EDUCATIONAL EFFICACY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE REPRESENTATION AND VOICE OF STUDENTS AT RISK

by

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

University of Phoenix
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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study, of phenomenological design was to explore educational efficacy through the verbalized needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk academic middle students and educators at a public High School in the southwestern United States. The study involved 30 individuals: one administrator, one school psychologist, 13 teachers, and 15 students. Research about the representation, needs, perceptions, and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students in relation to educational efficacy is limited. Due to these limitations, no single theory fully addresses this problem or any resulting questions. Themes of significance identified in the main study were: educational responsibility, student views, student voice, and perceived positive aspects.
Dedication

From the depths of my heart and insatiable soul, I dedicate the work entailed with in this dissertation to the Grand Architect on High, whose spirit and breath live on infinitely through me, my sons, and the sons of my sons. Although I understand now, that my hands have become his hands, no words exist, which could possibly give form to the true depth of my gratitude, and any attempt therein, would only serve as a denial of His gifts. Sometimes, silence is the most honorable means of dedication. I also dedicate this work to my family, for having faith in me, when I did not have the strength to believe in myself. I will eternally seek more light, until I have uncovered all of the answers. I have always had the spirit, but I now also have the credentials. I love you all.
Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my family and friends, for without their love and support, this dissertation would not have been possible. I also acknowledge my friends from the front lines of the educational war on ignorance and fear, who believed in me even when others may have had doubts. A special thank you to Mr. Mark Yslas, who saw my potential and who was always supportive, allowing me to be myself, thus enabling me to help those in need. I also wish to thank the study participants from Valley High School, without whom, this study would not have been possible. I will eternally be grateful to the faculty and staff of University of Phoenix, my committee members, and my Mentor Dr. Martine Bates Sharp.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Educational reforms including the Elementary and Secondary Education Acts, Improving Americas Schools Act, Educate America Act and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), were implemented within educational institutions throughout the United States in an attempt to guarantee quality education everywhere (Shirvani, 2009). The acts were also meant to insure equal access to good education opportunities, and improve and rectify issues pertaining to student achievement. Despite the reformation acts, problems still exist within public schools: achievement gaps, teacher quality, proficiency in math and English, and a means of achieving adequate yearly progress (AYP) for all students (Shirvani, 2009).

For the past century, as each of the educational reforms evolved, was implemented, institutionalized, and ultimately, intractably condemned to failure (Sarason, 1990), a new educational paradigm also began to emerge and evolve. Holistic education, a movement which, according to Forbes (1996) may be hard to define, encompasses historical and contemporary pedagogical roots. Included within the framework of holistic education, according to Forbes (1996), are elements of such monumental movements and theorists including the works of Rousseau and Emerson, to name just a couple, and even some elements of Paulo Freire’s critical education theory.

Contemporary proponents of holistic education suggest that what is recently and currently driving the growth of alternative schools and programs is at the root of humanistic pedagogy (Forbes, 1996): promoting the development of the whole student including his emotions, mentality, morality, spirituality, intellect and body (Dewey, 1938). Contrasting previous responses to reform within public educational institutions,
holistic education replaces one foundational key component, as a means of increasing student achievement. Instead of focusing on the bottom-line, driving the broad growth of materialist, capitalist economics, the new paradigm focuses on the relevant individual needs, talents and abilities of the student stakeholders. Traditional education institutions, in their attempts to meet the needs of a growing global market, may place the purpose of education upon economics, but fail to consider the whole of individual student potential, talents and abilities. In regards to the purpose of education Luther King Jr. (1947) stated, …most of the "brethren" think that education should equip them with the proper instruments of exploitation so that they can forever trample over the masses. Still others think that education should furnish them with noble ends rather than means to an end. It seems to me that education has a two-fold function to perform in the life of man and in society: the one is utility and the other is culture. Education must enable a man to become more efficient, and to achieve with increasing facility the legitimate goals of his life. (p. 1)

Nearly 50 years later, King’s quote still captures the dilemma of serving underachieving/at-risk students of any race—that schools and educators must connect education in ways that resonate with every student’s personal goals and individual experiences. This is the impetus for this phenomenological study. Chapter one includes a statement of the problem and provides information on the perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students, and of teachers of underachieving/at-risk students. It also includes the purpose and need for this type of study, definition of terms, assumptions, information pertaining to the scope, perceived and possible limitations, assumptions, and delineations, and closes with a summary of key points addressed.


**Background of the Problem**

Educational institutions and policy makers have aimed at meeting the demands of consumerism, capitalism and western civilization with an educational curricular focus on standardized academic achievement (Pearson Assessments 2003). However, according to Anderson and Anderson (2001), in order to substantially implement and institutionalize transformational reform and change, all mental and cultural models must be considered (p. 39), and within educational institutions, students are part of the mental and cultural models. Anderson stated, “…transformation is the radical shift from one state of being to another, so significant that requires a shift of culture, behavior, and mindset to implement successfully and sustain over time” (p.39).

Herein lies an intractable component of educational reform, the reformers, the educational institutions and policy makers who have failed to obtain input from the most important stakeholder involved within the educational process, the students. According to Allen (1995), students who show interest in school-related problems should be participants in the decisions concerning those problems.

While Dynan (1980) suggests that students, as clients of education institutions, have a right to take part in assessing the services they receive (p.4), Hargreaves (1992), suggests students also have the right to negotiate. Groves and Welsh (2010) state, “Increasingly it is recognized that high school students’ views about learning and school experiences are important considerations in education. Students’ insights are important as a basis for their active and productive involvement, and where there is a serious intention to improve students’ learning.” (p. 87).
In regards to including student stakeholders in developing and institutionalizing substantial educational change, Kotter (1996) suggests group selection and development as one of the most important elements of the change process (p. 52). The selection and development of committees has the potential to affect all stakeholders within the chosen educational setting, thus making inclusion of members of each of the stakeholders groups, essential within the group. Also essential, according to Kotter (1996), is the establishment of trust within the development committees, and to establish a level of transparency within the groups, to aid in developing and maintaining the established trust (Kotter, 1996).

Ultimately, by failing to study, consider, and incorporate individualized, holistic student stakeholder needs, perceptions and experiences in relation to educational reform and change, policy makers and educational institutions mandate and uphold reform that serves an educational double-loop (Peschl, 2007). The lack of consideration of student representation in education reform efforts, their needs, perceptions and lived experiences, coupled with their continual levels of underachievement, creates a need within the contemporary realm of public education for more information about the perceptions of students (Cook-Sather, 2006). What is needed in particular is the perceptions about education efficacy as derived from the experience of underachieving/at-risk students (Cook-Sather, A. (2006).

According to Peschl (2007), within educational double loop learning, which incorporates intellectual and cognitive changes, policy makers and institutions may reframe, reorganize and attempt to optimize (p. 139), aspects of education, which is sufficient for mastery of everyday situations and problems. However, for
transformational, radical change to take place, Peschl (2007), suggests the addition of existential changes which go beyond the average cognitive and intellectual levels, incorporating new knowledge, insights and understanding (p. 139). According to Freire (1973), the addition of existential experiences and alternatives may aid with critical learning for students, and aid in educational reform efforts (p. 132). Douglas et al. (2008) suggest alternative curricula and delivery methods may aid in increasing test scores.

Douglas et al. (2008), identifies a relationship between multiple intelligence curriculum and higher test scores on mathematics tests. The study shows that students receiving a multiple intelligence curriculum score higher than those receiving a traditional instructional method. Students with various intelligence styles or non-traditional educational needs such as mental and physical disabilities do not fit the one-curriculum-suits-all experience of standardized achievement.

Statement of the Problem

The general problem is that, despite continual attempts at educational reform (Rossi et al. 1995, Stillwell et al., 2011), many students still fail to graduate (Robinson, 2008, Stillwell et al., 2011). Historically, these reform efforts have included all important stakeholder parties, except for students (Rossi, et, al., 1995). Rossi et al. state

Presidents, congressional leaders, state and local policymakers, educators, parents, and business leaders have all endorsed reforms in schools, and a wide-ranging array of reform efforts are underway currently in thousands of schools across the nation (p.1).

This lack of consideration of student perceptions, emotions and differentiated experiences, may lead to a mis-educative (Dewey, 1938), experience, or an
underestimation of the achievement potential of all student populations (Gutek, 2006). Specifically, specialized student populations including, underachieving/at-risk students with disabilities, minorities, and students considered to be poor, have been considered within educational reform efforts; however, they have only been considered within the context of achievement as measured by dominant cultural standards (Irmscher, 1997; Ormrod, 2010; Rossi, et al., 1995). Dynan (1980) suggests that students, as clients of education institutions, have a right to take part in assessing the services they receive (p.4). Hargreaves (1992) suggests students also have the right to negotiate.

The problem creates a need within the contemporary realm of public education for more insight into the representation, needs, perceptions and experiences of students who are considered to be underachieving/at-risk, in relation to educational efficacy. A qualitative study was needed to explore the lived experiences of underrepresented students. Participants included students over the age of 18 and educators.

**The Importance of Specific Student Information**

A qualitative phenomenological research study was conducted to gather data from high school senior students over the age of 18, recent graduates, their teachers and administrators during interviews and surveys for analysis and interpretation. A phenomenological study will aid in understanding, through individual and group interviews and observations, the essential and important needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students in relation to educational efficacy and engagement within contemporary educational institutions.
**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study of hermeneutic phenomenological design was to explore educational efficacy through the verbalized needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk, academic middle students, and some of their educators at a public high school in the southwestern United States. To help ensure confidentiality during the study a pseudonym, Valley High School, was used in place of the school’s real name.

In an attempt to get at the underlying, subjective lived experiences of at-risk students, a hermeneutic phenomenological design (Prasad Kafle, 2011) was used to view genuine phenomena through the lens of the students themselves. Leedy and Ormrod (2010) suggested that a phenomenological design is relevant and appropriate when researching the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of individuals. Based on the works of German mathematician, Edmund Husserl (Zavari, 2003), phenomenology provides insight in to themes specific to the nature of the phenomena being studied (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Specifically, qualitative phenomenological research is based on the exploration of multiple perceptions, and an examination of experiences considered meaningful to individuals in different social contexts (Moustakas, 1994).

Cook-Sather (2006) suggests over the last 15 years, a new educational framework has begun to develop, which places students and their thoughts and concerns, within the realms of educational research and reform. The latest evolution of what Cook-Sather (2006) calls “student-voice,” is the need for research pertaining to students, their feelings, interests, fears, thoughts and concerns, which are generally excluded from educational
research (p.286). If by chance students are represented at all within a study, they are usually viewed from the external perspective of adults (Cook-Sather, 2006. p.286).

A phenomenological design was most appropriate for the study due to the need for exploring emergent themes derived from in-depth interviews and observations. The phenomenological framework provides a means through which researchers may gather qualitative information related to the needs, perceptions and life experiences (Moustakas, 1994) of the sample participants.

The study consisted of a deviant case sample for exploratory, in-depth interviews and observations with 31 participants from Valley High School in the southwestern United States. The interviews and observations elicited perceptions of strategies and techniques used to promote engaged learning for all students. A qualitative phenomenological approach provides the researcher the opportunity to explore the phenomena surrounding underachieving/at-risk students, their teachers and administrators perceptions and lived experiences (Finlay, 2008).

**Significance of the Study**

A qualitative study of this nature will be beneficial to teachers, administrators and educational researchers, in providing information into the expressed needs, perceptions and experiences of underachieving/at-risk students. The results and findings may not resolve issues that may exist with a standardized educational experience, but ultimately, the value of the study and findings lies in the contribution to a growing effort which brings attention to the problems surrounding whole student learning and standardization.
For the purposes of this study, underachieving/at-risk students were defined as students who face the possibility of not graduating, and whom face the difficulties of life without a high school degree. (Riele, 2006).

**Significance of the Study to Leadership**

Through this phenomenological study, information and data were produced that may aid students, parents, teachers, administrators and possibly educational leaders within the profession. In producing information and data pertaining to the needs, perceptions and experiences of underachieving/at-risk student stakeholders, educational leaders may be enabled to make more informed decisions.

**Nature of the Study**

The intent behind this phenomenological study was to gain information and data from the emergent needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students, pertaining to the perceived effectiveness of standardized educational instructional design and delivery that was used specifically for increasing student achievement with underachieving/at-risk students.

Qualitative phenomenological designs consist of deep study of a phenomenon, individual, group, institution or community (Creswell, 2009). Phenomenology involves studying multiple variables or aspects of phenomena, in a number of different scenarios, for emergent themes (Moustakas, 1994). Focusing on the multiple aspects of the phenomena, researchers may uncover the relationships of factors that are indications of the situation, which provide a foundation for exploration through the process of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994).
This study is a qualitative phenomenological study conducted to explore themes emerging from the needs, perceptions and experiences involved with efficacy and student achievement of underachieving/at-risk students at Valley High School in the southwestern United States. For this study, open ended interviews of individual students, teachers and administrators involved in the study and the environment in which the educational experiences takes place, were used.

The objective of the study was not to develop a theory based upon the collected data, gain understanding of culture-specific behaviors, create a narrative, or conduct a case study. Nor was the purpose of the study trying to change the phenomena, curriculum, deliveries, relationships or environments while conducting the research, or determine cause and effect relationships (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

Specifically, a phenomenological design was most appropriate for this study due to the desired objectives of gaining insight into the needs, perceptions and experiences surrounding the curricula, instructional strategies, and delivery methods pertaining to educational efficacy. Phenomenological research is based upon exploring the individual participant’s realities and experiences, and trying to capture and determine the essence of the phenomena being studied (Neuman, 2006). Thus, a qualitative, phenomenological approach was ideal for discovering various meanings involved with at-risk students’ experiences with the effectiveness of education through an analysis of emergent, thematic patterns.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore educational efficacy through the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of
underachieving/at-risk students, and their educators at Valley High School in the southwestern United States. The following research questions, developed using related, relevant topics and research addressed within the literature review, guided the phenomenological design in an attempt to obtain information pertaining to the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students.

Central Research Question

What needs, perceptions and experiences surround the curricula, instructional strategies, and delivery methods pertaining to educational efficacy?

Research Sub-Question

How are student needs, perceptions and experiences surrounding the curricula, instructional strategies, and delivery methods represented within the educational experience?

Theoretical Framework

Research dealing with the representation, needs, perceptions, and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students in relation to educational efficacy is limited. Due to these limitations, no single theory fully addresses this problem or any resulting questions.

Several theories, including behaviorism, cognitivism, social-cognitivism, constructivism, humanism, moral reasoning theory, and multiple intelligence theory offer insights into the multiple variables involved with learning. Specifically, the works of Bloom (1956), Gardner (1999), Maslow (1999), Fielding (2004, 2010), and Freire (1994), provide further insight and foundation within the framework, and reinforce the need for understanding underachievers in relation to educational efficacy.
To obtain and explore themes emerging from the expressed needs, perceptions and lived experiences involved with the phenomena surrounding the efficacy and achievement of underachieving/at-risk students, interviews and observations were conducted. Although the significance and importance of the study lie within the specific information and data derived from student stakeholders, the information provided by educators in relation to underachievers was also relevant, and also was collected and analyzed for emergent themes pertaining to the phenomena.

Within the conducted study, a deviant case sampling process was used due to the need for what Lincoln and Guba (1985), suggest may be considered “troublesome or enlightening” (p. 200), information and data. An exploration into the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students, their teachers and administrators provided information and data pertaining to educational efficacy and achievement in relation to standardized experiences. Ultimately, the study and findings may serve as a potential contribution to future studies pertaining to phenomena surrounding underachieving/at-risk students, as well as those theories and studies established which support and maintain the importance of student input and perspective.

**Educational Theories**

Although various educational theories and models aid in developing the framework for the study, specifically, the study relies on, and builds upon the foundational frameworks and research established by the educationally influential, Bloom’s (1956) *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, Gardner’s (1999) *Multiple Intelligences: New horizons in theory and practice*, and Maslow’s (1999) *Toward a Psychology of Being* (3rd ed.). Similar to the theories and research established and
conducted by Bloom (1956), Gardner (1999), Maslow (1999), and Fielding (2004, 2010), the study offers insights into phenomena surrounding underachieving/at-risk students, with themes which emerged from the interviews and observations pertaining to the underachiever’s needs, perceptions and lived experiences, possibly uncovering and adding new information to existent frameworks.

The works and taxonomy produced by Benjamin Bloom (1956) offer important insight and resources for the framework of this study due to the information pertaining to the affective, cognitive and psychomotor classifications of behaviors in relation to learning and student achievement. Bloom’s taxonomy (1956) is designed to be a classification of the student behaviors which represent the intended outcomes of the educational process.

Building upon Bloom’s work, and contrasting traditional educational constructs, Howard Gardner’s (1999), work suggests the existence of multiple intelligences. Gardner (1999), inquired, “In general, why does the contemporary construct of intelligence fail to take into account large areas of human endeavor?” (p. 6). Gardner’s work was exceedingly important to the study due to the information pertaining to understanding the various ways in which students learn and process information. Gardner (1999) suggests that different tasks and objectives call for varying skills and intelligences. Thus, Gardner’s work on multiple intelligences in relation to learning provided insights into understanding the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students.

Maslow’s (1999) works suggest that human motivations, including those related to educational processes, are hierarchically driven by varying levels of urgency, intensity
and priority. Maslow termed these interrelated influential or inhibiting variables which define human motives as “prepotencies” (preface).

**Critical Theories**

Neo-Liberalism is an economic framework that reinforces the importance of consulting students (Fielding, 2004, 2010). Although opponents of neo-liberalism claim student-led school improvements are ultimately driven by adult-based agendas (Fielding, 2004, 2010), Neo-liberalism was important to the study due to the importance placed on student voice in relation to their learning and experiences.

Post-structuralism, a framework that offers educational ideals similar to those of neo-liberalism, was also important to the current framework of the study. Post-structuralism, similar to neo-liberalism, provides important groundwork for the importance of student insights, but also provides insight into the social costs of implementing student ideals within the educational realm (Fielding, 2004. p. 206). Post-structuralism is important to the study due to the importance placed on student voice in relation to their learning and experiences, but also the insights offered regarding the social costs of implementation (p. 204).

Emancipatory approaches are frameworks which, according to Fielding (2004), address concerns and ideals that neo-liberalism ignores or distorts (p. 207). These approaches also support the structure of the study. According to Fielding (2004), contributions of emancipatory efforts generally include a sense of responsibility for conducting work for groups and persons often marginalized within particular communities or wider society (p. 207). Emancipatorialism was important to the study due
to the importance placed on research undertaken on behalf of special populations. (p. 204).

A Person-Centered approach was another structural support for the framework of the conducted study (Fielding, 2004). This approach builds on the student-based contributions of Neo-liberalism, Post-structuralism, and Emancipatorialism but provides an additional essential element (Fielding, 2004). According to Fielding (2004), Person-Centered approaches posit that at the heart of the current education crisis, a humanity crisis exists (p. 208). Person-Centered approaches are important to the study due to the importançe placed on underlying social issues and the interrelatedness of educational and social problems.

Critical Theory and Pedagogy, social frameworks that proponents posit can be used to develop alternative and emancipatory social environments (Leonardo, 2004. p. 11), were important supports to the study. According to Cho (2010), critics of critical theory suggest the framework and movement are little more than political projects. Included within the study’s theoretical framework humility, resistance, and hope as expressed through critical theory (Freire, 1994), supports the emphasis on underrepresented student experiences. In the sense that critical theory values and concepts drive the focus of the study, they are important structural supports.

Lastly, educational sustainability frameworks were important to the framework of the current study. Specifically, sustainability frameworks focusing on social ethics involved with meeting the needs of future generations (Davidson, 2009), are important to the framework of the study. Sustainability builds upon all of the previously stated
frameworks, but imparts one additional, essential element: the integration of ideals and activities that will ensure future generations are capable of meeting their own needs.

Definition of Terms

The study includes terms that require specific definitions pertaining to their use and relevance within the study. The need for a relevant common vocabulary and the designated definitions became apparent during the initial stages of the literature review and research for the study.

*Underachievement*, according to McCoach and Siegle (2003), can be defined as a discrepancy between performance and actual potential. For the purposes of the study, McCoach and Siegle’s (2003), definition will be used.

*At-risk students*, according to Riele (2006), can be defined as students who face the possibility of not graduating. For the purposes of the study, Riele’s (2006), definition will be used. Riele (2006) also suggests possible influential and inhibiting variables that contribute to students not graduating including (a) boredom with school, (b) falling behind more than two grade levels, (c) participation in illegal activities, (d) feeling as if they are not part of the group and, (e) lack of adequate family and peer support. Due to the interrelatedness of the topics within the study, and in an attempt to create a common vocabulary for the participants of the study, the terms underachievement and at-risk, were held to be synonymous. For the purpose of defining underachievers/at-risk students within the constructs of the study, the deviant case sample consisted of students in jeopardy of not graduating, and who had failed one or more attempts on the state’s mandatory standardized assessments, and who maintained an overall cumulative grade point average of 2.5 or below.
Standardization is defined within the study as policies, curricula, instructional strategies, and delivery methods which are aligned with state and national standards (Marsh & Willis, 2001), and implemented and institutionalized in an attempt to increase educational efficacy and student achievement.

Deviant case sampling is defined within the study as a sampling technique suitable for phenomenological research which considers special population information and data which, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), may be considered “troublesome or enlightening” (p. 200).

Student voice is defined as various activities which include promoting student reflection, communication, dialogue, discussion, and action on educational matters that relate to students (Fielding, 2004, p. 199). Student voice may also include educational programs that encourage and enable students to communicate their views, and take part in the changes; schools councils, governing bodies, and panels for selection of new staff (p. 199).

Student representation is defined as the way in which students are represented within educational processes (Fielding, 2004).

Student needs is defined as any considerations that need to be included in the educational environment in order for the student to succeed (Dynan, 1980; Hargreaves, 1993; Groves & Welsh, 2010; Fielding, 2004).

Student perceptions is defined as the way in which students view and interpret educational processes. This includes students’ concerns, thoughts, beliefs, feelings, interests, emotions, mentality, and the way in which they cognitively process their
experience within the school environment (Dynan, 1980; Hargreaves, 1993; Groves & Welsh, 2010; Fielding, 2004).

*Student lived experiences* is defined as any experiences students have had which relate, pertain, or are relevant to their education (Dynan, 1980; Hargreaves, 1993; Groves & Welsh, 2010; Fielding, 2004).

*Educational efficacy* is defined as the personal and professional objectives of teachers and administration aimed at the academic success of all students (Reeves, 2011).

While various influential variables exist which play a role in student perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and views, no attempt was made in this study to explain student perceptual development outside of school, only the way in which existing perceptions relate to their educational experiences.

**Assumptions**

Within the current study proposal, multiple assumptions from within related and relevant research and educational topics influence the need for a study of this nature. The first assumption within the conducted study was that study participants were knowledgeable enough to communicate reliable and valid information pertaining to their needs, perceptions and lived experiences. The second assumption within the study was that all participants would participate honestly. The final assumption was that researcher bias would not impact the findings of the study. As an educator, I assume to find out personalized information about what types of methods and strategies work well for at-risk students.
Perceived Scope

Scope

For the purpose of this study, the term scope refers to time spent conducting the study, as well as other resource information logistics within the study. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore educational efficacy and achievement levels through the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk, academic middle students, their teachers, and their administrators at Valley High School in the southwestern United States. The interviews took place during the 2012-2013 school year. Data collection and analysis was conducted simultaneous to the interviews. Teachers and administrators not associated with underachieving/at-risk students were not part of the sample.

Perceived Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

The study was limited to one sample of students 18 years of age or older, their teachers and administrators. Due to sample restrictions pertaining to age, the exclusion of student stakeholders under the age of 18 is considered to be a limitation of the actual population of students at-risk within Valley High School.

Delimitations

For the purpose of the study, the term delimitations will be defined as any and all limitations recognized by the reviewer. Delimitations of the study included the use of information from a limited number of participants within the study location. Geographical delimitations to the study was a public high school in the southwestern United States. The purpose of the study was only to provide information and data
pertaining to educational efficacy in relation to the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk attending Valley High School.

**Summary**

Throughout the past century, educational reforms, including the Elementary and Secondary Education Acts, Improving Americas Schools Act, Educate America Act and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), were implemented and institutionalized throughout the United States in an attempt to rectify issues pertaining to student achievement. Despite the reformation attempts aimed at increasing efficacy and achievement, problems still exist within public schools. Specifically, there is a lack of information pertaining to the educational efficacy of underachieving and at-risk students (McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Riele, 2006), and there is a lack of student stakeholder representation and input contributing to educational reform.

This lack of consideration of student needs, perceptions, emotions and lived experiences, may lead to an underestimation of the achievement potential of all student populations (Gutek, 2004), evidenced by high dropout rates and low achievement levels demonstrated in low GPAs and standardized test results (Roscigno et al. 2006). The problem creates a need within the contemporary realm of public education for more insight into the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students in relation to efficacy and achievement.

The purpose of the conducted qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore educational efficacy and achievement levels through the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students, their teachers, and their administrators at Valley High School in the southwestern United States. According to Groves and Welsh
(2010), a new educational realization exists which acknowledges, that the needs, perceptions and experiences of students are important considerations within the realm of education, specifically where the intention is to improve efficacy and achievement (p. 87).
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

The purpose and intent of the conducted qualitative phenomenological study was to explore educational efficacy and reform through the expressed needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students, and their educators at Valley High School in the southwestern United States. Chapter two includes current and relevant literature pertaining to (a) historical and contextual information pertaining to public education and reform, (b) educational learning, (c) theories about underachieving/at-risk students, (d) forms of alternative education including holistic education and critical theory, and (e) student representation and voice.

While literature on underachieving/at-risk students provides the central theme of this review, other sections pertaining to the various learning theories or educational reform provide support. The relevant and related resources reviewed within Chapter two support the information presented in Chapter one, and provide a basis, and need for the methodology discussed in Chapter three.

Title Searches, Articles, Research Documents, and Journals

Research for relevant and related literature and resources consisted of exploring peer-reviewed literature from various libraries including the University of Phoenix library, Rice University library, Arizona State University library, and the Free Library Online. Database searches for relevant literature included the ProQuest online database, and the Ebscohost online database. Research for relevant resources also included multiple internet searches and reviewing books and edited works from multiple authors. The literature review includes information pertaining to educational reform,
underachieving/at-risk students, various theoretical models, educational perspectives, and existing program options for underachieving/at-risk students.

Within the relevant literature included within the review, a gap in the literature existed. Due to difficulty in locating current research and information pertaining to the representation and role of student input within the realm of educational efficacy and reform, the lack of peer reviewed resources was reinforced within the review with relevant books.

According to Cook-Sather (2006), over the last 15 years a field of thought has begun to emerge within education, which strives to acknowledge and represent students within education and reform (p. 359). Although Allen (1995) suggests, during the 1990’s, that very little research exists which focuses on the perceptions and experiences of students (p. 286), an educational evolution was beginning to take place. Fielding (2004), suggests that during this time in the 1990’s, this new emerging field (Cook-Sather, 2006) which, was once just a topic of conversation, began to evolve. What began as a nameless topic of discussion amongst educators, has progressed and grown into what is now considered to be a substantial educational field of thought, containing a common vocabulary, and definitively titled, “student voice” (Cook-Sather, 2006).

Of the 63 cited references, 24 are from books written or edited by scholars within relevant fields. The remaining references consist of contemporary peer reviewed articles, two dissertations and recent internet searches. Table 1 provides the number of references used, and a breakdown of the type and age of the reference.
Table 1

Relevant References Searched

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of References</th>
<th>Number of Sources</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Sources</th>
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</thead>
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<td>References more than 5 years old</td>
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<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>References 5 years old or less</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>References that are peer reviewed</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
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<td>References from internet searches</td>
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<tr>
<td>Books</td>
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<td>14%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dissertations</td>
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<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2%</td>
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According to Groves and Welsh (2010), students’ views about learning and school experiences are increasingly becoming more important considerations within the realm of education. Groves and Welsh (2010), state, “Students’ insights are important as a basis for their active and productive involvement, and where there is a serious intention to improve students’ learning.” (p. 87). Dynan (1980) suggests that students, as clients of education institutions, have a right to take part in assessing the services they receive (p.4), Hargreaves (1992), suggests students also have the right to negotiate.

However, Lageman (2005) suggests that despite historical attempts at educational reform, educational institutions continue to fail and need to be overhauled (p.20). Hence, gaps exist within the literary works pertaining to the representation, expressed needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students in relation to educational efficacy. Despite the gaps within the relevant literature, the literature review thoroughly explores and covers the issues that provide a foundation for the research study.
Literature Review

The literature review was intended to reinforce and justify the need for exploration into the variables surrounding underachieving/at-risk students in relation to educational efficacy. Research for the literature review included searching for peer reviewed articles, books, dissertations and other literature relevant and related to the study.

Twentieth Century Education and Reform

Historical and Contextual Aims

The need for secondary education, according to Inglis (1918), was due to the industrial and agricultural growth of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (p. 361). Within the country a need arose for systematic and conventional forms of secondary education (p. 361-362). Inglis (1918) suggests that the initial aims of secondary education were an attempt to meet the industrial and agricultural workforce demands. These aims included (a) Social-civic - the preparation of individuals to become cooperating members of society, (b) Economic-vocational - the preparation of individuals as prospective workers and producers, and (c) Individualistic-vocational - the preparation of the individual for various leisurely activities (p. 368).

Historical and Contextual Functions

In order to meet and attain the three foundational aims of secondary education, Inglis (1918) suggests secondary education institutions implement and institutionalize six essential functions (p. 375). The functions, according to Inglis (1918), were determined in part by the needs of society, and the pupils being educated (p. 375). The essential functions of secondary education are; (a) the adjustive or adaptive function, (b) the
integrating function, (c) the differentiating function, (d) the propaedeutic function, (e) the selective function, and (f) the diagnostic and directive function (p. 376).

While some contemporary theorists believe these core aims and functions are still effective in meeting the needs of contemporary society (Ediger, 2003), others posit that despite the evolution of society, schools have failed to change (Gatto, 2004). On one side of the argument are traditional education theorists who believe schools which function as factories are effective in meeting the needs of contemporary society (Ediger, 2003).

On the other side, are theorists who suggest the compulsory, materialistic factory-style (Clarken, 2007) traditional education fails to meet the holistic, and sustainable needs of society, and more importantly, the individual (Clarken, 2007; El Pueblo Integral, 2010). Gatto (2004) suggests traditional education may be the cause of the breakdown of family, and cultural loss, while Weinstein (1995) suggests traditional society is to blame for contemporary teachers having to become “surrogate parents” (p. 140).

The adjustive function, established to meet the social aim of secondary education, was provided, according to Inglis (1918), to prepare and enable students to be able to adjust to issues which arose within their social lives (p.376). Inglis (1918) in rationalizing and justifying the adjustment function, posits that the history of social evolution shows clearly that for any one generation, the social organization represents a combination of elements relevant to the past, and to the present (p. 376). The integration function, also implemented in an attempt to meet the social-aim of secondary education, was established to develop, as Inglis (1918) states, “amounts of like-mindedness, unity in thought, habits, ideals, and standards, requisite for social cohesion and social solidarity” (p. 377).
According to Inglis (1918), the differentiating function arises out of a necessity within education to acknowledge and take advantage of the differences amongst individuals, for the purpose of determining social efficiency (p. 378).

The propaedeutic function, according to Inglis (1918), is considered to be another phase of the adjustment function, and is considered to be curricula and instruction which will prepare and enable those students who are determined to have the ability to continue with their educations to be successful at colleges or universities (p. 379).

The selective function of education according to Inglis (1918), serves two different purposes (p. 382). The first of the two purposes, selection by elimination, is a selection process which takes place to determine students incapable of meeting the required objectives, thus they are eliminated from further educational processes (p. 382). The second purpose, selection by differentiation, is a selection process which is used to separate individuals by ability level (p. 382).

According to Inglis (1918), the diagnostic and directive functions of education are also phases of the adjustment function (p. 382). Based upon the determination that individuals should do what they do best, the diagnostic and directive function provides students with various materials and opportunities to learn about, and take part in, varying exploratory activities (p. 383)

Inglis’ representation of aims and functions of secondary schooling do not come without critique (Gatto, 2003). The true purpose of public education, according to professional journalist and chronicler of Inglis’ era, H.L. Mencken (1924), was nothing more than social control (p. 504). Mencken (1924), states, “Nothing could be further from the truth. The aim of public education is not to spread enlightenment at all; it is
simply to reduce as many individuals as possible to the same safe level, to breed and train a standardized citizenry, to put down dissent and originality” (para. 2).

However, more contemporarily Gatto (2003) suggests that the aims and functions designed, implemented, and institutionalized during the early 20th century, are still in use within contemporary public schools today (p. 35-36). Gatto (2003) states,

These goals are still trotted out today on a regular basis, and most of us accept them in one form or another as a decent definition of public education's mission, however short schools actually fall in achieving them. But we are dead wrong.

Compounding our error, is the fact that the national literature holds numerous and surprisingly consistent statements of compulsory schooling's true purpose (p. 35-36).


**Reform Efforts**

The movement towards a standardized educational curricula and experience within contemporary educational institutions in an attempt to increase academic achievement (Pearson Assessments, 2003) is not new. According to Jeffery (1978), the roots of education reform can be traced back to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was an integral part of President Lyndon Johnson’s 1965 War on Poverty. Jeffery (1978) suggests the original intent and provisions set forth by the Act were to enable schools and teachers to provide poor students with various opportunities.
Specifically, according to Jeffery, (1978), the act was established to enable poor children to perform more like middle class children, and to aid the poor in job training, placement, and earning of money so they may escape poverty.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2010), the act is still apparent in public schools across the country in the form of what we refer to as “Title I”. Revisions to the (ESEA), referred to as “Title I”, according to the U.S. Department of Education (2010, para. 3-11), include

- Ensuring that high-quality assessments, accountability, curriculum, and instructional materials alignment, and teacher preparation and training.
- Meeting the educational needs of underachieving/at-risk students in highest-poverty schools.
- Closing the achievement gaps between students, specifically achievement gaps between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers, and also between minority and nonminority students.
- Accountability measures for schools, and states. Identifying and turning around low-performing schools, and the provision of alternatives to students in such schools to enable the students to receive a high-quality education.

Other historical reform measures include the Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA), and the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, both enacted in 1994, which not only revitalized and reauthorized the ESEA, but aimed at the needs of all students, and not just the disadvantaged ones from poorer areas (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2010), in August of 1981, the National Commission on Excellence in Education was formed by then Secretary of
Education, T. H. Bell. Bell’s initial directive for the newly formed commission was to examine the quality of education in the United States and to produce a report (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2010), the report entitled; “A Nation at Risk” provided important information about troubled students. The report stated that scores had declined in mathematics, verbal, physics, and English subjects as measured by the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT). The report also stated that nearly 40 percent of all 17 year old students could not draw inferences from written material, that only 1/5th could write a persuasive essay, and only 1/3rd could solve complex math problems. The report also reflected that 13 percent of all 17 year old students in the United States could be considered to have insufficient literary skills for practical needs, and that the number of remedial math courses taught at the college level had increased by 40 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The data provided by the A Nation At Risk report coupled with the IASA and the Goals 2000 acts lead the way for the No Child Left Behind Act and the movement towards the contemporary standardized educational experience for all students.

NCLB requires scientifically proven educational methods be used to increase learning and achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). However, according to Suarez-Orozoco and Sattin-Bajij (2010), vibrant, engaging and academically rigorous schools are the exception, not the rule (p.4). According to Suarez-Orozoco and Sattin-Bajij (2010), too often, the schools of today function as automated factories, where students and teachers routinely take part in prescribed educational experiences, and boredom is the underlying theme (p.4).
To better understand the phenomena surrounding underachievers/at-risk students, and their needs, perceptions, and lived experiences regarding educational efficacy, information on the history of traditional education and reform becomes important.

**Educational Learning Theories**

Throughout history, social theory and educational philosophies have existed that have offered many insights to educational curriculum, application, practice and reform (Johnson et al., 2008). Despite the vast number of substantial theories, no one theory has prevailed as an educational panacea, (Posner, 1992). Thus a need exists for further research into literature pertaining to the history and context of educational learning theories.

**Behaviorism.** Behaviorism, primarily developed by famed psychologist Ivan Pavlov, is an educational theory and scientific framework that can be traced back to the early 20th century (Van Wagner, 2009). Pavlov’s behavioral psychology theories focused on the learning of observable behaviors, or reactions to behavior. Thus, behaviorism influenced traditional forms of education with the use of classical conditioning, and explicit and direct learning, used by contemporary teachers (Ormrod, 2008). Ormrod (2008) suggests modern behaviorism consists of the analysis of physical actions that maintain and change behavior, and any variables that influence learning of behavior. Behaviorism plays an influential role within the framework of the study due to the need to observe and interpret the behaviors exhibited by underachieving students.

**Constructivism.** Constructivism generally falls under the umbrella of cognitive thought theories, and as many constructivist theorists believe, according to Ormrod (2008), learning is constructed, rather than acquired from outside sources (p. 164).
Similar to behaviorism, the seeds of what would grow from constructivist theory to constructivism were planted and nurtured in the early twentieth century with the initial works of both Dewey and Piaget (Ormrod, 2008). Tanner and Tanner (2007) suggest that although Dewey and Piaget were not conceived of as constructivists, their works included the idea of the student being actively involved in their learning process (p. 185). According to Jones and Brader-Araje (2002), the influence of constructivism is alive and well within contemporary educational institutions throughout the United States.

As a response to the inadequacies of behaviorism (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002), constructivism has been used by teachers throughout the last decade who have felt behaviorism may not be the right approach to optimizing learning.

Jones and Brader-Araje (2002) state, “After years of implementation, behaviorism fell short of producing positive effects within the complex context of the classroom and left teachers feeling shortchanged and cheated by a system that placed the guilt for students' failure to learn in their hands.” (para. 3)

**Cognitive and Social Cognitive Theories.** Cognitive theory is the most predominantly used perspective today to study and explain human learning (Ormrod, 2008, p. 192.). According to Ormrod (2008), the roots of the cognitive theory that focus on how thought processes change over time and how different learning mechanisms make that change possible can be found within behaviorism and Gestalt psychology (p.192). Cognitive theories, according to Ormrod (2008), are the predominant perspectives used today to study and explain human learning.

Social cognitive theory, which builds upon cognitive and behaviorist theories, focuses on human learning through imitating, modeling and observing the behaviors of
others (Ormrod, 2008). Considered to be a conglomeration of behaviorism and cognitivism ideals, social cognitive theory was initially known as the social learning theory (Ormrod, 2008). To better understand phenomena surrounding underachievers/at-risk students, their needs, perceptions and lived experiences in relation to educational efficacy, information on existent and emergent theories and practices, becomes important.

**The Underachieving /At-Risk Student**

Historically, the term at-risk has had varying definitions and uses within education and reform (Glossary Of Education Reform, 2013, The National At-Risk Education Network, 2010). The first use of the term at-risk within American public education dates back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries (para. 2-3). In 1906, Congress mandated what would become known as the Carnegie Unit, a term used to represent 125 hours seat time, or one credit, in various discipline areas (para. 2-3).

According to the National At-Risk Education Network (2010), the Carnegie unit was established to align school “credit” and graduation requirements within each of the different states school systems (para. 2-3). Historically, the term at-risk was generally applied to high school juniors who, nearing the end of their high school careers where in jeopardy of dropping out, or deficient in the required amount of Carnegie Units for graduation (National At-Risk Education Network, 2010).

By the 1960’s the term at-risk had evolved to encompass minority students and children of the poor (Jeffery, 1978). According to Jeffery (1978), when Lyndon Johnson unexpectedly became the new president in 1963, anti-poverty legislation was already in the works, and the new president supported the efforts (preface). Jeffery (1978) suggests,
although the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 encouraged and enabled community action against poverty, the real attack on poverty came from the roots of education reform; the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), of 1965 (preface). With the ESEA of 1965, nearly one billion dollars was used within public schools to contribute to programs for at-risk minority, and children of the poor (preface).

According to a study and report on educational reform and at-risk students, conducted by Rossi et al. (1995), during the 1970’s, the term at-risk was still used to represent minority and poor students (p. 23). However, during the mid to late 1990’s Rossi et al. (1995) suggest the term at-risk again evolved, this time to represent a much more diverse spectrum of students (p.25). The term at-risk came to mean more than as a designation for minorities and poor students. Rossi et al. stated,

Yet they are not the only children at risk. Any child who lacks sufficient support may fail to develop adequate academic and social skills. Prenatal conditions, quality of health, family characteristics, peer influences, community climate, and social status may be affected by support networks and significantly influence a child’s “readiness to learn” (p. 25).

Contemporarily, according to Ormrod (2010), at-risk has come to encompass any and all students who have special needs.

Ormrod (2010) states, “For example, they may have learning disabilities or emotional and behavioral problems that interfere with their learning and achievement. Others may be students whose cultural backgrounds don’t mesh easily with the dominant culture at school or may be students from home environments in which academic success is neither supported nor encouraged” (p. 138).
Ormrod (2010) suggests at-risk students now come from every socioeconomic background, and students at the greatest risk are those whose families speak little or no English. However, despite the new designations of at-risk for all socioeconomic levels, poor children and students growing up in single parent homes are still more likely to drop out (p. 138).

Variables and Characteristics

Many variables exist which contribute to, and can be used to predict the probability of students becoming underachievers at-risk (Bowers, 2009). According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2009), seven thousand students drop out of school every day, and more than a million of the students who enter as freshmen each fall, fail to graduate four years later (p.1). Of the annual dropouts, nearly 11 percent are students who are not considered special education students, learning disabled, or students with disabilities (Kemp, 2006, p. 236). Ormrod (2010) suggests boys are more at risk than girls, and African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans are more at-risk than European American and Asian American students (p. 138). Regionally, according to Ormrod (2010), students in large cities and rural areas are more at-risk than suburban students. Students at greatest risk are those whose families speak little or no English.

Research suggests, (Bowers, 2009; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007), grade retention is a major indicator of at-risk/dropout probability. However, other variables considered to be indications of at-risk probability include, but are not limited to; single-parent homes, social-economics, absenteeism, sibling dropout, and disciplinary problems, to name just a few (Bowers, 2009, p.192).
According to Jimerson and Ferguson (2007), nearly two and a half million students are retained each year, at a cost of nearly 14 million dollars. In a longitudinal study conducted by Jimerson and Ferguson (2007) on the effectiveness of grade retention, the findings suggest grade retention in various forms is ineffective as an at-risk, dropout prevention tool (p. 314). Jimerson and Ferguson (2007) suggest that within some school districts, 30 to 50 percent of ninth graders have received retention as a form of intervention (p. 315). Contemporary educational changes, according to Jimerson and Ferguson (2007), which endorse ending continual forms of social promotion, and passing of students despite the student’s failure to master the objectives, plays a large role in the large number of students being retained (p. 315). According to Jacob and Lefgren (2009), retention of elementary age students does not always correlate to at-risk, drop out potential by high school, but retention within middle school grades does (p. 33).

Historically, according to Ormrod (2010, p. 138), Eckstein and Wolpin (1999, p. 49), and Riele (2006), at-risk students, specifically those who eventually drop out, possess the following characteristics:

- A history of academic failure. When compared to students who graduate on time, at-risk students have poor academic histories, have weak reading and study skills, score lower on achievement tests, earn lower grades, are more likely to repeat a grade level, and have more absences.
- Are older than their classmates. Due to having to repeat a grade level, at-risk students are often older than their classmates. Ormrod (2010) states, “Quite possibly, school becomes less attractive when students find they must attend
class with peers they perceive as less physically and socially mature than they are”

- Are more prone to have emotional and behavioral problems. When compared to students that graduate on time, at-risk students tend to have lower levels of self-esteem.

- Generally associate with other underachieving/at-risk students. When compared to students that graduate on time, at-risk students tend to associate with underachieving/at-risk, and in some cases, anti-social students. Often, at-risk peers distract each other away from school and academic endeavors.

- Lack a natural attachment to their schools. Students at-risk often fail to identify with their schools, or perceive themselves as an important part of the academic environment. Rarely, if ever, will at-risk students engage in extra-curricular activities.

- Are more likely to be unemployed. When compared to students that graduate on time, at-risk students who eventually drop out are 72 percent more likely to be unemployed. On average, earn $10,000 less per year, receive more public assistance, and are more likely to become teenage parents.

- Are less healthy than those who graduate. When compared to students that graduate on time, at-risk students are less likely to have health insurance, resulting in a national lifetime expense of nearly 17 billion dollars. At-risk students are also at higher risk for a variety of diseases, and early death.

- Are more likely to become delinquents. On average, underachieving/at-risk students have more behavior issues, are more likely to be suspended, use drugs,
and engage in delinquent, criminal activity. According to Harlow (2003), nearly 50 percent of federal inmates, 68 percent of state prison inmates, and 60 percent of jail inmates did not earn a regular high-school degree.

Outside of external variables contributing to underachieving/at-risk probability, Cassidy and Bates (2005) suggest at-risk students portray characteristic attributes which reinforce the probability of becoming underachieving/at-risk. According to Kim and Van Tassel-Baska (2010), underachievers often dislike the controlled arrangement of the classroom environment, mandatory regulations and rules, and conformity at the expense of the individual learner (p. 186). This resentment, Kim and Van Tassel-Baska (2010) suggest, leads to unhappiness with school, enabling and driving the student to become underachieving/at-risk.

Often, according to Kim and Van Tassel-Baska (2010), underachievers are not provided opportunities to be creative, express themselves as individuals, perceive social acceptance, or earn and comprehend teacher reinforcement for mistakes (p. 186). This cycle of withdrawal and negative/lacking reinforcement drives and enables the student to further underachieve (p. 186). Kim and Van Tassel-Baska (2010) also suggest underachievement may be the result of affective dysfunction, a condition in which students fail to develop discipline and self-regulation in relation to their other skills and talents, resulting in underachieving performance, especially within school environments.

According to Kemp (2006), students with emotional/behavioral disorders have a dropout rate between 50 and 59 percent; while between 32 and 36 percent of students with learning disabilities annually drop out (p. 236). Based upon research from Editorial Projects in Education (2007), 58 percent of Hispanic students and 53 percent of black
students will graduate on time with a regular diploma, compared to 80 percent of Asian students and 76 percent of white students. Editorial Projects in Education (2007) states, “Graduation rates are consistently lower for racial and ethnic minorities, males, all students in impoverished and urban areas, and segregated communities” (p. 21).

**Preventative Interventions and Programs**

Historically, according to Jeffery (1978), interventions and programs to aid at-risk students initially began with the implementation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Contemporarily, Lessard et al. (2009) suggest, although a relatively stable percentage of at-risk students will eventually drop-out of school, other students, equally at-risk, will not (p. 21). Referred to as “resilient students,” Lessard et al. (2009) suggest that despite their designation of being “at-risk,” these students have adapted, persevered through the risks, and succeeded at graduating (p. 21).

According to Lessard et al. (2009), research into effective interventions and at-risk success stories is rare; however, research which focuses on the variables that keep at-risk students in school could prove valuable for prevention programs (p. 21).

Lessard et al. (2009), state, “In an effort to improve the success rate of students, researchers have studied both students who succeed and youth who drop out, but students who are at risk and eventually succeed in obtaining their diploma have not benefited from much scrutiny” (p. 21).

According to Finn and Rock (1997), one of the most effective tools for countering underachievement/at-risk behaviors which lead to dropping out, is student engagement. In a study conducted by Finn and Rock (1997), the researchers found student engagement and their ability to deal with problems was associated with lower drop-out rates. Among
the most important factors found to be associated with engagement success were two personality characteristics that were identified as important in early child development: self-esteem and locus of control.

According to Fournier, (2013), locus of control, or the idea that external variables are responsible for an individual’s fate, has been attributed to lower achievement and higher drop-out rates. Significant within the study, note Finn and Rock (1997), was the apparent correlation between at-risk students’ self-esteem, an internalized locus of control, and their ability to succeed in high school. Although Finn and Rock (1997) suggest locus of control has had a long history within educational research, noted for having a correlation with levels of student success, they also suggest the possibility of changing locus of control as a means of countering at-risk behaviors.

Besides internalized locus of control, Somers and Piliawsky (2004) also suggest the following variables as means of at-risk intervention: teacher demonstrations of care and respect, teacher interest in student growth, expectations of achievement, curricula relevance, class size, engagement, regular attendance, and parental expectations and involvement (p. 17).

**Academic and Peer Tutoring**

Specifically important in at-risk intervention programs, Somers and Piliawsky (2004) suggest, are the use of academic tutoring programs during non-school hours, to aid at-risk students with general study skills and academic problems (p. 18). Peer tutoring is also important within at-risk intervention programs (p.18). Often referred to as reciprocal peer tutoring (RPT), contemporary research suggests (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004; AVID, 2010), when used as a means of at-risk intervention, RPT’s have produced
higher rates of mathematics achievement, positive self-image, social acceptance, positive behavior and conduct, and student task-oriented behavior (p.18). Somers and Piliawsky (2004), Lessard et al. (2006), and Weinstein (1995), noted that programs which enable students to bond with teachers and peers provide at-risk students opportunities for increased academic achievement, a vision of attainable futures, and involvement in school activities (p. 18). Similarly, Somers and Piliawsky (2004) note parental involvement in intervention processes as contributing to prevention of dropout (p. 18).

**Extra-Curricular and Outreach Programs**

According to Somers and Piliawsky (2004), extra-curricular activities and student outreach programs have also proved to be effective variables for preventing at-risk behavior, and dropouts (p. 18-19). Extra-curricular and outreach programs reduce failure and dropout levels by engaging students in activities outside of the regular school environment (p. 18). Somers and Piliawsky (2004) suggest such activities as community service, volunteer service, vocational training, volunteering in hospitals and nursing homes, and other peer-related services all provide marginalized students the opportunity to express their talents and abilities (p. 18).

**Existing Programs at Valley High School**

**Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)**

Currently at Valley High, two at-risk intervention and preventative programs exist. The first program, AVID, was added to the various school programs in 2009. Currently, AVID, which has been in use for nearly 30 years throughout the United States, is considered an effective at-risk and drop-out prevention program within problematic schools, (AVID, 2010). Developed in San Diego in the 1980’s by Clairemont High
School English instructor, Mary Catherine Swanson (AVID, 2010; Black et al., 2008), AVID has experienced growth over the last three decades. Initially consisting of a single class of 32 students, AVID has evolved to currently serve over 400,000 students in over 47 states, the District of Columbia, and 16 different countries (AVID, 2010).

**AVID Students**

Specifically, the AVID program is designed for students who are considered to be “academic middle,” or B, C, and D students (AVID, 2010; Black, et al. 2008). AVID (2010) suggests these students have the potential to academically succeed and complete high school, but they are at-risk due to variables contributing to underachievement (para. 4). Within Valley High School, AVID students are recruited and determined by grade point average, and whether or not the student has passed the state required graduation exam which is required for graduation. In order to be considered for the AVID program within Valley, students must be considered academic middle (Valley High Registrar, personal communication, September, 2012).

**AVID Elective Course**

Once accepted and enrolled within the AVID program, students take various traditional courses, but are also enrolled in the AVID elective course. For one period a day, students take part in a smaller class focusing on organizational and study skills, critical thinking and problem solving, working with peers and college tutors, participating in motivational and enrichment and activities that aid in improving their vision of the future (para. 5). AVID (2010) suggests within the AVID program, student self-image improves, and students become academic role models for other students (para. 5).
AVID Curricula

Developed by middle and high school teachers in collaboration with college professors, the rigorous AVID curricula incorporates a foundation framed by writing, inquiry, collaboration, and reading (WICR), (para. 6). Within the school to be studied, the AVID instructors received formal training in California prior to the 2009 school year, and they also take part in annual AVID conferences and workshops, each year. According to AVID (2010), curricula are implemented within elective and core courses, AVID schools, and even in schools where AVID courses are not offered (para. 6).

AVID Faculty

According to AVID (2010), essential to a successful AVID program is the site coordinator (para. 7). Often, the site coordinator is an individual who works well with both secondary and college level students and faculty, organizes curricula and activities, and is dedicated to serving “academic middle” students. The site coordinator also is responsible for implementation of school-wide AVID components, and for working with advisors and students in preparation for college (para. 7).

AVID Tutors

Within the AVID program, specifically the elective course, AVID tutors play an essential role (para. 8). Often, AVID tutors, who also serve as role models within the program, are formally trained students from nearby colleges and universities who facilitate the rigorous curricula. In many instances, AVID students who eventually graduate and move on to college will return as tutors (para. 8).
AVID Parents

Parents of AVID students are generally encouraged to reinforce positive academics and achievement. (para. 9). AVID (2010) suggests the parents of AVID students will often serve on advisory boards, take part in site meetings, and are regularly contacted by the site coordinator to participate in family workshops (para. 9). Parental involvement is one area the school to be studied has struggled with. Teachers and administrators are continually trying to implement new programs to establish and maintain a level of parental/community involvement.

AVID Findings and Results

Findings from data produced by AVID programs, and independent research, both validate the effectiveness of AVID as an intervention measure for at-risk students (para. 10). According to AVID (2010), when compared to non-AVID at-risk students, AVID students are more likely to enroll and succeed in Advanced Placement courses, complete college eligibility requirements, and be accepted and enrolled in four-year colleges (para. 10).

Despite an established support of the AVID program from within contemporary research (Black et al. 2008) critics of the program suggest adequate evidence of the program’s ability to change influential variables does not yet exist (p.114). In one comparative study (Bailey, 2002) using inferential statistics, significant differences were not acknowledged between AVID and non-AVID students on the targeted course-taking patterns, nor on behavioral variables. However, after baseline achievement data was adjusted, AVID students showed increased academic achievement (Bailey, 2002).
Another study (Gandar, et al. 1998), noted when compared to national enrollment averages, AVID student enrollment was not maintained one year later.

**Jobs for America’s Graduates (JAG)**

JAG, the second of two at-risk intervention and preventative programs implemented within Valley High School, was added to the school’s programs a year after AVID was added, in 2010. According to Jobs for America’s Graduates (2006), JAG was founded in 1980, and over the duration of the last three decades has grown to serve 750,000 students within 800 different JAG programs in more than 32 states (para. 1). Jobs for America’s Graduates (2006) suggests JAG programs have achieved amazing results within middle schools and high schools, contributing to aiding at-risk youth to stay in school through graduation (para. 1). Within Valley High School, both the AVID and JAG programs have shown to be effective programs for not only aiding in drop-out prevention for students at-risk, but also playing a role in assisting program graduates with pursuing post-secondary education, and in securing entry level jobs with career advancement opportunities.

**JAG Students.** According to Jobs for America’s Graduates (2006), student eligibility and recruitment are determined by what are referred to as “barriers to success” (para. 6-9). JAG’s designated barriers of success consist of the four separate types of barriers; academic, personal, environmental and income-work related. Table 2 represents the four JAG barrier designations and their characteristics (according to Jobs for America’s Graduates, 2006).
### Table 2
**JAG Barrier designations and characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrier</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic</strong></td>
<td>• One or more grades behind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Low academic performance, a grade point average of “C” or below.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Deficient in basic skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Failed state proficiency exams.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Excessive absences.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Has been suspended, expelled or on probation during high school.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Has repeated a grade level.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Has previously dropped out.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Limited English proficiency.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Personal</strong></td>
<td>• Special education certified.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lack of motivation and maturity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Emotional disorders.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Has a documented disability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Health problems which impair educational progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Environmental</strong></td>
<td>• Family environment not conducive to education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is pregnant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Already has children.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Has documented addiction problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Has been convicted of a criminal offense other than traffic violations.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Violent behaviors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Homeless.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Runaway.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Income-Work</strong></td>
<td>• Economically disadvantaged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related</td>
<td>• Minority.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Inadequate or no work experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lacks occupational skills.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within Valley High School, similar to the AVID program, JAG students are recruited and determined by grade point average, and whether or not the student has passed the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) exam (Arizona Department of Education, 2010), which is required for graduation.
**JAG Model.** The objectives of the JAG model, according to Jobs for America’s Graduates (2006, para. 1), consist of:

- Targeting and recruiting students capable of service jobs.
- Keeping JAG students enrolled and active in school through graduation, or the completion of a general education diploma (GED).
- Continued support services for JAG students for 12 months after graduation or attainment of a GED.
- Assistance with entrance into post-secondary education, or entry level jobs that lead to careers.
- 12 month follow up assistance and services for dropouts, to aid in GED/diploma attainment.

**JAG Components.** The components of the JAG model, according to Jobs for America’s Graduates (2006) consists of a combination of best practices and performance standards (para. 3). Specifically, Jobs for America’s Graduates (2006) suggests the components are comprised of four “program applications” (para. 3). The three program applications are:

- The middle school program, for students 12 to 14 years of age.
- The multi-year dropout prevention program, for students in grades nine through twelve.
- The school-to-career program, for students in their senior years of high school.

**Performance Outcomes.** According to Jobs for America’s Graduates (2006), all data collected via JAG programs implemented within various schools, is tracked and recorded by the National Data Management System (NDMS). Data which is tracked and
reported includes information on participants served, services delivered, and the various outcomes achieved (para. 1). NDMS compiles the data and produces data reports for schools each year. Specific performance outcomes which JAG programs strive to attain are:

- A 90 percent graduation/completion rate by the end of twelfth grade.
- An 80 percent positive outcome rate, by the close of the 12 month follow up period.
- A 60 percent employment rate.
- An 80 percent placement rate within fulltime employment, college, or military service.
- Less than a 10 percent unable to contact rate, during the 12 month follow up period.

Ultimately, despite continual reform, research and implementation, (Rossi et al. 1995; Stillwell et al. 2011), many at-risk students still fail to graduate (Robinson, 2008; Stillwell et al. 2011). To understand the relevance of the underachievers/at-risk students, and their needs, perceptions and lived experiences, definitions and background information becomes important. Underachieving/at-risk students may be anyone who does not perform at their full potential (Bowers, 2009), or has the possibility of not succeeding in school (Riele, 2006).

**Alternative Forms of Education: Schools and Programs**

Eighty years ago, in his introduction to the philosophy of education, Dewey (1916) suggested that within traditional forms of educational experiences, conformity is made equivalent to uniformity (p. 51), and the natural instincts and abilities of children
are either disregarded, or suppressed (p. 50). Saito (2000) suggests contemporary educators are still frantically searching for an educational vision which can reverse the selfishness, cynicism and moral decline of the young, (p. 155). Saito (2000) argues in favor of a holistic vision offered by Dewey (1916), which he believes may not only provide answers for education, but also has the ability to fix democracy from within (p. 155).

More contemporarily, Clarken (2007) suggests traditional education can be characterized as materialistic education, which fails to decrease levels of violence, conflict, hate, instability, oppression, prejudice, hopelessness and greed (p. 1). Clarken (2007) states:

This materialistic view of the human race assumes that we are no more than animals, and that the overriding goal of life is the satisfaction of our animal needs.

It encourages materialism, competition, elitism, division, disunity, injustices and a limited and limiting view of human reality and possibilities. (p. 1)

Siegrist et al. (2010) suggest alternative programs offer a needed change for students who do not do well in traditional settings. Carver and Lewis (2010) concur:

Alternative schools and programs are designed to address the needs of students that typically cannot be met in regular schools. The students who attend alternative schools and programs are typically at risk of educational failure (as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school). (p. 1)

According to Fowler (2002), opposition to alternative schools and programs suggest the possibility that alternatives could lead to segregation in student placement and
divisions within curriculum (p. 15). Based upon the National Center for Educational
Statistics data from the 2007-2008 school year, Carver and Lewis (2010) suggest 10,300
districts in the United States currently have alternatives available for at-risk students
(p.6). Carver and Lewis (2010) also suggest that nearly 645,500 students were enrolled
within the alternative schools and programs available for the 2007-08 school year (p.8).
According to Foley and Pang (2006), various types of alternative schools and programs
exist. Currently, alternatives; charter schools (Aud et al. 2011), magnet schools, school
within-a-school, distance learning, home schooling, and specialized programs that attract
students based on specialized curricula (Carver & Lewis, 2010).

One increasingly popular alternative for students who for any number of reasons
need a change from the traditional school environments, are charter schools (U.S.
over the last nine years, the number of students enrolled in charters has more than tripled
from 340,000 in 1999, to over 1.4 million in 2009 (para. 2). According to the U.S.
Department of Education (2010), the percentage of charters considered to be “high-
poverty” schools, has also increased over the last nine years, from 13 percent in 1999, to
30 percent in 2009 (para. 3).

**New Alternatives: Holistic Education and Critical Theory**

Cook-Sather (2006) suggests, over the last 15 years, a new educational framework
has begun to develop, which places students, their thoughts and concerns, within the
realms of educational research and reform (p. 359-360). The roots of critical theory in
contemporary education can be traced back to the social theory ideals of German
philosophers of the early twentieth century (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2005).
According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2005), a critical theory may be distinguished from a traditional theory according to a specific practical purpose: a theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human emancipation, “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (para. 1). According to Leonardo (2004), critical theory presents social frameworks that can be used to develop alternative and emancipatory social environments (p. 11). Cho (2010) suggests critical theory frameworks provide hope, resistance of ineffective models, and a component which focuses on the importance of humanity.

Alternatives to the traditional education experience have taken multiple forms, one important alternative being the freedom school. Freedom schools offer an alternative to traditional schools which, according to Chicago Freedom School (2012) are often filled with inequalities, and dependent upon poorly funded government programs (para. 3). Other contemporary options include holistic professional learning communities or PLC’s (Paulo Freire Freedom School, 2010). Contrasting traditional educational experience, holistic PLC’s provide an alternative which focuses on the whole of the student via social and educational equity, and environmental sustainability (Paulo Freire Freedom School, 2010). One example of this new holistic learning alternative is the Paulo Freire Freedom School, located in Tucson, Arizona (El Pueblo Integral, 2010).

Established in 2005 as a holistic alternative to traditional schools in the area, the philosophy and curricula implemented within the school are based upon the works of critical education theorist, Paulo Freire (El Pueblo Integral, 2010). According to El Pueblo Integral (2010), education and development must address the whole of the
student, body, mind, heart and soul, and should also include the relationship of the individual to the community (para.2).

According to Forbes (1996), alternatives, and more specifically, holistic education, which began as an educational paradigm shift in the 1960’s, has gained popularity and growth over the last few years due to the contrast with conventional education. Forbes (1996) states, “I feel that what gave rise to their popularity is particularly important because it is a combination of new perceptions and values which seems to be something like an international grass roots movement – a movement which rejects many of the authorities as well as the values and perceptions of the immediate past.” (p.1).

Despite the various arguments for and against alternatives for traditional education, the need exists for more information on the representation, needs, perceptions, and lived experiences of underachievers in relation to educational efficacy. To understand phenomena surrounding underachievers/at-risk representation, needs, and perceptions, and lived experiences in relation to educational efficacy, information on alternatives for underachieving/at-risk students becomes important.

**Student Representation, Voice and Choice**

Cook-Sather (2006) stated that “In the early 1990s, a number of educators and social critics noted the exclusion of student voices from conversations about learning, teaching, and schooling” (p. 361). According to Allen (1995), very little research has been done that places the student needs, perceptions and experience at the center of attention (p.286). Students, their feelings, interests, fears, thoughts and concerns are generally excluded from educational research, and if by chance students are represented
at all within a study, they are usually viewed from the external perspective of adults (p.286).

Allen (1995), states that “Rarely is the perspective of the student explored” (p.286). However, over the last 15 years, a new educational framework has begun to develop that places students, and their thoughts and concerns, within the realms of educational research and reform (Cook-Sather, 2006, pp. 359-360).

According to Cook-Sather (2004), student voice has received documentation in Canada, England, and more recently the United States (p. 359). Within educational reform in Canada, Cook-Sather (2006) suggests student voice has evolved from a topic lacking from reform efforts in the early 1990’s, to one which may be the turning point needed to change the cultural and practical models of high schools (pp.361-362). In England, according to Cook-Sather (2006), student voice efforts are institutionalized within various schools, primarily because it is mandated by the government (p. 369). In England, the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED), takes into consideration various forms of student voice as forms of evidence in reinforcing teachers (p.369).

Fielding (2004, 2010), suggests that having students articulate their thoughts and concerns in regards to educational processes is not a new field of thought, rather, a re-emerging one (p. 100), that has recently evolved due to the development of common vocabulary (Cook-Sather, 2006). According to Fielding (2004, 2010), it is the detrimental policies and practices of the past two decades that have aided in reinforcing the new emergence of what is being called “student voice” (p. 198).

Student voice, according to Fielding (2004) encompasses various activities that promote student reflection, communication, dialogue, discussion, and action on
educational matters that relate to students (p. 199). Student voice may also include educational programs that encourage and enable students to communicate their views, and take part in the changes; schools councils, governing bodies, and panels for selection of new staff (p. 199).

Despite the various insights and information evoked via student representation and voice programs, opposing viewpoints and arguments exist (Taylor & Robinson, 2009). Critics of the ideas suggest that in many situations student voice programs lead to basic attempts at school improvement, rather than a deeper sense of social engagement and reflection (Taylor & Robinson, 2009, p. 163). Clark and Percy-Smith (2006) state, “It is clear that, given powerful adult agendas at play, ‘having a say’ is insufficient to achieve effective and meaningful participation for young people” (p. 2).

Clark and Percy-Smith (2006) suggest, instead of focusing on implementing and institutionalizing student representation and voice programs, considerations need to be made of the interrelated and complex values and interests that exist within everyday social activities (p. 2).

According to Cook-Sather (2006), the foundational ideals surrounding student representation and voice have evolved into a much larger context, with multiple purposes (p. 364). The consideration of positive and negative arguments surrounding student representation and voice within educational research and reform further reinforces the need for additional inquiry and research (p.364).

To better understand phenomena surrounding underachievers/at-risk students and their, needs, perceptions and lived experiences in relation to educational efficacy, information on student representation, voice and choice, becomes important.
Conclusions

Public education has a long, interrelated history within American industry, agriculture, culture and society. Research suggests as society changes over time, educational institutions also evolve, meeting the contemporary needs of society (Ediger, 2003). However, critics of contemporary public education posit traditional schools have not only failed to evolve, (Clarken, 2007; El Pueblo Integral, 2010), but that, traditional education may be the cause of the breakdown of family and cultural loss (Gatto, 2003), and partially to blame for contemporary teachers having to become “surrogate parents” (p. 140).

Lagemann (2005) suggests that possibly due to various attitudes in academia, some of the educational reform efforts have not been as productive as intended. These ineffective reform efforts, which may have hindered academic success for students from at-risk populations (Lagemann, 2005), bring to light a need for further contemporary research and study pertaining to the representation, needs, perceptions and experiences of underachieving/at-risk students in relation to educational efficacy. The theories contributed to the study by Bloom (1956), Gardner (1993), Maslow (1999), Fielding (2004, 2010), Freire (1994), and various sustainability theorists provided a framework that creates a foundation for educators and researchers to gain better insight into the lives of at-risks students.

Researchers have conducted pertinent research related to students and their learning, but according to Allen (1995), little research exists which specifically pertains to the student perspective, from a student perspective (p. 286). This study combines the
use of theories and practices known to work, with theories and practices, which, experts in the field of education predict will work.

**Summary**

A review of available resources and literature revealed the necessity for educators and reformers to be aware and pro-active towards the representation, needs, perceptions and experiences of underachieving/at-risk students in relation to educational efficacy. The purpose of this qualitative study, of phenomenological design was to explore educational efficacy through the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk, academic middle students, and their educators at Valley High School in the southwestern United States.

Although according to Allen (1995), very little research has been done which places the student needs, perceptions and experience at the center of attention (p.286), Cook-Sather (2006) suggests over the last 15 years a new educational framework has begun to develop which places students, their thoughts and concerns, within the realms of educational research and reform (p. 359-360). The latest evolution of what Cook-Sather (2006) suggests contemporary researchers are calling “student-voice,” is the need for research pertaining to students, their feelings, interests, fears, thoughts and concerns, which, are generally excluded from educational research (p.286).

The general problem is that academia’s move towards a standardized educational curricula and experience within contemporary education may focus on increasing academic achievement for all students (Pearson Assessments, 2003), but lacks the input of student stakeholders (Fielding, 2004), and progressive, whole-student, (El Pueblo Integral, 2010) components. Educational standardization which lacks whole-student
components may be mis-educative (Dewey, 1938), for various student populations, as evidenced by continual underachieving/at-risk students, continual dropout rates (Stillwell, et al. 2011), and wavering standardized test results (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Chapter two included relevant historical and current literature pertaining to (a) historical and contextual information pertaining to public education and reform, (b) learning theories, (c) underachieving/at-risk students, (d) forms of alternative education including holistic education and critical theory, and (e) student representation and voice.

The following chapter provides further explanation of the methodology used within the conducted study to explore educational efficacy through the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk, academic middle students, and their educators at Valley High School in the southwestern United States.
Chapter 3: Method

The focus and purpose of the conducted qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore educational efficacy and achievement levels through the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students, their teachers, and their administrators at Valley High School in the southwestern United States. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2009), 7,000 at-risk students drop out of school every day, and more than a million of the students who enter as freshmen each fall, fail to graduate, four years later (p.1). Ideally, a study of this nature will aid in providing information into explore educational efficacy through the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students, and their educators at Valley High School in the southwestern United States.

Although according to Allen (1995), very little research has been done which places the student needs, perceptions and experience at the center of attention (p.286), Cook-Sather (2006) suggests that over the last 15 years, a new educational framework has begun to develop, which places students, and their thoughts and concerns, within the realms of educational research and reform (p. 359-360). The latest evolution of what Cook-Sather (2006), suggests contemporary researchers are calling “student-voice,” is the need for research pertaining to students, their feelings, interests, fears, thoughts and concerns, which are generally excluded from educational research (p.286).

The problem is despite continual attempts at educational reform (Rossi et al. 1995; Stillwell et al. 2011) many students still fail to graduate (Robinson, 2008, Stillwell et al., 2011). Historically, these reform efforts have included all important stakeholder parties, except for students (Rossi et al., 1995). While NCLB has addressed achievement
goals for all students, the voice of underachieving students has not been considered because the goals are based on a one-size-fits-all nature, rather than the efforts that would draw out each individual’s unique gifts and talents. (Irmsher, 1997, Ormrod, 2010, Rossi et. al., 1995). Dynan (1980) suggests that students, as clients of education institutions, have a right to take part in assessing the services they receive (p.4), Hargreaves (1992), suggests students also have the right to negotiate.

The problem creates a need within the contemporary realm of public education for more insight into how to include underachieving/at risk students into decisions related to educational efficacy, and how to represent their, needs, perceptions and experiences in those decisions. Chapter three begins with details pertaining to the chosen qualitative methodology for the study, and a discussion of the appropriateness of the chosen phenomenological design.

Nature of the Design

According to Creswell (2009) and Leedy and Ormrod (2010), qualitative research is intended to answer broad, subjective questions and sub-questions about why certain phenomena or areas of inquiry exist. Through multiple analysis of unstructured, subjective information, which consisted of information from interviews, emails, notes, observations, transcripts, and surveys, varying forms of feedback, videos, and photos, I drew conclusions and interpretations about the phenomena in question.

Creswell (2009) suggests the first step in any qualitative research project is to define the phenomena or area of inquiry that the study will focus on. Creswell (2009) also suggests the problem statement within the study should define the reasoning for conducting qualitative research. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2010), within
qualitative research, the problem statement is much less objective than a quantitative problem statement. Leedy and Ormrod (2010) suggest that although a quantitative problem statement is concise and to the point, a qualitative problem generally does not narrow on a specific aspect, but rather, will consider all processes involved in the phenomena as they begin to develop a perspective.

The researcher has the responsibility to accomplish two goals within the purpose statement of a qualitative study. First, the researcher determines and defines the problem (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010.) Second, the researcher clearly outlines the intention of the study (Creswell, 2009). The problem statement gives reasoning for conducting research (Creswell, 2009), and the purpose statement plays an important role in qualitative research, guiding both the researcher and reader as to the true aim of the research.

**Research Method and Design Appropriateness**

Contemporary research (Gutek, 2004; Ormrod, 2010), suggests phenomenology is increasingly becoming more important within educational research. The exploration, data collection and analysis, and interpretation of the underlying and emerging themes, and patterns are important, especially for educators (Gutek, 2004). The capacity of phenomenology to explore perceptions as derived from experience allows educators to understand the phenomenon of learning from the learner’s perspective.

Leedy and Ormrod (2010) suggest that a phenomenological design is relevant and appropriate when researching the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of individuals. Phenomenology, historically based on the works of German mathematician, Edmund Husserl (Zavari, 2003), provides insight in to themes specific to the nature of the phenomena being studied (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).
Specifically, qualitative phenomenological research is based in the exploration of multiple perceptions, and an examination of the experiences considered meaningful to individuals within different social contexts (Moustakas, 1994). The student participants of this study were asked to describe their needs, perceptions, and experiences pertaining to the effectiveness of their educational experience. Participants were also asked how their needs, perceptions and experiences are represented within educational experiences. Teacher and administrator participants were asked about their perspectives regarding the effectiveness of educational processes for students at-risk.

A qualitative, phenomenological approach is appropriate for this study, due to the need to research phenomena surrounding the representation, needs, perceptions, and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students. Through a phenomenological methodology, themes and patterns were uncovered pertaining to the phenomena surrounding how effective schools and teachers are in providing educational opportunities for at risk students.

According to Creswell (2009), qualitative and quantitative methods differ in various aspects. Contrasting the preferred design with quantitative designs that may be used to examine cause and effect variables (Creswell, 2009), a qualitative, phenomenological design is more appropriate, due to the need to explore lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2009). This study is not based on an examination of relationships between dependent and independent variables; rather, the focus of the study was to explore emergent themes and patterns related to phenomena surrounding educational efficacy of underachieving/at-risk students. Quantitative measures are not suitable for investigating the representation, needs, perceptions and
lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students. Therefore, a phenomenological design, suitable for research involving perceptions and lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2009), was most appropriate.

Phenomenological research is based upon exploring the individual participant’s realities and experiences, and trying to capture and determine the essence of the phenomena being studied (Neuman, 2006). Thus, a qualitative, phenomenological approach is ideal for discovering various meanings involved with at-risk students’ educational experiences through an analysis of emergent, thematic patterns.

Various qualitative designs exist, which may be used to explore emerging themes and patterns (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2009). Ethnography is a design method that may aid in formulating themes and patterns from the experiences of individuals within a cultural setting. However, ethnography was not appropriate for the study, because the purpose of the study does not involve examining cultural models (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2009).

A case study was also not appropriate for the conducted study. Case studies, according to Creswell (2009), are used in the examination of “case by case” events within a bounded system. Because the purpose of the conducted study was to explore educational efficacy through the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students, and their educators a case by case examination study was inappropriate.

The grounded theory design was not selected for the study because grounded theory designs are based upon the development of a theory to explain specific events and processes (Creswell, 2009). The objective of the conducted study was to explore the
representation, needs, perceptions, and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students.

**Research Questions**

Generally, according to Creswell (2009), after the qualitative problem statement and purpose statement have been established, the researcher then begins the process of developing the research questions (Creswell, 2009). Creswell (2009) suggests a good approach for creating the research questions is to use a single, broad, subjective question to guide the study and sub-questions. The sub-questions should be narrow and specifically align to the broad question. Sub-questions should become either issue questions or topical questions that will help to produce as much information as possible (Creswell, 1998).

To explore phenomena surrounding educational efficacy for underachieving/at-risk students, non-linear interviews and observations were used. The following research questions were developed using related and relevant topics and research addressed within the literature review, and guided the phenomenological design in an attempt to obtain information pertaining to the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students.

**RCENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION.** What needs, perceptions and experiences surround the curricula, instructional strategies, and delivery methods pertaining to educational efficacy?

**RRESEARCH SUB-QUESTION.** How are student needs, perceptions and experiences surrounding the curricula, instructional strategies, and delivery methods represented within the educational experience?
To obtain information, students, teachers, and administrators were asked to respond to the interview questions specifically relevant to them. Students, teachers, and administrators were the best sources to address the interview questions, because these individuals have the knowledge and experience of the phenomenon investigated.

The intended amount of time for the interviews with the students, teachers, and administrators participating in the interviews took approximately a half hour to an hour. Each participant received as much time as s/he needed to answer the questions. Data collection included face to face interviews with all participants during school hours, and at their convenience. The information gathered from the interviews helped to establish a better understanding of how underachieving/at-risk students feel about the efficacy of their educational experiences. Responses to interview questions developed from relevant issues in the literature review addressed the research questions. The interviews were an attempt to obtain information for the study (see appendices A and B).

**Population and Sampling Frame**

The population for the study included underachieving/at-risk students, their teachers and administrators. Within the district, according to Valley High Registrar, Valley serves a very distinct socioeconomic demographic, with nearly 75 percent of the families at or below the poverty level as determined by the average free and reduced lunch program (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2011). The sample represented the district-identified at-risk population within the school. Students involved within the study were 18, or older. Through the aid of the registrar at Valley High School, at-risk participants were identified by their overall grade point average and high stakes exam scores. The conducted study did not depend upon random sampling, but upon purposive,
selective sampling. Due to the specific characteristics of the participants involved, and the desire to explore lived experiences (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994), purposive sampling was used. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative studies are not based upon probability sampling; therefore, the study employed a purposive, non-probability sampling for exploring emergent themes and patterns surrounding underachieving/at-risk students.

The characteristics of the sample were appropriate for conducting a qualitative study. The participants of the study were selected from the population of underachieving/at-risk students. Their teachers and administrators within the school were also included. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2010), qualitative samples are dependent upon the research questions, and should represent the entire population from which the inferences are to be drawn (p.147). Leedy and Ormrod (2010) suggest a good rule of thumb on populations around 100 people, would be to sample the entire population (p. 214).

However, due to population and age restrictions within Valley’s AVID and JAG programs, the study sample consisted of a deviant sample of 31 individuals. The study sample consisted of 15 at-risk students and recent graduates, 14 of their teachers and one administrator. Teachers and administrators of students at risk were considered important to the study due to their daily interactions with the students and their ability to provide substantial information pertaining to phenomena surrounding the students at risk.

The data collection process was specific for students, teachers and administrators involved with the phenomena surrounding underachievement. Permission from the school
district and school administration was obtained (see appendix D) in order to select and enlist the participants in the research study.

Contact information was provided to administrators and selected instructors, who then aided in enlisting the students selected to participate in the study. Participation in the study is completely voluntary. Teacher participants were selected from various disciplines including English, mathematics, science, social-studies, fine-arts, and foreign language.

All participants were provided an interview questionnaire with open ended questions aimed at eliciting information pertaining to their representation, needs, perceptions, and lived experiences. Participants answered the interview questions verbally, which were then digitally recorded and transcribed. Using a small, deviant case sampling of ease, participants responses aided in developing details pertaining to phenomena surrounding underachievers.

**Informed Consent**

The interview process involved insignificant risk for study participants. The interview questions were not designed to elicit personal information pertaining to home life, or relationships, and anonymity was guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms and code names. Interview questions focused on eliciting information pertaining to educational experiences, and the questions required participants to provide no information pertaining to specific individuals. Participants were encouraged to express themselves with honesty when providing details into their representation, needs, perceptions, and experiences.
There was no penalty for withdrawal from the study, and no explanations were required for refusal to participate. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time. A letter of permission from the district superintendent and principal was included with the study proposal for IRB approval. A copy of the dissertation proposal, accompanied by copies of informed consent forms and interview questions were provided to the superintendent and the principal, prior to initiating the study. All decisions pertaining to the participation of school administrators and teachers were at the discretion of the school board/district. Informed consent forms (see Appendix C) were obtained from all participants prior to initiating each interview.

**Confidentiality**

Due to the underachieving/at-risk population within the school, permission to access staff and premises was necessary and was obtained from the school and district prior to the study.

Through the use of pseudonyms for the school (Valley High), and participants, all data collected from the interviews remains confidential. All informed consent forms, interviews, and transcriptions were stored within a locked filing cabinet within my office for the duration of the study, and will be destroyed, due to ease of access, via incineration within a high fire kiln three years after the conclusion of the study.

All participants and parents of student participants received information pertaining to the purpose of the study, the procedures involved with the process, and of protection of confidentiality for all participants via email and standard mail.
Data Collection

According to Creswell (2009), data collection steps include determining the boundaries of the study, collecting the information through both structured and semi-structured interviews, observations, document reviews, visual, and audio materials. Qualitative research also involves the use of multiple forms of data and the establishment of how the information will be gathered (p. 178). Researchers should begin by purposefully selecting individuals and sites that will provide the researcher with understanding about the problematic phenomena (Creswell, 2009). The next step is to identify the types of data to be collected. Creswell (2009) suggests that qualitative research generally consists of up to four different approaches to collecting data. The types of data collection for the study consisted of observations, interviews, documentation, and audio recordings. For validation purposes, the interview data was triangulated with observation field notes that pertained to the phenomena surrounding students at-risk using the NVivo9 software package. Documentation data collection consisting of AVID and JAG yearly reports, and email correspondence with instructors was also triangulated for validation purposes via the NVivo9 software. Finally, observation notes and interviews were also included (Creswell. 2009). In qualitative research, according to Creswell, (2009), the interviewer is regarded as an instrument. Within this study the interviewer will acted as an instrument, in gathering and analyzing data.

Participants of the study included underachieving/at-risk students, and the teachers and administrators who had daily interaction with the students. The teachers and administrators of students at-risk were included within the sample because they had relevant insight into what the students experienced in relation to their educations. Email
and phone contact information for the researcher was provided to all participants of the study.

Data collection for the study included interview questions designed to address the research questions and guided the study towards a point of saturation of information. Saturation, according to Creswell (2009), occurs when no new information becomes available via the interview process. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis, and only information from individuals who had experiences with underachieving/at-risk youth were collected and analyzed.

Instrument Reliability

McMillan (2008) suggests reliability is determined by estimating the amount of error that accompanies the obtained answer. If there is little error, then the reliability is high. If there is much error, the reliability is low (p. 37). In an attempt to increase instrument reliability, a pilot study was conducted prior to initiating the study to aid in the development of valid interviews (see appendix A and B). The pilot consisted of providing three teachers and 3 students the interview questions for validation purposes. Feedback from individuals participating in the pilot interviews was used to better formulate the actual interview questions prior to initiating the study. According to McMillan (2008), by administering peer and face validation pilot tests to individuals not included in the study sample, researchers can increase the amount of reliability. The use of a purposive, deviant case sample may also aid in the reliability of the instrument, by providing the researcher multiple opportunities to elicit substantial information from participants. Information and results from the pilot interviews was used to refine the study interviews to better elicit the desired information.
**Internal and External Validity**

Leedy and Ormrod (2010) suggest internal validity within a study refers to the extent to which the design and data enable the researcher to draw accurate conclusions pertaining to the data (p. 97). External validity of a study, according to Leedy and Ormrod (2010), is the extent to which the results of the study can be applied to situations outside of the parameters of the study (p. 98). Also important within qualitative studies is trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is an aspect of validity in qualitative studies. Trustworthiness within this study was established through member checks, triangulation of data, and a clear audit trail that documented the decisions I made in analyzing the data.

Within this study, internal validity was established by triangulating the interview data from multiple participants, from various backgrounds and experiences. In an attempt to determine emergent themes and patterns, the interview data was also triangulated with observational classroom data and documentation data, student at-risk reports from the two campus intervention programs, and email correspondence data from the teachers and administrators.

Leedy and Ormrod (2010) state, “Multiple sources of data are collected with the hope that they will all converge to support a particular hypothesis or theory. This approach is especially common in qualitative research; for instance, a researcher might engage in many informal observations in the field and conduct in-depth interviews, then look for common themes that appear in the data gleaned from both methods.” (p. 99).
External validity within the study was established by using real life settings, and a representative sample. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2010), studies with real-life settings may be more valid, yielding results which apply to real world context (p. 99), and representative samples provide researchers the opportunity to collect data and draw conclusions pertaining to a specific population (p. 100).

**Data Analysis**

Before beginning the qualitative process, researchers should plan their means of recording and analyzing data. The analysis of qualitative data is dependent upon what types of data collection procedures are used (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research data analysis generally involves making interpretations and presumptions about text and image data. According to Creswell (2009) many generic forms of analysis may take form. These generic forms may include continual reflection, collecting open-ended data, or reporting of themes (p. 184).

Creswell (2009) also suggests that researchers use a combination of general and specific steps for data analysis that may include organization and preparation, overview of the data, using a coding process, using the coding process to generate a description, developing how the description will be presented, and finally making an interpretation (p. 188-89).

Specifically, data analysis for the study consisted of transcribing the collected data with the use of the NVivo9 software program. The NVivo9 software aided in the initial listing, grouping, and determination of data relevance. According to QSR International (2011), NVivo9 software is ideal for:

- Organizing, classifying and analyzing data.
• Importing information from PDF’s, spreadsheets, audio, video and pictures.
• Systematic data collection.
• Uncovering subtle connections within phenomena.

According to Leedy and Ormrod (2010), the primary task during data analysis is to identify common themes. Within this study, views were compared within and across the sample population for emergent and thematic patterns. After initial transcriptions were made, information was separated into “relevant” and “irrelevant” categories (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010), with the “relevant” categories receiving further separation into sentences and phrases which reflected specific thoughts (p. 142). Within the next step, specific sentences and phrases were separated into categories that reflected aspects of the experiential phenomena (p.142). Next, considerations of varying perspectives of the phenomena took place, followed by, a construction of a descriptive composite of the phenomena (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 142). The concluding result is the development of a general description of the phenomena surrounding educational efficacy for students at-risk, with a primary focus on the common themes, regardless of individual and environmental differences (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 142).

Summary

Although qualitative research may be more subjective than a quantitative methodology, Creswell (2009) suggests it is no less rigorous. Creswell (2009) suggests valid studies consist of a broad problem statement that considers all aspects of the phenomena or environment, a purpose statement that helps to define and align sub-problems and offers guidance about the true nature of the study.
Qualitative studies also include research questions, which are either issue questions or topical questions that will help to produce as much information as possible from the informants (Creswell, 1998). Data collection should consist of one or more of the four types of data collection, and the analysis of that data should follow specific steps including organization and preparation, and overview of the data (Creswell, 2009).

Chapter 4 focuses on the piloting and development of a valid and reliable instrument, data collection procedures, analysis of the data, and presentation of results derived from transcriptions of in-depth interviews and observations with students, their teachers and administrators within Valley High School in the southwestern United States. Details of the analysis explain the lived experiences of the participants as represented by the emerging themes derived from the interviews, transcripts, textual representations, and observations.
Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study is to explore educational efficacy through the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students, and their educators at Valley High School in the southwestern United States. The following research questions were developed using related, relevant topics and research addressed within the literature review. They guided the phenomenological design in an attempt to obtain information pertaining to the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students.

CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION. What needs, perceptions and experiences surround the curricula, instructional strategies, and delivery methods pertaining to educational efficacy?

RESEARCH SUB-QUESTION. How are student needs, perceptions and experiences surrounding the curricula, instructional strategies, and delivery methods represented within the educational experience?

To establish reliability of the instruments used, a pilot study was developed and administered at Valley High School. The purpose of the pilot study was to aid in the development of effective questions for the study, which would not only be reliable and valid, but also be capable of producing information aligned with the research questions.

The pilot study served as a dress rehearsal of the procedures to be followed in the study, and aided in determining the effectiveness of the questions, prior to initiating the study. An empirical research pilot survey/interview was used whereby research respondents were asked a series of open-ended questions in order to guide data collection and analysis. Due to difficulty finding participants who met the age requirement for the
study, the pilot included six research participants: three regular classroom teachers, two current high school seniors, and one recently graduated student.

**Study Development**

**Demographics of Study Participants**

Valley High School, found in the suburbs of a major city in the southwest United States, is the smallest of six traditional high schools within the Valley High School District. The district also offers a non-traditional credit reclamation school, a gifted academy within a school, and an International Baccalaureate World School within a school. Total student population for the entire district during the 2011-2012 school year was approximately 13,270 students. The total student population at Valley High school for the 2011-2012 school year was 1250 students. Although Valley High consistently holds the title of smallest student population in the district, it also holds the title of oldest high school in the state, which contributes to an exceedingly strong school culture.

Within the district, Valley serves a very distinct socioeconomic demographic, with nearly 75 percent of the families at or below the poverty level as determined by the average free and reduced lunch program (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2011). The sample represents the district-identified at-risk population within the school. As of the 2012-2013 school year, Valley High School’s overall school population was comprised of the following ethnic demographics: 60.6% Hispanic, 16.6% Black, 14.5% White, 3% Asian, 4% Indian, and 0.9% Multi-ethnicity. (Valley High Registrar, personal communication, September, 2012).
Specific Demographics

Participant Demographics

Participants in the study involved 30 individuals: one administrator, one school psychologist, 13 teachers, and 15 students determined to be at-risk. During the study, 11 identified themes were generated from the 31 interviews (see Appendix E). The student participants, deemed at-risk due to any number of “barriers” (Jobs for America's Graduates, 2006), were identified with the aid of the school registrar. Participants were then individually asked to participate in the study. In recruiting the teacher and administrative participants, the teachers and administrators who had contact with the at-risk student population from the study received an individual email detailing the study.

All interviews took place on the Valley High School campus during school hours, either during lunch, or during the academic support class hour, a 35-minute school-wide study period. The following tables illustrate the demographics of the teacher/administrator, and at-risk student participants within the pilot and main studies from Valley High. Table 5 illustrates the six themes most referenced within the main study. Significance in themes was identified by agreement within and across the groups of teachers and students.
Table 3

*Demographics of Pilot Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>2 Male</td>
<td>3 Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>3 M.A.</td>
<td>2 Seniors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 Recently graduated</td>
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<td>Years of Experience</td>
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</tr>
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<td>2 Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 Caucasian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

*Main Study Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Administrator/Teacher</th>
<th>Student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>5 Male</td>
<td>10 Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 Female</td>
<td>5 Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>15 Caucasian</td>
<td>2 Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>19 Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in Profession</td>
<td>Ranged from 2 to 35</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Class Size</td>
<td>Ranged from 15 to 30</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Education</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12 M.A.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>1 Ph.D</td>
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<td>Subjects Taught</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 Science</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Social-Studies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5

Description of Participant Reference

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Number of Times Theme was Referenced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational Responsibility</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Views, Voice and Representation in Education</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Positive Aspects of Education</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influential Variables (other)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help For At-Risk Students</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Negative Aspects of Education</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Specific Demographics of the Pilot Study

Although the primary ethnic demographics of teachers within Valley High are comprised of: Caucasian, Hispanic, and African American, the teachers in both the pilot and main study were representative of, and comprised of the primary ethnic group: Caucasian. For the purpose of this study and in accordance with NCLB guidelines, all teachers were individuals considered by the state to be “highly qualified.” Given the nature of this study, the location of this study was limited to participants working at, going to school, or who have gone to school at Valley High School. All three student participants within the pilot study were Hispanic. Table 5 includes the demographics of the six participants in the pilot study. Two groups participated in the pilot: three teachers, two current high school seniors, and one recently graduated student. Understanding the
perceptions of individuals in the two groups was essential to aid in exploring educational efficacy through the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students, and their teachers.
Pilot Results

Pilot Sample Process Analysis

Six individuals participated in the pilot, three teachers, and three students. The data collection process was tested in the pilot study. Initially, all student pilot participants were to have been 18 year olds, currently enrolled as seniors at Valley High; however, due to a lack of adequate population participants fitting into that demographic, students who had graduated from Valley High the previous school year, were also used.

Pilot Interview Difficulty and Clarity

Both the teacher and pilot interviews with students A and B seemed to flow rather smoothly, with the participants having very little, to no, difficulty in answering the questions. The questions worked well in eliciting useful and relevant information. However, student participant C had a very difficult time in answering the questions, but the difficulty was not due to the questions, subject matter, wording. Rather, the participant’s difficulty in answering the questions was due to not wanting to disclose personal information, or not knowing how to communicate ideas and feelings regarding the subject matter. Student participant C needed clarification on nearly every question. However, again, the need for clarity was not due to the questions, subject matter, or wording. Rather, the participant’s need for clarification of the questions was due to not knowing how to communicate ideas and feelings regarding the subject matter.

Pilot Study Interpretation

All of the participants for the pilot study were either teachers or students at Valley High. Although finding teacher participants for both the pilot and main study was not problematic, a major issue that became apparent during the recruiting stage of the pilot,
and one which continued to resurface through the duration of the main study was finding at-risk, student participants 18 years of age, or older. Within the recruitment stage of the pilot study, 10 students fitting the criteria were identified; however, only three returned the signed letters of consent. Along with the three student participants, three teacher participants were also identified, all of whom readily signed the letter of consent, and agreed to help with the pilot study. Overall, with the exception of student participant C, the participants seemed comfortable with the questions and interview process. Through the use of probing questions and clarification, I was able to help each participant feel more secure, and at ease with the questions, and interview process. Although the recruitment stage of the pilot study was difficult, the experience prepared me for the major challenge waiting within the recruitment stage of the main study.
Pilot Summary

The pilot study was successful in many ways. When beginning the pilot study, the Nvivo 9.2 software was found to be intimidating; however, after the initial tutorials, the software proved to be beneficial by aiding in bringing the study’s methodology and design into fruition. The pilot was also beneficial due to the preparation and practice it provided with the steps and procedures needed for conducting interviews, and for collecting, categorizing, and analyzing data.

Data Collection

Participant interviews for the main study were all conducted on the Valley High School campus during the first quarter of the 2012-2013 school year. Although identification and interviewing of the adult participants was a relatively seamless process, the student data collection process was slower, as the process of identifying student participants who met the age requirements took approximately two to three weeks. The student participants, who were deemed at-risk due to any number of “barriers” (Jobs for America's Graduates, 2006), were identified with the aid of the school registrar. Participants were then individually asked to participate in the study, and provided with a consent and information letter pertaining to the study. Fifteen students, all 18 years of age or older returned the signed consent form. In recruiting the teacher and administrative participants, the teachers or administrators who have had contact with the at-risk student population from the study received an individual email detailing the study. All interviews took place on the Valley High School campus during school hours, either during lunch, or during the academic support class hour. Interaction with the school district, school administration and staff, and students allowed for collecting hard copies
of the signed letters of consent. Within approximately two weeks from initiating the main study, all 15 adult participants were interviewed, and data collected. Approximately three weeks from initiating the study with the adult participants, the last of the student participants was identified, the 15 student participants were interviewed, and data collected.

Data Analysis

Interview Analysis

Investigating the phenomenon related to educational efficacy, and the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students and their educators, required obtaining responses from an administrator, a school psychologist, several classroom teachers, and several students deemed to be at-risk. Through answering questions from the study instrument, the thoughts and perceptions were offered by each participant for interpretation. To prepare for data analysis, Microsoft Word document interviews were imported into the NVivo 9 software program. NVivo 9 helped to organize the transcribed data for analysis by grouping data, and relevant information into what the software refers to as “nodes.” For the purpose of the study, nodes will be referred to as case themes. Emergent themes were categorized within groups, or "case themes”. Beneficial to the research, was NVivo's ability to calculate number of references and produce charts indicating the percentage of references for each node. Node charts were then produced for each participant. Though calculating the number of references to each theme, from each participant, the NVivo 9 software program helped with data saturation, making significant theme identification possible.
Data Presentation

Valley High Administrator (VHA)

VHA was a female Caucasian employed by the Valley Unified High School District. The participant was one of four administrators at Valley High School. The participant had attained an Ed.D, and 26 years of experience working within the education profession, with six years in her present position as an administrator. Figure 1 illustrates the participant’s references to *inhibiting variables* 12 times during the interview. In addition, the participant referenced *teacher perceptions* 12 times, *influential variables* 11 times, and *educational responsibility* eight times. The interview lasted approximately one hour.

![Admin-Coding By Node](image_url)

*Figure 1. Valley High Administrator (VHA).*

Valley High School Psychologist (VHSP)

VHSP was a female Caucasian employed by the Valley Unified High School District. The participant had attained an Ed.D, and five years of experience working within the education profession, with all five years in her present position as the school psychologist. Figure 2 illustrates the participant’s reference to *help for at risk students* eight times during the interview. In addition the participant referenced *perceived positive aspects* seven times, *teacher perceptions* seven times, and *educational responsibility* six times. The interview lasted approximately one hour.
Valley High Teacher “A” (VHTA)

VHTA was a male Caucasian employed by Valley High School District. The participant was one of 13 teacher participants from Valley High School. The participant had attained an M.A., and has less than five years of experience working within the education profession, with all of those years in his present position. VHTA teaches math classes, and his average class size is 20. Figure 3 illustrates the participant’s highest reference to educational responsibility 15 times during the interview. In addition, the participant referenced help for at-risk students 11 times, inhibiting variables 10 times, and teacher perceptions nine times. The interview lasted approximately one hour.

Figure 2. Valley High School Psychologist (VHSP).

Figure 3. Valley High Teacher “A: (VHTA).
Valley High Teacher “B” (VHTB)

VHTB was a male Caucasian employed by Valley High School District. The participant was one of 13 teacher participants from Valley High School. The participant had attained an M.A., and has 20 years of experience working within the education profession, with 10 years in his present position. VHTB teaches math, and his average class size was 15. Figure 4 illustrates the participant’s highest reference to educational responsibility 14 times during the interview. In addition, the participant referenced help for at risk students 10 times, teacher perceptions eight times, and influential variables six times. The interview lasted approximately one hour.

![Teacher B-Coding by Node](image)

*Figure 4. Valley High Teacher “B” (VHTC).*

Valley High Teacher “C” (VHTC)

VHTC was a male Caucasian employed by Valley High School District. The participant was one of 13 teacher participants from Valley High School. The participant had attained a B.A., and has five years of experience working within the education profession, with all five years in his present position. Figure 5 illustrates the participant’s reference to educational responsibility five times during the interview. In addition, the participant also referenced teacher perceptions, help for at risk students, and perceived negative aspects five times. The interview lasted approximately one hour.
Valley High Teacher “C” (VHTC)

VHTC was a female Caucasian employed by Valley High School District. The participant was one of 13 teacher participants from Valley High School. The participant had attained an M.A., had 15 years of experience working within the education profession, with all 15 years in her present position. VHTC teaches science classes, and her average class size was 25. Figure 6 illustrates the participant’s highest reference to educational responsibility nine times during the interview. In addition, the participant referenced help for at risk students nine times, perceived negative aspects six times, and inhibiting variables five times. The interview lasted approximately one hour.

Valley High Teacher “D” (VHTD)

VHTD was a female Caucasian employed by Valley High School District. The participant was one of 13 teacher participants from Valley High School. The participant had attained an M.A., had 15 years of experience working within the education profession, with all 15 years in her present position. VHTD teaches science classes, and her average class size was 25. Figure 6 illustrates the participant’s highest reference to educational responsibility nine times during the interview. In addition, the participant referenced help for at risk students nine times, perceived negative aspects six times, and inhibiting variables five times. The interview lasted approximately one hour.
Valley High Teacher “E” (VHTE)

VHTE was a female Caucasian employed by Valley High School District. The participant was one of 13 teacher participants from Valley High School. The participant had attained a Ph. D., had 25 years of experience working within the education profession, with the past 20 years in her present position. VHTE teaches math classes, and her average class size was 25. Figure 7 illustrates the participant’s highest reference to *educational responsibility* 14 times during the interview. In addition, the participant referenced *perceived positive aspects* eight times, *help for at risk students* six times, and influential variables six times. The interview lasted approximately one hour.

![Teacher E-Coding by Node](image)

*Figure 7. Valley High Teacher “E” (VHTE).*

Valley High Teacher “F” (VHTF)

VHTE was a female Caucasian employed by Valley High School District. The participant was one of 13 teacher participants from Valley High School. The participant had attained an M.A., had 20 years of experience working within the education profession, with the past 20 years in her present position. VHTF teaches math classes, and her average class size was 20. Figure 8 illustrates the participant’s highest reference to *educational responsibility* 13 times during the interview. In addition, the participant
referenced *perceived negative aspects* six times, *teacher perceptions* four times, and *peer influence* four times. The interview lasted approximately one hour.

![Teacher F-Coding by Node](image1)

*Figure 8. Valley High Teacher “F” (VHTF).*

**Valley High Teacher “G” (VHTG)**

VHTG was a female Caucasian employed by Valley High School District. The participant was one of 13 teacher participants from Valley High School. The participant had attained a B.A., had 10 years of experience working within the education profession in her present position. VHTG teaches English. *Figure 9* illustrates the participant’s highest reference to *educational responsibility* 10 times during the interview. In addition, the participant referenced *help for at risk students* and *teacher perceptions* nine times, and *influential variables* three times. The interview lasted approximately one hour.

![Teacher G-Coding by Node](image2)

*Figure 9. Valley High Teacher “G” (VHTG).*
Valley High Teacher “H” (VHTH)

VHTH was a male Caucasian employed by Valley High School District. The participant was one of 13 teacher participants from Valley High School. The participant had attained an M.A., had five years of experience working within the education profession, with all five years in his present position. According to VHTH, his average class size was 30. Figure 10 illustrates the participant’s highest reference to teacher perceptions 11 times during the interview. In addition, the participant referenced help for at risk students nine times, preventative strategies nine times, and educational responsibility seven times. The interview lasted approximately one hour.

![Teacher H-Coding by Node](image)

Figure 10. Valley High Teacher “H” (VHTH).

Valley High Teacher “I” (VHTI)

VHTI was a female Caucasian employed by Valley High School District. The participant was one of 13 teacher participants from Valley High School. The participant had attained an M.A., had five years of experience working within the education profession, with all five years in her present position. VHTI teaches English, and her average class size was 25. Figure 11 illustrates the participant’s highest reference to educational responsibility eight times during the interview. In addition, the participant
referred help for at risk students five times, inhibiting variables five times, and teacher perceptions four times. The interview lasted approximately one hour.

Figure 11. Valley High Teacher “I” (VHTI).

Valley High Teacher “J” (VHTJ)

VHTJ was a female Caucasian employed by Valley High School District. The participant was one of 13 teacher participants from Valley High School. The participant had attained an M.A., had 20 years of experience working within the education profession, with 20 years in her present position. VHTJ teaches math, and her average class size was 25. Figure 12 illustrates the participant’s highest reference to help for at risk students nine times during the interview. In addition, the participant referenced teacher perceptions seven times, preventative strategies five times, and educational responsibility four times. The interview lasted approximately one hour.
Figure 12. Valley High Teacher “J” (VHTJ).

Valley High Teacher “K” (VHTL)

VHTK was a male Caucasian employed by Valley High School District. The participant was one of 13 teacher participants from Valley High School. The participant had attained an M.A., and had 15 years of experience working within the education profession, with all 15 years in his present position. VHTK teaches English, and his average class size was 25. Figure 13 illustrates the participant’s highest reference to help for at risk students 10 times during the interview. In addition, the participant referenced teacher perceptions nine times, educational responsibility nine times, and inhibiting variables eight times. The interview lasted approximately one hour.

Figure 13. Valley High Teacher “K” (VHTK).
Valley High Teacher “L” (VHTL)

VHTL was a female Caucasian employed by Valley High School District. The participant was one of 13 teacher participants from Valley High School. The participant had attained an M.A., and had 10 years of experience working within the education profession, with all 10 years in her present position. VHTL teaches science, and her average class size was 25. Figure 14 illustrates the participant’s highest reference to help for at risk students ten times during the interview. In addition, the participant referenced both teacher perceptions and educational responsibility nine times, and inhibiting variables eight times. The interview lasted approximately one hour.

![Teacher L-Coding by Node](image_url)

*Figure 14. Valley High Teacher “L” (VHTL).*

Valley High Teacher “M” (VHTM)

VHTM was a male Caucasian employed by Valley High School District. The participant was one of 13 teacher participants from Valley High School. The participant had attained an M.A., and had 15 years of experience working within the education profession, with all 15 years in his present position. VHTM teaches social studies, and his average class size was 25. Figure 15 illustrates the participant’s highest reference to inhibiting variables seven times during the interview. In addition, the participant
referenced *teacher perceptions, educational responsibility, perceived negative aspects* and *help for at risk students*, all five times. The interview lasted approximately one hour.

**Figure 15.** Valley High Teacher “M” (VHTM).

**Valley High Student “A” (VHSA)**

VHSA was a Hispanic male, who lived with his grandmother. The participant’s highest referenced theme was *student views* 26 times during the interview. In addition, the three next highest referenced themes were *educational responsibility* 22 times, *influential variables* 18 times, and *peer influence* 16 times. The interview lasted approximately one hour. Figure 16 illustrates the frequency of the participant’s references to the emergent themes.

**Figure 16.** Valley High Student “A”.

```plaintext
Teacher M-Coding by Node

Perceived Negative Aspects  
Educational Responsibility  
Teacher Perceptions  
Inhibiting Variables
```

```plaintext
Student A-Coding by Node

Peer Influence  
Influential Variables  
Educational Responsibility  
Student Views
```
Valley High Student “B” (VHSB)

VHSB was a Hispanic male, who lived with both parents. The participant’s highest referenced theme was student views 22 times during the interview. In addition, the three next highest referenced themes were educational responsibility 15 times, perceived positive aspects 14 times, and peer influence 12 times. The interview lasted approximately one hour. Figure 17 illustrates the frequency of the participant’s references to the emergent themes.

![Student B-Coding by Node](chart)

Figure 17. Valley High Student “B”.

Valley High Student “C” (VHSC)

VHSC was a Hispanic female, who lived on her own. The participant’s highest referenced theme was student views 26 times during the interview. In addition, the three next highest referenced themes were educational responsibility 18 times, perceived positive aspects 16 times, and influential variables 14 times. The interview lasted approximately one hour. Figure 18 illustrates the frequency of the participant’s references to the emergent themes.
Figure 18. Valley High Student “C”.

Valley High Student “D” (VHSD)

VHSD was a Hispanic male, who lived with both parents. The participant’s highest referenced theme was *student views* 24 times during the interview. In addition, the three next highest referenced themes were *influential variables* 15 times, *educational responsibility* 14 times, and *perceived positive aspects* 13 times. The interview lasted approximately one hour. Figure 19 illustrates the frequency of the participant’s references to the emergent themes.

Figure 19. Valley High Student “D”.

Valley High Student “E” (VHSE)

VHSE was a Caucasian male, who lived with one parent and a step parent. The participant’s highest referenced theme was *student views* 26 times during the interview. In addition, the three next highest referenced themes were *influential variables* 17 times,
educational responsibility 16 times, and perceived positive aspects 12 times. The interview lasted approximately one hour. Figure 20 illustrates the frequency of the participant’s references to the emergent themes.

**Figure 20.** Valley High Student “E”.

**Valley High Student “F” (VHSF)**

VHSF was a Hispanic male, who lived with one parent. The participant’s highest referenced themes were student views and educational responsibility, both referenced 21 times during the interview. In addition, the three next highest referenced themes were peer influence 12 times, perceived negative aspects 12 times, and help for at-risk students 10 times. The interview lasted approximately one hour. Figure 21 illustrates the frequency of the participant’s references to the emergent themes.

**Figure 21.** Valley High Student “F”.

\[\text{Student E-Coding by Node}\]

- Perceived Positive
- Educational Responsibility
- Influential Variables
- Student Views

\[\text{Student F-Coding by Node}\]

- Help for at-risk Youth
- Peer Influence
- Educational Responsibility
- Student Views
Valley High Student “G” (VHSG)

VHSF was a Hispanic male, who lived with his grandparents. The participant’s highest referenced theme was *student views* 11 times during the interview. In addition, the three next highest referenced themes were *educational responsibility* and *peer influence* each seven times, and *influential variables* six times. The interview lasted approximately one hour. Figure 22 illustrates the frequency of the participant’s references to the emergent themes.

![Student G-Coding by Node](image)

*Figure 22. Valley High Student “G”.*

Valley High Student “H” (VHSH)

VHSH was a Hispanic male, who lived with his grandparents. The participant’s highest referenced theme was *student views* 15 times during the interview. In addition, the three next highest referenced themes were *educational responsibility* 14 times, *perceived positive aspects* eight times, and *inhibiting variables* eight times. The interview lasted approximately one hour. Figure 23 illustrates the frequency of the participant’s references to the emergent themes.
Valley High Student “H” (VHSI)

VHSI was a Hispanic male, who lived with a room-mate. The participant’s highest referenced theme was student views 22 times during the interview. In addition, the three next highest referenced themes were educational responsibility 20 times, influential variables 14 times, and perceived positive aspects 13 times. The interview lasted approximately one hour. Figure 24 illustrates the frequency of the participant’s references to the emergent themes.

Valley High Student “I” (VHSJ)

VHSJ was a Caucasian female, who lived with a room-mate. The participant’s highest referenced theme was student views 27 times during the interview. In addition,
the three next highest referenced themes were *educational responsibility* 19 times, *influential variables* 15 times, and *peer influence* 15 times. The interview lasted approximately one hour. Figure 25 illustrates the frequency of the participant’s references to the emergent themes.

![Student J-Coding by Node](image)

*Figure 25. Valley High Student “J”.*

**Valley High Student “K” (VHSK)**

VHSK was a Hispanic female, who lived with both parents. The participant’s highest referenced theme was *student views* 21 times during the interview. In addition, the three next highest referenced themes were *perceived positive aspects* 13 times, *educational responsibility* 10 times, and *perceived negative aspects* nine times. The interview lasted approximately one hour. Figure 26 illustrates the frequency of the participant’s references to the emergent themes.

![Student K-Coding by Node](image)
**Figure 26.** Valley High Student “K”.

**Valley High Student “L” (VHSL)**

VHSL was an African-American male, who lived with one parent and a grandparent. The participant’s highest referenced theme was student views 11 times during the interview. In addition, the three next highest referenced themes were influential variables 10 times, educational responsibility seven times, and purpose of school four times. The interview lasted approximately one hour. Figure 27 illustrates the frequency of the participant’s references to the emergent themes.

![Student L-Coding by Node]

**Figure 27.** Valley High Student “L”.

**Valley High Student “M” (VHSM)**

VHSM was a Caucasian male, who lived with both parents. The participant’s highest referenced theme was student views 12 times during the interview. In addition, the three next highest referenced themes were educational responsibility 12 times, perceived positive aspects nine times, and influential variables five times. The interview lasted approximately one hour. Figure 28 illustrates the frequency of the participant’s references to the emergent themes.
Figure 28. Valley High Student “M”.

Valley High Student “N” (VHSN)

VHSN was a Hispanic male, who lived with both parents. The participant’s highest referenced theme was *educational responsibility* 12 times during the interview. In addition, the three next highest referenced themes were *student views* 11 times, *peer influence* eight times, and *perceived positive aspects* six times. The interview lasted approximately one hour. Figure 29 illustrates the frequency of the participant’s reference to the emergent themes.

Figure 29. Valley High Student “N”.

Valley High Student “O” (VHSO)

VHSO was a Hispanic male, who lived with both parents. The participant’s highest referenced theme was *educational responsibility* 11 times during the interview. In
addition, the three next highest referenced themes were *help for at risk students* nine times, *perceived positive aspects* seven times, and *student views* six times. The interview lasted approximately one hour. Figure 30 illustrates the frequency of the participant’s references to the emergent themes.

![Student O-Coding by Node](image)

*Figure 30. Valley High Student “O”.*

**Significant Themes**

Within both the pilot and main studies at Valley High, significance in themes was identified by agreement within and across the groups of teachers and students. The NVivo 9 software recognizes similarity in answers and comments, and categorizes responses into case themes, or what the software refers to as “nodes”. Within Table 6, “number of participants” refers to the number of participants out of the total 31 participants that made a reference to a particular significant theme. The number of times a theme was referenced refers to the number of times, any of the participants referred to the specific theme. While adult references refers to the number of references made by adults participants, student references refers to the number of references for each theme, made by student participants. Table 6 illustrates the 3 themes indicating the most significance from the Main study.
Table 3

*Most Significant Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Number of Times Theme was Referenced</th>
<th>Adult References</th>
<th>Student References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational responsibility</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Views, Voice and Representation in Education</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Positive Aspects of Education</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**First Theme of Significance**

The educators and students involved, all agreed that the educational process is the responsibility of all involved stakeholders. The theme of educational responsibility, which refers to any obligations, duties or resources required, by any stakeholders, for academic success, was a point of agreement both within and across the teacher and student perceptions, with 363 separate references. VHSA stated,

*I think it should be a collective responsibility. In order for public education to be completely successful you need a coalition of people working towards helping one another. However, if there is no intrinsic motivation coming from the student then the commitment of others is nearly futile. Although, it is the job of parents and teachers to instill this motivation within children at a young age* (Personal communication, 2012). While the adult participants referenced
educational responsibility 141 times, student participants references for the theme were much higher, at 222 times.

Whereas teachers primarily believed educational responsibility lies with the students and their parents, students on the other hand, believed that although parents, friends and teachers all play an influential role, educational responsibility starts with them. Educating students about their personal responsibility is essential to the success of the at-risk students. The data shows that educators, and students agree that students hesitate taking an active responsible role within their educations for a variety of reasons. Reasons include students being deterred by class size, as well as social aspects of their lives. While VHSA posits, “I could have focused in class, but frankly, decided not to,” VHTB suggests many at-risk students lack the desire to want to do well with their academics.

Within both groups of participants, references suggest that to initiate student involvement among at risk students, students require consistent and individualized differentiation and encouragement. The interventions educators used for initiating student self-motivation and internalized locus of control included various forms of individualized differentiation and encouragement.

**Second Theme of Significance**

Interviews with educators and students revealed a second theme of significance in *student views, voice, and representation within education (student views and voice)*, being referenced 283 separate times throughout the interviews. While adult participants referenced student views and voice 123 times, student participants referenced the theme 160 times. *Student views and voice* pertains to various activities which include promoting
student reflection, student-self motivation, communication, dialogue, discussion, and action on educational matters that relate to students (Fielding, 2004, p. 199). \textit{Student views and voice} may also include educational programs that encourage and enable students to communicate their views, and take part in the changes that occur in schools councils, governing bodies, and panels for selection of new staff, for example (Fielding, 2004, p. 199). \textit{Student views and voice} overlaps with the themes of \textit{educational responsibility} and \textit{perceived positive aspects of education}, and is distinctive in reference to educator actions that enable student success. Actions that contribute to at-risk student self-motivation and responsibility include teacher acknowledgement and inclusion of \textit{student views and voice}, in the development of curricula, and in delivery methods and strategies, in order to meet the individualized academic needs of the at-risk student.

While one adult participant suggested students are not represented nearly enough, and it would be interesting to hear from them on how we could improve their educational experiences, student participant “D” posits that many classes are personally irrelevant and boring, making him not want to come to school.

\textbf{Third Theme of Significance}

The third theme of significance identified within the main study is \textit{perceived positive aspects of education}. \textit{Perceived positive aspects of education} refers to any and all programs, curricula, classes, or teachers which at-risk students, and their peers perceive as having a positive impact upon at-risk youth, and their educational experiences. The data indicated that educators with extensive experience will usually have the ability to create positive educational experiences/resources for their at-risk students. However the data also illustrates a clear picture of how many issues exist within public school
programs today, which inhibit even the most experienced of teachers from being able to create consistent positive educational experiences, which help these students help themselves. Specifically, VHTB posited that rarely, if ever, are teachers provided any resources for aiding in determining at-risk students.

The findings from this study suggest that the educators and students were aware of disparities in the public education system, which might negatively influence the effectiveness of education for students at-risk. Based on the participants’ responses, variables contributing to this phenomenon included the following:

1. Misperceptions of students needs, perceptions and lived experiences
2. The lack of resources within public education pertaining to educational efficacy for students at-risk, and specifically, student views and voice
3. The need for professional development training related to educational efficacy for students at-risk, and specifically, student views and voice

Therefore, the findings from this study indicate congruence with arguments and conclusions presented in the review of literature related to educational efficacy for students at-risk.

Applying Predominant Themes to the Research Questions

The following research questions, developed using related, relevant, topics and research addressed within the literature review, guided the phenomenological design of the study in an attempt to obtain information pertaining to the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students.
CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION. What needs, perceptions and experiences surround the curricula, instructional strategies, and delivery methods pertaining to educational efficacy?

RESEARCH SUB-QUESTION. How are student needs, perceptions and experiences surrounding the curricula, instructional strategies, and delivery methods represented within the educational experience?

These questions as well as the questions within the educator and student interviews, provided the foundation needed to generate a rich and deep description of the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students. Through the process of horizontalization of both studies, and considering all aspects of phenomena, personal experiences, and as holding the same weight, (Merriam, 2009), invariant constituents or themes emerged from both groups of participants. A subsequent clustering of the themes produced 11 themes as noted in (Appendix E), and four predominant themes, as determined by percentage of agreement within and across the groups of teachers and students, were produced. Predominant themes related to the research questions were *educational responsibility, student views and voice, perceived positive aspects of education*, and *influential variables* (other). Educators and at-risk students agree that programs which take into consideration *student views, and voice* aid in creating a positive learning environment, and establishing a foundation in which educators can help these students begin to take responsibility, thus, improve their academics, and their lives. Additionally, students give specific credit for their change in perspective, and increased educational responsibility, to those teachers who go the extra mile, and who seem to genuinely care.
VHSA suggested that “The teachers that I’ve had who have been effective have generally arranged their class as a discourse and an environment where students are liberated to think freely. This typically creates a positive relationship between teachers and students and motivates children to want to learn.

While 26 of the participants believed that once at-risk students overcome the initial fears and inhibitions of interacting with their teachers, peers, and each other, and are exposed to an educational environment which focuses on the students’ view and voice, the at-risk students tend to be more receptive and supportive of taking responsibility for their educations. However, those participants also believed schools need to do more for students who are at-risk. While VHTA stated that class sizes keep teachers from being able to aid at-risk students, VHSJ suggested that traditional educational experiences do not provide insight and experiences with diversity and tolerance. Although many student participants had positive perceptions of various aspects of their current educations, nearly all of the student participants discussed negative aspects of their past and current educational experiences.

Concerning changes which she believed should be implemented within public education, VHSJ posited, “I would make it more based towards the individual, and so, like, small classes, but mostly, not focused on teaching and learning to/for the test…Some benchmarks/tests are needed, but I would change it so classes provide more intrinsic motivation and opportunities for different types of learning.”

Adding corroboration to both the instrument and study, many teachers within the pilot and main study suggested various variables which they believed contributed to their students being “at-risk,” mentioning economics, lack of secure home life, and even
student self-motivation. However, despite the teacher participants’ many references to the lack of a caring home life, or parental support, they failed to consider themselves the “surrogate parents” (Weinstein, 1995. p. 140), that so many of these at-risk students need in their lives, in order to become successful.

The data revealed the more willing the teacher was to openly consider the individual students’ views, and voice, and incorporating that information into the curricula for the student, the more willing the student was to taking responsibility. Specifically, VHSA suggested that teachers create and maintain an important social bond with students, stating it would be easier to help the students, inspiring them, making them want to learn.

Educators and students agreed that by working together, with a focus on the student, they could improve the academic efficacy for the student. Teachers need students to take responsibility for their educations, but students need teachers to care about them as individuals, considering and incorporating their individual needs into an educational experience, to increase the efficacy of their educations. Comments made concerning student views and voice made the need for teacher consideration of student views and voice evident. When asked about positive tools which teachers may use, VHSJ stated, “Essentially, my best teachers know I assess best through basic communication, not through standardized tests. Which I also feel adds to a productive, communal environment, where relationships, over the demand to meet objectives, is important.”

Teachers and students involved in the study posited that at-risk students are more likely to increase their personal role and responsibility in their educations, if the students believe the education is relevant to them personally. While VHA stated she didn’t believe
many of the courses targeted for at-risk youth, outside of the AVID and JAG courses were relevant and effective, VHSB stated that schools need to have more hands on types of programs aimed at catering to non-traditional students.

The data also revealed that at-risk students, who are successful, have teachers who are willing to take the extra time and effort to get to know their students as individuals. In many instances, behavior and academics of the at-risk students tended to improve when teachers convincingly worked side by side with the students within their classes.

VHSA stated, “They communicate with me in a way that doesn’t feel like a student-teacher relationship. My favorite teachers have always treated me like a real human being with real problems, not just another kid who needs to sit in his seat and do his work or else he’ll go to the principal’s office. These types of teachers inspire me and make me want to listen to them and learn from them.”

Assumptions, Scope, Limitations, and Delimitations

In readdressing the assumptions, scope, limitations, and delimitations, as described in chapter 1, the intent is to clarify their influence on the results of the current study, but also to describe any changes their impact made upon the design of the study. An explanation is included, pertaining to whether the research findings were similar to, or contradicted previous research findings, and whether the teachers’ and students’ responses might be generalized. Within chapter five, potential bias within the participant’s responses was analyzed as well.

Assumptions

Three assumptions were presented for the purpose of this study. First was that study participants would be knowledgeable enough to communicate reliable and valid
information pertaining to their needs, perceptions and lived experiences. The second assumption was that all participants would participate honestly, and the final assumption was that researcher bias would not impact the findings of the study.

While the research design supported the selection of qualified participants from Valley High, their knowledge base concerning the educational efficacy of students at-risk, varied. Although all participants had a relative knowledge of the phenomena, nearly all participants needed background, or clarification or information on various elements pertaining to the phenomena, in order to feel as if they could answer questions accurately. Although the majority of teacher participants had a genuine grasp on all the variables involved, the student participants needed more clarification. Despite reinforcing and differentiating information, and providing follow-up questions, some participants provided answers that when compared to the data from earlier studies, were deemed irrelevant. Based on the assumption that the participants believed they were able to understand and express information pertaining to their experiences and perceptions, the data from earlier studies presented in the literature review provided a foundation for comparison with the current research findings, and the responses deemed “irrelevant” were then discarded.

The second assumption, that all participants would provide honest answers, did appear to be an accurate assumption. Before initiating the studies, while distributing the informed consent forms, the participants were reminded that the interview process involved insignificant risk for them as participants. The participants were advised that the interview questions were not designed to elicit personal information pertaining to home life, or relationships, and anonymity was guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms and
code names. Participants were encouraged to express themselves with honesty when providing details into their representation, needs, perceptions, and experiences.

Based on the assumption that the participants were able to provide honest information pertaining to their experiences and perceptions, the data from earlier studies presented in the literature review provided a basis for comparison with the current research findings. On the basis of this analysis and similar findings appearing in previous studies and the review of literature, the teachers’ and students’ responses indicate the reliability and validity of the current study’s findings.

The third assumption, that researcher bias would not impact the findings of the study, also proved to be an accurate assumption. Through the help of the registrar and two at-risk prevention teachers at Valley High, participants were identified, who remained anonymous to me until the interviews. I did not know the participants personally, so no pre-conceived expectations existed.

**Scope**

Investigating the phenomenon related to educational efficacy, and the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students, and their educators, required obtaining responses from an administrator, a school psychologist, several classroom teachers, and several students deemed to be at-risk. The study included a literature review of historically and contemporarily relevant perspectives, and also, information pertaining to interview protocols administered to the sampled population within phenomenological studies.

The purpose of the investigation was to determine the sampled population’s perceptions of the existence of the phenomenon related to educational efficacy, in
relation to the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students, and their educators. Also important within the study, was to determine factors related to the phenomenon, and to contribute information to, and develop recommendations for the educational leadership and future research on the phenomena.

**Limitations**

This qualitative phenomenological study had the following limitation. The conducted study was limited to one sample, of students 18 years of age or older, their teachers and administrators. The exclusion of student stakeholders under the age of 18 was a limitation of the actual population of students at-risk within the school selected for the study.

The venue selected to identify qualified participants for the study was Valley High School, a public high school located in a major metropolitan suburb in the southwestern United States. As noted in the review of literature, extending this study to questioning at-risk individuals of all ages, and also involving participants involved with at-risk students from other schools and organizations, may present findings that conflict with, or are similar to, the research findings of this study.

Although data collection was conducted within a two to three month period, the answers provided by the participants could have been related to events that occurred recently, or sometime in the past. Also important, was that the research was dependent upon the willingness of the participants to participate, and to respond honestly. Thus, their reasons for participating in this study may have been (a) to offer insights and information to help improve future programs related to students at-risk, or (b) to express their anxieties and angers related to their educational experiences.
Delimitations

As stated in Chapter 1, the anticipated delimitations of the study included the use of information from a limited number of participants from one public high school location. The purpose of the study was to provide information and data pertaining to educational efficacy in relation to the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students and their educators. Thus, due to the age-restricted sample and geographic location, the generalizability of the research results may be limited.

Although generalizability is often considered a component of quantitative research, according to Horsburgh (2003), generalizability in qualitative studies refers to the degree to which the theory within one study may be used to provide explanation for the experiences of other individuals in similar situations. Two delimitations were found to be associated with this study. First, the generalizability of the study was limited due to the sample size \((n=30)\): 15 educators, and 15 students. Sample size was restricted due to age restrictions for student participants. Hence, the data collected might not be representative of the experiences of other at-risk students, teachers, or programs. Second, the location of the study was conducted only at one high school. Hence, the findings might not take into account the phenomena surrounding educational efficacy in relation to at-risk students, teachers, or programs in other locations. The deviant case sampling, as well as the single location, may decrease the generalizability of the findings.

Summary

Valley High School, located in a major metropolitan suburb in the southwestern United States, is a school that, despite curricular programs aimed at improving the
efficacy of educational experiences for at-risk students, still struggles to meet the specific needs of the individual. Data analysis of the pilot and main studies revealed similar themes in both studies that easily connected, reinforcing the internal validity of the research. Themes of significance identified in the main study were *educational responsibility, student views and voice, and perceived positive aspects*. In an attempt to offer contributions to future research efforts surrounding at-risk youth, and to aid in establishing external validity, Chapter five includes recommendations and conclusions based upon the results presented from the data. Chapter five also includes a discussion of the effects of the research assumptions, limitations, scope and delineations. The significance of the study, in relation to educational leadership is provided.

**Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore educational efficacy through the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students, and some of their educators at a public high school in the southwestern United States. Qualitative data collection was accomplished through interviews with open-ended questions which encouraged participants to respond openly. Through analysis of participant interview answers with NVivo 9 qualitative data analysis software, emergent themes were revealed. Three themes of significance emerged when study participants’ responses were imported into the NVivo 9 qualitative data analysis software. The triangulation of themes, student grade point average data, and observation notes, verified the perceptions of the teachers and students at-risk regarding educational efficacy.
The conclusions and recommendations regarding educational efficacy in Chapter 5 derive from the analysis of the data, and emergent themes depicted in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 presents educators and educational leaders with recommendations and strategies that may aid in improving educational efficacy for students at-risk. According to the data presented in Chapter 4, educational efficacy for students at risk requires the use of effective, and sometimes creative instructional strategies that address the diverse learning styles present at Valley High School, and other public schools, with similar student populations of students at-risk. This qualitative phenomenological study design provided the framework for the instrument creation, data collection, coding, findings and recommendations, for possible future courses of action by educators and educational leaders. Educators and educational leaders in similar public schools with similar student demographics may find the recommendations a reliable tool for increasing levels of educational efficacy for students at-risk.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions, developed using related relevant topics and research addressed within the literature review, guided the phenomenological design of this study in an attempt to obtain information pertaining to the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students.

**CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTION.** What needs, perceptions and experiences surround the curricula, instructional strategies, and delivery methods pertaining to educational efficacy?
RESEARCH SUB-QUESTION. How are student needs, perceptions and experiences surrounding the curricula, instructional strategies, and delivery methods represented within the educational experience?

These questions, as well as the questions within the educator and student interviews, provided the foundation needed to generate a rich and deep description of the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students. The research questions focused on eliciting a deep exploration and description through asking open ended questions. The use of open-ended questions within one-on-one interviews enabled me to elicit the perceptions of educators and students pertaining to educational efficacy for students at-risk.

The analysis of the one-on-one interview responses with the Nvivo 9 qualitative evaluation software produced 11 themes, three being of significance, as determined by total number of references within the study. The study results provide information that led to recommendations for educational leaders and educators of students at-risk in Valley High School that may also be generalized to other public schools with similar situations and school population demographics. The perceptions of teachers and students provided insights into the various challenges faced by both students at-risk, and the teachers who try to keep them engaged. Soliciting information pertaining to the effectiveness of education practices surrounding students at-risk, from both students and teachers, aided in identifying the need for a new modality of communication, resources and strategies in regards to not only establishing effective educational practices for students at-risk, but maintaining and sustaining them, too.
The analysis of the one-on-one interview responses with the NVivo 9 qualitative evaluation software produced 11 themes, three being of significance. The themes associated with the educational efficacy of students at-risk were established through the use of a qualitative phenomenological study design and the NVivo 9 qualitative data analysis software. Recommendations of possible strategies, and resources, for any and all educational stakeholders were generated in response to the themes.

**Conclusions**

The foundation and ability to recognize themes associated with the educational efficacy of students at-risk were provided through the use of a phenomenological study design and NVivo 9 qualitative data analysis software. Study participants elicited three research themes of significance through the data analysis. Recommendations for educational leaders, educators of at-risk students, and the students themselves were generated through the analysis of themes.

**First Theme: Educational Responsibility**

Of the educators and students involved, all agreed, that the educational process is the responsibility of all involved stakeholders. The theme of educational responsibility, which refers to any obligations, duties or resources required, by any stakeholders, for academic success, was a point of agreement both within and across the teacher and student perceptions, with 363 separate references. Whereas teachers primarily believed educational responsibility lies with the students and their parents, students on the other hand, believed that although parents, friends and teachers all play an influential role, educational responsibility starts with them. Both teachers and students noted that although it is important for parents to play a responsible educational role in their
students’ lives, in many situations, parents are not always available for their students. Both sets of participants felt that educating students about their personal responsibility is essential to the success of the at-risk students, and is the responsibility of both the parents and teachers of students at-risk. Respondents believed that educators and parents have a reciprocal relationship, surrounding their students, in which both stakeholder parties instill and reinforce educationally responsible behaviors and traits.

Within both groups of participants, references suggest that to initiate student involvement among at risk students, students require consistent and individualized differentiation, encouragement, and reinforcement. The interventions educators used for initiating student self-motivation and internalized locus of control included various forms of individualized differentiation, encouragement, and reinforcement.

Recommendation One

Collaborative Stakeholder Partnerships

Given their specific needs, students at-risk need guidance and reinforcement regarding types of behaviors and actions that will contribute to their educational success. Establishing stakeholder groups and relationships requires that all stakeholders involved with the students at-risk, play a role in the students' education. An inclusive group would be comprised of at least one member from each stakeholder party: teachers, students, and parents.

The historical perspective presented within the literature review of Chapter 2, included the evolution of education and reform in the United States. While some conditions may have improved in public education for students at-risk, there will always be issues with parental and community involvement within education. Research suggests
that parental involvement leads to higher levels of academic success for students at-risk, while also deterring deviant behaviors and attitudes (Cleopatra, et. al., 2004). However, these partnerships should not just include students, teachers and parents. Accordingly, communities, businesses, educators and policy makers must step up, and take on the social burden of aiding in educating our children. According to Kotter (1996), stakeholder group development is one of the most important elements of organizational change (p. 52). The selection and development of the partnership has the potential to affect all demographic stakeholders, thus making inclusion of members of each of the stakeholders groups essential within the group. It is also essential to establish trust within the group, and maintaining transparency within the group will aid in developing and maintaining trust (Kotter, 1996).

**Theme Two: Student Views and Voice**

Interviews with educators and students revealed a second theme of significance in student views, voice, and representation within education (student views and voice), being referenced 283 separate times throughout the interviews. While adult participants referenced student views and voice 123 times, student participants referenced the theme 160 times. Student views and voice pertains to various activities which include; promoting student reflection, student-self motivation, communication, dialogue, discussion, and action on educational matters that relate to students (Fielding, 2004. p. 199). Student views and voice may also include educational programs that encourage and enable students to communicate their views, and take part in the changes that occur in schools councils, governing bodies, and panels for selection of new staff, for example (p. 199). Student views and voice overlaps with the themes of educational responsibility and
perceived positive aspects of education, and is distinctive in reference to educator actions that enable student success. Actions that contribute to at-risk student self-motivation and responsibility include teacher acknowledgement and inclusion of student views and voice, in the development of curricula, and in delivery methods and strategies, in order to meet the individualized academic needs of the at-risk student. While one adult participant suggested students are not represented nearly enough, and it would be interesting to hear from them on how we could improve their educational experiences, VHSD posited that many classes are personally irrelevant, and boring, making him not want to come to school. Matthews (2010) suggests that substantial student voice inclusion can increase productivity and achievement; however, teachers struggle with how to implement the inclusion.

**Recommendation Two**

**Incorporate and Sustain Student Views and Voice**

Contemporary research suggests that provided the opportunity, students considered as equal partners in their educations, will experience higher levels of productivity and achievement (Fielding, 2004, 2006; Hargreaves, 2001, Matthews, 2010). Matthews (2010) states, “At a high school in Kennebunk, Maine, a student voice initiative generated data that showed 90% of students had a positive experience in school after the initiative was started” (p. 36). Matthews (2010) also suggests that systematic inclusion of student voice into academic improvement plans has the potential to produce data that can be continually used to increase and maintain levels of achievement for students at risk.
The students want to have a say in what is going on in their lives, and in their academics. Whereas past forums for student voice may have only included student councils, or temporary committees or groups, contemporary inclusion of student voice may take the form of action research, student creation of lessons and assessments, and forms of shared decision making including seats on student council and the school board. Also as important as including student voice is a means of cyclically assessing and maintaining student voice (Matthews, 2010). Determining levels of participation using a rubric, will aid with understanding how much student voice and forms of comprehensive student involvement are actually occurring.

**Theme Three: Perceived Positive Aspects of Education**

The third theme of significance identified within the main study is *perceived positive aspects of education*. *Perceived positive aspects of education* refers to any and all programs, curricula, classes, or teachers which at-risk students and their peers perceive as having a positive impact upon at-risk youth and their educational experiences. The data indicated that educators with extensive experience will usually have the ability to create positive educational experiences/resources for their at-risk students. However the data also illustrates a clear picture of how many issues exist within public school programs today, which inhibit even the most experienced of teachers from being able to create consistent positive educational experiences, which help these students help themselves. Student participants suggested they were more receptive and able to engage in their educations when their classes were smaller, and they had more individual time with their teachers. Students believed one-on-one, personalized time with their instructors made them feel important, thus reinforcing their internal locus of control. Students also
believed they were more apt to take a positive role in their educations when the classes were more relevant to their personal learning styles, interests, and goals.

**Recommendation Three**

**Individualized Learning Inventories**

According to Sagan (2002), traditional and at-risk students have vastly different learning styles. At-risk students generally have tactual and/or kinesthetic learning styles, and scored statistically higher when taught using curricula including tactual and kinesthetic visual strategies. Using curricula designed with the aid of individualized learning styles inventories, can help teachers to produce more personally relevant lessons for the students, thus increasing levels of achievement, and positive behaviors and attitudes. Use of learning style inventories can also aid in improving the learning environment and teacher delivery methods to better suit the individual needs of the students (Sagan, 2002, p. 44). Research suggests that learning styles change as students grow older, making annual assessment of learning styles important (Sagan, 2002), in order to change strategies and curricula accordingly.

**Recommendation Four**

**Academic Support Class (ASC)**

Modeled after collegiate level support classes offered for freshmen athletes who lack the academic credentials for college, an academic support class not only helps student at-risk, but also provides some relief for teachers whose classes are filled to capacity. The ASC resembles a study hall period and takes up as much time as one of the regular scheduled classes. It has three essential, interrelated components which serve as the foundation of the class: peer support, delegates, and incentives.
At the beginning of the week, the ASC teacher, who in many situations will act as a surrogate parent (Weinstein, 1995), does a complete grade check (grade tracking), for each of the students. Weekly grade checks help establish routine and protocol for the students, ideally getting them to self-advocate and to the point where they will check their own grades throughout the week. Students who have a grade point average of 3.0 or higher become eligible for the incentives or delegates programs offered during the ASC period, and can leave the ASC once they show the teacher their grades. Delegates, who must also obtain two letters of recommendation from their teachers, serve as peer mentors and tutors alongside the regular teachers during the ASC. Students who have grade point averages less than 3.0 are required to schedule ASC remediation appointments with one of their regular class teachers. Generally, if the student is doing poorly in multiple classes, the student will schedule their first appointment of the week for the class in which they have the lowest percentage point and then schedule for the remainder of the week accordingly.

**Academic Support Components**

Specifically important in at-risk intervention programs, Somers and Piliawsky (2004) suggest, is the use of academic tutoring to aid at-risk students with general study skills and academic problems (p. 18). One benefit of using students with higher grade point averages as delegates is that it enables the teachers to have more one-on-one and small group time with students at-risk. Peer tutoring is also important within at-risk intervention programs (p.18).

At the beginning of each week, the ASC teacher will put in a delegate request with the delegate committee leader for a delegate who does well with a specific discipline
area like math, science, or English. After a week or so of the ASC program, the teachers will have a better idea as to what type of delegate the majority of their students need.

Often referred to as reciprocal peer tutoring (RPT), contemporary research suggests (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004; Avid, 2010) that when used as a means of at-risk intervention, RPT’s have produced higher rates of mathematics achievement, positive self-image, social acceptance, improved behavior and conduct, and student task-oriented behavior (p.18). Somers and Piliawsky (2004), Lessard et al. (2006), Weinstein (1995), note programs which enable students to bond with teachers and peers provide at-risk students opportunities for increased academic achievement, visions of attainable futures, and involvement in school activities.

Also important to the success of the ASC, is the implementation of an incentive program that motivates the students to want to do well academically. Students, as active participants in their educations should play a role in the development of the incentives. Incentives may include movies in the auditorium, early release for lunch, open gym, or even monetary prizes. According to Fishbein (1992), incentive programs have the ability to improve grades and motivation, while deterring absenteeism, and behavioral issues.

**Significance of the Study**

Although the size of the population sample (n=30) as well as the location limit the generalizability of the study, the study is significant because of (a) the qualitative methodology and phenomenological design, (b) the inclusion of regular classroom teacher and at-risk student participants in the study, and (c) the focus on educational efficacy of at-risk students. The phenomenological design proved to be more than efficient for collecting information from the teacher and student participants as both were
involved in phenomena. Provided the opportunity to answer open-ended questions related to educational efficacy and at-risk phenomena, participants were able to openly discuss and elaborate on their experiences. Generally, responses highlighted their thoughts related to variables that hinder the efficacy of the educational experience for at-risk students. Furthermore, a similar study in which educators and students considered to be “at-risk” were asked similar questions regarding phenomena to determine similarities and differences in their perceptions, could not be identified or located in library searches or on-line databases. Allen (1995), Cook-Sather (2006), Fielding (2004; 2010), and Taylor and Robinson (2009), all posit that students remain underrepresented in the public education. Furthermore, Clark and Percy Smith (2006), and Dynan (1980) have continually contended, what constitutes as educational effectiveness tends to be a reflection of a single group’s conceptualization of the purpose of education.

**Significance of the Study to Educational Leadership**

Despite the overwhelming acknowledgment of the need for student stakeholder representation within public education, the continued lack of including students in decisions regarding their own educations signals a systematic weakness within the public education system (Cook-Sather, 2006). Viewed from the theoretical frameworks of humanism, neo-liberalism, post-structuralism, Emancipatorialism, critical theory, and sustainability, current public education institutions are destined to cyclically and continually fail. If the previously mentioned frameworks were incorporated into curricular policies and practices of public schools, perhaps they could enhance the social, intellectual, emotional, cultural, and even academic compassion in our schools, our westernized society, and perhaps even the world.
Furthermore, the findings from this study might assist educational leaders in reevaluating contemporary programs in relation to their efficacy. I maintain, that addressing the phenomenon from the vantage point of the above-mentioned frameworks, signals the need for a transformative cultural change for public education, one which ensures that all students, have a say in their academic experiences. Hence, the aforementioned recommendations are based on responses taken from participants in this study.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

Phenomenological participants in this qualitative exploratory study characterized educational populations from public schools in the United States. Future research on public high schools with similar demographics may produce notable phenomenological similarities or differences in themes. However, similar research of public high schools with similar educational cultures and demographics may produce other themes or recommendations that may serve to increase at-risk student achievement levels.

Additional and continued research into developing educational stakeholder groups may provide valuable support to all educational stakeholders regarding at-risk student achievement. Further research may also consider a variety of methods that may improve stakeholder communications.

Additionally, continued longitudinal research could be conducted into the influence of student voice on curricula development, teacher delivery styles and assessment both within at-risk and traditional student populations to observe the influence on student achievement levels. A study of this nature would elicit valuable insight into the ability of student voice to influence educational culture. A comparative
analysis could be conducted to examine achievement levels at schools using student voice curricula strategies, and schools that do not use student voice strategies.

Further research into the use of curricula designed with the aid of individualized learning styles inventories, can help teachers to produce more personally relevant lessons for the students, thus increasing levels of achievement, and positive behaviors and attitudes. Future research into learning style inventories can also aid in improving the learning environment and teacher delivery methods to better suit the individual needs of the students (Sagan, 2002).

Additionally, continued research into academic support programs which integrate components including peer support, delegation and incentives may aid teachers and educational leaders on producing higher rates of mathematics achievement, positive self-image, social acceptance, improved behavior and conduct, and student task-oriented behavior (Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). Somers and Piliawsky (2004), Lessard et al. (2006), and Weinstein (1995), noted programs which enable students to bond with teachers and peers provide at-risk students opportunities for increased academic achievement, visions of attainable futures, and involvement in school activities (p. 18).

**Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study of phenomenological design is to explore educational efficacy through the verbalized needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk, academic middle students, and some of their educators at a public high school in the southwestern United States. The study involved 30 individuals: one administrator, one school psychologist, 13 teachers, and 15 students.
The review of the literature disclosed the challenges for at-risk students within public schools in the United States. Three themes of significance and five recommendations were produced with the aid of NVivo 9 qualitative analysis software while analyzing participants’ responses. The findings from this phenomenological study illustrate the need for strategies for working with at-risk students in a public school in the southwest United States, and other public schools with similar situations and student demographics.
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Appendix A: Teacher and Administrator Questionnaire

Hello, my name is________________, and I would like to assure you that your identity will remain confidential and will not be revealed within the study. Initially, I would like to ask some preliminary questions. Define underachieving/at-risk here.

1. What is your title?
2. What is your average class size?
3. What is your highest level of education?
4. What subjects do you teach?
5. How long have you been in the field of education?
6. How long have you been in your current position?
7. What is the percentage of underachieving/at-risk students in each of your classes?
8. What is the percentage of underachieving/at-risk students in all of your classes combined?

Teacher Interview Questions
1. What do you see as major influential variables for underachievement/at-risk behaviors?
2. What programs exist, if any, offering prevention strategies for at-risk students?
3. At the beginning of each year, what information, if any, are you provided, detailing which students are considered to be at-risk?
4. What resources, if any, do you use in determining at-risk students?
5. Once at-risk students are determined, what changes, if any, are made to the curricula, instructional delivery, and assessment procedures?
6. What role, if any, do you play in the creation of curricula for underachieving/at-risk students?
7. How are rules implemented which regulate the number of at-risk students enrolled in a class together?
8. What instructional strategies do you implement which cater to the needs of underachieving/at-risk students?
9. Are underachieving/at-risk students ever the subjects of school improvement or professional development meetings?
10. What role do underachieving/at-risk students play in the creation of curricula, instructional strategies and assessment procedures within your classes?
11. In what ways are your classes effective for students at-risk?
12. In what ways are your classes ineffective for at-risk students?
13. To what extent are your students active in their educations?
14. What role, if any, do your students play in the creation of curricula, instructional design and delivery, and assessments within your classes?
15. What role do the expressed needs and perceptions of your students play in guiding their educations?
16. What role do the experiences of your students play in guiding their educations?
17. How are students represented within education and reform?
18. What role do intelligence inventories play in the development of curricula, instructional strategy and assessment for students at-risk?
19. In what ways, if any, are your students provided opportunities for expressing your ideas or concerns to their teachers and administrators?
20. In what ways, if any, are you encouraged to be a part of problem solving at this school?
21. In what ways, if any, does the school celebrate individual, cultural differences?
22. In what ways, if any, does, or does the school not provide a caring/supportive learning environment for all student populations?

Thank you for taking part in the interview process. I appreciate your cooperation and honesty. Again, please be assured, your identity will remain confidential. If you have any further questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me.
Appendix B: Student Interview Questionnaire

1. What grade are you in?
2. Do you live with both parents, if not, whom do you live with?
3. Why do you come to school?
4. What is the purpose of school?
5. What is your favorite subject, why?
6. What is your least favorite subject, why?
7. What have been some barriers, if any, you’ve encountered with your education?
8. What aspects of your education, if any, have improved your life? How?
9. Including elementary, middle and now high school, what do you think of public education up to this point?
10. Is your ability to do well in class your responsibility, your parents, or your teachers, explain?
11. Do your peers affect your ability to do well in class?
12. In what ways are your classes effective?
13. In what ways are your classes ineffective?
14. What influences your ability to do well in school?
15. What programs exist, if any, offering you strategies to do well in school?
16. What resources, if any, do you use to aid in your success in school?
17. What role, if any, do you play in the creation of curricula (projects and assignments), instructional design and delivery (how the assignments are taught), and assessments (how the students are tested) within your classes?
18. How do you see yourself today, in terms of your education?
19. Based upon your education, how do you see yourself in 10 years?
20. What, if anything, would you change about your education if you could?
21. To what extent do you consider yourself active in your education?
22. In what ways, if any, have things become better with your education since elementary school?
23. In what ways, if any, have things become worse with your education since elementary school?
24. In what ways, if any, have your educational experiences influenced your ability to do well in school and in your life?
25. Based upon your experiences, what do you think are the goals of public education?
26. How do your feelings and beliefs play in to your education?
27. What instructional strategies does your teachers use, which you feel are effective for your learning, and why?
   i.e. Direct instruction (lecture, drill and practice), Indirect (observations, investigations), Independent (computer based learning, journaling, investigation, research), Experiential (sharing, activities, simulations, role playing), Interactive (cooperative, group work)
28. In what ways, if any, do your teachers meet your individual educational needs?
29. If you could increase, decrease or change any thing about what you learn and how you learn it, what would it be, why?
30. What do your best teachers know and understand about you and the way you learn?
31. How do your best teachers prepare to teach?
32. In what ways, if any, are you provided opportunities for expressing your ideas or concerns to your teachers and administrators?
33. In what ways, if any, are you encouraged to be a part of problem solving at this school?
34. In what ways, if any, does the school celebrate individual, cultural differences?
35. In what ways, if any, does the school not provide a caring/supportive learning environment?

Thank you for taking part in the interview process. I appreciate your cooperation and honesty. Again, please be assured, your identity will remain confidential. If you have any further questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me.
Appendix C: Letter of Permission to Use Premises
CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION and ASSESSMENT DEPARTMENT

DIRECTOR: DEREK HOFFLAND

To: Dale Cooper

From: Maja Aleksi, Director of Assessment and Accountability

RE: Pending Approval

Mr. Cooper,

We have received your research proposal and are interested in working with you. However, our Executive Team has requested that you submit to the Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment office an IRB approval form indicating that your research proposal has been reviewed and approved by the Institution you are affiliated with.

If you have any further questions please do not hesitate to get in touch with me.

Sincerely,

Maja Aleksic
Appendix D: Informed Consent
My name is Dale Cooper, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Phoenix, working on a degree in education. For my doctoral dissertation, I am conducting a research study entitled, Educational Efficacy, Representation and Voice of Students at Risk. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore educational efficacy through the needs, perceptions and lived experiences of underachieving/at-risk students, educators at a public high school in the southwestern United States. To help insure confidentiality during the study, a pseudonym will be used in place of the school’s real name. The pseudonym for the school will be Valley High School.

Your participation will involve will involve taking a short questionnaire, and a short audio-recorded interview, that will take approximately one hour. Participants have the right not to answer any of the questions, and to stop the interview at any time.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, you can do so without penalty or loss of benefit to yourself, by contacting the researcher by phone or email. The results of the research study may be published but your identity will remain confidential and your name will not be disclosed to any outside party. In this research, there are no foreseeable risks to you. The interview questions were not designed to elicit personal information pertaining to home life, or relationships, and anonymity is guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms and code names.
Although there is no benefit to you as an individual, possible benefits of your participation in the study include improvements to the programs and classes within the school, and possibly other schools in Arizona. There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in the study.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please call me at: 480-266-0655, or by email at: dcooper@tuhsd.k12.az.us

As a participant in this study, you should understand the following:

You may decline to participate or withdraw from participation at any time without consequences.

Your identity will be kept confidential.

Dale Cooper, the researcher, has thoroughly explained the parameters of the research study and all of your questions and concerns have been addressed.

If the interviews are recorded, you must grant permission for the researcher, Dale Cooper, to digitally record the interview. You understand that the information from the recorded interviews may be transcribed. The researcher will structure a coding process to assure that anonymity of your name is protected.

Data will be stored in a secure and locked area. The data will be held for a period of three years, and then destroyed.

The research results will be used for publication.

“By signing this form you acknowledge that you understand the nature of the study, the potential risks to you as a participant, and the means by which your identity will be kept confidential. Your signature on this form also indicates that you are 18 years old or older and that you give your permission to voluntarily serve as a participant in the study described.”

Signature of the interviewee __________________________ Date ____________

Signature of the researcher __________________________ Date ____________
## Appendix E: Main Study Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Number of Times Theme was Referenced</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Educational Responsibility</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Views, Voice and Representation in Education</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>283</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived Positive Aspects</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influential Variables (other)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>197</td>
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<tr>
<td>Help for At-Risk Students</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>197</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived Negative Aspects</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>177</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer Influence</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Inhibiting Variables</td>
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<td>154</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher Perceptions and Views of Student Perceptions, voice, and views</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>139</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preventative Strategies</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>74</td>
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<tr>
<td>Purpose of School Theme</td>
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<td>71</td>
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