problems every day. Unfortunately, gangs are one of those problems."

Q21. Are there any other comments or statements you wish to make regarding the study topic, this study in general, or the interview process? If so, please feel free to speak as you wish.

"I think gangs are an interesting topic to study. I don't know anyone who has done it before around here. I'd like to know what you find out. If you don't mind, let me know how your study goes."