A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ATTACHMENT BONDING
EXPERIENCES OF AT-RISK STUDENTS WHO GRADUATED HIGH SCHOOL

by

Marie Lawrence

Liberty University

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

Liberty University

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APPROVED BY:

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to describe the attachment bonding experiences by at-risk students who graduated high school. The theory guiding this study was the Attachment Theory by John Bowlby. This theory explains how attachment bonds help at-risk individuals form relationships that assist in the development of psychological health. Data collection sources were composed of participant surveys, semi-structured participant interviews, and written letters of advice to other high school at-risk students. The practical significance derived from this study demonstrated the need to train education professionals of the necessity of developing secure attachment bonds with students and to reflectively develop sound pedagogy to assist in this process. The empirical knowledge gained from this study was the importance of positive learning communities. The implication for practice was the need for professionals in the field of education to be given training to better understand the necessity of attachment bonding experiences for at-risk students. The study revealed themes of perseverance, self-motivation, and mentorship. An interesting finding from the study revealed that even though at-risk students greatly benefited from attachment bonds established during participation in extra-curriculum activities, every research participant was forced to withdraw from participation due to the requirement by school administrators to pay for equipment and other cost. This finding was highlighted by the fact that every research participant self-identified as being at-risk of dropping out of high school because of low household income.

*Keywords*: at-risk students, high school drop-outs, attachment bonding, mentoring, extra-curricular activities, at-risk factors
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and loved ones. I would not have started my educational journey in graduate studies without the love and support of my family and loved ones, especially Joshua, Benjamin, and Steven Prosser. I would also like to thank Nicholas Sparks for his support and encouragement. Your dedication to writing and your strong work ethic inspired me to persevere through my dissertation process. Steven, thank you for always encouraging me to continue my studies through my graduate program. I would never have finished many of my graduate projects without your support. Joshua and Benjamin, I consider it an honor to be your mother. No matter what God allows me to accomplish in my career, you were the greatest thing God ever allowed me to create. I love you all very much.

I would like to also dedicate this dissertation to the teacher who made the greatest impact on my life, Mrs. Ethel Mills. She was my reading resource teacher when I was in the 2nd grade. Through her skill and guidance, she helped me progress from below a kindergarten reading level to an advanced reading level. She was my mentor, my inspiration, and my lifelong friend. Even though Mrs. Mills has gone to be with her Lord, her life continues to touch and bless my life in countless ways. Thank you, Mrs. Mills.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the many gifted and talented teachers, school administrators, school faculty, and staff with whom I have worked throughout the years. Your love and dedication to children inspire me each day. You touch countless lives in ways that you may never realize this side of heaven. It has been an honor and a privilege to learn and work with you.
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List of Abbreviations

Children of Parents with Alcohol and Drug Use Disorders (COPADS)

General Equivalency Diploma (GED)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

International Assessment for Adult Competencies (IAAC)

National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES)

Program for the Study of International Assessment for Adult Competencies (PIAAC)

Attachment and Aware Schools Programme (AASP)

Circle of Security (COS)

Evidence-Based attachment and Bio-Behavioral Catch-Up (ABC)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Every year approximately 1.2 million high school students drop out of school in the United States alone (Brandenburg, 2020; Kokemuller, 2020; Pyne, 2019; Straussner & Fewell, 2018). This statement suggested that the needs of at-risk students were not being adequately served by their educational institutions. One of the primary factors that helped determine if a student will graduate high school was school engagement (Akin & Radford, 2018; Allen et al., 2018; Anticevic et al., 2018; Widlund et al., 2021). Disengaged students did not have the social resources to establish secure bonds with other students and school faculty members and thus did not receive the educational and emotional benefits for social inclusion and academic achievement (Ben-David & Jonson-Reid, 2017; Nicholson & Putwain, 2018; Pyne, 2019; Sanders et al., 2016). They were less likely to seek academic help from fellow students and staff and were more likely to suffer academic failure (Akin & Radford, 2018; Bederian-Gardener et al., 2018; Pyne, 2019; Thomas et al., 2020). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the attachment bonds that contributed to the successful completion of high school programs of study by at-risk students. The theory guiding this research was the Attachment Theory pioneered by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). The Attachment Theory is a psychological model that stresses the need for human attachments in the development of healthy emotional growth (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). The data derived from the study did not only capture the essence of this phenomenon but gave voice to at-risk individuals whose successful bonding experiences helped them graduate high school (Moustakas, 1994). This chapter provided a historical, social, and theoretical context for the study and explained the necessity for a
transcendental phenomenological qualitative study to address the experience of at-risk students who were able to form secure attachment bonds, which assisted in the completion of high school programs of study.

**Background**

Secure attachment bonding led at-risk students to progress academically and to develop strong positive emotional ties with members of the educational community (Northey et al., 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Walls, 2016). My focus of inquiry addressed the concept of Attachment Theory as it pertained to students' bonding which served as a stabilizing factor in at-risk students' lives. This attachment bond thus enabled them to complete their high school programs of studies. This study sought to capture the unique perspectives and essence of the experiences of at-risk students who formed positive attachment bonds and graduated high school.

**Historical Context**

The theory guiding this research is the Attachment Theory pioneered by John Bowlby. The Attachment Theory is a psychological model that stresses the need for human attachments in the development of healthy emotional growth (Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954, 1977, 1982). John Bowlby first conceived the concept of Attachment Theory when researching the separation anxiety children experience when removed from the presence of a primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954). Before Bowlby's research, early behavioral theorists believed that child attachment was a learned behavior and not a psychological drive (Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954). They felt this attachment was merely a result of the relationship between an infant and the person who provided the infant's source of nourishment. Since the caregiver provided the basic need of nourishment, the infant was attached to the source of this process (Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954). Bowlby's research results showed the nourishment process did not diminish the anxiety...
experienced by the infant when the infant was removed from the primary caregiver. His results consistently showed, however, that infant anxiety was characterized by distinct behavioral and motivational patterns (Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954). Attachment describes the level of care and responsiveness displayed to the infant by the caregiver and determines the level and quality of attachment bond. This secure attachment helps a child develop a secure sense of self-esteem and self-reliance and, therefore, will enable the child to develop secure attachment bonds with others (Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954). Modern Attachment Theory developed by Mary Ainsworth enhances Bowlby's original theory and incorporates the concepts of human bonding, regulation of fear, emotional states of being, adaptiveness, and psychological growth (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Solomon et al., 2017; Stover et al., 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018). Current trends in attachment theory link early attachment bonding styles with emotional growth and social adaptation throughout an individual’s lifespan (Hafner et al., 2018; Nicholson & Putwain, 2018; Northey et al., 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018). The research incorporated previous knowledge derived from seminal research and expanded upon this concept to specifically address attachment bonding in an educational setting (Bae & DeBusk-Lane, 2020; Walls, 2016, Xerri et al., 2018).

**Social Context**

High school drop-out rates in the United States have reduced significantly within the past decade. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2020), drop-out rates decreased from 9.7% in 2006 to 5.3% in 2018. While high school graduation rates were decreasing, failure to complete high school still led to significant consequences (Akin & Radford, 2018; Mowen & Brent, 2016; Pain, 2019). One way in which individuals were affected by their decision to drop out of high school was an increased chance of being unemployed and
relying on public assistance (Bederian-Gardener et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2016; Xie & Zhang, 2020). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for youth who drop out of high school (16-24 years old) was roughly 54% in 2017. When high school drop-outs did find employment, they earned on average, significantly less than those who complete high school (Kokemuller, 2020; McMahon et al., 2016). The Bureau of Labor Statistics stated in 2018 that high school drop-outs in American earned 27% less than their peers who graduated high school and were more likely to be reliant on public assistance (Bederian-Gardener et al., 2018; Fish, 2017; Xie & Zhang, 2020).

High school drop-outs also had a greater risk of incarceration in some sort of correctional facility (Akin & Radford, 2018; Mowen & Brent, 2016; Pain, 2019). According to the U.S. Program for the Study of International Assessment for Adult Competencies (PIAAC) Survey of Incarcerated Adults, 30% of imprisoned adults had dropped out of high school. In addition, male African American high school drop-outs were incarcerated at a nearly 70% higher rate than high school graduates (Fisher, 2017; Kokemuller, 2020; McCarter, 2019). High school drop-outs were also more likely to suffer from substance abuse (Allen et al., 2016; Ben-David & Jonson-Reid, 2017; McCarter, 2019). A study of 16-18-year-old teens in 12th grade who dropped out of school before graduation were more likely than their peers to be users of cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, and other illicit drugs (Allen et al., 2016; Ben-David & Jonson-Reid, 2017; McCarter, 2019). Illicit drug use among high school drop-outs in 2017 was 13.2% higher than students who did not drop out of school (National Center of Addiction and Drug Use, 2017). High school drop-outs were 12% more likely to be current marijuana users than those in school and 4.4% more likely than their peers who stayed in high school to be non-medical users of prescription drugs (National Center of Addiction and Drug Use, 2017). These negative outcomes not only affected
the individual who decided not to complete high school but also affected the individual’s family, community, and ultimately the nation (Akin & Radford, 2018; Bederian-Gardener et al., 2018; Briere et al., 2017; Galamay-Cachula et al., 2018; McCarter, 2019; Schwartz, 2016).

Table 1

Negative Potential Effects of Dropping Out of High School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential Negative Effects of Dropping Out of High School</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment Rates</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifetime Earnings Compared to Peers Who Graduated</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imprisoned Adults</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male African American Drop-Outs Who Were Incarcerated</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illicit Drug Use Compared to Peers Who Graduated</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop-Out Marijuana Use</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop-Out Use of Non-Medical Prescription Drugs</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Theoretical Context

An extensive body of research shows the importance of secure attachment bonding in the psychological growth and development of at-risk individuals (Webber, 2016; Wog et al., 2019; Xerri et al., 2018). Secure attachment to a teacher, athletic coach or athletic staff member, student peer, or positive member of one’s church or community all provide secure attachment bonds for an at-risk student (Robinson et al., 2016; Sandoval-Hernanze & Bialowolski, 2016; Shirley et al., 2019). These types of secure attachment bonds help at-risk students stay actively engaged in school and help them to complete their academic programs of high school study (Brandenburg, 2020; Cuevas et al., 2017; Northey et al., 2018; Sattler & Font, 2018; Schwartz et al., 2016).

Recent studies examined how at-risk individuals established secure attachment bonds and successfully navigated through psychological stressors to graduate high school (Allen et al., 2018; Beri & Kumar, 2018; Brandenburg, 2020; Nicholson, & Putwain, 2018). This study expanded upon this issue by describing the phenomenological event of secure attachment bonding experiences by at-risk individuals who successfully graduated high school. By giving a voice to these research participants, at-risk individuals who graduated high school had an opportunity to share their life experiences regarding this phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This study not only increased knowledge in the field of education but this knowledge could then be incorporated into school programs to assist in the development of secure attachment bonds for at-risk individuals (Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri, et al., 2018; Xie & Zhang, 2020).

**Problem Statement**

The problem this study sought to address was the United States yearly high school dropout rate of 1.2 million students (Pyne, 2019; Sanders et al., 2018; Straussner & Fewell,
The term “at-risk” is generally applied to a broad range of specific student characteristics such as low-income family status, living in a single-parent home, having an immediate family member drop out of school, and having served a school suspension (Bederian-Gardener et al., 2018; Briere et al., 2017; Huang & Cornell, 2017; Schwartz et al., 2016).

Historical research first determined in the late 1940s of the need for secure attachment bonding in the development of psychological health (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1977). Current research expanded upon this knowledge and showed that attachment bonds helped individuals develop a sense of security and belongingness throughout an individual’s lifespan (Anticevic et al., 2018; Beri & Kumar, 2018; Delgado et al., 2016). Although extensive research existed regarding attachment bonding in general psychological growth (Beri & Kumar, 2018; Caugher & Crofts, 2018; Delgado et al., 2016), and minimal research showed the positive effect of attachment bonding in school settings (Im et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2020; Webber, 2016), research has not addressed attachment bonding experiences in an educational setting by at-risk students who successfully graduated high school. The transcendental phenomenological study was conducted to bridge this gap in research by describing the essence of secure attachment bonding experiences of at-risk students who graduated high school. Not only did this research give voice to these at-risk individuals who can successfully navigated high school programs of study, but the results of this research also provided empirically significant results which may enable professionals in the field of education to develop mentorship programs that increase at-risk student bonding. These attachment bonding relationships can enable at-risk students to stay actively engaged in their academic school settings and persist to high school graduation (Walls, 2016; Xie & Zhang, 2020). This could then reduce the high school dropout
rate of the United States and increase theoretical knowledge in this field of study (Hafner et al., 2018; Kokemuller, 2020; Pyne, 2019).

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe attachment bonding relationship experiences by at-risk students who graduated high school. The term "at-risk" generally applies to a broad range of specific student characteristics such as low-income family status, living in a single-parent home, having an immediate family member drop out of school, having served a school suspension (Ben-David & Jonson-Reid, 2017; Mowen & Brent, 2016). At this stage in educational research, attachment bonds are generally defined as an emotional connection of love, care, and concern for another’s well-being that typically builds and deepens over time (Solomon et al., 2017; Stover et al., 2018; Yoo, 2018). The theory which guided this study is the Attachment Theory pioneered by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1977; Schwartz, 2015). Attachment Theory is a psychological model that stresses the need for human attachments in the development of healthy emotional growth (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1977; Schwartz, 2015). This theory served as the basis for the research study, which sought to describe the attachment bonds for at-risk students who successfully graduate high school.

**Significance of the Study**

This study has great practical significance. It is established that human beings need to establish secure attachment bonds to develop and maintain cognitive and psychological health (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Students who are considered "at-risk" of dropping out of high school often do not have a stable source of attachment bonding to serve as a resource to assist with this process. This study seeks to describe the successful phenomenological
experiences of at-risk students who can graduate high school in hopes that this information could assist other at-risk students in following suit and thus graduating as well.

**Theoretical Knowledge**

My research will add theoretical knowledge to this discipline in education by addressing the concept of Attachment Theory as it pertains to secure attachment bonding by at-risk students who successfully graduate high school. This theory is approached from a transcendental phenomenological perspective by researching the experiences of at-risk individuals who can establish secure attachment bonds and graduate high school (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The research highlights the importance of secure attachment bonding for at-risk students and stresses the need for attachment bonding relationships in an educational setting (Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Zolkoski et al., 2016).

**Empirical Knowledge**

The empirical knowledge derived by this study gives voice to at-risk individuals who establish secure attachment bonds in an educational setting and are thus able to complete high school academic programs of study (Solomon et al., 2017; Stover et al., 2018). The description of the research participants’ life experiences and the thematic and sub-thematic results from this research can then be used to address the need to establish secure attachment bonds in an academic setting through mentorship programs and organizations which nurture student attachment bonding (Stover et al., 2018; Xerri et al., 2018; Yoo, 2018). It could also be used to help educational professionals better understand at-risk individuals and how they could assist these individuals in the development of secure attachment bonding (Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xie & Zhang, 2020).
Research Questions

Central Research Question

What experiences foster secure attachment bonds for at-risk students who graduate high school?

**Sub-Question 1.** How do at-risk students who graduate high school experience secure attachment bonds with teachers?

**Sub-Question 2.** How do at-risk students who graduate high school experience secure attachment bonds with family members?

**Sub-Question 3.** How do at-risk students who graduate high school experience secure attachment bonds with coaches and sponsors of extra-curricular activities?

**Sub-Question 4.** How do at-risk students who graduate high school experience secure attachment bonds with members of community organizations?

**Sub-Question 5.** How do at-risk students who graduate high school experience secure attachment with academic peers?

Definition of Terms

1. *At-risk students* - The term “at-risk” has been generally applied to a broad range of specific student characteristics such as physical disabilities, learning disabilities, low-income family status, living in a single-parent home, having an immediate family member drop out of school, having served a school suspension (Ben-David & Jonson-Reid, 2017; Kokemuller, 2020).

2. *Attachment Bonding* – An attachment bond is an emotional connection of love, care, and concern for another’s well-being that builds and deepens over time (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Ein-Dor & Hirscheberger, 2016).
3. **Extra-curricular activities**- Activities that are performed by students of schools that fall outside the sphere of the normal academic curriculum of the school (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Robinson et al., 2016; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017).

4. **Mentoring**- A relationship characterized by mutual trust, respect, understanding, and empathy (Antivevic et al., 2018; Stover et al., 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018).

5. **Student Engagement**- The level of passion and interest students show in their learning experiences (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Robinson et al., 2016; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017).

6. ** Learned Helplessness**- A condition formed by individuals who feel they do not influence their own life choices or events that occur in their own life. This normally occurs as a result of emotional trauma or stressful life events (Abramson et al., 1965; Majer & Seligman, 1976; Majer & Seligman, 2016).

**Summary**

Every human being has unique gifts and talents (Christiner & Reitener, 2018; Johnsen, 2016; Krombholz, 2018; Owen & Porath, 2017). These gifts and talents are present at birth, and if given the right nurturing environment, they can develop and thrive (Christiner & Reitener, 2018; Johnsen, 2016; Krombholz, 2018; Owen & Porath, 2017). Primary attachment bonding with a loving parent or caregiver is essential for cognitive and psychological growth (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1977; Schwartz, 2015; Slavit et al., 2016). Unfortunately, not every child grows up in an environment that is conducive to this type of positive interaction and bonding (Pyne, 2019; Sanders et al., 2016; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Yoo, 2018). These types of individuals are considered at-risk of dropping out of high school because they lack the sociological and psychological skills to establish strong positive attachment bonds and thus become successful students (Sandoval-Hernandez &
Bialowolski, 2016; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Xerri et al., 2018). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to provide a voice for at-risk individuals who successfully established healthy secure attachment bonds and were thus able to complete their academic programs of study (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994, Van Maren, 1990). The experience of the phenomenon may then be used to help other at-risk individuals establish positive attachment bonds (Schwartz, 2015; Solomon et al., 2017; Webber, 2016; Yoo, 2018). This study can also be used by professionals in the field of education to better understand at-risk students and establish opportunities and programs to help at-risk students establish attachment bonds to aid in their completion of high school programs of study (Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018; Xie & Zhang, 2020).
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Children are born into the world with untapped potential and abilities (Christiner & Reitener, 2018; Johnsen, 2016; Krombholz, 2018; Owen & Porath, 2017). They have instinctual drives and desires that are genetically programmed into the essence of their being (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954, 1977, 1982; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Schwartz, 2015). One of the greatest instinctual needs of human beings is that of attachment bonding (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Solomon et al., 2017; Webber, 2016). The earliest attachment bonding should naturally occur between a child and a mother or primary caregiver (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954, 1977, 1982; Schwartz, 2015; Solomon et al., 2017; Stover et al., 2018). When positive attachment bonding occurs on this level, the child begins the process of developing a healthy emotional state of well-being which lasts throughout the child's life (Ainsworth, 1989; Schwartz, 2015; Solomon et al., 2017; Stover et al., 2018). This stable attachment bond enables the child to have the emotional security to establish healthy attachments to peers, other adults, teachers, and authority figures in general (Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018; Xie & Zhang, 2020). They have the security to ask others for help when needed and have a healthy sense of personal worth and value (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Masten, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Webber, 2016). Their sense of self-esteem and well-being helps these individuals discover their potential and abilities and enhance their skills through their growth processes (Akin & Radford, 2018; Masten, 2018; Solomon et al., 2017; Stover et al., 2018; Webber, 2016). At-risk students’ healthy sense of self-esteem and well-being is normally accomplished through academic pursuits (Robinson et al., 2016; Sandoval-Hernanze & Bialowolski, 2016; Slavit et al., 2016). A child’s sense of belonging to a school community is essential to successfully navigate
through an academic program of study and thus graduating high school (Allen et al., 2018; Highs et al., 2016; Im et al., 2016; Masten, 2018; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017). The establishment of secure attachment bonding is a major component of this process (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Allen et al., 2018; Im et al., 2016).

Unfortunately, not every child begins life by establishing a healthy attachment bond with their parent or primary caregiver (Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). Children who lack secure attachment bonds are more likely to be suspended from school, be habitually delinquent from school, have aggressive behavioral problems throughout their lifespan, become incarcerated, abuse alcohol and drugs, suffer from psychological disorders, become gang-affiliated, and drop out of high school (Gage et al., 2018; Kokemuller, 2019; Mowen & Brent, 2016; Pyne, 2019). The harmful effects which are derived from the lack of healthy attachment bonding with a parent or primary caregiver can be altered and even reversed by the establishment of healthy attachment bonding relationships with teachers, academic club sponsors, athletic coaches and staff, positive academic peers, school faculty and staff, and members of the local support community (Anticevic et al., 2018; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018; Zolkoski et al., 2016). The most startling result derived from the literature review shows the benefits of positive attachment bonding relationships can be achieved with just one secure attachment bond (Beri & Kumar, 2018; Solomon et al., 2017; Stover et al., 2016; Yoo, 2018). This means that just one person in the school environment or local community can change the life trajectory of an at-risk child who did not have the opportunity to form a secure attachment bond with a parent or primary caregiver (Solomon et al., 2017; Stover et al., 2018; Webber, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018; Yoo, 2018).
The research project examines the attachment bonding experiences of at-risk students who can successfully graduate high school. This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study gives voice to these individuals by using the actual words of the research participants to capture the essence of this experience (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The data gathered from this study can then be used to incorporate programs in the educational school community to help at-risk students overcome the lack of early attachment experiences and form secure attachment bonds which can help in the navigation of a high school academic programs of study (Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018). The incorporation of these programs may help at-risk students become more academically successful and emotionally well-rounded and thus may help to reduce the high school drop-out rates of our nation (Kokemuller, 2020; Pyne, 2019; Straussner & Fewell, 2018).

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this research study is based upon Attachment Theory. This theory was pioneered by a British psychologist named John Bowlby (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954, 1977, 1982; Schwartz, 2015). The major premise of this theory focuses on the lasting bonds and relationships between people and the effect of these relationships on long term psychological growth and well-being (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954, 1977, 1982; Schwartz, 2015).

**The Development of John Bowlby’s Attachment Theory**

John Bowlby began research in the mid-1940s to understand the separation anxiety children experience when removed from the presence of their primary caregiver (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954; Schwartz, 2015). Until Bowlby's research findings, early behavioral theorists believed that child attachment was simply a learned
behavior and not an internal psychological drive (Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954). They felt that
infant attachment was merely a result of the relationship between an infant and the person who
provided the infant’s source of nourishment (Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954). Since the caregiver
provided the basic human need for nourishment, the infant was attached to the source of this
process (Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954). Through the course of Bowlby’s research, results derived
from his studies show that the nourishment process does not diminish the anxiety experienced
from the infant when the infant is removed from the presence of the caregiver (Ainsworth, 1989;
determined that infant anxiety is characterized by distinct behavioral and motivational patterns
Schwartz et al., 2016). Children will seek proximity to their primary caregiver when frightened
(Ainsworth, 1989, Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Schwartz et al., 2016). When the child has
established strong attachment bonds with the caregiver, this process will bring comfort to the
1982; Schwartz et al., 2016).

The theory John Bowlby then established describing emotional bonds with another
person was named The Attachment Theory (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991;
Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954, Schwartz et al., 2016). The theory states that the earliest bonds
created by an individual are with the mother or primary caregiver (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth &
Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954; Schwartz et al., 2016). He felt the quality of this
bond affected the individual for the remainder of the child's life (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth &
Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954; Schwartz et al., 2016). Bowlby suggests the process
of early attachment serves a psychological need for the infant to remain close to the mother or
primary caregiver, thus improving the chances for the survival of the infant (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954). While early behaviorists of the time felt attachment was a learned process, Bowlby's research demonstrates this is an innately driven evolutionary process within the child to form attachments with early caregivers (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Schwartz et al., 2016). If the child remains close to the primary caregiver, the child will receive comfort and protection and will therefore be more likely to survive into adulthood (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954; Schwartz et al., 2016). This research went against the behaviorist of the time who felt that food was the primary component that aided in the formation of attachment behavior (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954; Schwartz et al., 2016). Bowlby's research consistently demonstrates the level of care and responsiveness displayed to the infant by the caregiver determines the level and quality of attachment (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Schwartz et al., 2016). The central component of John Bowlby's original Attachment Theory suggests mothers or primary caregivers who are readily available and responsive to the needs of the child assist in the development of a sense of security and emotional well-being within the child (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954, 1977, 1982; Schwartz et al., 2016). The child feels the mother or caregiver is reliable and dependable, and thus a secure attachment bond is established between the child and the mother or primary caregiver (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954; Schwartz et al., 2016). This secure attachment bond helps children develop a secure sense of self-esteem and self-reliance and is thus able to explore the world in which they live and to develop secure attachment bonds with others (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1954, 1977, 1982; Schwartz et al., 2016).
The Expansion of Attachment Theory

Psychologist Mary Ainsworth greatly expanded upon John Bowlby's original Theory of Attachment while conducting research in the 1970s (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Schwartz et al., 2016). Extensive knowledge on the effects of attachment on behavior was enhanced through a study called The Strange Situation (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Schwartz et al., 2016). This study involved the use of children ages 12-18 months of age and their response to situations where they are briefly left alone and then reunited with their attachment caregiver (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Schwartz et al., 2016). From this research, Ainsworth established three major styles of attachment. The healthiest attachment is labeled secure attachment (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Schwartz et al., 2016). Secure attachment is demonstrated by children who show some distress when the presence of their caretaker is removed but can resolve separation stress because they feel that their caregiver will return (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Schwartz et al., 2016). The secure attachment style demonstrates the child understands that the caregiver will return and is confident in the caregiver's ability to protect from harm (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Schwartz et al., 2016). The second attachment style pioneered by Ainsworth is called ambivalent-insecure attachment. Children with this type of attachment are often wary of strangers and need constant reassurance they are loved (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Schwartz et al., 2016). Ainsworth described children with this attachment style as frequently worried that they are going to be rejected or abandoned by the caregiver (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). The third attachment style described by Mary Ainsworth is that of avoidant-insecure. The avoidant-insecure attachment style often occurs as a result of early trauma and is said to be a type of defense mechanism (Ainsworth,
An individual with avoidant-insecure attachment relationships may avoid relationships altogether and be extremely reluctant to form new relationships because of extreme fear of rejection (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Schwartz et al., 2016). Children who endure a childhood saturated with emotional neglect, absentee parenting, emotional or physical abuse, or have a family history of domestic violence are extremely prone to the formation of this type of attachment style (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Schwartz et al., 2016).

Duschinsky and Solomon (2017) further expanded Attachment Theory with the addition of a 4th attachment style. The 4th attachment style was named the disorganized-insecure attachment bond (Duschinsky & Solomon, 2017). A child who has a disorganized-insecure attachment bond with a primary caregiver often have parents who consistently fail to respond or inconsistently respond appropriately to the child’s distress or feelings of fear (Briere et al., 2017; Duschinsky & Solomon, 2017; Solomon et al., 2017; Stover et al., 2018). A child who displays a disorganized-insecure attachment bond exhibits behavioral disorganization through the act of freezing, undirected movements, wandering, confused expressions, or contradictory patterns of social interaction with a caregiver (Briere et al., 2017; Duschinsky & Solomon, 2017; Solomon et al., 2017; Stover et al., 2018).

**Table 2**

*Primary Caregiver and Child Attachment Styles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment Styles</th>
<th>Psychological and Behavioral Ramifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Secure Attachment:</strong></td>
<td>A child develops self-esteem and secure attachment bonds with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ambivalent-Insecure Attachment:</strong></td>
<td>A child is frequently worried about being rejected or abandoned</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Attachment Styles | Psychological and Behavioral Ramifications
---|---
Avoidant-Insecure Attachment: | Occurs as a result of early trauma and is said to be a type of defense mechanism. The child may be extremely reluctant to form new relationships due to fear of being rejected.
Disorganized Insecure Attachment | A child displays disorganization through the act of freezing, undirected movements, wandering, confused expressions, or contradictory patterns of social interaction.

**Factors That Directly Affect Early Attachment Bonds**

Several factors directly affect how individuals form early attachment bonds. Quality caregiving has a great impact on the formation of secure attachment bonds (Briere et al., 2017; Duschinsky & Solomon, 2017; Delgado et al., 2016; Solomon et al., 2017). A child is highly likely to develop secure attachment bonds when a primary caregiver responds quickly and consistently to the needs of the child (Briere et al., 2017; Duschinsky & Solomon, 2017; Delgado et al., 2016). Secure attachment bonding occurs because the child learns that the caregiver can be depended upon to care for the child. Secure attachment is vital for healthy attachment and consequent emotional growth (Beri & Kumar, 2018; Duschinsky & Solomon, 2017; Delgado et al., 2016; Solomon et al., 2017).

Children who do not have a primary caregiver may not develop feelings of trust needed to form secure attachment bonds (Akin & Radford, 2018; Allen et al., 2018; Briere et al., 2017; Caugther & Crofts, 2018). Disorganized- insecure attachment bonding can occur in settings such as orphanages and other similar types of care institutions (Akin & Radford, 2018; Allen et al., 2018; Briere et al., 2017; Duschinsky & Solomon, 2017). Other factors may negatively influence
the type of attachment bonding that occurs in situations where a child has a primary caregiver who may respond inconsistently, may be neglectful, or abusive (Briere et al., 2017; Duschinsky & Solomon, 2017; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018).

**Need for the Study**

Current trends in attachment theory link early attachment bonding styles with childhood, adolescent, and adult emotional growth and social adaptation (Akin & Radford, 2018; Anticevic et al., 2018; Briere et al., 2017; Solomon et al., 2017; Stover et al., 2018). This study incorporates previous knowledge derived from seminal research and expands upon this concept to bridge the gap in research by specifically addressing attachment bonding in an educational setting. These educational attachment bonds can lead at-risk students to form secure attachment bonds with members of the educational community (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Allen et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2016; Webber, 2016). These positive attachment bonds thus enable at-risk students to stay engaged in the educational process and complete their high school programs of study (Anticevic et al., 2018; Caughter & Crofts, 2018; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018).

The results of this research may increase understanding in the field of educational theory by expanding on the concept of attachment theory to include secure attachment bonding in an educational setting (Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018; Xie & Zhang, 2020). Secure attachment bonding may thus aid in the successful completion of high school programs of study by at-risk students (Walls, 2016; Xie & Zhang, 2020; Zolkoski et al., 2016). Secure attachment research also has the potential to have a great many empirical uses. The results of this study may then be used by professionals in the field of education to increase sensitivity to at-risk students and develop mentorship programs to encourage secure attachment...
bonding (Bae et al., 2020; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018; Xie & Zhang, 2020). The results can also be used to implement organizations and extracurricular activities which encourage secure attachment bonding, positive school engagement, and the completion of high school academic programs (Akehurst et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2016; Sandoval-Hernanze & Bialowolski, 2016; Slavit et al., 2016; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017).

**Related Literature**

High school dropout rates have reduced significantly within the past decade. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2020), yearly dropout rates decreased from 9.7% in 2006 to 5.3% in 2018. While high school graduation rates are decreasing, failure to complete high school may still lead to negative results such as a greater risk of incarceration (McCarter, 2018; Mowen & Brent, 2016; Payne, 2019; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016), reliance on public assistance (McCarter, 2019; Morgan & Wright, 2018; Payne, 2019; Straussner & Fewell, 2018), and substance abuse (Allen et al., 2016; McCarter, 2019; Mowen & Brent, 2016; Payne, 2019; Straussner & Fewell, 2018). These negative outcomes not only affect the individual who decides not to complete high school but also affect the individual's family, community, and ultimately the nation (Akin & Radford, 2018; Beri & Kumar, 2018; McCarter, 2019; Payne, 2019).

**Personal Characteristics of At-Risk Students**

Individuals who are at-risk of dropping out of high school often have several unique characteristics which contribute to the increased chance of failing to complete a high school academic program of study. Some of these characteristics include social isolation, low self-esteem, poor body image, academic struggles, and they often have endured emotional trauma or stressful life events (Majer & Seligman, 2016; Payne, 2019; Straussner & Fewell, 2018;
Emotional trauma and stressful life events can also assist in the development of an emotional state of being described as learned helplessness (Majer & Seligman, 2016; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). Learned helplessness describes individuals who possess extreme external locus of control and often feel they do not influence their own life choices (Abramson et al., 1965; Majer & Seligman, 2016; Kirkman et al., 2016). An individual who suffers from learned helplessness often lacks confidence in their abilities and have notably diminished autonomy (Abramson et al., 1965; Majer & Seligman, 2016; Kirkman et al., 2016). Learned helplessness is often thought to be one of the underlying causes of depression (Abramson et al., 1965; Majer & Seligman, 2016). Research has also shown that some individuals are prone to use learned helplessness as a self-defense mechanism (Abramson et al., 1965; Majer & Seligman, 2016; Kirkman et al., 2016). The accumulation of at-risk factors over time increases the likelihood of negative outcomes such as substance abuse, violent behavior, teenage pregnancy, juvenile crime, mental health disorders, emotional distress, poor academic achievement, and dropping out of school (Briere et al., 2017; Gage et al., 2018; Huang & Cornell, 2018; Kokemuller, 2020; McCarter, 2019 Schwartz et al., 2016). Children of parents with alcohol and drug dependency issues often suffer from physical, mental, and behavioral problems and are more likely to develop alcohol and drug dependency problems as well (Briere et al., 2017; Dupere et al., 2017; Gage et al., 2018; Mowen & Brent, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2016). At-risk children often have parents who are inconsistent, disengaged, or harsh in their parental styles, and this family dysfunction can become multigenerational (Briere et al., 2017; Dupere et al., 2017; Gage et al., 2018; Stover et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2016; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018). Current research has determined that perceived parenting styles affect social-
emotional functioning from infancy and throughout an individual’s lifespan (Briere et al., 2017; Dupere et al., 2017; Gage et al., 2018; Kokemuller, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2016).

The primary relationship which affects the earliest human bonding attachment is that of the mother or primary caregiver and a child (Fuchs et al., 2016; Li et al., 2016; Musetti et al., 2016; Webber, 2016). These early experiences help develop an individual’s emotions, behaviors, personal self-esteem, and behavioral interactions with peers and authority figures (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Briere et al., 2017; Schwartz et al., 2016; Webber, 2016). Unfortunately, not every child has the opportunity to establish supportive attachment bonds with an early caregiver and enters school with a well-developed sense of emotional health (Briere et al., 2017; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). The deficit of supportive attachment bonds can often lead to severe behavioral problems and a lack of proper cognitive and emotional growth (Briere et al., 2017; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). The instability derived from this deficit often leads at-risk students to disengage from their school environment and eventually drop out of high school (De Cock et al., 2017; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018; Xie & Zhang, 2020).

**The Effect of Poverty on At-Risk Students**

Poverty affects at-risk students in various ways. Living in a low-income household can create emotional trauma and turmoil simply because of the household tension derived from trying to provide necessities for the family without adequate financial means to do so (Briere, 2017; Hafner et al., 2018; Kokemuller, 2020). Students who live in low-income families have a higher rate of absenteeism or leave school altogether because they are more likely required to work and care for other family members (Children Incorporated, 2020). At-risk students who come from low-income families are seven times more likely to drop out of school than those
families with higher incomes (Children Incorporated, 2020). This cycle of poverty and the subsequent occurrence of dropping out of school often develops into a multigenerational cycle (Briere et al., 2017; De Cock et al., 2017; McCarter, 2019; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018).

Table 3

*Characteristics of Public School Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lived In Poverty</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had Parents Who Did Not Complete High School</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived In Single Parent Households with Mothers</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived In Single Parent Households with Fathers</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 2015, approximately 10% of children who attended the public schools of the United States had parents who didn’t complete high school, 27% lived in households with single mothers, 8% lived in single father households, and 20% of students lived in poverty (Children Incorporated, 2020). All of these factors can greatly affect the emotional health and well-being of at-risk children (Brandenburg, 2020; Briere et al., 2017; De Cock et al., 2017; Hafner et al., 2018). The emotional trauma compiled through these at-risk factors may impede the ability of children to socially bond with members of the school community and academically succeed (Brandenburg, 2020; Briere et al., 2017; Hafner et al., 2018; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018).

Table 4

*Factors that Contribute to Being At-Risk of Failing to Graduate High School*

Factors that Contribute to Being At-Risk of Failing to Graduate High School

- Low Income Family Status
Factors that Contribute to Being At-Risk of Failing to Graduate High School

- Having a Family Member Drop-Out of High School
- Living in a Single Parent Home
- Being Suspended from School

Poor Student-Teacher Attachment Bonding

At-risk students not only have to navigate through very harsh life circumstances, they often struggle in a school setting (Brandenburg, 2020; McCarter, 2019; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). In a school setting, the role of teachers in academic achievement cannot be overstated. For students who are characterized as “at-risk,” there is a marked increase in the likelihood of experiencing negative student-teacher relationships (Brandenburg, 2020; Nicholson & Putwain, 2018; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). The student-teacher attachment bonding relationship is often negatively affected by student behavioral difficulties, negative attachment history, student personal characteristics such as low social skills, and personality conflict between the student and teacher (Dupere et al., 2017; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). It has also been determined by current research that students who are labeled “at-risk” are often perceived more negatively by teachers (Brandenburg, 2020; Gage et al., 2018; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). It is also worth noting that teachers and school administrators tend to state three main reasons why at-risk students fail to meet academic standards. The explanations given by the teachers involved in the research were student behavior and attitudes toward school, community forces, and lack of parental commitment to student growth (Brandenburg, 2020; Gage et al., 2018; Straussner & Fewell,
The role of teachers' perceptions in the success or failure of students cannot be overestimated as well. Teachers affect student success by holding at-risk students to low-performance expectations and doubting their intellectual abilities (Brandenburg, 2020; Nicholson & Putwain, 2018; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). This instructional behavior has a profound effect not only on academic performance but on student’s anti-social behavior, peer rejection, adjustment difficulties, lower school attendance, negative attitudes toward school, and poorer academic engagement and achievement (Brandenburg, 2020; Dupere et al., 2017; Gage et al., 2018; Mowen & Brent, 2016; Nicholson & Putwain, 2018). Research has shown that kindergarten students who have negative student-teacher relationships continue to experience more conflictual relationships with teachers at fifth grade, and adolescents with insecure attachment histories have been shown to behave more disruptively at school than other students who have established secure attachment bonds with early childhood teachers (Bae et al., 2020; Masten, 2018; Nicholson & Putwain, 2018; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). Early childhood teachers who react negatively to disruptive at-risk students may unknowingly strengthen students’ negative social behaviors and students’ feelings regarding the world being unresponsive to their needs (Schwartz, 2015; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016; Thomas et al., 2020). At-risk students’ anti-social behavior also encourages an escalation of negative reactions by teachers and this detrimental cycle often ends with students dropping out of high school (Dupere et al., 2017; Gage et al., 2018; Kokemuller, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2020).

Poor student-teacher bonding relationships greatly affect students’ sense of self-worth (Bae et al., 2020; Briere et al., 2017; Dupere et al., 2017; Gage et al., 2018; Kokemuller, 2020).
These feelings of low self-worth can create distrust in others, may cause the student to behave disruptively at school, exhibit poorer emotional control skills, struggle with a difficult task, and have extremely low academic motivation (Dupere et al., 2017; Gage et al., 2018; Mowen & Brent, 2016; Thomas et al., 2020). A student’s low sense of self-concept coupled with prior school experiences may result in the student being reluctant to attach to the school environmental setting (Majer & Seligman, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2016; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Thomas et al., 2020). The lack of failure of at-risk students to securely attach to the school setting and the subsequent rebellion associated with this action is often manifested in displays of student inappropriate behavior (Majer & Seligman, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2016; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016; Thomas et al., 2020). When students feel alienated from the school setting, they often do not have a sense of affiliation with a school environment. The lack of affiliation, coupled with the basic psychological need to establish a sense of group belonging, increases the chance of the student transferring the natural need for belongingness to gang affiliation (Hughes et al., 2015; McCarter, 2019; Schwartz et al., 2016; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). They are also more likely to behave aggressively and to be suspended from the school setting (Gage et al., 2018; McCarter, 2019; Schwartz et al., 2016; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Thomas et al., 2020). Research has shown that a student’s history of suspensions, more than any other factor, causes the greatest negative impact on a student’s educational outcome (Gage et al., 2018; McCarter, 2019; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016; Thomas et al., 2020). Although student suspensions have not been shown to change or correct student behavior, research has shown that school suspensions increase the potential for student academic failure, lack of school identity, and lowered trust in schools in general (Pyne, 2019; Straussner & Fewell,
These factors may all lead students to subsequent withdrawal from high school (Gage et al., 2018; Kirkman et al., 2016; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). Not only are suspended at-risk students more likely to drop out of high school but suspended students are also more likely to be involved with the legal system outside of school and have a marked increase in the risk of being incarcerated (Kirkman et al., 2016; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016).

At-Risk Students’ Need for School Engagement

Secure bonding attachments to parents and friends are extremely important in the psychological health of an individual (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Schwartz et al., 2016; Solomon et al., 2017; Webber, 2016). Those who do not have a sense of connection to a larger group or community are more likely to experience increased emotional distress (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). It is, therefore, essential for a child who has not been securely attached to a primary parent or caregiver to establish attachment bonds with members of the school community (Fish, 2017; Masten, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Thomas et al., 2020).

The formation of healthy attachment bonds with members of the school community enables students to develop resilience which involves protective factors well beyond simply the emotional stability of the attachment relationship (Fish, 2017; Masten, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Thomas et al., 2020). Resilience is not a fixed thing but is continuously evolving and adapting. Resilience is not simply a personal characteristic that some individual’s possess and other individuals do not, but develops within a reciprocal nurturing relationship over time (Fish, 2017; Masten, 2018; Stover et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2020). Both attachment bonding and the
growth of personal resilience rely on acceptance, emotional connection, and a sense of safety in a nurturing relationship to grow (Bae et al., 2020; Hafner et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2020; Webber, 2016). One of the most important catalysts for secure attachment bonding and the development of personal resilience is the support from a wider community so that these factors can evolve and flourish (Bae et al., 2020; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Stover, Choi, & Mayes, 2018). Secure attachment bonding and the growth of personal resilience can often be accomplished by the attendance of schools that employ school administrators who strive to create loving, nurturing school climates (Bae et al., 2020; Nicholson & Putwain, 2018; Webber, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018; Yoo, 2018).

Students who are actively engaged in their school environments understand the relationship between academic learning and their future life goals, demonstrate an aptitude to motivate themselves and to persist when faced with frustration and hardships, can effectively develop a specific action plan to accomplish learning goals, and can seek and receive social and emotional support when needed (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018; Xie & Zhang, 2020). Research has shown that active student engagement positively affects cognitive and intellectual skill development, moral and ethical development, psycho-social development and helps in the development of a positive self-image (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Walls, 2016; Xie & Zhang, 2020; Zolkoski et al., 2016). At-risk students who are actively engaged in their school community have higher levels of academic achievement, academic motivation, less aggression and delinquency, and fewer health risk factors such as suicide attempts, early initiation of sexual behavior, and alcohol and cigarette use when compared to at-risk students who are disengaged with their academic institutions (Sanders et al., 2018; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). The education
of an individual involves addressing the needs of the whole person, not just cognitive processes (Solomon et al., 2017; Stover, Choi & Mayes, 2018; Webber, 2016). Students are not just empty vessels that need to be filled with academic content but should be seen as whole persons with multifaceted needs and interests who are actively seeking to belong to a community (Solomon et al., 2017; Stover et al., 2018; Webber, 2016; Yoo, 2018).

A student’s motivation to succeed in school cannot be understood apart from the social context in which it encompasses (Robinson et al., 2016; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017; Solomon et al., 2017; Stover et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Webber, 2016; Yoo, 2018). Students who feel a sense of belonging to a supportive educational family or a caring community of learners can be shown to have stronger academic motivation and positive academic outcomes (Sanders et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018; Xie & Zhang, 2020). Student engagement has been described as the level of passion, and interest students show in their learning experiences (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Robinson et al., 2016; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017; Zolkoski et al., 2016). Student engagement in school settings is a multifaceted process that involves the interplay of several key components. A student's behavior is the first major component that encourages strong school engagement (Slavit et al., 2016; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017; Zolkoski et al., 2016). A student’s behavior in the classroom during academic instruction, proper behavior skills which promote social interaction and bonding, and appropriate behavior displayed during after-school events and extra-curricular activities all contribute to the effectiveness of a student’s ability to become and maintain healthy school engagement (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Robinson et al., 2016; Sandoval-Hernanze & Bialowolski, 2016; Slavit et al., 2016; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017). The second component of active school engagement aligns with proper student behavior but also involves proper social responses and interplay between the student and others (Jordan & Wilson,
An at-risk student must understand how to appropriately converse and interact with teachers, peers, and other individuals in the school setting (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Robinson et al., 2016; Slavit et al., 2016). Finally, the at-risk student must develop strong cognitive learning skills such as understanding the need for mental effort, the investment of time needed for lesson mastery, organizational skills, and general time management (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Robinson et al., 2016; Sandoval-Hermanze & Bialowolski, 2016; Slavit et al., 2016; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017).

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits for At-Risk Students Who are Engaged in Their School Communities</th>
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<tr>
<td>At-Risk Students Who are engaged in Their School Communities</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Have higher levels of academic achievement</td>
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<td>- Have higher levels of academic motivation</td>
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<td>- Have less aggression and delinquency</td>
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<td>- Are less likely to engage in early sexual behavior</td>
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<td>- Are less likely to use alcohol and cigarettes</td>
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School Administrators Who Encourage Secure Attachment Bonding

School administrators who encourage secure attachment bonding have unique characteristics. These characteristics are reflected in a school’s philosophy of shared attitudes and values among students, teachers, and administrators (Sanders et al., 2018; Walls, 2018; Xie & Zhang, 2020). These types of school administrators encourage and maintain open, honest, and
respectful communication between every individual who is affiliated with the school setting (Sanders et al., 2018; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xie & Zhang, 2020). School administrators who encourage secure attachment bonding create respectful school climates where students feel a sense of security and protection regarding their right to express their opinions even with those who do not necessarily share their feelings and beliefs (Sanders et al., 2018; Walls, 2016, Xerri et al., 2018; Zolkoski et al., 2016). As part of a respectful school climate, school administrators promote interpersonal safety and emotional health (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Robinson et al., 2016; Slavit et al., 2016). Research has shown that educational administrators who protect students from physical and emotional harm by providing safe, stable, nurturing learning environments promote student well-being and serve as factors of support from maltreatment and other forms of violence and victimization (Sanders et al., 2018; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). Students who attend schools managed by these types of school administrators are more likely to build healthy brain architecture and are less likely to experience toxic stress within their school environment (Akin & Radford, 2018; Huang & Cornell, 2017; Tudge, 2016). The stability derived from attending a nurturing learning environment may assist at-risk students in developing stronger, more stable attachment bonding relationships with peers, teachers, and other members of the school administration and staff and had markedly fewer days absent from school (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Robinson et al., 2016; Sanders, 2018; Slavit et al., 2016).

Stability also plays an important part in creating a school environment where secure attachment bonding is encouraged (Sanders et al., 2018; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018; Xie & Zhang, 2020). A stable school environment is predictable, positive, and consistent (Walls, 2016; Xie & Zhang, 2020; Zolkoski et al., 2016). School administrators who
strive to develop and maintain a stable, secure atmosphere are careful to address changes in school curriculum cautiously and strive to maintain continuity by maintaining curriculum in an orderly, organized, and consistent fashion (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Robinson et al., 2016; Sanders et al., 2018; Slavit et al., 2016). Any changes to the curriculum are addressed cautiously with insight into the impact curriculum transitions might have on students and staff (Sanders et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xie & Zhang, 2020; Zolkoski et al., 2016). Research has shown that a developmentally appropriate curriculum that reflects cultural and ethnic diversity and is centered on strong social and emotional goals help at-risk students gain social skills that can often aid in the creation of secure attachment bonds with other members of the school community (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Walls, 2016; Xie & Zhang, 2020; Zolkoski et al., 2016).

The focus school administrators place on stability also extends to how a school's administrative team addresses issues of staff stability (Walls, 2016; Xie & Zhang, 2020; Zolkoski et al., 2016). Staff stability is essential to create a nurturing, respectful climate for teachers and staff to encourage low teacher turnover (Masten, 2018; Thomas et al., 2020; Webber, 2016). The consistency and predictability of a continuous, predictable nurturing teaching staff encourage healthy and caring teacher-student relationships (Sanders et al., 2018; Webber, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018; Yoo, 2018). School administration professionals of effective schools that encourage secure at-risk bonding are especially concerned with matching students with at-risk characteristics with teachers who are especially adept at handling at-risk behavioral temperaments (Gatlin et al., 2016; Huang & Cornell, 2017; Webber, 2016). School administrators and staff can also help promote school attachment bonding by providing staff development training that helps to teach staff to understand student motivation, how to help
student's increase self-confidence, how to instruct students how to manage stress, and organizational and goal setting skills (Masten, 2018; Pyne, 2019; Webber, 2016; Yoo, 2018).

School administrators who encourage strong attachment bonding to take special care to ensure that all school policies are fairly and consistently enforced throughout the entire school (Rogers et al., 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Webber, 2016). The administration and staff of the school develop and implement intentional strategies that foster supportive, nurturing, secure attachment bonding relationships among not only students but among adults as well (Webber, 2016; Yoo, 2018). This intentionality especially extends to the implementation of student disciplinary practices (Kirkman et al., 2016; Masten, 2018; Mowen & Brent, 2016; Webber, 2016). School administrators who promote the respectful treatment of every student foster the development of respectful attachment relationships and seek to understand the underlying influences that drive student behavior (Huang & Cornell, 2017; Kirkman et al., 2016; Mowen & Brent, 2016; Webber, 2016). The collaboration of all involved parties is essential to address the social and emotional needs of students who make inappropriate behavior choices and is paramount in the development of a respectful school climate (Huang & Cornell, 2017; Mowen & Brent, 2016; Pyne, 2019; ). Effective school leaders intentionally decide to not use disciplinary practices as a means of removing disruptive students from the classroom but intentionally seek to increase a student’s sense of belonging and acceptance into the school environment by proactively addressing inappropriate behavior choices (Kirkman et al., 2016; Nicholson, & Putwain, 2018; Thomas et al., 2020; Webber, 2016).

School-wide teacher-student mentorship programs are extremely effective ways to increase school engagement and encourage secure attachment bonding (Rogers et al., 2018; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018). Student-teacher mentorships offer
students opportunities to form nurturing, positive bonding relationships and help students develop feelings of school connectedness (Rogers et al., 2018; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Zolkoski et al., 2016). By acquiring school connectedness, at-risk students develop positive attitudes toward adults in the school setting and feel that these adults see them as capable individuals with unique learning and life goals (Rogers et al., 2018; Xerri et al., 2018; Zolkoski et al., 2016). Research has also demonstrated that secure teacher-student attachment bonds increase daily school attendance, academic achievement, and high school graduation success (Masten, 2018; Nicholson & Putwain, 2018; Rogers et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2020).

**Teachers Who Encourage Secure Attachment Bonds**

Secure attachment bonding often occurs between a student and a teacher (Pyne, 2019; Robinson et al., 2016; Sandoval-Hernanze & Bialowolski, 2016). Because a child’s internal emotional health and development become more resistant to change over time, early student-teacher relationships have a strong influence on subsequent attachment relationships (Pyne, 2019; Robinson et al., 2016; Sandoval-Hernanze & Bialowolski, 2016). Bonding between a preschool teacher and an at-risk student who has not formed secure attachment bonds with a parent or primary caregiver is, therefore, especially impactful to a child’s emotional and psychological growth (Robinson et al., 2016; Sandoval-Hernanze & Bialowolski, 2016). Secure student-teacher relationship bonding often may compensate for negative child-parent relationships (Kirkman et al., 2016; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). Students with insecure attachment bonding with their mother/primary caregiver but experience high student-teacher closeness are less likely to display aggressive behavior than those who did not have the benefit of a supportive, nurturing relationship with a
There are several characteristics of effective teachers that can positively affect at-risk students and thus assist at-risk students with the establishment of secure attachment bonds (Kirkman et al., 2016; Pyne, 2019; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016). Teachers who promote secure attachment bonds with students form teacher-student relationships based on care, trust, respect, and cooperation (Kirkman et al., 2016; Pyne, 2019; Walls, 2016). They establish positive, open communication within the classroom setting and approach behavior management in positive and encouraging ways (De Cock et al., 2017, Kirkman et al., 2016; Pyne, 2019; Walls, 2016). Teachers who are responsive to at-risk students often view inappropriate student behavior as opportunities for student growth and openly display confidence in the ability of at-risk students to perform well in the classroom (De Cock et al., 2017; Pyne, 2019; Xerri et al., 2018). It should be noted that it is critically important that all teachers of at-risk children strive to look behind incidences of inappropriate student behavior and examine the reasons why at-risk students choose to behave inappropriately in light of information regarding attachment behaviors and of students’ attachment histories (Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018; Xie & Zhang, 2020). The knowledge of why a student displays inappropriate behavior helps teachers to better understand at-risk students’ reactions to classroom situations and why their reactions are grounded in attachment patterns (Pyne, 2019; Walls, 2016; Xie & Zhang, 2020; Zolkoski et al., 2016). It is easy for at-risk students to establish healthy relationships with this type of teacher because teachers of this type create classroom atmospheres that encourage positive attachment bonding (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Pyne, 2019; Walls, 2016; Zolkoski et al., 2016). They are understanding, supportive, and provide intense motivation for struggling students. (Jordan &
Wilson, 2017; Pyne, 2019; Walls, 2016). They also help these students feel valued and an important member of the learning community (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018, Walls, 2016). A teacher who supports secure attachment bonding experiences for at-risk students transform classroom settings into communities of learning where every member of the classroom contributes to learning success (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Pyne, 2019; Walls, 2016).

These classrooms promote positive thinking, high motivation and are goal-driven (Pyne, 2019; Walls, 2016; Zolkoski et al., 2016). Effective teachers often accomplish rapport building and secure attachment bonding with students by setting high expectations for learning and providing encouraging one-on-one feedback for students during the learning process (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Pyne, 2019; Walls, 2016). An effective teacher also encourages academic skill mastery by addressing all learning styles of students and creating stimulating lessons which capture student interest (Kirkman et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2016; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017).

A major factor in classrooms where teachers encourage secure attachment bonding is the fact that teachers include students in the classroom decision-making process (Robinson et al., 2016; Slavit et al., 2016; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017). Being involved in the decision-making process demonstrates to at-risk students that they are valued and that their opinions are important to the dynamics of the classroom (Barrie et al., 2016; Pyne, 2019; Robinson et al., 2016; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017).

Research has determined that having a positive relationship with a teacher is a powerful buffer against traumatic events and at-risk life circumstances (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Pyne, 2019; Solomon et al., 2017; Stover et al., 2018). Supportive teachers can promote emotional health and healing in many ways. One of the most effective techniques that can be utilized with at-risk students to promote emotional growth is through the use of scaffolding techniques to
promote productive and developmentally appropriate social opportunities between students (Stover et al., 2018; Webber, 2016; Wiggins et al., 2015; Yoo, 2018). By utilizing knowledge of classroom dynamics, a responsive teacher can promote student responsibility for developing and maintaining positive peer relations (Pyne, 2019; Robinson et al., 2016; Sandoval-Hernandez & Bialowolski, 2016; Slavit et al., 2016). Research has shown that this can be accomplished in any classroom regardless of the age of the child, but this technique is best accomplished at an early age before patterns of classroom behavior are established (De Cock et al., 2017; Walls, 2016; Webber, 2016; Xie & Zhang, 2020).

If a teacher successfully establishes secure attachment bonds with at-risk students, students are less likely to perceive the school environment as threatening (Robinson et al., 2016; Slavit et al., 2016; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017). School environments that are seen as non-threatening provide at-risk students with an important resource to aid in the adjustment process during times of stress and risk. It may also safeguard and increase an at-risk student's ability to develop a positive self-identity (Gage et al., 2018; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xie & Zhang, 2020). Furthermore, the harmful effects of other negative relationships for at-risk students may be less emotionally damaging and more easily overcome through the development of a more defined sense of self-worth (Allen et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2016; Solomon et al., 2017; Stover et al., 2018).

It has long been determined that learning occurs within a formal and informal classroom network of social relationships (Allen et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018; Xie & Zhang, 2020). A teacher's actions and interactions within the classroom influence the development of students’ self-esteem and directly impacts students’ motivation and behavioral patterns (Kirkman et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2016; Slavit et al., 2016; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017). A teacher’s
pattern of positive actions and interactions within the classroom is extremely important during the critical preadolescent and adolescent years of growth (Masten, 2018; Solomon et al., 2017; Stover et al., 2018; Webber, 2016). When secure bonding attachment occurs during the preadolescent and adolescent years, positive student-teacher relationships are found to protect against maladaptive, risky behavior for at-risk students (Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). Unfortunately, as the need for positive teacher interaction increases, there is a marked decrease in the quality of time spent between an adolescent and teaching instructors during the middle and high school years (Kirkman et al., 2016; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). Although positive student-teacher relationships become increasingly influential and are an essential component of healthy emotional growth, student-teacher relationship quality decreases during these essential formative years (Pyne, 2019; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). A positive student-teacher relationship is especially pertinent for at-risk students who have a difficult temperament and for students with externalizing behavior problems who feel that life events are beyond their control (Huang & Cornell, 2018; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). With preadolescent and adolescent students, culturally responsive teaching and response interventions have been successfully implemented in the classroom to address at-risk factors (Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016; Zolkoski et al., 2016). These types of interventions address topics such as conflict resolution training, appropriate classroom behavior, social skill training, and teamwork building (Wall, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018; Xie & Zhang, 2020). All of these training interventions serve to enhance students’ capacity to stay actively engaged in the classroom and increase academic competencies (Gatlin et al., 2016; Walls, 2016; Xie & Zhang, 2020; Zolkoski et al.,
The importance of caring, nurturing classroom teachers in redirecting and establishing secure attachment bonds with at-risk students cannot be overemphasized (Robinson et al., 2016; Slavit et al., 2016; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017). Teachers who strive to develop positive, secure attachment bonds with their students will offer their students the best chance of developing healthy emotional and psychological health (Gatlin et al., 2016; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018). A positive, nurturing teacher can have a lasting impact on the lives of students well beyond the classroom doors (Robinson et al., 2016; Slavit et al., 2016; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017).

**Family Characteristics that Encourage School Success**

Schools that encourage secure attachment bonding and nurturing environments that foster open communication and respect understand the value of family involvement and encourage family member participation throughout the school year (Blake & Blake, 2017; Li & Fischer, 2017; Otani, 2018). School administrators should clearly understand the importance of family involvement throughout a child's educational process and have a clear set of established beliefs about students and families for the implementation of family involvement to be successful (Hafner et al., 2018; Masten, 2018; Santos et al., 2016). There are several main principles of family involvement in a school setting. The first principle is essential to not only family involvement but student success in general. Every member of the school educational community must feel that all students are capable of learning to relatively high levels of mastery if suitable supports and instructional opportunities are provided (Blake & Blake, 2017; Li & Fischer, 2017; Masten, 2018; Otani, 2018). Every member of the educational community must also feel that all families want the best for their children (Blake & Blake, 2017; Li & Fischer, 2017; Masten, 2018; Otani, 2018). The main aspect of this belief is that there is considerable variation in what
is considered “best” among families (Hafner et al., 2018; Masten, 2018; Santos et al., 2016). Research demonstrates that face-to-face meetings between school staff and family members increase understanding of school expectations for their children as well as provide manageable ways family members can participate and help at home (Blake & Blake, 2017; Li & Fischer, 2017; Otani, 2018). As their child progresses through each grade of the education process, family members can understand more about the general curriculum expectations for each stage of their child's education (Blake & Blake, 2017; Li & Fischer, 2017; Otani, 2018). Face-to-face meetings between family members and school staff also help family members understand the school's assumptions about student expectations regarding homework and other school assignments (Blake & Blake, 2017; Hafner et al., 2018; Li & Fischer, 2017; Otani, 2018).

A major result of current research has shown that family member engagement is nurtured when family members believe they should be involved in the education of their child and have a positive belief in their abilities and usefulness regarding their involvement in their child's education (Blake & Blake, 2017; Hafner et al., 2018; Li & Fischer, 2017; Otani, 2018). Building a close ongoing relationship between teachers, family members, and school staff can aid families in building a strong family culture that focuses on education (Blake & Blake, 2017; Hafner et al., 2018; Li & Fischer, 2017; Otani, 2018). Families with a strong belief in the value of education frequently talk to their children about school plans, life goals and help their children with their homework and other school assignments (Hafner et al., 2018; Otani, 2018; Santos et al., 2016). Communicating with children about educational aspirations is a strong predictor of future lifelong success (Hafner et al., 2018; Masten, 2018; Sanders et al., 2018). The importance of academic stimulation from an extremely early age cannot be overemphasized (Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018). Effective families supervise their child’s activities to
ensure that the child understands the importance of receiving a good education, set guidelines about the amount of time spent on homework, check homework, and ensure that assignments are completed promptly (Li & Fischer, 2017; Kirkman et al., 2016; Santos et al., 2016). These are all examples of strong family behavior that encourages student success (Blake & Blake, 2017; Li & Fischer, 2017; Otani, 2018). Strong family cultures which focus on education foster high expectations among family members for their children's success not only at school but throughout the child's life (Blake & Blake, 2017; Hafner et al., 2018; Li & Fischer, 2017; Otani, 2018). Research demonstrates the link between family expectations and high scholastic outcomes (Blake & Blake, 2017; Hafner et al., 2018; Li & Fischer, 2017; Otani, 2018). The link between family expectations and high scholastic outcomes is based upon the long-held belief that people live up to the expectations of others, especially one's family members (Blake & Blake, 2017; Hafner et al., 2018; Li & Fischer, 2017; Otani, 2018). It should be noted that studies show that at-risk students who successfully graduate high school and go on to colleges and universities to further their education are far more likely to come from a family culture where attending college is a foregone conclusion and seldom optional (Blake & Blake, 2017; Kirkman et al., 2016; Li & Fischer, 2017; Otani, 2018). These supportive families not only encouraged academic success while their children were young but continued providing emotional support and encouragement throughout their child's attendance at colleges and universities (Hafner et al., 2018; Li & Fischer, 2017; Kirkman et al., 2016; Santos et al., 2016).

Children from these types of educationally supportive families have higher life goals, have more life long financial resources, and report high levels of life satisfaction (Hafner et al., 2018; Li & Fischer, 2017; Kirkman et al., 2016; Santos et al., 2016).
Table 6

Characteristics of Students Who Come From Supportive Educationally Focused Families

Supportive Families that Encourage School Success Often Have Children Who Have:

- Higher life goals
- Higher levels of life satisfaction
- More life-long level of financial resources

The Positive Effects of Extra-Curricular Activities on At-Risk Students

Student extra-curricular activities are activities that are performed by school students that fall outside the sphere of the normal academic instruction (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Robinson et al., 2016; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017). An extensive body of research conducted over the past 25 years demonstrates the benefits of student participation in school-sponsored extra-curricular activities, especially during the critical adolescent years of development (Belton et al., 2016; Felfe et al., 2016; Mushtag et al., 2019; Rathore et al., 2018). The benefits of student participation include the positive development of appropriate competitive and social behaviors, a general increase in student motivation, goal-setting skills, and an increased sense of self-worth and value (Belton et al., 2016; Felfe et al., 2016; Mushtag et al., 2019; Pyne, 2019; Rathore et al., 2018). Research shows the longer a student is involved in extra-curricular activities, the greater the personal benefit derived from these activities (Belton et al., 2016; Felfe et al., 2016; Mushtag et al., 2019; Pyne, 2019; Rathore et al., 2018). Research also demonstrates that at-risk youth who participate in sports are given positive opportunities to interact with peers and adult leaders, learn how to follow rules and routines, learn how to set and monitor performance goals, confront
and overcome challenges, learn how to manage emotions in positive ways especially during times of loss, and are much more likely to form positive and strong school identities (Belton et al., 2016; Felfe et al., 2016; Mushtag et al., 2019; Pyne, 2019; Rathore et al., 2018). At-risk students are given opportunities for growth regarding teamwork building. They can learn to recognize the importance and value of each team member, and this leads to positive emotional growth (Belton et al., 2016; Felfe et al., 2016; Mushtag et al., 2019; Pyne, 2019; Rathore et al., 2018; Rogers et al., 2018). Students from at-risk backgrounds are shown to function more effectively when given opportunities to join networks of adults that support their efforts to succeed in school and provide guidance to them about school and personal social matters (Belton et al., 2016; Felfe et al., 2016; Mushtag et al., 2019; Pyne, 2019; Rathore et al., 2018; Rogers et al., 2018). Extra-curricular activities are often designed in ways that facilitate high-quality peer and coach interactions and for the development of prosocial friendships and bonding (Akehurst et al., 2020; Belton et al., 2016; Felfe et al., 2016; Mushtag et al., 2019; Pyne, 2019; Rathore et al., 2018; Rogers et al., 2018).

Table 7

The Positive Effects of Extra-Curricular Activities on At-Risk Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>At-Risk Students Who are engaged in Extra-Curricular Activities:</th>
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<tr>
<td>- Positive Development of Appropriate Competitive and Social Behaviors</td>
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<tr>
<td>- General Increase in Student Motivation</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Increase in Goal-Setting Skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Increased Sense of Self-Worth and Value</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Given Positive Opportunities to Interact with Peers and Adult Leaders</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
At-Risk Students Who are engaged in Extra-Curricular Activities:

- Given Opportunities to Learn How to Follow Rules and Routines
- Learn How to Set and Monitor Performance Goals
- Given Opportunities to Confront and Overcome Challenges
- Learn How to Manage Emotions in Positive Ways, Especially During Times of Loss
- Are Much More Likely to Form Positive and Strong School Identities
- Given Opportunities for Growth Regarding Teamwork Building
- Given Opportunities to Join Networks of Supportive Adults
- Given Opportunities for Positive Behavior Management
- Given Opportunities for High-Quality Peer and Coach Interactions
- Are Shown to Have Higher Academic Goals
- Increases the Likelihood of Graduating High School

Research shows the many benefits for at-risk students who join and participate in extra-curricular activities transfer to the academic school setting. These benefits include the development of positive school identities, positive behavioral engagement in the classroom, better academic grades, and is an important factor in the likelihood of at-risk students’ graduation from high school (Belton et al., 2016; Felfe et al., 2016; Mushtag et al., 2019; Pyne, 2019; Rathore et al., 2018; Rogers et al., 2018). Taking into consideration all of the positive benefits and consequences of at-risk students' participation in extra-curricular activities, schools, families, and government sponsors need to view participation as an educational asset rather than an expendable option (Belton et al., 2016; Felfe et al., 2016; Mushtag et al., 2019; Pyne, 2019; Rathore et al., 2018).
Community Organizations’ Effect on At-Risk Students

There are many community organizations and after-school programs that aid in the process of secure attachment bonding for at-risk individuals. These organizations strive to provide safe and nurturing environments for children and can be found in many various communities throughout the nation (Bryan et al., 2017; Liao et al., 2019; Rogers et al., 2018; Schutz, 2016; Watson et al., 2017). Effective after-school programs and community organizations bring a wide range of benefits to students, families, and communities. These organizations and programs can boost academic performance, reduce risky student behaviors, and promote physical health (Bryan et al., 2017; Liao et al., 2019; Rogers et al., 2018). Leaders of these organizations can intercede as a positive source for the emotional growth for at-risk individuals and can serve as mentors and guides during the developmental process (Bryan et al., 2017; Liao et al., 2019; Rogers et al., 2018; Schutz, 2016; Watson et al., 2017).

Community organizations and after-school programs can assist at-risk students in many ways. Students who participate in community organizations and after-school programs may improve childrens’ social skills by providing opportunities for students to make new friends since children in an after-school program may feel more included and part of the group (Bryan et al., 2017; Liao et al., 2019). Being away from the school setting may also offer a break from the normal school cliques or social concerns (Akehurst et al., 2020; Schutz, 2016; Watson et al., 2017). Some organizations and after-school programs offer classes in areas like science, computers, drama, and music which can help students find and develop a new interest and provide opportunities for children to work together and enhance teamwork and cooperation skills (Akehurst et al., 2020; Brooms, 2018; Gatlin & Wilson, 2016; Webber, 2016).
Local Community Churches’ Effect on At-Risk Students

Current research highlights that one of the most influential but often untapped sources of mentorship and bonding resources in local communities is that of the local community church (Brooms, 2018; Dumangane, 2017; Gatlin & Wilson, 2016; McDougal et al., 2018). Studies show that involvement in church activities, such as regular church attendance, can decrease the effect of violence exposure and counteract 11-12-year-old preadolescents’ intention to use violence as a means of solving conflict (Dumangane, 2017; Gatlin & Wilson, 2016; McDougal et al., 2018). Specifically, the more frequently preadolescents and adolescents attend religious services, the more likely they are to choose non-violent means of resolving conflict even in the face of extensive exposure to community violence (Brooms, 2018; Dumangane, 2017; Gatlin & Wilson, 2016; McDougal et al., 2018). Research also shows that religious beliefs help build positive social adaptations which could be productively used throughout the individual’s life (Brooms, 2018; Dumangane, 2017; Gatlin & Wilson, 2016; McDougal et al., 2018).

Research is just determining the protective and inspirational benefits of church attendance by at-risk youth (Brooms, 2018; Dumangane, 2017; Gatlin & Wilson, 2016; McDougal et al., 2018). Faith can aid at-risk students by serving as a motivator and a form of protection from destructive behavior patterns (Brooms, 2018; Dumangane, 2017; Gatlin & Wilson, 2016; McDougal et al., 2018). At-risk students who are actively involved in a religious organization have shown to have a well-developed sense of self-worth (Gatlin & Wilson, 2016; McDougal et al., 2018; Nicholson & Putwain, 2018). An at-risk students’ sense of self-worth may be accomplished through attachment bonding with church members who can serve as forms of emotional support through life difficulties and in uncertain times of strife (Gatlin & Wilson, 2016; McDougal et al., 2018; Nicholson & Putwain, 2018). Church bonding experiences can
serve to provide at-risk children with resources regarding societal norms and values (Brooms, 2018; Dumangane, 2017; Gatlin & Wilson, 2016; McDougal et al., 2018). An important benefit from regular religious service attendance and participation for at-risk children is the discouragement of church organizations of certain life choices such as sexual promiscuity and substance abuse and the encouragement of morality, personal ethical behavior, and civic responsibility (Dumangane, 2017; Gatlin & Wilson, 2016; McDougal et al., 2018; Nicholson, & Putwain, 2018).

**Table 8**

*Local Community Churches’ Effect on At-Risk Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Community Churches’ Effect on At-Risk Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Decreases the Effect of Violence Exposure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- More Likely to Choose Non-Violent Means of Resolving Conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Helps to Build Positive Social Adaptations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Provides Protection from Destructive Behavior Patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Helps Develop Feelings of Self-Worth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Can Help Form Attachment Bonds and Mentorship Opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Provide Resources to Lean Societal Norms and Values from Role Models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Helps Discourage Children from Sexual Promiscuity and Substance Abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Increases Sense of Social Belonging and Acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Profound Effect on Social Learning and Growth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Local Community Churches’ Effect on At-Risk Students

- High Level of Educational Support for Student Success
- Encourages the Development of Morality, Personal Ethical Behavior, and Civic Responsibility

One of the major psychological benefits of local church attendance by at-risk students is an increased sense of social belonging and acceptance which has a profound effect on social learning and growth (Brooms, 2018; Dumangane, 2017; Gatlin & Wilson, 2016; Jordan & Wilson, 2017). The local church serves at-risk children by providing a network of concerned adults who are attached to the student and show care and a high level of love (Brooms et al., 2016; McDougal et al., 2018). The bond between at-risk students and church mentors also may serve to promote a high level of educational support and provide the at-risk student with love, affirmation, a sense of belonging, and high expectations for student success (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; McDougal et al., 2018). Participation in local community churches has particularly aided in the academic progress of at-risk children from low-income families largely through connecting youth with positive role models (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; McDougal et al., 2018). Local churches can also aid schools in general by having school supply drives, arranging tutoring opportunities for struggling students, acknowledging honor roll students during church services, and recognizing student success throughout the year (Brooms, 2018; Dumangane, 2017; Gatlin & Wilson, 2016; Jordan & Wilson, 2017). Research shows local church communities have assisted at-risk students by distributing information throughout the school year to members of the congregation about the local school calendar, early school closings, and school events such as cultural and college fairs (Brooms, 2018; Dumangane, 2017; Gatlin & Wilson, 2016; Jordan &

The local community church can also offer support services for at-risk youth by offering classes that foster leadership skills and training and through providing faith-based conflict resolution training (Gatlin & Wilson, 2016; Jordan & Wilson, 2017; McDougal et al., 2018). Local churches have also helped by partnering with local schools to form mentorship programs, lunch buddy programs, and classroom assistant partnerships with teachers of at-risk students (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; McDougal et al., 2018). Recent studies have just begun to understand the value of local faith-based institutions (Brooms, 2018; Dumangane, 2017; Gatlin & Wilson, 2016; McDougal et al., 2018). Churches and other faith-based groups remain an untapped and under-researched community resource for student engagement, bonding, and emotional stability (Brooms, 2018; Dumangane, 2017; Gatlin & Wilson, 2016; Jordan & Wilson, 2017; McDougal et al., 2018).

The Effect of Peer Relationships on At-Risk Students

The kindergarten classroom serves as an introduction to the school environment (Forester et al., 2017; Geerling, 2018; Thomas et al., 2020). Teachers must create a classroom atmosphere characterized by high levels of security and warmth and establish classroom patterns of low conflict and adversity (Forester et al., 2017; Hugher & Im, 2016; Thijs et al., 2018). Negative student-teacher attachment relationships in kindergarten have lasting effects on an individual’s general school adjustment patterns, academic achievement, student behavioral engagement, and a student’s perceptions of school in general (Forester et al., 2017; Hugher & Im, 2016; Thijs et al., 2018). Student-teacher bonding relationships also set the general tone of the classroom
climate and directly impact the social dynamics of the entire class (Forester et al., 2017; Geerling, 2018; Thomas et al., 2020). Peer relationships are strongly contingent not just on personal student behavior but also on classroom dynamics (Forester et al., 2017; Hugher & Im, 2016; Thijs et al., 2018). Students in the classroom make inferences about their peers' likability, social competence, and academic aptitude based upon their observations of their teacher's interactions with their classmates (Forester et al., 2017; Hugher & Im, 2016; Thijs et al., 2018). Positive teacher interactions with students are especially pertinent to at-risk students whose attitudes toward school may be drastically affected by poor student-teacher relationships and because they are very susceptible to forming negative attitudes towards school (Forester et al., 2017; Hugher & Im, 2016; Thijs et al., 2018). At-risk students may also increase aggressive behaviors as a response to unhealthy teacher-student relationships and thus may be rejected by their classroom peers (Forester et al., 2017; Hugher & Im, 2016; Thijs et al., 2018). These effects are observed with students as young as four years of age (Forester et al., 2017; Hugher & Im, 2016; Thomas et al., 2020). The 4-year-olds who are observed in research avoid interactions with peers who they believe their teacher disliked despite the nature of their personal interactions with these peers (Forester et al., 2017; Hugher & Im, 2016; Thijs et al., 2018). During this study, it is noted that student-teacher relationships are firmly established early in the school year and change very little throughout the school term (Forester et al., 2017; Hugher & Im, 2016; Thijs et al., 2018). It also shows that the degree to which teachers are aware of a student's at-risk history and previous negative experiences with other teachers may influence their relationships with these students and drastically affect at-risk students' relationships with other members of the school community (Forester et al., 2017; Hugher & Im, 2016; Thijs et al., 2018).
Not all at-risk students have negative experiences with school peers. Positive peer bonding may contribute to the psychological health of at-risk students and greatly aid in the ability of at-risk students to graduate high school (Allen et al., 2018; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018). Research shows that positive student-peer relationships increase the academic, behavioral, and emotional health of at-risk students and this effect continues throughout the length of their academic career (Allen et al., 2018; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018). At-risk students who have positive peer relationship bonding are also shown to have better attitudes regarding school and stronger relationships with their teachers (Allen et al., 2018; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018).

At-risk students are often reluctant to seek academic assistance from teachers and can often use peers as academic tutors and sources of assistance when faced with academic or social difficulties (Forester et al., 2017; Hugher & Im, 2016; Thijs et al., 2018). Current trends in educational curriculum call for learners to become more self-directed and able to engage in higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills (Solomon et al., 2017; Stover et al., 2018; Webber, 2016). Not only do positive relationships with peers lead to the development of academic competencies through the sharing of advice and modeling of relevant goal-oriented behavior, but positive gains can be accomplished through peer-mediated instruction and cooperative learning (Brandenburg, 2020; Forester et al., 2017; Hugher & Im, 2016; Thijs et al., 2018).

A notable result of recent studies about positive, secure peer attachment bonding is the fact that at-risk students' peers will intervene during instances of bullying (Dumangane, 2017; Forester et al., 2017; Huger & Im, 2016). Peer intervention, coupled with the greater sense of belonging established through these acts of support, greatly impacted the at-risk students’ sense
of self-worth and increased their sense of school community identification (Dumangane, 2017; Forester et al., 2017; Hugher & Im, 2016; Thijs et al., 2018).

Positive peer bonding skills continue to develop throughout one's entire lifecycle and greatly affect areas such as adult friendships, marriage relationships, and nurturing patterns of parenthood (Kirkman et al., 2016; Sanders et al., 2018; Wall, 2016; Webber, 2016).

**Summary**

Although at-risk students have a greater risk of negative academic outcomes due to the influence of at-risk environmental factors, at-risk students do not necessarily gravitate toward maladjustment (McCarter, 2019; Solomon et al., 2017; Webber, 2016). Secure attachment relationships forged during one’s academic school years can offset the negative effects of poor early attachment bonding (Pyne, 2019; Solomon et al., 2017; Webber, 2016). Secure attachment bonding can be formed by children to any caregiver who is responsive, caring, and supportive of the child’s needs both physically and emotionally (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Pyne, 2019; Solomon et al., 2017; Webber, 2016). The benefits of secure attachment bonding can be gained through the development of positive attachment relationships between the child and anyone who consistently provides nurturing and supportive care over a period of time (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Pyne, 2019; Schwartz et al., 2016; Solomon et al., 2017; Webber, 2016). Just one positive attachment bond can greatly assist an at-risk child who has not experienced secure attachment bonding with a primary caregiver to overcome early emotional deficits and develop strong emotional and behavioral skills and behaviors (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Pyne, 2019; Schwartz et al., 2016; Solomon et al., 2017; Webber, 2016).
Recent studies examine how at-risk individuals successfully navigate through psychological stress factors and graduate high school (Allen et al., 2018; Gage et al., 2018; Master, 2018; Merrow & Stults, 2016). At-risk individuals often foster academic success through the development of secure attachment bonds with other individuals (Gage et al., 2018; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xie & Zhang, 2020; Zolkoski et al., 2016). In a school setting, attachment bonding can occur between at-risk students and teachers, school administrators and faculty, athletic coaches and staff, positive peers, caring community members, or members of a local church or organization (Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020; Robinson et al., 2016; Sandoval-Hernanez & Bialowolski, 2016; Smith & Bradshaw, 2017). These positive attachment bonding relationships can protect at-risk students against numerous negative influences, including maladaptive behavior, negative life events, and poor quality child-parent relationships (Allen et al., 2018; Gage et al., 2018; Master, 2018; Merrow & Stults, 2016). The positive effects from secure attachment bonding can also predict a range of positive behavioral and academic outcomes not just during the school years but even into adulthood (Ibrahim & Zaatar, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2016; Solomon et al., 2017; Stover et al., 2018).

Human development is a transactional process in which an individual’s emotional, psychological, and physical development is influenced by various interconnections with one’s environment (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Schwartz et al., 2016). The interactions individuals have with each other and their social environment are based upon shared meanings or understandings of the world around them and how they connect with their surroundings (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Schwartz et al., 2016). Achieving quality education for at-risk students is a team effort, and all members of the team must do their part to ensure that at-risk students overcome difficult obstacles to reach academic success and
establish a healthy sense of emotional well-being (Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018; Xie & Zhang, 2020; Zolkoski et al., 2016). The most important member of the team is the at-risk individual themselves since they are the ones who have the most to gain from secure attachment bonding experiences (Belton et al., 2016; Felfe et al., 2016, Mushtag et al., 2019; Rathore et al., 2018).
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the attachment bonds that contribute to the successful completion of high school programs of study by at-risk students. This attachment bonding behavior enabled at-risk students to successfully navigate their high school programs of study and graduate high school (Allen et al., 2018; Claussen et al., 2016; Foster et al., 2017). The research was a qualitative transcendental phenomenological study that sought to capture the essence of this phenomenological experience by providing an opportunity for at-risk individuals to describe their personal bonding experiences which contributed to their graduation success (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). This research followed the qualitative transcendental phenomenological research method with fidelity (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Maxwell, 2021; Moustakas, 1994). The data collection utilized for this study followed Moustakas’ steps for transcendental phenomenological research and was composed of participant surveys, research participant interviews, and written letters of advice by research participants to other high school students who are at-risk of dropping out of school (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Maxwell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). This chapter describes the methods that were utilized to conduct the study. It also provides information on the research design, data collection and analysis, and methods for establishing trustworthiness.

Research Design

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for use in the study and addresses the meanings that individuals place on the phenomenon of study (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016). I was directly involved on a personal level and was the research instrument
to study the experience of at-risk students who formed secure attachment bonds and were thus able to graduate high school (Marshall & Rossman, 2015, Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016). With these factors in mind, choosing the qualitative design for the research was the most correct and sound choice. While quantitative research uses numbers and mathematical calculations (quantitative data) to derive research analysis, qualitative research places emphasis upon studying the subject itself in an in-depth manner (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Maxwell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). This study was not concerned with gathering statistical numeric data for this research study but used the actual words of the participants to capture the essence of the experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016).

**Phenomenological Research**

Phenomenology was founded in the early years of the 20th century by Edmund Husserl, who sought to discover the ultimate foundation of our beliefs of the world and our existence by understanding the framework of our consciousness (Maxwell, 2012; van Manen, 2016). A phenomenological researcher wants to understand how the world appears to others (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological researcher views reality as constructed through one's conscious interpretation of an event (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological research provides a profound, detailed understanding of a single phenomenon that is rich and descriptive (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Maxwell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). It uses exploratory open-ended participant questions to construct a detailed description of a singular event through the use of the exact words of a participant and seeks to capture the essence of the phenomenological experience through this process (Geertz, 2008; Maxwell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). Phenomenology was the most viable option for the research study because the research sought to capture the essence of the participant’s interpretation of being an at-risk
student and establishing secure attachment bonds, which assisted in the completion of a high school program of study (Patton, 2014). Capturing the essence of this phenomenon was accomplished through the actual words of the research participants (Moustakas, 1994). By using a phenomenological approach to this study, I described the commonalities between the participants as they experienced the shared phenomenon and sought to reveal the true essence of the phenomenon under study (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014).

**Transcendental Phenomenology**

The focus of transcendental research is how individuals describe experiences and not on the interpretations of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). The qualitative transcendental phenomenological research design was an appropriate choice for this study because transcendental phenomenological qualitative research focuses on participants' subjective experiences and interpretations of the world (Moustakas, 1994). This research attempted to accurately portray real, first-hand experiences of individuals who were considered "at-risk" and successfully graduated high school (Patton, 2014; van Manen, 2016). The research participants' experiences and interpretations of this experience were documented and given a voice through this research (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). The participants' interpretations of how they successfully formed secure attachment bonds and graduated high school was described and the essence of this experience was documented (Moustakas, 1994). I did not attempt to interpret meaning from the participant descriptions but merely served as an instrument through which these individuals used to voice their lived experiences with this phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Moustakas, 1994). Since this approach to phenomenology correctly addressed the goals of the study, I based the study on the transcendental phenomenological approach to research.
Research Questions

Central Question: What experiences foster secure attachment bonds for at-risk students who graduate high school?

Sub-Question 1. How do at-risk students who graduate high school experience secure attachment bonds with teachers?

Sub-Question 2. How do at-risk students who graduate high school experience secure attachment bonds with family members?

Sub-Question 3. How do at-risk students who graduate high school experience secure attachment bonds with coaches and sponsors of extra-curricular activities?

Sub-Question 4. How do at-risk students who graduate high school experience secure attachment bonds with members of community organizations?

Sub-Question 5. How do at-risk students who graduate high school experience secure attachment with peers?

Site and Participants

The site and participants for this study were drawn from a small local community college located in a county in eastern North Carolina. Drawing a research participant pool from the local community college was a purposeful choice since the site contained a large population of potential research participants who have successfully graduated high school.

Site

The community college used to draw participants was a small public community college and part of the North Carolina Community College System. It has an enrollment of 9,000 undergraduate students and offers 145 major programs of study. The yearly percentage of high school drop-outs in the county where the community college campus is located is 13.3%. This
percentage is over double the national yearly average of 5.3% (United States Census, 2019). The yearly poverty rate for the county is 23.2% which is also more than double the national yearly average of 11.8% (United States Census, 2019). Since research shows one of the major factors in determining “at-risk” individuals is poverty, this county was a sound purposeful choice to conduct this type of research because of the percentage of county citizens who are from low-income households (Strussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016).

Table 9

Comparison Between County Where Research is Conducted and National Averages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Annual Drop-Out Rates</th>
<th>Poverty Rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Average: 5.3%</td>
<td>National Average: 11.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County Average: 13.8%</td>
<td>County Average: 23.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants

Qualitative transcendental phenomenology seeks to capture the essence of a specific phenomenon through the exact words used by the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016). Since being able to cognitively draw upon past experiences to form articulate descriptions of a phenomenon is extremely important to capture rich, thick descriptions of a phenomenological event, drawing research participants from a local community college was a sound choice. The choice to use local community college students was based upon the premise that individuals who attend college have earned a high school diploma and passed entrance exams proving their ability to express themselves and articulate their thoughts and opinions.
Research participant selection is extremely important for any study but especially true for qualitative research. Since most qualitative data is collected through interactions with participants, the selection of research participants is paramount for the validity of qualitative research findings. A qualitative researcher must gather a research pool of participants who are readily accessible, have experience with the phenomenon of study, and are willing to share their thoughts and feelings about this experience. (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Maxwell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). This transcendental phenomenological study sought to describe what the participants experienced through textural descriptions and how they experienced the phenomenon through structural descriptions. It is extremely important to draw from a participant pool of individuals who not only are self-categorized as "at-risk" but can cognitively recall this experience, formulate this experience into a logical presentation, and verbally articulate this experience to enable the research to draw thick, rich descriptions of the phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). To fully describe the essence of the phenomenon, only college students who felt they were at risk of dropping out of high school were selected for participation in this study. The decision to draw research participants from a local community college helped this process because the individuals enrolled in a local community college have graduated high school and have proven their ability to be articulate and highly verbal.

**Table 10**

*Description of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>At-Risk Factors</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>At-Risk Factors</td>
<td>Age Range</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<td>--------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
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<td>-Having Served a School Suspension</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Researcher Positionality**

I have many motivations for my research of bonding relationships that influence an at-risk student to graduate high school. I have worked in the field of education for over 28 years. I have served as a teacher, assistant school director, school director, and school principal. During my time as an administrative intern in an elementary school, I noticed school administrators were using out-of-school suspension as a means of removing "undesirable" students from the classroom (McCarter, 2019; Pyne, 2019; Sanders et al., 2016). Administrators were sending students home for inappropriate behavior rather than using inappropriate student behavior as an opportunity to teach students conflict resolution skills or appropriate behavior management (Brandenburg, 2020; Pyne, 2019; Straussner & Fewell, 2018). Students fell further behind in their studies and often wanted to avoid classroom settings where they were struggling academically (Bae et al., 2020; McCarter, 2019; Pyne, 2019). This often served to reinforce inappropriate behaviors because students increased displays of inappropriate behavior in hopes
of being sent home from school (Briere, 2017; Sanders et al., 2016; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Wog, Chen & Yen, 2019).

I also noticed, while serving as a second-grade teacher, that teachers were actively encouraged to remain distant from students. Teachers seldom talked to students, and teacher-student conversation only pertained to direct instruction or to direct students to follow classroom rules. Students were generally not bonded with teachers or administrative staff, and there were many incidents of inappropriate student behavior. Students were habitually placed in suspension and displayed very aggressive behavior toward teachers, administration staff, and fellow students (Mowen & Brent, 2016; Pyne, 2019; Straussner & Fewell, 2018). I have always held the belief that personal, caring relationships are essential for student growth and development (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1946, 1950, 1977; Schwartz, 2015). While working as a second-grade teacher, I became passionate about helping at-risk individuals' graduate high school. I conducted this research in hopes of better understanding the attachment bonding experiences of individuals who were considered at-risk and graduated high school. This information will hopefully help professionals in the field of education better understand attachment bonding factors that encourage secure attachment bonding and to implement programs to assist in this process.

**Interpretive Framework**

My research paradigm is derived from a social constructivist point of view. I believe individuals construct meaning to life experiences through interaction with others and the historical and cultural norms of the individual's social environment (Maxwell, 2012; Patton, 2015). My qualitative research intended to report the perspectives and realities of at-risk students who established secure attachment bonds and completed their programs of high school academic study. This was done through the use of the actual words of each research participant during
semi-structured participant surveys, semi-structured participant interviews, and written letters of advice by research participants to other at-risk high school students (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). This process thereby ensured that each participant's perspective of the reality of this phenomenon was accurately captured and these participants' true voice was documented and heard (Maxwell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014).

**Philosophical Assumptions**

I strongly believe that every individual should be allowed to discover and enhance their unique gifts and talents. This can best be accomplished by providing the opportunity to every individual to receive a high-quality education. I feel that it is imperative to provide educational settings that encourage this process for students to thrive and grow. I feel that quality education involves addressing all of the needs of the student. This involves not only addressing the cognitive needs of the student, but the physical, social, and psychological needs as well.

**Ontological Assumption**

My ontological assumption is that the nature of reality is subjective, and therefore individual experiences are subjective (Geertz, 2008; Patton, 2014; van Manen, 2016). I seek to understand the world in which I live by developing subjective meaning to my life experiences (Moustakas, 1994). I look for the complexity of views and feel that life experiences are varied and multiple (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). The goal of my research was to rely as closely as possible on the participants' views of the experience (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). Specifically in how at-risk individuals form positive attachment bonds that assist in the completion of high school programs of academic study. I feel research participants' experiences with the phenomenon being studied are formed through personal interactions with others and through the historical and cultural norms that have been imprinted on participants through life.
experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2016; van Manen, 2016). This belief led to the need for me to bracket my life experiences from the coding and thematic interpretation of my research and to try, to the best of my ability, to rely solely on the participants' voices throughout this process to capture the essence of the phenomenological experience (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014; van Manen, 2016). My ontological assumption influenced my choice to conduct a qualitative rather than quantitative study because the qualitative method of research more closely align with my beliefs (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014; van Manen, 2016).

**Epistemological Assumption**

I am a qualitative researcher and feel I should try to get as close as possible to the research participants involved in my study (Moustakas, 1994). I feel knowledge is known through the subjective experiences of individuals and enabling the research participants to feel comfortable in expressing their true thoughts and feelings aided in the process of establishing rich and thick descriptions of the phenomenon in question (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). I feel that if the research participant is not comfortable with the person conducting the research and the researcher is not perceived as relatable, then the interview process will be compromised, and true data of the phenomenological experience will not be obtained (Moustakas, 1994).

**Axiological Assumption**

According to Moustakas (1994), qualitative researchers make their values known in their research studies. A qualitative researcher discloses the value-laden nature of the study and actively reports values and biases (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). Qualitative researchers "position themselves" by identifying their gender, age, race, immigration status, and other personal experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). I feel my values and biases will reflect on all stages of my research process and thus created a need for me to reflectively bracket out, to the
best of my ability, my thoughts and feelings (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). I also sought to capture the essence of the phenomenon by using the exact words of the research participants through the development of thematic units and the use of the research participants’ exact quotes (Moustakas, 1994).

**Researcher’s Role**

Moustakas (1994) states that to conduct sound qualitative research, the researcher should clearly and thoroughly explain how they serve as a human instrument in the study. Even though I do not have any authority over my research participants, I have a great deal in common with the participants. I am self-identified as being at-risk of dropping out of high school. I have a very strong bias in regards to the effect of establishing secure attachment bonds with teachers and I feel these secure attachment bonds assisted in the successful completion of my high school program of study. I attended a local community college my first year of college and very strongly identify with my research participants. I bracketed out my feelings about my identification with my research subjects and also my strong feelings regarding the benefit of helping at-risk students establish secure attachment bonds in the pursuit of completing high school. I worked diligently to ensure that I objectively listened to the exact words of the research participants to accurately portray their personal experiences with the phenomenon of study. Bracketing out my personal feelings and bias helped the research participants to be given an accurate and true voice and helped me to draw thematic conclusions based on their experiences and not mine. This process also enabled my research study to have sound validity and thus can be used to develop effective programs built on solid data analysis which can help at-risk students’ graduate high school.
Procedures

The data collection utilized for this study followed Moustakas’ steps for transcendental phenomenological research and was composed of participant surveys, participant interviews, and written letters of advice to other high school at-risk students (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Permissions

Once the proposed dissertation passed the dissertation proposal review and defense, I sought and received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Liberty University (See Appendix A). I received this approval before moving forth with the research process and before gathering any research data. I then contacted the prospective community college in eastern North Carolina where I sought to conduct my research study to secure their approval to conduct research (Appendix B). The Institutional Review Board of the local community college requested information regarding the nature of the study and all documentation of this study. Upon review, the Institutional Review Board of the local community college gave written consent to conduct the study (See Appendix C).

Recruitment Plan

The participants for my study were undergraduate students recruited from a local community college who self-identified as having been at-risk of dropping out of high school. I sought to have a participant pool with a maximum variation for my participant sample by purposefully seeking participant variation. Such variation considerations were incorporated into the study by the choice of a pool of participants who had a wide range of factors which placed the students in a self-described at-risk category and through variations of race and gender (Moustakas, 1994).
Sample Size

Since transcendental phenomenology focuses on the experience and consciousness of a specific phenomenon of interest (Moustakas, 1994), the determination of appropriate sample size is paramount to allowing the true meaning of phenomena to naturally emerge (Moustakas, 1994). I followed Liberty University's recommendation to have a minimum of 10 research participants for qualitative research. Following Liberty University's guidelines, I reserved the right to incorporate as many as 15 research participants if needed so that I could ensure data saturation of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014).

Type of Sample

A purposeful framework is a research framework where the individual conducting the research selects individuals and sites for the research study because these factors can purposefully provide an understanding of the research phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Maxwell, 2012; Patton, 2014). Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to a phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002).

Criterion Sampling

The type of purposeful sampling used for this research was criterion sampling. Criterion sampling involves the selection of individuals or groups of individuals who are especially knowledgeable about a phenomenon of interest (Maxwell, 2012; Patton, 2002). The individuals in this group were not only willing to participate but possessed the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; van Manen, 2016). A local community college was a logical location to draw research participants for a criterion sample for this transcendental phenomenological study.
because of the availability of individuals who have proven their ability to cognitively draw upon past experiences and to express their thoughts and feelings in very articulate ways demonstrated by their success in passing college English and composition entrance exams (Marshall & Rossman, 2015, Maxwell, 2012).

It should be noted that even though there are factors such as growing up in a one-parent household while in high school, living in a low-income home, having a family member who has dropped out of high school, and serving a school suspension have been deemed through extensive research to determine if an individual has been considered “at-risk”, all of these factors may not be considered factors by every individual (Bederian-Gardener et al., 2018; Ben-David & Jonson-Reid, 2017). It should also be noted that I hold an ontological philosophical assumption. I feel that each individual has a unique perspective and feelings about an event (Maxwell, 2012; Patton, 2014; van Manen, 2016). Researchers following an ontological philosophical assumption feel that individuals understand the world in which they live by developing subjective meaning from life experiences (Patton, 2014; van Manen, 2016). Different individuals have varying views and feelings about a life experience and different individuals can have a different perspective about the same event (Maxwell, 2012; Patton, 2002). Reality thus is determined from an individual's perspective (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Maxwell, 2012; van Manen, 2016). With this philosophical assumption incorporated into the research study, I was concerned with the fact that the prospective research participants perceive themselves to have been "at-risk" (Moustakas, 1994). This assumption also relates to secure attachment bonding. I sought to capture the description of individuals who perceive themselves to be "at-risk" and also perceived themselves to have formed secure attachment bonds with other individuals who have helped them successfully graduate high school (Moustakas, 1994). The at-risk individual could receive
benefit from the secure attachment bond regardless of the thoughts and feelings of the other party involved in the attachment relationship (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Moustakas, 1994). I am not interested in quantifying the reality of the secure attachment bond, only the perception of the research participant’s description of the phenomenon in question (Moustakas, 1994).

**Data Collection Plan**

A critical aspect of qualitative inquiry is rigorous and varied data collection techniques. Data collection methods for this study included a participant survey, semi-structured participant interviews, and letters of advice to other at-risk high school students. The semi-structured individual interviews were concluded once the individual participant had reached data saturation of the research phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). Once each participant interview was concluded, a reflective journal entry detailing the interview was written. The decision to stop the interview process was only be made once data saturation had occurred (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994).

**Participant Recruitment**

A booth in the community college student union was set up to draw the interest of prospective research participants. The booth displayed containers of candy and other small gift items to draw student interest. There were also flyers posted throughout the student union explaining the study and providing general details about being at-risk (See Appendix D). Perspective participants were engaged in conversation about the study and given a recruitment flyer explaining the study. The prospective research participants were provided an opportunity to ask detailed questions about the research and research process (Moustakas, 1994). They were also provided the knowledge that if they were a research participant, they could withdraw their consent to participate at any time (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Maxwell, 2012; Patton, 2014).
The prospective participants were also clearly explained that if they chose to participate in the study, they would be given pseudonyms to ensure their privacy (Moustakas, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This technique was used to encourage participants to be more open and forthright in their detailed responses (Moustakas, 1994). This also ensured that the study would maintain a high level of integrity and minimized potential risk to research participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Maxwell, 2012; Patton, 2014). If the prospective participant self-identified as being at-risk of failing to graduate high school and wished to participate in the study, the individual signed a consent form stating their agreement to engage in the research process (See Appendix E).

**Participant Survey**

The first step in the data collection process was to have the research participants complete a survey to determine if the participant felt they were considered at-risk of dropping out of high school (See Appendix F). It also helped the participants determine which factors contributed to their feelings. The open response/mixed response survey was the first data collection method administered to the research participants and helped the participants begin the process of describing their personal experiences. This relatively short survey was composed of several open-ended questions that helped the participants begin the process of describing their feelings of being at risk of failing to graduate high school. It also gathered basic information such as gender, age, and ethnicity which helped the data analysis process. This survey could also help others in the field of educational research expound upon this study to more closely examine the various factors which may also contribute to being at-risk of dropping out of high school.

The survey was generated based upon my research of journal articles which detail risk factors that contribute to an individual's feelings of being self-described as being at-risk of
failing to graduate high school (Bederian-Gardener et al., 2018; Briere et al., 2017; Huang & Cornell, 2017; Schwartz et al., 2016). The first participant was used to pilot the survey questions and the first research participant agreed that the questions were well worded and served to help the participant conceptualize the phenomenological experience. Content validity and reliability were also solidified by having each participant read over the survey once the survey was completed and agreed on the information provided on the survey.

**Participant Survey Questions**

The following questions were used for the participant survey and were based on extensively supported research (See Appendix F). All of the research participants were given the same survey but the open-ended nature of several questions allowed the participants to respond in such a way that their individualized experiences were best described.

1. Did you receive a high school diploma while attending a high school campus?
   - Yes
   - No

2. At any point in high school did you feel at-risk of dropping out of school? If so why?
   - Yes __________________________________________________________
   - No

3. If you did feel at-risk, please circle any factors you feel contributed to those feelings.
   - Low-income family status
   - Living in a single-family home
   - Having an immediate family member drop out of high school
   - Having served a school suspension
Other cause/ reason _________________________________________________

4. What is your age range?
   18-21
   22-29
   30-39
   40 plus

5. Do you feel your age affects your perspective of being at-risk of dropping out of high school?
   Yes (If yes, why do you feel this way?)
   _________________________________________________

   No

6. Please indicate your self-identified gender.
   Male
   Female

7. Do you think your gender affected your feelings of being at-risk?
   Yes (If yes, why do you feel this way?)
   _________________________________________________

8. Please indicate your self-identified ethnicity.
   White
   Black or African American
   Hispanic or Mexican American
   American Indian or Alaska Native
   Asian
   Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
Multiple Races

Other (Please specify ___________________________)

9. Do you think your ethnicity affected your ability to graduate high school?
   Yes (If yes, why do you feel this way?
   ______________________________________________________________________
   No

   Question 1 was structured to determine if the research participant received a high school diploma which attending a high school campus. This question was very important because the research was based on the premise that attachment bonding experiences while on high school campuses help at-risk students to graduate high school.

   Question 2 was a broad general question that sought to determine if the participant truly felt as if they were at risk of dropping out of high school. The question was a mixed closed and open-ended question that sought to gather data as to why the participant felt as if they were at risk of dropping out of high school.

   Research question 3 sought to gather information about which of the researched documentation describing the factors which contributed to an individual self-identifying as being at-risk was selected from a predetermined list.

   Research questions 4 and 5 addressed the issue of participant age and how it affected the self-identified at-risk status of individuals. It was based on the premise that the number of years and personal experiences of the self-described at-risk individual change as life experiences alter the personal reflections of the phenomenon.
Research questions 6-7 addressed the issue of participant gender and to what degree the research participant felt that their self-identified gender affected their perceptions of being at-risk of dropping out of high school. It also sought to gather information from the research participant about how the perceptions of others regarding their gender affected their personal experiences with the phenomenon.

Research questions 8-9 sought to gather data about the research participants’ ethnicity and their feelings regarding the extent they felt their ethnicity affected their feelings of being at risk of failing to graduate high school.

**Participant Survey Data Analysis Plan**

The participants had an opportunity to review their open response participant surveys immediately after completing their responses. This provided the research participants an opportunity to review their responses to ensure their responses accurately reflected their personal experiences of being at risk of failing to graduate high school. Once all of the participants had completed their surveys and had agreed that their personal experiences had been accurately documented, data analysis was conducted on this data collection source.

The surveys were reviewed several times and significant statements were documented that provided an in-depth understanding of the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). Moussakas’ (1994) technique for data analysis for phenomenological reduction was used to analyze this data. During this process, I bracketed out my personal experiences and bias regarding this experience. The equal value was given to all participants' statements (Moustakas, 1994). Following Moustakas recommendations (1994), participants' repetitive statements and statements that did address the phenomenon in question were removed from the
analysis. Once this process was completed, I then selected common words and phrases from the research participants' surveys and derived themes from the data.

**Individual Participant Interviews**

Once participant surveys were given, the research participants were interviewed. (Moustakas, 1994; Lincoln Y Guba, 1985). Each research participant was taken to a private conference room to participate in the semi-structured interview process. This setting ensured confidentiality and provided a secure setting where participants felt comfortable in expressing their thoughts and feelings regarding the phenomenon of study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This interview was audio recorded with two different recording devices to ensure the accuracy of data transcripts (Patton, 2014).

**Individual Interview Questions**

The following questions were used for the open-ended research participant interviews and were based on extensively supported research (See Appendix G). All of the participants were asked the same questions but the open-ended nature of the questions allowed the participants to respond in an individualized, open manner. This method also allowed for reduced interview bias and helped to facilitate standardization in the interview process (Patton, 2015).

1. You stated on your survey that you feel that you were at risk of dropping out of high school. Please tell me a little about why you feel this way? CRQ
2. How would you describe your childhood? SQ2
3. How was your relationship with your mother? SQ2
4. Did you live with both of your parents; just one parent; or with grandparents or other family members? Please tell me about your experiences growing up? SQ2
5. Please describe any members of your family that had a great impact on you while growing up? SQ2

6. How did your family feel about the importance of education? SQ2

7. If you have close family members who dropped out of high school, why do you think this happened? CRQ

8. Please tell me about your experiences in kindergarten, first, and second grades. SQ1

9. Please tell me about your relationship with your kindergarten and early elementary school teachers? SQ1.

10. If there was a time when you were punished for inappropriate behavior, please describe a significant event you remember and how this affected your education. CRQ

11. You've described your early experiences in school and how you felt about school during this time in your life. Please describe your school experiences when you were in middle school and high school. Did your feelings toward school change and if so, why did they change? CRQ

12. Please describe your sense of belonging to your school community when you were in high school? Why did you feel this way? CRQ

13. Please tell me about your relationship with fellow students and friends while you were in high school. SQ5

14. Please describe your relationship with your teachers when you were in high school. SQ1

15. Please describe a relationship, good or bad, with a notable teacher you had in high school. SQ1
16. Let's talk about your experiences with extra-curricular activities when you were in high school. If you played sports, joined clubs, or participated in other organizations during high school, what effect did these activities have on your high school education? SQ3

17. Please tell me about your experiences with community organizations such as after-school programs or church events. Describe how this involvement affected your education. SQ4

18. You were academically successful in school because you are now attending college. Please describe your experiences preparing for college while you were in high school. CRQ

19. What advice would you give someone who also considered themselves to be “at-risk” of dropping out of high school? CRQ

20. Is there anything else you would like to share or you feel I should understand relating to your experiences? CRQ

The questions for this research participant interview focused on at-risk students’ attachment experiences who were able to successfully establish secure attachment bonds and graduated high school. All of the individual participant interview questions were expertly reviewed. Questions 1 and 2 were designed to serve as an introduction to the interview and were used to help establish rapport with the research participants. It was based on Marshall and Rossman's (2012) suggestion of developing a "grand tour" question to help enable participants to become more comfortable in sharing their personal experiences. It focused on the central research question and sought to generally inquire about the attachment bonding experiences of at-risk students who were able to establish secure attachment bonds and thus graduate high school.
Questions 3-6 addressed Sub-Question 2 and sought to have research participants explain how their relationship with family members impacted their ability to graduate high school. It specifically inquired about the mother or primary caregiver relationship. The primary relationship which affects the earliest human bonding attachment is that of the mother or primary caregiver and a child (Fuchs et al., 2016; Li et al., 2016; Musetti et al., 2016). These questions inquired about the research participants’ family life and the value the family places on the importance of education. A major result of current research has shown that family member engagement is nurtured when family members believe they should be involved in the education of their child and have a positive belief in their abilities and usefulness regarding their involvement (Blake & Blake, 2017; Li & Fischer, 2017; Otani, 2018). Family communication about educational aspirations is a strong predictor of student lifelong success (Sanders et al., 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018).

Question 7 sought to ask a broad question about why the research participant is self-identified as being at-risk of failing to graduate high school and was based on the central research question. The focus of the inquiry was intentionally broadened at this point in the interview to allow the research participant to think about the topic in broad general terms in hopes that new information will be derived from the research participant. Different individuals have varying views and feelings about a life experience and different individuals can have a different perspective about the same event (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). With this philosophical assumption incorporated into the research study, the research was addressing the fact that the prospective research participant perceived themselves to have been "at-risk" and how the participant described this event (Moustakas, 1994, Patton, 2015).
Research questions 8-9 focused on participants' experiences with early teachers and their experiences adjusting to a school setting. It sought to gather data that related to sub-research question 1 and was concerned with how at-risk individuals who graduated high school experienced attachment bonds with teachers, especially in the early grades.

Questions 10 through 12 addressed behavioral issues and how these experiences affected the participant's educational outcomes (CRQ). Early childhood teachers who react negatively to disruptive at-risk students may unknowingly strengthen students' negative social behaviors and students' feelings regarding the world being unresponsive to their needs (Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). This behavior also encourages this detrimental cycle which often ends in the occurrence of students dropping out of high school (Dupere et al., 2017; Gage et al., 2018; Kokemuller, 2020; Mowen & Brent, 2016).

Questions 10 through 12 (CRQ) were general thought-provoking questions and were structured to address participant experiences with attending school while feeling at risk of dropping out (Bederian-Gardener et al., 2018; Kokemuller, 2020). Question 11 joined the topics of middle and high school experiences into one question to describe the transition process between educational settings. When secure bonding attachment occurs during the preadolescent and adolescent years, positive student-teacher relationships are found to protect against maladaptive, risky behavior for at-risk students (Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). Unfortunately, as the need for positive teacher interaction increases, there is a marked decrease in the quality of time spent between an adolescent and teaching instructors during the middle and high school years (Kirkman et al., 2016; Straussner & Fewell, 2018; Sulimani-Aidan, 2018; Sulkowski, 2016). Question 12 seeks to have research participants
describe how their feelings of school evolved as they progressed through school. It is a general
thought-provoking question that addresses the participants' general sense of school belonging.

Question 13 was designed to focus on sub-question 5 and it sought to have participants
describe their relationships with fellow students and peers. These relationships are closely linked
to the development of a sense of belonging to a school community. Positive peer bonding may
have a profound impact on the psychological health of at-risk students and greatly aid in the
ability of at-risk students to graduate high school (Allen et al., 2018; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018;
Walls, 2016; Xerri, Radford & Shacklock, 2018). It was also designed to allow participants to
address their feelings about being a member of the school community. Research has shown that
active student engagement positively affects cognitive and intellectual skill development, moral
and ethical development, psycho-social development, and helps in the development of a positive
self-image (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Walls, 2016; Xie & Zhang, 2020; Zolkoski, Bullock &
Gabale, 2016).

Questions 14-15 were used to focus on sub-question 1 which provided research
participants an opportunity to describe their relationship with teachers while attending high
school. Research has determined that having a positive relationship with a teacher is a powerful
buffer against traumatic events and at-risk life circumstances (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Pyne,
2019; Solomon et al, 2017; Stover, Choi & Mayes, 2018).

Question 16 addressed the participant's experiences with extra-curricular activities and
the effect of these activities on their educational outcomes and was linked to sub-question 3. An
extensive body of research conducted over the past 25 years has shown the benefits of student
participation in school-sponsored extra-curricular activities, especially during the critical
adolescent years of development (Belton et al., 2016; Felfe, Lechner, & Steinmayr, 2016;
Mushtag et al., 2019; Rathore, Chaudhry & Azad, 2018). The benefits of student participation include the positive development of appropriate competitive and social behaviors, a general increase in student motivation, goal-setting skills, an increased sense of self-worth and value (Belton et al., 2016; Felfe, Lechner, & Steinmayr, 2016; Mushtag et al., 2019; Pyne, 2019; Rathore et al., 2018).

Question 17 asked participants to describe experiences with members of community organizations and addressed sub-question 4. Community organizations and after-school programs may improve students' social skills by providing opportunities for students to make new friends since children in an after-school program may feel more included and part of the group (Bryan et al., 2017; Liao et al., 2019). Being away from the school setting may also offer a break from the normal school cliques or social concerns (Schutz, 2016; Watson et al., 2017).

Question 18 was designed to inquire about the participant's process of graduating high school and preparing for college and was structured to provide research participants the opportunity to share any information they have not been allowed to express through the previous interview process, especially of bonding experiences in general (Patton, 2015).

Question 19 was designed to be a thought-provoking question about sharing advice to other at-risk high school students (CRQ). This question was intended to serve as a precursor to conclude the interview process and help the research participant transition to the next form of data collection, written letters of advice to other at-risk high school students.

Lastly, question 20 (CRQ) served to conclude the personal participant interview and is a chance for research participants to add any final comments that they wanted to share that they felt were not addressed in the preceding series of questions.
**Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan**

Once the research participants' interviews were transcribed (See Appendix H), the research participants each received their interview transcript and were provided an opportunity to check their transcript for accuracy. Once the participants examined the transcripts through the process of member checking and agreed that a true description of their experience with the phenomenon had been captured, data analysis was conducted on this data collection source. The first major part of the data analysis process for transcendental phenomenological research was to create interview transcripts and highlight significant statements or quotes that provided an understanding of how the participants’ experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). Moustakas’ (1994) technique for data analysis for phenomenological reduction was primarily used for this study, and my personal bias and experiences regarding this phenomenon were bracketed out of the analysis procedure.

I followed Moustakas’ (1994) recommendations, and equal value was given to all participants’ statements. All of the participants' repetitive statements and statements that do not relate to the research questions and topic were removed from consideration (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). Once this process was completed, I then selected common words and phrases from the research participants' interviews and derived themes from the interviews.

**Letter Writing**

This data collection method was an additional outlet for research participants to reflect on their own experiences and identify critical attachment bonds that were beneficial in their ability to successfully graduate high school (Patton, 2015). All 10 research participants were allowed to write letters of advice to other at-risk high school students (See Appendix I).
After the personal interviews were concluded, research participants were then directed to a table located in the back of the conference room and asked to use their pseudonym and write a letter of advice to other at-risk high school students. This served as the third data collection method.

Once the research participants completed their letters of advice, I asked the participants to read over their letters of advice to make sure that their thoughts were accurately portrayed in their letters. I also informed each participant that I would be compiling a transcript of their personal participant interview for member checking purposes and would be sending the transcript to the e-mail listed on their consent form. Each research participant was then given $20 as a gift of appreciation as they exited the conference room.

**Letter Writing Data Analysis Plan**

The first major part of the data analysis process for the letters of advice to other at-risk high school students was to carefully examine each participant's letter (See Appendix I) and highlight significant statements or quotes that provided an understanding of the essence of the phenomenological experience (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). Moustakas' (1994) technique for data analysis for phenomenological reduction was primarily used for this data collection method, and my personal bias and experiences regarding this phenomenon were bracketed out of the analysis procedure.

I then followed Moustakas’ (1994) recommendations, and equal value was given to all participants’ written statements of advice. All of the participants' written, repetitive statements and statements that did not relate to the research questions and topic were removed from consideration (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). Once this process was completed, I selected
common words and phrases from the research participants' surveys, interviews, and written letters of advice and derived themes from this data.

**Data Synthesis**

All of the research data gathered from the participant surveys, research participant individual interviews, and written letters of advice to other at-risk high school students was synthesized into a coherent singular body of evidence that identified themes and offered answers to the research questions. Moustakas’ (1994) technique for data analysis for phenomenological reduction was primarily used to examine and synthesize all of the data derived from the three sources of data collection for this study. The following steps outline Moustakas’ (1994) phenomenological model for reduction (a) bracketing the topic, (b) horizontalization, (c) clustering data into themes, (d) construct a textural description of the experience, (e) derive a structural description of the experience, (f) develop a textural-structural synthesis of the phenomenological experience. In this particular study, a description of the lived experiences of at-risk students who formed secure attachment bonds and were thus able to successfully graduate high school was examined and synthesized.

**Reflective Journaling**

I compiled and maintained a reflective journal throughout the entire research process (See Appendix J). This journal greatly aided in helping to reflectively analyze biases and pre-assumptions of the phenomenon in question (Moustakas, 1994). It also assisted me in bracketing out personal factors so that I could examine the described lived experiences of the research participants with minimal personal subjective interpretations (Maxwell, 2012; Patton, 2014; van Manen, 2016).
**Horizontalization**

The first major part of the data analysis process for transcendental phenomenological research is to create interview transcripts and highlight significant statements or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). It should be noted that all participant interviews were transcribed verbatim (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014; van Manen, 2016). The participant interviews were examined several times and significant statements from the interviews were highlighted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). Initially, all statements had equal value (Moustakas, 1994). After multiple readings, I coded the interviews by focusing on significant participant statements (See Appendix K). Overlapping statements were consolidated to give a better description of the phenomenological experience. This process is called horizontalization (Geetz, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016). The process of horizontalization supported my ability to identify commonalities and differences in the participant surveys, personal interviews, and written letters of advice to at-risk high school students (Patton, 2015). The process of horizontalization also ensured the elimination of any overlapping statements and highlighted significant statements, phrases, or words expressed by the research participants (See Appendix K).

**Clustering Data into Themes**

Once horizontalization was completed, I developed clusters of meaning from these significant statements (See Appendix L). Significant statements by the research participants were used to identify themes from the research data (Saldana, 2016). A theme in qualitative phenomenology is a frequently used word or phrase (Saldana, 2016). The methodology of transcendental phenomenology involves the reduction and analysis of specific statements to tease
out the clusters of meaning into overarching themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). The research themes are then used to write a rich, thick description of the participants' experience (Geetz, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014; van Manen, 2016).

**Textural Description of the Experience**

Once horizontalization was completed, I developed clusters of meaning from these significant statements (Geetz, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Moustakas, 1994). The textual descriptions of the research study (See Appendix M) sought to describe the individual experience of at-risk students who established secure attachment bonds during their academic programs of study and successfully graduated high school. The methodology of transcendental phenomenology involves the reduction and analysis of specific statements to tease out the clusters of meaning into overarching themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Moustakas, 1994). During this process, I used specific quotes from the research participants to fully describe the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Research themes were then used to write a description of the participants’ experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). A thick, rich description of this phenomenon was written from the participant transcripts and sought to capture the feelings of the research participants and aided in fully describing the phenomenon in question (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014; van Manen, 2016).

**Structural Description of the Experience**

While the textural description of phenomenology focuses on the "what" of the phenomenon, the structural description focuses on the background and the "how" of the phenomenon under study (Moustakas, 1994). Structural descriptions focus on the subtleties of
the experience (Saldana, 2016). The structural description of the research participants as a group helps readers understand how the participants collectively experienced the phenomenon (See Appendix N). The structural description of the research study searched for the details of how at-risk students were able to form secure attachment bonds during their school years and how these experiences helped them to complete their high school programs of study.

**Textural-Structural Synthesis of the Phenomenon**

The final step in a phenomenological research study is the textural-structural synthesis of the research phenomenon (Saldana, 2016). The textural-structural synthesis serves as the foundation for explaining the “how” and “what” of the experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2014). It combines all participant data to capture the essence of the phenomenological experience (Moustakas, 1994). In the research study, the fundamental textural-structural synthesis captured the essence of at-risk students who formed secure attachment bonds during their school experience and were able to successfully graduate high school (See Appendix O). The textural-structural synthesis captured this particular experience at a specific time and place from the vantage point of an individual researcher following an extensive and reflective study of the research phenomenon (Saldana, 2016). This textural-structural synthesis culminated into a full, thick, and rich description of the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

**Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985), addressed criticism of qualitative research’s lack of rigor, reliability, and objectivity by establishing benchmarks for qualitative research trustworthiness. The benchmark concepts used by Lincoln & Guba (1985) are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This section describes the procedures which will assure that
Credibility

Credibility is a term used in qualitative research to describe the extent to which the study's findings accurately describe the reality of the participants' phenomenological experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is the degree of confidence that the reader will have in the truth of a study's findings and the extent to which the reader feels that the findings accurately describe the reality of the phenomenological experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). High-quality data for this study was obtained through the use of systematic, in-depth interviews (see Appendix H), participant surveys (See Appendix F), and written letters of advice to other at-risk high school students (See Appendix I). The data was systematically and conscientiously analyzed with attention to issues of credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Saldana, 2016). Credibility was achieved through this study through the use of triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking.

Triangulation

Triangulation of data for this study was achieved through the use of individual participant interviews, participant surveys, and written letters of advice to other individuals who are at risk of dropping out of high school. Source triangulation was not achieved because all sources were derived from one site, a local community college. The study also failed to achieve source triangulation since all research participants were local community college students who self-identified as being at-risk of dropping out of high school but completed their high school programs of study. The trustworthiness of this transcendental study was not compromised since the study seeks to capture the essence of this phenomenological experience through specific
participant criteria and this is best accomplished by narrowing the focus of the study to one type of participant source.

Theory triangulation was achieved using John Bowlby's (1977, 1982) Attachment Theory, Mary Ainsworth’s (1989) expanded Attachment Theory through a study titled, The Strange Situation Study, and of the addition to these theories by Duschinsky & Solomon (2017). All three theories are incorporated into the study in both the organizational and analysis frameworks.

**Peer Debriefing**

This study used the technique of peer debriefing (See Appendix P) frequently throughout the entire research process. The use of peer debriefing increased the credibility of the study since using peers as a debriefing source allowed the study to be critiqued and evaluated as the study progressed. The unique perspectives of professional peers who are familiar with similar research were highly beneficial since professional peers were used as supports and guides throughout the research process (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Additionally, other study data written by peers in the field of education which is similar to the research phenomenon under investigation published in peer-reviewed journal articles were examined to compare with the current study investigation to gain further insight into the phenomenological experience (Patton, 2014).

**Member Checking**

Once the research participants' interviews were transcribed, the member checking process was implemented (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014; van Manen, 2016). The research participants each received their interview transcript and were provided an opportunity to check their transcript for accuracy. Once the participants agreed that a true description of their experience with the phenomenon had been captured, data analysis was
conducted from this source (Moustakas, 1994). The member checking process ensured that the true voice of the research participants was described, and the essence of the phenomenological experience was captured (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Transferability**

Science is concerned with rigor (Patton, 2015). By definition, good rigorous research must be reliable, valid, and maintain a high level of transferability. Transferability refers to the ability of the research findings from one study to be applied to another study of the same general context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative research is said to have strong transferability if there is a high level of confidence in the research data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was established through the use of thick descriptions of research (Moustakas, 1994). Transferability was also achieved when the proposed research study results mirrored the views of the participants under study and through maximum use of variation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Maximum variation for the participant sample was accomplished by purposefully seeking variation in terms of demographics (See Appendix J). Such variation considerations were highlighted through my choice of a pool of participants who had a wide range of factors that placed the student in a self-described at-risk category and through variations of race and gender (Moustakas, 1994). Transferability was also accomplished by allowing the research participants to review the results of the study and through their agreement that the description of their experiences was accurately portrayed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). Thick descriptions of the phenomenon give the reader a proper understanding of the experience thus enabling them to compare instances of the phenomenon explained in other research studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). It is important to acknowledge that the research can
only create the conditions for transferability but cannot assure transferability. This judgment can only be made by the reader of the research study.

**Dependability**

Research dependability is achieved when research results show that findings are consistent and can be repeated (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Dependability was shown in this study through a detailed effective description of the procedures undertaken during the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It was also achieved through an inquiry audit (See Appendix P), which occurred through a review of the research process by the dissertation committee and the Qualitative Research Director.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability with the research study is the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the research participants and not through research bias, personal motivation, or interest of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used bracketing (See Appendix J) throughout the entire research process to ensure validity and confirmability of the description of the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Though complete bracketing is never possible, reflexively is used to bracketed presuppositions to focus as closely as possible on the phenomenon of study (Moustakas, 1994). This was accomplished through the use of personal mental assessments of my feelings and preconceived beliefs of the phenomenon. This reflexively was essential to the research process because if a researcher is unaware of one's preconceptions and beliefs, one can't put these issues aside by bracketing (Moustakas, 1994). Reflexivity was incorporated into every aspect of the research process, especially through the use of my reflective journaling procedures. All thoughts and feelings while conducting research were journaled, especially during the participant interview process and data analysis phase. The
reflexive journal helped with bracketing and aided in the entire research process (see Appendix J). Topics that are unique and interesting which emerged during data collection were noted in a reflective journal, and notes about coding and the rationale for why codes were merged were included in the journal entries. A detailed description explaining why particular themes emerged during the data collection process helped to increase confirmability and was noted in the reflective journal (See Appendix J).

Bracketing was not only used for reflecting upon research bias and assumptions but was considered throughout the selection of journal articles to be used and incorporated into the literature review of the dissertation (Patton, 2015). It was also used during the interview and data analysis process by following Moustakas’ methods of data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). An audit trail (See Appendix P) was also incorporated into this study to increase validity and confirmability (Patton, 2015; Saldana, 2016). The process of data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of data were audited periodically by the research dissertation committee and the Qualitative Research Director (Saldana, 2016). All of these factors increased the confirmability of research study findings and helped ensure the study results accurately reflected the true experiences of the research participants regarding the phenomenon of study.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were evaluated and addressed before conducting the study (Patton, 2015). According to Patton (2015), before beginning the data collection process, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval should be sought (See Appendix A), and permission to conduct the study should be received (See Appendix B). The ethical standards for the conduct of the research were approved before gathering any participant data (Patton, 2015). Patton’s recommendations were also followed, and pseudonyms (See Appendix D) were used for all
participants to keep the participants’ identities confidential (Patton, 2015). The research proposal was explained to every potential participant, and written permission was obtained using consent forms for all concerned parties as well as the site location (See Appendix E). Research participants were informed and had input into the results of the study through the process of member checking of participant transcripts (Patton, 2015). Through participation in the study, the research participants had their personal experiences validated (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, to ensure high ethical standards, all participant interview transcripts and other research data will be kept in a securely locked location or password-protected in the case of electronic files. The data derived for this study will be destroyed after three years (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). Once the research participants had completed the member checking process and verified that the transcripts accurately capture the words and thoughts of the participant experience (See Appendix H), the personal information documented in the contact log which connected the participant’s name to their pseudonym was destroyed, thus decreasing the likelihood of a breach of participant confidentiality. To show appreciation and gratitude for their willingness to participate in this research study, the participants received $20 after completing and submitting their letters of advice to other at-risk high school students and were exiting the conference room.

**Summary**

Recent studies have examined how at-risk individuals successfully navigate through stressful psychological factors and graduate high school (Allen et al., 2018; Gage et al., 2018; Master, 2018; Merrow & Stults, 2016). However, a research gap exists in the fact that studies have examined factors that contribute to at-risk student attachment bonding, but no research giving a voice to at-risk students who formed secure attachment bonds and completed their high school programs of study has been conducted. This transcendental phenomenological study
described the factors that contributed to the successful completion of a high school academic program by at-risk students.

A purposeful sampling framework was used for this study (Patton, 2015). The type of purposeful sampling used for this research was criterion sampling (Maxwell, 2012; Patton, 2015). Criterion sampling involves the selection of individuals or groups of individuals who are especially knowledgeable about a phenomenon of interest (Maxwell, 2012; Patton, 2015). The individuals in this group were not only willing to participate but possessed the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner (Maxwell, 2012; Patton, 2015). A local community college was a logical location to draw research participants for a criterion sample for this transcendental phenomenological study. A total of 10 participants from an eastern North Carolina community college were selected to participate in this research study (Patton, 2015). All research participants are at-risk community college students who successfully established secure attachment bonds and were thus able to graduate high school programs of academic study. These research participants also had received a high school academic diploma while attending a high school campus and not through other means.

The data collection utilized for this study followed Moustakas’ steps for transcendental phenomenological research and was composed of individual surveys, participant interviews, and written letters of advice to other at-risk high school students (Moustakas, 1994). The data derived from the research study was coded, bracketed, and phenomenologically reduced to identify recurring themes, subthemes and sought to capture and describe the essence of the phenomenological experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014).
Moustakas’ (1994) methodological steps for descriptive phenomenological studies were followed. The interview transcripts were read several times until I had a complete understanding of every phenomenological description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014). Significant statements were identified that were of direct relevance to the phenomenon under study (Saldana, 2016). All of the data was then coded, bracketed, and phenomenologically reduced to identify recurring themes and subthemes (See Appendix L). This process sought to capture and describe the essence of the phenomenological experience under study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2014).

This research study is crucial to the understanding of at-risk students who can establish healthy secure attachment bonds during their academic programs of study and how these secure attachment bonds assist at-risk students to successfully graduate high school. The research study will add to the body of current research and will provide an additional perspective to current studies by giving voice to at-risk students who were able to form secure attachment bonds during school and how these attachment bonds helped them to graduate high school. The results of this study could assist professionals in the field of education in better understanding at-risk students. Although this study focuses mainly on at-risk students, the results of the study could also assist members of the educational community in developing supportive and nurturing school communities. It can also be used to develop mentorship programs to assist all students, not just students who are considered “at-risk”.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the attachment bonds that contribute to the successful completion of high school programs of study by at-risk students. The content of this chapter describes this phenomenon using the participants' voices and provides an overall understanding of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). A participant survey, personal participant interviews, and written letters of advice to other at-risk high school students are used to compile a thorough and well-rounded description of the study and serve as tools for research participants' exact words about the essence of their experiences. During this process, research themes emerged. The major themes were perseverance, self-motivation, and mentorship. The sub-themes derived from participant data were goal-setting, delayed gratification, belief in a better future, and not letting others down.

Participants

There were 10 participants in the study. Each research participant (a) graduated from high school after attending a high school campus of study, (b) is a student at a community college, (c) is self-identified as being at-risk of dropping out of high school, (d) formed secure attachment bonds which they felt helped the participant graduate high school. Strict guidelines for research participation were designed to ensure the phenomenon under investigation would be researched and studied. Because this study focuses solely on students who were self-identified as being at-risk of dropping out of high school, only students who meet this criterion are included in this study. In addition, because the study focuses on at-risk students who formed secure attachment bonds which they feel positively contributed to high school graduation, only students who attended a high school campus for their academic instruction were selected as research
participants. Research participants were easily secured for this study, and the entire data
collection process took 12 hours. The participants are eager to share their life experiences, and
all procedures are followed with fidelity.

**Descriptions of Participants**

The following section provides a short description of the 10 participants; pseudonyms are used.

**Ona**

Ona is an African American female aged 18-21. She is a first-year college student. She
self-identifies as being at-risk because she came from a home self-categorized as having low-income, she lived in a single-parent home, and she served a school suspension because of inappropriate behavior.

**David**

David is a Mexican-American male aged 18-21. He is a first-year college student. He
self-identifies as being at-risk of failing to graduate high school because he came from a family of self-categorized low-income status. He also stated that he felt at-risk because he lost interest in school and did not enjoy it.

**Rachel**

Rachel is an African American female who is 40 plus years of age. She has attended college for 4 years. She self-identifies as being at-risk because she came from a home self-categorized as having low income, and grew up in a single-parent home.

**Casey**

Casey is an African American female aged 22-29 years old. She has attended college for
3 years. She self-identifies as being at-risk of failing to graduate high school due to self-identified low family income status and living in a single-parent home.

**Phyllis**

Phyllis is an African American female aged 30-39 years old. She has attended college for 2 years. She self-identifies as being at-risk of dropping out of high school due to self-identified low family income status, living in a single-parent home, and other factors such as teenage pregnancy.

**Wan**

Wan is an Asian American male who is 18-21 years of age. He has attended college for 2 years. He self-identifies as being at-risk of failing to complete high school because of his perception of low-income family status and living in a single-parent home.

**Rick**

Rick is an African American male aged 30-39 years of age. He has attended college for 1 year. He self-identifies as being at-risk of dropping out of high school due to his self-identified status of living in a low-income and single-parent home.

**Raven**

Raven is an American Indian female aged 30-39 years of age. She has attended college for 2 years. She self-identifies as being at-risk of failing to complete high school due to self-identified risk factors such as low-income family status, living in a single-parent home, and having an immediate family member drop out of high school.

**Michael**
Michael is a white male aged 30-39 years of age. He has attended college for 5 or more years. He self-identifies as being at-risk of dropping out of high school due to his self-identified status of coming from a low-income family.

Robert

Robert is an African American male 30-39 years of age. He has attended college for 2 years. He self-identifies his status as being at-risk of failing to complete high school because of living in low-income family status and living in a single-parent home.

Comparison of Participant Data

All 10 of the research participants feel low-income status is a contributing factor to their feelings of being at-risk of dropping out of high school. Living in a single-parent home is also a major factor in 9 out of 10 research participants' feelings of being at risk of failing to graduate high school. Of the total amount of research participants, only 1 has served a school suspension and only 1 participant has a close family member drop-out of school. The category of other reason or cause is added to serve as an opportunity for research participants to list other reasons why they feel at-risk of failing to graduate high school. This category has 2 responses from research participants. A research participant said he lost interest in high school and another participant said she became pregnant in high school which made graduating more difficult.

Table 11

Comparison of Participant Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison of Participant At-Risk Factors</th>
<th>Percentage of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Income Family Status</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in a Single Parent Home</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Comparison of Participant At-Risk Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>At-Risk Factor</th>
<th>Percentage of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having a Family Member Drop-Out of High School</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having Served a School Suspension</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Cause of Reason</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparison of Participants’ Age

Of the 10 research participants, half of the research participants are in the same age category of 30-39. The second-highest number of research participants is 18-21-year-olds. There is 1 research participant that is 22-29 years of age and 1 research participant that is 40 plus years or older.

Table 12

Comparison of Participants’ Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants’ Age</th>
<th>Percentage of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-21 years of age</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-29 years of age</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39 years of age</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40+ years of age</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparison of Participants’ Gender

When examining the research participants' gender, 5 of the research participants were self-identified as male and 5 of the research participants were self-identified as female. The selection of an equal amount of self-identified males and females is not intentional but merely a
result of available individuals who are willing to participate and share their experiences with the phenomenon of study.

**Table 13**

*Comparison of Participants’ Gender*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants’ Gender</th>
<th>Percentage of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Comparison of Research Participants’ Self-Identified Ethnicity*

The research participants’ self-identified ethnicity accurately reflects the ethnic percentages of the community college where the study was conducted. Sixty percent (N=6) of the participants self-identified as being black or African American. Ten percent (N=1) participant self-identified as white and ten percent (N=1) self-identified as American Indian or Alaska native. Research participants who self-identified as Asian were ten percent (N=1) and ten percent (N=1) participant who was self-identified as a Mexican-American. There were no participants who self-identified as Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander and no participants who self-identified as multiple races.

**Figure 1**

*Comparison of Participants’ Ethnicity*
Results

The results of this study demonstrated that there were many common life experiences among all of the participants. All 10 research participants stated that they grew up in low-income families and were often bullied because of their lack of nice clothes, shoes, and lack of material possessions. There was also a commonality in the fact that 9 out of 10 participants stated they were from a single-parent home. As the research participants described their experiences, several themes and subthemes emerged.

Table 14

Thematic Results

Theme: Perseverance
Sub-Theme: Overcoming Obstacles
Codes: Taking Control of Life’s Circumstances
Significant Statements:
“I know it may be rough, but do not give up! This is your life, you navigate it!”
"The advice I would give to anyone that are at-risk is to never give up."
“Keep moving on and work on your goal. You can win is you just keep trying.”
“There are times where one loses faith but if you keep pushing, things will get better.”

**Theme: Self-Motivation**
Sub-Theme: Goal Setting
Codes: Stay Focused on Your Goals

Significant Statements:
“Keep moving on and work on your goal. You can win is you just keep trying.”
“Set a goal and remember what’s ahead. Don’t give up!”
“Look to where you want to be and work toward that goal.”
“Keep pushing and never look back in regret!”

**Theme: Self-Motivation**
Sub-Theme: Delayed Gratification
Codes: Stay Focused on Your Goals

Significant Statements:
“See what’s ahead and never give up!”
“If you keep pushing, things will get better.”
“I wanted a better life. We can do anything. That’s one of the greatest virtues because of the efforts and time we put toward our life long goals.”
“There was a point in my life when I was going to give up but I knew that I wanted a better life. Keep pushing through it. It will eventually happen!”

**Theme: Self-Motivation**
Sub-Theme: Belief in a Better Future
Codes: Stay Focused on Your Goals

Significant Statements:
“Never underestimate yourself. You are your greatest fan.”
“Life is different after high school. It will get better and you will reach your dreams if you just stay focused and try.”
“Never give up. Every dark night eventually has a sunny day.”
“Keep moving and working on your goals. You can win!”
**Theme: Mentorship**
Sub-Theme: Not Letting Others Down
Codes: Seek Help from Others

Significant Statements:
“Seek help from others. There is nothing wrong with that.”
“Find a mentor who cares.”
“It’s always good to talk to someone if you need help.”
“Stay around people that will have a positive effect on your life.”
“Find people you like and surround yourself with the kind of person you would like to be.”
“Find yourself a person to hang around with and encourage each other.”
“Ask for help from all resources like church, school, and family.”
“Look for people doing what you want to do. Find a mentor and become a mentor-exchange processes and support each other.”

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**Perseverance**

The first theme that emerged is that of perseverance. Each of the research participants explained how important the concept of perseverance played in their ability to complete high school. Phyllis explained in her letter of advice to other at-risk high school students the importance of perseverance. "I know it may be rough, but do not give up! This is your life, you navigate it!" Raven also stated in her letter, "The advice I would give to anyone that are at-risk is to never give up." Michael said, “Keep moving on and work on your goal. You can win is you just keep trying.” Casey highlighted the concept of perseverance by stating, “The advice I would give to anyone that is at-risk of dropping out is to never give up. You can do anything you set your mind to and more. You can persevere!”

**Overcoming Obstacles**

Overcoming obstacles emerged during the research process as a subtheme of the overarching theme of perseverance. All participants described the need to overcome obstacles to
graduate high school. They all felt they were treated differently from others because of several factors and they navigated through these factors to become successful. Some of the obstacles in which the research participants felt they overcame to graduate high school were poverty, poor life choices, and learning disabilities.

Since all of the research participants came from low-income families, the participants felt that they had to navigate through life factors brought about by poverty to graduate from high school. When explaining how poverty affected her experiences in high school, Casey explained, "You always get picked on, whether it was your clothes, your shoes, whatever." Raven also explained how poverty affected her high school experiences, "There were a lot of different cliques. If you don't wear this, then you’re not good enough. That kind of thing."

Some of the research participants felt that their life choices created obstacles in which they had to overcome to graduate high school. Rachel said, “I see things differently because of my life experiences. I got pregnant in high school and almost dropped out but my mother and teachers encouraged me not to give up.”

Rick also explained how he had to overcome poor life choices while in high school. He attributes his poor choices to peer pressure. He stated, “Well, I dropped out twice. All my cousins, they all dropped out. Those were the ones that I hung with the most. A lot of my friends dropped out. I went back. I just finished a year late that’s all.”

Learning disabilities were mentioned by three of the research participants as reasons why they struggled and obstacles in which they had to overcome to graduate high school. One of the participants named Robert described his learning disability in the following way, “I had a learning disability and it was hard for me to understand a lot of things and I struggled through
school and I had some problems going on at home, family problems. Those were some of the reasons why I felt at-risk.”

Self-Motivation

Research participants expressed their belief that self-motivation was a very important attribute that contributes to completing high school academic programs of study. Though expressed in different ways, participant responses fell into several common sub-themes. These sub-themes were goal setting, belief in a better future, delayed gratification, and not letting others down. Phyllis wrote in her letter of advice to other at-risk students, “Never underestimate yourself. You are your greatest fan.” Ona made a similar statement, “Stay encouraged and above all, believe in yourself.” Wan stated, “You are better than you think. Even when it does not seem like it.” Robert spoke of self-motivation in the following statement:

There were some people that I went to school with that dropped out of high school. It didn't affect me personally because I knew that I wanted to finish high school and I knew that if I finished school, I would have better opportunities later on. I was self-motivated to do better. I wanted to be successful in the future for myself and my family.

Goal Setting

There are many instances where the research participants described the importance of goal setting. The most poignant example come from a research participant named Ona.

I knew that I had to change my mindset and everything I had in high school because I procrastinated a lot. I now watch motivational videos. I watch motivational videos every morning. I have a dream board. So every morning
when I wake up, I look at the dream board and I’d be like, this is what I’m working on—this is my goal.

Raven’s feelings about goal-setting were expressed in the following way, “When we find who we are in life, we can do anything and that is one of the greatest virtues because of the efforts and time we put towards our life long goals, we will accomplish what we plan for.” Phyllis gave the following advice, “Look where you want to be and work toward that goal. Watch out for set-backs like peer pressure, gangs, and bad decisions.” Casey talked about goal setting in the following way, “I know it may be rough, but do not give up. This is your life and you navigate it. Point yourself in a direction and work towards your goal.”

_DELAYED GRATIFICATION_

An unexpected sub-theme emerged during the data collection process. The sub-theme of delayed gratification was mentioned by 6 of the 10 research participants. Research participants not only contribute their graduation success on perseverance but stated that they understood the importance of making sacrifices while in school to ensure that they will be able to more easily acquire higher-paying jobs and can purchase desired material possessions once they reached their educational goals. Robert stated, “There were people that I knew that dropped out. I saw them with more things than I had because they were working. I knew that if I stayed in high school, I could have better opportunities and more money in the long run.” Raven explained how she learned to delay her desire for material possessions until she reached her educational goals.

I remember wanting to get a car so badly when I was in high school. My mother encouraged me to get one and I did. Unfortunately, I had to work longer hours at my part-time job and gave up sports. I wish I didn’t do that.

I remember noticing some of my friends who dropped out of high school
went to work and had nice cars and money to spend on the weekends, things like that. I would tell other at-risk students in high school to be careful not to fall into those traps that young people fall into. The trap to satisfy the need now and not looking long term.

David also had similar experience about the importance of delayed gratification.

I’ve learned that it’s better to work first. Do your school first and later in life, it will start to be better. It’s like your planting a seed and things will start to pop up. It’s like hey, I want this nice sports car, whatever. The benefits of your studies will help you reach that goal and blossom into whatever you want in life.

**Belief in a Better Future**

All of the research participants described the importance of going to school. They mentioned in similar terms the need to go to school to get well-paying jobs and to provide for themselves and their family members. They stated that getting a good education is the path to getting out of the cycle of poverty and helping not only themselves but for future generations of family members. Ona was very focused on her future. She said, “I am very self-motivated to do better. I knew that if I stayed in high school I could get better opportunities and make more money.” Rachel described her reasons for staying in high school because she wanted a better future.

Looking back on my high school years, from the outside looking in kind of thing, at the time you think, oh wow, they are having fun and I’m in school. Why am I in school? But later on down the road, I see that I made the better choice because right now, they are struggling to get a job and
keep a job and those kinds of things and now I was completing high school and building my future.

Robert had strong feelings about his belief in a better future. He stated,

The reason I never dropped out of high school was mostly because I really wanted to not be at the bottom anymore. There is always something higher to reach for. I’m a first-generation college student and I wanted to show and give an example to future generations like my future kids and others.

**Mentorship**

The theme of mentorship was addressed by every participant. All of the participants stated in various terms their appreciation to an individual who served as personal mentors in their lives. The research participants very clearly believed that without mentors, their ability to graduate high school would have been greatly impeded, if not resulting in their dropping out of high school and failing to graduate. Phyllis made the following statement:

I had a few counselors and teachers who cared. They tried to help but I still ended up leaving high school and dropping out for my own reasons. I ended up becoming pregnant and leaving but they tried. There were a couple of counselors that tried and even tried to get me into programs while I was pregnant and dropped out of school. After I had my little girl, they helped me get back into school and continue with my studies and I went back to school. I’m proud of myself.

Wan was a strong example of being guided by the sub-theme of not letting others down. He stated,

My mom felt that education was really important. She never pushed
me or anything. She had to be strict with me because she knew why I was doing what I was doing. I need to get a good job to help my family. She just had to trust in me and that’s what kept me going. To know that it is important. That is what will get you somewhere.

Rick described his feelings about his sisters and how he felt they mentored him throughout his high school years. Rick stated, “My sisters were definitely my mentors in high school. They were like, ‘He’s not worried about school.’ So they were like, you gotta stay out of trouble. We don’t want you in jail so be careful who you hang out with.” David described his mother as his greatest mentor. He said, “My mother was always pushing me to do better. She was like, ‘You’ve got this. If you want this, you can do it.’ My mom is always there to motivate me and keep me going.” Ona was very touched and cried when she described her feeling about her mother and grandmother being her mentors. “My grandmom and my mom had a great impact on me. When I wanted to give up, they wouldn’t let me. My mom told me that if she graduated high school with a child, anybody could. It kept me motivated.”

**Not Letting Others Down**

An experience described many times in the course of data collection was the desire of research participants not to let members of their support system down through dropping out of school and not taking advantage of the opportunity to get a good education. David, who is self-described as a Mexican-American, described his feelings about not letting his parents down by failing to graduate high school.

My mom and dad have great poverty. The idea of education and school, they want me and my sisters, not just me, to pursue an education. They want us to take advantage of the opportunity that they didn’t have when
they were younger. And that it is best, it is hard in the beginning, but as
time goes on, you take it one day at a time, no rush, no pressure... There
are people there to help you. Yes, there will be times when it is tough, but
it is always something you can get through. Patience is mainly the key to
everything and I didn’t want to let them down.

Michael explained his experiences with his parents and their expectations for his education in the
following statement: “My family felt that education was extremely important. Both of my
parents have advanced degrees in different things, so it was never an option not to go to school.”

Rachel was another research participant that had strong feelings about not letting her loved ones
down by not graduating high school.

One thing, I was so scared that I didn’t want to let my mom down. She
had already said that she was the only one to graduate in her family. She
came from a family of about 8-9 children. She said that if nothing else,
you are going to graduate.

Rick had a very similar experience but his desire not to let anyone down was centered on his
relationship with his sisters. “My sisters had a great impact on me growing up. When they
weren’t leading the way, they were pushing me to do stuff. I had one a sister who wanted me to
go off to college and she wanted me to be like her.”

**Outlier Data and Findings**

There was 1 outlier experience contrary to the rest of the research participant responses
and worthy of notation and 1 significant finding gleaned from the participant data.

**Negative Experiences with Teachers**

The outlier finding related to the negative impact of teachers on at-risk students.
During the process of data collection, several research participants highlighted the struggles and difficulties experienced by having to learn under a teacher who was less than compassionate and not supportive of the students’ difficulties in life. Several female research participants addressed the issue of student bullying and the psychological trauma that these events caused. When these students reported the instances of bullying, their teachers either haphazardly addressed the instances of bullying or ignored the issues altogether. The research participants not only felt traumatized from these events but were punished for lashing out in response to the incidences.

A male student named Michael also described an incident when a teacher had a very negative effect on his self-esteem and subsequent struggle to graduate high school. Michael said,

I remember one negative teacher. She was my physics teacher in high school. When I had questions that she couldn’t answer, or didn’t want to answer, she would tell me to shut up and sit down. This was the only class that I ever walked out of. I was suspended for that.

**Financial Burdens of Extra-Curricular Activities**

A significant finding directly related to growing up in a low-income home was the financial burdens imposed by participating in extra-curricular activities. It has long been established the value of students' participation in sports and other extra-curricular activities (Belton et al., 2016; Felfe et al., 2016; Mushtag et al., 2019; Pyne, 2019; Rathore et al., 2018; Rogers et al., 2018). Participation in sports and the skills and bonds acquired through this activity has life-long effects on a student’s physical, social, and psychological health. Unfortunately, even though the research participants in this study attended a public school, they were prevented from benefitting from these extra-curricular experiences due to their inability to pay for things
like cleats, uniforms, football pads, baseball gloves, and meals required during away games and events. Michael explained,

After school programs are good. That is something really good to get into. But as someone who grew up without a lot of money, sports, especially football, can be kind of a big deal because you have to purchase all of your pads and equipment. Track was better but you still had to purchase your shoes. It got really expensive fast.

Rachel had a similar experience in cheerleading. She said,

I was into sports and cheerleading and things of that nature. I found it interesting and I liked my coaches but after a while I stopped. For me, it was a low-income issue in pay for uniforms and shoes, things of that nature. Also, when you play sports, you have to have money for when the team goes out to eat. You don’t want to be the only person who doesn’t eat.

**Research Question Responses**

**Central Research Question**

What experiences foster secure attachment bonds for at-risk students who graduate high school? This central research question encompassed all of the research themes of perseverance, self-motivation, and mentorship. The participants all felt that there were people in their lives who have a positive influence on their ability to graduate. They relied on these individuals to keep them focused during times of need, both academically and psychologically. David was one of the 8 research participants who felt that their mothers helped them become academically successful. “My mom and me, we get along very well. She is always pushing me to do better, even though I
sometimes give up very easily. She would say, “I know you’re hard working. Just do it!” A research participant named Ona, not only attributes her success to the love and support of her mother and grandmother, but she also attributes teachers to her academic success. “I had a teacher, the second-grade teacher that had a big impact on me. She would let me hang out at her house and she would buy me clothes and stuff. I remember her to this day. She was a really good lady. I appreciate everything she did for me.”

**Sub-Question 1**

How do at-risk students who graduate high school experience secure attachment bonds with teachers? Research has shown that teachers who promote secure attachment bonds with at-risk students establish learning communities based on care, trust, respect and cooperation (Kirkman et al., 2016; Pyne, 2019; Walls, 2016). They establish classroom environments where positive, open communication is encouraged and approach behavior management by looking behind instances of inappropriate behavior to examine why at-risk students choose to behave inappropriately in light of information regarding attachment behaviors and students’ attachment history (Walls, 2016, Xerri et al., 2018; Xie & Zhang, 2020).

The research study question gleaned the themes of mentorship and the sub-themes of overcoming obstacles and of not letting others down. The research participants agreed with the literature on this subject and felt that teachers had a great impact on their ability to graduate high school. In several instances, a teacher not only helped the student but helped the entire family. Wan described his experiences with one teacher who not only helped him graduate high school but helped his entire family as well.

I had this one teacher that wanted me to get into health care and I did.

I still do now. She taught me everything I needed to know. She helped
me get on the path that I needed to be. She helped my family. She helped my family with different situations when it came to Social Security and things like that. She was like a second mom to me.

Rick stated one teacher changed the entire trajectory of his life. He stated,

My science teacher told me, ‘I don’t care. Whatever you do, just pass this test’. I struggled with my science class but I passed the test by the skin of my teeth. I will never know if I did pass, or she just passed me on because I tried so hard. Now and then when I go back to Wilmington, I go to my old school and check on her and give her a flower or something. She saved my life because I wouldn't be doing anything that I’m doing now without her. I would have never gone back to school. It affected my confidence. One teacher made that kind of difference. She changed my entire life!

Sub-Question 2

How do at-risk students who graduate high school experience secure attachment bonds with family members? Extensive studies have been conducted which demonstrate the importance of family members in the academic success of students (Blake & Blake, 2017; Hufner et al., 2018; Li & Fisher, 2017; Otani, 2018). Families which develop and maintain a family culture which fosters high expectations for childrens’ academic achievement increase the likelihood of the child being academically successful (Blake & Blake, 2017; Hufner et al., 2018; Li & Fisher, 2017; Otani, 2018).

The described personal phenomenological experiences of the participants highlighted and further emphasized the research results conducted on this subject. All 10 research participants
attributed the love and support of a family member to their ability to graduate high school. The majority of participants specifically named their mother. This sub-question addressed the research themes of perseverance, self-motivation, and mentorship and the sub-themes of goal setting, delayed gratification, belief in a better future and not letting others down. Phyllis stated, “My mom had a tremendous impact on me. She was the first in my family to go to college. I wanted to follow her. I wanted to be like her. She inspired me.” Wan explained his relationship with his mother as supportive and very close.

I love my mom. She’s my everything. She is the reason why I am doing what I am doing now. Why I am really happy with what I am doing. My mom didn’t do well in school when she was in Miramar. It was not her thing and she didn’t have anyone around to help her either and so my mom wants me to be the person that she was never able to be so she wanted me to finish school.

Ona described her relationship with her mother and grandmother and the support and encouragement they gave her regarding graduating high school. She explained,

My grandma and my mom had a great impact on me while growing up. They took education very seriously. When I was wanting to give up and drop out of high school, they wouldn’t let me. My mom had me when she was a teenager and she told me, ‘If I can do it, anyone can.’ It kept me motivated.

**Sub-Question 3**

How do at-risk students who graduate high school experience secure attachment bonds with coaches and sponsors of extra-curricular activities? Research has shown that students who
participate in extra-curricular activities reap countless physical, psychological, and social benefits (Belton et al., 2016; Felfe et al., 2016; Mushtag et al., 2019; Pyne, 2019; Rathore et al., 2018). Student benefits in the participation of extra-curricular activites include the positive development of appropriate competitive and social behaviors, a general increase in student motivation, the development of goal setting skills, and an increased sense of personal self-worth and value (Belton et al., 2016; Felfe et al., 2016; Mushtag et al., 2019; Pyne, 2019; Rathore et al., 2018).

The described personal experiences of the participants strongly agreed with the findings derived from the literature review on this subject. The themes of mentorship and self-motivation were developed through this question as well as the sub-themes of goal setting, and not letting others down. Raven stated that her experiences with coaches and sponsors of extra-curricular activities had a great impact on her life and her ability to graduate high school. She states,

Well, I guess I can say that I met some good people and into a group such as a swim team, debate team, ROTC, anything like that is the best thing I did because it helps you focus and make goals. It keeps you around positive people. It helps to drive you to do better so you can go to a competition. You can do this. You can do that. It keeps you the insight of like-minded people.

Ona also had very fond memories of extra-curricular activities while in high school. She stated, I was in ROTC. I love my Master Sergeant. When I would get suspended and stuff, he would call me and he would be like, ‘I’m very disappointed in you.’ When I came back, he would always come to my classroom to make sure I was doing what I was supposed to do and that I was okay. He was like my second father.
Sub-Question 4

How do at-risk students who graduate high school experience secure attachment bonds with members of community organizations? Literature has shown that there are many positive benefits gained by at-risk students who participate in community organizations. Community organizations can boost academic performance, reduce risky student behaviors, and promote physical health (Bryan et al., 2017; Liao et al., 2019; Rogers et al., 2018). Leaders of community organizations can serve as positive sources for emotional growth and can also serve as mentors and guides for at-risk students during the developmental process (Bryan et al., 2017; Liao et al., 2019; Rogers et al., 2018; Schutz, 2016; Watson et al., 2017).

The majority of research participants stated that they did not participate in community organizations and therefore could not describe if leaders of community organizations contributed to their ability to form secure attachment bonds and graduate high school. Only 1 research participant felt that members of community organizations assisted at-risk students to graduate. Michael stated,

I remember in middle school there was a community program after school that taught Karate. It helped. It was a confidence builder. I stopped getting attacked because I could defend myself. It was a team builder and helped with discipline. It helped with everything. I bonded with my teacher but I had to quit because my family couldn’t afford it.

Sub-Question 5

How do at-risk students who graduate high school experience secure attachment bonds with peers? This sub-question addressed the themes of perseverance, self-motivation, and mentorship and the sub-theme of overcoming obstacles. Though Rachel stated that she didn't feel
like she had a group of peers that she spent a great deal of time with, she felt that her peers did
help her a great deal in her ability to learn and graduate high school.

I didn’t have quote, unquote ‘friends’, but I did have people that I was in
class with and who were doing good. I wanted to know what they were
doing. Why are they getting good grades? I’m even doing it now….
also, you know, we made it fun. We are in class, we are going to be
competitive. Who’s doing the best? Those kinds of things make learning
fun.

Research has shown that positive peer bonding may contribute to the overall
psychological health and well-being of at-risk high school students (Allen et al., 2018; Starkey-
Peret et al., 2018; Walls, 2016; Xerri et al., 2018). Positive peer relationships can increase the
academic, behavioral, and emotional health of at-risk students and this effect may continue
throughout the length of their academic career (Allen et al., 2018; Starkey-Peret et al., 2018;

Unfortunately, most of the research participants’ experiences with peers were not
positive. There were many descriptions of bullying and very negative behaviors and these
experiences with peers did not help at-risk students to graduate and often served as a hindrance
to learning success. Casey described her experiences with peers in high school simply as
bullying.

The problem I had in high school was bullying. You know the drama
from the pretty girls. Not being that girl, the popular girl. So I had trouble
with that, but I don’t know. It was just hard. You go to school. You’re
always getting picked on for whatever type of the reason, whether it was
your clothes, whoever you liked, or whoever you hung out with. So that’s what I got picked on for.

Ona also had similar feelings. She described her feelings of being bullied and not getting emotional support from her teachers.

I was getting suspended a lot because I was like… I was getting picked on a lot. I would tell the teacher and they wouldn’t do anything. So I would have to do what I felt was best at the time. I would get into fights and suspended for fighting. I was never in school. I mean I was in school but I would get into trouble a lot. Then I would get suspended a lot and wouldn’t know how to do the work. It was getting overwhelming and I was thinking about dropping out of school.

**Summary**

The research participants were very articulate and able to conceptualize their life experiences in a very detailed manner. Through the course of the interview process, the themes of perseverance, self-motivation, and mentorship emerged. Research findings suggested that family members played a very important role in helping at-risk students to graduate high school, especially the mother. Participants felt their mothers served as a source of encouragement, psychological stability, and love.

Research participants also felt other factors such as teachers, coaches and sponsors of extra-curricular activities also played an important role. One interesting fact from this study was one teacher can have an enormous impact on the life of a student. Most of the research participants had very positive experiences with at least one teacher and often continued this relationship well into adulthood.
A very notable finding from this study demonstrated the importance of extra-curricular activities in helping at-risk students stay actively engaged in the school community. These activities help students develop physical, emotional, social, and psychological health in countless ways. Unfortunately, every research participant who participated in extra-curricular activities, mainly sports, described having to quit these activities due to a lack of financial resources. Students were required to buy not only sports gear such as cleats and uniforms, but to pay for food and expenses during away games. The research participants explained that just as they were reaping the benefits of participating in these extra-curricular activities and developing bonds with the coaches, they were forced to quit. They felt that this only exacerbated their feelings of being at-risk.

Participants stated several times that living in a low-income family greatly affected their lives. This seemed to be a strong contributing factor in their self-described feelings of being at-risk. Several research participants stated that it was hard to concentrate on academics and life goals when you struggle to find food and you are hungry. They also described their difficulty in doing their homework when their house did not have running water or electricity. When asked about her experiences growing up in a low-income family, Ona responded,

Well, my mom was a single parent and she had to do what she had to do, so we didn’t have a lot. Some Christmases, we didn’t have anything underneath the tree. Sometimes, we didn’t have lights...sometimes we didn’t have water and stuff like that. It’s really hard to do homework when you can’t concentrate because you’re hungry.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

This transcendental phenomenological study described the life experiences of 10 research participants who were self-described as being at-risk of failing to graduate high school. This concluding chapter of this research study addresses the interpretation of findings, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, and limitations and delimitations of the research study as well as recommendations for future research.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The openness and willingness of the research participants to share and describe personal life experiences of being at risk and graduating high school enabled the research to have thick, rich data on this phenomenon. The participants not only were incredibly forthright in their responses but were extremely eager to help other at-risk students become academically successful. The following interpretations were derived from this data.

Taking Control of Life’s Circumstances

The theme of perseverance was highlighted in all 10 research participant interviews. All the participants felt that to become successful, they first must persevere through various difficulties encountered in life. They acknowledged some of the obstacles in which they overcame were from their own poor life choices, and some obstacles were a result of factors beyond their control. In these types of situations, they frequently responded that they may not have been able to control every hardship in life, but they could control how they responded to these factors. This psychological belief seemed to empower at-risk individuals and helped them become self-motivated and to seek emotional support and help from others through mentorship relationships.
Stay Focused on Your Goal

Research participants eagerly shared the need to establish a goal and to remain focused on achieving it. Research participants described the need to clearly understand who you are and what you wish to achieve in life. Once this concept is understood, work to achieve these goals. Research participants stated the need to not to be deterred by events that seem to interfere with life goals but to stay focused and work on your goals. They stated that they felt that eventually, if you keep trying to reach your goals, they will be achieved. One research participant compiled something she described as a "dream board," which she placed on her wall in her room. This "dream board" held pictures of all of the things she wished to achieve. She stated that she looks at this “dream board” every morning, and this helps her stay focused and self-motivated.

Seek Help from Others

The research participants all described the importance of getting help from others who can serve as a support system. Participants described seeking help from their mother and close family members, teachers, school administrators, counselors, coaches, ROTC leaders, community organization leaders such as Karate instructors and peers. The participants also described their feelings of isolation and embarrassment about their family poverty. The participants offered advice to other at-risk students who were struggling to graduate high school by emphasizing the need to make connections with others. Several participants stated that they feel that everyone struggles at one point in their life and suggest that at-risk students become involved with others who can help. They also stated that after you become successful, you should look back and help others who are struggling. By doing this, your struggles can be used to help someone else. It should be noted that writing letters of advice to other at-risk students who were struggling to graduate was mentioned by most participants as being their favorite method of
data collection. They all stated that they are very eager to help other at-risk students to complete high school.

Discussion

Students who are considered at-risk of dropping out of high school must overcome many life circumstances to become academically successful. Some of these well-documented factors are low-income family status, living in a single-parent home, having an immediate family member drop out of high school, and having served a school suspension (Ben-David & Jonson-Reid, 2017; Mowen & Brent, 2016). One of the prominent factors which help determine if a student will graduate high school is school engagement (Akin & Radford, 2018; Allen et al., 2018; Anticevic et al., 2018; Widlung et. al., 2021). Disengaged students do not have the social resources to establish secure bonds with other students and school faculty members and thus do not receive the educational and emotional benefits for social inclusion and academic achievement (Ben-David & Jonson-Reid, 2017; Nicholson & Putwain, 2018; Pyne, 2019; Sanders et al., 2016). At-risk students are less likely to seek academic help from fellow students and staff and are more likely to suffer academic failure (Akin & Radford, 2018; Bederian-Gardener et al., 2018; Pyne, 2019; Thomas et al., 2020). This study sought to highlight the importance of secure attachment bonding for at-risk students and the need for attachment bonding relationships in an educational setting.

This study utilized a central research question and 5 sub-research questions to glean the experience of at-risk students who formed secure attachment bonds and graduated high school. The central research question sought to determine what experiences foster secure attachment bonds for at-risk students. The research participants agreed that there were people in their lives who had a positive effect on their ability to graduate high school. Sub-Question 1 sought to
describe the research participants bonding experiences with their teachers. The participants felt that attachment bonds with teachers greatly helped them to academically succeed in high school. Several participants established life-long bonds with teachers and in several instances teachers not only helped the participants, but the entire family as well. Sub-Question 2 sought to have participants describe their experiences and attachment bonds with family members. All 10 research participants expressed their feelings regarding how they felt the love and support of family members greatly aided in their ability to graduate high school. A majority of research participants specifically stated that the attachment bond with their mother had the greatest positive impact on their academic success. Sub-Question 3 focused on the attachment bonding experiences of coaches and sponsors of extra-curricular activities. Research participants described how their coaches and sponsors, especially their football, basketball, and track coaches, helped them to feel connected with the school community. Unfortunately, just as a secure attachment bond was being formed with their coaches, they were forced to withdraw from these activities because of financial reasons. Participants stated this only exacerbated their feelings of isolation from the school community and increased their emotional distress. Sub-Question 4 sought to have participants describe their feelings of attachment to members of community organizations. Only 1 research participant felt that members of community organizations helped them to graduate high school. The participant described how taking Karate classes helped to develop positive skills that assisted him to not only be academically successful but helped him to develop skills that could be used throughout his life. He stated that he was very bonded with his Karate teacher but had to stop attending classes due to financial hardship. Sub-Question 5 addressed the participants’ feelings regarding attachment bonds with peers in high school. Peers did not seem to have a great positive impact on the participants’ ability to form
attachment bonds and graduate high school. Participants viewed high school peers as a source of bullying and strife. If anything, research participants felt that peer relationships were an obstacle to their success.

**Interpretation of Findings**

Research findings of this study stress the significance of secure attachment bonds in the ability of at-risk students to graduate high school (Dozier, & Bernard, 2019; Harlow, 2021; Kelly et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2016). The thematic findings gleaned from participant interviews are perseverance, self-motivation, and mentorship. All 10 of the research participants are self-described as growing up in a low-income household and knew this factor from a very young age. Several of the participants described experiences of feeling isolated and inferior to other students who came from families with more financial resources. Participants stated that they understood that they needed to persevere to become successful and this required achieving their academic goals of graduating high school. Because of their understanding of the need to overcome the risk factor of poverty, many research participants established clear life achievement goals. One participant even constructed a “dream board” of her future dreams and aspirations. Every morning, the participant would look at the board and this act helped her stay self-motivated to graduate high school. The theme of mentorship was also described as being paramount to my research participants’ feelings of being able to successfully graduate high school. The most significant source of mentorship bonds found in this study was that of the family, especially the mother. Almost every research participant specifically explained how their mother mentored them throughout their academic years and most still have strong, loving, mentorship relationships with their mothers.
Teachers were another source of mentorship bonds. The participants all described at least one teacher who had a profound impact on their lives and their ability to graduate. The participants described teachers who not only helped them academically, but purchased clothes for them, helped their families enroll in social programs to help receive aid and assistance from the government, and gave them places to stay when they needed somewhere to sleep. These teachers, who are described by many participants as being like second parents, formed strong attachment bonds with these participants that lasted well into adulthood. These secure attachment relationships not only helped the participants graduate but formed lifelong bonds that serve to provide sources of psychological health for both parties. A significant conclusion from these thematic findings is the participants all stated they felt all the themes are interconnected. They felt that incorporation of all attributes and thematic components were essential in their ability to be academically successful and thus graduate high school.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

This study highlights the need to make several changes in policy and practice. These changes can be applied to legislative, state, local school systems and even in an individual classroom setting. Considering the increased likelihood of high school drop-outs being unemployed, relying on public assistance, being incarcerated, more likely to suffer from substance abuse, and decreased loss of lifetime earnings and subsequent tax revenue, the cost of implementing policy and practices to help at-risk students graduate high school is marginal at best (Akin & Radford, 2018; Bederian-Gardener et al., 2018; Briere et al., 2017; Galamey-Chchula et al., 2018, McCarter, 2019; Schwartz, 2016).
Implications for Policy

There are several implications for policy highlighted by this research study. It has been noted that extra-curricular activities are very beneficial to at-risk students in many different ways and these activities enable at-risk students to feel connected to the school community and thus graduate high school (Belton et al., 2016; Felfe et al., 2016; Mushtag et al., 2019; Pyne, 2019). It is also well documented that one of the major factors of an individual being considered “at-risk” is poverty (Akin & Radford, 2018; Bederian-Gardener et al., 2018; Schwartz, 2016). This study describes the life experiences of at-risk students who either wanted to participate in sports and other extra-curricular activities and could not afford to join or had joined extra-curricular activities and groups but were forced to quit for financial reasons. These participant life experiences stress the need to make changes in school policy regarding funding for extra-curricular activities and groups. Federal, state, and local school communities must modify budgetary expenses to cover the cost of all equipment and expenses regarding these student activities. If these costs are not expected to be paid by low-income at-risk families, then more at-risk students may benefit from this type of attachment bonding experience.

Implications for Practice

Attachment bonding experiences are crucial for at-risk students in their ability to graduate high school (Sandoval-Hernandez & Bialowolski, 2016; Starkey-Perret et al., 2018; Xerri et al., 2018). Students often struggle to make secure attachment bonds with members of the school community, and therefore having school programs to assist in this process may be very beneficial for these individuals. Great Britain has conducted extensive studies on attachment bonding experiences in a school setting and during 2014 implemented The Children and Families Act to assist in this process (Harlow, 2021; Kelly et al., 2020). This legislation directed
local authorities in Great Britain to develop teams and sub-teams in local schools to monitor and support struggling students (Harlow, 2021; Kelly et al., 2020). Under the umbrella of the Children and Families Act (2014), programs such as the Attachment and Aware Schools Programme (AASP) were established (Harlow, 2021; Kelly et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2019). This attachment awareness program was developed to build programs for education professionals to understand the importance of attachment bonding and to develop sound pedagogy to support at-risk learners (Harlow, 2021; Kelly et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2019). This program and other similar programs are designed to not only assist at-risk students but to help schools focus on the identification of key adults to be used as mentors for vulnerable at-risk student populations (Harlow, 2021; Kelly et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2019).

Another program developed under this legislative umbrella is called the Designated Teacher Program (Rose et al., 2019). It not only serves to help identify safe adults in the field of education at each school who could be grouped with at-risk students but changes the focus of schools to become more inclusive and to have a more person-centered perspective (Kelly et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2019). Schools that implement the Attachment and Aware Schools Programme (AASP) strive to help school faculty and staff to better understand the need to consistently challenge and develop critical thinking regarding pedagogy and to develop a deeper understanding of the behaviors of children and young adults. Each school teaching professional is guided to reflect upon how their teaching strategies affect at-risk students. This knowledge may then be incorporated into sound pedagogy and thus assist at-risk students to become successful (Harlow, 2021; Kelly et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2019). By implementing the same type of legislative and academic practices as those used in Great Britain, professionals in the field of education throughout the United States and the world may be given learning opportunities to
better understand at-risk students and establish classroom learning environments that help at-risk students establish attachment bonds to aid in the completion of high school programs of study.

**Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

This research study is based on Attachment Theory by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Attachment Theory stresses the need for secure attachment bonds for the development of healthy psychological growth (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). This research study confirms this theory. Research participants repeatedly describe how forming attachment bonds help at-risk students graduate high school. These findings support previous studies on attachment bonding experiences of at-risk students (Atkinson, 2019; Berlin, 2021; Bosmans et al., 2020; Sloan et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2020; Verela et al., 2021). It does, however, diverge from the main concept of attachment theory described by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). The research of Bowlby and Ainsworth (1991) focuses on a single attachment bond, that of the mother-child bond. This study describes the importance of the mother-child bond in the ability of at-risk students to graduate high school, but it also describes the experiences of at-risk students who feel that a combination of attachment bonds all serve to assist in the process of graduating from high school. This combination of mentorship relationships may best serve at-risk students. The concept of multiple attachment bonds is highlighted in Great Britain’s *Children and Families Act* (2014) in the incorporation of both the parental/primary caregiver role and the teacher/educational professional role in addressing the needs of at-risk children (Atkinson, 2019; Berlin, 2021; Bosman et al., 2020; Dozier & Bernard, 2019; Sloan et al., 2020; Verela et al., 2021). This legislation spurred the formation of many programs to assist the incorporation of family members into the secure attachment bonding school experience. *The Circle of Security*
(COS) is a program that was developed as a result of this legislation and supports parental/primary caregiver attachment bonds during the preschool years of development (Berlin, 2021). It also provides home-based training for parents in attachment-focused intervention and helps the parent/primary caregiver become sensitive to parent-child attachment organization. A sub-set of this program is the *Evidence-Based Attachment and Bio-Behavioral Catch-Up* (ABC). This program consists of 10 home visits provided by a trained parent coach to help in the child-parent/primary secure attachment process (Bosman et al., 2020). During these and many more programs based upon the principle of attachment bonding, the parent/primary caregiver, teaching professional, and school administrators all work together to monitor student progress and success. This highlights the advantage of how multiple sources of secure attachment bonding can work together to assist at-risk students (Akinson, 2019; Berlin, 2021; Bosman, 2020; Doizier & Bernard, 2019; Sloan et al., 2020; Varela et al., 2021).

This study deviates from Attachment Theory (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991) in the fact that it examines the attachment bonds of mentorship sources other than the mother or primary caregiver. This study examines attachment bonds in an educational setting and seeks to learn of the relationship between at-risk students and teachers, coaches, community organizational leaders, and peers. This research does not dispel Attachment Theory but serves to broaden the scope of the theory (Berlin, 2021; Bosmans et al., 2020; Dozier & Bernard, 2019; Harlow, 2021; Kelly et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2019; Sloan et al., 2020; Varela et al., 2021).

The empirical knowledge gained from this study is the importance of positive nurturing school communities (Berlin, 2021; Sloan et al., 2020; Varela et al., 2021). These types of learning communities help at-risk students feel valued and accepted and may contribute to the successful completion of high school programs of study by at-risk students. School
administrators, teachers, and all members of school faculty and staff should be extremely aware of the necessity of establishing secure attachment bonds with students and strive to create the type of bonds conducive to this type of relationship (Bademci et al., 2020; Bosmans, 2016; Kelly et al., 2020; Lopez, 2020).

**Delimitations and Limitations of the Study**

A purposeful decision made to limit and define the boundaries of this study is the choice not to directly research and examine how learning disabilities affect an individual's ability to graduate high school. This delimitation is made to narrow the focus of the study and to more directly examine other factors which categorize an individual as being at-risk of dropping out of high school. A decision to only examine individuals who have already graduated high school is a purposeful delimitation because the research examines the life experiences of individuals who have completed their academic programs of high school study. This allows participants to reflectively examine this phenomenon. The last purposeful delimitation of this study is the fact that the research participants were drawn from community college students. This delimitation is selected because at-risk individuals who are attending a community college are articulate and have successfully displayed their ability to express themselves in passing college entrance examinations. This will help develop thick, rich descriptive data regarding the phenomenon of study.

One of the limitations of the study is the limited amount of research participants who are from various age groups. Having a larger amount of research participants from different age groups may provide a unique perspective of descriptive data since life experiences may influence the research participants’ interpretation of at-risk high school experiences. The fact that the research study was conducted at one community college in Eastern North Carolina is another
limitation of the study. If the research was conducted at numerous community colleges in different regions of the United States, the experience of being at-risk of dropping out of high school might be described differently.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The first recommendation for future research is to conduct a phenomenological study of at-risk students who have been identified as having learning disabilities and how these disabilities contribute to being self-identified as being at-risk of dropping out of high school. Various types of studies have been conducted which examine at-risk students who have learning disabilities (Butler, & De La Paz, 2021; Didion et al., 2021; Shilshtein & Margalit, 2019) but a phenomenological study focused on at-risk students who have learning disabilities may gain valuable insight into this phenomenon. Another study that would merit study is to conduct a phenomenological study of older individuals (60+ years of age) who are self-identified as being at-risk of failing to graduate high school and examine how age affects an individual's perception of being at-risk and what attachment bonds they feel helped them academically succeed.

A source of great untapped attachment bonding, whose potential is just starting to be recognized, is the local community church. This community organization can be used as a means of helping at-risk youth develop secure attachment bonds with church leaders and mentors (Brooms et al., 2016; Harris & Wong, 2015; Jordan & Wilson, 2017; McDougal et al., 2018). The encouragement of leaders of local churches can assist not only at-risk students but all children in developing spiritually, academically, and emotionally (Harris, & Wong, 2015; Jordan, & Wilson, 2017). This area of opportunity has great possibilities and defiantly warrants future study. The last recommendation proposed for future study would be a study of individuals who are still attending high school. A qualitative case study of these individuals as they progress
through high school and past graduation would give valuable insight into the concept of being self-identified as "at-risk".

**Conclusion**

This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study sought to describe what experiences foster secure attachment bonds for at-risk students who graduate high school. The theory on which this research study was based is Attachment Theory developed by Bowlby and Ainsworth (1991). This theory stresses the need for secure attachment relationships between the mother and child in the process of psychological growth (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). This research study expanded upon this theory and incorporated attachment relationships in an educational setting which assisted in the successful completion of high school academic programs of study. Educational bonds which were examined and described were bonds with family members, teachers, coaches and sponsors of extra-curricular activities, leaders of community organizations such as churches, and peers.

An interesting highlight was the fact that just one secure attachment bond can have a tremendous impact on the future success of a student. An unfortunate revelation was derived from this study when research participants’ described forming attachment bonds with coaches and sponsors of extra-curricular activities but being forced to drop out of these activities for financial reasons. Because all 10 participants stated that they come from low-income families, and this is a well-known contributing factor in being considered at-risk of dropping out of high school, a policy implication may be to amend the need for students to fund their equipment and expenses and for the school to pay for all required expenses and equipment for extra-curricular participants who attend public schools.
Through the implementation of this research, the themes of perseverance, self-motivation, and mentorship were identified. An interesting note is that all three themes were interconnected, and highly successful students incorporate all three themes into their life experiences. Casey said while writing a letter of advice to other at-risk high school students, "Education is the key to success. Push forward and never look back in regret."
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Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

July 2, 2021

Marie Prosser
Floralba Arbelo Marrero

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-329 A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ATTACHMENT BONDING EXPERIENCES OF AT-RISK STUDENTS WHO GRADUATED HIGH SCHOOL

Dear Marie Prosser, Floralba Arbelo Marrero:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b): Category 2. (iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) 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(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research Ethics Office
IRB #: IRB-FY20-21-329
Title: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ATTACHMENT BONDING EXPERIENCES OF AT-RISK STUDENTS WHO GRADUATED HIGH SCHOOL
Creation Date: 11-10-2020

End Date:

Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Marie Prosser
Review Board: Research Ethics Office
Sponsor:

Study History

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<td>Exempt - Limited IRB</td>
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Key Study Contacts

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<th>Role</th>
<th>Contact</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Floralba Arbelo Marrero</td>
<td>Co-Principal Investigator</td>
<td>***********************</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie Prosser</td>
<td>Principal Investigator</td>
<td>************</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie Prosser</td>
<td>Primary Contact</td>
<td>************</td>
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Appendix B: Community College Consent to Conduct Research Letter

Dear *************

My name is Marie Lawrence, and I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University. The research I wish to conduct for my doctoral dissertation is a qualitative study of attachment bonding by at-risk students who successfully graduated high school. The purpose of this study is to understand how secure attachment bonds help at-risk students successfully graduate high school. This study is significant because it will contribute to the existing body of research on understanding at-risk students' attachment bonding experiences, which help at-risk students graduate high school. It will also provide professionals in the field of education with information on how to encourage secure attachment bonds within a school. This information may help at-risk students successfully graduate and thus could reduce the high school drop-out rate of our nation.

The proposed research will involve 10 community college students who are self-described as having been at-risk of dropping out of high school but through the establishment of secure attachment bonds, were thus able to successfully graduate high school. The data collection methods for this proposed study will be individual participant interviews, focus group discussions, and written letters of advice to other at-risk high school students. I would like to set up a table in a common area of campus where I can tell students about my study and would also like to use a conference room to conduct my participant and focus group interviews. I have received approval from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board and I will follow with fidelity all ethical recommendations given to me by this board.

I have included a document that will be given to potential research participants and a copy of the letter of consent that will be signed by all research participants before any research will be conducted. I respectfully request to be permitted to conduct my research study at *****. If permission is granted, I will provide your college with a hard-bound copy of the full research report upon completion of my study.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this matter. If you have any questions, please feel free to reach me at **********

Best Regards,

Marie Lawrence
Marie!

I am pleased to advise you that Drs. ************** have approved your request to collect ************** student data in connection with your doctoral research. The only caveat is that we very much would like to receive the results of your research.

Do let me know what else I can do to assist you in this process!

Until then, best of luck!!
Appendix D: Recruitment Flyer

Research Participants Needed

A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ATTACHMENT BONDING EXPERIENCES OF AT-RISK STUDENTS WHO GRADUATED HIGH SCHOOL

- Are you 18 years of age or older?
- While attending high school, did you ever feel at risk of dropping out of school?
- If you did feel at-risk, did any of these factors contribute to your feelings?
  - Low-income family status
  - Living in a single-parent home
  - Having a family member who has dropped out of high school
  - Served a school suspension

If you answered yes to the above questions, you may be eligible to participate in a study that examines your attachment bonding experiences that helped you graduate high school.

The purpose of this study is to understand how secure attachment bonds help at-risk students successfully graduate high school. It will also provide information on how to encourage secure attachment bonds within a school and thus could help reduce the high school drop-out rate of our nation. Participant interviews will be individually audiotaped and these interviews will last for approximately 20 minutes. Participants will also take part in audio and videotaped focus group discussions which will last approximately 20 minutes and write letters of advice to at-risk high school students which are estimated to take approximately 10 minutes. Once the transcripts from the individual participant interviews have been compiled, the researcher will email participants their interview transcripts. The participants will then have an opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy. This process should take approximately 10 minutes. The entire participant process should take approximately 1 hour. Participants will receive $20 as a token of appreciation for their participation in this study in person after they complete and submit their letters of advice.

The study is being conducted at

Marie Lawrence, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Please contact Marie Lawrence at *************** for more information.
Appendix E: Consent to Participate in Research Study

Consent to Participate in Research

Title of the Project: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Attachment Bonding Experiences of At-Risk Students Who Graduated High School
Principal Investigator: Marie Lawrence, Doctor of Education Candidate, Liberty University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Invitation to be part of a Research Study</th>
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<tr>
<td>You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, consider yourself to have been &quot;at-risk&quot; of dropping out of school while attending high school, consider yourself to have grown up in a low-income household, lived in a single-parent home while in high school, had a member of your family drop out of high school, and/or served a school suspension while in school. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.</td>
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<th>What is the study about and why is it being done?</th>
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<tr>
<td>The purpose of the study is to understand how secure attachment bonds help at-risk students successfully graduate high school. It will also provide information on how to encourage secure attachment bonds within a school and thus could help reduce the high school drop-out rate of our nation.</td>
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<tr>
<th>What will happen if you take part in this study?</th>
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| If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:  
  You will complete a screening/demographics survey to determine if you are a potential research participant. Once you have been determined to be eligible to participate, data collected from this survey will also be used for research purposes. After this determination, you will be asked to:  
  1. Participate in an individual interview. These interviews will be approximately 20 minutes and will be audio recorded for data analysis.  
  2. Participate in a focus group discussion. These focus group discussions will be video and audio recorded for data analysis and will last approximately 20 minutes.  
  3. I will also have each participant write a letter of advice to an at-risk high school student. This should take approximately 10 minutes.  
  4. Once the transcript from your participant interview has been compiled, the transcript will be emailed to the participant to be reviewed for accuracy. This process should take approximately 10 minutes.  
  5. The entire process will take approximately 60 minutes. |

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<tr>
<th>How could you or others benefit from this study?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.</td>
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Benefits to society include providing information on the formation of attachment bonds by at-risk students who were able to successfully graduate high school. From these experiences, professionals in the field of education may increase their understanding of the need for at-risk students to establish secure attachment bonds and how these bonds aid in the successful completion of high school. This increased understanding may assist professionals in the field of education to establish mentorship programs to assist in this process and thus help reduce the drop-out rate of high school students.

**What risks might you experience from being in this study?**
The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risk you would encounter in everyday life.

**How will personal information be protected?**
The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. Hard copy data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and hard copy data will be shredded.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for five years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

**How will you be compensated for being part of the study?**
Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Research participants will receive $20 as a token of appreciation for their participation in this study. This token of appreciation will be given to participants in person once the participants hand in their letters of advice to other at-risk high school students.

**Is study participation voluntary?**
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or ***************.

If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.
What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Marie Lawrence. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at ************** You may also contact the researcher’s faculty sponsor, Dr. Floralba Arbelo Marrero, at ***************

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

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., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at ***************

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted ethically as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.
By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy of the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

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

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

Printed Subject Name ______________________________________________________

Signature___________________________________ Date _________________

I wish to be called ___________________________. (Pseudonym used to protect your identity)

My e-mail address is __________________________________________________________

(An e-mail address is requested to send the research participant a copy of their interview transcript so that the participant may check the transcript for accuracy)
Appendix F: Participant Survey Example

Pseudonym: ________________

Participant Survey

1. Did you receive a high school diploma while attending a high school campus?
   Yes
   No

2. At any in point high school, did you feel at-risk of dropping out of school? If so why?
   Yes
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   No

3. If you did feel at-risk, please circle any factors you feel contributed to those feelings?
   Low-income family status
   Living in a single-parent home
   Having an immediate family member drop out of high school
   Having served a school suspension
   Other cause/reason

4. What is your age range?
   18-21
   22-29
   30-39
5. Do you feel your age affects your perspective of being at-risk in high school?

6. Please indicate your self-identified gender.
   Male
   Female

7. Do you think your gender affected your feelings of being at-risk?
   Yes (If yes, please state why.)

8. Please indicate your self-identified ethnicity.
   White
   Black or African American
   American Indian or Alaska Native
   Asian
   Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   Multiple Races
   Other (Please specify________________________)

9. Do you think your ethnicity affected your feelings of being at-risk? (If yes, please state why.)
   Yes________________________________________________________
Appendix G: Individual Participant Interview Questions

1. You stated on your survey that you feel that you were at risk of dropping out of high school. Please tell me a little about why you feel this way.

2. How would you describe your childhood?

3. How was your relationship with your mother?

4. Did you live with both of your parents; just one parent; or with grandparents or other family members? Please tell me about your experiences growing up.

5. Please describe any members of your family that had a great impact on you while growing up?

6. How did your family feel about the importance of education?

7. If you have close family members who dropped out of high school, why do you think this happened?

8. Please tell me about your experiences in kindergarten, first, and second grades.

9. Please tell me about your relationship with your kindergarten and early elementary school teachers.

10. If there was a time when you were punished for inappropriate behavior, please describe a significant event you remember and how this affected your education.
11. You've described your early experiences in school and how you felt about school during this time in your life. Please describe your school experiences when you were in middle school and high school. Did your feelings toward school change and if so, why did they change?

12. Please describe your sense of belonging to your school community when you were in high school. Why did you feel this way?

13. Please tell me about your relationship with fellow students and friends while you were in high school.

14. Please describe your relationship with your teachers when you were in high school.

15. Please describe a relationship, good or bad, with a notable teacher you had in high school.

16. Let's talk about your experiences with extra-curricular activities when you were in high school. If you played sports, joined clubs, or participated in other organizations during high school, what effect did these activities have on your high school education?

17. Please tell me about your experiences with community organizations such as after-school programs or church events. Describe how this involvement affected your education.

18. You were academically successful in school because you are now attending college. Please describe your experiences preparing for college while you were in high school.

19. What advice would you give someone who also considered themselves to be “at-risk” of dropping out of high school?

20. Is there anything else you would like to share or you feel I should understand relating to your experiences?
Appendix H: Sample of Interview Transcripts

Research Participant 3: Rachel

1. You stated on your survey that you feel that you were at risk of dropping out of high school. Please tell me a little about why you feel this way.

My home was a single parent home. And then also being low income. Well you see, at lot of times when you see those combinations of factors it’s very easy to get discouraged and limited into the resources that you have and its hard to make the connections between how education is the key to getting out of those types of environments.

2. How would you describe your childhood?

Okay, so I ummm. I don’t know how to say this. As far as background currently? (No coming up in high school) High school wise, I started out as a freshmen, I was more into sports and things of that nature. I found it interesting. But after a while, you realize that it is time consuming and for me I figured that I needed to get back into my studies. For me the low income issue, transportation, things of that nature. Also when you play sports you have to have money for the team goes out to eat, you don’t want to be the person who can’t eat. So when you see those obstacles, you say, “well, maybe I’ll stay home.” Parents could see that as an extra cost not as an opportunity to maybe for you to blossom and socialize and an outlet for the child.

3. How was your relationship with your mother?

Umm she’s deceased now. It was very good. But my mother was one, I would say, it goes back to income and education as well. She was the only person in her family to graduate from high school and there was, I don’t know, 8-9 of them. And with that being said, it was something she
was very proud of and wanted for us to obviously graduate. Due to the fact that there was limited resources. She was a diabetic type 2, in those environments, our family kind of rotated around who kept her. That was an added risk too.

4. Did you live with both of your parents; just one parent; or with grandparents or other family members? Please tell me about your experiences growing up.

Just my mother. I say we were at risk.

5. Please describe any members of your family that had a great impact on you while growing up?

Yes, even though my mom, did not continue her education, I would say, indirectly she did not directly try to hinder us, but because she was sickly, it did hinder us in doing what we wanted to do. In saying that, I think she was inspirational for me to continue my education. And I know this may sound weird, but by watching her life, I wanted to make sure I didn’t go through some of the things that I saw her go through, financially, emotionally, educationally.

6. How did your family feel about the importance of education?

They said it was important but they never really showed me by helping me with homework and things like that. It’s easy for someone to tell you to do something, but you don’t see them doing it then you say, ummm. You don’t ketch them early to see that the connection- the relationship between education and income, it is easy for them to fall through the cracks.
7. If you have close family members who dropped out of high school, why do you think this happened?

Nobody in my nuclear family, my siblings, but I do know of family’s that their kids dropped out.

(Did it have an effect on you?)

It did. Because some of the kids at that time, were pregnant, into drugs, unemployed. So it wasn’t as if they were doing productive things for lack of a better terms.
Appendix I: Sample Letter of Advice to At-Risk High School Students

Now that you have reflected on your experiences of being an at-risk student and forming attachment bonds which helped you graduate high school, what would you share with other at-risk students who are in danger of dropping out of high school? What specific advice would you give to individuals as they complete their high school classes and graduate?

Hey, I know it may be rough but do not give up! Why? You may ask? This is your life, your life, you navigate it! Things may be bad now but it won’t last always! Think about it like this, your running your own race and that gold medal/trophy is yours for the win. Your beautiful inside and out. Education is key, push forward and NEVER look back in regret. Stay humble and always carry a smile. You never know when someone else needs your sunshine.

God Bless!

Casey
Appendix J: Reflective Journal Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Entry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7-18-2021</td>
<td>I believe that I have a great deal of bias regarding this phenomenon. I was an at-risk student who struggled during school. I never contemplated dropping out of high school, but I struggled academically during 1st and 2nd grade. I formed a strong attachment bond with Mrs. Mills and I went from a reading level substantially below grade level to an advanced reading level due to her help and encouragement. I must rely on the research participants’ experiences with this phenomenon and not on my personal experiences. This also applies to coding the research data and in the development of themes regarding their words and experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-5-2021</td>
<td>Received IRB approval from Liberty University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-16-2021</td>
<td>Submitted Request to *** to conduct research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-30-2021</td>
<td>Notified by *** that the college needed documentation regarding Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-1-2021</td>
<td>Sent documentation to ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-7-2021</td>
<td>*** stated that they have the document stating that I received IRB approval but needed a signed letter from Liberty University’s IRB department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-7-2021</td>
<td>Sent a request to Liberty University’s IRB department requesting a signed letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-8-2021</td>
<td>Liberty University’s IRB department sent a signed letter showing my IRB approval to conduct research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-24-2021</td>
<td>Notified by *** that the college would consider my request to conduct research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-28-2021</td>
<td>Sent another local college a request to conduct research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-1-2021</td>
<td>*** sent documentation to complete to request permission to conduct research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-1-2021</td>
<td>Documentation completed and sent back to ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-6-2021</td>
<td>Notified that documentation should be sent to Dean of Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Documentation sent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-11-2021</td>
<td>Permission granted to conduct study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-15-2021</td>
<td>Placed recruitment flyers around campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-18-2021</td>
<td>Research was conducted in the student center and in the library of college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-18-2021</td>
<td>Interviewed participant 1: Ona</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I piloted my research questions with Ona and she felt that the questions were well worded. I made no adjustments to the questions. She was very open and emotional during the interview and at one point, we stopped the interview because she was crying. I reminded her that she could stop at any time but she stated that she wanted to continue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-18-2021</td>
<td>Participant 2: David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>David’s interview was long. He would state that he was very poor but</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in the next five minutes would state that he was paying for 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sports cars. I mentally reminded myself that I could not judge the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>accuracy of his statements. A lot of data was very insightful into</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>his personal experiences of being at-risk however.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-18-2021</td>
<td>Participant 3: Rachel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rachel was an older student who was very eager to share her experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of being at-risk and graduating high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-18-2021</td>
<td>Participant 4: Casey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Casey was in her 20’s and very open and forthright about her life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>experiences. She was very eager to help other at-risk students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and wrote a very powerful letter of advice to other at-risk students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-18-2021</td>
<td>Participant 5: Phyllis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phyllis was in her 30s and was very open about her experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She appeared to be very self-motivated and psychologically healthy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>She described the importance of persevering and overcoming obstacles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-18-2021</td>
<td>Participant 6: Wan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wan was from Asia and came to this country as a young child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This experience and the subsequent experiences of being from a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>background of severe poverty had an enormous effect on his life-ex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>experiences. He stated that he had enormous pressure to be successful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and to provide for his family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 10-18-2021| Participant 7: Rick  
Rick is a first year college student who stated that he dropped out of high school twice. He had cousins who dropped out and he was enticed to do the same. After a while he reenrolled and not only completed high school, but is now attending college. |
| 10-18-2021| Participant 8: Raven  
Raven is a native American who lost her father at an early age. She moved around a lot and had a very difficult time connecting with her school community. She experienced a great deal of bullying. |
| 10-18-2021| Participant 9: Michael  
Michael is from a military background. He stated that poverty greatly affected his life in high school. He was very guarded in his responses. |
| 10-18-2021| Participant 10: Robert  
Robert was very shy and guarded at first. He opened up as the interview progressed. He stated that he had a learning disability which caused him to struggle through school. He credits his mother’s support for his academic success. |
<p>| 10-18-2021| I felt a very strong connection to these research participant and had to be very careful not to interject my thoughts and feelings into the interview process. I greatly admire their openness and courage. I especially admire their ability to push through hardships and to have a positive attitude about life experiences. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Entry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10-20-2021</td>
<td>Thank you letter sent to ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-20-2021</td>
<td>Participant interview transcripts were completed and sent to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>research participants for review.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix K: Horizontalization Sample

Significant Statements:
“I know it may be rough, but do not give up! This is your life, you navigate it!”
"The advice I would give to anyone that are at-risk is to never give up."
“Keep moving on and work on your goal. You can win is you just keep trying.”
“There are times where one loses faith but if you keep pushing, things will get better.”

“Keep moving on and work on your goal. You can win is you just keep trying.”
“Set a goal and remember what’s ahead. Don’t give up!”
“Look to where you want to be and work toward that goal.”
“Keep pushing and never look back in regret!”

“See what’s ahead and never give up!”
“If you keep pushing, things will get better.”
“I wanted a better life. We can do anything. That’s one of the greatest virtues because of the efforts and time we put toward our life long goals.”
“There was a point in my life when I was going to give up but I knew that I wanted a better life. Keep pushing through it. It will eventually happen!”

“Never underestimate yourself. You are your greatest fan.”
“Life is different after high school. It will get better and you will reach your dreams if you just stay focused and try.”
“Never give up. Every dark night eventually has a sunny day.”
“Keep moving and working on your goals. You can win!”

Horizontalization:
Keep pushing and work toward your goals. Don’t give up!
Appendix L: Clustering Data into Themes Sample

**Thematic Results**

**Theme: Perseverance**
Sub-Theme: Overcoming Obstacles
Codes: Taking Control of Life’s Circumstances

Significant Statements:
“I know it may be rough, but do not give up! This is your life, you navigate it!”
"The advice I would give to anyone that are at-risk is to never give up."
“Keep moving on and work on your goal. You can win is you just keep trying.”
“There are times where one loses faith but if you keep pushing, things will get better.”

**Theme: Self- Motivation**
Sub-Theme: Goal Setting
Codes: Stay Focused on Your Goals

Significant Statements:
“Keep moving on and work on your goal. You can win is you just keep trying.”
“Set a goal and remember what’s ahead. Don’t give up!”
“Look to where you want to be and work toward that goal.”
“Keep pushing and never look back in regret!”

**Theme: Self-Motivation**
Sub-Theme: Delayed Gratification
Codes: Stay Focused on Your Goals

Significant Statements:
“See what’s ahead and never give up!”
“If you keep pushing, things will get better.”
“I wanted a better life. We can do anything. That’s one of the greatest virtues because of the efforts and time we put toward our life long goals.”
“There was a point in my life when I was going to give up but I knew that I wanted a better life. Keep pushing through it. It will eventually happen!”

**Theme: Self-Motivation**
Sub-Theme: Belief in a Better Future
Codes: Stay Focused on Your Goals

Significant Statements:
“Never underestimate yourself. You are your greatest fan.”
“Life is different after high school. It will get better and you will reach your dreams if you just stay focused and try.”
“Never give up. Every dark night eventually has a sunny day.”
“Keep moving and working on your goals. You can win!”

Theme: Mentorship
Sub-Theme: Not Letting Others Down
Codes: Seek Help from Others

Significant Statements:
“Seek help from others. There is nothing wrong with that.”
“Find a mentor who cares.”
“It’s always good to talk to someone if you need help.”
“Stay around people that will have a positive effect on your life.”
“Find people you like and surround yourself with the kind of person you would like to be.”
“Find yourself a person to hang around with and encourage each other.”
“Ask for help from all resources like church, school, and family.”
“Look for people doing what you want to do. Find a mentor and become a mentor-exchange processes and support each other.”
Appendix M: Textural Descriptions of Study Sample

Specific quotes used to glean the theme of mentorship. These are general quotes that describe the experience in general terms.

“I had a teacher, my second grade teacher that had a big impact on me.”

“They felt education was important.”

“I would never have gone back to school without her support.”

“My grandma and mama had a great impact on me growing up.”

“Yes, she felt education was important and she wanted me to do my best at all times.”

“Education was really, really important. So it was never an option not to go to school.”

“She was like a second mom to me.”

“Later on, I was able to find some people that were able to push me through.”
Appendix N: Structural Description Sample

These are very specific and detailed quotes that describe the subtleties of the research participants’ experiences with delayed gratification.

Delayed Gratification:

I’ve learned that it is better to work first, do your school first and later in life, it will start to come out. It’s like your planting a seed and things will start to pop up. It’s like hey, I want this nice sports car, whatever. The benefits of your studies to reach that goal will actually blossom to whatever you want in life.

-David

I watch motivational videos. I have a dream board. So every morning when I wake up, I look at the dream board and I’d be like, this is what we’re working on, this is our goal. My grandma told me to do that.

-Ona

One of the decisions that my mother made me to do, or pushed me to do was to get a car early on in high school. It’s wonderful. Yes, you have transportation, but now you also have to work long hours, or longer hours to pay for a car payment and I think this could be very tempting to drop out of school as well. Why? Because you want to keep on to that luxury and you don’t see the school long term would be your better route. I would say to be careful not to fall into those traps that young people fall into those traps to satisfy the need now and not looking long term.

-Rachel
Appendix O: Fundamental Textural-Structural Synthesis Sample

The textural-structural synthesis combines all participant data to capture the essence of the phenomenological experience. In the research study, the fundamental textural-structural synthesis captured the essence of at-risk students who formed secure attachment bonds during their school experience and were able to successfully graduate high school.

Perseverance

The first theme that emerged is that of perseverance. Each of the research participants explained how important the concept of perseverance played in their ability to complete high school. A subtheme of perseverance which emerged from the data was that of overcoming obstacles. All participants described the need to overcome obstacles to graduate high school. They all felt they were treated differently from others because of several factors and they navigated through these factors to become successful. Some of the obstacles in which the research participants felt they overcame to graduate high school were poverty, poor life choices, and learning disabilities. Since all of the research participants came from low-income families, the participants felt that they had to navigate through life factors brought about by poverty to graduate from high school.

Mentorship

The theme of mentorship was addressed by every participant. All of the participants stated in various terms their appreciation to an individual who served as personal mentors in their lives. The research participants very clearly believed that without mentors, their ability to graduate high school would have been greatly impeded, if not resulting in their dropping out of high school and failing to graduate.
Appendix P: Inquiry Audit Trail

11/29/2021
Dr. Marrerro
-Your figures are tables- please change the language where appropriate. See apa 7 for the difference between the two.

11/29/2021
Dr. Marrerro
-Your Chapter 3 must be in past tense. When a table carries over from one page to another, there is an apa rule for a continuation heading. Please look that up for apa 7 and review.

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-Add findings to abstract

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-Consider adding IRB to the list of abbreviations.

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-Please update to include a table of your final sample participant demographics and update this section to reflect your final sample.

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-I advise moving to Chapter 3 under Participants.

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-Please place all analysis tables/charts in appendices and reference here to create your audit trail.

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-Place year after author

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-Good, please include evidence of all analysis steps in appendices and reference through the data analysis section.

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-Add examples to the appendix
12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-See Above

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-Add page breaks to keep formatting

12/2/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-Thanks for including even though current template does not require.

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-Please add some discussion above this to explain or switch order and place table under the discussion of the content.

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-See above: Ten percent \(N = 1\)

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-Please add a table here presenting all results, so major themes on the left and then sub-themes on the left and then column filled by codes/significant statements that contributed to each theme.

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-A sub-theme of Perseverance

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-I advise past tense in this discussion.

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-Should be double spaced. Add remove quotes as it is a block quote.

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-I think it would read better in past tense.

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-Use consistently
12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-These block quotes seem to be too far indented from the left and on the right.

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-Or encompassed?

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-I feel the Discussion section should begin with a summary, then follow with discussion and interpretation.

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-Check heading formatting with apa.

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-Please succinctly summarize to each RQ here.

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-I advise beginning with delimitations and concluding with limitations.

12/3/2021
Dr. Spaulding
-Great Job!

12/6/2021
Dr. Marrerro
-Keep tracked changes and send back when these are corrected.