A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY OF GRADE RETENTION AS EXPERIENCED BY
MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO WERE TWICE RETAINED

by

Dimetri Nicole Richardson

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for Degree
Doctor of Education

Liberty University
March, 2016
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of grade level retention for twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia. During data collection, 10 twice retained, middle school students in grades 6-8 residing in Eastern Virginia were surveyed, interviewed, and provided personal journals. The theory guiding this study was constructivism, due to its consideration of individuals’ unique experiences and multiple realities (Piaget, 1954). This study’s qualitative data was coded using horizontalization, and clusters of meaning were developed, which allowed textural and structural descriptions of the participants’ unique experiences. The study’s findings reveal twice retained, middle school students’ views of and experiences with grade level retention. Also, participants disclosed their feelings following grade level retention and its impact on their motivation. Furthermore, this study presents factors contributing to grade level retention and viable options. This study contributes to the current understanding of the impact of grade retention on individuals and practices of grade retention due to its qualitative nature and focus on twice retained, middle school students’ experiences with grade retention.

Keywords: alternatives, constructivism, contributing factors, grade retention, middle school, motivation, phenomenological, twice retained.
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List of Abbreviations

Adult Basic Education (ABE)
Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)
Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP)
Common Core State Standards (CCSS)
Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI)
Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)
Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)
General Educational Development (GED)
High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE)
Imaginary Audience (IA)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
National External Diploma Program (NEDP)
No Child Left Behind (NCLB)
Personal Fable (PF)
Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC)
Socioeconomic Status (SES)
Standards of Learning (SOLs)
Virginia Department of Education (VDOE)
Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

In spite of the fact that research demonstrates grade retention fails to produce prolonged academic or emotional growth (Huang, 2014; Willson & Hughes, 2009; Pagani, Vitaro, Tremblay, McDuff, Japel, & Larose, 2008), grade retention has been continuously utilized as an intervention for students unprepared to perform academically or emotionally on the subsequent grade level. In past years, many school districts neglected to create formal retention criteria and depended heavily upon teachers’ recommendations and students’ social or emotional maturity levels (Schnurr, Kundert, & Nickerson, 2009). Due to the accountability requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) Act and the reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), which will go into full effect in 2017, there continues to be a strong emphasis on closing achievement gaps existing between low performing, retained students and their promoted counterparts (“Evidence Requirements,” 2016; Maleyko & Gawlik, 2011). Consequently, because of NCLB (2001) school districts relied heavily upon students’ performance on standardized tests to determine a need for grade retention (Gottfried, 2012). However, the reauthorization of ESSA (2015) “encourages a smarter approach to testing by moving away from a sole focus on standardized tests” (“The White House,” 2015, para. 9) and promotes a holistic approach to education.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the experiences of grade level retention for twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia. This chapter introduces the study and its focus, beginning with background information regarding grade level retention. Additionally, the statement of the problem investigated is elaborated upon, and rationale for why the study is worthy of pursuit is incorporated.
Background

Although retention of students is intended to improve mastery of educational objectives, many retained students do not receive adequate assistance and continue to poorly perform on grade level objectives (Robles-Pina, 2011). Furthermore, the repetition of identical material in core classes, without differentiation to meet individual students’ needs, is a futile instructional method because some students may be years behind in one subject area but only a number of months behind in other content areas. The controversial practice of grade retention has become a concern in the United States due to the fact that the practice has not consistently proven to be beneficial to the majority of the retained students, and post-retention, students consistently trailed their promoted peers (Gottfried, 2012).

The NCLB Act (NCLB, 2001) and Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI, 2010) have created new academic standards and testing procedures; consequently, many retained and low achieving students may remain in middle school settings long after their peers have been promoted to high school. The accountability standards of NCLB intensified educational problems such as grade retention and the drop-out rates, and NCLB may have broadened the educational achievement gap for retained students (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). The Common Core outlines the skills and knowledge in English and mathematics that should be taught so that students will academically succeed and be “prepared for the global economic workplace” (Common Core State Standards [CCSS], 2010, p. 1). The Common Core encourages academic improvement by instituting “tough standards that control what is taught and by testing students on the standards, thereby making sure that the standards are taught” (Krashen, 2014, p. 37). Via these standards and NCLB, a culture of high expectations is fostered for all students in grades K-12; however, there is “no evidence that having national standards and increasing testing
have improved student learning” (Krashen, 2014, p. 38). In alignment with Krashen (2014), standards set forth by ESSA (2015) acknowledge that school districts should refrain from reliance on excessive and poor-quality assessments to improve student learning. Instead, educators are encouraged to foster critical thinking, problem solving, and composition skills.

Not only will many twice retained students drop out of school but those who remain in school may lose motivation and demonstrate classroom discipline problems, which negatively affect classroom environments and school climates (Robles-Pina, 2011). Previous research has indicated that the practice of grade retention hinders the success of low achieving students and their classmates by restricting their motivation to learn (Ehmke, Dreschel, & Carstensen, 2010).

All stakeholders, inclusive of students, parents, faculty, and communities, will benefit from the proposed research. Stakeholders, via the results of this study, will be better prepared to address an extensive range of retained students’ emotional, motivational, and behavioral needs. The current study, by elucidating students’ lived experiences and perceptions, enhances past research because retained middle school students’ perceptions are critical in shaping their educational experiences. It is often during this time that middle school students are presented with opportunities to either commence toward accomplishment and success or become diverted and frustrated. Because middle school students’ turning points are often relational or social related, educational stakeholders must be mindful of students’ “social activities, family complications, or changes in peer groups” (Zabloski, 2010, p. 146). Consequently, an ongoing concern in middle school improvement efforts will be the necessity to address the unique and plentiful needs of retained middle school students, who are at least two years older than the traditional age for a particular grade.
Situation to Self

Moustakas (1994) addressed the importance of a researcher in a phenomenological study having “a personal interest in whatever he or she seeks to know” (p. 59). I am personally interested in and motivated to conduct this study because, as a middle school teacher, I educated a number of students who experienced grade retention. Although some students were academically unsuccessful in my content area, I experienced mixed emotions concerning their grade level retentions. While I was mindful of the fact that the retained students were ill-prepared to experience success in the upcoming grade level, I was also aware of my opinion that grade level retention is not an academic intervention that improves student learning. In the classroom, I utilized instructional strategies that I felt best; however, I often questioned the effectiveness of my methods and contemplated what I could have done differently to address their specific educational and personal needs. By means of this study, I expected to discover whether or not twice retained, middle school students shared my opinion concerning the ineffectiveness of grade level retention.

The ontological philosophical assumption that I brought to the study was that multiple students’ realities would be unearthed. Additionally, the goal of the study was to reveal “what it means to be” (van Manen, 1990, p. 183) a twice retained, middle school student in Eastern Virginia. In this study, twice retained, middle school students’ various realities “and the implications of those constructions for their lives and interactions with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 96) were explored.

My ontological assumption acknowledges varied perspectives. Participants’ realities were reported, no realities were deemed more accurate than others, and I pursued a meaningful understanding of the collected data and its context by means of an ontological inquiry. Holstein
and Gubrium (2000) stated that an understanding of data and context is significant because an ontological inquiry aims “to document the articulation and emergence of meaning in rich detail as it unfolds” (p. 33). An ontological assumption that assumes multiple realities reveals a socially created, multidimensional, and constantly fluctuating perception of reality. Glesne (2006) indicated that reality is “relative to the specific location and people involved” (p. 6). Since qualitative research is aimed at seeking to understand and interpret how a variety of participants construct their worlds, an ontological assumption provides an opportunity to access and acknowledge multiple experiences of participants.

The paradigm that guided the study is constructivism because of its consideration of individuals’ unique experiences and interest in multiple realities, which are often dependent upon individuals’ backgrounds (Martin, 2011). Constructivism, a theory based upon the idea that students can actively create their own knowledge and reasoning, allows students opportunities to develop into perceptive beings by leaving them free and unaided with their peer groups, in order to pursue their independent interests and questionings (Ducret, 2001). The theory of constructivism is rooted in the practices of Socrates, who led his students to realize for themselves the strengths and weaknesses of their thought processes. In addition, Jean Piaget believed that individuals learned via construction of one logical thought after another (Bruner, 1997). A constructivist framework upholds that individuals construct their views of the world, and all points of view are equally valid.

A constructivist view requires that educators rely less upon instructive or textual transmissions of knowledge in the classroom and challenges educators to closely examine socially constructed natures of institutions, objectives, and accepted practices (Ducret, 2001). Attention to a constructivist view takes into consideration individuals’ realities, ways in which
their realities can be interpreted, and how realities impact individuals’ comprehension and analysis of information. By means of a constructivist view, experiences of middle school students who were twice retained were gleaned. Additionally, a constructivist view afforded opportunities to discover students’ realities and ways in which their realities directly impacted their educational and personal achievements.

**Problem Statement**

Although grade retention negatively impacts students (Pagani et al., 2008), it is widely practiced throughout the United States, and in 2011 there were nearly 2.4 million students who repeated grades (Bornsheuer, Polonyi, Andrews, Fore, & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). According to Goldschmidt and Wang (1999), grade retention is “the single strongest factor predictor of dropping out” (p. 717). Additionally, students who experience grade retention are twice as likely as their promoted classmates to be retained multiple times, and they are nearly 80% more likely to drop out of school (Robles-Pina, 2011).

While previous studies have focused on the impacts of grade retention on classroom environments and drop-out rates (Jimerson, 2012), a gap in the literature existed addressing twice retained middle school students’ experiences with grade retention. In particular, it was important to explore middle school students’ experiences because the negative impacts of grade retention are significantly increased when students are retained in grades 4-8 (Franco & Patel, 2011).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of grade level retention for twice retained, middle school students in grades 6-8 residing in Eastern Virginia. Throughout the research, twice retained students are defined as students who have
been retained at least two consecutive or non-consecutive years. The theories guiding this study are Maslow’s (1943) theory of motivation, Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory, and Elkind’s (1967) theory of adolescent egocentrism. Maslow’s (1943) theory of motivation is related to the focus of inquiry because individuals’ needs are “arranged in a hierarchy of prepotency” (p. 14), and once more essential needs are met individuals can then progress to the higher stages (Onyehalu, 1983). Bandura’s (1967) self-efficacy theory contributes to the understanding of the amount of effort retained students exhibit, and Elkind’s (1967) theory of adolescent egocentrism provides reasons for adolescent students’ mindsets, choices, and actions.

**Significance of the Study**

This study is significant due to its unique perspective on grade retention from twice retained, middle school students’ viewpoints. An abundance of research has been conducted concerning the perceived impact, contributing factors, and importance of early intervention concerning retention of students (Peterson & Hughes, 2011). However, minimal research has been conducted on students’ detailed experiences with grade retention. This research study addressed this gap in literature by conducting a phenomenological study that gleaned first-hand accounts of students’ experiences, as well as their perceptions of grade retention.

Through descriptions of middle school students’ experiences and perceptions of retention, stakeholders can glean not only a better understanding of the causes, concerns, and consequences of repeated grade retention but most importantly gain a greater understanding of twice retained students’ subjective stories and experiences with grade retention. All stakeholders, after understanding these experiences, can take active roles in modifying this widely accepted practice (Johnson & Perkins, 2009). Modifying the practice of grade retention
can improve the probability of students’ academic successes, foster environments conducive to learning, and improve students’ socioemotional adjustment (Powell, 2010).

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

**Research Question 1:** What are twice retained middle school students’ experiences with grade retention? This research question was designed to elicit twice retained, middle school students’ descriptions of their unique experiences. Via this question, I explored students’ feelings of debilitating anxiety when facing repeated academic failure (Martin & Marsh, 2008). Additionally, this question revealed students’ experiences with frustration, humiliation, hostility, and oppositional behaviors (Wu, West, & Hughes, 2010).

**Research Question 2:** How does grade retention influence the motivation of twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia? Maslow’s (1943) theory of motivation addressed the esteem needs of individuals and pointed out that failure to realize these needs often “produces feelings of inferiority, of weakness and of helplessness” (p. 7). By means of this question, I learned ways in which failure influences students’ motivation. Martin (2011) stated that retained students are likely to be “significantly lower in academic motivation, engagement, literacy and numeracy” (p. 742) and are more likely, than their promoted counterparts, to desire to drop out of school and poorly perform academically.

**Research Question 3:** What factors do twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia identify as contributing to repeated grade retention? By way of this question, the study presented contributing factors, identified by twice retained, middle school students. As stated by Langenkamp (2010), social relationships often impact middle schools students’ academic successes and failures. Factors often identified as being closely associated with success in
middle school are positive teacher bonding and peer relationships, which are linked to students’ academic achievement and success (Langenkamp, 2010). Furthermore, disruptions such as relocation or familial structure changes frequently and significantly influence students’ academic careers (Langenkamp, 2010), and middle school students frequently experience life-altering events that are directly correlated to their academic difficulties (Chau, Baumann, Kabuth, & Chau, 2012).

Research Question 4: What alternatives to grade level retention are identified by twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia? According to Knesting (2008), alternatives to grade retention have been thoroughly discussed from the perspectives of parents, educators, school board members, politicians, and researchers; however, “students are seldom involved in the conversation” (p. 7). Via this question, I actively sought students’ perspectives concerning possible alternatives to grade retention and discovered what would assist them in achieving academic success.

Research Plan

For this study investigating the experiences of grade level retention of twice retained, middle school students, a phenomenological approach was utilized. A phenomenological approach was best for this study because I gleaned an understanding of middle school students’ (N = 10) shared experiences with grade retention. This approach, which “is committed to descriptions of experiences, not explanations or analyses” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58) provided ample opportunities to understand and describe the common experiences of twice retained, middle school students. A survey, semi-structured interviews, visual narrative, and journaling were utilized to collect data for this study. Once saturation was achieved, I organized and analyzed the data to facilitate the development of textural, structural, and composite descriptions.
The essence of retained students’ experiences revealed “the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller or deeper manner” (van Manen, 1990, p. 10).

Delimitations

This qualitative study was delimited to twice retained, middle school students in grades 6-8 residing in Eastern Virginia. Although there were numerous benefits of focusing on general education middle school students located in Eastern Virginia, it is possible that dissimilar students’ experiences would be found in students in different areas of the United States. This study was not designed to determine the causes and effects of grade retention; rather it was designed to describe students’ experiences of being twice retained. The study’s results are unable to be generalized due to its qualitative nature; however, it is important to note that I provide ample detailed descriptions so that the reader can relate the setting to his or her current setting. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) indicated, an effective method of ensuring transferability is to compose thick descriptions “of the sending context so that someone in the potential receiving context may assess the similarity between them and the study” (p. 125). Since information on the survey was self-reporting, there was a possibility that students would only report information they felt comfortable sharing. The hindrance of self-reporting was addressed via a rapport developed with students during multiple interviews.

Definitions

The definitions below are provided to explain terms utilized in this phenomenological study.

1. *Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)* – measure utilized by school districts to determine that students are improving academically; in order to achieve AYP districts must
exhibit an increase in the percentage of students meeting or exceeding statewide yearly achievement objectives (Thompson, Meyers, & Oshima, 2011).

2. **At-risk Student** – students most impacted by risk factors such as low academic achievement, grade retention, and low socioeconomic status (Morris, 2010).

3. **Dropout** – student who was enrolled at any time during the previous school year who is not currently enrolled at the beginning of the current school year and who has not successfully completed school (Zehr, 2010).

4. **Grade Retention** – the practice of requiring students who have been on a particular grade level for a complete school year to remain in that grade level for a subsequent school year (Wu et al., 2010).

5. **Social Promotion** – the practice “of keeping students who fail with their age group” (Renaud, 2013, p. 5).

**Summary**

Chapter One introduced the study’s focus and background information regarding grade level retention. This chapter was inclusive of my motivation to complete this phenomenological study exploring the experiences of twice retained middle school students in Eastern Virginia. Since varied perspectives were acknowledged in this study, I brought an ontological assumption into the study. A constructivist view guided the study because of its concern with multiple realities and unique experiences. A gap in the literature existed concerning twice retained, middle school students experiences with grade level retention. This study provides a distinctive perspective on grade level retention from the points of view of twice retained, middle school students residing in Eastern Virginia.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of grade level retention for twice retained, middle school students in grades 6-8 residing in Eastern Virginia. This chapter provides an overview of the historical background and theoretical framework guiding this study. The review of current literature explicates the impacts and contributing factors, as well as perceptions of grade retention. Additionally, characteristics of retained students and current practices are discussed, and the chapter concludes with alternatives to grade retention and the study’s imminent contribution to the research field. Empirical literature correlated to grade retention is reviewed, and previous studies outlining the outcomes and practice of grade retention are examined.

Historical Background

Grade Retention in United States

Grade retention, the act of requiring that students repeat the same grade for at least one additional year, has been utilized in the United States’ educational system in excess of 100 years (Peterson & Hughes, 2011). Since the inception of age-based classrooms in the 19th century, grade retention has been an accepted and implemented educational practice (Ehmke et al., 2010). Evidenced by the fact that nearly 20% of the students in the United States have been retained at least once (Reschly & Christenson, 2013), many stakeholders view grade retention as a positive academic intervention. Proponents contend that grade retention provides an additional opportunity for students to relearn curriculum and become academically equivalent to their grade-level peers.
During the mid-1960s a paradigm shift occurred, and stakeholders began to acknowledge the detrimental effects of grade retention. Historically, grade retention has negatively impacted students by decreasing their educational motivation, lowering their self-esteem, and limiting their learning opportunities (Ehmke et al., 2010). The practice of grade retention places educators in a quandary because oftentimes there are few viable options available to meet the educational needs of students. Because of this dilemma, educational researchers and administrators, in the 1960s, began to promote social promotion, which encourages advancement of students to the next grade level with their age peers (Jacob & Lefgren, 2009).

Due to No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) legislation, there was another paradigm shift triggering extreme emphasis on core standards and accountability, thus returning grade retention to the forefront of educational debates. Schools’ accountability for students’ academic performance has also increased, and more students are being “left behind” their peers because they are unable to meet predetermined local and state standards. The contentious and prolonged examination of grade retention has resulted in individual educational settings developing varied methods to determine students’ success in attaining specified educational and social criteria (Reschly & Christenson, 2013). Gottfried (2012) suggested that NCLB has caused many schools to increase the number of retained students as a proposed strategy to increase schools’ adequate yearly progress (AYP), improve students’ mastery of curriculum, and an intervention for struggling students.

**No Child Left Behind Act and Every Student Succeeds Act**

As a result of the NCLB Act of 2001 there were vast modifications to the United States educational system. NCLB aimed to hold states wholly accountable for the successes and failures of all students by establishing three main components that all must implement: “(a)
develop content standards to determine what students should know, (b) administer assessments to measure whether students are meeting those standards, and (c) institute accountability mechanisms to ensure that all students attain the proficiency standards” (Maleyko & Gawlik, 2011, p. 615). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) is the most current version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was initially passed in 1965 and signed into law by President Johnson (Holton, 2010). ESSA (2015) maintains the requirement that states incorporate yearly assessments in reading/language arts and mathematics for students in grades 3-8 and once in high school, in addition to a science assessment at least once in grades 3-12.

NCLB integrated both positive and negative consequences for states, schools, and students. On account of NCLB, states were required to recurrently test students and report on their progress, which is determined by the proportion of students achieving AYP by scoring at least a “proficient” level (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). In order to increase accountability in schools that do not make AYP for two consecutive years, NCLB required that these schools:

(a) develop a two-year school improvement plan with input from parents, staff, the school district, and outside experts; (b) notify parents of public school choice and provide transportation to an available school of choice; and (c) obtain technical assistance geared at achieving school reform and provide professional development for teachers. (Kubick & Mcloughlin, 2005, p. 352)

Based upon reported test results, states and schools not only implemented better methods of data collection and analysis, but they encouraged focus on under-served, under-achieving students (Fusarelli, 2004). On the other hand, an abundance of research studies exposed the flaws in NCLB because of its reliance upon the use of standardized testing to determine students’ academic gains (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). In contrast, ESSA (2015) incorporates efforts to streamline annual testing, aims to reduce instructional time spent on standardized testing, and places less emphasis on standardized testing as a determinate of students’ academic gains. Under NCLB (2001) states regulated individualized minimum requirements for AYP, and it was problematic to determine “whether students have improved in a given time frame or the standards or cut points were simply altered” (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009, p. 138). In order to document and monitor students’ academic improvement, ESSA (2015) requires that states report: academic achievement on yearly assessments, graduation rates, and English language proficiency; indicators must be generated for all students in order to evidence their progress and achievement gap closures.

**Common Core State Standards**

Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are the skills and knowledge in English language arts and mathematics taught to students in grades K-12 in order to “ensure that students have the skills and knowledge they need to be successful” (CCSS, 2010, p.1). Currently, 43 states have adopted and are in the process of fully implementing the standards (CCSS, 2010). The CCSSI-promotes a national curriculum, gives the federal government complete control of educational decisions, and directly impacts all children residing in the states that have fully or partially adopted the standards (Krashen, 2014). States that have adopted CCSS were given 4.5 billion
dollars; however, acceptance required denial of Title I funding (Krashen, 2014). The standards were created to be:

- Fewer, cleaner, and higher, to best drive effective policy and practice;
- Aligned with college and work expectations, so that all students are prepared for success upon graduating from high school;
- Inclusive of rigorous content and applications of knowledge through higher-order skills so that all students are prepared for the 21st century;
- Internationally benchmarked, so that all students are prepared for succeeding in our global economy and society; and
- Research and evidence based (CCSS, 2010).

The CCSS (2010) were established by state education chiefs and governors in 48 states; educators, administrators, and parents also participated in the development of the standards. Application of the standards, inclusive of how they are implemented in the classroom, curriculum development, and supplemental materials are entirely determined on state and district levels (CCSS, 2010). The Common Core establishes what English and mathematics skills students should learn; however, the standards do not regulate how educators should teach their students. Educators are given autonomy in development of their lesson plans and curriculum, in order to address the particular academic needs of their students. The CCSS (2010) directly impact educators by:

- Providing them with consistent goals and benchmarks to ensure students are progressing on a path for success in college, career, and life.
- Providing them with consistent expectations for students who move into their districts and classrooms from other states.
• Providing them the opportunity to collaborate with teachers across the country as they develop curricula, materials, and assessments linked to high-quality standards.
• Helping colleges and professional development programs better prepare teachers.

There is no detailed data collection requirement associated with Common Core (CCSS, 2010). The standards determine learning expectations for all students; however, assessment and data collection methods are solely determined by states (CCSS, 2010).

Opponents of Common Core claim that the standards increase the federal government’s control over educational decisions and decrease school districts’ accountability to stakeholders (“Virginia Standards Predated”, 2014). States such as Virginia are not adopting CCSS because the state considers its Standards of Learning (SOLs) curriculum as comparable and in some instances superior to Common Core (“Virginia Standards Predated”, 2014). Supporters of Virginia’s adopted SOLs indicate that the current state standards incorporate higher-ordered thinking, “provide good structure for teachers, and the requirements of the SOL tests encourage purposeful instruction” (Grogan, 2001, p. 8). Additionally, abandonment of SOLs and adoption of Common Core would send unclear signals to “educators who have made standards-based reform a success for the commonwealth’s students” (“Virginia Standards Predated”, 2014, p. 18).

Unfortunately, there were multiple unintended consequences of educational initiatives such as NCLB and Common Core, and demands of the initiatives “may be increasing the achievement gap for at risk-students” (Belfiore, Auld, & Lee, 2005, Planty el al., 2008). Additionally, researchers (Dworkin, 2005; Haney, 2000; Lipman, 2002; Urrita, 2004) indicated that accountability systems have increased grade level retention and drop-out rates for low-income, minority students. Haney (2000) specified that standardized testing is linked to the
retention of at-risk students prior to a testing grade, and this practice is of special concern because students who have been retained are more likely to drop out of school.

**Theoretical Framework**

Due to the fact that grade retention is a multidimensional process, three theories have emerged to explain the phenomenon and assist in understanding underlying causes and perceptions. Maslow’s (1943) theory of motivation offers awareness of students’ hierarchy of basic needs, and Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory provides insight into the amount of effort retained students often exhibit. Elkind’s (1967) theory of adolescent egocentrism offers reasoning for adolescents’ mindsets, choices, and actions. Educators must be mindful of these theories in order to address the educational needs of retained students.

**Maslow’s Theory of Motivation**

Maslow’s (1943) theory of motivation addresses the physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization needs of individuals; these basic needs are intertwined and placed on a “hierarchy of prepotency” (p. 14). According to Maslow (1943), “the most proponent goal will monopolize consciousness and will tend of itself to organize the recruitment of the various capacities of the organism” (p. 14). When needs are satisfied, a higher need surfaces and governs individuals’ conscious because fulfilled needs no longer serve as effective motivators.

Maslow (1943) indicated that individuals’ physiological needs are required for survival and inclusive of food, water, and rest. Students lacking physiological needs often fail to properly function, and other needs are more likely to “become simply non-existent or be pushed into the background” (Maslow, 1943, p. 3). For example, in the event that students’ physiological needs are unmet, they are less likely to express interest in composing poetry or studying American
history (Maslow, 1943). Students’ physiological needs are considered most important and must be addressed prior to subsequent needs.

Once individuals’ physiological needs are satisfied, safety needs arise. Maslow (1943) indicated that satisfaction of safety needs is inclusive of an “undisrupted routine or rhythm” (p.5) and “a predictable orderly world” (p. 5). Parents play critical roles in assisting children in realization of safety needs because “injustice, unfairness, or inconsistency in the parents seems to make a child feel anxious and unsafe” (Maslow, 1943, p. 5). According to Smetana, Campione-Barr, and Metzger (2006), consistent parental monitoring and involvement is significant and associated with “higher academic achievement and better adolescent adjustment” (p.262). Adolescents frequently crave structure, organization, and dependable individuals because they prefer environments in which unforeseen, uncontrollable, or other unsafe situations do not occur.

Satisfaction of physiological and safety needs creates an emergence of “love and affection and belongingness needs” (Maslow, 1943, p.7). In a quest to satisfy love needs, individuals desire affectionate interactions and group acceptance. Love needs are inclusive of both giving and receiving love, in conjunction with acceptance from individuals’ peers. During adolescence, peer relationships are multifaceted, and adolescents “are more involved and intimate with peers, increasingly sharing thoughts and feelings” (Petersen, 1988, p. 600). Grade level retention negatively impacts students’ sense of belonging since they are no longer with their “peers and have to join a new group of students younger than they are” (Ehmke et al., 2010, p. 27). Because of adolescents’ social development, their desires to be accepted by peers often supersedes physiological and safety needs.

All individuals desire “firmly based, high evaluations of themselves for self-respect or self-esteem” (Maslow, 1943, p. 7). Esteem needs are divided into two categories: (a) desire for
strength, achievement, adequacy, confidence, and independence and (b) desire for reputation (Maslow, 1943). Satisfaction of esteem needs causes individuals to feel self-confident, worthy, capable, and useful; however, failing to satisfy esteem needs produces feelings of “inferiority, of weakness, or of helplessness” (Maslow, 1943, p.7). According to Ehmke et al. (2010), students who have previously repeated a grade, are likely to experience decreased self-esteem and motivation.

Once previous needs are mastered, the desire for self-actualization or self-fulfillment arises (Maslow, 1943). This level of need encourages individuals to reach their full potential and “become all that one is capable of becoming” (Maslow, 1943, p.8). After deficiency needs are met, “students seek intellectual activity according to their passions” (Wakefield, 2012, p. 349). Realization of this need greatly varies because the passions of one may not coincide with the passions of others.

Research has suggested significant correlations between grade retention and students’ personal and academic motivation (Martin, 2011). Because failure to achieve these needs often negatively impacts students, educators must be cognizant of Maslow’s (1943) theory of motivation when planning, implementing, and assessing instructional methods that meet the individualized, educational needs of twice retained, middle school students in their educational settings. Additionally, individuals’ motivational levels are powerfully influenced by their self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1977).

**Bandura’s Self-Efficacy Theory**

According to Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory, people possess the ability to exercise control over their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Efficacy expectation is defined as “the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes”
Individuals with low self-efficacy usually believe that situations are more difficult than they actually are; in contrast, high self-efficacy creates “feelings of serenity in approaching difficult tasks and activities” (Pajares, 1996, p. 545). Self-efficacy often determines the amount of effort and persistence people exhibit in order to produce desired outcomes.

Self-efficacy theory indicates that individuals’ beliefs about themselves strongly influence their behaviors (Bandura, 1977). However, it is not the singular determinate of behavior; individuals must also have “appropriate skills and adequate incentives” (Bandura, 1977, p. 194). Students’ beliefs and expectations often produce desired results, if compatible skills are present (Bandura, 1977). For instance, Pajares (1996) indicated that students “confident in their math skills expect high marks on math exams and expect the quality of their work to reap benefits” (p. 558). On the other hand, students who doubt their mathematical abilities envision failure prior to attempting tasks (Pajares, 1996). Due to their lack of appropriate skills, students’ “imagined performances will be differently envisioned: academic success and other benefits for the former, academic failure and curtailed possibilities for the latter” (Pajares, 1996, p. 558). Improvement of students’ academic skills is of importance to educators of retained students because students’ self-efficacy can be enhanced “if the skills for each subject have been adequately taught and developed by a competent teacher” (Pajares, 1996, p. 564). In order to successfully perform academically and increase self-efficacy, students should also have meaningful incentives (Bandura, 1977). Lee (1988) indicated that incentives frequently impact performance because they lead to individuals setting and obtaining higher goals. In turn, self-efficacy levels increase because higher goals were accomplished (Lee, 1988). Students with suitable skills and acceptable incentives frequently select and complete difficult
tasks, exert maximum amounts of effort, and appropriately address stressful situations (Bandura, 1977).

Bandura (1997) identified four sources that create opportunities for individuals to develop their self-efficacy beliefs: (a) enactive mastery, (b) vicarious experiences, (c) verbal persuasion, and (d) physiological/affective state. Bandura (1997) indicated that enactive mastery, successful performance of an intended behavior, is most important to individuals’ self-efficacy because it provides “the most authentic evidence of whether one can muster whatever it takes to succeed” (p. 80). Since students often recognize their ability to succeed once tasks are mastered and perceived hurdles are overcome, retained students’ attention should be redirected to evidence of their successes, instead of constant focus on their failures. Vicarious experiences influence individuals’ self-efficacy and provide opportunities for them to observe modeled tasks and judge their abilities in comparison to others (Bandura, 1997). Retained students’ vicarious experiences should be carefully organized in order to ensure that they are partnered with peer models that they can easily relate to and comprehend. Verbal persuasion’s goal is to convince individuals that their successes are achieved via effort and ability. Bandura (1986) indicated that individuals who are verbally persuaded are more likely to exhibit “greater sustained effort and sustain it than if they harbor self-doubts and dwell on personal deficiencies when problems arise” (p. 400). Verbal persuasion provided to retained students can positively impact their self-efficacy and assist them in attributing their successes to personal efforts and abilities.

Physiological or affective state relates to individuals’ emotional and physical reactions to success and failure and occurs concurrently with enactive mastery, vicarious experiences, and verbal persuasion (Bandura, 1997). Individuals’ physiological or affective state is important because people “can rouse themselves to elevated levels of distress that produce the very dysfunction
they fear” (Bandura, 1997, p. 107). Therefore, it is critical that educators closely monitor students’ reactions to success and failure and make necessary adjustments when instructing retained students.

Academic self-efficacy is defined as “the perception of individuals regarding their skills and qualities that direct their efforts to attain success” (Kandemir, 2014, p. 101). Students’ academic efficacy beliefs impact how they view their educational goals and aspirations, their responses to opportunities and challenges, and ultimately their decisions about colleges, majors, and careers (Hagiwara, Maulucci, & Ramos, 2011, p. 1001). Academic self-efficacy is task specific; in some instances, retained students may have high self-efficacy in one content area but low self-efficacy in another. Since grade retention negatively impacts students’ academic efficacy (Wu et al., 2010), stakeholders should begin to carefully examine what supports students’ academic self-efficacy in addition to the constructs that undermine their academic self-efficacy.

**Theory of Adolescent Egocentrism**

Elkind’s (1967) theory of adolescent egocentrism addresses adolescents’ focus on themselves and typical adolescent behaviors. Due to psychological changes, adolescents are primarily concerned with themselves and frequently lack the ability to distinguish between their own preoccupations and concerns of others. Consequently, adolescents have distorted views of themselves and others, and they believe others are preoccupied with their appearances and behaviors (Elkind, 1967).

Elkind (1967) identified the imaginary audience (IA) and personal fable (PF) in order to describe the egocentric mindset of adolescents. The IA, the first consequence of adolescent egocentrism, indicates that adolescents consider themselves the focus of all societal situations.
and audience members’ points of view parallel their viewpoints (Beaudoin & Schonert-Reichl, 2006). Elkind (1967) further described the IA as adolescents’ tendencies to view themselves as the centers of other’s attention or the predisposition to assume the reactions of others in both real and imagined situations. According to Lapsley (1993), IA explains adolescents’ increased self-consciousness, ostentatious behaviors, excessive desire for privacy, and “concern with shame, shyness, and embarrassment” (p. 563).

The PF, the second consequence of adolescent egocentrism, causes adolescents to “construct fables about themselves that stress the themes of personal uniqueness, omnipotence, and invulnerability” (Lapsley, 1993, p. 563). When faced with academic failure, adolescents frequently create personal fables, negative self-images, and “a sense of inadequacy that may hinder future learning” (Slavin, 1997, p. 53). Adolescent failure, either real or perceived, is viewed as “an inability to measure up to one’s own standards” (Slavin, 1997, p. 53) or standards of audience members. The theory of adolescent egocentrism provides understanding of increased internal and external behavioral problems experienced by adolescents. According to Lapsley (1993), PF accounts for adolescents’ increased “risk-taking and the seeming disregard for danger and for the consequences of imprudence in social behavior of all kinds” (p. 563). Increased internalized behaviors are linked to lowered self-esteem; whereas externalized behaviors are linked to increased academic obstacles, delinquency, drug and alcohol consumption, and teen pregnancy (Beaudoin & Schonert-Reichl, 2006).

Adolescent egocentrism tends to lessen by the age of 16, and adolescents’ focus on IA shifts to reactions and concerns of real audiences (Elkind, 1967). On the other hand, PF is overcome by intimate relationships, discovery that others have feelings similar to theirs,
establishment of true relationships, and “integration of the feelings of others” (Elkind, 1967, p. 1032) with their personal emotions.

Smenta et al. (2006) divided adolescence into three distinct developmental periods: entailing early adolescence (10-13), middle adolescence (14-17), and late adolescence (18- early 20s). During these developmental periods, adolescents are frequently described as unsettled and rebellious “because they are actively exploring possibilities for self-definition, which may require questioning or rejecting previously held beliefs” (Cauley & Pannozzo, 2009, p. 39). Awareness of the theory of adolescent egocentrism and adolescents’ development periods provide insight into how adolescents relate to others and view the world. Stakeholders must put forth positive influences on adolescents’ worldviews, in particular those at risk of academic failure. Educators must begin to create classroom environments that are supportive of adolescents as they contend with egocentrism and their identities. It is additionally imperative that educators foster environments that are supportive of personal acceptance and expansion of students’ views of their abilities to succeed in the educational arena.

**Related Literature**

This review of published literature highlights the causes and impact of grade retention. Additionally, the information addresses characteristics of retained students, current practices, alternatives to grade retention, and perceptions with grade retention. Based upon the available literature, additional research should be conducted concerning students’ experiences with grade retention, which was the intention of this study.

**Contributing Factors**

Several internal and external factors contribute to repeated grade retention of students, and nearly 25% of students’ academic success is attributed to nonacademic factors (Bloom,
1976). In order to aid students in their academic achievements, stakeholders must also address nonacademic factors impacting students’ successes. Willson and Hughes (2009) addressed the impact social and psychological variables have on grade retention and identified multiple areas that are related to grade retention: (a) academic competence, (b) sociodemographic characteristics, (c) social, emotional, and behavioral characteristics, (d) classroom context, and (e) home environment.

Academic competence is a key variable to consider when predicting grade retention and high school dropout. Willson and Hughes’ (2009) comprehensively examined the impact of cognitive ability, achievement in reading and math, teacher perception of achievement and teacher-rated engagement on grade retention. Findings indicated that academic competence is the “greatest constellation of variables” connected to grade retention (Willson & Hughes, 2009, p. 262). According to Cohen and Smerdon (2009), failure in eighth grade English and mathematics courses are early predictors of repeated grade level retention and “predictors of high school dropout” (p. 182). Low academic competence is linked to increased retention and dropout rates, and further exploration of these variables is imperative.

An understanding of social, emotional, and behavioral characteristics’ relationship to achievement is imperative. Adolescents experience vast changes in social, emotional and behavioral characteristics, and these changes often impact academic success. During adolescence, individuals begin to cultivate personal identities and experience increased autonomy (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Adolescent students begin to develop social networks and experience changes in their behaviors. Cohen and Smerdon’s (2009) study indicated that adolescents often displayed lower self-esteem and uncertainties concerning social situations, which led to increased academic stress and could cause “negative or disruptive behaviors” (p.
Adolescent students’ decline in self-esteem during middle school may lead to academic withdrawal, failure, and school dropout. Middle school is a significant transition for students, and focus should be placed on the connection between social, emotional, and behavioral characteristics’ relation to grade retention. Further studies need to be conducted to assess the effect of grade retention on students’ “behavioral engagement in middle school” (Im, Hughes, Kwok, Puckett, & Cerda, 2013, p. 350).

Supportive teachers and safe learning environments increase academic achievement and school connectedness in middle schools students. Middle school students’ peer and teacher relations are directly linked to academic achievement. A study conducted by Connell, Halpern-Felsher, Clifford, Crichlow, and Usinger (1995) found that increased levels of teacher support were linked to students school engagement and academic efficacy. Future research conducted by Fall and Roberts (2012) reinforced previous research and established that teacher support “positively influenced students’ self-perceptions and school engagement” (p. 795). The study’s results further supported the belief that supportive teachers “directly influence students’ perception of self and nurture student’s levels of school engagement” (Fall & Roberts, 2012, p. 795). Huang (2014) reinforced the notion that “poor student-teacher relationship quality” (p. 81) is correlated to decreased academic readiness. Students’ satisfaction with their teachers’ support and schools’ safety are significantly linked to increased academic achievement and decreased grade retention.

Nonacademic and personal factors, such as home environment, become increasingly important for students with weak academic skills. The Pagani et al. (2008) study noted three factors contributing to students’ academic failure: “mothers not completing high school, early childhood single-parent family status, and grade retention” (p. 179). Low parental education and
absence of one biological parent in the home environment influence school failure. Pagani et al. (2008) stated that being raised in a single-parent family is associated with low academic achievement. In particular, a single-parent upbringing is correlated to “behavior problems associated with primary school failure, delinquency, and educational attainment” (p. 176). Children with parents who did not successfully complete high school “are more likely to perform poorly in school and eventually drop out” (Fall & Roberts, 2012, p. 787). Students’ academic engagement and successes are directly linked to their home academic environments.

Chen’s (2008) study highlighted the importance of involved parents and guardians and positive, supportive home environments. Students experienced improved academic performance when their parents or guardians were actively involved in the educational process (Chen, 2008). It is imperative that educators gather ample information not only concerning students’ academic abilities but also their nonacademic and personal needs. Fall and Roberts (2012) suggested that additional research should be conducted, in a single study, to demonstrate the impact of parental, family status, and teacher support on students’ academic success. Educators must specifically target nonacademic and personal needs in order to effectively address the diverse needs of retained students.

**Impacts of Grade Retention**

The practice of repeatedly retaining overage students impacts them in a multitude of ways. It is imperative that educational stakeholders develop and implement methods of reducing the immense number of retained students because consistent retention of students has the potential for having negative impacts on middle schools’ educational settings. Although the majority of the research reviewed indicates that retention serves little benefit to middle school
students, it unfortunately remains a widely accepted educational practice (Bornsheuer et al., 2011).

**Increased negative behaviors.** Repeated retention of overage students often leads to negative behaviors both outside and inside the classroom; additionally, grade retention is one of the strongest predictors of dropping out of school (Bowers, 2010; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Students exhibiting increased negative behaviors are regularly viewed as immature and inadequately prepared for subsequent grades; consequently, these students are regularly retained in order to academically remEDIATE them and improve their “approaches to learning, self-control, and interpersonal skills” (Huang, 2014, p. 81).

Unfortunately, many retained students frequently engage in behaviors that negatively impact their current and future health. Jimerson and Renshaw (2012) associated grade retention with students’ negative activities outside of the classroom such as drug and alcohol abuse, sexual promiscuity, and aggressive behaviors. Additionally, retained students are more likely to become affiliated with gangs, commit violent acts, and become incarcerated (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). It is imperative that stakeholders address the correlation between retention and incarceration because “about 75% of state prison inmates and about 59% of federal prison inmates” (Franco & Patel, 2011, p. 16) do not possess a diploma. Retained students often exhibit many negative behaviors that are correlated to and frequently hinder their efforts to succeed personally and academically.

The negative emotional and behavioral impacts of grade retention frequently hinder subsequent learning and increase unacceptable behaviors in retained students. Educators found that “children’s anxious, inattentive and disruptive behaviors persisted and often worsened after retention” (Pagani et al., 2008, p. 177). Retained students frequently exhibit “low conformity to
school norms, values and rules” (Im et al., 2013, p. 350). In particular, retained students are frequently disruptive, inattentive, and truant (Gottfried, 2013). Due to frequent absences, retained students feel alienated from their peers and educators “and may thus disrupt classroom instruction through their negative interactions and social disengagement” (Gottfried, 2013, p. 407). Chronically absent students frequently exhibit reduced skills in reading and mathematics; additionally, “students who were excessively absent in 6th grade were shown to have a less than 13% chance of graduating in 4 years from high school” (Rath, Rock, & Laferriere, 2012, p. 11). These negative behaviors create undesirable classroom cultures and often cause increased disengagement.

Also, retained students’ behavioral issues affect other students in a multitude of ways. A quantitative study conducted by Bru (2009) revealed that 60% ($n = 1399$) of students surveyed felt that retained students’ behaviors distracted them and disrupted classes, and nearly 55% ($n = 1282$) felt they would improve academically if disruptive students were removed from their classrooms. Gottfried (2013) outlined the following influences of retained students in the classroom: (a) disengagement of classmates via retained students’ disruptive behaviors, (b) disengaged behaviors of retained students, and (c) redirection of teachers’ emphasis on behavior modification and remediation. Retained students frequently “convey attitudes to other pupils which may be counterproductive to high academic achievement” (Bru, 2009, p. 464). Because of adolescent students’ emphasis on peer group acceptance, they are more likely to be distracted and disengaged if retained students have “a high social position in the peer group” (Bru, 2009, p. 464). According to Gottfried (2013), the peer effect creates “an adverse relationship between the number of retained classmates and the academic outcomes of non-retained students in the same
Grade retention not only adversely impacts retained students, it also diminishes academic engagement and outcomes of non-retained students.

Educators frequently adjust their instructional focus in order to accommodate the educational needs of retained students. Retained students frequently exhibit “lower achievement levels” (Gottfried, 2013, p. 407); as a result, teachers are often required to decrease the rigor and pace of instruction. Consequently, a large portion of classroom instruction is geared towards remediation, which is often detrimental to the educational needs of retained students’ classmates (Gottfried, 2013).

As a result of disruptive classroom behaviors, approximately 25 minutes of a 90 minute class is squandered because educators are focused on behavior modification as opposed to classroom instruction (Bru, 2009). Increased negative behaviors of retained students and adjustment of instructional focus are important to consider because retained students’ actions are likely to influence classmates’ learning outcomes.

**Drop-out rates.** Research concerning the connection between grade retention and increased drop-out rates indicates that dropping out of school is a cumulative process that begins as early as grade 7. Goldschmidt and Wang’s (1999) descriptive research found that “being held back is the single strongest factor predictor of dropping out” (p. 717). Consistent with previous research Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) stated that grade retention precipitates students’ decisions to drop out of high school. Robles-Pina (2011) found that retention increases the likelihood of a student dropping out of school by 78%. In fact, a longitudinal study of economically disadvantaged African-American kindergarten students (N = 220) conducted by Blair (2001) indicated students’ increased levels of negative classroom behaviors were found to predict future grade retention. Studies of this nature are significant because dropping out of
school is viewed as a cumulative process, precipitated by a host of factors, including grade retention and low academic achievement.

While some research indicates that many students are at risk of dropping out in high school (Christle et al., 2007), others indicate that students are most at risk of dropping out in middle school, as early as grade 7 (Bowers, 2010). Bowers’ (2010) study revealed the following: (a) drop out risk began in grade 7, two years before most intervention programs begin; (b) the most probable grades for drop out were grades 8 and 11; and (c) grade retention negatively impacted students’ likelihood of on-time graduation. Jacob and Lefgren (2009) found that retained sixth grade students are 5% “more likely to drop out of school” (p. 49), and retained eighth grade students are 9% “more likely to drop out” (p. 49). Additionally, Rath et al. (2012) also supported this notion in their study, which highlighted the growing population of repeatedly retained students in our nation’s schools and the likelihood that students retained multiple times will drop out of school. Further research suggested that students retained, at least once, by the seventh grade “are less likely to complete high school than their low-achieving, but continuously promoted peers” (Im et al., 2013, p. 350). The findings are particularly relevant to this study’s problem because eligible participants will be twice retained in grades 6-8.

There are numerous negative consequences for students who drop out of school. A report published by Rath et al. (2012) indicated that “the unemployment rate of high school dropouts is almost three times the rate of students with some postsecondary education” (p. 7). In addition to facing higher rates of unemployment, students that drop out of school but manage to find employment earn “nearly $8,000 less each year than a high school graduate and over $27,000 less each year than a college graduate” (Rath et al., 2012, p. 7). Gottfried’s (2013) study further
supported the belief that retained students are more likely to face future economic hardships, such as unemployment. Grade retention can lead to consequences that are severe and long-term.

**Decreased esteem.** Retained students often exhibit lower self-esteem than their grade-level peers. Self-esteem is frequently described as a “generalized form of self-efficacy” (Pajares, 1996, p. 560). It is necessary to address retained students’ self-esteem because the stronger the individuals’ esteem, “the more likely are persons to select challenging tasks, persist at them, and perform them successfully” (Pajares, 1996, p. 565).

Martin (2011) documented a direct correlation between grade retention and students’ self-esteem and found that grade retention was the source of severe harm to students’ self-esteem. According to this study, grade retention not only negatively affected students’ self-esteem but also students’ abilities to concentrate on basic classroom assignments. Whitted’s (2011) research corroborated Martin’s findings and addressed the emotional deficiencies created by retained students’ academic failures. Retained students are more likely to display decreased levels of personal adjustment, self-esteem, and attitude toward educational experiences; additionally, they exhibit increased “rates of delinquency by age 14; and poorer emotional health, peer acceptance, and behavior in the classroom” (Dombek & Connor, 2012, p. 570).

Robles-Pina (2011) indicated a scarcity in studies concerning the correlation between grade retention and students’ self-esteem, and existing studies are contradictory. In some studies, there was no direct relationship between grade retention and self-esteem; conversely, in other studies, there was a direct relationship between grade retention and lowered self-esteem (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008). Because of this contradictory information, Robles-Pina (2011) suggested additional research on the effects of grade retention on students’ self-esteem and motivation.
**Academic achievement.** Grade retention’s impact on academic achievement is often debated. Some indicate that a benefit of grade retention is that academic deficiencies are addressed, and students are less likely to risk academic failure in subsequent grades. Jacob and Lefgren (2004) revealed that grade retention slightly impacts students’ academic achievement and challenged the commonly held view that grade retention is a negative practice. Their argument was that grade retention benefitted students and provided opportunities for them to academically become equal to their peers. If this is the case, retained students should exhibit academic improvements in years subsequent to their retention. A subsequent study conducted by Jacob and Lefgren (2009) discovered that students retained during grade 6 were able to academically catch up with their peers; however, students retained in grade 8 exhibited decreased academic achievement. In support of Jacob and Lefgren (2009), Wu et al. (2010) found that retained students exhibited short term improvements during the onset of the repeated year; however, their brief improvements were “followed by a rapid decline relate to grade mates as the children encountered new material” (Wu et al., 2010, p. 149). Retained students’ “struggle-succeed-struggle” often creates academic “vulnerabilities that do not appear until middle grades” (Wu et al., 2010, p. 149). While students may experience success immediately following grade retention, academic gains were not maintained at subsequent grade levels (Wu et al., 2010). Their studies also highlighted the fact that retention’s effects could possibly differ under diverse district policies. Consequently, further studies inclusive of specific retention policies are needed.

However, Robles-Pina (2011) and Dong (2010) suggested that repeated grade retention decreases students’ academic achievements. Research illustrated a positive association between decreased academic achievements and grade level retention (Robles-Pina, 2011; Dong, 2010). Simply repeating identical curriculum and instructional methods is not likely to rectify the
problem. Although grade retention is widely practiced, research indicates that the positive effects of grade retention “diminish over time” (Dong, 2010, p. 231) and students exhibited little academic growth. In fact, students who have experienced grade level retention are twice as likely as their non-retained peers to repeat multiple grades (Robles-Pina, 2011). It is suggested that the positive impacts of grade retention are fleeting because students are taught with the same approach and alternate instructional methods are not implemented.

A correlation exists between repeated grade retention and students’ diminished academic performances because very few retained students academically recover from failure, especially when students are retained in middle school (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007). Jimerson and Ferguson’s research is particularly relevant because of this study’s focus on twice retained, middle school students. A study conducted by Griffith, Lloyd, Lane, and Tankersely (2010) indicated that retained students’ reading achievement levels were inferior to their low-performing, yet promoted age-level peers, and their deficiencies were still evidenced in high school. As a result of this association, an excessive number of retained students eventually drop out of high school.

**Characteristics of Retained Students**

**Socioeconomic Status (SES).** Economic marginality is strongly connected to retention and increased dropout numbers. Whitted (2011) specified that children from low-income households are more likely to encounter an increased number of risk factors that encumber their academic successes; these factors are inclusive of (a) low levels of maternal education; (b) high levels of maternal depression; (c) inconsistent and harsh disciplinary practices; (d) and exposure to drug abuse, domestic violence, and child abuse (p. 11). Gottfried (2013) also supported the notion that urban students are exceptionally high risk for educational failure. In addition, Pharris-
Ciurej, Hirschman, and Willhoft (2012) established that students from low-income families are nearly 26% less likely to graduate from high school. This study’s findings further proposed that retained students residing in “disadvantaged areas are overrepresented among students who drop out” (Pharris-Ciurej et al., 2012, p. 14), and students residing in underprivileged areas exhibit unforeseen academic difficulties. Additionally, Pharris-Ciurej et al. (2012) suggested that African-American students would be more likely to graduate if they possessed the socioeconomic resources comparable to their Caucasian peers.

Characteristics such as students’ eligibility for free or reduced lunch prices significantly contribute to grade retention. Willson and Hughes’ (2009) longitudinal study concluded that approximately 33% (n = 117) of the economically disadvantaged students experienced grade level retention; on the other hand, only 19% (n = 48) of the non-disadvantaged students experienced retention. As evidenced by these results, students’ SES significantly contributes to grade level retention.

Research consistently supported the fact that students from poor, single parent households were more at risk of dropping out of high school (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Being raised in a welfare-dependent family doubled male students’ likelihood of being retained and dropping out of school (Pagani et al., 2008). Pagani et al. (2012) stated that parents’ economic resources predict children’s future educational and economic achievement. Educational strategies for assisting economically disadvantaged children must be addressed because “each day in America, 2,483 babies are born into poverty” (Whitted, 2011, p. 11). Based upon these studies’ results and staggering statistics, students’ low socioeconomic status must be addressed as a key risk factor that precipitates future academic and economic disadvantages.
Gender. Sociodemographic characteristics such as gender are frequently associated with increased likelihood of dropping out of school. Huang (2014) indicated that females have a lower probability of being retained and eventually dropping out of school. In comparison to their female classmates, males are “about twice as likely to repeat a grade as girls” (Jimerson et al., 2006, p. 87). Research further indicated that low income African American boys were more likely to be repeatedly retained and eventually drop out of school; Bowers’ (2010) longitudinal study revealed that nearly 30% (n= 29) of the retained male students dropped out of school; whereas, nearly 20% (n = 18) of the retained female students dropped out of school (Bowers, 2010). Of the 6.7 million students who have dropped out of high school, the majority of them are male and minority (Rath et al., 2012, p. 6).

Grade retention rates and impact of grade retention differ across gender. Repeating a grade, according to Morrison and No (2007), was somewhat more detrimental to males than females. On the other hand, Jacob and Lefgren (2009) found that “the retention effect of 18 percentage points for girls implies that retention is roughly moving girls up to the dropout likelihood of boys” (p. 52). Likewise, Willson and Hughes (2009) found that gender was not a clear indicator of grade retention. Due to conflicting points of view, it is important that intervention efforts, based upon gender, are further explored.

Ethnicity. Students’ ethnicities have not been consistently considered a predictor of dropping out of school, which is commonly connected to grade level retention. In some studies, minorities had a higher probability of being retained (Corman, 2003; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). Gottfried (2013) found that “academic and developmental problems are exacerbated for minority youths in urban school systems, particularly when it comes to retention issues” (p. 410). Bowers (2010) indicated that “retaining a student at any grade level is one of the highest
predictors of dropping out” (p. 192). Stillwell (2010) reported that African-American (38.5%) and Hispanic (35%) students dropped out of school at higher rates than Caucasian (19%) and Asian (8.6%) students. Constant with Stillwell’s data, Bowers (2010) indicated that approximately 12% (n = 10) of the Caucasian students dropped out of school; however, almost 31% (n = 19) of the African-American and Hispanic students dropped out of school. Based upon these studies, students’ ethnicities factored into their possibility of dropping out which is often precipitated by grade retention and diminished academic progress.

In contrast, Burkham, LoGerfo, Ready, and Lee (2007) found that Caucasian students had a higher likelihood of retention and drop out in comparison to African-American and Hispanic students. Varied drop-out rates are evidenced across ethnic groups. Because of the stark discrepancies in the results, the association between ethnicity and grade retention should be further explored. The characteristics of retained students must be strongly considered because “the more risk factors young children are exposed to, the more likely they are to experience school failure” (Whitted, 2011, p. 11).

**Current Practices**

School reform efforts such as the NCLB (2001) and CCSSI (2010) led to an increase in the percentage of students retained due to implementation of state policies which base students’ promotion on standardized test performance and curriculum (CCSS, 2010). Schools and districts have also established higher promotion and graduation standards and are currently “focusing on broader outcomes such as graduation rates, success in career, and college transition” (Orthner et al., 2010, p. 223).

In some instances, there is increased emphasis on interventions that promote educational success that are dependent upon “multiple interim or mediating indicators of success, not just the
standardized achievement test scores” (Orthner et al., 2010, p. 223). Unless sincere efforts are made to adjust the current retention practices, retention and social promotion will continuously intensify students’ educational shortcomings.

Social Promotion

Social promotion is the practice of advancing students to the upcoming grade level, in spite of the fact that they “have not mastered the academic requirements of a particular grade” (Norton, 2011, p. 210) and considered an alternative to grade retention. Martin (2011) indicated that grade retention “has problematic implications for academic achievement and educational attainment” (p. 743); however, social promotion has increased educational validity. During the mid-1960s, social promotion became a prominent theme in the educational arena, and “keeping students in age-appropriate groups aligned with that view” (Carifio & Carey, 2010, p. 222) because the primary purpose of school was viewed as socialization. Socially promoted students are provided opportunities to remain with their age-level peers and avoid the stigma of academic failure. Norton (2011) indicated that social promotion results in “more positive advantages than non-promotion relative to academic achievement and other factors such as personal behavior, self-esteem, and the potential for becoming a dropout from school altogether” (p. 210).

Proponents of social promotion argue that lower performing students are positively affected by their higher-performing classmates and strive to attain their classmates’ academic achievement levels (Gottfried, 2012).

On the other hand, opponents of social promotion assert that “for students at risk there is a negative prediction of school success if they were promoted” (Ehmke et al., 2010, p. 29). Low performing students do not possess enough prior knowledge to experience success in the upcoming grade level. Furthermore, opponents of social promotion consider grade retention as
an intervention, providing low-achieving students additional opportunities and time to master educational curriculum (Ehmke et al., 2010). However, additional interventions must be considered because research (Ehmke et al., 2010) indicates that low performing students continue to experience failure, whether retained or socially promoted.

**Alternatives to Grade Retention**

Previous studies indicated that educators’ focus should be centered on alternatives to grade retention. Alternatives to grade retention such as virtual learning and credit recovery provide necessary options and support for low performing, at-risk students (Goos, Van Damme, Onghena, Petry, & de Blide, 2013; Im et al., 2013). Many school districts are utilizing various technologies to help at-risk students succeed. Nearly half of the states give students’ opportunities to complete coursework online (Franco & Patel, 2011). In the past decade, virtual learning has been used to increase student achievement and decrease grade retention and dropout rates. Virtual learning is beneficial to some at-risk students because online coursework is more flexible and self-regulated. For instance, homebound students and teen mothers can continue their educational endeavors, without forfeiting valuable educational progress. Roblyer (2006) stated that virtual learning promotes teenage mothers’ opportunities to complete their coursework without the difficult task of consistently hiring babysitters during traditional school hours. While there are benefits to virtual learning, concerns were also addressed. Oliver, Osborne, Patel, and Kleinman (2009) found that virtual learning presented the following complications: (a) unclear and confusing assignments, (b) students’ limited skills, and (c) lack of counseling and academic support. Franco and Patel (2011) indicated that virtual learning, in comparison to traditional learning, does not lead to significant differences in students’ academic performances, and students are more likely to fail or drop out of online courses. Because many
at-risk students have not fully developed self-regulative strategies “and the ability to guide their own learning” (Franco & Patel, 2011, p. 18), many districts provide academic counseling and organizational support to increase students’ success rates. In order for virtual learning to successfully decrease grade retention and dropout rates, additional student and parental support and facilitator training is essential.

Credit recovery programs give at-risk students opportunities to earn credits for previously failed courses. Many credit recovery programs are completely online, while others incorporate online instructional components. Students enrolled in online credit recovery programs complete assignments based upon their independent schedules; however, they are required to complete the coursework within one semester (Franco & Patel, 2011). Although students are enrolled in online, asynchronous courses, certified teachers are available for academic assistance (Dessoff, 2009). On the other hand, many school districts require that students attend hybrid credit recovery programs. Students in these districts must attend classes “from 330 – 800 PM Monday through Thursday for an entire semester” (Franco & Patel, 2011, p. 20). They receive face-to-face instruction for half of each class session and complete online components for the remainder of the session (Franco & Patel, 2011). Students are also required to attend at least 80% of their classes in order to earn credit (Dessoff, 2009). As a result of these programs, students can earn ample credits and graduate with their grade-level peers. Students enrolled in credit recovery programs opt to enroll in the program at any time and complete assignments at their own pace (Franco & Patel, 2011). Franco and Patel (2011) indicated that participants “recovered all of the credits for which they attempted” (p. 25). The ability to recover credits increases students’ motivation and desire to succeed; thus, dropping out is no longer a viable option. Students who
are enrolled in and successfully complete credit recovery programs sustain grade level status with their peers and remain on track to graduate from high school within four years.

ESSA (2015) not only promotes academic achievement but also career readiness by reinforcing career-ready standards for America’s youth. In order for the nation’s youth to globally complete, they must possess “work readiness skills” (Kenny, Blustein, Haase, Jackson, & Perry, 2006, p. 272). Consequently, districts have incorporated programs such as CareerStart in order to nurture critical thinking and problem solving skills, while preparing students for college and careers (Feller, 2009). Research (Kenny et al., 2006) revealed a positive correlation between career guidance and academic engagement and achievement and showed that “higher levels of career planfulness and expectations are associated with school engagement” (p. 276).

CareerStart, originally “designed to help connect at-risk students to their education” (Orthner et al., 2010, p. 224) promotes future careers via middle school core curriculum and exposes students to career exploration, which increases engagement and academic achievement “for all students, but especially those at higher risk for school failure” (Orthner et al., 2010, p. 227). CareerStart begins in middle school because 6th grade students are generally highly engaged; however, as students progress through middle school “many begin to psychologically drop out” (Orthner et al., 2010, p. 226). Allowing students opportunities to experience ways in which their current curriculum connects to their futures reduces “the risk of students leaving school early” (Orthner et al., 2010, p. 231) and helps them appreciate the value of their academic successes. CareerStart can counter at-risk students’ disengagement and improve students’ behavioral, social, and psychological connections to their educational successes.

**Perceptions of Grade Retention**
Many stakeholders agree that grade retention is a costly intervention. In several school districts, retention of students creates budgetary strains; in these instances, social promotion is often viewed not only as a solution to an excessive number of retained students but also as a method of balancing districts’ budgets. From a budgetary perspective, grade retention “increases the education cost for that student by 8%” (Renaud, 2013, p. 2). Not only does grade retention cost districts astronomical amounts, the nearly 1.3 million students who do not graduate from high school will cost the United States in excess of “$325 billion in lost wages, taxes, and productivity during their lifetimes” (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009, p. 178).

However, teachers and principals tend to have differing perceptions concerning the effectiveness of grade retention. Range, Pijanowski, Holt, and Young (2012) conducted research aimed at analyzing the perceptions of elementary teachers and principals concerning grade retention and overage students and stated that teachers, as opposed to principals, are generally more supportive of grade retention. Advocates of grade retention contend that retained students who do not comprehend the curriculum will not benefit from curriculum on the subsequent grade level (Tanner & Combs, 1993; Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1993; Powell, 2010). Educators who have a linear view of learning, which centers on the belief that learning is “a building-block structure whereby one skill or concept must be mastered before the next higher skill or concept can be learned” (Norton, 2011, p. 211), retained nearly 30% of their students. Grade retention, as regarded by educators with linear views of learning, gives low performing students opportunities to increase understanding. Additionally, proponents propose that grade retention “reduces the range of abilities within each grade” (Clearinghouse, 1982, p. 472), and students retained in elementary and middle school “have more opportunities to catch up with their peers” (Jacob & Lefgren, 2009, p. 34). These educators are supportive of grade retention and consider
academic performance more important than ability, effort, esteem, and maturity when determining whether or not students should be retained.

Opponents of grade retention argue that retention is detrimental to social and personal development of low performing students. In contrast to many classroom educators’ beliefs, principals perceive grade retention in middle school “as having more serious consequences than retention at earlier ages” (Frederick & Hauser, 2008, p. 736). According to Frederick and Hauser (2008), grade retention best benefits students from kindergarten to 5th grade, and principals in the study indicated that grade retention in earlier grades does not have the same social stigma attached as grade retention in middle and high school. In alignment with principals’ perceptions, many parents perceive grade retention in middle and high school as a faulty intervention with a “negative effect on all areas of student achievement, including reading, math, language, and social and emotional adjustment” (Norton, 2011, p. 212).

Most states require that students are five years old by August, September, or October of the current school year; however, young-for-grade students due to their birthdates enter kindergarten at four years of age (“Access to Kindergarten”, 2013). Examining the impact of age on grade retention on students \( N = 3,684 \), Martin (2009) suggested that even if children are young for their grade-level peer groups, it is best for them to be promoted with their peer groups rather than be retained. Martin (2009) proposed that students were best “served by residing with their age-appropriate cohort and receiving any necessary intervention in that context” (p. 110). In contrast to Martin’s (2009) study, Huang (2014) discovered that young-for-grade students were at a higher risk of repeated grade retention than their peers. Huang (2014) indicated that young-for-grade students were “five times more likely to be retained” in comparison to their grade-level peers (p. 89). These findings could be a result of younger students exhibiting
immature behaviors and underdeveloped socioemotional skills. Because of conflicting perspectives, Martin (2009) suggested future research, inclusive of “qualitative work that can more fully scope the detailed nature and extent of age within cohort” (p. 112). There is a possibility that grade retention could have a positive effect on students in the event that additional educational services, such as tutoring and counseling sessions, are provided (Chen, Liu, Zhang, Shi, & Rozelle, 2010). There are multiple studies (Clearinghouse, 1982; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009; Range et al., 2012) contrasting perceptions of grade retention from the points of view of educators, principals, and parents; however, additional studies should also be inclusive of middle school students’ perceptions and experiences.

**Summary**

Grade retention is continuously debated in spite of the majority of the evidence indicating its ineffectiveness and detrimental impact on students’ emotional well-being (Huang, 2014; Willson & Hughes, 2009). However, with the implementation of NCLB, pressure to meet AYP, CCSS, and increased accountability many schools have utilized grade retention as the solution for students who do not master grade level curriculum or fail to demonstrate proficiency on high stakes testing (Fusarelli, 2004). In spite of increased pressure and accountability due to NCLB, many educators have rejected the idea of mandatory grade level retention when students fail to meet grade level standards on high-stakes assessments because “at least 15% of America’s children continue to fail tests” (Wakefield, 2012, p. 351). Instead, educators are “retaining those who might benefit and promoting those who will not” (Wakefield, 2012, p. 351). Advocates of grade retention contend that retained students who do not comprehend the curriculum will not benefit from curriculum on the subsequent grade level. Though frequently used, the benefits of grade retention are often limited and short term, and most students benefit from promotion with
their grade-level peers (Jimerson, 2012). Students’ short term academic improvements weaken in subsequent years and gains become insignificant.

Grade retention hinders the social, emotional, and academic development of students (Huang, 2014). Retained students often become disengaged, disruptive, and view education as irrelevant (Robles-Piña, 2011). Opponents of grade retention argue that students are actually harmed by the trauma of being held back, the challenge of adjusting to new peer groups, and reduced expectations of their academic performance (Martin, 2011). Additionally, grade retention is associated with increased school dropout rates. Multiple studies indicate that retained students are more likely to drop out of school than their peers (Christle et al., 2007; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Robles-Piña, 2011).

Several internal and external factors are attributed to grade retention, and nearly 25% of students’ academic success is attributed to nonacademic factors (Bloom, 1976). Factors that students contend with are inclusive of (a) academic competence, (b) sociodemographic characteristics, (c) social, emotional, and behavioral characteristics, (d) classroom context, and (e) home environment (Willson & Hughes, 2009).

The perceived negative impacts of grade retention led to an increase in alternatives such as social promotion, virtual learning, and credit recovery. While alternatives to grade retention are considered slightly effective, successful academic intervention and additional support should begin early in students’ academic careers.

Furthermore, much of the information concerning dropout, a byproduct of grade retention (Bowers, 2010; Jimerson, 2012), is focused on high schools students. However, this study’s focus on middle school students in grades 6-8 is essential because many students “have disengaged from their education before high school and these students begin dropping out before
such innovative high school programs have an opportunity to turn them around” (Orthner et al., 2010, p. 224). As a result, it is imperative that middle school students are given voices in order to gain information that will enable stakeholders to counteract “early adolescent school disengagement” (Orthner et al., 2010, p. 224). This study contributes an essential understanding of the experience of grade level retention from the perspective of twice, retained middle school students.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences with grade level retention for twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia. This chapter includes a description of the study’s design, research questions, participants and setting, procedures, researcher’s role, and data collection and analysis procedures. Additionally, this chapter addresses trustworthiness and ethical concerns associated with research.

Design

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological design with the intent of describing the experiences of grade retention of twice retained, middle schools students. A qualitative study was appropriate because there is a necessity to better understand students’ experiences with retention, and a phenomenological study is geared towards providing all-inclusive descriptions of individuals’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, qualitative research provides an understanding of “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their world, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). In alignment with the focus of qualitative research, this study’s purpose was to describe the meaning of students’ experiences and descriptions of their educational and personal experiences. The research questions explored the experiences of grade level retention.

A transcendental phenomenological approach “emphasizes subjectivity and discovery of essences of experiences” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 45). Husserl (1965) emphasized the discovery of meanings and essences and indicated that phenomenology “utilizes only the data available to the consciousness – the appearance of objects” (p. 23). According to Farber (1943), transcendental phenomenology serves five functions:
1. It is a logical approach because it seeks to identify presuppositions and “put them out of play”.

2. It is not concerned with matters of facts but seeks to determine meanings.

3. It deals both with real essences and with “possible” essences.

4. It offers direct insight into the essence of things, growing out of the self-givenness of objects and reflective description.

5. It seeks to obtain knowledge through a state of pure subjectivity, while retaining the values of thinking and reflecting. (Farber, 1943, p. 568)

A transcendental phenomenological approach provided an avenue to understand the essence of twice retained, middle school students’ experiences, and I was able to view the phenomenon “just as it is, and to explicate what is in its own terms” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41). Epoche, which means to refrain from judgment, was required to ensure that “everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). By means of transcendental-phenomenological reduction, I derived “a textural description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon, the constituents that comprise the experiences in consciousness, from the vantage point of an open self” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). Imaginative variation provided an opportunity for me to “grasp the structural essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 35). A transcendental phenomenological approach was also suitable because although I have not experienced the phenomenon, I have previously taught retained middle school students. I removed myself from previous teaching experiences and described the phenomenon “in its totality, in a fresh and open way” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34), based upon data collected from students who have experienced the phenomenon.
Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study:

Research Question 1: What are twice retained middle school students’ experiences with grade retention?

Research Question 2: How does grade retention influence the motivation of twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia?

Research Question 3: What factors do twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia identify as contributing to repeated grade retention?

Research Question 4: What alternatives to grade level retention are identified by twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia?

Setting

Participants were selected from middle schools in Eastern Virginia. The specific educational settings were provided pseudonyms (Cavalier Middle School and Tech Middle School) for the study. The first setting selected for the study, Cavalier Middle School, serves students in grades 6-8 and is one of nine public middle schools in the district. During the 2014-2015 school year, there were 1038 students (African American 43.64%, Asian 3.47%, Biracial 6.55%, Caucasian 34.22%, Hispanic 11.06%, and Native American 1.06%) enrolled, and the student-teacher ratio was 25:1 (Virginia Department of Education, n.d.). According to the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) website, 65% of the student population is considered economically disadvantaged and eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program. The organizational leadership at this setting consists of one principal, one assistant principal, and two deans of students.
The second setting selected for the study, Tech Middle School, serves students in grades 6-8, and is one of nine public middle schools within the district. During the 2014-2015 school year, there were 791 students (African American 91.15%, American Indian 0.13%, Asian 0.63%, Biracial 1.64%, Caucasian 5.06%, and Hispanic 1.39%) enrolled and the student - teacher ratio was 13:1 (VDOE, n.d.). According to the VDOE website, 81% of the student population is considered economically disadvantaged and eligible for the free or reduced lunch program. The organizational leadership at this setting consists of one principal, one assistant principal, and two deans of students.

I incorporated these settings because, while they are within the same district, their demographic makeups are quite dissimilar. Additionally, the VDOE’s website reported that Virginia’s Summary of Accountability Results indicated that Tech Middle School’s state accreditation status is “Accreditation Denied”; however, Cavalier Middle School’s state accreditation status is “Accredited with Warning”. Utilization of students from multiple settings, with diverse student populations and state accreditation statuses, may increase the study’s transferability.

**Participants**

Purposeful, criterion, and snowball sampling were utilized to select participants for this research study. Purposeful sampling was utilized since the study’s participants were selected due to their ability to provide a deep understanding of the phenomenon. Participants selected for the study were able to share “a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). As the goal of purposeful sampling “is to select cases that are likely to be information rich with respect to the purpose of the study” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007,
p. 178), participants were middle school level, twice retained, public school students. Middle school students who have not been twice retained were not eligible to participate in this study.

In order to glean a deep understanding of the phenomenon Englander (2012) suggested incorporation of 5-20 participants. This study consisted of 10 participants, which is within the recommended range. Because the study consisted of twice retained, middle school student participants, criterion sampling was utilized. For this study, only middle school general education students, grades 6-8, who have repeated at least two consecutive or non-consecutive years were eligible to participate. A criterion sampling of this group of twice retained students was effective because the study’s purpose “is to describe some particular subgroup in depth” (Patton, 2002, p. 235). Additionally, criterion sampling was appropriate for this study because it improved “quality assurance efforts” (Patton, 2002, p. 238) and all participants experienced the phenomenon, which allowed in depth descriptions of students’ experiences.

In order to recruit and secure participants for the study, I first gained IRB (see Appendix A) and district approval. Once approval was secured, participants were selected from students’ promotion and educational records via the guidance counselor. Using these records, the guidance counselors obtained parents’ addresses and contact them with a mailed letter and parental consent forms, explained the nature of the study, and requested permission to include their child in the study. District authorization was followed by consent from parents, teachers, principals, counselors (see Appendix B, C, D, E), and students, via consent and assent forms. Parental consent forms (see Appendix B), with addressed, pre-stamped envelopes, were mailed to parents. Following parental consent, I spoke to a criterion sampling of twice retained, middle school students, in the presence of the principal or counselor, concerning the nature of the study and distributed child assent forms (see Appendix C).
Participants were also located via snowball sampling, using social media (see Appendix F). The social media message was posted on Facebook, Twitter, and emailed to colleagues and friends. Snowball sampling assisted in accumulating “new information-rich cases” (Patton, 2002, p. 237). Recruitment of participants via snowball sampling began upon receiving IRB approval and continued until maximum variation in the sample and thematic saturation in the analysis was achieved.

In order to ensure maximum variation, students of different ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses were incorporated in the study. The participants, all provided pseudonyms, were male and female middle school students, ranging in age from 13-16 years old. Six males (three African American, two Caucasian, and one Hispanic) and four females (two African American, one Caucasian, and one Hispanic) participated in the study. Maximum variation also created opportunities to determine patterns across a variation of genders, ethnicities, and socioeconomic statuses. Participation in the study was voluntary, and students and their parents were informed of the fact that they could withdraw from the process at any stage without penalty.
Table 1

Brief Description of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants (Pseudonyms)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Current Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keisha</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawrence</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
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<td>6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raul</td>
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<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Male</td>
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</tr>
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<td>7th</td>
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<td>7th</td>
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<td>8th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troquan</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8th</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Procedures

Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix A) approval was first obtained in order to protect minor subjects and approve the survey, visual narrative, interview questions, and journal prompts (Patton, 2002). Data collection for this phenomenological study was dependent upon my access to twice retained, middle students who have lived the phenomenon of grade retention. In order to gain access to students, district authorization was obtained following IRB approval. In order to obtain district authorization, I was required to complete an Application Form for an External Research Study, which was inclusive of the following: a copy of research plan, data collection instruments, and Application for the Use of Human Research Participants.
Form. Once applications were reviewed by the districts, which took approximately four weeks, I received written notification from two districts indicating the Application Form for an External Research Study was approved. District authorization was followed by consent from parents, teachers, principals, counselors (see Appendix B, C, D, E), and students, via consent and assent forms. Promotion and academic records of current middle school students were obtained by the district, and a listing of students who met the criteria required of the participants was compiled. After compiling a list of potential participants, district employees contacted parents via mail. Principals, parents, and counselors were required to complete Consent Forms prior to participating in the study (see Appendix B). Participants were also gained via snowball sampling. A snowball sampling recruitment letter was posted on Facebook, Twitter, and emailed to colleagues and friends (see Appendix F).

Once parental consent was granted, participants were required to complete Child Assent Forms prior to participating in the study (see Appendix C). Participants were encouraged to complete Child Assent Forms under the guidance of their parents; however, Child Assent Forms were also provided prior to the initial semi-structured interview. After I obtained Parental Consent Forms and Child Assent Forms, participants were given a survey, designed to collect students’ demographic data, school engagement, and motivation. Prior to interviews and students taking the survey, I recorded my personal career experiences with twice retained middle school students (see Appendix G). Participants had the option of completing the survey online or paper-pencil (see Appendix H, used with permission).

I conducted two, approximately 30-minute semi-structured interviews with each participant (see Appendix I), during which participants not only discussed shared experiences with the phenomenon but were also asked to create a visual narrative (collage). Visual narratives
provided nonverbal representations of participants’ experiences. Participants’ self-concepts, via selected photographs expanded an understanding of the phenomenon (Glesne, 2006). Additionally, I utilized personal journals for both participants and researcher to collect and record detailed data (see Appendix J). The interviews were audio recorded, with previous approval, and I transcribed them. During the second interview, participants had opportunities to discuss their visual narratives, review transcriptions, and amend or provide additional clarification to their previous responses. Following the initial semi-structured interview, students responded in written or voice memo form to pre-determined journal prompts, and I utilized a journal to record notes and personal thoughts after conducting interviews. Students were encouraged to share their experiences and thoughts, without being concerned with spelling and grammatical errors. The students’ interview questions and journal prompts were developed based upon the study’s research questions and grounded in the theoretical framework and empirical literature on the topic.

**The Researcher’s Role**

In this study, I was a human instrument, which is considered a research instrument in the scientific inquiry process for qualitative studies (Peredaryenko & Krauss, 2013). Peredaryenko and Krauss (2013) indicated that human instruments are beneficial because of people’s “sensitivity, responsiveness, and flexibility” (p. 1); thus, making people “the most appropriate instrument for inquiries aiming to arrive at understanding, meaning, and the promotion of critical awareness” (p. 1). As a human instrument, I was careful not to become fully engrossed and remain “sufficiently detached to observe and analyze” (Merriam, 2009, p.126). Since my purpose was to uncover the essence of participants’ experiences, it was of upmost importance that I, with limited bias, intensely question experiences that were examined by my research
questions (van Manen, 1990). While it was important to bracket previous experiences and biases, it was equally important to develop a rapport with participants. Peredaryenko and Krauss (2013) stated that developing a connection with participants is essential because it (a) allows a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon and (b) results in understanding and interpretation of participants’ subtle cues.

In order to bracket previous middle school teaching experiences, I wrote about those experiences prior to conducting interviews with students (see Appendix G). Currently, I am an adjunct instructor of Writing Composition at local colleges in Eastern Virginia; formerly, I taught middle and high school composition. I received my Bachelor of Science in Liberal Arts, Master of Science in Secondary Education, and Education Specialist in Educational Leadership.

**Data Collection**

A survey was given to students in order to collect information concerning demographic data, students’ school engagement, and their motivation. Two semi-structured interviews (see Table 2) were conducted, audio recorded, and transcribed. Following the initial interview, students created a visual narrative. Participant journaling, inclusive of prompts I create, were available to students throughout the research process.

**Survey**

Upon receipt of parental and student consent forms, students were given an option to complete an online or paper-pencil adapted version of the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) created by the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP) (see Appendix H) to complete prior to participating in semi-structured interviews. Students experiencing reading and comprehension difficulties were given the option of having the survey read to them by a counselor, current teacher, or me. None of the study’s participants utilized the
option of having the survey read to them. In order to tailor the questionnaire to middle school students, minor adjustments were made to the HSSSE. For example, Question 1 requires that students record their current grade level and are given choices between grades 9, 10, 11, and 12. The question was modified to give students choices between grades 6, 7, and 8. The survey consists of 30 questions, and based upon the question cluster, students responded with Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, or Strongly Agree; Not at all, Very little, Some, or Very much; 1 or less, 2-3, 4-7, or 8 or more; Never, Rarely, Sometimes, or Often; Yes or No, None, Some, Most, or All; and multiple choice questions addressing students’ demographics and backgrounds.

Since its implementation in 2003, the HSSSE, created by CEEP is frequently reviewed by individuals with expertise in the areas of survey research, curriculum development, and scientific methodology (Spradlin, 2012). The review process is inclusive of a series of analyses in order to make a determination of questions that are efficiently measuring engagement and motivation and which questions are ineffective (Spradlin, 2012). Modifications made to the HSSSE included new content, adjusted terminology to reflect today’s students, and removal of questions the Technical Advisory Panel and educational leaders considered ineffectual (Spradlin, 2012).

HSSSE is constructed on a “three-component framework of engagement” (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012, p. 750). The first component focuses on students’ cognitive, intellectual, and academic engagement levels. For this dimension, the Cronbach’s alpha is 0.943 (Johnson & Dean, 2011). Secondly, HSSSE focuses on students’ social, behavioral, and participatory engagement levels. Cronbach’s alpha for the second element is 0.760 (Johnson & Dean, 2011). The final dimension focuses on students’ emotional engagement, and Cronbach’s alpha for it is 0.937 (Johnson & Dean, 2011). As of fall 2013, neither a fee nor permission is required for the utilization of the HSSSE; however, it is stated that Center for Evaluation and Education Policy
“must be cited/referenced in documentation and publications” (“High School Survey of Student Engagement,” 2014, para. 2).

The results of the survey assisted in developing connections between student engagement, motivation, and learning. I gained an improved understanding of the extent to which students are motivated and engaged in their educational experiences. Additionally, I discovered the amount of time and individual efforts students dedicate to their academics.

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

Because careful consideration was given to the wording and development of interview questions (Patton, 2002), I anchored all questions (see Appendix H) in the theoretical and empirical literature and had peers and experts review them. Pilot respondents reflected “critically on the usability” (Glesne, 2006, p. 86) of the interview questions. Additionally, respondents reviewed questions for grammar, clarity, and value to study (Glesne, 2006). Seidman (2006) suggested utilizing pilot respondents because researchers “learn whether their research structure is appropriate for the study” (p. 39) and become familiar with “aspects of establishing access, making contact, and conducting the interview” (p. 39). In the event that a formal pilot study is not practical, Glesne (2006) recommended designing “a period of piloting that encompasses the early days of interviews with actual respondents, rather than a set-aside period with specially designed pilot respondents” (p. 86). Since a formal pilot study was not practical, I utilized the first two interviews as “a period of piloting” (Glesne, 2006, p. 39). As there were no necessary modifications of questions after pilot interviews, I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants in order to gain a deeper understanding of how students view themselves, others and their experiences with and feelings concerning grade retention (van Manen, 1990). Seidman (2006) indicated that interviews with younger participants should be
conducted for shorter periods of time. Consequently, I conducted two, 30-minute interviews with participants. Additionally, Seidman (2006) stated that interviews should be spaced at least three days apart so that participants can contemplate the previous interview. The scheduling of follow-up interviews were dependent upon the length of time required for transcription. Glesne (2006) indicated that transcription of audio recordings will take at least five hours, per 90 minute recording. I met with participants for feedback and further clarification, after I completed transcription of audio taped interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in a conference room or an empty classroom before or after school or during students’ elective classes.

Table 2

*Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What are your hopes and dreams for your future?</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Tell me about a typical day at school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Tell me about your experiences in school from as early as you can remember.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Who were your favorite teacher(s)? Why?</td>
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<td>5. What was your favorite year(s)? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What is your favorite subject(s)? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Share some positive experiences you have had in elementary and middle school. Why would you consider them positive?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. What was your least favorite year(s)? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. What is your least favorite subject(s)? Why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10. What are your experiences with grade retention?

11. What kinds of challenges do you experience as a retained student?

12. How do you feel about your classmates? Teachers?

13. Tell me about support you receive from your teachers? Parents?

14. What else could your parents and teachers do to support you?

15. Some people would say that retained students are disruptive in classrooms. What would you say to them?

16. Some people would say that retained students are more likely to drop out of school. What would you say to them?

17. How would you describe an ideal program for retained students?

18. Tell me about what you think caused your academic difficulties.

19. Describe your feelings when you repeated a grade(s)?

20. What motivates you to perform academically?

21. Tell me about your feelings and concerns about transitioning to high school.

22. Describe the visual narrative you created.

23. Explain why you chose those photographs.

The goal of the interview questions concerning grade retention and academic motivation was to acquire information concerning retained students’ experiences with grade retention. Seidman (2006) indicated that it is important to develop an appropriate rapport at the commencement of semi-structured interviews with student participants. Consequently, initial questions were utilized as ice-breakers. Robles-Piña (2011) found that adolescents experiencing “shameful experiences such as low grades, retention, and/or rejection by a romantic partner” (p. 3) frequently have feeling of hopelessness and depression. Question 1 was designed to
determine whether grade level retention had negative emotional effects and ascertain students’ hopes and dreams for their futures. Question 2 was created to reveal events throughout the day that may be common to all students. Questions 3-7 were created to reveal positive aspects of students’ educational experiences. Questions 8-9 revealed students least favorite educational experiences and possibly their academic weaknesses. Question 10 was developed to discover retained students’ perceptions of grade retention because their opinions may directly correlate to their academic successes and experiences. Question 11 was designed to discover students’ academic, as well as personal challenges faced due to grade retention. Research indicated that social interactions, others opinions, and acceptance are extremely important to middle school students (Robles-Pina, 2011). As a result, Questions 12-14 were developed in order to give students opportunities to share experiences with classmates, teachers, and parents and their perceptions of others’ statements. Question 15, in particular, addressed retained students’ disruptive behaviors; Pagani et al. (2008) stated that students’ “anxious, inattentive, and disruptive behaviors persisted and often worsened after retention” (p. 177). The incorporation of Question 16 is supported by Franco and Patel’s (2011) indication that retained students are “ten times more likely to drop out than those who are not” (p. 16). Maslow (1943) indicated that individuals should become interested in what essentially motivates them; because of this, Question 17 was created with the purpose of discovering students’ ideas of programs and interventions that will motivate them to excel academically and emotionally. Willson and Hughes (2009) indicated students’ sociodemographic characteristics, emotional and behavioral characteristics, and home environments often cause academic failure. As a result, Question 18 was developed in order to discover what students considered causes of their academic failures. Students indicated that retention elicited feelings of fear, anger, and sadness (Robles-Pina, 2011).
In order to determine whether participants harbored similar feelings, Question 19 was designed; additionally, I hoped to discover whether or not their feelings differed between the first and second grade level retentions. Question 20 was developed to discover students’ motivation to academically achieve. According to Maslow’s (1943) theory of motivation, all humans are innately motivated by their unsatisfied needs; unfortunately, many twice retained, middle school students’ basic needs remain unfulfilled. Cohen and Smerdon (2009) indicated that students transitioning from middle to high school often “exhibit lower self-esteem and fears about new social situations” (p. 179). Question 21 was designed to discover students’ feelings concerning their middle to high school transition. Questions 22 and 23 were utilized as ice-breakers during the follow up interview and a connection to the visual narrative students were asked to complete following the initial semi-structured interview.

**Visual Narrative**

At the conclusion of the initial semi-structured interviews, I asked students to complete visual narratives in the form of collages, which they brought to their follow-up interviews. Students were asked to locate personal photographs or photographs from provided magazines that depict who they are and whom they strive to become. Glesne (2006) indicated that photographs are instrumental in research because they aid researchers in “building rapport, conducting cultural inventories, and probing while interviewing” (p. 64); additionally, photographs provide historical backgrounds of participants. During the follow-up interviews, I asked participants to (a) describe the visual narrative you created and (b) explain why you chose those photographs. In addition to providing opportunities to give shape to students’ lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994), visual narratives provided additional topics of discussion during follow-up semi-structured interviews.
**Participant Journaling**

Van Manen (1990) stated that journaling frequently leads to self-discovery and reflections on students’ learning experiences. At the conclusion of the initial interview, students were provided personal, paper journals to record their thoughts and replies to provided prompts. Students were encouraged to complete one prompt per day, record their daily feelings, and reply to provided prompts. Four journal prompts (Appendix J) were provided: (a) What can be done to create a school environment that motivates you to learn and succeed? (b) Discuss things that make you feel proud/ sad/ anxious/ angry. (c) Describe what could have been done differently to avoid previous retention. (d) Imagine your future and describe where you intend to be in five years.

**Data Analysis**

The study’s data were obtained via a survey, two, 30-minute interviews, visual narrative, and participant journaling. During and following research, I adhered to a detailed approach to data analysis, which allowed for emersion of significant experiences and themes. The emersion of these experiences and themes led to astute descriptions of the “essences of the experiences” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13).

**Epoche and Bracketing of Phenomenon**

Epoche is the process of setting aside preconceived notions regarding the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). During this process, I described my personal experiences and biases concerning the phenomenon and reflected upon and recorded personal experiences teaching retained, middle school students and my personal opinion of grade retention (see Appendix G). This process gave me an opportunity to set aside personal experiences and focus on participants’
experiences with phenomenon from the point of view “of a pure or transcendental ego” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33).

Bracketing involves suspending personal beliefs, “prejudices and unhealthy attachments that create false notions of truth and reality” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). During this phase, the study’s topic was bracketed, and all else was placed aside “so that the entire research process is rooted solely on the topic and question” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). In order to bracket, I wrote about my “subjective or private feelings, preferences, inclinations, or expectations” (van Manen, 1990, p. 185) that would hinder me from “coming to terms with a phenomenon or experience as it is lived through” (van Manen, 1990, p. 185).

**Organizing the Data**

Initially, I organized and saved data onto flash drives and categorized data based upon the participants’ pseudonyms, ages, and date(s) interviewed; in addition, my desktop and laptop computers were password protected. As a back-up plan, data was also printed, filed in locked storage, and identified according to participants’ pseudonyms, ages, and date(s) interviewed. Additionally, a detailed audit trail (see Appendices K, L, M, N, and O) was maintained in order to log “in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry” (Merriam, 2009, p. 223). I also created a table (see Appendix P) in order to summarize participants’ responses to research questions. Verbatim transcriptions were completed within one week of completing each 30-minute interview and was considered beneficial because it “provides the best database for analysis” (Merriam, 2009, p. 110). Merriam (2009) indicated that interview transcripts should be specifically formatted to enable analysis; researchers should: (a) list identifying information concerning when, where, and with whom the
interview was conducted, (b) place line numbering down left margin, (c) utilize single spacing, (d) leave space on right-hard margin to record notes codes and themes.

**Survey**

Prior to collection of textual data, the survey data was analyzed. Because the survey was created on Survey Monkey, a basic analysis of the data was conducted via the program’s built-in analysis and graphing abilities. Survey Monkey tabulated the number, as well as the percentage of participants who selected particular responses to questions. Based on the participants’ responses, I described and summarized the information; the summary was inclusive of the mean, median, and frequency of participants’ responses. An analysis of the data assisted in determining participants’ needs and preferences. Additionally, Survey Monkey allowed me to compare how respondents in differing groups responded to questions. For example, I utilized cross-tabulations to compare responses between students in grades 6, 7, and 8.

**Reading and Reflective Journaling**

I repeatedly examined transcripts and collected data in order to wholly comprehend information prior to dividing it into smaller sections. During this aspect of analysis, I recorded specialized written records inclusive of analytical and conceptual notes (see Appendix P) that “strive for accuracy, but avoid being judgmental” (Glesne, 2006, p. 56). This process aided me in learning from and managing the information received because it is important that a qualitative researcher takes “time for reflective and analytic noting” (Glesne, 2006, p. 59). I also formed preliminary categories, reflected on emerging themes, considered relationships between themes, research problem, and research questions which will aid in the “progressive process of sorting and defining and defining and sorting those scraps of collected data” (Glesne, 2006, p. 152) that
are applicable to my research purpose. Reading and reflective journaling provided a record of the analytic process, direction, and assistance in sorting ideas.

**Horizontalization**

Horizontalization of data centers on participants’ experiences and development of a list of significant statements. During this phase of data analysis, I recorded all statements since all are considered equally important (Moustakas, 1994). In vivo coding, the practice of assigning labels to sections of data (King, 2008), was utilized to identify significant statements and students’ specific wording; sections were indicated by colored tabs, post-it notes, and highlighting. For the purpose of organizing and coding data, ATLAS.ti, a software package specialized in analyzing qualitative data, was utilized to aid in assigning codes to students’ significant statements. These processes created opportunities to consider and organize all potentially meaningful data collected throughout the research process and presented the emergence of themes.

**Clusters of Meaning**

After organizing and line by line coding all sets of textual data, extraneous statements should be eliminated, only leaving “invariant constituents of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). I developed categories and placed data in appropriate clusters; superfluous data was discarded. I then utilized highlighting in varied colors to delineate categories and pertinent information. This process created opportunities to reduce an abundance of data into “a small, manageable set of themes” (Creswell, 2013, p.186) to be incorporated into the final narrative.

**Textural Description**

In the Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction process, I considered the epoche, horizontalization, and clusters of meaning, in order to compose a textural description that wholly described the phenomenon in a novel way (Moustakas, 1994). With the purpose of composing
textural descriptions of participants’ experiences, exact wording from interviews was included, and I also incorporated “the meanings and essences of the experience, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). While composing the textural description, I focused on “variations of perceptions, thoughts, feelings, sounds, colors, and shapes” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34) from twice retained, middle schools students’ vantage points.

**Structural Description**

The structural description is centered on how the participants’ experiences occurred. During the process of structural description, I presented “a picture of the conditions that precipitate an experience and connect with it” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34) and composed multiple descriptions of the underlying factors that provide explanations for participants’ experiences. This process created opportunities for me to reflect upon particular settings and conditions under which the studied phenomenon most likely occurred.

**Composite Description**

The composite description is a synthesis of both the textural and structural descriptions and addresses how participants recount their experiences (Giorgi, 1985). I utilized various methods “to collect rich, descriptive, contextually situated data in order to seek understanding of human experience” (Mann & Stewart, 2000, p. 3). My composite description incorporated varied perspectives of the phenomenon and provided readers with an understanding of participants’ experiences. Additionally, I utilized the Student Engagement Survey’s data to evaluate participants’ reasoning and academic engagement; community, behavioral, and participatory engagement; and emotional engagement levels. The process presented opportunities for me to seek multiple meanings, consider divergent points of view, and “comprehend the essence, or structure, of those lived relations” (Giorgi, 1985, p. 43).
Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is extremely critical in qualitative studies due to the fact that researchers interpose in participants’ lives (Merriam, 2009). A rigorous study, inclusive of careful collection, analysis, and interpretation of data increased the trustworthiness of this study.

Credibility

I incorporated triangulation by incorporating multiple sources of data, methods of data collection, and theories. Triangulation increases the credibility of the study because I utilized data from a variety of sources and methods in order to reveal themes and individuals’ experiences (Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007).

Repeated member checking, conducted “throughout the course of the study” (Merriam, 2009, p. 217) was incorporated in order to clarify the accuracy of my understanding and representation of students’ experiences with repeated grade retention. Member checking occurred following transcriptions of semi-structured interviews; additionally, member checking occurred after findings were reported. Via member checking, I benefitted from “the process of continuous, informal testing of information by soliciting reactions of respondents” to my reporting of information that was communicated (Schwandt et al., 2007, p. 19).

A peer review provides a peripheral reflection and input on information (Glesne, 2006). The process increases the credibility of the study because the peer debriefer promotes honesty, assists in development of a working hypothesis, and assesses the emerging design (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). For this study, I utilized two individuals, a current middle school educator and middle school principal, as peer debriefers. These individuals are qualified to provide reviews because they are “knowledgeable about the topic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 220) and able to “scan
some of the raw data and assess whether the findings are plausible based on the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 220).

**Transferability**

I addressed transferability by providing rich, thick descriptions, along with detailed depictions of studied participants and settings. Thick descriptive data is important because individuals can make conclusions concerning “the degree of fit or similarity” (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 19) to future studies and other settings. Another method of enhancing transferability is maximum variation because it “allows for the possibility of a greater range of application by readers or consumers of the research” (Merriam, 2009, p. 227). This study included students of different ethnicities, genders, and grade levels. Six males (three African American, two Caucasian, and one Hispanic) and four females (two African American, one Caucasian, and one Hispanic) participated in the study. Of the 10 participants ranging in age from 13-16 years old, four were in grade 6, three were in grade 7, and three were in grade 8.

**Dependability**

Epoche and bracketing helped reduce biased reporting of information because I was required to address my previous experiences with retained middle school students and personal opinion of the practice of grade retention. An audit trail (see Appendices K, L, M, N, O, and P) also increased dependability because it “describes in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry” (Merriam, 2009, p. 223). Via peer reviews, dependability was increased because of conversations with colleagues concerning “the process of study, the congruency of emerging findings with the raw data, and tentative interpretations” (Merriam, 2009, p. 229).
Confirmability

With the intention of creating an audit trail, I kept a reflective journal of descriptive and reflective details concerning the process of research throughout the inquiry (Merriam, 2009). With the reflective journal, I recorded my initial reactions and novel questions and ideas. Establishment of an audit trail was important because it verified the rigor of a study, minimized bias, and addressed confirmability, while maximizing accuracy (Patton, 2002).

Ethical Considerations

Before, during, and after conducting this qualitative study, I was cognizant of ethical issues that could possibly surface during all phases of the research process and established clear agreements with participants and their parents, maintain confidentiality and informed consent, and construct measures to ensure full disclosure of the “nature, purpose, and requirements of the research project” (van Manen, 1990, p. 109). Since the research is inclusive of a vulnerable population, I obtained appropriate parental consent and student assent forms; additionally, I discussed the study’s purpose and how data would be utilized. I created pseudonyms for all educational settings, students, and educators. Additionally, electronically stored data was secured via password protection, while printed data was placed in a locked cabinet.

To ensure that students’ instructional time was not disrupted, I conducted interviews during times in which they were not removed from core classes. For example, I conducted interviews before and after school and during elective courses in a conference room or unoccupied classrooms. Also, no additional stigma was intentionally placed upon the students.

A school counselor was available to discuss participants’ concerns or apprehensions in the event that the proposed study unintentionally stigmatizes students and negatively impacted their self-esteem or self-perception. I debriefed (see Appendix Q) with participants so that they
would have opportunities to provide formative feedback and verification of field notes.
Throughout the study, rapport was controlled because “when the interviews are concluded, the
interviewing relationship shifts dramatically” (Seidman, 2008, p. 98). The relationship between
the researcher and participants became “more distant, less intimate, focusing on what happens to
the material generated by the interview” (Seidman, 2008, p. 98).

Summary
Chapter Three illustrated the processes utilized to conduct this qualitative study
investigating the experiences of twice retained, middle school students in grades 6-8 residing in
Eastern Virginia. I utilized phenomenological research methods of Moustakas (1994) and van
Manen (1990) to describe the phenomenon via the data collection and analysis procedures.
Additionally, the study’s sampling methods, setting, and procedures were outlined. Steps were
delineated and executed to ensure this study was credible, trustworthy, and accounted for all
ethical considerations.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of grade level retention for twice retained, middle school students in grades 6-8 residing in Eastern Virginia. A transcendental phenomenological approach was used to provide an understanding of the essence of twice retained, middle school students’ experiences with grade retention. The study was guided by four research questions: Research Question 1: What are twice retained middle school students’ experiences with grade retention? Research Question 2: How does grade retention influence the motivation of twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia? Research Question 3: What factors do twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia identify as contributing to repeated grade retention? Research Question 4: What alternatives to grade level retention are identified by twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia?

In the beginning of the chapter an overview of the ten participants, who were attained through purposeful, criterion, and snowball sampling, is provided. Additionally, this chapter includes a description of the findings obtained through triangulating data from an engagement survey, semi-structured interviews, visual narratives, and participant journaling.

Descriptions of Participants

This study’s participants ranged in age from 13-16. Six males (three African American, two Caucasian, and one Hispanic) and four females (two African American, one Caucasian, and one Hispanic) are represented in the study. Participants, all assigned pseudonyms, reside in Eastern Virginia and have twice experienced grade level retention.
**Damian**

Damian, a 15-year-old, African American male, is currently in the seventh grade. Following high school, he intends to either attend college or join the Marines “and have a nice family.” As the eldest child in a single-parent household, he now attends school on a regular basis to set a positive example for his younger brothers.

The school year most regrets is his sixth grade year because he continuously fought classmates, “just kept getting suspended”, and attended an alternative school. In contrast, his fondest memories were in fifth grade because he experienced academic success, made honor roll, and felt proud of his accomplishments. Damian indicated that he will be excited yet nervous to “finally go to high school” because there will be more teachers and students to encounter on a daily basis.

**Elaine**

Elaine is a 14-year-old, Caucasian female who is currently in the seventh grade. Elaine hopes to go to college to become a writing teacher because she wants “to show students that teachers do care” about them and their academic progress. Elaine is passionate about writing because it provides an opportunity to express her intimate feelings. She resides in a dual parent household but does not spend an enormous amount of time with her parents because they have intense work schedules.

Elaine expressed that she mostly enjoyed elementary school because teachers “acted like they cared and make learning fun” for all students. Elaine stated that her least favorite year was fifth grade because that was the first time she experienced academic failure. She is excited about attending high school in the near future and feels as if she will perform well since she will be exposed to more mature classmates and new educational concepts.
Jasmine

Jasmine is a 15-year-old, Hispanic female and currently in the eighth grade; she wants to attend medical school and become a pediatrician. Jasmine normally attends her classes and completes assignments, but there are occasions that she experiences exhaustion and boredom in classes. Jasmine frequently runs away from home; however, she currently lives with her mother and indicated that she does not maintain a relationship with her father.

According to Jasmine, her least favorite year was sixth grade because she was continuously bullied which made her “feel bad and insecure.” Additionally, sixth grade was the first year she experienced grade retention. Jasmine indicated that she enjoyed her first eighth grade year “because all my friends were there, and the stuff we were learning was like new to me and it kinda made it fun and more interesting.” She has a positive attitude about attending high school because the only obstacle she foresees is multiple class options.

John

John is a 16-year-old, African American male who is currently in the eighth grade. He intends to play college football and eventually play in the National Football League. John expressed that he avoids coming to school sometimes because there is an enormous amount of screaming students and angry teachers. He lives in a single-parent home and infrequently spends time with his father.

Although he cannot provide specific reasoning, John indicated that first grade was his least favorite year. He vividly remembered his sixth grade year as being his favorite because it was his first year playing organized football. He excelled in football and, although it was his first year playing organized sports, he “started over a lot of older people and I liked that.” John is
somewhat nervous about attending high school because of his discomfort with “seeing a lot of new people” and “meeting a lot of new teachers and stuff.”

**Kayla**

Kayla is a 13-year-old, African American female who is currently in the sixth grade. She aspires to attend community college and obtain a business degree so that she can become a manager and financially secure. Kayla resides in a single-parent home and expressed that she has a close relationship with her mother, who does not “force me to go to school” because she was “bored in class.” Consequently, she often arrives late and leaves early.

Kayla expressed that her least favorite year was fifth grade because that was the first time she experienced failure; she also indicated that this is her second time being in the sixth grade. Kayla is enjoying this year because she thinks she will be promoted to the seventh grade. This year, she only respects one teacher, Ms. Williams (pseudonym), because she believes in Kayla and frequently communicates the importance of self-belief, hard work, and perseverance. Kayla looks forward to eventually attending high school but is not concerned with it at this time “because she is trying really hard to finish middle.”

**Keisha**

Keisha is a 13-year-old, African American female who is currently in the sixth grade. Because Keisha resides in a single-parent home and frequently cares for her younger brother, she aspires to have a traditional family and become a wife and stay-at-home mother. Keisha admittedly arrives late to school on a regular basis; upon her arrival, she first has conversations with her friends and lingers in the hallways. Regardless of when she arrives, Keisha normally leaves school following lunch and ensures that she leaves before the school busses arrive to pick up students at the day’s end.
Because Keisha experienced academic failure in the fourth and fifth grades, she considers those years her least favorite. On the other hand, she thoroughly enjoyed her third grade year because her teacher, Ms. Pitalo, “acted like she cared about us” and “she made class fun.” When asked about high school, Keisha indicated that she “will be excited about it but a little scared. It seems like it will be a long time away.”

**Lawrence**

Lawrence, a 13-year-old, Caucasian male, is currently in the sixth grade. In the future, Lawrence wants to play professional basketball or another sport. If he is unable to pursue a career in athletics, he is not sure what else might interest him. He lives in a two-parent household and stated that his parents do their best to academically and personally support him.

Lawrence indicated that his least favorite years were grades four and six because those were the years he experienced academic failure. Although Lawrence maintains faint memories of elementary school, he vividly remembers kindergarten and his caring teacher, who made him “feel smart.” Because of these fond memories, kindergarten was his favorite academic year. He is frequently bored in school and often leaves the campus early. Lawrence looks forward to attending high school and confidently said that he will “pay attention when I get there” and experience academic success.

**Raul**

Raul is a 14-year-old, Hispanic male who is currently in the sixth grade. He has no concrete goals. However, he indicated that he wants to become successful and assist in supporting his close-knit family because “family is very important to me, and we always hang out.” His parents work extremely hard, and he admires them for their work ethic.
Raul stated that his least favorite year was first grade because that was the first time he experienced grade retention. He feels as if school is boring; as a result, he does not communicate much with the majority of his teachers and classmates. His favorite teacher this year is his Spanish teacher because she assists him in grasping difficult concepts; he also enjoys Spanish class because he makes As and provides assistance to his classmates. Raul anxiously anticipates transitioning to high school because his parents did not attend.

Sam

Sam, a 14-year-old, Caucasian male, is currently in the seventh grade. After completion of high school, he is determined to emulate his older brother and join the military. Sam indicated that he is frequently tardy to school and occasionally completes his assignments but most enjoys socializing and sleeping.

Sam expressed that his least favorite years were third and fifth because he experienced academic failures. Additionally, he indicated that his “parents fought a lot” and eventually divorced, which caused him a great deal of anger. Because his parents are divorced, he does not spend a great deal of time with his father, and his mother works several hours during the week. Sam’s favorite year was second grade because “my parents were still together, and I did good in school.” He looks forward to attending high school because he will have an opportunity to become a member of Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC).

Troquan

Troquan is a 16-year-old, African American male who is currently in the eighth grade. After completing high school, he plans to become a partner in his father’s mechanic’s business, and Troquan wants “it to be like when he (his father) get old, I want to take over the business.” Troquan stated that he tries to get to class on time and complete his daily assignments.
Currently, he lives in a single-parent household with his mother, but he spends time with his father on a weekly basis.

Troquan identified his least favorite academic years as kindergarten and first grade because those were the years he was retained. In contrast, he thoroughly enjoyed seventh grade because there were more extracurricular activities, and he was more involved in his education. He looks forward to attending high school because he will be able to spend additional time with his friends.

**Research Questions Results**

This study, guided by four research questions, describes the experiences of grade level retention for twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia. As I narrated participants’ experiences, I strived to equally represent students’ perspectives. In most instances, participants were extremely articulate and eagerly elaborated on their responses. However, a few participants were more succinct and hesitant to fully disclose personal details concerning their experiences with grade level retention. The salient themes in this study’s research are presented below in accordance with the research questions.

**Research Question 1: What are twice retained middle school students’ experiences with grade retention?** Multiple questions were asked to discover middle school students’ accounts of their unique educational experiences, points of view, and common feelings as a result of their experiences with grade retention. Participants’ interviews and Student Engagement Survey responses highlighted students’ positive and negative educational experiences, views of grade retention, and feelings related to grade retention.
The Experience

Students were asked to describe positive and negative educational experiences in relation to grade retention. When probed about positive educational experiences, students mostly recalled instances in which they maintained positive relationships with teachers and peers.

Positive educational experiences. Peer and teacher relationships and excelling the classroom played important roles in students’ perceptions of their educational experiences. Elaine recalled that her preferred educational experiences occurred in elementary school because she completed all of her classwork and was continuously promoted to the next grade. She describes school, at that time, as “fun and interesting” and indicated that she enjoyed all of her teachers “because they really helped me out a lot. It has been a long time since I had a good experience in school.” Although Elaine does not “remember everything about elementary school”, she does recall positive experiences in elementary school because she completed her assignments, and she was consistently promoted until the fifth grade. Damian also noted that his positive educational experiences occurred in elementary school. He proudly boasted that fifth grade was his most memorable experience because he made honor roll and felt a sense of pride. Additionally, Keisha’s and Sam’s statements regarding their favorite academic years indicated their preference for elementary school because of their nurturing teachers. Sam recalled, “I had good teachers, and I passed.” In contrast, Raul indicated that, because of his previous retention, he is not confident in his academic abilities. However, he described being in his Spanish class as a positive educational experience because “people in Spanish class asked me for help because it make me feel smart. Most times I don’t understand stuff and have to ask them questions.”

Lawrence said that all of his positive experiences in school are associated with being with his peer group. The last time his friends were in classes with him was in the fourth grade, which
is the first year he experienced retention. Now his friends “are not at the same school as me and I only see them at home sometimes. So now I do not really like school since I failed.”

**Negative educational experiences.** Eight of the participants, Damian, Elaine, Kayla, Keisha, Lawrence, Raul, Sam, and Troquan, indicated that the years they were retained are considered the worst experiences in their academic careers, and some students indicated that they have never had positive educational experiences. When asked to elaborate on his least favorite academic years, Sam explained that he disliked “third and fifth because I failed.” Elaine indicated that school has been difficult for her for quite some time, and she only remembers “liking school when I was in the first grade. After first grade, I never liked school for real.” Elaine stressed that the grade she disliked the most was “fifth grade because that’s when I failed for the first time.” Kayla provided a similar point of view and emphasized “the grade I really hate is fifth grade because that’s when I failed for the first time. School has not been a good experience for me.” Likewise, Raul indicated that school has been a difficult experience for him because he experienced retention in the first grade. He explained that he doesn’t “really like being at school” because he has always been behind his grade level peers. Students expressed a multitude of views, feelings, and anxieties when addressing their unique experiences. The essence of the students’ experiences center on how grade retention impacted their views, feelings, and anxieties.

**Views of grade retention.** During semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to share their perceptions of grade retention. This question was designed to elicit their opinions regarding grade retention. Eight of the participants expressed unfavorable opinions of grade level retention. Only one participant, John, felt as if grade retention could benefit students, depending on “whether the student wants to be helped or not.” He went on to explain that “if they want to
be helped I think it’s good to give them a chance to get everything down that they want to know and just start over.” From his point of view, retention was beneficial, and he “thought it was a little bit good because the stuff that I didn’t remember. I thought it was a chance to like get certain things in my head that I can finally know.” Many themes, including ineffective, isolating, and monotonous emerged in this section.

Ineffective. According to the participants, repeating multiple grades was ineffective and did not produce positive academic results. Several students echoed Raul’s sentiments concerning grade retention. He said, “I don’t feel like making me do the same classes is going to help me understand better.” Seven of the ten participants expressed that they did not glean new knowledge and performed worse the second time in the grade; however, they were promoted. Sam reflected, “I didn’t learn any new stuff. I don’t know why they held me back because I was still lost when they passed me.” Lawrence shared that many of his friends have experienced grade retention, and his opinion is that “it does not work for most of the students.” He added,

The next year I didn’t really learn anything new. So, I still didn’t know what was going on. It was a waste of time. They coulda just passed me the first time so I can be in my right grade.

Elaine simply stated that grade retention does not work but when asked to further explain, she was unable to provide specific reasoning; however, she clarified that most students, “want to do the work but we just have other stuff going on. Maybe they should find out the other stuff and help us learn so we can pass”.

Due to NCLB (2001) legislation, there was an emphasis placed on core standards and accountability. As a result, many educators focused on implementing strategies to aid students in scoring on a proficient level. Keisha expressed that teachers only care about Standards of
Learning (SOLs), and grade retention was ineffectual because students only learn SOL testing skills and objectives. Keisha adamantly stated,

Teachers don’t care about me failing because they keep talking about passing the SOL. Every day we just learn how to pass the tests, but I don’t learn any new stuff to help me pass the regular work. So what’s the point of holding me back? Everything is always multiple choice and writing the paper for the writing test.

Damian also explained that his teachers are most concerned with SOLs and rarely assist with understanding the “basic stuff” and asked, “What’s the point?” Damian does not feel as if the purpose of grade retention is to help students learn but simply to memorize rules and test taking skills so they can “pass the test this time.” He further elaborated,

Because don’t nobody be like let me help you do this. I be asking for help and they say like don’t come up here. All we talk about is the SOL stuff. I can’t get help so I can pass. I feel like I am alone trying to figure it out, and they don’t help.

**Isolating.** After retention, students assumed they would be able to address misconceptions and receive individualized instruction from their teachers. However, for many, this was not the case. In most instances, participants stated that their teachers were helpful at first, but as the year progressed, they experienced isolation and were often overlooked. Jasmine indicated that she tried to get help from teachers; however, she frequently worked alone and rarely addressed misconceptions with her teacher. Jasmine indicated that the first time she felt isolated was the second time she was in the sixth grade. According to Jasmine,

They say I don’t try hard enough and stuff. I mean some of them help. They try to make it seem like they care and try, but some of them really don’t help. And I would ask for
help and they were either too busy or trying to teach the class so I didn’t really ask for help that much. I just sat in the back of the room and figure it out on my own.

Consistent with Jasmine, Troquan stated,

The math teacher moves too fast. So sometimes I don’t get some stuff done. I’m like can you slow down? And then, she’ll say something like we’re already behind. We can’t slow down. She’ll be like my class is already behind. I just sit in the back by myself and try to figure it out. I don’t want to keep asking because she sometimes say we did this last year. Sometimes, I just put my head down.

As a result of frequent absences, retained students often feel alienated from their educators and peers (Gottfried, 2013). Damian shared that isolation negatively impacted his attendance, and he was alienated from his teachers and classmates. He added,

If you not getting the help it’ll make you feel like dang why I’m coming to school if I’m not even getting the help that I need. She just sit me in the back of the room by myself and the teacher act like she don’t see me. Why am I coming to school basically? If the teacher won’t help you nobody won’t help you. What’s the point? That’s why I stay home a lot. I just chill by myself at home listen to music sleep until it’s time for us to get out of school.

Elaine shared that she sometimes sits through an entire session and her teachers completely ignore her. She said, “It’s like I’m back there by myself, and they don’t even try to help me out.” Because of her experiences with isolation, Elaine frequently disengages, infrequently attends school, and rarely completes her assignments.

Additionally, students experienced isolation because their peer groups were promoted. Grade level retention impacts students’ sense of belonging since they are no longer with their
“peers and have to join a new group of students younger than they are” (Ehmke et al., 2010, p. 27). Keisha and Damian indicated that they experienced isolation because all of their friends were promoted, and they were retained. During the following school year, Keisha had a difficult time forming a new peer group and spent a great deal of time alone because she considered her classmates “too immature.” John provided a similar account and indicated that he felt isolated because of his classmates’ immaturity and the absence of his peer group. As a result, he sits alone in the back of the room in order to “just watch” his classmates do “silly things.” He described retention as isolating because he feels as if he is the “only one” that understands and is on his level. Participants indicated that falling behind their peer groups and not graduating with their friends contribute to their negative experiences related to grade retention.

Monotonous. Participants in the study indicated that grade retention leads to boredom, which discouraged them from actively engaging and consistently attending school. On the Student Engagement Survey, nine of the participants reported that they were often bored in class. Students cited multiple reasons for classroom boredom immediately following grade retention. For example, students shared that many teachers utilize identical worksheets, PowerPoints, and activities each year. In fact, Damian, Elaine, Jasmine, Kayla, and Sam indicated that they submitted assignments from the previous year, instead of completing identical assignments multiple times.

Since the assignments were familiar the year following grade retention, Jasmine said that she quickly completed them and slept until teachers provided additional instruction. Kayla also described the year following retention as boring and indicated that “making us stay back is not helping. We have to sit in the same boring classes. Most of the time it’s the same work too.” Raul expressed that because of grade retention, he views school as “kinda boring. I just come in
and go to my classes. I don’t really do or talk too much.” Troquan he indicated that he frequently slept in class due to the repetitious assignments and lectures. He explained that he was not “acting up or nothing. I was just going to class every day, sleeping, and getting some stuff done.”

Sam, Damian, and Lawrence cited boredom as justification for their disruptive classroom behaviors. Sam said that his boredom frequently leads to classroom disruptions because “we keep learning the same mess and it’s boring.” He further explained, “I am disruptive because I am bored and don’t know what I’m doing. If she ignores me, I just go to sleep or walk out.” Damian willingly admitted that he was frequently disruptive in class due to boredom. He explained,

Yes I am kind of disruptive; you got a whole bunch of people talking and that makes you want to talk. Then somebody else get loud and you get loud and it’s a whole bunch of commotion and everybody talking. Plus, the stuff she’s talking about it boring because she said the same thing last year. So, I just keep talking until she probably kick me out of class.

Because some teachers taught objectives in a similar manner, many students were bored and had little desire to complete their assignments because they were repetitious and, in some instances, they did not comprehend the material the previous year.

**Feelings related to grade retention.** Students were asked to describe their feelings when they experienced grade level retention. This question was posed in order to elicit students’ experiences with frustration, humiliation, and hostility (Wu et al., 2010). Nine of the participants indicated on the Student Engagement Survey that, following retention, they did not feel good about who they are as students. Participants did not associate as many negative feelings with
grade retention experienced in elementary school; however, this was not the case when they were retained in middle school. Troquan shared that since he experienced retention during elementary school he “didn’t care for real.” However, if he was retained in middle school it would make him “look and feel bad.” When discussing feelings related to retention, three themes emerged: embarrassment, sadness, and anger.

**Embarrassment.** Because acceptance is important and relationships are dominant in middle school, participants were deeply concerned with grade retention’s impact on the way others perceived them. After experiencing grade retention, seven participants indicated that they did get along with most of their classmates but still felt a constant sense of embarrassment because they were older, more mature, and often taller than their classmates. The imaginary audience explains participants increased “concern with shame, shyness, and embarrassment” (Lapsley, 1993, p.563). Feelings of embarrassment were not isolated to the educational setting; in one instance, a participant indicated that he was embarrassed to admit his failure to his mother and avoided returning home.

Although Troquan experienced grade retention in elementary school, he recalled feelings of embarrassment “because when I failed they gave me the same teacher again.” He felt as if his teachers viewed and treated him differently; he was most often embarrassed when teachers asked him if he remembered completing assignments during the previous year. Keisha provided a similar account and indicated that she felt teachers and classmates treat retained students differently “because they know you failed.” She also shared that she does not “like being embarrassed so sometimes I just chill out in the back so don’t nobody notice or say something to me.” Kayla’s initial experience with grade retention was in the fifth grade. Because of grade retention, she was extremely uncomfortable the following year. She said, “When I had to come
back the next year, I was really embarrassed and didn’t really say much to anybody. I just felt like they all knew I had failed.” A few students, like Elaine, expressed numerous feelings associated with grade retention. Elaine commented, “I was embarrassed and mad that I had to repeat. I knew that I could have done better, but I didn’t even really try. It was frustrating because I didn’t feel like anyone cared.”

Lawrence disclosed that because of the embarrassment associated with grade retention, he stopped completing his assignments or asking teachers for assistance. He further explained that “it’s kinda embarrassing to be in the same grade when all your friends are in the next grade and you’re like the oldest one in the class.” Sam expressed embarrassment as a result of grade retention and described his classmates as “immature” and irritating. He further explained, I feel weird being around all those younger students. It’s not a good feeling to be the oldest and most mature in a class with them. I think I should be in like the tenth grade, but I’m in the seventh with these young kids. That’s a shame. Because Damian’s niece attended the same school, he indicated that he was ashamed when he encountered her in the hallways and avoided informing his mother of his failure. Damian said, And like dang I’m in here with people like my niece’s age. I need to get outta here. I didn’t want to tell anybody. I didn’t want to tell my mom. I was feeling bad. I stopped coming home. I was like man I can’t even go home. Then I was like I’m gonna tell my momma. I was like “Ma, I failed,” and she was like, “I been knew I just wanted you to tell me.”

Overall, participants viewed the experience of grade retention as humiliating and recalled being embarrassed to begin the upcoming school year in the same grade.
Sadness. Although most of the participants indicated that they were not surprised by their failure, a sense of sadness followed receiving official notification from their principals or teachers. Elaine discussed the difficulty of coming to terms with the fact that her friends would be promoted to the sixth grade; she recalled, “I was sad and cried a lot that summer before school started. Then I was really sad when school started because all my friends were in sixth grade, and I was still in the fifth.” When informed of grade retention, John experienced multiple feelings. He indicated that he harbored feelings of overwhelming sadness yet at the same time anger. He further elaborated that retention “made me sad and cry for a long time. I don’t really cry, but I did that time.” Raul described similar feelings. He expressed,

I was sad and mad because I didn’t understand the stuff. Being held back made me cry because I was sad about being in the same grade. I was in first grade when I fail the first time. But the next time I failed I was mostly sad and a little angry because I knew it was going to make people pick on me more.

Damian openly expressed feelings of sadness when questioned by his classmates concerning his previous grade retention and current age. He is often the tallest in his class and feels as if the fact that he is older than his classmates is extremely obvious. He explained,

You got everybody coming up to you like, “Dang bro how old is you?” Teachers throwing it in your face like you’re the only one. How old is you? I feel like dang; it’s true though. It is true. It mostly makes me feel sad. I got retained sixth and seventh. I think I should be in tenth or ninth.

During the interviews, five students contemplated grade retention’s impact on their professional futures. Sam was melancholy when addressing his future; he stated,
I wonder if I’ll ever graduate, and if I do will I be too old to do the military? I look older than all my people in my class; so, that’s hard. I am sometimes depressed because I think about how bad things are now because I failed.

Damian also hopes to join the military, but is apprehensive about being able to join ROTC; he said, “I hope I’m not too old to join the ROTC because I really want to be in the military so I can do something with myself.” John dreams of attending college and becoming a professional football player; however, he is concerned that his academic failures may negatively impact his long-term goals. He shared that he intends to “go to college, play football, and I guess probably make it into the NFL. I don’t know though because I failed a few times. Will they think I’m too old to be on the team?” Additionally, Kayla aspires to attend community college and earn a business degree. However, she believes her success will be difficult due to previous retention. She explained,

I just hope that failing all these times don’t really mess me up. Like I want to have a good future, but I’m not sure. It’s just hard. Like right now I’m only in the sixth grade, and I have a long time to go. I hope I can at least finish high school, but I really want to go to college. It’s just a sad situation, and my mom is sad too.

**Anger.** Students expressed feelings of anger because many considered themselves academically proficient but incapable of reaching their full academic potential. In fact, seven of the participants indicated that they had the skills and abilities to complete their assignments but admitted that they put forth very little effort when completing their work. Sam expressed mixed emotions and stated that he was angry yet “didn’t care at the same time because I knew I could do it if I wanted to.” Jasmine internalized her anger and felt as if being retained was her fault because she should have put forth more effort. She added, “I sometimes get angry but try to
Additionally, Jasmine expressed her anger towards individuals who judge her based on past failures. She explained, “It makes me mad when people think they know stuff about me just because I failed. They don’t know me.” She stressed that teachers and students should get to know her before making assumptions. When asked to elaborate on her feelings, Keisha replied, “I get mad because I had to repeat grades two times. I’m kinda mad at myself but mostly at my teachers because they did not really try to help me. It upsets me when people don’t want to help me just because I failed.

Two of the participants, Damian and Lawrence, expressed their anger by engaging in physical altercations with classmates. Damian explained,

During the 6th grade, I got sent to Madison. I just kept getting suspended; I was like dang I can’t go to homecoming; I can’t do nothing. I kept getting mad at people when they say something about me failing. I was angry. I was just angry.

Lawrence readily admitted that school was difficult, and he rarely understood teachers’ instruction. His lack of comprehension and retention caused a great deal of anger. He added,

School was hard, and I kept getting suspended because I was fighting. Any time someone said something about me failing or being too old, I just went off on them.

When I came back to school I didn’t know what was going on.

The participants in this study fully accepted responsibility for their grade retention, but students expressed concern that they did not have anyone to talk to concerning strategies for overcoming their anger.

**Research Question 2: How does grade retention influence the motivation of twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia?** Nine of the study’s participants stated that grade
level retention negatively impacted their academic motivation. Six themes developed in this section including dropping out, extracurricular activities, kinesthetic activities, affirmation, family, and possibility.

**Impact of Grade Retention**

During semi-structured interviews, students were asked to share grade retention’s impact on their academic motivation. Via this line of questioning, I hoped to learn ways in which failure influenced students’ motivation and methods of motivating retained students. Martin (2011) stated that retained students are likely to be “significantly lower in academic motivation, engagement, literacy and numeracy” (p. 742) and are more likely, than their promoted counterparts, to desire to drop out of school and poorly perform academically. When addressing the impact of grade retention on students’ motivation and motivating factors, several themes such as dropping out, affirmation, extracurricular activities, kinesthetic activities, family, and possibility emerged. The essence of grade retention’s impact on students’ motivation and motivating factors centers on how these themes affected the motivation of twice retained students.

**Dropping out.** Grade retention is one of the strongest predictors of dropping out of school (Bowers, 2010; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Following grade level retention, eight of the participants considered dropping out of school and seven have considered transferring from their current schools. While several students considered dropping out of school, only one participant indicated that she actually dropped out for short periods of time. Jasmine explained, I mean did it once or twice, but half-way through it I thought about it and was like uhm I said that I felt guilty about it. So I really don’t do that a lot but if other people do it they
just don’t wanna learn. And that’s how they feel. I understand because I quit too but came back.

When asked about dropping out, Elaine said, “I have thought about it but know that my parents and family would be upset with me. Plus, I want to go to college.” Sam shared that he thinks about dropping out of school on a daily basis; however, when he contemplates his future goals, he is motivated to remain in school. He added, “I would probably drop out if I didn’t want to go to military.”

Students retained multiple times are more likely to drop out of school (Rath et al., 2012). When probed about the likelihood of repeatedly retained students dropping out of school, John said, “I think it’s possible. Because they keep getting retained and get tired of coming. And they just don’t come no more. They just stop coming. I think about it.”

Likewise, Keisha explained,

I think they are right. It’s hard not being in your right grade. After a while, you want to just quit. I think dropping out might be easier than coming to school every day and not learning anything or getting some help.

Troquan agreed that retained students are more likely to drop out of school because many do not want their classmates to know they are “going back to the same grade.”

Raul indicated that he first considered dropping out as early as elementary school. He believes that retained students are more likely to drop out of school and said, “both my cousins dropped out and started working. Sometimes, I feel like doing the same thing but my parents want me to try.” Raul explained that many of his family members experienced grade level retention and eventually dropped out of school. In spite of the fact that multiple family members have dropped out, Raul continues to attend school because of his parents’ influence. Although
several participants indicated that grade retention decreased their motivation and increased their desire to drop out of school, in most instances family influence and future goals encouraged participants to remain in school.

**Affirmation from others.** Bandura (1986) indicated that individuals who are verbally persuaded are more likely to exhibit “greater sustained effort and sustain it than if they harbor self-doubts and dwell on personal deficiencies when problems arise” (p. 400). Participants indicated that their motivation diminished following grade level retention; however, their motivation increased when they were encouraged by others. Sam was extremely discouraged immediately following grade retention and considered dropping out of school. However, he was motivated by his brother’s comforting words and professional success. He stated, “My brother kept talking to me and telling me I could do it and be like him. If it wasn’t for him I would have dropped out of school.”

Six of the participants indicated that they were motivated by individuals who provided emotional support. For example, Elaine expressed that she likes to “hear positive things from other people like my teachers, friends, and mom.” Likewise, Jasmine appreciates words of wisdom and inspiration from others; she shared,

> They could like help me out and say encouraging stuff to make me motivate me more. Like they talk to me about how their life was and they don’t want me to be like them or just tell me how they were and like and how they succeeded in life and how I should succeed too.

Kayla’s teachers, Ms. Williams in particular, strongly impact her academic motivation. Kayla recalled that “Ms. Williams told me to not give up because she knew I could do it and pass. She
always said nice things and let me help her.” Sam fondly recalled an incident in the second grade; he said,

When I was in 2nd grade and I did good. My parents came up to the school and said they was proud of me and they was happy for me. When people tell me I did good, I am motivated.

**Extracurricular activities.** In some instances, students were motivated by extracurricular activities because they were rewarded and praised for doing well. On the Student Engagement Survey, four out of ten participants indicated they attend school in order to participate in extracurricular activities. Troquan indicated that he “tried harder” in elementary school because “they had more activities than other schools.” He was motivated to do well because his participation in activities such as “Career Day, Field Day, and field trips” was contingent upon passing grades and positive behavior. Sam’s career goal is to join the military. Consequently, he is motivated to do well in school because he intends to join ROTC when he is promoted to high school.

John shared that he was strongly motivated by football because he started over several upperclassmen, the coaches and teammates consistently praised his physical prowess on the football field, and he had to maintain passing grades in order to play.

Football motivates me most. So the coaches and stuff they be on you about your grades. I figured football was the only sport I was playing and so after that it wasn’t like any motivation. I stopped playing football for a while. Bad things started happening. Things went on from there. I stopped playing because I was moving a lot. And sometimes my dad he’ll put me in football but sometimes he wouldn’t be around so I wouldn’t stick to it. If he wasn’t there I didn’t play.
Without an opportunity to play football, John stressed that he lacks academic motivation.

Jasmine also shared positive experiences with extracurricular activities. She explained that she previously played soccer and softball and also participated in the school’s spelling bee. She was quite surprised “because it was something I never did before, and I never knew that I could like spell that many words.” After the spelling bee, she was elated because she received a trophy and administration, teachers, and her classmates congratulated her accomplishment. By positively influencing participants’ worldviews, individuals increase retained students’ motivation and alter negative self-images.

**Kinesthetic activities.** Participants revealed that classroom activities involving kinesthetic activities interested and engaged them. On the Student Engagement Survey, nine participants noted that hands-on projects and activities involving technology motivated them to complete their assignments. During the semi-structured interviews, Lawrence, Sam, and Troquan shared they were motivated to complete their assignments when provided opportunities to engage in kinesthetic activities. Lawrence and Troquan considered science their favorite class because they were given opportunities to conduct experiments. Lawrence explained, “My favorite subject is science because we sometimes do experiments and go outside.” When asked about his favorite subject, Troquan said, “Science. Because it’s uh..experiments. I like to do stuff with my hands.” Sam shared that one of the reasons he does not have a favorite class or enjoy school is because “I really like doing stuff with my hands and we don’t do that here.”

**Family.** All of the study’s participants stated that their families played critical roles in their motivation to succeed and consistently attend school following repeated grade retention. On the Student Engagement Survey, all of the participants indicated their school attendance was directly related to familial influence. In some situations, students were motivated by the
mistakes of their families. On the other hand, students were also motivated by their families’ abilities to provide safe and nurturing environments.

**Familial mistakes.** Although eight students considered dropping out of school, they also identified it as a hindrance to success, which is evidenced in the lives of their family members. Kayla expressed that she is determined to stay in school and receive her degree. She added,

> My mom works a lot because she didn’t finish school and don’t have a good paying job. I know I need to stay in school because I don’t want to make the same mistake she make and not get a degree. Then I will have to work really hard for only a little bit of money.

Throughout the interview, Jasmine did not have positive comments to share about her experiences with her family and indicated that she intends to utilize those negative experiences as motivation. Because members of her extended family do not “have professional jobs”, Jasmine aspires to become a pediatrician. She enjoys working with children, but most importantly she wants “to be successful because a lot of the women in my family are not.” Additionally, she shared that her mother’s academic failures motivated her to work harder. She added that she wants to experience academic and professional success because her mother dropped out of school in the ninth grade and does not have a professional vocation.

**Safe and nurturing environments.** Elaine shared that her parents cultivate a positive home environment, which encourages her to strive for academic success. She explained,

> My mom cares, but sometimes, she’s very busy. Well both my parents care. I try because I want them to be proud of me. Most people keep saying Imma quit, but I’m not. My parents the only ones that believe in me.

Troquan also indicated that he is strongly motivated by his desire to make his mother and father proud. The majority of the men in his extended family dropped out of school and are currently
incarcerated. By staying in school, Troquan hopes to break the familial cycle of dropping out and incarceration. He stated,

My parents tell me to stay in school. Do my homework. And don’t drop out like your brothers did. Get your high school diploma. I got four brother; I’m the baby. Two of them didn’t go. One of them died. And one got locked up. Well, all of them locked up now. My parents want me to stay in school.

Sam chose multiple family oriented photographs when he created his visual narrative. When asked to elaborate, he expressed the importance of familial motivation and craved the safety and structure he experienced when his family was intact. He stated,

I remember when my family was together; I wanted to do good and stay in school because they was there to help me, tell me I did good, and give me love. I felt kinda safe when my dad was there. Now, we spend a lot of time alone. We would have like family game night and do stuff every weekend. Now, my family is not together because my parents divorced. That’s the kind of life I want for my family. It’s good for little kids to have that. I miss that, and know I did better when my family was like one and not split up.

Monitoring, involvement, and motivation from family are essential because adolescents desire structure and reliable home environments.

**Possibility.** In spite of their academic setbacks and unique challenges, students outlined personal, professional, and academic goals that they are determined to achieve. Nine of the surveyed participants expect to either obtain a high school diploma or attend college; furthermore, nine of the participants shared that they were motivated by their desire to succeed in the world outside of school. John and Lawrence indicated that the possibility of playing college
and professional sports motivated them to remain in school. John expressed that his interest lies in college football and believes he will “probably make it to the NFL.” His visual narrative incorporated a variety of college and professional teams. He explained that those locations are “where I think I will be when I grow up. I am not sure where I will go to play football but I like all those schools.” Lawrence expressed the desire to “play professional basketball or some other sport.” Both students indicated that because of their goals to play professional sports, they realize the necessity of a high school diploma and college education.

Participants also expressed the need to prove to others that there is a likelihood that they can be successful, in spite of previous failure. Kayla said,

Like even though I failed there is still a chance that I can be something good. After I finish college, I can let the people know that I am doing good. So there is still hope that I can make my mom proud of me.

Additionally, Kayla’s visual narrative was inclusive of photographs of individuals she perceived as wealthy. When questioned about her selected photographs, she stated,

I plan to go to community college and get a business degree. I want to be a manager. I put pictures of people with money because I think I will make a lot of money when I get to have a real job after college.

After experiencing failure, Troquan quickly made the decision to focus on his academics; additionally, he is currently motivated by the possibility of owning his father’s business. In his journal Troquan wrote, “I plan to get my high school diploma. And start my own mechanic company.” During the semi-structured interview he further elaborated,
Because like after I failed first and kindergarten I just go in second grade and started doing my work and coming to school and not sleeping. I want to work with my dad. I want it to be like when he get old I want to take over the business.

After completing high school, Damian intends to attend college or join the Marines. He is excited about the opportunity to join the military because no one else in his family is a service member and it’s “just something I can get my mind on.” He illustrated future goals on his visual narrative. When asked to explain his visual narrative, he said,

Military people. A family. And nice stuff. I chose these pictures because I want to join the military and have a nice family. I also want my family to have good stuff and live in a house instead of an apartment.

In response to their academic challenges, many participants became more determined to acknowledge the possibilities that await them. By acknowledging their possibilities, participants believe they can overcome previous failures. After discussing their possibilities and ability to succeed, participants indicated that they were more willing to put forth the additional effort and prove their worth to others.

**Research Question 3: What factors do twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia identify as contributing to repeated grade retention?**

Participants in the study identified common factors contributing to their repeated grade level retention. The themes that emerged in this section include academic competence, relationships, and familial factors.

**Contributing Factors**

Multiple factors were mentioned as contributing to students’ grade retention. When addressing factors contributing to grade retention, the principle themes that emerged include
academic competence, relationships, and familial factors. The essence of contributing factors revolves around these themes and their contribution to students’ academic success.

**Academic competence.** When asked to reflect upon what caused their repeated grade retention, participants cited academic deficiencies as the main reason. Six of the study’s participants indicated that all or most of their classes challenge them to their full academic potential, and they consistently struggled in mathematics and English classes. Failure in eighth grade math and English are early predictors of repeated failure and dropping out of high school (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Two of the three eighth grade participants indicated that they are currently failing math and will more than likely fail English. In contrast, one of the eighth grade students considers math and English her favorite subjects.

In many instances, students explained that they felt overwhelmed and confused in their math classes. Elaine said that she performed poorly in math class because of her discomfort with numbers and “the formulas and stuff are hard to remember.” While in math class, John is often hesitant to participate because he does not comprehend his teacher’s instruction. John expressed that he did not want people to think he cannot count, but he performed poorly in math because there are “a lot of symbols and stuff. And it’s a lot of steps to it. And it’s not just one it’s a whole lot of other things you gotta get down.”

Raul explained that he had difficult time comprehending information in his classes because he did not learn to speak English until he was in kindergarten. He stated that he was retained in the first grade because he did not speak English well and still prefers to speak Spanish.

I don’t understand English very good, and I was embarrassed to ask. So I just sat in class and didn’t ask for help. Then, I failed my English classes. Sometimes, the teachers just
passed me, but I am in the seventh and still don’t speak it good. My least favorite subject is writing class because it’s hard to know the rules.

Sam shared that he did not believe he would pass his English class because it, “takes too much time and it’s just too hard to understand.”

On the other hand, Jasmine indicated that math and English are her favorite subjects because “you learn stuff and with the numbers makes it seem fun. And English you learn like stories and stuff and you make up your own and stuff.” Elaine also identified English as her favorite subject because she appreciates opportunities in class to express herself.

Participants also indicated that the year immediately following grade retention, they initially considered themselves academically ahead of their classmates, only to discover that by midterm they were falling behind again. Their experiences aligned with research that shows that retained students’ short term improvements were “followed by a rapid decline rate” (Wu et al., 2010, p. 149). Elaine shared,

Like at the beginning of the year I did good because I remembered some of the same stuff from last year. But then it started getting harder, and I didn’t know what to do.

Keisha and Damian stated that, immediately following grade retention, they initially excelled in their classes but experienced academic difficulties by the end of the first quarter. They felt as if they were consistently behind their classmates and could never catch up. Keisha added, “most times I didn’t understand the stuff they knew, so I just sat there and didn’t want to ask.”

Although the majority of the students indicated difficulties in most of their classes, in particular math and English classes, four students divulged that they give little to no effort in their classes. When asked about how many hours they spend outside of school studying or completing homework, six students indicated that they spend one hour or less per week.
Because of participants’ perceived academic deficiencies, many chose not to complete assignments and spent minimal time completing homework assignments. Participants felt that there was not much they could do to pass their classes, and their teachers do not have adequate time to address their misconceptions.

**Relationships.** During adolescence, relationships are increasingly important and influential. Peer relationships are more prominent because students “are more involved and intimate with their peers” (Petersen, 1988, p. 600). Additionally, students’ relationships with their teachers contribute to their academic achievement. The major themes that emerged in this section are relationships with peers and relationships with teachers.

**Relationships with peers.** Five participants, Damian, Jasmine, Kayla, Lawrence, and Sam, attributed grade retention to their negative peer groups. Grade retention also impacted their sense of belongingness since they are no longer with their friends, and they expressed difficulty forming new peer groups. Prior to experiencing grade level retention, Damian fondly recalled making honor roll and being an excellent student; however, in the sixth grade he began to associate with the “wrong people” and stopped focusing on academics. He said,

> I started hanging around the wrong people. Before I moved out my old neighborhood I was making straight As and Bs. Then we left the neighborhood, and I start hanging with the wrong people; they weren’t doing their work so I just fell in with them. They all the way in high school, and I’m still here. I stopped hanging around them. The people I hang out with changed how I was acting. My mom was like, “You was making straight honor roll. Why it change up now?” I was like, “It’s the people I hang around with.” I mostly keep to myself now to keep me out of trouble.
Jasmine indicated that the first time she was in the eighth grade was her favorite year because her best friends were in her classes. However, she explained that spending time with her friends lead to academic failure. She explained,

All my friends were there and the stuff we were learning like was new to me and it kinda made it fun and more interesting. But it was kinda bad because I spent a lot of time hanging out with my friends and didn’t really do my work. And I failed. They passed and went to high school.

Kayla recalled her initial failure in the fifth grade and shared that she frequently missed classes because several of her friends “didn’t really go to school.” Because of her infrequent attendance and focus on spending time with her friends, she explained that she rarely understood her teachers’ instruction and failed all of her classes.

Only one student indicated that a relationship with his peers positively contributed to his academic success. John recalled that when he played football, his teammates encouraged him to do well in his classes so that he could remain eligible. The camaraderie with his teammates contributed to John’s academic success in the sixth grade because he did not want to disappoint them.

**Bullying.** For nearly every participant, bullying by their peers was a main concern. On the Student Engagement Survey, two students indicated they often experience bullying and five indicated they sometimes experience bullying. As a result of being bullied by their peers, many students indicated that they disengaged from daily instruction or skipped school which precipitated academic failure.

Jasmine expressed that her sixth grade year was the worst educational experience because she was incessantly bullied, which made her “feel bad and insecure.” Keisha stated that it is
“wrong to hold students back because they get picked on and still don’t learn the stuff. It makes us feel dumb in front of our friends.” In order to avoid being bullied, Keisha frequently arrives late to school and leaves early because she does not want to ride the bus home with her classmates. Kayla said that several students “pick on her” on a daily basis; in many instances she does not retaliate because she does not want to get suspended. Kayla shared that being bullied caused her to fail the sixth grade because she rarely attended a full day of school. As a result of frequent bullying, Raul explained that he does not like his classmates or school in general. He stated,

My experience in school has not been good because I always got bullied. Because I am short and don’t speak English good. They always say stuff about me being older than them and ask why I’m still in middle school. I don’t really talk to anyone at the school. This makes me not want to do anything, so I just fail.

Because of Damian’s experiences with bullying, he described himself as “kinda protective of others.” He shared an incident when he observed bullying and confronted a classroom bully. He said, “One day I seen a boy picking on another boy, and I was like naw bro he cool; bro don’t even mess with him like that.” John also expressed that grade level retention taught him be nicer to others and considerate of their feelings. He said, “I don’t know. It taught me to be nice to people even though they don’t be nice to you.” Participants’ concern with others’ feelings is due in part to the diminishing of adolescent egocentrism. Because of their experiences with bullying, Damian and John are more concerned about the “feelings of others” (Elkind, 1967, p. 1032).

**Relationships with teachers.** The relationships that participants maintained with their teachers were factors in students’ academic successes and failures. When teachers fostered supportive relationships and caring environments with participants, they expressed positive
experiences and increased academic competence. However, when teachers did not foster supportive relationships and caring environments, students expressed negative experiences and decreased academic competence.

Seven of the ten students indicated that they thoroughly enjoyed elementary school because of extracurricular activities and compassionate teachers. Sam recalled his second grade teacher because “he cared a lot and gave us gifts for doing good and behaving in class. I always did all of my work and studied for him because he acted like he thought I was smart.” Kayla credited Ms. Walters for her current academic success because “she makes class fun and gives us stuff for answering questions and doing our work.” Troquan explained that he excelled academically in the third grade because his teacher cared, he wanted to make her proud, and she made learning exciting. He fondly recalled a field trip his favorite teacher. He said,

They had more activities than the other schools. More than the other schools. I like when they had more activities. We had Career Day, Field Day, and they went on more field trips. Like every three or four months they went on field trips. One of my teachers took me out. Her name Ms. Ralph—in third grade. She took me to a museum right downtown. I enjoyed that. That was my first time going there.

Jasmine shared that she will probably be promoted this year because she has very positive relationships with two teachers, Ms. Martinez and Ms. Young. Without their support and engaging teaching styles, Jasmine does not think she would be doing well this year. She explained, “Ms. Martinez makes learning fun. And Ms. Young, she teaches it to where you can understand. Instead of you being confused.” Raul stated that his relationship with his Spanish teacher has positively impacted his academics. He added,
My Spanish teacher is my favorite because she helps me understand stuff. She would take some time to help me understand my other classes. I like her a lot. Right now I have an A in Spanish class. She also helps me understand my other classes. I don’t pass everything, but I’m doing much better this year.

Participants’ relationships with supportive teachers contributed to increased academic competence and higher self-efficacy. Students indicated that they were able to overcome academic obstacles, and in one instance, assist their classmates because of the support and nurturing environments some of their teachers fostered.

Students indicated that negative relationships with their teachers contributed to their repeated retention. Following retention, participants felt as if teachers viewed them differently, treated them with disrespect, and ignored them. On the Student Engagement Survey, seven participants indicated that teachers did not respect their opinions, and eight participants pointed out that teachers never engaged them in classroom discussions. Troquan, Jasmine, Damian, Sam, Raul, Lawrence, and Elaine pointed out that their teachers’ lack of assistance contributed to their academic failures. Sam revealed that he could potentially excel academically in his classes if “the teachers could take the time to help us when we don’t understand.” Elaine indicated that her teachers initially “act like they care”; however, their attitudes toward her begin to change after the initial weeks of school. She further elaborated,

They sometimes try to help a little but then they start acting like they don’t care once they know I failed before. I feel like they always getting smart with me. If you get smart with me I don’t like it, so I don’t say or do nothing in their class.

Lawrence added that he often feels disrespected by his teachers “because I’m older than the other kids in the class. So when they do that I just walk out and don’t get my work done. So I usually
fail those classes.” Similarly, Keisha shared that she frequently has questions but is reluctant to ask for help “because some teachers try to ignore me when I ask questions. So that makes me mad, and I don’t want to get in trouble for like going off in class.” When asked about his relationship with his teachers, John said,

They alright some of them. A lot of them seem like they don’t care. They pretty good. There just one teacher I really don’t like. She just have an attitude every day. Like she always mad at me for some reason. I don’t like asking her questions, so I’m gonna probably fail her class. I might end up failing again this year.

Lawrence felt that uncaring relationships with his teachers contributed to his lack of academic success. He stated,

My teachers could slow down and act like they care about us. Stop being so mean and kicking me out of class. Sometimes I don’t really do nothing; they just put me out. When I get put out I get behind and can’t do my work.

**Familial factors.** In this study, participants indicated that family factors often impacted their academic success. The majority of the students revealed that complications and lack of support at home hindered them from succeeding in school. Students raised in underprivileged, single-parent households are more at risk of academic failure and dropping out of high school (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Three themes developed in this section including single-parent home, parental involvement, and economic status.

**Single-parent home.** Several factors are associated with grade level retention, and being raised in a single-parent household is related to low academic achievement (Pagani et al., 2008). In this study, Troquan, John, Jasmine, Damian, Keisha, Sam, and Kayla reside in single-parent households, and all of them mentioned that residing in single-parent homes impacted their
academic progress. When asked about her familial structure, Jasmine replied, “I don’t have a
dad or I don’t know my dad. I live with my mother.” Jasmine said that a lack of paternal role
model in the home caused her to rebel and frequently get into trouble. She shared that her
rebellious behaviors caused her to run away from home multiple times, which eventually led to
academic failure. Keisha also resides in a single parent home and indicated that her mother is
“gone most of the time”, so she is frequently home alone with her younger brother. She further explained,

I had to take care of my brother when my mom worked. I don’t really have time for
homework and studying cause I have to take care of my little brother. So most times I
don’t get stuff done because I’m tired too. If I don’t take care of him and cook clean stuff
like that it won’t get done.

Parental separation and eventually divorce negatively impacted Sam’s academic progress. He
fondly recalled his second grade year because his family was still intact, and he “did good in
school.” However, when he was in the third grade, his mother and father experienced marital
difficulties and separated. As a result, his world was “turned upside down.” He added,

My least favorite years are third and fifth because I failed. My parents fought a lot and
split up, and I was mad. I failed the first time because my parents split up and I was mad.

After that, I did not care or understand what was going on.

Damian added that he has numerous responsibilities because he resides in a single-parent home,
and his mother works several hours per day. Because of his added responsibilities, he is unable
to focus as much as he would like on his academics. He explained,
Like because it’s just my mom I have a lot of responsibility at the house. So I can’t stay after school for help or come in early. I think that’s why I fail sometimes because I can’t stay for after school sessions.

John often views himself as “the man of the house” because his father infrequently visits the family. Taking care of his family’s needs leaves little time for completing homework or attending after school tutoring. Most of his spare time is spent helping his mother shoulder daily responsibilities. Because of this added pressure, John indicated that it is sometimes difficult to focus on doing classwork or passing the SOLs.

**Parental involvement.** In some instances, participants’ parents did not emphasize the importance of obtaining an education. As a result of their parents’ lackadaisical attitudes, students often neglected to complete homework and class assignments or regularly attend school. On the other hand, some parents stressed the importance of education but were unable to provide the academic support their children desired.

Troquan indicated that his poor attendance habits began when he was in kindergarten because his parents frequently let him stay at home. He reflected,

> When I in elementary school like I ain’t I was in kindergarten and I remember myself crying every time my momma and daddy dropped me off at my classroom. And I started crying. I didn’t want to be there. So sometimes, they let me stay home. That’s one of the reasons I failed because I always wanted to stay home.

Additionally, Kayla said that her academic failures were partially caused because her mother did not make school attendance mandatory. She added, “My mother didn’t make me go to school, and I was bored in classes. I just stopped doing my work.”
Participants indicated that they mainly request academic support from their mothers; unfortunately, in many instances their mothers were unable to comprehend the assignments well enough to provide academic guidance. Keisha stated that her mother attempts to assist her with homework assignments, “but she’s mostly tired.” Because of her mother’s strenuous work schedule, Keisha normally completes her homework assignments alone. Keisha added that when her mother does not have to work, “we just hang out, and she don’t like to do homework and all that kind of stuff. So I don’t really worry about it.” Also, Kayla and John indicated that, because their mothers do not understand the assignments, they rarely receive academic assistance from them. John said, “My mom do all she can already, so. I mean a lot of the stuff she don’t understand for real.” Lawrence provided a similar experience and stated, “My mom and dad try to help, but they don’t know the stuff either. My parents do the best they can.”

Children, whose parents did not complete high school, “are more likely to perform poorly in school” (Fall & Roberts, 2012, p. 787). Even though Raul’s parents place an emphasis on obtaining a high school diploma, they do not speak English well and did not complete high school. Raul explained that there are “many things they don’t understand.” As a result, he attempts to “figure stuff out on his own.” Jasmine shared that she often has difficulty completing her homework assignments but does not feel as if her mother can provide assistance. She explained, “I can’t really ask my mom because she doesn’t know how to do my homework. She says it’s too hard for her. I think it’s because she dropped out when she was in the ninth grade.” Raul and Jasmine stated that although they believe their parents want to assist, they are unable to because of their limited education. Consequently, they inconsistently complete homework assignments and rarely study for tests.


**Economic status.** Students’ eligibility for free or reduced lunch contributes to grade retention (Willson & Hughes, 2009). On the Student Engagement Survey, seven of the ten participants indicated they receive free or reduced lunch, and during semi-structured interviews they expressed concern about their families’ financial status. At times, participants’ socio-economic statuses caused them to neglect their academic responsibilities in order to assist with responsibilities at home. Many students stressed that their lives would be much better if they were upper-class. Also, participants’ parents frequently maintain multiple jobs in order to satisfy financial responsibilities.

Troquan indicated that he often worries about his family’s economic status and dreams of a future in which money is not a major concern. On his visual narrative, he included items that signify monetary success. He added,

> I want my kids to have nice things. It’s hard not having nice things. It’s like my family doesn’t have much money, so we are always struggling. Sometimes, I have to go without a lot of stuff, and I don’t want my family to live like that. I don’t want my kids to be hungry and cold. And not be able to focus on their school and things like that.

Lawrence shared that his family does not have an abundance of money, and it often “stresses me and my mom out.” He added that at times he worries more about his family’s economic situation more than he is concerned with “passing classes.” He indicated and illustrated on his visual narrative that he want to play professional sports so that he can earn “a lot of money and take care of her.”

Five of the seven participants residing in single-parent homes indicated their mothers work several hours and sometimes have multiple jobs. Sam shared that he rarely sees his mother
and cannot depend on her to help him academically because she works multiple jobs. He said, “My mom can’t really do anything because she needs to work. We don’t have a lot of money cause my dad don’t help.” Likewise, Damian stated, “Sometimes my mom try to help me at home, but she work a lot. So, she is not at home all the time.” Jasmine indicated that her family’s economic status makes it difficult for her to concentrate on her academics because she constantly has to help out at home because of her mother’s lengthy work hours. However, her mother’s financial difficulties also motivate her to strive for a better future. She explained,

She has not a good job. That makes me want to do more because I don’t want to end up like her and not have enough money to pay for my kids or not enough money to pay for myself.

While describing their visual narratives, four students mentioned that their lives would be better if their families were wealthy. Troquan explained, “If I work hard and get a good job and make a lot of money my life will better and probably easier than now.” Keisha provided a visual representation of the wealth she would like her family to experience. When Keisha was asked to explain her visual narrative, she stated,

This stuff is things I want my family to have. Like we will live in that neighborhood, drive that car, and wear those kinda clothes. My family don’t have that kind of stuff, so I want it in the future. I think life is easy when you rich.

Jasmine provided a similar point of view when asked to explain her visual narrative; she said, “I want to be a successful pediatrician because it’s hard when you’re like poor and have to struggle all the time.” When elaborating on her visual narrative, Kayla stated, “When I get older, I want to get a good job and make good money. Right now we don’t have a lot of money, and I’m tired of living in the hood and not having money to do stuff like other people.”
Raul and Elaine, two of the three participants currently residing in dual parent households, indicated that financial obligations cause their parents to work lengthy hours; as a result, their parents are unable to monitor their academic progress on a regular basis. Raul stressed that his parents are always at work, and they “can’t stop work to help. We have like a little money, but my parents try really hard.” Elaine stated,

I’m not sure what my mom and dad could do. They have to work a lot because of all the bills we have. Since they are at work, I’m home alone most of the time and have to help around the house. It’s hard because we have to move a lot when they can’t pay rent. We moved to a new place when I started 5th grade, and I just stopped working because I didn’t really like the new school.

Research Question 4: What alternatives to grade level retention are identified by twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia? Although grade retention is a widely accepted practice, most students believed that it is ineffective and stressed that alternatives should be implemented. Via participants’ interview responses and journal entries, the following themes emerged: individualized instruction with separation from classmates and social promotion.

Individualized Instruction with Separation from Classmates

Eight of the participants stated that individualized instruction and separation from classmates are their preferred methods of instruction. Lawrence would prefer “different classrooms and teachers for us so that we can get caught up and understand the classes.” He further elaborated,

Putting us together in different classes would be better because we would not be
embarrassed to be in classes with other students that never failed, and the teachers could give us what we need. All of us would have like our own classes to go to and get help and be around students like we are.

Troquan also explained that individualized instruction should be incorporated because teachers would keep him on track and ensure that his work was completed. By means of individualized instruction, Troquan felt as if students would not be retained because they would receive additional support and better instruction.

Damian explained that there a “too many people in this class; I can’t concentrate.” If classes were smaller, he thinks he would get more teacher assistance and do well in his classes. Damian added, “If I’m by myself I can get my work done. I just need someone to help me.” He also talked about what he would do as a teacher of retained students. He said, “I’d have it would just be like I’d help everybody. If you need any help with homework, I’d give kids my number like come if you need any help I’ll give more one-on- one.”

Keisha’s ideal alternative to grade level retention would be inclusive of separate classes and “extra help.” She also thinks it is important to have separation and instruction by “teachers that care and can teach so we understand.” Sam is self-conscious because he was retained and wishes classes were held “away from other kids so we won’t be embarrassed.” He would also prefer separate classes because retained students require “more one-on-one help because its hard stuff to understand, and they go so fast. Then, the teachers could take the time to help us when we don’t understand.” Raul provided a similar point of view; he said, “It should be a special building that helps students understand the classes. I would like that. Then the other students would not know that I failed.”
John emphasized the importance of having a separate program for failing students because retention is “not right.” He would prefer separate classes from his classmates and “a program to help certain kids. That’s better to help keep up their work so they won’t be able to get retained again.” If he had attended a program separate from his classmates, John believes that he would not “feel as bad” and might not have experienced retention the second time.

**Social Promotion**

Nine of the students admitted that they had not mastered particular objectives; however, six felt as if they should have been socially promoted, not retained. Keisha believes it is important to remain with her peer group and feels that students “should not have to spend the whole year in our wrong grade.” John remembered certain classmates who also failed classes, but they were promoted. This inequality in the application of retention guidelines was confusing and caused him to believe that he was retained because the teachers did not like him. He said,

> Because I know certain kids that got to get promoted and just don’t remember stuff. They failed all the classes like me and went to the next grade. Why couldn’t I do that? I think some of them were their favorites.

John further expressed in his journal that if he had an option such as social promotion, he would have been motivated to work “harder, complete all assignments that were given, stayed on track, and come on time.” In addition, Sam’s journal entry indicated “if we could get moved up to our right grade maybe we would not like act out in class. I think we should be moved so we won’t mess up in class and fail again.” Elaine also believes that social promotion would motivate retained students and should be implemented instead of grade level retention. She explained that an alternative,
Should have something that looks at only what students need and make sure they get the help to pass to the next grade. Making us do the same work is not a good thing. We could start the year in the wrong grade and then get moved up in our right grade so that we are not behind our friends. I would like that better than being in the same grade again. Kayla expressed that she would prefer attending a different school so that she “wouldn’t feel weird around those young students.” She further explained that once students grasped the objectives they “should be moved up to our right grade. A friend of mine did that, and now she’s in her right grade.” Jasmine strongly feels as if students should not be “held back”; instead, students should be given a chance to master the concepts they misunderstood, and “if they get it right they should be moved up to their original grade that they are supposed to be in.” The majority of the participants consider social promotion a positive alternative to grade retention because it would motivate them to work hard and excel academically.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I present the experiences of African American ($n = 5$), Caucasian ($n = 3$), and Hispanic ($n = 2$) middle school students residing in Eastern Virginia who were twice retained. The study’s participants, 4 females and 6 males, are general education students in the general education curriculum. The study’s results were derived from school engagement surveys, semi-structured interviews, visual narratives, and participant journaling. I implemented the following data analysis procedures: reading and reflective journaling; horizontalization; clusters of meaning; and textural, structural, and composite descriptions. Findings were organized based upon the study’s research questions.

Students highlighted a multitude of experiences, views, and feelings due to repeated grade level retention. While describing their experiences, students expressed their views of
grade retention from which the following themes emerged: ineffective, isolating, and monotonous. Students’ feelings following their experiences with grade retention produced three themes: embarrassment, sadness, and anger. As students addressed grade retention’s impact on their motivation and motivating factors, themes such as dropping out, affirmation, family, and possibility emerged. The main themes that emerged when identifying factors contributing to grade retention are inclusive of academic competence, relationships, and familial factors. Two themes, individualized instruction with separation from classmates and social promotion, emerged as students presented alternatives to grade level retention.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of twice retained, middle school students in grades 6-8 residing in Eastern Virginia. In Chapter Five, I first present a summary of the findings in relation to the research questions. Additionally, I relate the study’s findings to the review of literature. The remainder of the chapter is inclusive of implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

Summary of Findings

During semi-structured interviews, the study’s participants revealed positive and negative educational experiences. Students correlated positive experiences with encouraging relationships with their teachers and peers and surpassing their academic expectations in the classroom. Participants’ responses indicated that their worst educational experiences occurred during the years they experienced grade level retention. Students’ experiences centered on their views of grade retention and feelings related to grade retention. Eight of the study’s participants expressed unfavorable opinions of grade retention and described the practice as ineffective, isolating, and monotonous. Only one student indicated that grade retention could positively impact students. Nine of the study’s participants did not feel good about themselves immediately following grade level retention. When probed, students expressed feelings of embarrassment, sadness, and anger.

When addressing grade retention’s impact on twice retained students’ motivation, participants also revealed factors that motivated them to strive for academic success. The study’s participants stated their academic motivation diminished following grade level retention,
and eight of the students considered dropping out of school following grade level retention. The majority of the participants reported that their academic motivation increased as a result of affirmation from family members and teachers, extracurricular activities, family members’ mistakes and safe and nurturing home environments, and future goals.

The study’s participants identified varied factors contributing to grade level retention. Participants largely cited academic deficiencies as the main reason for their grade level retention. Six of the students indicated their classes challenge them to their full academic potential, and they experienced the most difficulties in mathematics and English classes. Students revealed that relationships with teachers and peers also impacted their academic successes and failures. Participants indicated their compassionate elementary school teachers encouraged them and increased their academic engagement. However, following grade retention students stated their teachers disrespected, ignored, and viewed them differently; consequently, students frequently disengaged and did not academically progress. Five participants indicated that negative peer groups attributed to grade level retention, and grade level retention negatively impacted their sense of belonging. Seven of the ten participants also revealed they were bullied by their classmates. Familial factors were also attributed to students’ grade level retention. Seven of the study’s participants stated that residing in single-parent homes impacted their academic progress. Parental involvement and economic status were also identified as contributing factors.

Eight of the study’s participants believed grade level retention is ineffective and suggested the following alternatives be implemented: individualized instruction with separation from classmates and social promotion. Participants suggested that individualized and separate instruction would provide opportunities to address misconceptions; additionally, separation would alleviate their feelings of embarrassment. As a result, they would be more focused on
academics and less self-conscious. Students also viewed social promotion as a viable alternative because they would be motivated to succeed in order to remain with their peer groups.

**Discussion**

This phenomenological study on the experiences of twice retained, middle schools students residing in Eastern Virginia was guided by four research questions. The study’s results yielded findings to describe the experiences of twice retained, middle school students residing in Eastern Virginia. The discussion section provides answers to the research questions in relation to the theoretical and empirical literature this study was grounded in.

**Discussion Related to the Literature Review**

Research Question 1: What are twice retained students’ experiences with grade retention? This question is essential to the efforts of understanding the educational experiences of students experiencing grade level retention multiple times. During semi-structured interviews, the study’s participants detailed positive and negative educational experiences; additionally, they expounded on their opinions of and feelings uncovered following grade level retention. Within their narrations, participants indicated their positive educational experiences typically occurred in elementary school and are associated with positive peer and teacher relationships. Previous research supports that positive relationships enhance students’ educational experiences and impact students’ self-perceptions and engagement levels (Fall & Roberts, 2012). Eight of the ten participants reported that their negative educational experiences are connected to the years during which they were retained. Although eight of the participants experienced grade level retention in elementary school, seven of them still considered elementary school their favorite years due to the encouraging and supportive relationships with their teachers.
The study’s participants provided information that vividly expressed their views of grade level retention. Gottfried’s (2012) research suggested that grade retention has not proven itself beneficial to most retained students. Additionally, Norton (2011) noted that grade level retention has a “negative impact on all areas of achievement” (p. 212). Consistent with these researchers’ positions, eight out of ten participants held negative views of grade level retention. When asked to articulate their views of grade level retention, participants utilized essentially the same terminology: ineffective, isolating, and monotonous.

In alignment with previous research (Frederick & Hauser, 2008; Norton, 2011), the majority of this study’s participants viewed grade level retention as ineffective because, in subsequent years, they were not provided opportunities to increase levels of understanding and address misconceptions. Participants reported feelings of isolation due to a lack of peer groups immediately following grade level retention; additionally, students felt overlooked by their teachers. Proponents of grade level retention contend that students benefit from grade level retention because they will have opportunities increase their comprehension of the curriculum (Tanner & Combs, 1993; Alexander et al., 1993; Powell, 2010). However, this study’s participants did not view retention in that manner. Students shared that because the content covered the subsequent year was identical to the previous year, they were frequently bored and disinterested in completing their academic tasks.

Elkind’s (1967) theory of adolescent egocentrism addresses adolescents’ concern with self and their lack of concern for others; furthermore, this theory utilizes the imaginary audience and personal fable to describe the mindsets of adolescents. In alignment with the imaginary audience, seven participants consider themselves the centers of others’ attention and have an extreme “concern with shame, shyness, and embarrassment” (Lapsley, 1993, p. 563).
Participants’ descriptions of their feelings were similar to the findings in Lapsley’s (1993) research; while describing their emotional reactions to grade level retention, participants repeatedly provided descriptors such as “embarrassed,” “sad,” and “angry.” Students’ sense of embarrassment was not contained to the educational setting; in addition, participants were embarrassed to admit to their family members and peers that they failed. Following grade level retention, students believed that others were acutely aware of their academic failures. Students communicated that classmates and teachers were aware of their failures, and they felt as if others were constantly making note of their academic failures, ages, and height, in comparison to their classmates.

Adolescents also create personal fables, which frequently stress “personal uniqueness, omnipotence, and invulnerability” (Lapsley, 1993, p. 563). This aspect of adolescent egocentrism was not confirmed in this study. Participants in this study did not articulate their invincibility and individuality; in fact, students frequently exposed their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Slavin’s (1997) research revealed that, when faced with failure, adolescents tend to create negative self-images and perceive themselves as unable to measure up to internal and external standards. Nine of this study’s participants do not feel good about themselves as students and alluded to feelings of inadequacy because they felt as if they did not possess the ability to meet the expectations of their families, teachers, and themselves.

Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory indicates that people control their thoughts, feelings, and actions, and self-efficacy effects people’s behaviors and determines the amount of effort and perseverance they demonstrate. Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory indicates that students’ beliefs and expectations, coupled with skills, often produce desired results. However, participants in this study believed that they were unprepared to successfully complete nearly all
of their assignments. Due to students’ low self-efficacy, participants often refused to try, especially in their mathematics and English classes. Additionally, individuals with low-self efficacy typically believe situations are more difficult than they actually are (Pajares, 1996). In alignment with Pajares’ (1996) research, participants who doubted their abilities envisioned failure prior to attempting tasks.

While seven of the study’s participants associated embarrassment with grade level retention and created negative self-images following academic failures, one student’s outlook diverged from research (Elkind, 1967; Lapsley, 1993; Slavin, 1997) in that he maintained a positive self-image and viewed grade level retention as opportunities for him to address academic misconceptions. Additional literature on grade level retention contends that retained students have opportunities to “catch up with their peers” (Jacob & Lefgren, 2009, p. 34). This participant’s experience was more aligned with Jacob and Lefgren’s (2009) perspective. The participant, currently in grade 8, indicated that he was not concerned with the views of others and considered his repeated grade level retention in elementary school as opportunities to better grasp concepts he “didn’t remember.” Instead of developing a negative self-image, he viewed grade level retention as an opportunity to “start over,” put forth more effort, and address his misconceptions.

The literature on retained students’ behaviors indicated that students’ anger and disruptive behaviors tend to exacerbate following grade level retention (Gottfried, 2013; Pagani et al., 2008). Similar to prior research, this study’s participants disclosed that grade level retention created feelings of anger, often followed by disruptive behaviors such as leaving classes without permission and aggressive behaviors toward their classmates. Students reported that they were not equipped to handle their feelings of anger, which frequently stemmed from
negative comments made by their classmates and teachers. Students revealed that they attempted to avoid confrontational situations by leaving their classes without permission; however, for students this proved to be a short term solution to their problems. Participants reported that when they remained in confrontational situations, they engaged in verbal or physical altercations with their classmates; consequently, students were frequently absent as a result of suspensions and avoidance of confrontational situations. When students returned to school following suspensions or lengthy absences, they were even further behind their classmates.

Research Question 2: How does grade retention influence the motivation of twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia? This question is essential in raising the awareness of the multitude of factors influencing the motivation of twice retained, middle school students. Before the academic needs of students can be addressed, students’ motivation must be identified and understood. In addition to current empirical literature, Maslow’s (1943) theory of motivation plays a significant role in twice retained, middle school students’ experiences with grade level retention. Maslow’s (1943) theory of motivation states that people’s physiological needs, inclusive of food, water, and rest, must be satisfied first. Otherwise, individuals improperly function, and their subsequent needs are neglected (Maslow, 1943). In this study, five of the participants reported that they sleep during their classes because they do not get adequate rest at home. Participants in the study cited the following reasons for their sleep deprivation: caring for younger siblings, household chores and responsibilities, and socializing with peers. As Maslow’s (1943) theory of motivation supports, sleep deprived participants were most concerned with satisfying this physiological need, even at the risk of academic failure.

Although five students indicated they sleep in class as a result of sleep deprivation, others shared
that they sleep in class because they are frequently bored in classes, often ignored by their teachers, and perceive themselves as academically behind their classmates.

Upon satisfaction of physiological needs, safety needs, largely impacted by parental monitoring and involvement, ascend. Previous research (Chen, 2008) posits that parental monitoring and involvement positively impact students’ academic motivation and engagement. All of the study’s participants expressed a desire to have their parents fully immersed in their educational experiences; however, John, Jasmine, Keisha, Sam, Raul, Lawrence, Kayla, and Elaine indicated their parents were often unable or unwilling to monitor their educational progress. Participants’ responses revealed their needs for parental consistency and involvement and “undisrupted routine or rhythm” (Maslow, 1943, p. 5). Additionally, seven participants specifically indicated that inconsistent paternal presence negatively impacted their academic achievements. When his parents divorced, one participant felt as if his “life was turned upside down” and indicated he performed better academically when his parents were married.

Participants believed that their parents’ inconsistencies impacted their motivation to attend classes on a regular basis. Gottfried (2013) found that retained students are frequently absent, which is supported in this present study. Nine of the participants shared that they skip school or fake illnesses in order to avoid attending school. Of the nine students, four stated their parents arbitrarily require school attendance; consequently, they do not feel compelled to regularly attend. However, all of the study’s participants indicated they attempt to consistently attend school because they want to pass and eventually get promoted to high school and, in some cases, attend college.

Participants also indicated that teachers’ inconsistencies create feelings of uneasiness, hinder their academic progress, and decrease their motivation and classroom engagement. In
some instances, teachers were described as compassionate and supportive at the beginning of the academic year immediately following grade level retention; however, by midterm participants believed their teachers did not assist and support them. Students who did not feel as if their teachers provide consistency and safe learning environments did not feel comfortable seeking assistance or motivated to complete their academic tasks. Participants’ positions are aligned with research conducted by Huang (2014) who suggested that negative student-teacher relationships are linked to decreased academic achievement and motivation.

Maslow’s (1943) theory of motivation also addresses individuals’ need for “self-respect or self-esteem” (p. 7), a “generalized form of self-efficacy” (Pajares, 1996, p. 560). When self-esteem needs are satisfied, people exhibit self-confidence; however, when this need is not satisfied feelings of inferiority surface. Participants recalled academic successes such as making honor roll or earning all As in their classes; during these events, they felt intelligent and exhibited increased self-esteem. Additionally, participants involved in extracurricular activities such as football, basketball, and the yearly spelling bee expressed a sense of accomplishment and confidence because they performed well while completing unfamiliar activities.

On the other hand, negative events such as grade level retention severely damage students’ self-esteem (Martin, 2011; Whitted, 2011). Participants in this study believed that grade level retention negatively impacted their academic motivation and self-esteem. Students’ self-confidence and academic motivation decreased, and their dominant feelings were identified as embarrassment, sadness, and anger after facing grade level retention.

According to Maslow (1943), the need for self-fulfillment arises following satisfaction of previous needs. In spite of the fact that deficiency needs were not satisfied for many students, they were strongly motivated by future possibilities and professional goals. Nine of the study’s
participants revealed that they were motivated by their desires to succeed in the world outside of school. Previous research (Kenny et al., 2006) revealed that career guidance and planning are correlated to increased school engagement. When students contemplated their preferred professions, they were motivated to remain in school in order to reach their full potential. Although students were motivated by future goals, five foreshadowed hindrances due to their prior grade level retention. Six participants reported that grade retention previously interfered with their goals and contemplated their abilities to overcome grade retention and experience future academic and professional success.

According to Goldschmidt and Wang (1999), grade level retention “is the single strongest factor predictor of dropping out” (p. 717). This position was reinforced by the majority of the study’s participants. As students discussed their feelings immediately following grade level retention, eight of the study’s participants indicated they considered dropping out of school. These results align with previous research conducted by Christle et al. (2007) indicating that grade level retention intensifies students’ desires to drop out of school.

Bowers (2010) found that students contemplated dropping out of school as early as grade 7 and the most likely grades for dropping out are grades 8 and 11. This study’s results diverged from Bowers’ findings, as participants elaborated on grade level retention’s impact on their academic motivation. Of the eight participants retained in elementary school, five considered dropping out of school immediately following their grade level retention. Because some participants experienced grade level retention as early as kindergarten and first grade, they expressed that they did not possess the vocabulary to specifically state they wanted to drop out; one participant vividly recalled “not wanting to go there anymore.” Students retained multiple times by grade 7 are less likely to graduate from high school than their consistently promoted
peers (Im et al., 2013; Rath et al., 2012). While this study does not incorporate the experiences of these participants in high school, prior research and participants’ early desires to drop out of school, tend to support these findings.

Research Question 3: What factors do twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia identify as contributing to grade retention? This research question is significant because it aimed to provide answers to identify the reasons for grade level retention. By revealing these contributing factors, specific actions can be taken to decrease and eradicate the factors leading to grade level retention. The major factors identified by this study’s participants include academic competence, relationships, familial factors, and economic status.

Willson and Hughes (2009) considered academic competence the greatest “constellation of variables” correlated to grade level retention (p. 262). The study’s results revealed that the participants considered academic deficiencies the major reason for their repeated grade level retention. In fact, on the Student Engagement Survey seven of the study’s participants indicated they do not possess the appropriate skills to perform well in their classes. Because of their perceived lack of skills, six of the study’s participants indicated they will likely have to repeat at least one class in the upcoming year.

In addition to self-efficacy, individuals must possess “appropriate skills and adequate incentives” (Bandura, 1977, p. 194) in order to positively influence their thoughts and behaviors. Participants’ academic self-efficacy varied; in several instances, students expressed low self-efficacy in English and math classes and shared that these are the classes they normally find challenging and fail. This revelation is significant because Cohen and Smerdon (2009) cited that failing English and mathematics classes in grade 8 are not only predictors of grade level retention but also “high school dropout” (p. 182). Two of the three eighth graders in the study
indicated they are currently failing their English and math classes. Students shared that they initially put forth a great deal of effort and tried to independently address their misconceptions; however, when students’ misunderstandings were unaddressed and they felt disregarded by their teachers, they slept, disengaged, or walked out of their classrooms.

Bandura’s (1997) research on increasing self-efficacy addressed the concept of enactive mastery, completing of specific behaviors, provides evidence individuals’ ability to “muster whatever it takes to succeed” (p. 80). In discussions with students concerning when they most believed in their abilities to successfully perform academic tasks, they repeatedly referenced elementary school experiences because their teachers regularly affirmed their educational efforts and fostered nurturing environments. Students’ enactive mastery during elementary school created opportunities to further develop their self-efficacy and increase academic competence.

Once physiological and safety needs are satisfied, love, affection, and sense of belonging needs emerge (Maslow, 1943). Participants’ readily described ways that positive and negative relationships with their peers and teachers influenced their academic achievement. The findings in this study indicated that participants yearn for acceptance from their peer groups and classmates. Involvement in extracurricular, team activities such as football increased participants’ sense of belonging. Participants who joined team activities reported that teammates assisted them with homework and classwork and coaches motivated them to maintain passing grades. One participant also described joining the football team as a positive experience because he had “a lot of friends.” Consequently, students experienced a heightened sense of belonging, academic success, and increased motivation.

On the other hand, participants indicated they felt excluded in classroom discussions, and only three of the study’s participants considered themselves valued members of their schools’
participants explained that they would have felt more included if they had been
provided opportunities to participate in group projects and more frequently interact with their
classmates. On the Student Engagement Survey, eight of the study’s participants indicated that
they appreciated collaborating with their peers and classmates; however, four of the participants
indicated they were rarely given opportunities to glean information from others.

Previous research (Gottfried, 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Pagani et al., 2008)
indicated that grade level retention often leads to increased negative behaviors in retained
students. Gottfried (2013) also noted that disruptive behaviors by retained students may “induce
disengagement in others” (p. 1394). Additionally, researchers stated that retained students are
less likely to conform to “school norms, values, and rules” (Im et al., 2013, p. 350). This study’s
results somewhat differed from these findings. While students readily admitted they were often
aggressive toward their classmates, they also shared that their grade level retention increased
their classmates’ negative behaviors. In multiple interviews, participants characterized their
classmates as intimidating, immature, and irritating. Seven of ten participants reported they were
often or frequently bullied by their classmates because of their repeated failures. Participants
shared that their classmates’ bullying negatively impacted their academic performances because
they often academically disengaged, skipped particular classes, or arrived late to school in order
to avoid confrontations with their bullies. Furthermore, bullying by their classmates lowered
participants’ self-esteem and increased their feelings of anger and embarrassment. As a result of
frequent bullying, participants expressed discomfort in their current educational settings and
fractured relationships with their classmates.

According to Elkind (1967), adolescent egocentrism lessens by the age of 16; at this
point, adolescents tend to become equally concerned others’ feelings. Students in this study
expressed concern for others facing grade level retention and suggested alternatives that they felt would improve the educational journeys of students facing similar predicaments. Participants’ sense of concern for others is also aligned with Erikson’s (1959) psychosocial theory which indicates that adolescents want to be significant to those who matter most to them (Erikson, 1968), and they are concerned with increased interactions with their “neighborhoods, communities, and schools” (Sokol, 2009, p. 143). Additionally, Erikson (1968) noted that during adolescence, ages 12-18, individuals tend to express a sense of morality and are more cognizant of right versus wrong. During semi-structured interviews, participants supported this notion by intervening when they witnessed other students being bullied.

The literature on student-teacher relationships reports that supportive teacher relationships positively impact students’ academic achievement (Connell, Halpern-Felsher, Clifford, Crishlow, & Usinger, 1995; Fall & Roberts, 2012). In alignment with the extant literature, Bandura (1986) indicated that verbal persuasion correlates to “greater sustained effort” (p. 400), and individuals are more likely to sustain “when problems arise” (p.400). This phenomenon was supported in the study because participants who received affirmation from teachers felt as if they would be promoted to the next grade level, and six of the participants indicated they are motivated by teachers who encourage them. Overall, students believed they experienced academic success when their teachers communicated with them, assisted them, and rewarded them for their efforts.

All participants in this study mentioned their families when addressing issues associated with grade level retention. This addressed a frequently cited conclusion that familial factors strongly predict students’ academic successes (Chen, 2008, Fall & Roberts, 2012; Pagani et al., 2008; Whitted, 2011). Research on the correlation between residing in a single-parent home and
diminished academic achievement indicates that children raised in single-parent homes exhibit an increased likelihood of experiencing “primary school failure, delinquency, and educational attainment” (Pagani et al., 2008, p. 176). In this study, seven of the twice retained, middle school students reside in single-parent homes. Of the seven students residing in single-parent households, five were retained in primary school.

An important factor contributing to grade retention is parental involvement. When students’ parents and guardians are highly involved in their educational journeys, students experiences academic gains (Chen, 2008). Participants reported that their parents were often less involved in their education because of their work schedules and inability to comprehend homework assignments. Additional research on parental involvement noted that “mothers not completing high school” (Pagani, 2008, p. 179) contributes to academic failure. Students in this study believed that assistance from their parents would be beneficial; however, many specifically mentioned their mothers’ inability to assist them and fully comprehend homework assignments because of low parental education. Eight of the ten participants revealed their mothers try to help; however, students noted that their mothers are unable to comprehend the assignments. One student stressed that her mother tries to help, “but some of the stuff she doesn’t understand.” Participants in this study understood the benefits of increased parental involvement; however, they were cognizant of their parent’s inability to assist due in part to the fact that fifty percent of their parents did not complete high school.

Research establishes that students’ socio-economic statuses are associated with their academic abilities, and students in low-income households are more likely to experience grade level retention (Gottfried, 2013; Whitted, 2011; Willson & Hughes, 2009). Additionally, Willson and Hughes (2009) suggested that students receiving free or reduced lunches experience
grade level retention more than their advantaged classmates. This study supported the premise that socio-economic status contributes to students’ academic progress. On the Student Engagement Survey, seven of the study’s twice retained, participants indicated they receive free or reduced lunches. The study’s participants were extremely aware of their economic disadvantages, and several expressed the need for an education so that they can eventually escape their current economic circumstances.

Research Question 4: What alternatives to grade level retention are identified by twice retained, middle school students in Eastern Virginia? This research question was geared to identify grade level retention alternatives preferred by twice retained, middle school students. When asked to provide grade level retention alternatives, several students made suggestions that they felt would not only benefit themselves but others in similar educational predicaments. The participants’ responses revealed that grade retention alone is not an effective intervention; however, they suggested individualized instruction with separation from classmates and social promotion as their preferred alternatives.

The literature on alternatives to grade level retention centers on options such as virtual learning and credit recovery programs. Virtual learning is considered a practical option by many because students are provided flexibility and self-paced learning conditions (Roblyer, 2006). However, for low-performing students, this may not be the most beneficial option because many lack prior knowledge and time management skills (Franco & Patel, 2011). Participants in this study expressed the need for consistency, guidelines, and academic support from their teachers in order to address their misconceptions. Consequently, virtual learning opportunities may not best address the educational challenges of the students represented in this study.
Credit recovery programs give retained students chances to earn lacking credits resulting from previous failures. While credit recovery programs are generally geared toward high school students, these programs could assist middle school students in passing classes and eventually graduating with their peers. Although these programs are largely online, there are certified teachers available to provide educational assistance for enrolled students (Dessoff, 2009). Because of the additional support by instructors, credit recovery programs may best address the educational needs of twice retained, middle school students.

Proponents of social promotion, advancing students to their upcoming grade levels, indicated that it has “more positive advantages” (Norton, 2011, p. 210) and lower-performing students are positively influenced by higher-performing students (Gottfried, 2012). Similar to prior research, the study’s participants believed that social promotion was a viable option because they would be motivated to diligently work and not squander the opportunity to remain with their peers.

Opponents of social promotion contend that low-performing students do not possess ample background knowledge and “there is a negative prediction of school success if they were promoted” (Ehmke et al., 2010, p. 29). While students in this study preferred social promotion, they substantiated this opponent’s position by revealing that they often do not comprehend multiple daily objectives. Immediately following grade level retention, participants indicated they performed well; however, as the objectives became more complex, they were unable to master educational curriculum, experiencing the same academic challenges they encountered the first time they were exposed to the material.
Implications

This study’s results suggest that grade retention alone did not prove beneficial to or foster favorable experiences for the study’s participants. Although this study has limitations, it provides theoretical and practical implications for practice as stakeholders collaborate to enrich the educational experiences of twice retained, middle school students. These implications can not only assist in providing enriched educational experiences for twice retained, middle school students but also support the educational community in building an improved rapport with parents and family members, students, and policymakers.

Practical Implications

In addition to elaborating on existing theories and current literature, this study’s findings revealed practical implications for educational stakeholders. This study’s findings revealed specific recommendations for educational communities, parents and family members, and policymakers. Participants’ points of view are also provided in support of these implications.

Educational communities. Twice retained, middle students’ educational communities, inclusive of teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, and school board members should work in collaboration to improve the experiences of twice retained, middle school students. As teachers search for ways to improve twice retained, middle school students’ experiences, it is beneficial if they receive extensive, pre-service training in order to make them aware of students’ specific educational and emotional needs. During pre-service training, teachers should be made mindful of twice retained, middle school students’ views of and feelings regarding grade level retention. In order to offer additional support for teachers of retained students, quarterly meetings should also occur and allow opportunities for growth in the professional knowledge of strategies to improve the educational experiences of twice retained, middle school students.
Also, quarterly meetings afford opportunities for teachers of retained students to glean best instructional practices from one another.

During semi-structured interviews, several students shared that their classes were “boring”, and on the Student Engagement Survey, nine of the participants indicated they were often bored in class. Consequently, teachers must provide rigorous, engaging instruction and utilize their content area strengths to develop lesson plans that address twice retained, middle school students’ misconceptions and pique their interest. In an effort to decrease retained students’ classroom boredom, teachers should also differentiate classroom instruction. During students’ repeated grade levels, teachers could provide alternate, high interest topics and assignments that address the previous year’s educational skills and objectives. Since several participants expressed their lack of understanding and boredom, especially in English and mathematics classes, differentiation of instruction may increase students’ engagement levels and academic competence.

Another implication for teachers relates to the importance of fostering affirming relationships with twice retained, middle school students. Twice retained, middle school students’ educational experiences are deeply impacted by their interactions with teachers; consequently, teachers should be acutely aware of their body language, word choice, and tone when communicating with retained students. During semi-structured interviews, several participants indicated that teachers’ interactions with them changed following grade level retention. Lawrence explained, “I feel like they disrespect me because I’m older than the other kids in the class. So when they do that I just walk out and don’t get my work done. So I usually fail those classes.” Developing positive relationships with retained students is key to their educational successes.
In order to counteract and perhaps prevent grade level retention, teachers must recognize early warning signs such as students’ poor attendance, negative or disruptive behaviors, and failing English and/or mathematics. Teachers’ reactions to students’ poor attendance and negative or disruptive behaviors should not always be punitive. Teachers could begin to implement incentives for consistent attendance and positive behaviors. By doing so, there will be a shift in the focus on reducing negative issues and a renewed focus on promoting positive behaviors. When teachers determine that students are experiencing difficulties in English and/or mathematics, they should assist students in securing additional resources such as tutoring or provide individualized instruction to address students’ misconceptions.

As warning signs are observed, teachers need to encourage communication between students, guidance counselors, and parents. Because it is frequently the familial context that strongly influences students’ educational journeys, it is imperative that teachers aim to actively involve parents and family members. Communication with parents should be recurring and in a variety of forms such as phone calls, emails, newsletters, and face-to-face meetings. Teachers could make initial positive contacts with parents and family members early in the school year and express the goal of forming partnerships, focused on fostering positive educational experiences for students, as well as parents. During communication, it is important to explain pedagogical approaches so that parents and family members are informed of educational objectives. Parental and familial communication should also be inclusive of resources available to assist students; teachers can provide summaries of weekly objectives, before and after school remediation schedules, and tutoring hotline phone numbers and websites that not only assist students but also parents. Extending invitations to develop partnerships and providing educational resources involves parents in the decision making process and encourages buy-in.
Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, and Eddy (2005) indicated that self-advocacy development incorporates the following: knowledge of human, civil, and legal rights; vocalizing beliefs, self-awareness; autonomy; options; needs; pride; partnerships; and initiative. Fiedler and Danneker (2007) stated that self-advocacy should be taught to students because these skills encourage social and academic growth. Teachers can play significant roles in developing students’ self-advocacy. In order to teach students self-advocacy skills, teachers could assist them in identification of educational resources, impart knowledge of and model key skills, and encourage confident communication with authority figures concerning their individualized needs.

The magnitude of the importance of the transition to middle school is evidenced in the fact that six of the study’s participants experienced grade level retention in 6th grade. Middle school teachers, in particular 6th grade teachers, must be acutely aware of the critical transition students are experiencing and the enormous impact student-teacher relationships have on the academic successes of students. In order to aid students during this transition, it is important to foster positive classroom climates and relationships. Teachers should build rapport with all students by fostering positive communication, modeling appropriate classroom behaviors, outlining expectations, and providing positive reinforcement and incentives. Teachers could play critical roles in positively impacting students’ middle school transitions, educational journeys, and perhaps assist them in avoiding grade level retention.

Administrators frequently establish schools’ academic cultures and should set high academic expectations for twice retained, middle school students. Twice retained students should be given ample opportunities to thrive in educational environments that support high expectations and academic success throughout their educational careers. With the aim of fostering cultures more conducive to academic success, administrators should implement school
wide behavior programs that assist students with managing their negative feelings and decreasing negative behaviors such as bullying. Additionally, the programs should specifically teach students replacement behaviors and positive coping mechanisms. By addressing the holistic needs of students, administrators can demonstrate their awareness that there are factors in addition to academics that influence students’ grade level retention.

In order to reach high expectations and academic success, some students may require additional support such as tutoring and mentoring programs. Additionally, administrators should encourage reading, English, and mathematics labs to assist students in their deficiency areas. Administrative attention to the holistic education of students provides opportunities for students to experience academic and emotional growth in school.

Administrators also play critical roles in developing self-advocacy in students and their families. Administrators should begin to facilitate opportunities for students to speak to authority figures concerning their goals and solicit information required to better address students’ academic, as well as psychological needs. By developing positive and supportive relationships with students, administrators can encourage open dialogue and opportunities for students to self-advocate and openly express their experiences. In addition to creating cultures of high expectations, administrators should also promote cultures of inclusion for twice retained students and their parents. Inclusive cultures could encourage parental advocacy for their children’s academic success. With the intention of fostering self-advocacy skills and increasing parental and family involvement, administrators must exercise and promote among teachers increased communication with students and parents concerning available resources. Educational resources and outreach programs should be readily accessible for parents and family members of all students so that adequate academic support and encouragement can be consistently provided.
Via increased communication with parents and family members, administrators will facilitate support systems that promote self-confidence and encourage parents to be more vocal concerning their needs and specific interests.

Additional implications for administrators include providing pre-service and quarterly professional development and continuing support for teachers. Administrators must provide detailed training, inclusive of differentiation strategies that can logically be integrated in teachers’ curricula. Educators who must differentiate instruction to adequately meet the educational needs of all students will require administrative support and guidance. Also, professional development for teachers, centered on developing students’ self-advocacy, should be inclusive of methods to develop students’ self-advocacy via instructional strategies, modeling, and positive reinforcement. Additional care should be taken when developing yearly schedules for previously retained students. Administrators should support placement of students in classrooms with teachers specifically trained to address the academic as well as social and emotional needs of retained students.

Implications for guidance counselors are inclusive of implementation of counseling sessions for twice retained, middle school students in order for students to address their feelings of isolation, embarrassment, and anger, as a result of grade level retention. Twice retained students could greatly benefit from training on how to positively channel their negative feelings. Additionally, guidance counselors should consider the fact that a number of twice retained students are frequently bullied, and they would significantly benefit from bullying intervention techniques.

An additional implication for guidance counselors is career counseling for twice retained students. Kayla shared, “I am motivated by going to college.” She further elaborated, “Like
even though I failed there is still a chance that I can be something good. After I finish college, I can let the people know that I am doing good.” Twice retained students are motivated by future possibilities, and their guidance counselors’ input and encouragement would be beneficial.

School board members’ responsibilities are inclusive of student advocacy, setting goals and visions for districts, and approving educational programs. Members of the school board should be cognizant of and strongly advocate for the unique educational needs of twice retained, middle school students. In order to ensure that the needs of all students are adequately addressed, school board members should advocate for ongoing professional development for principals, teachers, and guidance counselors. Also, school board members should increase communication with stakeholders to promote buy-in for educational programs and initiatives that will assist all students in obtaining academic success. Districts’ goals and visions must be inclusive of language addressing the importance of improving the educational experiences of marginalized students. In addition, districts should develop and distribute consistent, clear policies and procedures concerning grade level retention and guidelines for reporting grade level retention. According to Warren and Saliba (2013) many districts and states “do not report grade retention rates at all; those that do use different methods for calculating them” (p. 321).

Also, tutoring programs and educational resources specifically centered on retained students’ educational deficiencies should be outlined, funded, and implemented. By working together, teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, and school board members can addressed the educational needs of all students and positively impact twice retained, middle school students’ educational experiences, while assisting them in developing a stronger sense of community and belonging.
Parents and family members. Parents and family members of twice retained, middle school students play critical roles in students’ academic successes. Participants specifically indicated that they attend school because their parents encourage and believe in them. During the semi-structured interview, Elaine shared, “Well both my parents care. I try because I want them to be proud of me. Most people keep saying Imma quit, but I’m not. My parents the only ones that believe in me.” Because of their undeniable influence, parents must become increasingly involved in their children’s educational journeys.

Parents and family members must advocate for their children because “when parents advocate for their children alongside educators, higher educational attainment is possible” (Khalifa, 2013, p. 762). Parents must increase their involvement and interest in decisions made concerning their children’s educational experiences and communicate with administrators and teachers when their children are in need of additional resources and support. Parents should regularly contact their children’s teachers and administrators to seek out additional support from the educational community and remain abreast of resources, such as before and after school tutoring; reading, English and mathematics labs; summer school programs; and guidance counseling services available at their children’s schools. Advocating for their children and awareness of suitable resources and programs could potentially increase parental and family involvement.

Parents and family members must become proactive in seeking resources that better equip them to academically assist their children. Kayla shared, “My mom tries to help me but some of the stuff she doesn’t understand.” Likewise, during his interview, Damian shared,
But my mom tries. She be like want me to help you study? Need any help? With homework or whatever. I like one-on-one help. But it’s hard for both of us because she don’t know how to do it either.

Five of this study’s participants indicated their parents did not complete high school. There are currently community and state resources that parents, unable to academically support their children, should take advantage of. On a community level, there are resources such as the Boys and Girls Club and the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) that offer tutoring, computer learning centers, and referral services. By participating in these community resources, parents and family members can glean appropriate skills and resources to fully engage in their children’s educational journeys.

Children of low-educated parents commonly experience behavioral and academic difficulties (Redmond, Katz, Smart, & Gubhaju, 2013). Virginia’s Department of Education outlines educational services that are advantageous to parents who are unable to academically support their children. Parental options are inclusive of (a) Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs that assist adult learners in improving their basic skills, (b) Adult High School Diploma Program, which promotes receipt of a high school diploma, (c) General Educational Development (GED) High School Equivalency Exam, which focuses on the areas of Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies, and (d) National External Diploma Program (NEDP), a self-paced program that allows individuals opportunities to earn their high school diplomas (“Virginia Department of Education”, n.d.). By continuing their education, parents may increase their children’s academic achievement, encourage more appropriate classroom behaviors, and model the value of an education to their children.
**Policymakers.** As it currently stands, stakeholders may not be fully abreast of twice retained, middle school students’ unique educational experiences and needs. Educational policymakers should be mindful of the plight of twice retained students and develop local, state, and federal guidelines regarding responsibilities aimed at holistically educating retained students. Policymakers must appeal for funding allocated for the education of retained students. Funds must be available in order to make available adequate resources, support, tutoring, and training and provide an improved educational experience for twice retained students. As reflected in the unique experiences of this study’s participants, repeated grade retention did not benefit them academically and had detrimental effects on their social-emotional well-being. Instead of repeated grade level retention being the primary option, policymakers need to strongly consider the consequences of repeated grade level retention and indicate that students at risk of repeated failure will initially be provided support and alternative options such as family resource centers, early intervention procedures, extended day programs; credit recovery programs; and drop-out prevention initiatives, as early as elementary school. These supportive measures and alternatives ought to be expanded to all schools and a concerted effort needs to be made to ensure that parents and students are aware of them.

Additionally, there must be reliable and consistent policies established for determining state and national grade level retention guidelines and rates (Warren & Saliba, 2012). During semi-structured interviews, participants revealed that while they were retained, they recalled that peers who failed multiple classes were promoted. Because of perceived inequities, policymakers must develop local, state, and federal policies that are more aligned and provide an in-depth understanding of what constitutes the need for grade level retention. Retention and promotion policies set forth by the VDOE indicate:
Each student should learn the relevant grade level/course subject matter before promotion to the next grade. The division superintendent shall certify to the Department of Education that the division’s promotion/retention policy does not exclude students from membership in a grade, or participation in a course, in which SOL tests are to be administered. Each school shall have a process, as appropriate, to identify and recommend strategies to address the learning, behavior, communication, or development of individual children who are having difficulty in the educational setting.

Because the VDOE policy indicates that “each school shall have a process,” schools within the same district implement varied retention and promotion policies. Some schools and districts only publicize the policy set forth by the VDOE; however, neighboring schools and districts incorporate additional retention and promotion determining factors. For example, one district’s promotion and retention policy states:

Students in grades six, seven, and eight are promoted to the next grade on the basis of earning passing final grades in the core subjects of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies and a passing final grade in one of the following program areas: health/physical education and the equivalent of a full-year course in the exploratories/electives together with consideration of the following factors: (a) academic performance, (b) ability level, (c) attendance in conjunction with poor class performance, (d) chronological age in relation to the normal grade/age group, (e) prior retentions, (f) delayed/advanced physical advancement, (g) maturity in emotional and social development, (h) work and study habits, (i) student and parent attitude, (j) parental support, (k) SOL test scores at the end of grades 6 through 8; however, the use of SOL test scores as the sole criterion in awarding credit is prohibited (“Virginia Beach”, n.d.).
In order to promote transparency and consistency, policies should indicate that all schools and districts are required to publicize every factor considered when making decisions to promote or retain students.

**Students.** While it is of extreme importance that educational communities, parents and family members, and policymakers collaborate and nurture improved educational experiences for retained students, students must begin to self-advocate and take more active roles in their educational journeys. In this study, some students found it difficult to express their experiences with grade level retention, while others were more prepared to self-advocate. On the Student Engagement Survey, one of the study’s participants indicated he often spoke to his teachers concerning his classwork, and two of the study’s participants revealed they often discussed grades with their teachers. So that they remain well-informed of their current academic statuses, students should begin to initiate dialogue with their teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators concerning their daily assignments, homework, and academic progress.

In addition to their academic concerns, students must also become advocates for their social and emotional well-being and their personal and academic goals. During semi-structured interviews, students expressed desires to address their feelings of anger, sadness, isolation, and bullying from their classmates. In order to benefit from psychological support and exposure to appropriate coping strategies, students should take advantage of resources and advising provided by their guidance counselors. Additionally, this study’s participants revealed that they are motivated by future possibilities; therefore, students’ communication with their educational communities should be inclusive of soliciting strategies for mastery of short and long-term goals.

Participants often attributed their academic successes and failures to others such as their teachers and families; however, it is equally important that retained students bear some
responsibility for their academic achievements, as well as failures. Participants explained that their academic failures were partly due to their perceived lack of ability, and they often refused to attempt assignments considered difficult. Lawrence said, “A lot of stuff I don’t understand because it’s too hard. So I just didn’t try it. I didn’t want to do my work, and asking teachers for help wasn’t going to happen.” When faced with perceived misconceptions, students should begin to actively seek and consistently take advantage of educational resources such as before and after school tutoring, English and mathematics labs, and tutoring hotlines in order to address their misunderstandings and improve their classroom participation and preparation. By taking proactive approaches to their educational journeys, students could increase their engagement levels and improve academic outcomes.

This study’s participants’ revealed that relationships with peers altered their behaviors. In some instances, negative peer influences contributed to increased truancy, academic failure, and unacceptable classroom behaviors. Damian shared,

I started hanging around the wrong people. Before I moved out my old neighborhood I was making straight A’s and B’s. Then we left the neighborhood, and I start hanging with the wrong people; they weren’t doing their work so I just fell in with them.

Students should hold themselves accountable for making sound decisions and surround themselves with positive classmates that can provide sources of affirmation, advice, and assistance.

Limitations

This study was inclusive of 10 twice retained, middle school students residing in Eastern Virginia. This created a limitation because all participants reside in a specific region. To increase the transferability of the study’s findings, incorporation of participants from multiple
regions of the state and the country would have been helpful. The study’s participants were all enrolled in general education classes; incorporation of students with special educational needs may have created a more complete picture of students’ points of view.

Another limitation to this study was the ethnicity of the participants. There were no American Indian, Asian, or Biracial students represented in the study; additionally, 30% of the participants were Caucasian and 20% are Hispanic. The largest population represented was African American students (50%). It would have been helpful to expand the sample to ensure that participants’ ethnicities were more evenly distributed.

A third limitation was self-reported data on the Student Engagement Survey. Participants may have embellished their responses to make a good impression. Additionally, because I am an adult researcher, students may have only revealed information they felt comfortable sharing concerning their feelings and experiences. Because students completed the survey at the onset, I did not have an opportunity to develop a rapport with the students.

The final limitation was the duration of the study. Despite the fact students were asked to share their cumulative experiences with grade level retention, the data collection time for this study was five months, as opposed to their entire educational career or current academic year. Students’ points of view may change over the course of an academic year, but this study did not take into account these changes.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

There are multiple studies that address the positive and negative aspects of grade level retention. Few studies exclusively focus twice retained, middle school students’ experiences. This study’s purpose was to address the unique experiences of twice retained, middle school students. Ultimately, it is desired that completion of this study will encourage sincere dialogue
between educational communities, parents, students, and policymakers to foster an in depth understanding of and support for twice retained, middle school students.

The current study presents significant areas for future research. The study’s participants posed two alternatives to grade level retention: individualized instruction with separation from classmates and social promotion. Future research could include the examination of the impact of social promotion and grade 6 retention on twice retained, middle school students’ experiences and academic achievement. Additionally, it would be helpful to examine how individualized instruction of twice retained, middle school students impacts their academic achievement. Further research could be inclusive of a comparison of twice retained students and socially promoted students’ academic progress and successes.

This study was inclusive of 10 twice retained, middle school students residing in Eastern Virginia. Researchers should replicate this study with a larger sample size to determine if the findings are consistent with findings from participants in other regions. It would also be beneficial to analyze ways in which ethnicity impacts students’ likelihood of being twice retained. The study’s participants identified academic competence, relationships with peers and teachers, parents’ marital status, and economic status as factors contributing to their grade level retention. Research should be conducted to explore these factors in relation to students’ repeated grade level retention. Because the majority of the participants in the study indicated they experienced bullying, twice retained, middle school students’ experiences with bullying should be considered for future research.

While completing the Student Engagement Survey, six students predicted they would fail at least one class. It would be beneficial to replicate this study for an academic year to be inclusive of whether twice retained, middle students are promoted to the next grade level. All of
the study’s participants anticipated attending high school for various reasons; however, several also considered dropping out of school. Longitudinal research could be conducted to glean the experiences of twice retained, middle school students promoted to high school.

Summary

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the experiences of twice retained, middle school students residing in Eastern Virginia. Throughout the study, I examined twice retained students’ experiences with grade level retention, grade level retention’s impact on motivation, contributing factors, and perceived alternatives to grade level retention. The unique experiences of 10 twice retained, middle school students were examined and within their narratives themes emerged.

Although there has been an abundance of research conducted on grade level retention, there were few on twice retained, middle school students. By utilizing four central research questions to describe participants’ experiences, a gap in the literature was addressed. This study adds to existing literature on grade level retention and provides additional resources for educational stakeholders invested in improving the educational journeys of twice retained, middle school students.

Grade level retention, alone, is not the solution to twice retained, middle school students’ educational deficiencies. In order to adequately address their academic deficiencies, educational communities must collaborate and educate themselves of the unique experiences of twice retained students. Since parents and family members play intricate roles in students’ academic success, they must also be educated concerning twice retained, middle school students’ needs and provided resources to assist their children.
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Boston: Pearson


APPENDICES
Appendix A: IRB Approval

From: IRB, IRB
Sent: Monday, January 19, 2015 4:42 PM
To: Richardson, Dimetri Nicole
Cc: Spaulding, Lucinda S (School of Education); Garzon, Fernando (Ctr for Counseling & Family Studies); IRB, IRB
Subject: IRB Approval 2028.011915: A Phenomenological Inquiry of Grade Retention as Experienced by Middle School Students Who Were Twice Retained

Dear Dimetri,

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 from the date provided above with your protocol number. 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 are attached to your approval email.

Your IRB-approved, stamped consent form is also attached. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

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

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling

(434) 592-4054
Appendix B: Parent Recruitment Letter and Consent Form

Date:
[Name]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]

Dear [Parent]:
As a doctoral student at Liberty University, I am completing research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The study’s purpose is to describe the experiences of grade-level retention for twice-retained, middle-school students in grades 6-8 living in Eastern Virginia.

I would like to ask for your permission to have your child participate in the study. The guidance counselor viewed your child’s school records before considering him or her for this study. I did not view your child’s school records. I will give your child a pseudonym, and his or her real name will not be used in the study. I will be the only one who knows his or her identity.

If you are willing to let your child participate in the study, please take about 5-10 minutes to read and sign the parental agreement form that contains extra information about my study. I have also included a stamped, addressed envelope.

Sincerely,

Dimetri N. Richardson
dnrichardson@liberty.edu
(757) 285-1660
PARENTAL CONSENT FORM
A Phenomenological Inquiry of Grade Retention as Experienced by Middle School Students Who Were Twice Retained
Dimetri Nicole Richardson
Liberty University
School of Education

Your child is invited to be in a research study of twice-retained, middle-school students’ experiences with grade retention because he or she has twice experienced grade retention. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to allow your child to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Dimetri Nicole Richardson, a doctoral candidate at Liberty University.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to describe twice-retained, middle students’ experiences with grade retention.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to allow your child to be in this study, I will ask him or her to do the following: a survey, two interviews, a visual narrative, and journal responses, which should take about 3-4 hours.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:**

The study has minor risks, which are no more than your child would encounter in everyday life.

The benefits of participation may be the knowledge gained to better serve middle school students in the future.

**Compensation:**

Your child will **not** receive payment for participating in this study

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify your child. Research records will be stored in a locked file cabinet for three years, and only the researcher will have access. Recordings of interviews will be deleted after transcription. Your child’s school records were reviewed by the guidance counselor. However, your child’s name will not be used in the study, and I will be the only one who knows his or her identity. Once the three-year period for keeping data has passed, I will shred the printed data and erase all computer files.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to allow your child to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or your child’s middle school. If you decide to allow your child to participate, he or she is free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:**
If your child wants to withdraw from the study, please contact me at the email address or phone number on this form. If your child withdraws from the study, his or her interview(s) will be removed from the audio recorder.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Dimetri Nicole Richardson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact me at dnrichardson@liberty.edu or (757) 285-1660. You may contact my research advisor, Dr. Lucinda Spaulding, at lsspaulding@liberty.edu or (434) 592-4307.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

You will be provided a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I agree to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record my child as part of his or her participation in this study.

Signature of Parent or Guardian: ________________________________ Date: ______________

Signature of Investigator: ________________________________ Date: ______________
Appendix C: Student Recruitment Letter and Assent Form

Date: [Insert Date]

[Name]

[Address 1]
[Address 2]

Dear [Student]:
As a student at Liberty University, I am doing research to earn a doctoral degree. The purpose of the study is to describe the experiences of middle-school students in grades 6-8 living in Eastern Virginia who repeated a grade two times.

You are being asked to be in this study because you have repeated a grade two times. You will be asked to read and sign a form, take a survey, participate in two interviews, draw a picture, and write in a journal, which might take about 3-4 hours.

I will give you a fake name, and your real name will not be used in the study. I will be the only one who knows your identity.

If you want to participate, fill out the form and bring it to your counselor or mail it in the stamped, addressed envelope. Once the form is returned, you will be contacted about the survey and interviews.

Sincerely,

Dimetri N. Richardson
dnrichardson@liberty.edu
(757) 285-1660
Assent of Child to Participate in a Research Study

What is the name of the study and who is doing the study?
The name of the study is A Phenomenological Inquiry of Grade Retention as Experienced by Middle School Students Who Were Twice Retained. The researcher is Dimetri Nicole Richardson.

Why am I doing this study?
I am interested in describing the experiences of grade level retention for twice retained, middle school students in grades 6-8 residing in Eastern Virginia.

Why are we asking you to be in this study?
You are being asked to be in this research study because you have twice experienced grade retention.

If you agree, what will happen?
If you are in this study you will be asked to read and sign a student assent form, complete a Survey of Student Engagement, participate in two interviews, create a visual narrative, and compose journal responses. It should take approximately 3-4 hours for you to complete the procedures listed.

Do you have to be in this study?
No, you do not have to be in this study. If you want to be in this study, then tell the researcher. If you don’t want to, it’s OK to say no. The researcher will not be angry. You can say yes now and change your mind later. It’s up to you.

Do you have any questions?
You can ask questions any time. You can ask now. You can ask later. You can talk to the researcher. If you do not understand something, please ask the researcher to explain it to you again.

Signing your name below means that you want to be in the study.

_________________________________________________
Signature of Child    Date

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Dimetri Nicole Richardson
dnrichardson@liberty.edu

Dr. Lucinda Spaulding
lsspaulding@liberty.edu

Liberty University Institutional Review Board,
1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515
or email at irb@liberty.edu.
Appendix D: Permission Letter: Principal

Date: [Insert Date]

[Recipient]
[Title]
[Address 2]
[Address 3]

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is A Phenomenological Inquiry of Grade Retention as Experienced by Middle School Students Who Were Twice Retained, and the purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of grade level retention for twice retained, middle school students in grades 6-8 residing in Eastern Virginia. The data will be used to address a gap in literature by gleaning a first-hand account of students’ experiences.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at Your Middle School.

Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on approved letterhead indicating your approval.

Sincerely,
Dimetri N. Richardson
dnrichardson@liberty.edu
(757) 285-1660
Appendix E: Guidance Counselor Consent Form

Guidance Counselor Consent Form

“A Phenomenological Inquiry of Grade Retention as Experienced by Middle School Students Who Were Twice Retained”

Dear Guidance Counselor,

The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with the school district, middle school, principals, or researcher.

The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of grade level retention for twice retained, middle school students in grades 6-8 residing in Eastern Virginia. At this stage in the research, twice retained students are defined as students who have been retained at least two consecutive or non-consecutive years.

Data will be collected during the calendar school year. Data collection will involve a survey, interviews, visual narrative, and a reflective journal. Individuals involved in data collection will be students, guidance counselors, and principals. Once district and principals’ approval is secured, your assistance will be requested in the selection of participants based upon students’ promotion and educational records. Using these records, you will be asked to obtain parents’ addresses and contact them with a mailed letter and parental consent forms (prepared by the researcher), which explain the nature of the study and request permission to include their child(ren) in the study. In the event that there are adverse effects to the study’s participants, guidance counselors will be asked to be available to discuss participants’ concerns or apprehensions.

Do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study. Your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and only the researcher will know the student’s identity as a participant. There are no exceptional risks and/or discomforts associated with this study.

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to voluntarily participate in this study and that you have read and understood the provided information. You will be given a signed copy of this consent form.

Guidance Counselor’s Name     Researcher’s Name

Guidance Counselor’s Signature  Researcher’s Signature
Appendix F: Alternate/ Social Media Message

My name is Dimetri Nicole Richardson, and I am a doctoral student at Liberty University. I am currently working on a study that will describe the experiences of grade level retention for twice-retained, middle school students in grades 6-8 residing in Eastern Virginia.

The participants, all provided pseudonyms, will be twice-retained, male and female, middle school students, ranging in age from 13-17 years old and residing in Eastern Virginia. If you are willing to allow your child to participate, a parental consent document that contains additional information about my research will be provided with a stamped, addressed envelope. Participants will be asked to read and sign an assent form, complete a Survey of Student Engagement, participate in two interviews, create a visual narrative, and compose journal responses. It should take approximately 3-4 hours for participants to complete the procedures listed.

All data collected will remain strictly confidential.

This is an academic not-for-profit study, and this message is intended to give you information concerning my study.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me at dnrichardson@liberty.edu

Thank you,

Dimetri N. Richardson
Appendix G: Epoch

During my career, I have had an opportunity to teach middle school students for 19 years. Within those 19 years, I taught an average of five retained students per year. It was my experience that grade retention was not an effective academic intervention for the majority of the students I had an opportunity to teach. Many of the retained students I taught lacked academic motivation and skills and frequently became behavioral problems. Consequently, many of them were “promoted”, sometimes mid-year, without grasping grade-level concepts. In order for grade retention to be effective, students cannot be simply retained or socially promoted without detailed plans to assist them in experiencing personal growth and academic success. Educators must address the methods of instruction that retained and at-risk students receive in order to determine whether or not instructional methods impact their academic success and failure. Perhaps I would support grade retention in secondary school settings if more effective tools were in place to address retained students’ specific educational, motivational, and emotional needs. While I agree that educational reforms such as NCLB and CCSSI are strides in the correct direction, it is my belief that reform efforts must address the specific educational needs of all students, especially those who have been retained or are most likely to be retained.
Appendix H: Survey of Student Engagement

Thank you for your participation in this survey. Your responses will help me better understand your needs as a student. Please answer thoughtfully and honestly. Fill in only one response per question, except where indicated. I appreciate the time and energy you put into this survey.

1. What is your current grade?

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<tr>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

2. Select the highest level of education you expect to complete.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Will not finish high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community college degree (Associate’s), technical school, or vocational/trade certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four-year college degree (Bachelor’s)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Master’s, Doctorate, or other advanced degree</td>
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</table>

3. What is your sex?

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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements related to your school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall, I feel good about being in this school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I care about this school.</td>
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<td>I feel safe in this school.</td>
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<td>My opinions are respected in this school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>There is at least one adult in this school who knows me well.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teachers engage me in classroom discussions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I can be creative in classroom assignments and projects.</td>
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<td>I am comfortable being myself at this school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am an important part of my school community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>This school's rules are fair.</td>
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<tr>
<td>This school’s rules are applied and enforced consistently.</td>
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<tr>
<td>If I could choose a school right now, I would choose this school.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
5. How much do each of the following classroom activities and assignments interest or engage you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher lectures.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussions and debates.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual readings.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing projects.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research projects.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group projects.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Giving presentations and speeches.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Art, drama activities, role plays.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Projects and lessons involving technology.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

6. How much does your school emphasize each of the following?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Very Much</th>
<th>Some</th>
<th>Very Little</th>
<th>Not At All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memorizing facts and figures for classes.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding information and ideas for classes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analyzing ideas in depth for classes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Studying and completing school work at home.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spending time preparing for state and district standardized tests.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participating in school events and activities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using computers or other technology for class work.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Furthering education or training beyond high school.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Building positive relationships with students of different backgrounds.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

7. How much has your experience at this school contributed to your development in the following areas?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Very Much</th>
<th>Some</th>
<th>Very Little</th>
<th>Not At All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acquiring skills for a job after completing high school.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing effectively.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Speaking effectively.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thinking critically (reasoning, asking “Why?”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing creative ideas and solutions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading and understanding challenging material.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using technology to gather and communicate information.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Working well with others to complete a task.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning independently.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying school-based knowledge to everyday life.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning what life is like for other people in your community outside of school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing career goals.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding why what you learn in school will be important for life after high school.</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding yourself.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Treating people with respect.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing personal beliefs and values.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
8. In a typical 7-day week during the school year, about how many hours do you do the following outside of school? (Number of hours per week)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>8 or more</th>
<th>4-7</th>
<th>2-3</th>
<th>1 or less</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Completing homework for class.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying for tests or quizzes.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using technology for school assignments.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading for your own personal interest.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in school-sponsored activities.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in non-school sponsored activities or hobbies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working for pay.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Doing volunteer work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exercising for personal fitness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Watching television, playing video games.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Using technology for personal interest.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Spending time with family and friends in person.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in family commitments (chores, caring for siblings or relatives, etc.).</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9. During the school year, how often have you done each of the following?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asked or answered questions in class.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talked to a teacher about your class work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Made a class presentation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prepared a draft of a paper or assignment before turning it in.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed a creative writing assignment (reflections, journaling, short stories, poetry).</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed a formal writing assignment (research paper, speech, lab report, position paper).</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received feedback from teachers on assignments or other class work.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attended class with all assignments completed.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked on a paper or project that required you to research outside of assigned text.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked on a paper or project that required you to interact with people outside of school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worked with other students on projects/assignments.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussed questions in class that have no clear answers.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connected with ideas or concepts from one class to another in classroom assignments and discussions.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussed grades with teacher.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
10. During this school year, how often have you been picked on or bullied by another student?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

11. During this school year, how often have you witnessed an act of bullying?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

12. How often have you skipped school, faked an illness to stay home, or deliberately come to school because of disinterest in school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

13. Have you ever been bored in class?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

14. Have you ever considered transferring from this school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

15. Have you considered dropping out of this school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

16. Have you ever repeated a class in elementary or middle school?

Dropdown box

17. Do you believe you might have to repeat a class this year?

Dropdown box
18. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have the skills and abilities to complete my work.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I put forth a great deal of effort when doing my school work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I am motivated by my desire to learn.</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am motivated by my desire to get good grades.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am motivated by teachers who encourage me.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am motivated by my desire to succeed in the world outside of school.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I take pride in the quality of my school work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I have worked harder than I expected to in school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I like discussions in which there are no clear answers.</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy being creative in school.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I enjoy working on tasks that require a lot of thinking and mental effort.</td>
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<tr>
<td>My school work makes me curious to learn other things.</td>
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<tr>
<td>In general, I am excited about my classes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I see how the work I am doing now will help me after high school.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I feel good about who I am as a student.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

19. About how many of your classes challenge you to your full academic potential?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Most</th>
<th>Some</th>
<th>None</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

20. In about how many classes do you give your maximum effort?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Most</th>
<th>Some</th>
<th>None</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

21. In about how many classes do you put forth very little effort?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Most</th>
<th>Some</th>
<th>None</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
22. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I go to school because I enjoy being in school.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I go to school because of what I learn in classes.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I go to school because of my teachers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I go to school because of my friends.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I go to school because of my parent(s)/guardian(s).</td>
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<tr>
<td>I go to school because it’s the law.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I go to school to participate in athletics.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I go to school to participate in band, orchestra, and/or choir.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I go to school because I want to graduate and go to college.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I go to school because I want to learn skills and get a good job.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I go to school because there’s nothing else to do.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I go to school to stay out of trouble.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I go to school to get out of the house.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

23. How old are you today?

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24. What language is spoke in your home?

Dropdown box

25. What is your racial or ethnic background?

Dropdown box

26. Are you eligible for free or reduced-price lunch at school?

Dropdown box

27. What is the highest level of schooling that either of your parents or guardian completed?

Dropdown box

28. Which one of the following categories best describes most of your middle school grades?

Dropdown box

29. Which one of the following categories best describes most of the classes that you take?

Dropdown box

30. Would you like to say more about any of your answers to these survey questions or provide any other comments about your experiences at this school? Please do so in the space provided here.

Comment Box
April 15, 2016

Dimetri Richardson
Liberty University

Dear Ms. Richardson,

Permission is granted for use of the 2012 High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) and to incorporate information in your appendices concerning guidelines for use and publication of the HSSSE. Please reference as the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP) at Indiana University.

Regards,
Kathleen Lorenzen
HSSSE Project Associate
Appendix I: Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. What are your hopes and dreams for your future?
2. Tell me about a typical day at school.
3. Tell me about your experiences in school from as early as you can remember.
4. Who were your favorite teacher(s)? Why?
5. What was your favorite year(s)? Why?
6. What is your favorite subject(s)? Why?
7. Share some positive experiences you have had in school. Why would you consider them positive?
8. What was your least favorite year(s)? Why?
9. What is your least favorite subject(s)? Why?
10. What is your perception of grade retention?
11. What kinds of challenges do you experience as a retained student?
12. How do you feel about your classmates? teachers?
13. Tell me about support you receive from your teachers? parents?
14. What else could your parents and teachers do to support you?
15. Some people would say that retained students are disruptive in classrooms. What would you say to them?
16. Some people would say that retained students are more likely to drop out of school. What would you say to them?
17. How would you describe an ideal program for retained students?
18. Tell me about what you think caused your academic difficulties.
19. Describe your feelings when you repeated a grade(s)?
20. What motivates you to perform academically?

21. Tell me about your feelings and concerns about transitioning to high school.

22. Describe the visual narrative you created.

23. Explain why you chose those photographs.
Appendix J: Journal Prompts

Four journal prompts will be provided:

(a) What can be done to create a school environment that motivates you to learn and succeed?

(b) Discuss things that make you feel proud/ sad/ anxious/ angry.

(c) Describe what could have been done differently to avoid previous retention.

(d) Imagine your future and describe where you intend to be in five years.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Response</th>
<th>Analytical and Conceptual Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Be a mechanic. My daddy a mechanic. Sometimes I work with him.</td>
<td>Participant aspires to work with his father. Unlike others, father involved in his life. Could be possible motivators. Father owns a business.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is typical? I come here and do my work. I try to get to class on time. That’s it.</td>
<td>I need to clarify the meaning of “typical” for students. Mentioned trying to get on time. Do students in the study have difficulty with attendance? Literature review mentioned absenteeism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary school or this? I been here since 6th grade. We got some nice teachers.</td>
<td>Student’s earliest memories include nice teachers, failure in elementary (most common?). Literature review addresses students’ relationships with teachers (important). Specific memories of extracurricular activities. Could this be another motivating factor? I need to check Chapter 2 for information concerning extracurricular activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Harris (pseudonym) . Because she nice. She don’t do too much hollering. Ms. Brown</td>
<td>Participant preferred teachers who are nice and do not raise their voices. Teachers should be aware of interactions with students.(implication?) Student appreciated rewards (gifts/snacks). Could these be ways to motivate students? Would they be long-lasting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hhmmm.. Seventh grade. Like I don’t know. I just. They had.. It was just a lot to do.</td>
<td>Student strongly motivated by extracurricular activities in the 7th grade and considered his favorite year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science. Because it’s uh..Experiments. I like to do stuff with my hands. Mechanics stuff. My daddy got his own business. He has a shop.</td>
<td>This makes sense to me because the student also wants to be a mechanic – involves working with hands. Perhaps consider students’ learning styles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One of my teachers took me out. Her name Ms. Rouse (pseudonym) - in third grade. She</td>
<td>Strong rapport with teacher in elementary school. Took student to museum for first time – again extracurricular activities. Could this be an implication for educators? Motivating factor? Could rapport with students’ teachers be a contributing factor?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>took me to a museum right downtown. I enjoyed that. I worked hard for her and wanted her to be proud of me because I could tell she cared.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First and kindergarten. They were the two I failed.</td>
<td>Negative view of retention because years failed considered his least favorite.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math. It’s too much. I can count. I can do math but it’s too much.</td>
<td>Aligned with research concerning academic competence. Most retained students struggle in English and mathematics. Student concerned about other’s perceptions by pointing out that he “can count”. Aligned with Elkind’s theory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It ain’t the same. Being in the same grade. It makes you feel bad. But I was younger so I didn’t care for real. If it happened now it would make me look and feel bad.</td>
<td>Student has a negative perception of grade level retention. Feeling bad aligned with the literature. Some of the literature indicated that elementary school retention is “better”. Will have to look at how many were only retained in elementary school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| I don’t know if I have any challenges. | Literature also indicated that retention in middle and high school is “worse”.

In spite of being twice retained, student cannot identify challenges. Perhaps he considered them earlier when previously retained. Should have done a follow up question – note when conducting subsequent interviews. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They ok. They ok.</td>
<td>Student had very little response when asked how he felt about his teachers and classmates. Perhaps this aligns with literature that states students feel disconnected to classmates because their peers have been promoted. Also, he identified his most caring teachers were in elementary school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They show not show but tell me how to do it. And I just do it. When we have tests and stuff I wish I could get pulled out. Sometimes I just do it and figure it out on my own. My parents tell me to stay in school. Do my homework. And don’t drop out like your brothers did. Get your high school diploma. I got four brother; I’m the baby. Two of them didn’t go. One of them died. And one got locked up. Well, all of them locked up now. My parents want me to stay in school.</td>
<td>Minor support from teachers. Perhaps additional support is needed because student wishes he “could get pulled out”. Wonder if he witnessed special education students removed for testing? Misconceptions are not addressed, and student is left to “figure it out”. Strongly encouraged by parents to remain in school (strong implication and aligned with research). Family members dropped out and incarcerated; this could be a contributing factor. Will have to look for others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know. The math teacher moves too fast. When she be. The whole class be trying to keep up but she moving too fast. Like she’s going too fast when we’re doing instruction. She on the board going too fast. The whole class be trying to tell her to slow down. So sometimes I don’t get some stuff done. I’m like can you slow down? And then, she’ll say something like we’re already behind. We can’t slow down. She’ll be like my class is already behind. I just sit in the back by myself and try to figure it out. I don’t want to keep asking because she sometimes say we did this last year. Sometimes, I just put my head down.</td>
<td>Again mentioned difficulties in math – additional support needed by math teacher. Teacher extremely concerned with “being behind”. Could this be because of SOLs? Will have to look for this in other interviews. Because of NCLB, teachers are more concerned about required objectives and statistics (look at research again). Again mentioned working alone to figure it out. Consider how many students feel alone and try to address their own misconceptions. Student feels sense of embarrassment when teacher says it was done last year. Note another implication for teachers and perhaps a “feeling” related to retention. Student sleeping in class – this appears to be due to embarrassment. Will also have to look at students who put head down because of sleep deprivation vs. embarrassment/ boredom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel because like I won’t doing no work but I won’t acting up or nothing. I was just going to class every day, sleeping, and getting some stuff done. I was just bored in those classes hearing the same stuff.</td>
<td>Student disagrees with the literature that indicates retained students are disruptive in classes. Students mentioning boredom in classes (possible theme). Also mentioned doing the same assignments (another theme?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think so. Because they don’t want to see they don’t want people to know they’re like going back to the same grade. But I use to like I didn’t care back then but like but now if I get retained again…I</td>
<td>Student agrees that retained students are more likely to drop out. Again mentioned not caring in elementary (review literature on early retention). Mentioned feelings of embarrassment. A bit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>just I would probably want to go to another school. I would be embarrassed because everybody would know. But I don’t care how other people feel. Because they probably failed.</td>
<td>contradictory because then said he wouldn’t care. Perhaps consider the mixed emotions associated with retention. In his mind others have “probably failed”. Is this to make him feel better about failure, or does he think grade retention is “normal”?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They would provide supplies and keep you on track. Make sure all your work getting done. That’s it.</td>
<td>An ideal program for retained students would provide basic classroom needs and guidance. Do retained students come to school prepared – as in supplies? Could they get additional support staying on track from guidance counselors?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I in elementary school like I ain’t I was in kindergarten and I remember myself crying every time my momma and daddy dropped me off at my classroom. And I started crying. I didn’t want to be there. So sometimes, they let me stay home. That’s one of the reasons I failed because I always wanted to stay home. I am used to it now so I like I can go to school by myself now. Some of the classes hard - the only class that’s hard is that math class.</td>
<td>Failure caused because of parents’ inconsistency did not require school attendance. Others mentioned this – look at Maslow’s theory about consistency and safety. Again mentioned difficulty in math class definitely a “challenge” for student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It made me not want to go to school because when I failed they gave me the same teacher again. For both classes. Like I don’t know. I was sad. Then they were like don’t you remember this from last year?</td>
<td>Student felt embarrassed following retention – given same teacher? This is an implication for educators. Students should not have the same teacher. Also, teachers need to be aware of the power of their words and mannerisms when interacting with retained students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What makes me want to do good in school? Because like after I failed first and kindergarten I just go in second grade and started doing my work and coming to school and not sleeping. I want to work with my dad. I want it to be like when he get old I want to take over the business.</td>
<td>Student motivated by failure – can early failure be a motivator? Motivated by his future (possibility) working with dad and owning business. Themes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m ready to go. I will go to Montgomery (pseudonym).</td>
<td>Again thinking of future in high school could be a motivator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows nice things that I can have when I start working as a mechanic. This is what I want to be able to do for my family because I don’t have all that stuff. I want my kids to have nice things. It’s hard not having nice things. It’s like my family doesn’t have much money so we are always struggling. Sometimes, I have to go without a lot of stuff, and I don’t want my family to live like that. I don’t want my kids to be hungry and cold. And not be able to focus on their school and things like that.</td>
<td>Envisions future with wife and children. Aware of socio-economic status and does not want to “struggle”. Consider socio-economic as a contributing factor. Also think about single-parent homes? Mentioned kids being “hungry and cold” – relates to Maslow.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix L: Troquan’s (pseudonym) Procedural Log

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date(s)</th>
<th>Event(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12/10/2014</td>
<td>IRB Conditional Approval – pending district approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/19/2015</td>
<td>IRB Approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/15/2015</td>
<td>District Approval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/26/2015</td>
<td>Forms mailed to student and parent via district office manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/6/2015</td>
<td>Signed forms returned by student and parent. Forms placed in color coded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>folder and locked in file cabinet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/11/2015</td>
<td>Initial interview with participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student completed Student Engagement Survey (online)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Semi-structured interview (recorded/ stored in locked file cabinet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student provide visual narrative supplies and journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/12-15/2015</td>
<td>Transcription of interview/ conceptual notes (reflective journal)/ saved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>on password protected flash drive and stored in file cabinet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transcript printed and stored in participant’s folder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/19-21/2015</td>
<td>Listing of significant statement/ possible themes/ coding of interview/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>analysis of Student Engagement Survey responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/27/2015</td>
<td>Follow up interview/ Discussion of Visual Narrative and Journal responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/4-6/2015</td>
<td>Listing of significant statements/ possible themes/ coding of interview/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>analysis of Student Engagement Survey responses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix M: Example of Significant Statements

Significant Statements from interview with Troquan (pseudonym)

My daddy a mechanic. Sometimes I work with him.

I try to get to class on time.

In elementary school I failed twice.

They had more activities than the other schools.

Because she nice. She don’t do too much hollering. Because like she like brings in stuff for us.

I like to do stuff with my hands. Mechanics stuff. My daddy got his own business. He has a shop.

First and kindergarten. They were the two I failed.

Math. It’s too much. I can count. I can do math but it’s too much.

It makes you feel bad. But I was younger so I didn’t care for real. If it happened now it would make me look and feel bad.

My parents tell me to stay in school. Do my homework. And don’t drop out like your brothers did. Get your high school diploma. I got four brother; I’m the baby. Two of them didn’t go. One of them died. And one got locked up. Well, all of them locked up now. My parents want me to stay in school.

I just sit in the back by myself and try to figure it out. I don’t want to keep asking because she sometimes say we did this last year. Sometimes, I just put my head down.

I was just bored in those classes hearing the same stuff.

Because they don’t want to see they don’t want people to know they’re like going back to the same grade. But I use to like I didn’t care back then but like but now if I get retained again…I just I would probably want to go to another school. I would be embarrassed because everybody would know. But I don’t care how other people feel. Because they probably failed.

When I in elementary school like I ain’t I was in kindergarten and I remember myself crying every time my momma and daddy dropped me off at my classroom. And I started crying. I didn’t want to be there. So sometimes, they let me stay home. That’s one of the reasons I failed because I always wanted to stay home.
It made me not want to go to school because when I failed they gave me the same teacher again. For both classes. Like I don’t know. I was sad. Then they were like don’t you remember this from last year?

I want to work with my dad. I want it to be like when he get old I want to take over the business.

This is what I want to be able to do for my family because I don’t have all that stuff. I want my kids to have nice things. It’s hard not having nice things. It’s like my family doesn’t have much money so we are always struggling. Sometimes, I have to go without a lot of stuff, and I don’t want my family to live like that. I don’t want my kids to be hungry and cold. And not be able to focus on their school and things like that.
# Appendix N: Coding List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Sub-Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Research Question Alignment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Experience</td>
<td>Positive</td>
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<td>RQ1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Views of Grade Retention</td>
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<td>Ineffective</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Isolating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Monotonous</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feelings Related to Grade Retention</td>
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<td>Embarrassment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of Grade Retention</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Dropping Out</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
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<td>Motivating Factors</td>
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<td>Affirmation from Others</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Extracurricular Activities</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kinesthetic Activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Familial Mistakes</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>*Safe and Nurturing Environments</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Possibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contributing Factors</td>
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<td>Academic Competence</td>
<td>RQ3</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships with</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Peers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>**Bullying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familial Factors</td>
<td></td>
<td>Familial Factors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Single-parent Home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Parental Involvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>*Economic Status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternatives</td>
<td>Individualized Instruction with Separation from Classmates</td>
<td>RQ4</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Promotion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix O: Coding Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Participant’s Response/ Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are your hopes and dreams for your future?</td>
<td>Be a mechanic. <em>(Impact: Motivating Factor – possibility)</em> My daddy a mechanic. Sometimes I work with him.<em>(Contributing factors – familial)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about a typical day at school.</td>
<td>What is typical? I come here and do my work. I try to get to class on time. That’s it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about your experiences in school as early as you can remember.</td>
<td>Elementary school or this? I been here since 6th grade. We got some nice teachers. In elementary school I failed twice. <em>(The Experience – negative)</em> I was at Carmen Place. They had more activities than the other schools. More than the other Public Schools. I like when they had more activities. We had Career Day, Field Day, and they went on more field trips. Like every three or four months they went on field trips. <em>(Impact: Motivating Factor – extracurricular activities)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who were your favorite teacher(s)? Why?</td>
<td>Ms. Harris. Because she nice. She don’t do too much hollering. Ms. Brown. Because like she like brings in stuff for us. Like snacks and stuff. Others teachers did too but she like brings the most. I like getting gifts and snacks. <em>(Contributing factor – relationships – teachers)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was your favorite year(s)? Why?</td>
<td>Hhmmm.. Seventh grade. Like I don’t know. I just. They had.. It was just a lot to do. <em>(Impact: Motivating Factor – extracurricular activities)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your favorite subject(s)? Why?</td>
<td>Science. Because it’s uh..Experiments. I like to do stuff with my hands. Mechanics stuff. My daddy got his own business. He has a shop.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share some positive experiences you have had in school. Why would you consider them positive?</td>
<td>One of my teachers took me out. Her name Ms. Rouse - in third grade. She took me to a museum right downtown. I enjoyed that. I worked hard for her and wanted her to be proud of me because I could tell she cared. <em>(Contributing factor – relationships – teachers)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was your least favorite year(s)? Why?</td>
<td>First and kindergarten. They were the two I failed. <em>(Experiences – negative)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your least favorite subject(s)? Why?</td>
<td>Math. It’s too much. I can count. I can do math but it’s too much. <em>(Contributing factor – academic competence)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your perception of grade retention?</td>
<td>It ain’t the same. <em>(The Experience: Views of Grade Retention)</em> Being in the same grade. It makes you feel bad. But I was younger so I didn’t care for real. If it happened now it would make me look and feel bad. <em>(The Experience – feelings)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kinds of challenges do you experience as a retained student?</td>
<td>I don’t know if I have any challenges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Years Retained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damian</td>
<td>6/7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>5/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>6/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>1/7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>5/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keisha</td>
<td>4/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawrence</td>
<td>4/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raul</td>
<td>1/6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>3/5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troquan</td>
<td>K/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damian</td>
<td>Help from others; join military or college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>Positive words; support from others; college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Positive words; help from others; family mistakes; college; extracurricular; caring teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Football team; mother; college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>Caring teachers; mom’s words; college; family mistakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keisha</td>
<td>Positive words; family mistakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawrence</td>
<td>Caring teachers; help; professional sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raul</td>
<td>Success to help family; high school because parents didn’t attend; caring teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Positive words; join military; caring teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troquan</td>
<td>Work with father and own business; extracurricular; make family proud; family mistakes; caring teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Future Goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damian</td>
<td>College - Marines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>College - teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>College – pediatrician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>College - football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>College – business major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keisha</td>
<td>Wife/mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawrence</td>
<td>Professional sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raul</td>
<td>Unsure – just successful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Military</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troquan</td>
<td>Mechanic – work with dad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Challenge(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damian</td>
<td>Bullying by classmates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaine</td>
<td>I am too old to be here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Learning same stuff “over and over again”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Being around younger students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>Students pick on me and say stuff because I’m older.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keisha</td>
<td>Bullying by classmates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawrence</td>
<td>Oldest one; didn’t really learn anything new.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raul</td>
<td>Want to quit and stop going here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Wonder if will graduate; Look older than classmates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troquan</td>
<td>No challenges</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix Q: Debriefing Statement

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT
A Phenomenological Inquiry of Grade Retention as Experienced by Middle School Students Who Were Twice Retained
Dimetri Nicole Richardson
Liberty University
School of Education

You recently participated in a research study of twice retained, middle school students’ experiences with grade level retention. You were selected as a possible participant because you are currently a middle school student who has twice experienced grade level retention. The purpose of this debriefing statement is to reiterate the nature of the study, confidentiality procedures, and provide contact information, in the event that you have additional questions.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is describe the experiences of grade level retention for twice retained, middle school students in grades 6-8 residing in Eastern Virginia.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept private. I will create a list of pseudonyms for educational settings and all participants; this list of pseudonyms and real names will be stored in a locked file cabinet. Recordings of semi-structured interviews will be destroyed upon completion of transcription. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Additionally, electronically stored data will be secured via password protection, while printed data will be placed in a locked file cabinet. Research records will be stored securely and I will only have access to the records. Once the three year period for maintaining data has lapsed, I will shred the printed data and erase all computer files. I will have access to the data.

Contacts and Questions:
The researcher conducting this study is Dimetri Nicole Richardson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact me at dnrichardson@liberty.edu or (757) 285-1660. Additionally, you may contact my advisor, Dr. Lucinda Spaulding, at lsspaulding@liberty.edu or (434) 592-4307. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher or advisor, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Thank you for participating in this study,

Dimetri N. Richardson
dnrichardson@liberty.edu
(757)285-1660