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Barriers to High School Student Academic Success

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BARRIERS TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT ACADEMIC SUCCESS

by

JUDY S. SAPP

(Under the Direction of Linda M. Arthur)

ABSTRACT

Since the passage of the federal legislation known as No Child Left Behind, school districts are under increasing pressure to decrease high school dropout rates and to increase high school graduation rates. There is a critical need for schools to develop and implement programs designed to maximize academic success for all high school students. The purpose of this present research was to investigate the perceptions of high school teachers and high school students about barriers to high school student academic success. For purposes of this study, high school academic success is defined as the completion of all high school diploma requirements within the usual four-year time span.

Data for this study were obtained through individual face-to-face interviews with eight high school teachers and two focus group interviews of students. Data analysis focused on the identification of barriers to high school student academic success. Factors related to the following contexts emerged as recognizable academic success barriers: (a) the individual student, (b) the family, and (c) the educational institution. Teachers and students recognized high school student dropout risk factors to include low prior academic achievement, being over age for grade level, failure to accrue credits, and poor quality communications between the school and the home.

The researcher concluded that both participant groups are aware of many academic success barriers. Study findings suggest that all stakeholders wishing to

improve academic outcomes should become familiar with potential success barriers and take action to alleviate those amenable to change. Study data suggest that improved relationships among the following could potentially improve academic outcomes for students, and for at risk high school students, in particular: (a) teacher – student, (b) teacher – parent, (c) school – community. This study has policy and practice implications for public high schools and secondary school educators.

INDEX WORDS: Academic success, At-risk students, High school diploma, High
                              school graduation, High school students, High school teachers,
                              Secondary education, Success barriers, Teacher effects

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

2009

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Electronic Version Approved:
December 2009

DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this dissertation to those family members whose love, loyalty, and encouragement have indeed always been "the wind beneath my wings".

To my parents, Eugene and Wilma Smith, who instilled in me a desire for self-sufficiency and independence. By word and deed, my parents fostered a home environment where their children could develop a strong sense of independence, a love of reading and an intellectual curiosity.

To my sister, Susan, who shared her vision of a college education with her younger sister. The consummate salesperson, she imbued me with the confidence that I could thrive in the college environment and convinced me "to drop out" of high school so I could begin college as an early admissions candidate at the same prestigious four-year private college she was attending. I thank you for sharing the vision and paving the way.

To my sister, Nancy, whose affectionate and witty nature is legendary. I thank you for your unwavering support and loyalty during this life journey.

To my sons, Joseph and Andrew Woods, who are the absolute pride and joy of the Smith sisters.

Finally, to my husband, Wilton Sapp, who entered my life with God's perfect timing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the assistance, encouragement, and support of those individuals, without whom this dissertation would not have been completed.

I am especially appreciative of the guidance and advice provided by all members of my dissertation committee.

Dr. Linda Arthur, who agreed to serve as my committee chair. Your valuable suggestions, wit, and personable guidance helped me explore and identify a "new topic" and methodology one I could relate to and research with unbridled enthusiasm. Your guidance has been invaluable.

Dr. Mary Jackson, whose knowledge and expertise regarding interpersonal communications provided the impetus for this researcher to seek out the voices of the students. Thank you for your ongoing accessibility, your understanding nature, and your willingness to serve as a committee member.

Dr. Sonya Shepherd, whose knowledge and helpfulness throughout my doctoral studies has been invaluable. Thank you for your assistance with my initial research, your ongoing accessibility, and your consummate professionalism. Thanks for your patience and your willingness to serve as a committee member.

All teacher and student participants who agreed to add to the current research by participating in the study.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The importance of successfully completing high school and earning a high school diploma cannot be overestimated. The diploma and the academic preparation it represents indicate success for not only the graduate who receives it, but also for the educational system which confers it. The diploma signals both an ending and a beginning: an official end to childhood and parental dependence, as well as an official entry into society and adult independence.

Successful entry into the adult world and an increasingly global society require an education that includes, at a minimum, a high school education. In order for American citizens to have any reasonable opportunity to earn a living, they must have at an absolute minimum a high school diploma. Additionally, the secondary school education must also be rigorous enough to prepare a graduate for workforce readiness and postsecondary education. A strong educational foundation is a prerequisite for students to make a smooth transition into the ever-changing United States economy.

However, the attainment of a high school diploma, one indication of an individual's academic success, proves difficult for some groups of students, minorities in particular (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004; Olsen, 2006). Overall national high school graduation rates are low, with only an estimated 68% of those entering ninth grade graduating four years later with a regular education diploma (Orfield, 2004; Losen, 2005). Successful completion of high school is affected by many factors, including those related specifically to the individual as well as those related to the educational setting.

High school graduation rates have been a focus of research for decades, and have become a topic of special significance since the sweeping federal educational reform legislation known as the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001* was signed into law (Swanson, 2004). *NCLB* mandates that states must submit disaggregated student achievement and graduation data. One outcome of the mandated reporting is an increased level of attention to the identified achievement disparity among student groups and subgroups, especially those among White, African American, and Hispanic students. While the educational reform of *NCLB* aims to improve student educational outcomes, the testing and mandated reporting provisions may, in fact, contribute to the decision-making process that results in marginally performing students dropping out of school (McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, &Vasquez-Heilig, 2008).

Statement of the Problem

Exiting school without earning a high school diploma is viewed as a failure of the student as well as the overall educational system. A high school diploma provides students what is currently considered by most to be the minimal educational preparation and the official educational credential. A diploma provides the individual documentation necessary to directly enter the workforce and, depending on the individual's curricular choices, an adequate foundation for future postsecondary schooling. Even so, approximately 30% of students do not ever complete diploma requirements and others require more than four years to complete diploma requirements.

Under the *NCLB* legislation, all states must report some measure of graduation data. States and educational agencies use a range of methods to calculate dropout numbers. Graduation data reported for federal purposes indicate dropout numbers are

considerably lower than the same data found on the state's own databases. In her speech to the America's Promise Alliance Dropout Prevention Campaign Press Conference, in April 2008, U. S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings remarked, "One reason that the high school dropout crisis is known as the 'silent epidemic' is that the problem is frequently masked or minimized by inconsistent and opaque data reporting systems...." Spellings indicated her intent to change data reporting and to use "administrative steps to ensure all states would use the same formula to calculate how many students graduate on time and how many drop out ... so that people nationwide can compare how students of every race, background, and income level are performing."

Despite the myriad educational trends and reform efforts implemented during the past several decades, public school outcomes have not changed substantially. However, during that same period, social and family structures in particular have experienced tremendous upheaval. Still, despite apparently overwhelming obstacles, most students manage to complete their high school diploma requirements in the prescribed time of four years. One goal of present educational reform is to ensure that all students graduate high school on time and are prepared to continue with postsecondary schooling, or to directly enter the workforce.

Research Question

The purpose of the current research study is to examine the perceptions of high school teachers and high school students about barriers to high school student academic success. In the context of this current research study, the attainment of the state endorsed high school diploma within the usual four years will be considered as the measurement of high school student academic success.

Key elements in this study are the perceptions high school educators and high school senior students have of barriers to high school student academic success. The researcher will gather information from high school teachers and high school senior students to answer the following overall research question: "What are the perceptions of high school teachers and high school students about barriers to high school student academic success?"

Answers to this question could reveal information that potentially could be useful to all stakeholders working to improve academic success for all students. The information gathered will reveal what high school educators working directly with students and high school students themselves believe deter successful completion of high school.

<div align="center">Significance</div>

Whether an individual is able to successfully complete their secondary schooling has serious implications for numerous stakeholders. Successful completion is important not only to the student, who as an adult needs it to secure gainful employment, but also to those affected if he/she is not successful. Dropping out of high school affects not only the individual, but also their family and society as a whole. Dropouts are more likely to wind up on welfare, incarcerated or unemployed (Orfield, 2004).

The costs to society include crime prevention costs, increased incarceration costs, increased prosecution costs, and increased welfare costs. Additionally, dropping out and subsequent low-paying employment results in lost revenues to society as well as increased unemployment costs. The costs to the individual include low self-esteem, negative financial effects, increased rates of incarceration, with the added possibility of an increased risk of negative generational effects (Orfield, 2004).

Whether or not students successfully complete high school is a concern for all
members of society. The implications of dropping out of high school are far reaching.

The social costs of the dropout crisis are tremendous in scope and

duration. Many high school dropouts are not able to provide the essentials

for their families, and studies indicate that the economic and societal

effects of dropouts' lost earnings and taxes persist for many years.

Moreover, children of dropouts are far more likely to be in weak schools,

perform badly, and drop out themselves, thus creating powerful

intergenerational social problems. When an entire racial or ethnic group

experiences consistently high dropout rates, these problems can deeply

damage the community, its families, its social structure, and its

institutions. (Orfield, 2004, p. 2)

Context

A reflection on the development of the American educational system provides a
backdrop for the current secondary school achievement and dropout state of affairs.
Historically, the primary responsibility for education in America rests with each state, and
in turn, each local community (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). This means each
state has the responsibility and the authority to establish schools, develop curricula, and
guidelines for enrollment and graduation. Eventually, the Federal Department of
Education was created in 1867 and emphasized collecting of school information to help
states establish effective school systems. The Federal Department of Education continues
this mission of collecting and publicizing data about what works in education to the
present day educational system.

Years later, in an effort to establish a uniform set of guidelines for college admission, The National Council of Education mapped out a "standardized core curriculum for high-school to prepare students for college life and work" (Barker, 2005; Boyer, 1983). The so-called "Committee of Ten" recommended public education should offer identical educational options for all students. This idea of identical education opportunities was designed to insure all students received a quality education that would provide them an adequate liberal arts education considered necessary to continue their education at a university level. At the time, this was considered a radical idea because this new ideology helped equalize opportunities for more Americans.

In the era of the Committee of Ten recommendations, education for children of the poor and underprivileged was more vocationally oriented. The prevailing belief of the day was that only privileged elite, generally Caucasian males, from families with resources available for university study were believed to be in a position to benefit from the liberal arts curriculum. As an ideal, the revised American school system would help Americanize new immigrants and provide equal educational opportunities for all.

The Committee of Ten recommended all students should receive a liberal arts education, a change from a previous liberal arts design that provided the most benefit to those students preparing to go colleges and universities. Others believed high school should focus on providing students with skills designed for immediate employment (Stevens 2006; Finn, 2006). An education that provides both preparations for immediate vocational employment and for entrance into college/university studies is valid. However, both types of educational curriculum do not necessarily serve all students equally well.

Student demographics have shifted considerably since the original Committee of Ten report, from primarily "Caucasian, affluent males to virtually all persons between ages fourteen and eighteen" (Stevens, 2006, p. 45). Just as the profile of the American high school student has changed over the years, so have the educational needs. Contemporary political stakeholders and most educators believe students must have the opportunity not only for a liberal arts curriculum, but for vocational/career/technical education as well. Students must be prepared for postsecondary education and career readiness; they must also develop good problem-solving and communication skills required in today's world.

Historical Development of the American High School

Throughout the evolution of educational opportunities in America, education policy makers have not always agreed about the types of educational opportunity that should be available to all students. The 1918 Commission on the Reorganization of Public Education's final report, *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, made several assumptions (Stevens, 2006). This report alleged previous generations of students were innately more intelligent than the then current high school students were (Mirel, 2005, pp. 16-17). Furthermore, it also claimed it was counterproductive for current students to follow a college preparatory program since they were lacking in intellect, ambition, and financial resources to attend college. Mirel (2005) reports, "Proponents believed that requiring all students to follow the same academic course of study increased educational inequality" (p. 17).

The secondary curriculum of the early 1900s offered students both a strong academic focus and the opportunity to learn vocational skills in vocational and trade

classes. At the time, this educational arrangement provided those from differing backgrounds the opportunity to continue their education directly or to directly enter the workforce with a skill set enabling them to be self-sufficient. Until the Great Depression this arrangement served all well (Stevens, 2006).

With the Great Depression, jobs disappeared so more individuals who formerly had entered the work force earlier began to stay in school or to return to school. High-school enrollment during the 1930s and 1940s increased by over 2.3 million students (Stevens, 2006). According to Mirel (2005), educational leaders again supported educational change that began to offer fewer demanding courses to what they claimed were students with the weaker intellectual abilities than those of previous generations.

Federal legislation strongly affects curricular offerings, largely because federal funds are generally connected to state and school level compliance (Barker, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Federal legal decisions may also require school restructuring. The U. S. Supreme Court 1956 ruling in Brown vs. Board of Education mandated an end to segregated schooling. The court opinion was that segregated schooling could not provide separate but equal education for all. Eventually, this landmark decision brought about a complete desegregation of American public schools.

In the era of the cold war and the launch of Sputnik, the race was on to insure America maintained its perceived national supremacy. Federal legislation provided the impetus as well as much of the funding for educational improvement and change. In 1958, The National Defense Educational Act provided funds for the improvement of science, mathematics, and foreign language teaching. It was subsequently broadened to

include support for a humanities and social sciences as well. "Rigor became the catchword of the day" (Boyer, 1983, p. 54).

The 1983 report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) called *A Nation At Risk,* was "an indictment against the American public school system" (Angus & Mirel, 1999). Claiming the public school system was not only unequal, but also inadequate, *A Nation At Risk* "reanimated the idea that equality of educational opportunity meant that access to the same high quality programs, meaning identical programs should be available to all students. . . . Identical education was indeed the true definition of equal education" (p. 167).

Whether or not the report presented a valid assessment of American public education is debatable (Bracey, 2006); however, the report did serve as an impetus for national school reform. Waves of reform following the incendiary report included pushes for increased levels of excellence and increasingly more rigorous high-school graduation requirements. Individual states, however, had decision-making responsibility for their respective educational systems. Some educators believed job skills and vocation training should be included in liberal arts curriculum (Donlevy, 2000; Mirel, 2005).

Despite the myriad of reform efforts enacted since the release of *A Nation at Risk,* many students, minorities and disadvantaged youth, in particular, were not achieving on par with the majority. The most recent federal legislation known as *The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* required states to use accountability and assessment tools to assess and develop a strategy to address achievement gaps (Chapman, 2004). The intent behind this legislation was to improve student outcomes. In theory, the mandated reporting of

NCLB would force educational providers to be more accountable for helping all students succeed (Swanson, 2004).

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Legislation

The *No Child Left Behind Act* (*NCLB*) mandated the use of accountability and assessment measures and required extensive data reporting about achievement gaps among student groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The act legally established requirements for state data reports about achievement test scores and data regarding student progress through years of schooling, including high school graduation data (Chapman, 2004). Researcher Christopher Swanson (2004) says *NCLB* is the first federal law which requires not only school districts but also individual high schools within each district to be held accountable for graduation rates and student performance on academic assessments.

At the individual school level, school adequate yearly progress (AYP) data holds each school accountable for student success or failure. In accordance with *NCLB* requirements, the main data collected and reported for assessment of student outcomes are passing rates on standardized exams, graduation rate, and dropout rate. For high schools, the high school graduation rate data provides one measure of AYP (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Individual states have considerable latitude about how they actually calculate the graduation rate. This latitude has confounded the reliability of graduation reports nationally.

High School AYP and Diploma Requirements

NCLB's AYP requirement assesses schools and their students based, in part, on student standardized test scores in mathematics and language arts (U.S. Department of

Education 2004). *NCLB* also mandates graduation rates be reported in state annual reports. However, schools do have considerable leeway in selecting the second indicator of AYP (Orfield et al., 2004). In the state of Georgia, many high schools select their graduation rate as a second indicator (State of Georgia, 2003).

Georgia high school students are required to participate in the state assessment known as the Georgia High School Writing Test (GHSGT) and the Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHSGT). The GHSWT assesses only individual student writing samples. In contrast, the GHSGT is actually a group of tests that assess student achievement in four areas: language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. The GHSGT student scores on the language arts and mathematics tests for first time test takers are reported as data for purposes of the high school AYP.

Student test scores are doubly important for most Georgia high schools and their students, first in the school's AYP report, and second to the individual's graduation status. In order to receive a regular high school diploma, students must post passing scores on the GHSWT in addition to all portions of the GHSGT. In addition to the testing requirement, students must also earn appropriate credits in a prescribed program of study to qualify for a public state endorsed diploma.

Students have five testing opportunities before their projected graduation date. Students are eligible to take these tests for the first time in the eleventh grade. In the event of failing any portion of the test, students may test again for only the subject test failed. They may re-test at no cost to the individual for as many times as required. Any student meeting all coursework requirements, but not the testing requirement, would be eligible only for a high school certificate, not a regular high school diploma.

Even after exiting high school, a student who receives either a certificate or a special education diploma may exercise the option to retest at each scheduled test administration. If a student posts a passing score on all GHSGT portions and has completed all required coursework, then that student would be eligible to receive a regular high school diploma after the original graduation date.

The Dropout Problem

Understanding exactly who counts as a dropout proves difficult for some, since no universal definition of high dropout exists. However, the federal *NCLB* definition of a high school graduate indirectly provides the definition of a student who does not graduate, more commonly referred to as a high school dropout. The *NCLB* definition of a graduate refers to a student who attains a regular high school diploma within the standard four years. Therefore, any student not meeting the *NCLB* definition falls under the classification of non-graduate, i.e., a high school dropout. The federal *NCLB* high school graduate definition can and does contribute to public misunderstanding and confusion about graduation and dropout data reporting.

The American public's conception of a high school dropout readily includes any student who begins high school in the ninth grade and leaves high school before attaining a regular high school diploma. However, certain categories of students are not so readily identified or classified as non-completers by the public. These student categories may include individuals who participate in a graduation ceremony and receive a special education diploma commensurate with an individualized education plan (IEP); individuals who leave school early, but who subsequently attain a General Education Development (GED) Certificate; and individuals who complete high school diploma

requirements outside the standard four years. Individuals within each category received a secondary school credential, however for accountability purposes, their academic accomplishments are not included in the high school graduation data. Instead, these student accomplishments count in the more negatively construed and reported dropout data calculations.

The National Center for Education Statistics (Chapman, 2004) reports dropouts and graduates in these areas: the four-year completion rate, the cohort rate, the status completion rate, the status dropout rate, and the event dropout rate. In fact, dropout calculation rates can vary considerably, depending upon which data source and calculation method is used. Just as dropout definitions and public misconceptions contribute to the dropout confusion, so do the dropout calculations.

Who Drops Out and Why

Numerous national and state studies over the past four decades have attempted to provide insight into reasons why students do not complete high school. Researchers concluded the student dropout decision could seldom be attributed to a single event (Finn, 2006; Rumberger, 1987; Rumberger, 2005). They noted the final decision often is the culmination of a long process of student disengagement.

Finn (2006) noted the accumulation of events and circumstances combine to either hinder or help a student's opportunities for academic success. Shannon & Bylsma (2003) reported that students at-risk of dropping out may

- Have repeated at least one grade;
- Have poor school attendance and are frequently truant;
- Display behavioral problems in school;

- Belong to a peer group which does not value school;

- Have learning disabilities;

- Have moved several times throughout school career;

- Live in single parent households;

- Live in low-income households and neighborhoods;

- Have parents or siblings who did not complete high school;

- Belong to a minority ethnic group (Hispanic or African American);

- Be adolescent males.

Those in charge of education are keenly interested in learning more about why students leave school in order to develop ways to help them remain and succeed in school. Student academic outcomes correlate with a number of factors, some of which are alterable and some of which are unalterable. Factors found to correlate with student educational outcomes may be classified as those relating to the individual student, the student's family and community, as well as those related to the educational institution (Rumberger, 2001).

The educational setting and educational policy may influence the student dropout decision. This can be especially true when a student enters high school with one or more at-risk factors. Many students arrive at high school, off track and over age for their current grade, and possessing poor or inadequate skills for high school academic success (The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts, Gates Foundation, 2006). Often the high school setting is larger and more interpersonal than middle school. Excessive absenteeism and negative behavior are external symptoms of a lack of student

engagement. Eventually, issues with increasingly rigorous academic and behavioral expectations may influence the student decision to exit school voluntarily.

Federal and state accountability measures, which include mandated testing, require teachers to cover specific course curriculum. Student test scores may be used as measures of teacher and overall institutional effectiveness. Institutional rules and procedures may combine to "push out" the student or may compel the student to make the decision to leave or "pull out" out of the educational setting (Rumberger, 2004).

Conceptual Framework

From the student perspective, the attainment of a diploma outside the prescribed four years is still a positive outcome in terms of success for the individual student. The individual did not quit or drop out because of initially failing the mandated graduation test. However, for accountability purposes of school AYP, the initial failing test score and the diploma completion outside the usual four year limit count as a negative. The student did not count as an on-time graduate. This serves as one example of the complexities surrounding accountability for student achievement, graduation, and dropout reporting. Mandated data reporting does not and cannot reveal the entire story of individual high school student academic success.

As participants in the educational setting, all teachers are acutely aware of the role testing plays for educational accountability measures. As educational stakeholders themselves, teachers realize the significance of their actions in the classroom for school level accountability. Teachers must be ever vigilant in their efforts to maximize student potential, reduce barriers to student success, and improve educational outcomes for all students.

Autobiographical Background

The researcher, a high school guidance counselor, interacts on a daily basis directly with students and their parents, as well with classroom teachers and school administrators. From the educational counselor perspective, the researcher is privy to the frustrations expressed by students and parents when students struggle. The research also bears witness to the pride and exhilaration expressed when students excel in their academics, and receive awards and scholarships for exceptional academic outcomes.

The disappointment of not receiving a high school diploma with the class graduation ceremony is emotionally painful and frustrating for the student. In the role of student advocate, as well as from the perspective of a veteran secondary school classroom teacher, it is painful to witness the frustration, the anger, the regret, and finally, the acceptance of a final course grade, or the failing graduation test score that seals the graduation fate of the student. It is from the perspective of a high school educator that the researcher wished to investigate high school teacher and high school student perceptions of barriers to high school student academic success.

Importance of Study

A substantial body of student achievement and dropout research indicates teachers play an important role in how students relate to school and to their overall academic outcomes. This study identified high school teacher and high school student perceptions of barriers to high school student academic success. The researcher wished to reveal information useful to all stakeholders working to improve educational outcomes for students and the educational institutions they attend.

Procedure

This was a qualitative study in a suburban school district located in southeastern Georgia. Situated adjacent to a large military base, the school system has an annual average enrollment of 10,442 students in grades K-12. Two public school district high schools serve the approximately 3,136 high school aged students. One-third of district students are military dependents, many of whom have a deployed family member.

The 2007-2008 State of Georgia K-12 Report Card indicates system level student demographics by race/ethnicity as being 54% African-American, 29% Caucasian, 7% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 9% Multiracial. No Native American/Alaskan Native students were represented in the student population. Approximately 58% of students qualify for the federal free or reduced meals program. Many students have changed schools numerous times, in many cases because of a student status as a dependent military family member. Many students have been educated in other states as well as in the federally operated Department of Defense Schools (DODS).

Research Design

The researcher utilized semi-structured interviewing as a means to collect descriptive data about high school teacher and high school student perceptions of barriers to high school student success. The semi-structured interviews consisted of fifteen open-ended questions in an approximately one hour to one and a half hour long interview. The semi-structured interview approach allowed for systematic data collection from interview to interview. The interview format allowed the interviews to be more formal. The researcher made written notes about perceptions and observations during the interview to enrich the subsequent written transcription data. Interviews were audio taped with

participant consent and professionally transcribed for data analysis. The researcher

compared participant responses to interview questions, analyzed interview transcripts for

recurring themes and reported findings in a narrative form.

Participants

Eight teachers employed in the suburban southeastern Georgia school district

study location participated in individual 60-90 minute long interviews that occurred in a

one time natural setting. Individuals were conducted with educators randomly selected

from a sample to include district high school teachers representing a range of high school

grade level curriculum areas, teaching assignments, certification types and years of

experience, both genders and a range of ethnicities. High school senior student beliefs

about barriers to high school student academic success were explored via student focus

groups. The focus groups were comprised of currently enrolled seniors in a district high

school; focus groups were representative of system and school demographics. Student

focus group members were selected by asking senior high school principals, teachers, and

counselors from district schools to help the researcher obtain participants willing to

reflect on the study question and share their opinions openly.

Instrumentation

The researcher developed interview questions for the 60–90 minute long

interviews with study participants in order to obtain data about perceptions of barriers to

high school student academic success and high school completion. High school teachers

were requested to participate in an interview consisting of questions and prompts

designed to elicit information about barriers to high school student academic success.

High school students were requested to participate in a focus group and to respond to

questions designed to elicit their perceptions about barriers to high school student academic success. Marshall & Rossman (1999, p. 108) contend that qualitative in-depth interviews are a "useful way to get large amounts of data quickly" and provide a means for a researcher to convey the "attitude that the participants views are valuable and useful." This qualitative approach is important in that it allows the researcher an appropriate means to collect information from high school educators and high school students participating on a daily basis in the high school educational setting.

The study procedure included an identification of a problem (concern) and a literature review of relevant literature on the topic. The researcher developed interview questions based upon a review of relevant literature. Upon committee approval, the researcher submitted the research proposal to the Instructional Review Board (IRB) of Georgia Southern University. The researcher conducted data collection after obtaining study site administrative approval, dissertation committee approval, and IRB approval.

Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed individual high school teacher and high school student focus group interview transcriptions. Participant responses were compared and coded for analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns. The data analysis was reported in a narrative format.

Limitations

This study was designed to reveal high school teacher and high school senior student perceptions about barriers to high school student academic success. Research findings were limited to the context of the particular school district studied and may not necessarily generalize to other locations.

Delimitations

The perceptions of other high school educators, including counselors, media specialists, administrators, and central office administrators were excluded from the study due to limitations of time and accessibility.

<div align="center">Definition of Terms</div>

Academic Success: Attainment of a state endorsed high school diploma within the usual four-time span.

Barrier: Any obstacle, real or imagined, which stands in the way of a student obtaining a state endorsed high school diploma.

Dropout: A student of any age who does not graduate from high school within the standard four years.

GED: General Educational Development (GED) describes a battery of five tests which certifies the taker has American high school-level skills.

Graduate: To comply with the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB),* Georgia has defined a graduate as a student who leaves high school with a regular diploma (this does not include a high school certificate or special education diploma) in the standard time (i.e., 4 years).

High School Certificate: "The document awarded to pupils who do not complete all of the criteria for a diploma or who have not passed the state assessment requirements as referenced in Rule 160-3-1-.07 Testing Programs – Student Assessment, but who have earned 23 units and meet all local board requirements" (Georgia DOE, 2008, p. 26).

High School Diploma: "The document awarded to students certifying that they have satisfied attendance requirements, unit requirements and the state assessment

requirements as referenced in Rule 160-3-1-.07 Testing Programs – Student Assessment"
(Georgia Department of Education, 2008, p. 26).

Secondary School Credential: "a document awarded to students at the completion
of the high school experience" (Georgia DOE, 2008, p. 26).

Special Education Diploma: "The document awarded to students with
disabilities assigned to a special education program and who has not met the state
assessment requirements referenced in Rule 160-3-1-.07 Testing Programs – Student
Assessment or who have not completed all of the requirements for a high school diploma
but who have nevertheless completed their Individualized Education Programs (IEP)"
(Georgia DOE, 2008, p. 26).

Success: High school graduation with a diploma endorsed with a prescribed
program of study completed within four years.

Successful student: A student who makes chronological progress through each
grade level and ultimately graduates from high school with a cohort.

Unit: "One unit of credit awarded for a minimum of 150 clock hours of
instruction or 135 hours of instruction in an approved block schedule" (Georgia DOE,
2008, p. 26).

Summary

A primary goal of the American educational system is to enable students to
become productive, effective citizens, adequately educated and well-prepared to take
their place in a democratic society. Inadequately or marginally prepared students lack a
strong knowledge foundation, and often do not have the skill sets required for success at
the postsecondary educational level or the workplace at large. Poorly prepared graduates

give rise to serious concerns about the effectiveness of national and state educational institutions.

The reporting mandates of *NCLB* have brought about heightened levels of awareness and concern regarding the increasing numbers of students who leave high school without a diploma. High school teacher and high school student perceptions about barriers to high school student academic success could provide valuable information useful to all stakeholders seeking to alleviate this educational issue.

Educational policymakers are interested in identifying factors affecting student achievement. At the high school level, measures of student academic achievement such as mandated high school graduation tests and graduation rates, affect not only the individual student but also the overall school AYP. Since the school graduation rate is one indicator used for school level AYP, research data obtained from key players – those participants in the high school educational setting – could provide valuable insight into barriers to high school student academic achievement and success.

The researcher employed a qualitative research design to investigate high school student academic success. Responses from the 60-90 minute long individual high school teacher and student focus group interviews were professionally transcribed. Responses were analyzed for recurring themes and reported in a narrative form. Data collected in the qualitative research from high school teachers working directly with students as well as from current high school students in the district provided a unique perspective to high school student academic success research. Information revealed in this study enriches the research database for all stakeholders working to improve student achievement.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

National interest and concern about high student academic success has been

heightened since the passage of the federal legislation known as *No Child Left*

Behind (*NCLB*). This legislation mandates reporting of educational data at the school and

system level. High schools must report measures of student achievement test data and

data regarding high school completion.

Research efforts spanning the past forty years have attempted to learn more about

at-risk students. Early identification of at-risk individuals is important in order to develop

programs to help them attain academic success. Students drop out of school for many

reasons, and the characteristics of dropouts are often the same as those of students who

remain and graduate.

Educational researchers have explored the dropout phenomenon for decades, in an

attempt to identify at-risk students and to understand better the underlying reasons for

school dropout. Improved understanding is an important component in the development

of effective programs to improve educational outcomes for all students (Alexander,

Entwisle, Kabbani, 2001; Rumberger 2001). According to Rumberger (2001),

Understanding why students drop out of school is the key to addressing

this major educational problem. Yet identifying the causes of dropping out

is extremely difficult to do because, like other forms of educational

achievement (e.g., test scores), it is influenced by an array of proximal and

distal factors related to both the individual student and to the family,

school, and community settings in which the student lives (p 4).

The dropout decision is influenced by a myriad of factors, including social,

political, and economic factors, and is dependent upon the individual's developmental

and educational history and experiences, as well as current circumstances (Rumberger,

2001). Rumberger concluded that dropping out of school originates from an array of

factors found within four areas: those related to the individual, and those related to the

context of the family, the school, and the community.

<div align="center">Individual Risk Factors</div>

Early dropout research focused on traits of the individual and what traits students

need to do well in school. Researchers examined "dropouts in terms of the personal and

social characteristics they had in common" (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, &

Fernandez, 1989, p. 35). This line of research focused on deficits of the individual and

their family circumstances. Early dropout profiles often portrayed adolescent unemployed

males, urban poverty, and juvenile delinquency. Researchers often concluded "the

primary distinction between dropouts or graduates were characterized by their

"psychological defects" (Dorn, 1996, pp. 67–68).

Much dropout literature suggests dropping out is indicative of a mismatch

between individuals who drop out and the educational setting. The traditional school

design largely reflects white middle class values, which may not be congruent with the

values held by current students from an increasingly diverse ethnic, socioeconomic,

family, and community background. Educational outcomes, including the risk of

dropping out are associated with a range of individual student traits as well as family characteristics, including the family structure and socioeconomic status (SES).

Student Demographics

Numerous studies link many individual student factors to the risk of dropping out. Included in the individual student factors are the following: minority race/ethnicity, gender, SES, immigration status, limited English proficiency (Schargel, 2004) and/or a limited cognitive ability or other learning disability (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbot, Hill, Catalano, & Hawkins, 2000; Eckstrom, Goetz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). Students with disabilities are more likely to have multiple risk factors, and those diagnosed as emotionally disturbed (EBD) as well as those considered learning disabled (LD) are especially at risk of dropping out.

Scanlon & Mellard (2002) interviewed recent disabled and non-disabled high school dropouts about their school experiences. They found learning-disabled individuals disproportionately tended to drop out of high school and had lower academic achievement levels than their non-disabled peers. Many adolescents with LD or EBD experience academic difficulties, and develop a subsequent lack of academic self-confidence. They may have issues with self-esteem and frustration stemming from events within the educational setting (Gallagher, 2002; Rumberger, 1987). As a result, when the dropout decision allows them to leave the environmental where they are unsuccessful, many report a sense of relief.

Research from a 19-year longitudinal study (Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs, 1997) found multiple factors affect the school leaving decision: early childhood influences, and individual and family factors. Specifically, cumulative individual and family stressors,

poor middle school achievement, lower high school achievement and motivation, as well as drug use were associated with a higher likelihood of dropping out.

Academic Performance

The negative relationship of grade level retention and later educational outcomes is well known to educational researchers. Holmes (2006) noted, "The literature is unanimous in its linking of retention to dropping out" (p. 57). In fact, accountability measures and reform mandates designed to end social promotion often require the use of high stakes test scores in promotion and graduation decisions. Despite the plethora of educational research linking retention to later negative academic outcomes, the practice of grade level retention is still in place.

Grade level retention, especially at the middle school level, is strongly related to high school dropout (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Holmes, 2006). The dropout risk increases for several reasons, including the fact that the retention seldom achieves the aim of remediation. The retention is viewed by the student as being a failure in the eyes of the teacher and school.

Grade retention is associated with increased rates of behavior problems in children and adolescents, simply being older than others in one's class are, without experiencing grade retention, also is associated with increased rates of behavior problems, most noticeably among adolescents (Holmes, 2006, p. 58).

Roderick (1993) studied early grade and late-grade dropouts and reported poor middle school academic performance predicted poor high school academic outcomes. Students who leave school during the seventh through ninth grades have a history of poor

academics, including grade level retentions, and furthermore, the academic performance worsened during middle school. Roderick concluded that the odds of dropping out increase 40% to 50% with one grade retention, and with two grade retentions, the odds increase to 90%.

Rumberger (1995) reported approximately 20% of eighth graders in 1988 had been retained at least once. He concluded that students who were retained in grades 1 to 8 were four times more likely to drop out between grades 8 and 10 than students who were not retained, even after controlling for socioeconomic status, eighth grade school performance, and a host of background and school factors. Rumberger predicted the drop out numbers would continue to increase with the implementation of high school exit exam requirements and the end to social promotion policies.

Rumberger and Arellano (2007) investigated student and school predictors of high school graduation. Their analysis was based upon survey data and transcript analysis for 1343 individuals who attended 63 public California schools and who were expected to graduate in 2004. They found 77% graduated, 9% dropped out, and 12% transferred or had some other transcript designation. The analysis of graduate data revealed the following about graduate demographics: "females (83%) were more likely to graduate than males (71%); Asians (88%) and Whites (83%) were more likely to graduate than Blacks (76%) or Hispanics (70%); and students from high socioeconomic status (SES) families (89%) were more likely to graduate than students from low SES families (70%)" (p. 2).

Some students in the California study group were designated as being academically at-risk based upon whether the students were over age for their grade level,

had low grades in the ninth grade, and whether they had failed ninth grade (Rumberger & Arellano, 2007). Academically at-risk students comprised more than 40% of the study group. Of these, only three out of every five at-risk students graduated on time with their cohort.

Student Behaviors

The degree to which students are engaged in the overall school community is an indicator of future academic outcomes, including the risk of dropping out. Poor school attendance patterns as well as high incidence of school student discipline problems are associated with dropping out (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Alexander et al. (1997) concluded that dropping out of high school culminates a long-term process of disengagement from school. Indicators of future academic outcomes are evident in the early school years (Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004).

Rumberger (2001) found positive student engagement within the school community had a positive effect on student academic achievement. He reported high school completion correlated positively with high school program of study and participation in school athletic programs. Additional study findings indicated high levels of school academic involvement and overall school community participation, especially in athletics, correlated with higher graduation rates for non-minority students.

Student achievement is affected by a range of factors associated not only with the individual, but also with a student's family, community, peer group, and school. Adolescents are highly social and tend to identify strongly with a peer group and peer

group values. Association with friends who are involved in risky behavior and antisocial

behavior, which may include violence and illegal substance use, has been linked to

dropping out of school (Battin-Pearson, 1997; Ekstrom, 1986; Wehalge & Rutter, 1986).

Adult Responsibilities

Adolescents who take on adult responsibilities are at increased risk of leaving

school prematurely. Becoming a teen parent, getting married, working to augment family

income, or having caretaker responsibility for other family members significantly

increases the likelihood of school dropout before graduation (Jordan, Lara, &

McPartland, 1994; Rosenthal, 1998; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Wehlage & Rutter,

1986). The odds of negative student educational outcomes, including the risk of dropping

out increase as the number of risk factors accumulate (Woods, 1995).

Some students, including pregnant or teen parents and employed students, must

assume adult roles and responsibilities. Within the school context, student role

expectations do not allow students the degree of autonomy and independence they

experience off campus. These students often become increasingly resistant to and

intolerant of school rules and regulations. Thus, the school environment becomes too

difficult for at-risk adolescents attempting to navigate between the adult and the student

role. Either these at-risk students may find themselves "pushed out" of high school for

non-conforming behaviors, or they may elect to "pull out" and completely withdraw from

school altogether (Rumberger, 1987).

They may depart traditional high school for an alternative school, which may be

better structured for their individual needs. Alternately, they may leave school with the

stated objective of returning later or attaining what they consider a viable alternative to the diploma – the General Education Development (GED) certificate.

Stern (1997) reported that students working more than 15-20 hours each week are likely to do less homework and to have lower grades, resulting in negative academic outcomes. He concluded students employed more than 20 hours each week are more likely to drop out of high school or are less likely to complete postsecondary education. For students working less than 20 hours per week, fewer negative outcomes were reported.

McNeil (1997) found the odds of dropping out for working students were 30% higher than for students who did not work while in high school. He concluded the type of work may influence the drop out decision, and that after controlling for academic performance, males were less likely to drop out than females. He concluded, "Students who were employed in retail, service, manufacturing and other occupations were all more likely to drop out than were non-workers, and those employed in lawn work/odd jobs were significantly less likely to drop out" (p. 6).

<div align="center">Family Influence</div>

Individual student educational outcomes are influenced by factors related to the family, the community and the educational setting. Contextual factors within these groups influence many student behaviors, attitudes, and ultimately the student's cumulative academic achievement. Research efforts focused on the family and interrelated community attempt to reveal exactly how student educational outcomes are affected.

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Family socioeconomic status (SES) exerts a powerful influence on student achievement. This influence may be positive or negative, depending upon the family SES circumstances, as well as the educational attainment of the parents. Students living in more educated, stable, and affluent family circumstances are more likely to exhibit higher educational attainment than those from less affluent circumstances (Rumberger, 2005).

The negative effect of poverty on educational outcomes, including the risk of dropping out is well-documented (Schargel & Smink, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Wehlage et al., 1989). Teens from families with "incomes in the lowest 20% of all family incomes were six times as likely as their peers from families in the top 20% of the income distribution of dropping out of high school" (NCES, 2001, p. 6). Students from low-income families may hold jobs to augment family financial needs. They may have difficulty keeping up with job and school demands, and elect to leave school prior to diploma attainment for financial reasons.

Schargel & Smink (2001) found that low family SES has an overall negative effect upon student achievement. Because of costs associated with some school activities, including social and athletic activities, students from families with limited financial resources may have reduced opportunities for extracurricular school-related socialization. School-related extracurricular activities and socialization opportunities afford students the opportunity to develop a school affiliation. Thus, students from low SES families have limited opportunities to develop relationships with others within the context of the school.

Stanton-Salazar (1997) observed,

Socioeconomic barriers are erected when economic circumstances prevent

the young person from fully participating in the daily life of the school's

social world, especially those circumstances that impede the formation of

pro-social and supportive relations with adult agents and high status peers.

These circumstances may have to do with working outside the home, with

not having the economic resources to participate in the school's

extracurricular activities, or with being treated as an inferior because of

visible markers that communicate the student's low socioeconomic status

(e.g., dress, speech, family automobile). (p. 18)

Student activities outside the educational setting affect academic outcomes,

including diploma attainment. Employed students in poverty-stricken neighborhoods may

find juggling school and work-related responsibilities difficult. When faced with the

decision about where to direct their time and energy, many at-risk adolescents make the

decision to drop out of school. Fine (1986) reported this seems especially applicable to

teens who may feel classes are irrelevant or of little benefit to them. She noted that many

adolescents are aware that a diploma does not guarantee either job security or income.

For them, the importance of diploma attainment is diminished when immediate financial

gains overshadow predictions of future financial benefits.

The social identity of the adolescent student is closely linked to associations and

friendships within their peer group. An inability to participate in school related activities

may direct their social interactions more within the context of the community, which for

many low SES family members, may include high-risk peer groups. Association with a

high-risk peer group increases the potential for engaging in high-risk social behavior, including early sexual involvement, alcohol or drug use, and gang involvement. Gang involvement may seem particularly appealing to at-risk teens with a prior history of negative social experiences (Alexander et al., 1989).

Family Structure

The student family dynamics and structure significantly affect student educational outcomes. Students from a family with a single parent or stepparent head of household are at increased risk of dropping out (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger, 2005). Dynamics among family members resulting in high levels of household stress increases the risk of student dropout. Family stressors may include the following: substance abuse, family conflict, financial or health problems, death, divorce, remarriage, and residential moves (Alexander et al., 2001; Ensminger et al., 1996; Rosenthal, 1998). Adolescents living in a single parent household may need to work to augment family finances, or may be required to assume a caretaker role for younger siblings or older family members.

Female teens, in particular, often must assume caretaker roles for other family members while a parent is away at work. Some teen parents may have excessive school absences and lowered educational outcomes when their parental obligations conflict with their student responsibilities (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Fine & Zane, 1989). Several studies found teens caught up in the conflicting demands of school and family eventually dropped out or were forced out of school (Fine, 1986; Wehlage et al., 1989).

Researchers found student family roles and responsibilities can affect academic outcomes, including the risk of school non-completion. Many adolescents must divide

their time and energy between competing family and school demands. The conflicting

responsibilities of the family member role and the school student role can negatively

influence student educational outcomes. This seems to be especially true for female

students and low SES minority students (Romo & Falbo, 1995).

Socio-cultural Values

Family gender role expectations may present a barrier to student school

completion, especially for minority females. Romo and Falbo (1995) tracked 100 high-

risk Hispanic students over four years to study the risk factors of grades, gang

involvement, teen motherhood, immigrant families, and schools' policies and

administrative practice. They concluded that "students had to navigate the boundaries of

three cultures in order to graduate: the culture of the home, the adult culture of the school

system, and the student culture of the school" (Romo & Falbo, 1995, p. 47). Romo (1998)

also noted that for Hispanic females, maternal influences and expectations often conflict

with the student role and the likelihood of academic success.

Traditional Hispanic value systems, including those relating to female gender

expectations often conflict with the values and educational expectations of the

educational community. Some Hispanic family expectations regarding the traditional

female's role of motherhood, family responsibilities, and academic family value system

tend to cause "conflicts among traditional roles of motherhood, family responsibilities,

and academic success" (Romo, 1998). Although academically successful, females may

consider dropping out or not advancing their education beyond the secondary level

because "…gender attitudes signal whether girls will pursue stereotypical vocations and

familial paths or seek higher education and careers" (p. 1).

Finn (1989) used a frustration self-esteem model to explain why students drop out of school. He argues poor school outcomes (deficient school practices) leads to poor self-esteem and subsequent misbehaviors, including poor attendance, lowered educational achievement, leading to dropping out. Some researchers (Eckstrom et al., 1986; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) found that self-esteem for some dropouts actually improved after leaving school. The act of leaving the school environment of personal failure conflict for the more positive external environment over which they have more individual control is more appealing (Eckstrom et al., 1986; Fine, 1991; Gallagher, 2002).

Family Mobility

Research related to life events, such as divorce, family moves, and parental loss of employment or job changes with resultant moves between schools found a negative correlation to student achievement, including the risk of dropping out. Swartz (1995) investigated effects of family mobility and school changes on student achievement. "More than half the dropouts moved during the four-year study period, compared with 15% of the graduates, [and] nearly a quarter of the dropouts changed schools two or more times" (Schwartz, 1995).

Adolescent student identity is closely tied to the peer group, and the loss of the adolescent peer group may have a negative effect on student achievement. Adolescent students encounter academic success barriers when family moves result in a loss of the peer group (Wehlage et al., 1989). "Mobility can foster another kind of instability only rarely discussed in the at-risk literature. Even with a supportive family, students can experience serious disorientation after moving away from a community of peers who provided social identity" (p. 61).

Parenting Effects

Parental values, attitudes, and beliefs about education influence student educational expectations and outcomes. The risk of poor academic achievement, including dropping out is greater for students from families with low educational expectations. Parental educational attainment influences student achievement; the chances of student dropout increase if the mother was a high school dropout (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Kaufman, Bradbury, & Owens, 1992). The dropout odds also increase if a sibling has previously dropped out.

Students whose parents seldom talk to their child about school, have infrequent contacts with the school about academic performance, or generally do not get involved in school PTA or other activities are less likely to graduate (Eckstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey (1997) linked parental practices and student behavior as early as first grade to later school performance and dropping out. In their investigation of precursors leading to dropout, they analyzed data about family changes, school changes, and student deportment. Also associated with poor academic outcomes, including increased chances of dropping out, were the absence of study aids in the home and low levels of homework monitoring by the parent.

Parenting practices may mitigate negative effects of a low SES family and community. Parental educational expectations, attitudes and behaviors affect student educational achievement, and can increase the odds of high school completion. A number of research studies identified parental involvement in school as a significant predictor of

high school academic outcomes, including graduation (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Jimmerson et al., 2000).

Positive parenting practices can mitigate the negative effects of a low family SES and provide positive effects for student educational outcomes. Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbini (2001) found that "parenting strategies adopted by low-income parents can insulate their children by promoting positive school adaptations and/or preventing anti-school adaptations…" (p. 764). These favorable conditions of high levels of parental support and subsequent good school performance early in the student's academic career work to cancel out the adverse effects of low family socioeconomics and promote school completion for disadvantaged youth.

Rumberger (2001) also found that students whose parents monitor and regulate their activities, are involved in the school, and provide emotional support and encouragement are less likely to drop out of school. Alexander et al. (2001) observed that certain parenting behaviors mitigate the negative effects of low socioeconomic circumstances. "Parents who are materially poor can and do act in ways that support their children's schooling, and their children too play a role in directing their own academic development" (p. 806). Students with parents supportive of their educational activities are more likely to experience positive educational outcomes than students without supportive parents do.

High School Effects

The educational institutional setting, including school climate, rules, and community location can all contribute significantly to high school diploma attainment as well present barriers to high school academic success. Many dropout studies focused on

the individual, in keeping with the field of psychology which focuses "more on human behavior itself and less on the social environment in which the behavior takes place" (Rumberger, 2001, p. 10).

More recently, research studies have attempted to reveal associations between educational/school setting factors, conditions, and practices that may converge cumulatively to affect academically and socially at-risk students to push them out of school (Lee & Burkham, 2000, 2003). These more recent studies consider policies and practices which may negatively affect already at-risk students and present barriers to high school academic success.

Location and School Type

In comparison to smaller schools, large schools are linked to higher dropout rates, especially for schools located in low SES communities (Lehr et al., 2004; Rumberger, 1995). Schools in urban areas consistently have higher dropout rates than those in suburban or rural areas (Schargel, 2004).

Balfanz & Legters (2004) of Johns Hopkins University investigated student dropout and community contextual factors. They identified high schools by the neighborhood, state and city locations. They examined 10,000 schools and alleged 2000 of them were "dropout factories," and classified them as having poor promoting power (50% of first year students failed to graduate 4 years later) and weak promoting power (40% of the first year students failed to graduate 4 years later).

They found poverty to be a strong correlate of low promoting power, perhaps because of fewer resources and lower per-pupil expenditures than high-promoting schools. In many urban locations, where there is a high concentration of low promoting

schools, students have little or no choice about where to attend school. Therefore, for many students, because of where they live and attend school, the school may actually be the most influential factor in whether they complete or drop out of school.

Student Demographics

Student demographics may have a negative effect on the overall student achievement in a particular school. Dropout rates are higher for schools located in impoverished communities, where many students are members of a low SES family (Rosenthal, 1998; Rumberger, 2001). Schools with a high proportion of highly mobile minority students, as well as those with a large foreign-born population, tend to have high dropout rates. Researchers also identified a correlation between low SES minority populations and student dropout in the southern and western states (Ekstrom et al, 1986; Lehr et al., 2004; Schargel, 2004).

High dropout rates have been reported for schools located in communities with high numbers of single-parent households and an overall low educational attainment level among community adults. In communities with numerous employment opportunities for teens who exit school without a diploma, the odds of dropping out increase (Rumberger, 2001). Rumberger (1995; 2001) found high dropout rates are linked to high student-teacher ratios and that low dropout rates are associated with positive student perceptions about their teachers.

The community context affects educational outcomes, including the likelihood of dropping out. Students attending schools located in communities with a high rate of family instability and mobility are more prone to dropping out. Students living and attending school in poverty-stricken urban neighborhoods are likely to encounter school

overcrowding, as well as high levels of violence and crime often drug-related. Student attendance, academic progress, engagement, and ultimately, the odds of school completion are influenced by conditions relative to the community and school location (Rosenthal, 1998).

The composition of the overall student body affects individual student achievement. The odds of student dropout increase when a high proportion of students are retained (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). A high proportion of low SES students with poor academic achievement contribute to a negative school climate. Schools with negative climates often have high rates of absenteeism, truancy, disciplinary infractions, as well as problems with student violence and related high rates of dropout. Students who do not feel safe at school may choose to withdraw voluntarily to what they perceive to be a safer environment (Kaufman et al., 1992; Rumberger, 1995).

Students who do not feel safe at school are more likely to withdraw from school. Students who do not feel school discipline policies are fair or that they have supportive teachers are more likely to drop out. Discipline policies and attendance policies may converge to alienate and eventually push out less motivated students (Rumberger, 1995).

Academic Policies and Practices

Educational reform mandates and policies geared towards higher educational standards and increased educational rigor may contribute to students dropping out of school. An analysis of the Seattle School District (Dean, 2002; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006) found school suspensions and other policies affect a disproportionate number of students of color. Shannon and Bylsma (2006) summed up policy related to tardies, truancy and suspensions by stating that such policy exacerbates withdrawal behavior. At the

secondary level, a commonly held belief seems to be "that some students must fail in order to maintain academic standards for the rest." (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006, p. 34; Wehlege et al., 1989). Shannon & Bylsma (2006) point out this belief system creates "winners and losers," and those consistent losers "may give up and leave school" (p. 34).

Education policy, bureaucratic regulations, and behaviors of school personnel can contribute to student academic success or early school departure. Fine refers to some as "policies that purge" (1991, p. 81). Shannon & Bylsma (2006) acknowledged, "Policies and procedures related to discipline, attendance, grading and standards, high stakes assessments, and retention impact dropout" (p. 33). The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University (2002) report called Opportunities Suspended: The Devastating Consequences of Zero Tolerance and School Discipline determined that in 1998, 3.1 million students were suspended and 87,000 were expelled (p. v). According to the report, students of color were affected disproportionately by academic suspension policies.

Graduation Requirements

Failure to accrue course credits and to make regular academic progression through the high school years increases the chances of a student leaving school prior to diploma attainment (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Accountability mandates, including state and local diploma requirements, affect decision-making by adolescent students and their parents about school completion. For decades, quantitative researchers have used a variety of data sources and statistical procedures to study the effects of graduation requirements, including rigorous curricular and testing requirements, on high school completion rates.

Amrein & Berliner (2002) used an archival time series research design to investigate relationships among graduation rates, dropout rates, and GED enrollment data for 16 states that used exit exams. They concluded high school exit graduation test requirements led to higher dropout rates, lower graduation rates, and increased GED program enrollments in most states. In contrast, Jacob (2001) concluded that while exit exams did not affect the drop out probability for the average students, it did have a negative affect for low-achieving students. When compared to their peers in non-test states, low-achieving students were 25% more likely to drop out.

Warren & Edwards (2003) investigated the effects of mandated exit exams on high school completion. Their research considered students' enrollment status in Grade 12, as well as school completion with a diploma or GED acquisition. They concluded that students required to pass exit exams were approximately 70% more likely to obtain a GED instead of a regular diploma regardless of ethnicity, socioeconomic level or achievement level.

Other research findings do not support evidence of exit exam and dropping out. Davenport and colleagues (2002) investigated Minnesota graduation rates and exit testing. They found no overall negative relationship, noting that more than half of students who dropped out had passed the required exit exams. For students in this particular Minnesota study, high stakes exit exams were not a barrier to diploma attainment.

The Center on Education Policy Panel (2003) concluded that based upon the limited available empirical evidence, "there is only moderately suggestive evidence, to date, of exit exams causing more students to drop out of school" (p. 4). They also

concluded that "…from the research to date is that there is no evidence of exit exams *decreasing* dropout rates. That is, exit exams are not helping to keep students in school" (p. 4).

School Structure, Size and Organization

Size and organizational structure are associated with barriers to student academic achievement and diploma acquisition (Rumberger, 2001). In comparison with smaller schools, larger schools may appear more impersonal, a negative effect, especially for at-risk and minority students.

Researchers Lee & Burkam (2002, 2003) examined the relationship between student dropout and school size. They found an association between student dropout and school size, and noted the probability of student dropout is also influenced by additional factors. They observed that students who attended a medium-size high school (600-900 students) were least likely to drop out.

The school transition from middle school to high school represents the pivotal point for successful academic outcomes, especially for students already at-risk (Neild, Stoner-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2001). They observed high-risk peer groups and student age are "significantly associated with dropping out. The odds of a student dropping out more than double with each additional year older a student is at the start of high school. Furthermore, students who reported having more friends involved in a greater number of risk-taking behaviors had substantially increased odds of dropping out" (p. 557).

Allensworth & Easton (2007) found credits earned in core courses, in addition to overall freshman year credit accrual, to be a good predictor of future graduation or dropout. They also reported the overall grade-point average and attendance patterns as

good predictors of graduation. They concluded that students have better attendance and resulting academic success when they have strong teacher relationships and perceive their education as being important to their future.

Dropout research by Lan & Lanthier (2003) investigated differences in personal characteristics of graduates and non-graduates from 8th to 12th grades. They deduced the school transition from middle school to high school affected the personal characteristics of dropouts. They concluded that "Dropout student perceptions of school, teachers, and school-related work deteriorated between the 8th grade and the 10th grade and continued to decline after the 10th grade until they dropped out" (p. 325).

Research by Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) investigated school characteristics related to high school dropout rates in Kentucky schools. They examined variables associated with the individual student, the family, and the educational setting in a mixed methods research design. They compared a sample of 21 schools with high dropout rates to a sample of 20 schools with low dropout rates. Qualitative data from surveys, interviews, and observations yielded detailed descriptions of school characteristics in four schools which were included in the overall sample of 41 schools. They found students who feel a sense of school belonging and connectedness are more likely to remain in school and graduate. Students with numerous disciplinary infractions resulting in school suspensions are more likely to dropout. Family support and involvement in the educational process was positively associated with graduation. Schools with a high percentage of ethnic minority students were associated with dropping out.

Recent research efforts aim to identify factors that seem to promote positive adaptation and positive effects for at-risk youth, which result in educational perseverance rather than a predicted dropout outcome. For social scientists, this represents a paradigm shift, allowing for an analysis of factors and processes that promote persistence and resilience for high-risk youth, including those with disabilities.

Summary

From a historical perspective, high school completion in American schools is a relatively recent expectation. Prior to WWII, the majority of students did not complete high school studies (Dorn, 1996). However, after WWII, schooling opportunities became more readily available, and as a result, graduation rates steadily increased. Students who failed to complete high school were termed "dropouts" and a common public perception was that they were a drain on society, and were social deviants (Dorn, 1996; Wehlage et al., 1989).

The focus of early dropout research studied the problem from the individual perspective. Seemingly based upon the assumption that the educational setting was not to blame, researchers attempted to identify causes for educational failure related to the individual. Researchers identified links between student dropout and prior academic performance, and socioeconomic factors such as minority racial status, gender, and low family socioeconomic status. Later research explored the relationships between student educational outcomes and factors related to the family, community, and educational contexts.

Individual student traits and attributes including learning aptitude, motivation, learning disabilities, health status, attendance, behavior, and prior academic preparation

were all linked with student educational outcomes, including dropping out of high school

(Wehlage et al., 1989). Some traits such as ethnicity are unalterable. However, some

student traits, such as attitude towards school, are alterable, and more recently, research

studies have been geared toward identification of the potential effects school policies and

organizational structure may have on student achievement and dropping out (Shannon

and Bylsma, 2006).

Research studies indicate the overall school environment and culture, as well as

school size and structure, have an effect on student academic outcomes. Small school size

can foster student attachment to the school by providing more opportunities for

extracurricular activities, and more personalization. Students with a strong school

attachment and affiliation are more likely to follow school rules, including those related

to attendance and behavior. More productive classroom instruction can occur with

students who are present and who follow behavioral expectations. The overall result

possibly will be gains in student achievement and overall student educational outcomes.

Theories of developmental behavioral science take into account that student

behaviors are shaped by the various contexts in which students live and interact, (Jessor,

1993). The National Research Council Panel on High-Risk Youth reasoned that those

wishing to improve student outcomes should focus on the high-risk settings within which

they live and attend school, and not only on the characteristics of the so called "at-risk"

youth (National Research Council, Panel on High-Risk Youth, 1993; Rumberger, 2001).

Because exact reasons for dropping out, including those attributable to the

individual student as well as those associated with the overall educational context are so

inextricably intertwined, identification of early risk factors is especially important if

America is going to succeed in the goals of *No Child Left Behind*. Information gathered

in this research study revealed high school teacher and high school student perceptions

about barriers to high school student academic success. This information could

potentially benefit all stakeholders working to develop strategies and programs designed

to improve educational outcomes for all students.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

A primary goal of the American educational system is to enable students to become productive, effective citizens, adequately educated and well-prepared to take their place in a democratic society. Inadequately or marginally prepared students often do not have the skill set required for success at the postsecondary educational level or the workplace at large. Poorly prepared graduates give rise to serious concerns about the effectiveness of national and state educational institutions.

A high school diploma provides what is considered by most to be the minimal educational preparation. Approximately 30% of students never complete diploma requirements, and others require more than the usual four years for secondary school completion. Recent educational reforms are focused on the assumption that all students must be provided a quality education and the opportunity to attain a high school diploma. This study focuses on recognized barriers to high school student academic success.

Research Question

The purpose of this study was to identify barriers to high school student academic success from the perspectives of current high school teachers and students. An additional research purpose was to contribute research findings to the existent literature base about barriers to high school student educational outcomes. This study was designed to answer the following research question:

"What are the perceptions of high school teachers and high school students about barriers to high school student academic success?"

Research Site

The study site for this qualitative study was a suburban school district in southeastern Georgia. Situated adjacent to a large military base, the public school system has an annual average enrollment in excess of 10,000 students in grades K-12. The two public system high schools serve approximately 3,136 high school-age students. Approximately one-fourth of the district students are military dependents, many of whom have a deployed family member.

The 2007-2008 State of Georgia K-12 Report Card indicates system level student demographics by race/ethnicity as: 54% African-American, 29% Caucasian, 7% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 9% Multiracial. No Native American/Alaskan Native students are represented in the student population. Approximately 58% of students qualify for the federal free or reduced meals program and approximately 12% of the district students are enrolled in programs for students with disabilities. Many students have attended schools in other states and school districts and have changed schools several times over the course of their educational career. Because of a dependent military family member status, and military-related family relocations, many students have attended schools affiliated with the federal Department of Defense School System (DODS), and public state department of education schools in other states.

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative case study research design to examine high school teacher and high school student perceptions of barriers to high school student academic success. The researcher employed individual semi-structured interviews with eight teacher participants to elicit teacher perceptions and two focus groups were utilized to

explore the perceptions of student participants. Individual teacher interviews and student focus group interviews were chosen as a means for data collection from key participants in the high school educational setting. This method of data acquisition allowed the researcher an efficient means to attain many perspectives on a common topic from key participants (Glesne, 2006).

Interviews were an appropriate research tool because they can yield information about how present situations evolved from prior events or decisions. Research investigations about high school educational outcomes, including the risk of dropping out revealed a progressive course of student disengagement is indicative of students who fail to experience high school academic success (Finn, 1989). Interviews with key players in the high school educational environment yielded valuable information for the high school student academic research base.

The interview is used as "a principal research tool" for information gathering by many social scientists, including historians, sociologists, political scientists and educators (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 3). Qualitative interviewing provided an academic and practical tool which allowed the researcher "to share the world of others to find out what is going on, why people do what they do, and how they understand their worlds" (p. 5). Interviewing builds upon pre-existing conversational skills of participants and researcher. Nevertheless, qualitative interviews are different from ordinary conversation in that the interview is utilized as a research tool, with the specific design and intent of "learning about people's feelings, thoughts, and experiences" (p. 2).

In qualitative research, interviewing provides the researcher the opportunity to explore what cannot be seen and to consider alternative explanations for what is seen

(Glesne, 1999). Interviewing individuals enables a researcher to explore a topic from the perspective of those being interviewed, and provides a means to learn about what others think and feel (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Interviews always involve at least two people, but may include one or more interviewers and more than one interviewee (Glesne, 1999). The researcher utilized individual teacher interviews and student focus groups to elicit participant perceptions about the study question. Glesne noted, "Interviewing more than one person at a time sometimes proves very useful: children often need company to be emboldened to talk and some topics are better discussed by a small group of people (often referred to as a focus group)" p. 67. Therefore, to elicit student participant perceptions, the researcher utilized focus groups in order to facilitate maximum participant participation and expressive freedom.

An additional advantage of focus group interviews is that they provide an effective means to gather information in a relatively brief timeframe. The use of student focus groups allowed efficient data collection from multiple viewpoints on a topic affecting all participants (Glesne, 2006). Morgan (1997) observed that focus groups provide the following research advantages: (1) concentrated amounts of data about the research topic is produced; (2) interaction among group members produces useful data; (3) since the researcher controls the topic, the focus groups are topic oriented.

The researcher served as the facilitator for the student focus groups. At the beginning of each focus group, the researcher discussed interview parameters and ground rules (Glesne, 2006). Participants were made aware of session time limits as well as the rule that only one person should speak at a time. To generate dialogue about the research

subject, barriers to high school student academic success, the initial interview question inquired about the high school experience of each participant. The researcher continued the focus group interview with questions designed to elicit responses about the research topic for the remainder of the focus group session.

The aim of the present research was to explore participant perceptions about barriers to high school student academic success. The term academic success refers to student diploma acquisition within a usual four-year time span. Since teachers and students interact daily within the high school educational setting, perceptions from both groups were collected. The study design allowed data collection via individual teacher interviews and student focus group interviews. The voices of key participants within the high school setting provided a rich data source for the current research.

Participation in the individual teacher interviews and student focus groups was voluntary. Individual interviews and focus groups occurred in a one-time setting mutually agreed upon and convenient to study participants and the researcher. Study design allowed for follow up interviews as needed for clarification.

Participants

The study site was a suburban southeastern public school district. The purposive sample of high school teachers consisted of current employees in the district high schools. Eight high school teacher participants were selected from a purposive sample that included teachers with state certification in their respective instructional areas and at least four years of teaching experience in a district high school. Two student focus groups were comprised of current seniors enrolled in the district high schools. Their participation

allowed for data collection from the perspective of current students in the district. All persons invited to be in the study were told that participation was voluntary.

Instrumentation

The researcher developed a series of interview questions to be used with participants in the individual teacher interviews and the student focus groups. The individual and focus group interviews were guided by a series of questions designed to reveal participant perceptions about barriers to high school student academic success. No question allowed for a simple yes or no response, but was designed to elicit a fuller, context rich, and descriptive response. Individual interview and focus group participant responses were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed for review by the researcher. The researcher facilitated each focus group. Additionally, the researcher made observational notes during the interview process.

Each individual interview was between 60-90 minutes long, and occurred in a one time natural setting at the convenience of the participant. Each of the two student focus groups were of similar time length and scheduled at the convenience of the participants. The audio recordings were kept in a locked and secure filing cabinet in the researcher's office. At the conclusion of the research project, all original research data, including audio-recordings and written transcriptions will be maintained and disposed of in accordance with institutional IRB regulations. In compliance with IRB regulations, in the prescribed timeline, study materials will be shredded and audiotapes will be erased.

The researcher obtained building principal approval for the research study. Parental permission was obtained for all student participants. Prior to participation, each

study participant was provided a copy of the appropriate IRB approved letter of informed consent that explained the study purpose.

Data Collection

Permission from the Georgia Southern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained prior to conducting individual interview and focus group research. The researcher obtained written approval from high school building level principals prior to conducting the research. Participant names were randomly selected from the pool of qualified candidate names provided by the principal and/or senior counselor. In the event one qualified individual did not wish to participate, then the name of another qualified potential participant was randomly selected in a drawing until a suitable participant number was obtained.

The researcher conducted 60-90 minute long interviews with eight high school teachers at mutually agreed upon times and locations. The researcher utilized a 15-item semi-structured interview protocol to guide teacher interviews. The semi-structured interview protocol was also utilized with the two student focus groups. The interview protocol was based upon interview questions which addressed potential success barriers associated with factors and variables associated with the individual, the family, and the educational setting.

After formation of focus groups, a convenient meeting location and time was scheduled. Researcher developed questions guided the focus group discussion and data collection. With full consent and knowledge of participants, all individual and focus group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for later review by the researcher. The researcher made observational notes regarding participant behavior, and collected

school data and artifacts. The use of audiotapes, printed transcriptions, and researcher notes allowed for enrichment and validation during data analysis. All audiotapes and notes were kept in a locked secure filing cabinet in the researcher's office. Original research materials and data will be maintained and later destroyed in compliance with institutional IRB timelines and regulations.

Data Analysis/Data Reporting

The researcher sought to identify barriers to high school student academic success from the perspectives of high school teachers and high school students. Participant responses to interview questions were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. The researcher analyzed all interview transcripts for recurring themes and patterns.

Participant response data were coded based upon similarity of participant responses about success barriers. The researcher used an iterative process to develop themes, codes, and sub-codes. A narrative analysis was used to analyze and synthesize the collected data. Data analysis was reported as a narrative in Chapter 4.

Summary

A qualitative research design was used to investigate barriers to high school student academic success. Study participants were current high school teachers and current high school seniors. Individual teacher interviews and student focus groups were used as a means of data collection. The researcher conducted individual teacher interviews and student focus groups after obtaining IRB approval and signed consent forms. Individual teacher interviews and student focus groups were transcribed. Transcription data were reviewed and analyzed for recurring themes and patterns.

Participant responses revealed information useful for all stakeholders seeking to improve

high school educational outcomes for all students.

CHAPTER 4

REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

A primary goal of the American educational system is to provide a quality

education to enable adequately educated and well-prepared citizens to take their place in

a democratic society. A solid high school education provides the foundation for

postsecondary schooling or immediate employment. Current workplace conditions

require a well-educated work force, with technical skills, and the ability to continue to

learn and adapt to change. Individuals who fail to complete a high school education are ill

prepared to assume a productive role in American society.

A high school diploma provides what is considered by most to be the minimal

educational preparation. However, approximately 30% of American students never

complete diploma requirements, and others require more than four years doing so

(Orfield, 2004). One goal of recent educational reform is to ensure that all students are

provided a quality education and the opportunity to attain a high school diploma.

The researcher sought to identify high school academic success barriers from the

perspective of current high school teachers and current high school students. Research

data was analyzed by the researcher into themes and categories as presented in Chapter 4.

Research Question

The purpose of this qualitative study was to contribute to the existing research

base about high school student academic success. This was a qualitative research study

involving individual high school teacher interviews and high school student focus group

interviews to elicit participant perceptions about the research question. This study was designed to answer the following research question:

"What are the perceptions of high school teachers and high school students about barriers to high school student academic success?"

Research Design

The researcher employed a qualitative research design to identify barriers to high school student academic success. The researcher conducted eight face-to-face individual 60-90 minute long high school teacher interviews to obtain teacher perceptions about high school student academic success barriers. To obtain high school student perceptions about academic success barriers, the researcher conducted two student focus groups; each of the two focus group meetings was 60-90 minutes in duration. The researcher used interview questions relative to the study purpose to elicit participant responses.

The researcher utilized a 15-item interview protocol for individual teacher interviews and student focus groups. Researcher written interview questions were based upon potential explanatory factors related to high school academic success barriers. Interview questions addressed potential academic success barriers relative to contextual factors associated with the individual, the family, and the educational setting.

Participants

The participants for this study were eight high school teachers who were currently employed in the study district and nine high school students who were currently enrolled in the study district. All data collection was via face-to-face interaction between researcher and participants.

Teachers

Eight high school teacher participants (see Table 4.1) were randomly selected from a purposive sample of volunteers which included teachers with at least four years high school teaching experience in the study district and who were certified in their respective instructional areas. Teacher participants were representative of an ethnic and gender mix and a range of subject matter curricular teaching experience. All teachers participated voluntarily and signed consent forms prior to the investigation. Participants were advised that their identities would be held in confidence.

Table 4.1   *High School Teacher Demographic Data*

Characteristic		*n*	mean
Years at current school		110	13.75
Years in field of education		172	21.5
Highest professional degree attained			
	Bachelor	0	
	Master	4	
	Master plus specialized Degree	4	
	Doctorate	0	
Gender			
	Female	6	
	Male	2	
Ethnic Background			
	African American	2	
	Caucasian	6	
	Hispanic	0	
	Multi Racial	0	

Students

The two student focus groups (see Table 4.2) were comprised of nine high school seniors currently enrolled in the study district. There were four students in one group and five in the other. The students represented an ethnic and gender mix of twelfth graders selected from senior English classes. High school seniors were appropriate study participants because they had been enrolled more than three years in high school and had more extensive school experience than students who had attended high school fewer years. Student participants were selected from the pool of qualified candidate names provided by the principal, English teachers, or the senior counselor. Students were informed about the project and interested students were provided the appropriate consent forms required by IRB protocol. Those students who returned the signed parent consent forms comprised the pool of potential student participants. The researcher selected the research student participants using an impartial method: The first students to return the signed consent forms were those who were selected for study participation. All students participated voluntarily and returned signed consent forms prior to the investigation. Participants were advised that their identities would be held in confidence.

Table 4.2   *High School Student Demographic Data*

Characteristic		n	mean
Years at Current School		33	3.7
Number High Schools Attended			
	Present School Only	6	
	More Than One School	3	
Gender			
	Female	6	
	Male	3	
Ethnic Background			
	African American	3	
	Caucasian	4	
	Hispanic	1	
	Multi Racial	1	

Findings

Introduction

Eight individual high school teacher interviews and interviews from two separate high school student focus groups were used as a means to obtain participant beliefs about barriers to high school student academic success. The interviews and focus groups were held at mutually agreed upon times and locations. Individual teacher interviews and student focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed for later review and in-depth researcher analysis.

The transcriptions were analyzed by the researcher using grouping and theme development of the data, and session field notes. The researcher observational field notes regarding participant behavior, along with printed transcriptions, allowed for enrichment and validation during data analysis. The development of codes and sub codes was an ongoing and iterative process that resulted in themes related to the contexts of the individual student, the family, and the high school. Data analysis was used to answer the following research question:

What are the perceptions of high school teachers and high school students about barriers to high school student academic success?

The researcher conducted all individual teacher interviews and facilitated the two student focus groups. Individual teacher and student focus group interviews began with a brief review of the purpose of the research, an assurance of confidentiality, and description of participant rights. The interviews were guided by protocol questions from Appendix A designed to elicit participant responses about barriers to high school student

academic success. The researcher used follow up questions as needed for clarification or to elicit additional more in-depth responses.

Teacher and student participants provided a range of comments, opinions, and concerns related to the study topic. Findings are organized and presented in the following order: (1) themes related to the context of the individual student, (2) themes related to the family context, and (3) themes related to the high school context. Research data are presented within each of the three identified contexts and organized by teacher responses, followed by student responses.

Participant responses to interview questions related to the individual student yielded perceptions that were categorized into (a) student characteristics, (b) student values and behaviors, and (c) early adult roles. Participant responses included themes related to both academic barriers and social barriers.

<div align="center">Student Context: Teacher Responses and Perceptions</div>

Student Characteristics

Teachers believe individual student academic and social backgrounds play "a huge role" in how students themselves and others perceive their potential for success. Teachers perceive negative academic experiences, including prior grade retention, to have negative effects on student self-esteem and educational aspirations. Teachers said students with disabilities do have academic success barriers; however, they noted that accommodations designed to meet individual student needs are available as needed.

One core curriculum teacher was especially empathetic about difficulties experienced by certain students with disabilities in her classes. "These students know they are behind the other students intellectually and [they] cannot pass the tests." Another

empathetic teacher made a similar comment, "A lot of the things that have been hard for them to do their whole lives don't make any sense anymore." Another teacher stated that over age students said they were "tired of not feeling smart." This teacher felt many poorly performing students "just get tired of being here" and "quit trying to succeed" in academics, and eventually drop out of high school.

Teachers believed that an academic "skills deficit" and being over age in comparison to classmates led to student frustration and contributed to their apathetic and unmotivated behaviors. Teachers indicated some students with poor academic skills, even though they were physically present, often appeared unmotivated, would "quit trying" to do academic tasks and seemed to "mentally withdraw" from the educational context.

Several teachers believed that students sometimes adapted avoidance behaviors as a strategy designed to cover up their inability to "keep up" with schoolwork. Some students pretended indifference or "acted out" to camouflage "their inability to keep up with the work." One sympathetic teacher said she did not really blame them. "I think that I would rather be remembered as a troublemaking student than a dumb one." This teacher also observed that low achieving students sometimes commented that they were "bored" and "needed to get out and get a job."

Overall, teachers perceived most students with disabilities (cognitive, emotional, or behavioral) to have varying degrees of academic and/or behavioral skill deficits, which negatively affected high school student academic outcomes. One veteran special needs teacher summed up academic success barriers for some students with learning disabilities:

Some are just not adequately prepared to be in high school. They are not

prepared in reading level, math level, language level, or maturity level.

They often encounter academic and social barriers to student achievement.

Many students with disabilities have deficits in social skills that prevent

them from being able to fit in, and they have a hard time being a part of

extracurricular activities at all. As a result, they do not feel that same bond

with being in high school. A student with a learning disability may also

have deficits in academic skills resulting in lowered academic

achievement. In addition, when students with disabilities participate in the

larger school community [in collaborative teaching or inclusion classes]

they may not have the social skill set to interact well with other students,

who may take advantage of them.

However, another teacher alleged the current trend by the public to use a student

classification of "having a disability" as an excuse to "lower" educational goals and

expectations for all "students with disabilities." This teacher firmly believed all students

needed to recognize their responsibility as a student "to always do their best and to put

forth their best effort." This teacher spoke from her personal experiences of growing up

with a deaf brother who attended a school where there was a program for the deaf.

He still had to do the same type of *class work* that I did. My mom knew

that even though he was deaf, he still had to do the *same work*. I have

grown up with kids with just about every kind of disability that there is.

Everyone I knew understood that it was his or her responsibility to make it

happen. There was no excuse for them to not be like other kids. When I

was growing up, a disability meant that a student just would have to *work harder*, to do the same thing as other kids. Now we take a disability, like ADHD and dyslexia, and we take all of those and we give a kid *a reason* to fall behind. I think that is wrong.

This core curriculum teacher notes that students with disabilities should have appropriate accommodations. However, this teacher also believes that lowering expectations for students instead of helping them learn and develop coping strategies is not beneficial for students.

One teacher observed that students who were over age for their grade placement, and students with certain learning disabilities often failed to develop friendships at school and seemed to have problems finding a "niche." This teacher believed that without school friends, and a sense of membership within the school community, many became discouraged and felt they no longer belonged in school. "They know they can legally drop out when they turn sixteen, and some do."

No teacher voiced the belief that race or gender presented a particular success barrier for students in their classes. However, teachers did believe student motivation, preparation, and attitude was important to student success. One seasoned educator remarked, "I have taught students of all races, and both genders, who have been hard working students and then I have seen some students who are not motivated and not prepared, and not ready to learn."

Several teachers noted the importance of student motivation on academic success. They believed student motivation played a "huge" role in academic success, and a lack of motivation presented an academic success barrier. One teacher commented,

I think the major factor probably is motivation, and we see many students

who are not motivated to continue with high school for various reasons.

Either they are not interested in the study, or they do not see it as a

significant factor toward their future success.

Ninth graders entering high school "under-prepared from middle school" are at

risk for academic failure, according to teachers. Additionally, they observed that

immature students frequently failed to make an association between their present

educational efforts, course grades and credits, and progression towards graduation. They

noted immature students often failed to prioritize their educational responsibilities such

as studying and doing homework ahead of socializing or entertainment opportunities.

According to one teacher,

You cannot convince a ninth grader that doing well now is going to

benefit them four years in the future, or six or eight years in the future.

Because as far as a ninth grader is concerned, next week is a long way off,

much less four years from now. It may never happen. Therefore, what they

want is what they think will make them happy right now.

Student Values and Behaviors

In their responses to interview questions pertaining to student behaviors, several

teachers discussed the effects of student values and their apparent [negative] behavioral

effects. One teacher discussed the success barrier caused by students developing

friendships with other students [classmates] with low educational values. "Among many

of the students I teach, it [education] is not considered cool." This teacher said these

students referred to more academically oriented classmates who evidenced positive educational values and who participated in class activities as "nerds."

A different teacher expressed the perception that student behaviors related to "cultural values" interfere with student academic success. This academic teacher said some students who are "into the rapper/gangster/hip hop culture" do not see the value of "achieving academically."

This teacher believed other students who are more interested in "vocational" occupations such as "plumbing or auto mechanics" did not see the value of a high school education that included advanced mathematics and science courses. The recent boom in local housing construction has provided employment for many locals. Many male students are especially influenced by employment opportunities they learn about through their career/tech prep classes, technical college speakers, and older relatives who are employed in construction.

Teachers believed many students did not have realistic educational expectations or long range educational goals for themselves. Instead, students tended to think only about what is going on "in the present moment." One teacher emphatically voiced concerns about the apparent lack of personal responsibility embraced by many students, and of the negative long-term effects of students' overall value system.

Teachers discussed a values shift from values held by previous generations with those held by current teens. They noted current students seemed to set a high value on "things" and "money." They believed students who prioritized "material things" and "money" above education also prioritized their time and energies towards the attainment

of those things rather than an education. They noted the relatively low priority of educational attainment as an academic success barrier.

Early Adult Roles

Study participants indicated academic success barriers occurred for students when they failed to balance their student responsibilities with too many social, employment and/or family commitments. For many high school teenagers with a high degree of personal freedom, personal choices interfere with their academic focus. High school success barriers occur when students' lives outside the educational context of the high school interfere with their education. Teachers perceive the following to be success barriers for some teens: romantic involvement, premarital sexual activity, teen parenting, and employment.

Teachers noted that not all teens responded to parenthood in the same way. In some cases, student parents became more responsible about their academic work. They said some who seemed more mature had commented that they realized that whether they completed school directly affected how well they would be able to provide for their child in the future.

Participants noted most teens seemed knowledgeable about assistance and services available from state social services agencies for low-income unwed mothers. Many pregnant teens met eligibility requirements and obtained financial and medical assistance. This assistance from state agencies included medical and health care for the newborn, and financial provisions for daycare while the teen mother was in school. According to a teen parent, much of the assistance continued as long as the mother

continued her education, even throughout college years. Medical care for pregnant military dependents was covered under the family medical coverage.

A social studies teacher expressed sadness about the blasé attitude many district students display concerning premarital sexual activity, pregnancy, and having babies outside marriage. As an example, she spoke about a student she had taught the previous year who stopped by her room the following term to announce that she had a baby. This student did not appear to consider her situation unusual; she was very proud of her baby and showed off her baby pictures with a smile.

According to the teacher, many teen moms accept the idea of their own parent stepping into the parental role for the new baby as the natural order of things. This teacher said, "That's the way it is supposed to be." With a troubled expression, this teacher sadly noted, "That is what they are seeing as the norm -- it's a little scary."

However, parenthood can negatively affect school attendance and academic outcomes for some teen parents. Teachers knew of teen parents who worked to support and provide necessities for their offspring. They noted parental responsibilities, including childcare and working to provide financial support made keeping up with academic work difficult.

One teacher recalled the moral dilemma unexpected parenthood posed for one young man:

> I have a student right now who is a teen father; they are not married, but
> he takes a lot of responsibility in taking care of the child. Therefore, he is
> responsible for caretaking. There are times when if his son is sick, he has
> to stay home with him. In addition, he misses out academically. That is

affecting his performance at school. A child himself, his idea of

supporting the child is that he should have a job right now. He does not

understand that if he gets the education, he will be able to care for the

child much better. His immediate concern is that he would like to step up

and 'be a man' now.

One elective area teacher related an incident in which an usually alert and

involved student (in her early morning class) kept putting his head down on the table and

going to sleep. This teacher asked the student to sit up, and with an attitude of concern,

asked him about his behavior, "which was out of character for him." The student said he

had actually worked all night and then came to school, but "just could not stay awake."

This teacher believed the academic performance of many high school students was

negatively affected when students hold jobs that require them to work long hours.

Several teachers noted that demanding responsibilities outside of school can result

in students having little or no time to complete school assignments, being too tired to pay

attention, or being absent from school altogether. For some students, factors in their

personal lives were barriers to high school academic success. Teachers said they believed

some students found it easier to simply drop out of school.

<p style="text-align:center">Student Context: Student Responses and Perceptions</p>

Student responses to questions related to the individual student yielded

perceptions that were categorized into (a) student characteristics, (b) student values and

behaviors, and (c) early adult roles. Responses included themes about high school

academic success barriers associated with the academic context and the social context.

Student Characteristics

Students discussed the negative effects of being older than classmates are, and of being considered to be "behind" in school. They said many over age students "think they are judged negatively and [that] people are harder on them." In turn, students "start doubting themselves and begin to feel they are not good enough." One at-risk senior noted that when students have frequent absences, they "get behind" with their schoolwork. She alleged these students just try to "hurry up and get it done," and do not put forth their best efforts. Another who was in danger of not earning enough credits to graduate, said older students "reach the point that they just want to get out of the place" because they are "sick of being around people that are younger" than themselves.

School absences create student academic success barriers for students because they miss important instruction and often fail to make up missed work. In order to earn high school coursework credit, a student must attain a grade of 70 or better. Students realized that poor attendance patterns often resulted in students having difficulties with keeping up with their work and earning passing grades. One participant said, "I was not in school where I should have been and learning. I was more distracted by friends and did not go to school." This student realized the need to change her behavior because she kept getting into trouble about her attendance and, according to her, was in danger of not graduating.

Students also discussed the negative effects of diagnosed and undiagnosed behavioral or emotional disabilities, including emotional issues related to depression and anxiety. They noted depression and being anxious resulted in the inability to maintain a focus on education and school-related responsibilities. One girl perceived some students

would not seek help from adults in their life and when they attempted to deal with emotional issues on their own, encountered many obstacles attempting to "just get things done."

Participants also noted the importance of mastering essential academic concepts and skills. Seniors enrolled in the fourth required college preparatory mathematics course spoke about how stressful and difficult the class was. One student's job required working late some evenings, and the student was frequently absent from the early morning trigonometry class. According to this participant, an inability to keep up with class, fatigue, and discouragement, resulted in the participant eventually giving up on passing the class. For another participant, graduation was contingent upon passing the final math class. This participant earnestly remarked, "I would have paid more attention in Algebra I and Algebra II if I had realized how important they were for trig!"

Students noted academic success barriers to occur when individuals associated with "the wrong crowd." One participant spoke about a friend who got into trouble with the law, fell behind in school, and eventually dropped out. The student consensus was that the wrong friends and associates were barriers to student success.

Participants considered being involved in school-related extracurricular activities, such as sports, clubs, or the school band program as something that made their school years more enjoyable. Participants had fond memories of when they were actively involved in various extracurricular programs: females recalled being cheerleaders in previous years, and males spoke about clubs, sports, and band participation. In the words of one student, "I have stayed involved with school extracurricular activities. That has helped me a lot - I don't know what I would be doing if I wasn't doing that."

Student Values and Behaviors

Student participants perceived the negative student behaviors that are often associated with low student motivation to be an academic success barrier. One student made the following observations about low student motivation and associated educational outcomes:

Something that would separate a high achieving student from a low-achieving one would be their self-motivation. There are some who will always do their best and do what they are supposed to do and no one has to stay on them constantly just to keep them focused. And there are others who just don't want to be a part of something and they just don't care. When they are not motivated, they quit caring and their academic performance just gets worse and worse.

One student discussed the relationship between current high school academic performance and future economic implications. This participant had strong beliefs related to the value of an education. This student realized the necessity of a good educational foundation for his future career and a financially secure lifestyle. "I see things differently from some students . . . other kids want to joke around, and I know what that can do. I want to get a good job – I need an education."

Student perceptions mirrored teacher perceptions relative to success barriers posed by negative social values, negative peer group, and "gang influence." A female minority student who had attended different high schools in a northern urban city school district discussed the negative influence of gangs. She observed that even when they are not gang-affiliated, some [students] "just act like they are a gang member" [for

acceptance], but then they may be forced to join because of "pressure" and "the neighborhood they lived in."

The cumulative negative effects of being retained in middle school and associating with negative peers were well illustrated by one participant's comments. This participant spoke about a cousin, who was now referred to as a "friend, rather than a cousin." This minority participant, an honors student, with plans to continue postsecondary school at a state university, and the recipient of several academic scholarships, had a positive value for education and its future lifetime benefits. It appeared this participant did not wish to be associated with nor claim kinship with the individual whose values and personal choices had resulted in his getting into trouble and eventually dropping out of school.

> We used to be real close until he failed a grade and then he got in with the wrong crowd. He started selling drugs, and wound up being sent to Ombudsman ["the alternative school"] and now he has been to Youth Challenge. Nothing seems to help. He came back to school last year and then he dropped back out again, because he said he just could not do it at the time. He could not make the adjustment - he did not like to be told what to do. All the people he hangs with are like 5-10 years older than he is. He definitely has a 'high-risk' peer group.

One participant noted the positive implications her religious beliefs and positive values had for her academic outcomes. She considered her church and her faith as positive influences that helped her to overcome personal obstacles related to low self-confidence and previous academic failures. This senior had failed two classes when she

was a high school freshman, and for a while, this had negatively affected her self-confidence and self-esteem. She said her religious convictions restored her self-confidence and positive self-esteem, and in turn, minimized academic success barriers. For this student, her renewed faith restored her self-confidence, her conviction that she could "rise to any challenge," and the belief that her ability "was guaranteed." She expressed her beliefs in the following comments:

> For me, it was my faith, for me, it was becoming a Christian, that is what got me through it. I think once you realize *who you are*, and *where you come from* and *what you represent*, people can say whatever they want to say about you, but once you know who YOU are, and that *you are capable* of doing better, no one can tell you differently.

Students discussed the importance of being self-directed and of taking pride in their academic accomplishments, including graduation from high school. For a while during her senior year, one participant failed to stay focused on successfully completing school and graduating with her classmates. She was frequently truant and had numerous absences during her senior year. She realized that she had to be in school, do her assignments, and earn coursework credits in order to graduate on time.

> I spent more time with friends instead of coming to school and I got behind. I started to give up on myself. Then I realized I needed to finish school to get my life on track, so I started coming to school more.

Many teens struggle with the desire for independence, and cherish the idea of being in charge of their lives. However, most have to realize that they need parental support in order to complete high school, which means abiding by their parents rules

while living in their parents' home. Some participants found they could live on their own and still be successful in school. However, for most young people, leaving their parents' home presents insurmountable success barriers.

One participant tried living on her own, but discovered that in order to finish high school, she really needed the structure provided by living at home with her parents. Her comments illustrate her confidence about her ability to complete high school. Until she graduates, her desire to acquire her high school diploma, must continue to supersede her desire to live on her own.

I know I have the brains to overcome anything I want to; it is my choice to

use them. I know that if I graduate, I will feel better about myself. Also,

my parents will be more proud of me than they already are.

Parental support of a student's education is recognized as very important for student academic outcomes. Parental approval is also recognized as a powerful motivator for adolescents.

Early Adult Roles

Participants discussed success barriers associated with the way students spend their time outside regular school hours. They said students needed to maintain a high priority on keeping up with their schoolwork. They noted that some friendships and relationships, especially those of a romantic nature, could interfere with successful school completion.

Participants noted some romantic relationships and early sexual activity had the potential to create academic success barriers. They noted potential barriers which occurred with relationships to include alcohol and drug use, risky sexual behavior,

pregnancy and becoming a teen parent. They also discussed the stress teen parents experience when they try to be good parents, good students, and good employees. Students mentioned the influence of romantic partners and the temptation to skip school. In fact, several participants had elected to be absent on numerous occasions to spend time with boyfriends or friends.

Participants perceived teen pregnancy to be a success barrier for not only the teen mother, but also for other family members. Events related to the pregnant teen, and the arrival of a new baby also have a ripple effect on the entire family. For instance, participants spoke about a classmate who missed school so she could drive her pregnant sister to medical appointments. One participant related her account of missing school because she had to care for her sister's children when the sister could not.

Students perceived time management as critical for academic success, and noted poor time management as a success barrier. Many student responses were congruent with teacher responses regarding barriers associated with romantic relationships, employment and teen parenting responsibilities.

Students observed that for some students, working was optional, and for others, it was a financial necessity. They all agreed that working could present academic success barriers, and that it did for some students. Success barriers occurred for students who were unable to negotiate their work hours as well as those who could not manage successfully the multiple demands placed on their finite resources of time and energy. Student accounts of either their own or those of others illustrated the negative and positive effects of high school student employment.

One participant knew of a teen mother who had contemplated dropping out of school in the previous semester. The student had difficulty balancing parenting and part-time employment with school attendance and academic responsibilities because her baby was frequently sick and she needed to be home with him. According to the participant, this teen mother was an honor roll student, and enrolled in college preparatory classes. Although she was an honors student, because of financial hardship and parental obligation, this student considered dropping of high school. During her decision-making process, dropping out of school seemed to be the only immediate solution to her highly stressful and nearly overwhelming situation.

Participants discussed the effects of working long hours upon personal energy levels, motivation, personal life, and academic performance.

When I first began working, I had to juggle band practice, and work until 10 p.m. I really was not adjusted to the schedule. I know it does not sound that bad, but I made two B's that semester. If I had continued at that pace, I could have jeopardized some scholarships because I did not have any time. I slept in class all the time. I didn't care about schoolwork as much as I usually did because I was always thinking about how I was going to get through band and work without collapsing, basically. After that semester, I realized I could not keep on doing that, and I worked out a different work schedule with my manager.

Another participant discussed having to make choices about time management beyond the regular school day. The participant who usually worked about 20 hours a week said, "I can't work any more hours because I have already had to quit track and

FBLA. I can't do all that at one time." However, this student commented about a fellow student worker who lived at a local public housing project, who "always wanted to work as many hours as he could" because his earnings were used to help pay family bills. The coworker needed to work, and it appeared his academics suffered from his working so many hours while in school.

> The other kid will freak out if he just gets 25 hours a week. He says he must work more so he can help his mom pay the electric bill, and stuff like that. I think he's about to be a 6-year senior. Yes, in his case, he is really working to help his family.

> Another student explained that "she had to work" and at her previous job, she was required to work "more hours than I was actually supposed to." She said she was often tardy or even absent from school because of her "work situation," which also "hurt" her grades. Because this teen was older than 18, she said the manager "claimed" he could have her work longer and later hours on school nights, and that he did.

> I don't live with my mama, and I have to work to make my own money to pay expenses. It was hard to make it to school on time. At my last job, the manager would make me work late, past 11 o'clock on school nights. I had to figure out which classes I could miss, so I could still work.

> Another school work-study participant said working teens needed their jobs, and that there were not a lot of easily attainable employment opportunities available locally.

> So many people are out there looking for jobs, and with the economy out there like it is, you need to keep the job you have. There's nobody who

will really help you get another job; the work-study program helps keep

track of work hours, but it does not help you get a job.

In particular, students elaborated on the academic, social, and personal

implications of being behind a grade level, and possibly not graduating with their class.

They also elaborated on the effects of a negative peer group, and the stresses related to

school absences, learning issues, making up academic work, testing requirements, teacher

and student behaviors and romantic issues. Minority students noted English Language

Learners (ELL) students encountered academic success barriers associated with language

and the differences in school grade progression between the local district and Puerto

Rican schools.

<div align="center">Family Context: Teacher Responses and Perceptions</div>

Participant responses to interview questions related to the family context yielded

perceptions that were categorized into (a) low family socioeconomics (SES) (b) parenting

effects, and (c) family household structure. Participant responses included themes related

to academic barriers as well as themes related to social barriers.

Low Socioeconomic Status

Teachers expressed beliefs about family, home and community characteristics that

presented barriers to high school student academic success. They perceived that a low

socioeconomic family status (SES) could potentially have negative effects on high school

academic outcomes. They noted these barriers to be related to the family structure, family

stress levels, and family values. Teachers believed that low SES students are more likely

to have parents with a low educational attainment, and who may receive public

assistance, earn low wages or who may be unemployed.

One teacher believed limited family financial resources negatively affected the ability of some parents to participate in school functions, including school-wide parent-teacher conference days. This teacher made the following remarks about financial barriers that negatively influenced parental school contacts:

There is not enough time in the day to work two jobs and go have lunch with your son or daughter at school. I do believe that all parents want to be good parents and want their child to do well. However, some are given better tools to work with than others are.

One teacher remarked that the effects of financial stress caused mental and emotional distress for students. "These issues are also weighty concerns on the minds of the students. I can see why they may not have their minds on government [class] when they aren't sure if their parents will make rent that month." This teacher identified high levels of household stress as a barrier to high school student academic success.

Teachers perceived many poor teens were unable to attend or otherwise participate in school-related activities because of associated cost factors. Several teachers believed many low-income teens were limited in their ability to participate in extracurricular activities because they worked or "may have to take care of the younger siblings while mom goes to work at night and dad may or may not be in the picture. Here in this local community, I see students who work hard outside of school, because their family needs them to earn money to survive."

Parenting Effects

Participants believe high school student academic success barriers occur when parenting practices are not supportive of their children's education. They said that when

parents do not uphold a positive value of education for their children, then the children

encounter success barriers. Teachers noted that parents supportive of education were

"usually involved with their child's education." They said supportive parents generally

kept up with (monitored) their child's academic progress, discussed school studies with

their child regularly, and communicated with their child's teachers. Teachers commented

on an overall "dismal" rate of parent involvement, especially on scheduled district-wide

parent-teacher conference days. "On the last parent-teacher conference afternoon, only

one parent came in. Their child was one who had good grades and behavior. The ones I

would really have liked to speak with did not come in."

Several teachers were dismayed about the scarcity of communications between

parents and teachers. They indicated that most parent communications only took place

when "there is a problem." They also commented that of the parent contacts they did

establish, many parents were "non-supportive of teachers," and that they often questioned

the teacher's "teaching methods, and grading policies." One teacher noted that many

parents believe the child's word over that of the teacher; "Only in a conference with both

teacher and student, do the facts get straightened out."

Teachers perceive that often parents do not have a realistic sense of their student's

past or current academic achievement level, academic potential, or academic effort. They

said it appears some parents arrive at the parent teacher conference in a confrontational

mood and are "just looking to blame somebody" for their child's grades, rather than to

consider student behaviors and responsibilities in the teaching/learning learning process.

Teachers believe student academic barriers arise when parents do not establish

and reinforce high educational expectations. They said parents are the role model for their

children. Without parental actions and support for education, students are at a disadvantage for optimal academic outcomes. A home and community environment non-supportive of the educational process presents student academic success barriers. Homes lacking materials and supplies supportive of student schoolwork places students at a disadvantage. One teacher observed that "many students do not like to read and do not have many books in the home." She indicated that family expectations about reading and technological literacy are important. Teachers believe students need access to computers and other technology that is not a part of their parents' educational experience. One respondent indicated some parents might use limited financial resources for expensive clothing and sneakers rather than for goods and items that promote education in the home.

Teachers believe that parents with low expectations about their child's educational outcomes, they may fail to use limited financial resources to obtain items that promote student learning and academics. Instead, financial resources may go towards something parents value more, such as expensive consumer items. One teacher discussed the needs of current students, commenting that students today need access to a computer either at home or in a nearby library. She added, "Without computer access, students are at a severe disadvantage nowadays." In comparison, this teacher spoke about the books and other reading materials her parents provided in her childhood home:

> Even though my parents were not wealthy, we had a set of encyclopedias
> at home, we had a dictionary at home, there were newspapers, magazines,
> and we were encouraged to read them. The Dr. Seuss series that was
> purchased stressed to us that reading was extremely important. For

families with limited resources, student access to materials will depend on

what the parents think is more important. Choices the parents make are

going to have an effect on what the students are going to have to work

with. If students come to us with a background that education is important,

we can reinforce that. I do not think we can totally instill it, especially at

the high school level.

Communication issues, including the lack of effective and regular communication

between home and school, were perceived by teachers as an academic success barrier.

One teacher expressed frustration over the inability to establish and maintain school-

home communications and the barrier posed by this "limited parental contact." Another

teacher mentioned that when she spoke with parents about a student's academics, she

found parental reactions to be unpredictable. Of the contacts she initiated, the results

were usually mixed about whether the parents were supportive of the teacher's

educational efforts, or whether they were merely reluctant listeners. She perceived their

attitudes to often be one of "[meeting with the teacher] because they *have to.* Overall, I

have very limited success with attempts to establish parent contact." This teacher's body

language and facial expression reflected her dismay about not having mutually supportive

relationships with parents, which she believed was very important for student academic

success.

Several teachers described their frustration about the hurdles they have to

overcome when they attempt parental contact during the regular school day. In

exasperated tones, they mentioned issues with a lack of time, using a school telephone

with long distance access, as well as privacy and confidentiality concerns. Teachers said

many available contact numbers were disconnected and of the completed phone calls, teachers often found they had to leave a voice message. Teachers mentioned they seldom received returned calls when messages were left, and they wondered whether the parents actually received them, or if perhaps a student may have intercepted them.

Teachers noted a high rate of school absenteeism as another academic success barrier. They said students with high numbers of school absences are at risk for reduced academic achievement, including non-graduation, when they miss important academic content and, consequently, fall behind in their academic work. For district students, not being enrolled in school, especially at the beginning and the end of school, or near holidays, is often connected to family circumstances, which required a family move at those times. In the study district, it is not unusual for students to enter school many days, and even weeks after the academic year has begun. Likewise, many district families choose to withdraw their students a week or more before the end of the academic year. . One teacher commented about critical gaps in curriculum content that often occurs when "the family will pull them out of school for something they think is important or they want to go on vacation several days early before school lets out." In the final analysis, teachers believed the overall parental and family value system played a critical role in overall student attendance patterns and subsequent academic success.

Family Household Structure

In response to interview questions related to family influence on student academic outcomes, several teachers indicated a belief that factors related to the overall family structure may present high school student academic success barriers. In particular, they

believe that students encounter academic barriers when the family has little structure and stability and has a single parent head of household.

Teachers perceived factors found within the overall family structure and family dynamics as high school student academic success barriers. For example, one teacher spoke at length about a student who was frequently tardy and absent from school. Investigation by school officials revealed that factors related to family circumstances were the root cause of this student's punctuality and attendance problems. This teacher remarked:

> During the time she was not at school, she was required to baby sit and watch several younger siblings because mother worked an evening shift. Because this was the oldest child, she was required to baby sit and help the younger ones get off to school the next morning. I have had several students who have had excessive absences because they had to stay home with younger siblings so that the parents could work or if the younger sibling was ill and could not go to daycare. The child had to stay home so the parent would not miss work, because if the parent missed work, the parent did not get paid, which created a financial hardship on the family.

This same teacher spoke of a different student who was frequently tardy to school. "In this case, one parent was incarcerated, and the other parent left for work very early in the morning." The teacher noted the responsibility placed on this teenager, a girl, who was the oldest child in the family. "This student was responsible for getting herself and several younger siblings to school in the morning. She had trouble getting the younger siblings to school and then getting herself to school on time."

In response to interview questions about the role families play in student success, teachers mentioned other barriers experienced by students they have taught:

I have seen several students who are really the most responsible person in their family. At the age of seventeen, they have had to assume the parental role in raising their siblings. That prevented them from attending school, and it prevented them from being able to stay up with their studies.

Another teacher commented about barriers presented by parental educational values as well as the overall family structure. In this instance, home circumstances and structure posed academic barriers for the student.

I have had students who have actually complained to me or tried to explain that they really wanted to do the homework or they really wanted to come to school and that they did not want to miss [school] it. However, they said that a parent was keeping them out of school because they needed a babysitter.

One teacher discussed alternate educational settings that incorporated structure into every program component, which seemed helpful for some at risk students.

It seems to me that many of the students who are at risk are lacking structure in their lives; some of those students do not rebel against structure, but structure seems very important in helping those students succeed. Actually, in fact, I have seen students who did not do well in the regular school environment go to Youth Challenge Academy, which is much more structured, and just thrive. I think some of the students who

are at risk really need that structure and discipline in their lives to be able

to succeed and thrive.

<div align="center">Family Context: Student Responses and Perceptions</div>

Student participant responses to interview questions related to the family context

yielded perceptions that were categorized into (a) low family socioeconomics (SES)

(b) parenting effects, and (c) family household structure. Participant responses included

themes related to academic barriers as well as themes related to social barriers.

Low Socioeconomic Status

Only one student discussed a personal experience with limited financial resources.

This student did not live with either parent and held a job to meet financial needs.

However, in general terms, all students perceived certain factors related to low family

socioeconomic circumstances to be academic success barriers. Their perceptions were

grounded in their knowledge of low-income public housing projects located in the school

district. They spoke of friends living in stressful circumstances related to low

socioeconomic conditions. They knew of students who were stressed about having

limited resources for purchasing school supplies and clothing, and family transportation

problems.

From personal experience, some participants knew about living in a household

headed by a single mother, and about living in a blended family household. They stated

that it was difficult for students living under stressful family circumstances to keep

schoolwork as a top priority. One participant believed that some disadvantaged students

may have to make choices about daily survival, and sometimes schooling may not be the

top priority for them:

They have so many things they have to worry about - especially people who live in [public housing project], for example. A lot of them are 16 years old who have to help pay the bills. Because the parents, you don't know what is going on with them. And there are a lot of people out there who need a lot of things to survive that don't have anything to do with school. When it comes down to it, they have to leave something behind, and for some, it does end up being school. It's not something that is their fault; it can be some stuff they didn't choose. But a lot of times, just being in that community and growing up that way and everyone around you has a certain mentality about something. The way things are around you is going to influence how you are.

Another participant commented about the negative impressions and danger associated with the low income publicly subsidized housing projects:

I don't go to [public housing project] – you know that place where a man got shot in the head. I think that if they [students and other individuals] are around it all the time, then they will, you know, either think of it as 'oh, that it is nothing,' *or* [have thoughts of] ' I want to get away from it' all the time. So, it can be a positive or a negative thing, depending on the person. It all depends on their attitude towards it – about what they believe is important.

Parenting Effects

Several participants noted the positive influence their parents have had upon their educational values and educational outcomes. No participant discussed any negative

parental effects. Participant responses indicated they believed their own parents were a positive influence for their lives and had transmitted a positive value for education along to them. They all had plans to graduate with their high school class, and to continue their education in the fall at a two or four year college or university.

One participant discussed the positive influence of his parents, noting that in earlier years, his parents closely monitored his schoolwork, homework, graded work, and every report card. After his elementary and middle school years, as he grew older, he said, they didn't supervise so closely, because by that point he had developed an intrinsic motivation to do well in school. However, he said, if he slacked off and his grades took a downward turn, his parents were right there to reinforce the importance of excelling in his academic work. For this individual, reared in an intact nuclear family, the parental expectation was consistently reinforced his entire life that he would do well in school, complete high school and graduate from college.

Another participant also has grown up in an intact nuclear family. In this participant's situation, the mother has completed high school, and the father has not. However, the father at age 25, had become a credentialed professional truck driver. The participant said his dad usually made a "good income and was able to provide well" for the family. In good economic times, the father earned good money, however, because of the present economic downturn, there is a shortage of work, and the family income is "not so good now."

This student's educational goals were to graduate from high school and attend the local community technical college. He planned to obtain schooling for a job in a manufacturing plant in a nearby urban area. He recognized that a trade certification

enabled his father to provide financially for the family, and his plans included obtaining a trade certification so he could earn a good income by working in manufacturing.

Family Household Structure

The stressors associated with the dynamics of family changes and changes in household rules effect educational outcomes, and often in a negative way. Some participants discussed barriers associated with living in single parent households and blended family households. One participant discussed the negative effects of children being left in the care of guardians when their parents' employment required them to relocate outside the continental United States for over a year at the time. This participant said the different adult rules, expectations, and degree of supervision required "a lot of getting used to". The minority females in one focus group spoke about teenage pregnancy, moving out of a guardian's home, dropping out of school, and winding up on welfare as some of the unintended outcomes they perceived to be associated with changes in their family structures. Students also discussed events they perceived to be related to the extended absences of parents who worked a long ways from the home

Participants discussed barriers for female students associated with changes in the family household structure. One participant noted that her school attendance was negatively affected when a nineteen-year-old sister and her two young children moved into the house. The student discussed her experiences of missing school because she was put into the position of taking care of the children when they were sick during the night, and of having to stay with them during the day because the young mother was away from the home. Since the participant's mother had to report on time to work, or risk losing her job, this teen had to assume the childcare role in the place of the absentee teen mother.

With a distressed tone of voice, this student discussed her home family situation. She appeared quite distressed about the effects her sister's life choices and irresponsible behavior were having on the whole family. From her standpoint, her home situation was putting her academics and her very future in jeopardy and she was at a complete loss about anything she could do.

> My sister has two little girls, and I don't have kids. All I have to do is go
>
> to school. I am in work-study, so I am obligated to work some. But I
>
> cannot work as much as I could and should because she don't take care of
>
> her kids. I'm tied down taking care of her kids 'cause she's not here to
>
> take care of them. I have to care for them both all night long. I get up in
>
> the night with them. I'm having to take responsibility for something she
>
> did. That's why I'm backtracking in school and have missed so much
>
> school. I'm surprised I haven't been called up to the office. But I make up
>
> all my work, and for the most part, that is why I'm not in school. My mom
>
> needs to go to work and we cannot find the kids' mama. I have to watch
>
> the kids. They cannot watch themselves. They are only two and one years
>
> old.

Teen-aged females are more likely than males to assume a caretaker role when caregiver plans for younger siblings or older family members "fall through." One focus group participant spoke about her friend, a fellow senior, who had dropped out of school the previous month.

In this particular situation, the student was a member of an all-female household. The following family members lived in the home: an older aunt, a grandmother, the

single mother (head of household), two teen-aged daughters, and a baby daughter who was about one year old. When health issues prevented the older adults from caring for the baby girl, the older teen daughter decided to assume childcare responsibilities so the single mother could continue working to support the family and not have to pay for daycare. Although this senior girl had already passed the required high school graduation tests, she decided to withdraw from school and seek her GED after missing more than twenty-five school days during her final high school year. In this instance, attendance issues, family dynamics, and financial circumstances all contributed to this student's decision to drop out of school. For this student, it would appear that her family circumstances presented an insurmountable academic success barrier.

<center>High School Context: Teacher Responses and Perceptions</center>

Teacher responses to questions related to the high school context yielded perceptions that were categorized into (a) the school setting and student body effects, (b) teacher effects, and (c) accountability policy effects. Responses included themes about high school academic success barriers associated with the academic context and the social context.

Teacher responses to questions related to the high school centered on the effects of mandated accountability measures. They noted the emphasis on covering specific curriculum had resulted in a narrowing of the curriculum, and sometimes had a negative effect on teaching strategies and practices. They felt they did not have time to help students who were academically behind during class time. Even though after school tutoring was available , they believed many students were unable to attend because of transportation issues. They noted the ninth grade study skills course was put in place to

help students overcome weak or inadequate academic skills, and some believed the class was a step in the right direction for certain students.

School Community Effects

The local school district serves a diverse clientele that operates under markedly different socioeconomic circumstances. Backgrounds, experience, and preparation vary widely, producing a student population which may or may not have previous history in Georgia public schools. The local community supplies students whose educational backgrounds are from far-reaching geographic and cultural locales. As a result, the need to provide for the widely divergent groups in classrooms filled to capacity produces a student population that varies from mainstreamed special education students with comprehension gaps to gifted and talented students. This challenge may result in classes which incorporate everything from basic remediation to students with the highest potential.

Because the school district is adjacent to a large military installation, military dependents attend district middle and high schools. According to teachers, students from military families face academic barriers because their prior educational and curricular preparation do not necessarily align well with local academic curriculum.

Teachers believe that residents from different local neighborhoods and communities could have markedly different expectations about high school educational outcomes. The district high schools have a diverse student body, due in part, to the close proximity of the neighboring military installation, and in part to the geographic distribution of the school district population. Some students reside in rural areas of the county, where a large extended family has lived over several generations. In these rural

communities, neighbors have usually been acquainted all their lives. In contrast, some students may be relative newcomers to the area, and reside in what are more recently developed and more densely populated neighborhoods where neighbors are often strangers to one another. Other students have never known any home other than one located in a low-income publicly subsidized housing complex. Many district families are highly mobile, often because of family restructuring or military housing reassignments. High rates of family mobility are associated with many recently developed local neighborhoods, as well as with some publicly subsidized housing areas.

Academic success barriers occur when many local community members are not high school graduates, and for most, graduation is the exception rather than the community norm. One teacher recalled a local rural parent proudly saying, "My son graduated high school, and you know, for around here, that's pretty darn good!" Another teacher shared the following observations:

Community effects are highly important – we have many students that are from low-income families and many folks that are not necessarily high school graduates. I think that because that is the environment, that the emphasis on academics and academic success may not be the most important thing. Relationships within the family and community might be considered more important.

Several teachers did not believe that low socioeconomics circumstances or belonging to a minority ethnic group per se were academic success barriers. Rather, they believed many current students do not live in families or communities that emphasize the

positive value of education and the opportunities for upward mobility provided by an education.

One math teacher, who had grown up in an urban minority community in west Georgia, discussed low family socioeconomics for African American students:

> I think they do have an effect, but I do not think they have the effect that
> so many people have made it out to be. I think some of these
> characteristics now have become a reason for people to *not achieve*. I am
> from a predominantly black high school. Many of those students did go on
> to graduate, whether it was night school, or day school or GED programs.
> They went on to school. Those that dropped out of high school, did that
> for a reason, usually drugs, and honestly, some of them went to jail.

Teachers perceived academic success barriers related to low socioeconomic family and neighborhoods circumstances. They noted that sometimes single parents must prioritize their responsibilities and balance between family obligations, work obligations, and /or receiving public assistance. These economic pressures often result in immediate goals such as food, shelter, and housing, being met while less evident benefits such as education and training must be sacrificed.

A seasoned teacher discussed the implications of living in a rural setting and attending racially segregated schools. Unlike today, where information and entertainment opportunities are as close as the nearest television, rural inhabitants usually depended upon religious and school settings for learning and socialization opportunities. The school setting provided socialization opportunities for students, and usually the community as a whole, via athletic events, school plays, school dances, and school festivals. For many

impoverished rural youngsters, the challenge of learning about new things and the socialization opportunities made school "fun and exciting", and a place where students usually wanted to be. This teacher indicated good grades were a source of pride for most students and no one was "bragging about bad grades." This teacher indicated the rural and small town community and family values during the 1960s tended to emphasize the value of an education and the economic opportunities and upward mobility it conveyed. Education was considered very important to escape the cycle of poverty for all children. Unlike previous generations, this teacher believed many students and their parents do not hold the same value for education nor the opportunity it provides for a self-sufficient lifestyle.

> Students are not focused on school; instead, they are focused on their private lives. In addition, they think they do not *need* school, and they do not *want* school in order to carry that on. They stay home when they can, and when they cannot, then they will come to school.

Another seasoned teacher emphatically discussed a change in social values from those of previous generations. This individual noted the lack of a work ethic promoted today that was "totally unacceptable" in her generation.

A minority female teacher with 16 years teaching experience related the following example:

> Back in my day, nobody wanted a check. Everybody wanted to work. Pride came from working. Now we have given kids so many reasons not to do anything. For example, you do not have to work because 'I have ADHD,' which is considered 'a disability' now. Kids today are given a lot

with few expectations for anything in return [no responsibility for self].

Many students fail to develop a work ethic and sense of personal or social

responsibility.

Teachers also believed student egocentric values and behaviors presented

academic success barriers for themselves and other students.

Many kids today believe they are so important, that everything revolves

around them, that they take no notice of the effect their actions have on

others. They fail to acknowledge that their anti-social behaviors have a

negative effect on the self-esteem of others when they walk into them in

the hallway and do not even say 'excuse me.' They fail to understand that

the world does not revolve around them and in addition, that their

behavior causes problems. Their parents have instilled those values that

they are so special.

Teachers perceive the entertainment industry, television, and other public media

to promote values which are detrimental to student academic success. They noted the

negative effects of a value system that focuses on benefits to the individual without

regard for others; they voiced concerns about the negative effects of a value system non-

supportive of education, but focused instead on acquiring money and material things.

One participant discussed concerns about social values that appear to no longer

place a high value on education nor high moral values.

They do not value education as being important. Instead, 'things' now

seem more important. Our society has lost religious, moral values, and

gone to materials valuing. This has deteriorated our own educational

system. I do not think you can get kids who live in the ghetto to want to go to school when they look on television and somebody *throws money at them*. You will not see anybody on television that has just graduated from college, or just finished a high school degree. If you look at the advertisement they do for a high school diploma compared to the NBA, they are nowhere near the same.

Teachers perceived the intergenerational effect of "babies having babies" as an academic success barrier. One teacher said high school students encounter barriers to academic success, when teen pregnancy and parenting issues affect school attendance, and students have difficulty making up missed assignments. Several teachers noted that younger parents, who may be dropouts themselves, do not transmit a positive value of education to their offspring.

Teachers observed that families headed by an unmarried female are not unusual in the district. One social studies teacher perceived this family structure seems accepted by many students as "the norm nowadays." Several teachers perceived that parents who themselves did not complete their high school education passed a low value for an education along to their children. Teachers believed younger mothers, who were often single and immature themselves, and who did not graduate from high school, did not transmit a high value for education to their children.

Mothers who are now thirty with children in high school are not mature. They seem to believe there is nothing wrong with their child's actions, because they are the same as theirs. 'Mother' does not understand the importance of an education.

Teacher Effects

Study participants noted the importance of positive teacher-student interactions. They said when teachers seemed negative, and non-caring, students do not put forth the same effort as they do for teachers they perceive as concerned and encouraging. Teachers commented about the importance of encouragement, especially for students who lacked confidence in their academic ability and would not attempt new work. They noted that positive encouraging behaviors help many students overcome success barriers.

Teachers noted the importance of good teacher-student interactions and their positive influence on student conduct and academic outcomes. They believed teacher interpersonal behaviors strongly influenced student effort, student motivation, and student behavior. "If you develop a good teacher-student relationship, then the student will try harder for you, because they like you. They are not doing it for themselves; they are doing it for you, because they feel important." This minority teacher believed "many kids around here" have never had a family member excel academically nor "had anybody in the family graduate," and therefore, could "not see themselves succeeding."

The importance of caring relationships and positive encouragement was especially emphasized by a teacher who indicated that positive teacher-pupil interactions led to student academic persistence. She discussed the importance of instilling self-confidence in learners, and said she encouraged students by assuring them that if they would just try, she would be there to help them if they "got stuck."

You have to 'push' it into them. They do not do it for themselves. They do it for others, for their teacher, once they know they care. They do not want

to disappoint them. Initially they would not even try, that comes from not

seeing success in the real world around them.

This teacher believed that teachers who "in a sense become role models" for students

were those with whom students develop a bond. Because "they don't want to disappoint

you," they will "try harder for you."

Teachers believe students want to be acknowledged and valued as individuals.

They emphasized the importance of positive teacher-student interactions. This teacher

leaned forward, and spoke in a serious tone of voice,

Yes, they want a relationship with teachers, and they want you to respect

them. If they do anything to break that, they are hurt; if teachers take the

time to talk to them and get to know them, they have a bond for life.

Teacher comments indicated the importance of positive teacher-student

interactions: "You've got to let them know you care about them. That is the key, the most

important thing." This teacher reinforced the perceptions of another teacher who said,

If they feel like you really care about them and you are truly interested in

them, and you want to know who they are, then they are going to be much

more likely to listen to anything you might be going to say, and in what

you are trying to teach them.

Barriers to high school student academic achievement occur when teachers fail to

hold "high expectations" for their students. Teachers believe that many students develop

negative attitudes and behaviors when they perceive their teachers as non-supportive and

non-caring. Teachers said these student perceptions resulted in many students "shutting

down and not putting forth much effort." One teacher recalled students expressing these

sentiments as "I'm not going to do *her work* – she's cold, I'm not doing anything *for*

her." Teachers explained when a teacher is perceived as non-caring, "student motivation,

if it ever existed, is turned off." Teachers perceived that some poorly motivated students

simply failed to make the connection that the effort they put into their schoolwork is for

their benefit and for themselves, rather than for the teacher's benefit.

One teacher made this observation about teacher expectations and student

achievement:

> I think unless the teacher sets high expectations, most students will not
>
> rise to those expectations. I think the teacher has to be somewhat careful in
>
> doing that because the expectations need to be high, but they need to be
>
> attainable. The students should not feel that the expectations are so high
>
> there is no point in trying.

School Accountability Policies

Teachers who spoke about mandated high school testing supported the need for

accountability measures; however, they felt mandated tests were academic success

barriers for some high school students. According to teachers in the core subject areas,

testing mandates have resulted in narrowing of the curriculum, and in many cases, have

had a negative effect on what practices teachers are able to employ in the classroom.

> Testing has narrowed the curriculum. I cannot teach what I used to teach.
>
> If a child is lacking skills, I cannot spend the time to bring them up
>
> because I have to get so much covered for that test. It is getting to the
>
> point that we are teaching for the test. We are not teaching any concept
>
> skills to build upon.

One participant appeared regretful because specific critical course content had to be covered, and there was not time during class to provide remediation for low achieving students. This teacher's body language appeared sad as the participant observed that after school many students did not attend school sponsored tutoring, mainly because of transportation issues.

Noting the negative effect of mandated high school graduation tests on student morale and effort, one math teacher shared the following story:

> Yes, testing affects academic outcomes. For instance, my niece thought she was not going to pass the Georgia High School Graduation Tests, so she quit making any effort on her class work. That way she did not have to acknowledge the test failure. She actually said 'I didn't do anything because I didn't think I could graduate because of the test. Now that I have passed the test, I can do the work. I am going to graduate.' Passing the tests was the turnaround point for her. She had failed the science test two times and the math once and did not think she was going to be able to graduate. Before she let the high school graduation tests fail her, she was going to let coursework fail her. Once she passed, she did a 360-degree turnaround. She told her parents and grandparents she did not do work before because she thought she was not going to graduate. Once she passed the test, she began making A's and B's. So *yes,* the tests *do affect our children*. A lot [of them] are scared.

Regarding the GHSGT pretest, which was given earlier in the school year, one teacher remarked, "I see it as a help, but not with what they do not know. It does identify

what they do not know, so some are trying to get help with those things." This teacher's perception was that it helped students recognize areas where they needed to know more, and to realize that school staff was available to help them. The pretest helped offset the fears some students have about the graduation test and of not graduating. "They are not going into the test for the first time blind."

Teachers said classrooms with heterogeneous groups of students presented barriers to high school educational outcomes. One teacher commented about the instructional complication presented by having students with a broad achievement range grouped together in one classroom.

With the class make-up we have, there are students who have very good

skill levels and abilities. If you slow instruction down so much to catch up

those who are struggling, you have lost the other ones because they are

bored. It is a very difficult situation.

This teacher expressed dismay over the situation, but remarked that the daily 4x4 block schedule and 90-minute long classes allowed her to present material in formats beneficial to all students. She said students learn better when material is presented in "chunks." The longer class periods allowed instructional presentation to be "chunked and repetitive," which was beneficial for both slower learners as well as those on or above grade level. She indicated that the variety of presentation methods helped keep students engaged and more focused on course content.

This teacher perceived student success barriers to be diminished when students have teachers with a consistent class structure. "When they come in, they need to know what the daily structure is likely to be, from activity to activity." Several teachers

discussed the implications of teacher classroom structure, and concluded that a lack of consistency and structure in classes was an academic success barrier.

High School Context: Student Responses and Perceptions

Student responses to questions related to the high school context yielded perceptions that were categorized into (a) school community effects, (b) teacher effects, and (c) accountability policy effects. Responses included themes about high school academic success barriers associated with the academic context and the social context.

Students discussed negative academic effects associated with living in low socioeconomic neighborhoods. Students perceived success barriers occur when teachers fail to maintain a positive and encouraging classroom atmosphere. Students believe specific coursework requirements and mandated graduation tests are potential academic success barriers.

School Community Effects

Students had many opinions regarding academic success barriers experienced by district students who reside in low socioeconomic neighborhoods, including subsidized public housing. They considered many local neighborhoods to be high-risk and "outright dangerous" neighborhoods, and students in one focus group said they "did not feel safe going into them."

One African American girl spoke excitedly about the negative effects faced by some students who lived in district low-income neighborhoods. She believed students living in the local subsidized public housing projects often lacked an educated adult "for a role model to look up to." She spoke about the contradictions between what some people said about the value of a good education, while some others, especially minority

students, would openly make fun of students who value education and strive to be good students. She observed with a broad smile and head and hand gestures, "Some prominent people of color are respected for succeeding in life, but others seem to have been forgotten about, for instance, people like Spike Lee, and Thurgood Marshall." She said, "I suppose, on the way up, other minorities considered them as 'acting White.'" She thought this negative attitude and type of behavior was very counterproductive. "I think personally, Black people are trying to bring themselves down, because they don't try to uplift each other like that."

A Caucasian male honors student continued the dialogue about obstacles with which many low-income minority students, in particular, must contend.

They face stereotypes; anyone who tries to break away from that stereotype and become something different is often ridiculed because they are not [perceived as] a part of the community anymore. They are a 'minority within a minority.'

Students agreed that for students who live in dangerous neighborhoods, including low-income public subsidized housing, an education might not be valued as much as being "street smart" is valued. One student made this insightful comment:

They may want to get away from the neighborhood, but their thought may be 'oh, please let me keep from getting shot'. To be honest, knowing the Pythagorean Theorem is not going to keep me [anyone] from getting into danger. Being street smart is. Since street smart is going to keep me [someone] alive, that becomes the focus. Thinking street smart becomes a priority.

In the words of one minority student, negative neighborhood influences sometimes spill over into the high school environment. Events between groups of individuals within the local communities, may involve illegal activities, including drug activities and violence. Tension between community groups [gangs] can spill over into the school setting.

Many people live in an area where they get involved in illegal situations. They sometimes miss school because it can bring up situations at school because some people know they are a part of certain affiliations. They will not go to an adult at school because they are afraid then they will get into trouble.

Students believed the antisocial school behaviors of some students negatively affects their own academic success and interferes with the learning of other students.

It doesn't matter what the teacher does, if there are some who are going to misbehave, the problem is going to be there regardless. Students *will not listen.* I don't know why. If you go back to what we said about family effects, and values, obviously the family is not doing their part so well.

Another student remarked about the clash between student conduct at home and at school. The minority honors student observed that sometimes students have been taught appropriate behavior, but they behave one way at home and then a different way at school. "Sometimes the family may be doing their part, but the kids act one way at school and another way at home. I've seen some act one way at home and another way in public. It's ridiculous."

One student compared the larger high school setting with that of the smaller school middle school environment. This individual noted the smaller middle school allowed teachers to know students better, and as a result, she enjoyed middle school. This student enjoys a high degree of personal freedom. Although she currently lives with her mom and step dad, she tried living on her own for a few weeks earlier in the academic year. She said for some, high school not a "friendly place," and for them, there is a "sense of isolation." "High school is much bigger, with people picking on you. Teachers don't want to talk, and so you can freak out and not want to go to school. Some kids are being bullied and for some people, this is not a good place."

Students noted that the high school schedule, credit system for promotion, and 90-minute long class periods could be success barriers, especially for younger freshman and immature students. Incoming freshman or transfer students from other schools had to learn to navigate the school campus and in some cases, to adapt to class periods which were longer than those experienced in the middle school. Students new to the school had to become acclimated to the school routine and academic expectations. For some students, adjusting to the high school setting posed academic barriers.

Teacher Effects

Students noted the barriers students encounter in the absence of positive teacher behaviors and firm classroom management (leadership). Students also noted a disparity between teachers issued grades and standardized test score reports. Students perceived a Freshman Academy setting (only available in the larger district high school) to be a positive environment for younger freshman students. They said it was "a good situation" for freshman students. They observed such a setting allowed students to know and to be

known by the grade level teachers, the freshman counselor and hall administrator. They said because of the smaller environment, ninth grade students were more likely to have a smoother transition into the larger school environment the following year. They noted that a larger school setting could be a success barrier for some students.

One student felt very strongly about academic success barriers associated with non-supportive and negative teacher-student behaviors. She believed teacher classroom behaviors could either encourage or discourage students. She felt teachers should exhibit (1) high expectations for all students in a class, (2) encouraging teacher leadership behaviors, and (3) good classroom management. She asserted, "Students do look up to their teachers" for guidance, affirmation, and leadership, "because they feel the teacher already knows the subject matter well and should be in charge." She described failing two classes as an underclassman. She said she was in a class that was referred to as 'the bad class' and believed the teacher just "gave up on them." From her perspective as a student in such a class, she concluded, "If the teacher who knows the material gives up, it has a big effect on the students."

All female student participants spoke about student needs for strong teacher classroom leadership and teacher encouragement. These views were congruent with those expressed by African American teacher participants who spoke about the importance of relationships and the barriers that occur when positive relationships do not exist.

Student discussions in one focus group centered on the discrepancy between teachers' assigned grades and college entrance test scores. Students said their teacher-graded essays received much higher grades than those they received on standardized tests. One student who had taken all high school honors and AP classes offered said his

teacher-assigned essay grades did not match up at all with his SAT essay score. This honors student felt he was writing the way he was taught; however, his SAT essay score did not match up with his usual high teacher issued grades. Although the score discrepancy was not a high school success barrier for this honor's student, it might present a high school success barrier for a less academically able student.

Students expressed concern about the time it took some teachers to return graded work to them. According several, the turnaround time for graded assignments was unacceptably long, or perhaps no grade was marked. Some did not see any point in turning in work "if it was not going to be graded." One student mentioned, "I am finding that a lot of teachers don't give back as much [graded] work as they used to." Students valued and wanted more feedback, believing it contributed to better grades on future assignments when they were able to use graded work as a study aid. A student remarked,

> I didn't do well on one of my tests, because I didn't have the test prior to
> that one back yet to correct my mistakes. I would have done a lot better on
> the last test if I had gotten the other test back before then.

School Accountability Policies

Student participants expressed views similar to those of the teacher participants regarding the effects of mandated testing on classroom teaching. They also believed consistent classroom structure provided a positive effect on student academic outcomes and that unstructured noisy classrooms were academic success barriers. Students also commented about what they perceived to be insufficient academic support for non-English speaking students. They believed such students needed the assistance of a bilingual teacher "who could speak to them in their own language".

All student participants believed the graduation test requirement was very stressful for some students. Two minority participants expressively discussed their feelings about the high school graduation test requirement. Even though she had passed the graduation tests, one student still expressed doubts about her academic abilities. "I'm not a good test taker. I passed, but I don't know how. I scored good on all the tests, except social studies, and I passed that one on the second try, but only by one point." Another student commented about the high degree of stress she experienced related to the testing requirement: "That one test makes the difference. It scared me. I thought if I don't pass it, I'll drop out."

Students said the testing requirement "can alter their lives." In the words of one girl, "How can just one test out of 12 years determine whether I'm going to graduate or not be right?" However, this student took advantage of the school's tutoring program, and her comments clearly indicate the positive effects of the school's intervention program for her:

I went to after school tutoring every time, and I passed the first time. I went because I scored low on the pre test. The way they explained it to me, they said I didn't do so good. It scared me and I thought I should go to tutoring.

For some students, the mandated Georgia High School Graduation Tests present an insurmountable success barrier. In the study district, intervention programs are currently available to help students. Pre testing identifies students who are at risk of not passing the mandated graduation tests, and a tutoring program provides on going multiple remediation opportunities for them. Students are strongly encouraged to attend all

available tutoring sessions. Early identification measures and interventions (academic support programs) help academically at risk students overcome the barrier of mandated graduation testing. Early academic intervention is especially important when high stakes graduation tests determine whether a student is eligible for a diploma.

Because local district officials set them, academic calendars vary widely. In fact, the beginning and ending dates may vary by as much as four to six weeks, depending upon where the school district is located. This variance in school calendars is especially pronounced between certain geographic regions in the United States (for instance, the northern and southern states). When families move into a district where the academic calendars differ by several weeks, students may miss several weeks of instruction.

Only minority students mentioned family relocations as an academic success barrier. One girl said she had attended two different public New York City high schools as well as the local district high school. Because this student had moved between schools in two different states, she had been concerned about "getting enough required credits to graduate on time." She was also concerned about the amount of coursework she had missed because of the differences in each district's start and end dates.

Two minority students discussed the difficulties experienced by students for whom English was not the home language [English Language Learners (ELL) students]. They described the experiences of acquaintances from Puerto Rico who had attended only Puerto Rican schools before moving to the local community. These students could not speak or write English very well, and they were older in comparison to their grade level classmates. Participants said these Puerto Rican males dropped out because everything was "too much for them, and they were not going to graduate anyway." They

noted, however, that one young man did continue his education, earned a GED and currently works at an automotive store. However, the language barrier has proven too difficult for another one of the young men. This young man has been unable to attain a GED because, according to the participants, "he didn't know English so well."

One minority student spoke about how she often acted as a translator and unofficial guide for new students who did not speak English at all. Participants perceived believed that teachers for ELL students "should know how to speak Spanish if they were supposed to be helping them." They believed the language barrier created an insurmountable obstacle to academic success for some students.

Summary

The study was designed to investigate the perceptions of high school teachers and high school students about barriers to high school academic success. The researcher interviewed high school teachers and high school senior students in order to elicit their perceptions about barriers to high school student academic success. The researcher analyzed transcript data for recurring themes and patterns in order to answer the study research question. Researcher analysis of teacher and student interview transcripts, along with researcher field notes allowed for data grouping into themes and categories.

Participant responses to interview questions related to the individual student yielded perceptions about success barriers associated with personal, academic and social traits. Participant responses were coded and reported as the data group called Individual Context. Responses and perceptions were grouped and reported under themes related to the individual student characteristics, student values and behaviors, and the early

assumption of adult roles. Participant responses included themes related to academic barriers as well as themes related to social barriers.

Interview questions related to family influences on high school student academic success yielded a range of participant responses. Participant responses were coded and reported as the data group called Family Context. Teachers and students perceived some family contextual factors to present academic success barriers. The researcher grouped participant responses about success barriers related to the family context into the following categories: (a) background characteristics, (b) parenting effects, and (c) family household structure.

Interview questions that asked about variables associated with the high school yielded a broad range of teacher and student participant responses. Participant responses were coded into the data group called High School Context. Teacher and student participant responses related to academic success barriers presented by the high school location included themes related to community demographics, neighborhood effects, and family mobility effects. Participants believed some of the local communities and neighborhoods where district students reside presented academic success barriers.

Participant responses related to teachers revealed perceptions about academic success barriers related to teacher behaviors and expectations and teacher-student relationships. Mandated high school graduation tests, course credit accrual, and school rules were perceived by teachers and students as success barriers. Although teachers did not specifically comment about language barriers as success barriers, students in one focus group did note language difficulties as a potential academic success barrier for some students.

Participant responses provided a rich data source to add to the current body of research about factors affecting high school student academic success. All study participants, interacting on a daily basis in the secondary school setting were familiar with numerous high school academic success barriers. Many participants identified the same barriers and noted that not all students would respond in the same way when faced with similar success barriers. Further discussion about major findings, research conclusions, implications for educators, and recommendations are presented in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

An expected educational outcome for all students educated in the American

public educational system is the successful completion of a high school education.

However, recent reports indicate approximately 30% of students never complete diploma

requirements, and others require more than four years doing so. One goal of national

educational reform legislation is to improve academic outcomes for all students. Given

the long-term consequences of dropping out of school, educators and policymakers are

keenly interested in learning more about potential barriers to high school student

academic success and in developing successful programs and strategies designed to

overcome them.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to contribute to the existent high school

student academic success research base. The study was designed to answer the following

research question:

What are the perceptions of high school teachers and high school students

about barriers to high school student academic success?

The researcher employed a qualitative research design to identify barriers to high

school student academic success from the perspectives of high school teachers and high

school students. The researcher conducted eight face-to-face individual 60-90 minute

long interviews with current high school teachers to obtain their perceptions about high

school student academic success barriers. To obtain high school student perceptions

about academic success barriers, the researcher conducted two separate student focus

groups; each focus group was 60-90 minutes in duration. The researcher used interview questions relative to the study's purpose to elicit participant responses.

The researcher utilized a 15-item interview protocol for individual teacher interviews and student focus groups. Researcher-written interview questions were based upon potential explanatory factors related to high school academic success barriers. Interview questions addressed potential academic success barriers relative to contextual factors associated with the individual, the family, and the educational setting.

The participants for this study were eight high school teachers who were currently employed in the study district and two groups of high school senior students who were currently enrolled in the study district. The researcher determined all study participants were familiar with high school student academic success barriers. All data collection was via face-to-face interaction between researcher and participants.

Participant responses were audio-recorded and transcribed for later researcher analysis. The researcher analyzed all interview transcripts for recurring themes and patterns. Participant response data were coded based upon similarity of participant responses about academic success barriers. The researcher used an iterative process to develop themes, codes, and sub-codes. A narrative analysis was used to analyze and synthesize the collected data which was reported as a narrative.

Analysis of Research Finding

Data obtained in this study were analyzed to answer the research study question:

"What are the perceptions of high school teachers and high school students about barriers to high school student academic success?"

Study data indicated participants were knowledgeable about academic success barriers associated with factors relative to the context of the individual student, the family, and the overall high school setting.

Participant responses relative to academic success barriers associated with the individual student included individual student characteristics, student values and behaviors, and the early assumption of adult roles, which could include becoming a parent, and/or working. Barriers associated with the individual context included academic and social barriers, some of which were alterable while others were not.

Participant responses centered on barriers associated with individual student traits including being over age for current grade level, academic and social skills deficits, having a special education classification, student values, having a low degree of school affiliation, and outside school responsibilities. Teacher participants specifically noted academic deficits, prior grade retentions, special education classification, and low motivation as success barriers. Teachers also indicated students with disabilities face academic and social barriers; they believed many lack the cognitive, academic, and social skills for high school success. They also spoke of student barriers associated with poverty and low parental support for academic endeavors. Although student participant data also revealed perceptions of low grades, being over age for grade in school, and emotional issues as academic success barriers, only students noted success barriers to be associated with language barriers. According to research findings, student values and individual student motivation were perceived to play an important role in students' ability to overcome most perceived academic success barriers.

Study findings indicated participants' awareness of the importance of positive teacher-student classroom interactions. Teacher and student participant responses noted success barriers associated with teacher behaviors that students may perceive as negative, non-caring, or non-supportive. Teacher participant data indicated the importance of positive teacher and caring behaviors such as providing individual attention and encouragement, which was perceived to be especially important for helping at-risk students overcome the barriers of poor academic preparation and low motivation.

Both high school teachers and high school students perceived there were academic success barriers associated with the educational context; however, teachers elaborated on the success barriers encountered by students served by the special education program and those with academic deficits. Teachers especially believed a special education classification and individual characteristics related to the students with disabilities classifications were success barriers. For some of these students, teachers noted passing the mandated high school graduation tests and attaining sufficient credits in required core classes as potential academic success barriers for the attainment of a regular education diploma. Student participants also perceived diploma coursework and testing requirement as potential academic success barriers. Student perceptions related to students with disabilities reflected an awareness of barriers associated with emotional issues, rather than low cognitive abilities.

Teachers noted that for students classified with an emotional and/or behavioral disorder, impulse control and unacceptable behaviors frequently were success barriers. This supports the findings of Scanlon and Mellard (2002) and Gallagher (2002). The impulsive actions of this group of students often resulted in disciplinary actions leading

to student placement into an in-school suspension setting or even out-of-school suspension. Thus, teachers perceived that because of inappropriate acting-out behaviors and subsequent disciplinary actions, students with disabilities were more likely to be excluded from the instructional environment of their assigned classroom setting and suspended. As an unintended consequence of school suspensions, this group of students may earn tend to earn lower grades, and become more at risk of failure to accrue coursework credits.

Teacher and student data findings indicated some academic success barriers to be associated with the family context. Success barriers associated with the family included low socioeconomic circumstances, parenting behaviors and factors associated with the structure of the family household, including moving and others moving into the household. Teacher participants noted the importance of parental behaviors supportive of educational outcomes, including high school completion. They noted the educational attainment of family members to affect student educational goals. However, student data revealed examples of the negative effects of student family mobility. Student data also indicated that when others moved into to or out of the household, academic success barriers occurred.

Teachers and students perceived the overall high school context to present potential academic success barriers. Participants noted success barriers related to the school community location, teachers, and education policy. Participant responses relative to contextual factors associated with the school noted socioeconomic conditions found in the surrounding communities might present academic success barriers. This negative effect occurs because student body demographics reflect the values of the local

neighborhoods. Participants discussed factors associated with local low socioeconomic neighborhoods and the rural communities where some students reside. Because success barriers are associated with low socioeconomics in families and communities, they are also associated with the educational context because of students who reside in them constitute a portion of the high school study body. Consequently, student values and behaviors may present academic success barriers in the educational context. Both groups of participants noted these barriers. They believed students encounter success barriers associated with their home communities when adults around them do not promote a positive value for education.

Teacher-student interactions were noted by teachers and students as important to student academic success, and outcomes. Both groups of participants noted that good teacher-student relationships are important to student learning, while the absence of positive teacher behaviors was perceived as an academic success barrier. Study findings indicated teacher perceptions of success barriers related to educational reform policies to include negative effects on teaching practices. Both participant groups noted the mandated testing, especially the high stakes graduation tests, as an academic success barrier.

<div align="center">Discussion of Research Findings</div>

This research was designed to investigate participant perceptions of barriers to high school student academic success. Specifically, the qualitative research design allowed for data collection from current high school teachers and current high school senior students relative to perceived barriers to high school student academic success.

A literature review guided the development of interview questions designed to elicit participant responses about the research study question. Participant responses were analyzed and coded, and sub-coded into themes related to high school student academic success barriers. Data analysis revealed themes related to the contexts of the individual student, the family, and the high school educational setting.

Success Barriers Related to the Individual

The interview questions relative to academic success barriers associated with student individual characteristics were drawn from the researcher literature review. Literature supporting this study (Rumberger, 2001; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002, Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) indicated success barriers associated with individual student demographic factors to include low socioeconomic circumstances, prior academic achievement, academic and social skill deficits, a classification as a student with a disability, being over age for grade level, and the early assumption of adult roles, including working or teen parenting.

The data from individual teacher interviews validated the literature with responses about the success barriers presented by family low socioeconomic circumstances, academic skills deficits, learning disabilities, low motivation, and early adult responsibilities, such as teen parenting and working. Teachers perceived factors associated with individual student background characteristics to have a strong influence on high school academic outcomes and to present academic success barriers.

Teachers believe that students with disabilities face academic and social barriers because many lack the cognitive, academic, and social skills for high school success. One veteran special education teacher observed, "Many are socially immature and gullible,

and can fall into the wrong crowd." All participants noted student barriers to be associated with low socioeconomic circumstances. Teachers perceived a lack of parental support for their children's education to be an academic success barrier. Both teacher and student participants perceived low student motivation to be a substantial barrier to high school student academic success.

Teacher and student participants noted additional student responsibilities of working or parenting to be potential barriers to academic success. However, they believed not all students reacted to similar outside school activities and personal responsibilities in the same way. Still, they noted the potential of student involvement in numerous extracurricular activities to overtax the time and energies of students, and to have a negative effect on academic outcomes. Thus, student academic success barriers may occur when student time, attention, attendance, and academic efforts are negatively affected by their responsibilities and activities beyond the school environment. These findings support previous research by Stanton-Salazar (1997) who concluded that student circumstances, such as working often prevented them from fully participating in the school environment. Stanton-Salazar also reported that working could interfere with the student's ability to participate in school extracurricular activities such as academics and to forfeit opportunities for forming supportive relationships with adults and peers.

Student focus group participants perceived individual student traits, including personal values, low motivation, prior poor academic performance and being over age for grade level to be academic success barriers. By giving a personal example, one student was able to describe the convergent negative effects of low socioeconomic environmental factors, low academic skills, low value for education, low motivation and having a high-

risk peer group. The student described an acquaintance, who enjoyed school as a younger child, but who failed to overcome the cumulative effects of poverty and academic deficits. This individual was retained in elementary school, and began middle school and high school over age in comparison to his classmates. This individual fell behind academically, got into disciplinary trouble at school and, as a result, was required to attend alternative school. When allowed to return to regular high school, the student did not follow rules and failed to accumulate course credits towards graduation. Eventually, the student dropped out of school. These data support those of Allensworth and Easton (2007) who reported that credits earned in core courses and overall credit accrual in the freshman year to be a good predictor of future student drop out. Study findings also support the work of Neild, Stoner-Eby, and Furstenberg, (2001) who observed that the transition from middle school to high school is a pivotal point for at-risk students, and concluded that the odds of dropping our substantially increase when incoming freshmen were over age and had friends who were involved in high-risk behaviors.

Family-Related Academic Success Barriers

Teacher and student participants perceived low family low socioeconomic circumstances to present high school academic success barriers. Participants believed success barriers associated with family low socioeconomic status arose from a number of factors including a high level of family financial stress, having a single parent as head of the household, residing in low-income public housing, holding low educational expectations, and high-risk peer group associations.

Teachers indicated that limited parental financial resources often negatively influence the ability of students and their parents to participate in school-related

conferences and extracurricular activities. Teacher data indicated an awareness by some that limited financial resources, in some instances, contributed to low parental school involvement. Teachers believed parents want their children to do well in school, and some perceived that low levels of parental involvement and apparent disinterest of parents in their student's education were a result of limited financial resources. These findings support previous research which indicated positive parenting practices which promote positive student school behaviors can mitigate negative effects of a low family SES and help overcome academic success barriers (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbini, 2001; Rumberger, 2001).

Students and teachers believed that students living in low SES circumstances often held jobs to augment family income. These findings confirm those of previous research which found low family SES to have an overall negative effect on student achievement (Schargel & Smink, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Success barriers arose from student inability to participate and develop membership in the overall school community. Additionally, teachers perceived success barriers to occur when positive educational values were neither inculculated nor supported by parenting behaviors. Study findings support those of previous researchers who concluded that students whose parents did not complete high school, rarely talked to them about school, and who had limited school contact were at increased risk of dropping out (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Lehr et al., 2004).

Teachers indicated that many uninvolved parents fail to stay updated about their child's academic progress. As a result, they may not have realistic expectations about their student's educational behaviors, or academic progress and abilities. They indicated

that what appears to be widespread societal acceptance of a publicly subsidized lifestyle and non-employed single parents modeled a lifestyle non-supportive of legitimate employment and educational endeavors. Teacher participants believed family values had shifted away from a strong work ethic, self-sufficiency, and responsibility for self and family, and these factors presented barriers to high school student academic success.

Several teachers discussed success barriers presented by student and family value systems that appear to prioritize the acquisition of money and material goods above the acquisition of an education and future lifetime benefits. Teachers noted management of financial resources could present success barriers, especially if purchases did not promote nor reflect a value for education. They observed many students did not evidence a value for reading and preferred activities other than reading for leisure time.

Student focus group data correlated with teacher data regarding barriers presented by low socioeconomic family circumstances. Student responses elaborated on negative effects and success barriers presented by living in low-income public housing. Student responses included barriers presented by negative role models, associating with negative peer groups, illegal drugs, and neighborhood violence. These findings support the findings of previous research which identified the negative influence of low community SES on high school completion (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). One student participant pointed out that stressful conditions caused by living in dangerous local public housing areas may cause students living there to focus more on survival skills instead of academic skills. This participant concluded that, "street smarts rather than book smarts might make the difference in daily survival." Students and teachers noted that many minority students living in low SES circumstances who displayed an affinity and value for education were

often openly ridiculed and disparaged by community peers. These findings are supported by Rumberger (1990), who concluded differences in neighborhood characteristics can help explain differences in dropout rates among communities.

Study participants noted academic success barriers to be associated with teen parenting and student employment. Both teachers and students said some teens had few options about employment, because their family needed the added student income to live. Previous researcher which found negative educational effects when teen students assume adult roles (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Rumberger, 2001) support these findings.

Teachers believe parenting behaviors which do not promote a value of reading (such as not modeling reading, not reading to young children, and not having reading materials in the home) present student academic success barriers. They perceived that some parenting behaviors fail to promote a positive work ethic in the family unit. They also noted that many students who live in impoverished circumstances encounter numerous social and financial obstacles to completion of their high school studies.

Participant data indicated the family household structure as a potential high school student academic success barrier. Teacher and student participants also perceived family mobility to be a success barrier. Participants discussed family relocations that occurred during the academic term, which resulted in students missing critical coursework content. Teachers were especially concerned about gaps in instruction because of excessive absenteeism, often because of parental decisions about the timing of vacations and/or family relocations. Study results support previous research about student mobility effects which concluded that highly mobile students are twice as likely to drop

out than are their more stable peers (Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Rumberger & Palardy,

2005; & Rumberger & Arellano 2008).

Teacher and student participant data indicated that the number of household

members and the number of adults in the household may present academic success

barriers. Both teachers and students noted changes in the overall household structure

related to individuals moving in or moving out negatively affect student school

attendance and grades. In some instances, high school students may have to assume

childcare for younger siblings or relatives, provide care for older family members, or

even work to supplement household finances. These findings support previous research

by Croninger and Lee (2001) and Fine (1986) who noted the negative educational effects

of family and personal crises, such as illness of an older family member or childcare

needs for young children. Findings supported earlier research of Romo and Falbo (1995)

who reported lowered educational outcomes for minority and low SES students, and

especially for female students, as an unintended consequence of assuming a caretaker

role for sick or younger family members.

School-Related Academic Success Barriers

Teacher and student participant responses to interview questions related to school

effects on student academics identified a range of school-related factors. All participants

noted success barriers associated with school location because of the neighborhoods

where many students live. Only student participants discussed barriers related to negative

influences affecting students who live in publicly subsidized low-income housing project.

Conversely, only teachers discussed the low socioeconomic influence of rural

communities in the district. This researcher believes this difference may be explained by

factors such as location of the participant's residence and the participant's age and knowledge of the local area and overall school district.

Teachers, who are long-time area residents, are more familiar with the various communities located within the district than most students are likely to be. Teachers are aware that some residents of well-established local rural communities live in very impoverished conditions. For these residents, a diploma was not a prerequisite for working in the local fishing industry or manufacturing plants. For students from these communities, a means to earn income locally may be emphasized over earning good grades, a diploma, and even attending postsecondary school. These local students may have few, if any, educated role models in their everyday community experience, which presents an academic success barrier. This finding supports the research of Balfanz and Legters (2004) who noted that because of where students live, the school might be the most influential factor in whether they drop out or graduate from high school.

Teachers and students identified school locale, teacher effects, and school policy as potential success barriers. These findings are consistent with research by Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) and Croninger and Lee (2001) who concluded that teacher behaviors and characteristics strongly influence student educational outcomes. These researchers noted that teachers are the most frequently encountered role models other than adults within the family. Positive teacher-student relationships influence student academics in a positive way, and conversely, negative relationships influence academics in a negative fashion (Lehr et al., 2004; Rumberger, 2001).

Analysis of participant data indicated that teachers and students believe individual teacher behaviors that are perceived as caring and encouraging are very important to

positive academic outcomes for many students and for high-risk students in particular. Participants perceived teacher encouragement and positive teacher-student interactions as important to student academic success and supportive of appropriate student social behaviors. Student responses supported the importance of positive teacher classroom leadership, positive classroom environment, and timely teacher feedback. Students noted that when teacher behaviors do not provide for these, student academic outcomes are negatively affected. Teacher participants believed current educational reform mandates have negatively influenced teachers' classroom practices, because of the amount of specified curriculum that must be covered during an academic term. These observations support the findings of Allensworth and Eaton (2007), who concluded that students have better attendance and resultant academic success when they have strong teacher relationships. Study findings also support those of Rumberger (2001) who concluded that positive student perceptions about their teachers are associated with lower dropout rates.

Participants believed the community in which schools were located affects educational outcomes, and could potentially present academic success barriers. These findings support previous research which identified high rates of absenteeism and high rates of family mobility to be associated with high school non-completion (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Teacher and student respondents indicated strong beliefs about academic success barriers presented by community values in low socioeconomic neighborhoods, in particular those related to work ethics and educational attainment. These findings support research by Rumberger (2001), who concluded the community may influence parenting practices over and above parental education and income. These findings are supported by the work of Wehlage and colleagues (1989) who

observed that students whose friends have dropped out of school have increased chances of dropping out of school themselves.

Conclusions

High school student academic outcomes are influenced by a myriad of factors associated with the individual student and contexts of the family, the local community and school. Based on the finding of this research, high school teachers and high school students were cognizant of many factors that influenced high school academic success. Key players in the high school educational setting themselves, they were aware of many factors, attitudes, and actions that created and exacerbated those barriers, as well as those that helped to alleviate those barriers.

High school educators and high school students have a stake in high school student educational outcomes. Interacting on a daily basis in the academic setting, they have personal knowledge that not everyone who enters high school will successfully walk out four years later with a diploma in their hand. The current era of accountability has required educators to reevaluate the overall educational institution, and to consider the effects of factors related to the high school educational context. In order to improve academic outcomes for all students, educators need to better understand the influence of factors within the school setting and recognize those which may negatively influence student educational outcomes. The high school environment that seemed to work in the past may not be appropriate for successfully educating the diverse groups of students in the classrooms of today. Everyone charged with the education of America's youth must assess student educational outcomes on an ongoing basis and should use available data to determine what works best.

All educators, including building level administrators, support staff, and teachers, must consider all factors affecting student success. While many educators can recognize educational barriers associated with student and family demographic factors, they may fail to recognize barriers which occur as a result of their own actions. Educators must recognize the importance of the overall school context and make it a place students want to be. Teachers must also recognize that they are in a position to initiate action designed to foster improved interpersonal interactions and relationships among students, fellow educators, and between themselves and their students.

Most educators can readily identify factors within the educational setting which promote positive educational outcomes. However, educators may fail to recognize the academic success barriers which develop from student perceptions about their teachers. Success barriers occur when students do not perceive their teachers as encouraging and caring. Success barriers also occur when the first communication a parent receives from the school is a negative report about their child.

To reduce success barriers related to the educational setting and teacher behaviors, high school teachers must become more cognizant about the effects of interpersonal communications between themselves and their students. High school teachers must be aware of the importance of positive and encouraging teacher behaviors. They must understand that for many students good teacher-student relationships are essential for improving academic outcomes; this is especially true for at-risk students.

For improved high school student educational outcomes, school administrators should take action to implement programs designed to reduce school-level academic success barriers. Suggestions for actions, programs, and strategies designed to improve

high school student academic outcomes, including high school graduation are detailed the remaining portion of this section.

School administration should develop and implement action plans to alleviate identifiable high school success barriers. Based on the finding of this study, the researcher concludes the following:

- Offer staff development designed to heighten teacher awareness about family and community factors that impinge upon the students' ability to focus on and follow through with academic studies.

- Offer teacher staff development designed to heighten teacher awareness about the important role of positive teacher-student relationships as a prerequisite for academic persistence for many at-risk students. This is important in that high school teachers may fail to realize that while most students are adult-sized, high school students are immature and dependent upon high school adults for instruction, positive leadership, and encouragement. In order for at-risk students to attempt academic tasks, they must feel supported and encouraged by their teacher that they are academically capable and competent enough to be successful. This positive teacher-student relationship and interaction is essential to keeping students motivated and engaged in the learning environment.

- Offer teacher staff development opportunities designed to heighten teacher awareness of the importance of recognizing the need of working as a team with other educators to develop academic interventions to help at-risk students. This should be one component of an ongoing school-wide at-risk intervention program.

Many students begin high school with below grade level achievement in language arts and mathematics, which puts them at-risk for failing to graduate. Schools should implement programs designed to improve educational outcomes for all students. A list of pro-active programs is indicated below. Some listed programs are currently in place in the study district, whereas others are not. In this section, the researcher concludes the following programs are needed for student success:

- Implementation of a smaller and more supportive freshman learning environment in larger schools, such as that provided by a school-within–a school setting, sometimes referred to as a "Freshman Academy." This design allows freshman students and their teachers to interact in a smaller environment, such as a separate school hallway, or building on a main high school campus. This smaller educational context increases the opportunities for the development of positive relationships among students as well as between students and their teachers. The smaller settings places staff members in close proximity to one another, thus allowing for improved planning, collaboration, and communication among teachers, support staff, and administration with the goal of improving freshman student educational outcomes.

- Offer freshman-only classes with the stated goal of improving the academic skills of incoming freshman. These classes should focus on academic skill development in the areas of writing, language arts, and mathematics. The focus and design of these classes would be to help students overcome academic skill deficits and to experience academic success in the initial high school year.

Many academically at-risk students experience difficulty accruing required core subject area credits, which then results in the failure to progress through high school. High school students who are over age and at risk of dropping out can benefit from educational programs scheduled beyond the regular school day. For instance, evening programs can provide a smaller educational setting, with instruction provided by a certified content area teacher. In the study district, students only have the option of on-line instruction for "making up credits" in previously failed classes. Technology, program criteria, and financial issues often prevent many students who need to make up credits from program access. Consequently, some students decide to drop out and others take more than four years to complete diploma requirements.

Many students need access to educational support services, such as tutoring, outside regular school hours. There is an identified need for students to be able to access tutoring and earn credits outside the regular school day in order to graduate on time. Currently, no sufficient programs are in place locally to meet this instructional need. Credit recovery options often depend upon access to adequately functioning computer connections. Additionally, computer instruction does not allow opportunities for positive personal teacher-student interactions which research has shown to be very important to student academic engagement, academic persistence, and academic success.

Currently, many Georgia schools use on-line instructional opportunities for credit recovery. This is not appropriate for many students in that

- many at-risk students do not meet local program criteria.
- many students not considered at-risk do not meet program criteria.

- this program design does not allow for encouraging teacher-student interaction which has been identified as important to student academic success.

- program access is technology driven, students must be able to effectively utilize the technology, and the technology must be fully functional for student use.

Therefore, the researcher suggests the implementation of an afternoon and evening program for the stated goal of providing local and easily accessible opportunities for credit recovery and tutoring beyond the regular school day.

Research findings also support the implementation of an alternative school program with the following features:

- Staffed by certified core subject area teachers for teaching classroom core curriculum subject matter. This opportunity would provide a smaller classroom setting with a qualified subject area teacher. This setting would foster the development of a positive and supportive teacher-student relationship.

- Staffed by certified individuals who would be available for individual tutoring. One-to-one tutoring has been found to be the ideal tutoring format for students to make academic gains. This option would fill the identified need for remediation of individual student academic deficits.

- Scheduled classes and individual tutoring during after school and evening hours. This schedule would allow for student participation outside the usual school day. This schedule would accommodate the needs of younger students who could access tutoring immediately after school. It would also accommodate the needs of older students who may need to attend evening classes because of working or meeting their family obligations during the regular school day.

Decisions made by educational leaders and teachers have important implications for high school student academic success. Some program decisions are made at the district level, and school building level administrators make others. Suggestions for school leaders and practices at the high school building level, with the goal of improving student school affiliation, school-home communications, and student educational outcomes are listed below.

- Implement a daily school schedule that incorporates a ninety-minute long 4x4 block design. This design provides sufficient time during one class period for teachers to vary instruction among the following instructional practices: (a) independent guided practice, (b) group work, and (c) teacher-directed instruction. An additional benefit of this schedule format is that it provides ample time for completion of most instructional lab activities during a single class period

- Implementation of a student advisement on a regular and ongoing basis via teacher as advisor programs. The overall advisement program could be under the direction of high school guidance counselors and program design and implementation would be a guidance-related responsibility. The advisement program would supplement advisement programs already in place. The anticipated benefit of this program is that it would provide students with a regular and ongoing contact with an adult at school with a relatively small student/adult ratio of approximately 22-to-1. Advisement sessions should occur on a regularly occurring basis, ideally on a weekly basis, and should also be scheduled near the beginning and end of each grading period.

- Implementation of a school-wide plan with the stated goal of improving student engagement and school membership. A plan could include allocated days and times for school assemblies and school club meetings. By scheduling these times during the school day, more students would be afforded informal opportunities to develop positive relationships with teachers and school peers. These positive associations are especially important for at-risk students whose financial circumstances impinge upon their ability to participate in school activities that are scheduled beyond the school day.

- Implementation of a supervised school site tutorial program staffed by qualified individuals who will be available to provide individual help for students. This is important for students who need the individual help of a skilled professional to help overcome success barriers presented by weak academic skills.

Shifts in societal values and expectations are perceived by many to have undermined the importance of education and contributed to an erosion of educational values. However, study findings suggest that some educators believe that most parents *do value education* and they *do want their children to obtain a good education*.

Family circumstances may impinge upon a parent's ability to be as involved in their child's education as they would like. Many are unsure about ways to provide support for their child's education at home. Additionally, parents of high school students may "step back" and refrain from many parent-school communications in the belief that teens should have more independence. High school parents assume this posture of limited home-school communications, in the belief that teens should be more responsible for

their own actions, and that they should be allowed "to make their own mistakes" as a part of growing up.

Improved communications among educators, parents, and the overall community are needed to overcome a barrage of issues related to high school student academic success. Positive communications and productive relationships among these groups need to be developed. Such relationships must be based upon a foundation of common expectations, shared values and goals, and trust. Currently, many schools face the problem of establishing positive rather than adversarial relationships with parents and the local community. It is especially incumbent upon educators to take action to alleviate parental and community misconceptions, and to establish positive connections in the local school community.

Schools and educators can take steps to reinforce a positive value of education. Schools can develop programs with the goal of more improved communication and integration of the school and community; educators may need to stop waiting for the parents to come to an unfamiliar school environment. Rather, educators must recognize the need to implement programs which can take educators where the parents are.

Research findings suggest the following strategies and comments for improved school-parent-community relationships:

- Develop action plans for improved school-parent-community interactions within the local community. Reinforce a positive value for education, via public programs. Schools can no longer afford to stand by and expect only parents to make the initial school contact.

- Take school-level action to improve the overall school climate to make it more welcoming for parents and visitors.

- Implement a plan for educator - teacher home visits designed to improve communications and promote parental involvement in the student's education.

- Take education into the community by forming school partnerships with businesses in the school district community. Use these contacts to develop site locations for educators to provide personal contact and education-related information booths and displays. Options for parent conferences could be incorporated into this effort.

- Collaborate with local businesses and churches to identify sites which parents are likely to visit on an ongoing basis.

- Set up staffed education information booths on a regular and recurring basis for information dissemination. The recurring basis is important because communication among parents and community members should result in increased public interest and will enhance educator visibility and credibility in the local community.

In summary, myriad factors influence high school student academic achievement, including high school completion. Study findings identified academic success barriers related to the contexts of the individual, the family, and the educational institution. Notably absent from study findings was teacher awareness of the potential negative effects upon high school completion rates of impersonal and negative teacher-student interactions. Previous research that explored how high school structure and social organization may influence student academic decisions found that smaller schools with

positive school climates enhance student academic success (Lee & Burkam 2003). These researchers concluded that students are less likely to drop out when teachers and students have positive relationships. Other researchers who explored dropout rates in urban and suburban high schools found that dropout rates were lower in schools with lower student-teacher ratios and teachers whom students described as excellent (Rumberger & Thomas 2000).

Academic success barriers are present in the overall school social context, including teacher-student classroom interactions, which are not positive and encouraging. Some factors are outside the realm of school influence, however, those identified factors that may constitute barriers to academic success that are within the control of the educational institution should be addressed in order to improve high school student academic success, that is, the high school graduation rate. The focus of the present research was to identify perceptions of high school teachers and high school students about perceived barriers to high school student academic success. The previous section of the present study detailed researcher conclusions and suggested actions schools could take to alleviate recognized barriers.

Implications

A broad range of factors influences high school academic success, including the attainment of a high school diploma within a customary four-year time span. The existing literature supports the finding of the present study: a myriad of factors related to the contexts of the individual, the family, and the educational setting may present academic success barriers (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Rumberger, 2001; Lehr et al., 2004). Individual success barriers include

student characteristics related to self-esteem issues, low motivation, values, non-supportive family, and contextual factors related to the family, community, and school. Influential factors within the educational setting include the school community and student body demographics, school personnel and educational policy.

Because of *No Child Left Behind* accountability mandates, educators and policymakers are under increasing pressure to improve educational outcomes for all students. For improved outcomes, it is essential for teachers, educational administrators, and educational policymakers to recognize potential academic success barriers. Both awareness and an understanding of high school student academic success barriers are critical for those working to design intervention strategies and practices. Furthermore, an understanding of success barriers is also important for those educators working directly with students as they strive to implement those practices and interventions designed to improve educational outcomes for all students.

Combining previous educational research and the findings from this study, the following implications are presented:

1. High school policymakers, educators and others interested in improving educational outcomes for all students should be interested in study findings. Study results can be useful to all stakeholders working to develop strategies designed to improve high school student academic outcomes.

2. Georgia high school educators should find study results useful for improving educational outcomes for high school students. Research outcomes could be of immediate use to those charged with the development and implementation of intervention strategies for at-risk students.

3. Georgia educational administrators should find study outcomes useful in the development of programs designed to improve high school academic outcomes. Study results could be useful for designing staff development with the goal of heightened high school teacher awareness regarding the importance of positive and encouraging teacher-student interactions. Such staff development could include information and strategies designed to further promote positive and encouraging dialogue between high school teachers and high school students, and as a result, decrease high school dropout rates, and therefore, increase high school graduation rates.

4. Georgia educational administrators should find study results useful in the development of intervention strategies, including staff development programs designed for early identification and intervention for at-risk students.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the findings regarding high school student academic success barriers, the researcher makes the following recommendations:

1. Replicate a similar study in other locales.

2. Conduct a similar study which includes the perceptions of counselors, administrators, and other student services personnel.

3. Conduct a similar study which includes parent perceptions.

4. Conduct a similar study at the middle school level with input from teachers, students, and student services personnel.

5. Conduct a similar study with a focus on high school career/technology teachers, fine arts teachers, and core curriculum area teacher comparisons.

6. Formulate specific action plans to develop and implement programs designed to address identified high school student academic success barriers that arise out of the local educational setting.

<div align="center">Dissemination</div>

The researcher plans to present research findings as a published dissertation accessible via the Worldwide Web. The researcher will also offer to present at the Student At-Risk Conference sponsored annually by Georgia Southern University. If invited to do so, the researcher will be available to present research findings to community leaders and interested stakeholders, including high school educators, high school principals, school social workers, and central office educational staff.

The researcher will be available to present research findings to local civic groups and organizations, including the local Rotary Club, Chamber of Commerce, and community churches. This researcher also plans to share study results with interested high school student parents and fellow school educators.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe your own high school experience.

2. What role does individual student characteristics play in the success or failure of high school students?

3. What role does student motivation play in the success or failure of high school students?

4. What effect, if any, do a student's individual interpersonal behaviors have on their academic achievement?

5. What role does student outside of school activities play in academic achievement/success?

6. What role do interpersonal relationships play in the success or failure of high school students?

7. What role do families play in the success or failure of high school students?

8. What role do family responsibilities play in the success or failure of high school students?

9. What community or home characteristics promote or hinder student success?

10. What role do high school teachers play in the success or failure of students?

11. What can high school teachers do individually or as a group to contribute to the success of individual high school students?

12. What role does mandated tests, such as end-of-course tests and the Georgia High School Graduation Tests play in the success or failure of high school students?

13. What can high schools do to help students attain high school academic success, that is, to help students earn a high school diploma?

14. What can high schools do to help students who come to 9th grade with minimal or poor academic skills?

15. What role do high schools play in the failure of high school students

APPENDIX B

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Georgia Southern University
Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Phone: 912-478-0843		Veazey Hall 2021
		P.O. Box 8005
Fax: 912-478-0719	IRB@GeorgiaSouthern.edu	Statesboro, GA 30460

To: Judy Sapp
Educational Leadership

Linda Arthur
Educational Leadership

CC: Charles E. Patterson
Associate Vice President for Research

From: Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

Date: February 20, 2009

Subject: Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

After a review of your proposed research project numbered:**H09193** and titled **"Barriers to High School Student Academic Success"**, it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable.

Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research.

This IRB approval is in effect for one year from the date of this letter. If at the end of that time, there have been no changes to the research protocol; you may request an extension of the approval period for an additional year. In the interim, please provide the IRB with any information concerning any significant adverse event, **whether or not it is believed to be related to the study**, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRB Coordinator **prior** to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRB approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a *Research Study Termination* form to notify the IRB Coordinator, so your file may be closed.

Sincerely,

Eleanor Haynes

Eleanor Haynes
Compliance Officer

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT LETTERS

GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, TECHNOLOGY AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

INFORMED CONSENT

My name is Judy S. Sapp; I am doctoral student at Georgia Southern University conducting a research study as a part of the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree. The research study is titled "Barriers to High School Student Academic Success".

The purpose of the research is to investigate high school teacher and high school student beliefs about barriers to high school student academic success. This letter serves to request your assistance in gathering this information.

Individual teacher interviews and student focus group interviews will be used to gather information about participant perceptions. The researcher will conduct all individual and focus group interviews. Follow up interviews will be conducted as needed for clarification.

For high school teachers, participation in this research will involve responding to fifteen (15) interview questions about barriers to high school student academic success during one sixty to ninety minute long individual interview.

For high school senior students, research participation will involve responding to fifteen (15) study questions about barriers to high school student academic success during one student focus group interview. The student focus group will last from sixty to ninety minutes.

There is no identified risk associated with this study; any risk associated with the research is minimal, and is not greater than risk associated with daily life experiences.

The research will provide a benefit to society because it will help to fill a void in the existent literature on high school student academic success. The research data may prove useful for numerous stakeholders, including educators and policymakers who are seeking to improve educational outcomes for all students.

The identities of study participants will be kept confidential and responses will be anonymous. Specific participant names will not appear in my dissertation.

High school affiliation as well as the names of interviewees and focus group participants will be captured data; the term captured data means these items of information will be recorded. However, specific names of individuals as well as school and school district sites will be protected by pseudonyms throughout the dissertation and will be correlated only to identification of the specific focus groups and individual teachers by demographic information and/or instructional subject area. Thorough measures will be taken to remove identifying information. Absolute confidentiality during data collection cannot be promised since participants are exposed to other people thus knowing of their participation. Audiotapes do produce a "likeness" of participants, with confidentiality in use of tapes assured. The audio recordings will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office. Only the researcher will have access to audiotapes, transcripts, and any other research-related documentation. Upon acceptance and approval of my dissertation, all individual identifiers and audio recordings will be erased.

Participants have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher named above or the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-0843.

Participation in this study is voluntary. There is no penalty for deciding not to participate in the study; you decide at any time you no longer with to participate and may withdraw at any time without penalty or retribution.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this research study.
Your participation in this study will be limited to the time of one (1) focus group or individual interview, either of which will last approximately sixty to ninety minutes.
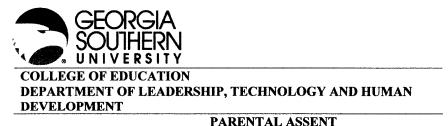
Please indicate your consent to participate in this research study and to the terms above, by signing your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

Title of Project: Barriers to High School Student Academic Success

Principal Investigator: Judy S. Sapp
                           591 Briar Circle
                           Hinesville, GA 31313
                           (912) 368-6966
                           judy.s.sapp@gmail.com

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Linda M. Arthur
                           Georgia Southern University
                           P.O. Box 8131
                           Statesboro, GA 30460-8131
                           912-478-0697
                           larthur@georgiasouthern.edu

_____   _____
Participant Signature   Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

_____   _____
Investigator Signature   Date

GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, TECHNOLOGY AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

PARENTAL ASSENT

Dear Parent or Guardian:

My name is Judy S. Sapp and I am presently a graduate student at Georgia Southern University. As part of the dissertation requirement, I am conducting a research project called "Barriers to High School Student Academic Success". The purpose of the research is to investigate high school teacher and high school senior student beliefs about barriers to high school student academic success.

If you give permission, your child will have the opportunity, along with three to four other students, to participate in a group interview called a focus group. The researcher will ask questions on the research topic, and each student will have the opportunity to provide a response to the question. Your child may choose to not answer any question he or she wishes. The student focus group interview will take place after school hours and should last approximately sixty to ninety minutes.

Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. The risks from participating in this study are no more than would be encountered in everyday life. Your child will be told that he or she may stop participating at any time without any penalty. Your child may choose to not answer any question(s) he/she does not wish to for any reason. Your child may refuse to participate even if you agree to her/his participation.

The focus group will be audio-recorded for later data analysis. In order to protect the confidentiality of the student participants, a coded pseudo-name, rather than the child's name will appear on all of the information recorded during the experiment. All information pertaining to the study will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office. No one at your child's school will see the information recorded about your child.

Your child's identity will be kept confidential and no personally identifiable information will ever be available to anyone other than the researcher.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study at any time, please feel free to contact me at (912) 368-6966 or my advisor, Dr. Linda Arthur, at (912) 478-0697. For questions concerning your child's rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at (912) 478-0843.

If you are giving permission for your child to participate in the research study, please sign the form below and return it to me as soon as possible. Thank you very much for your time.

****

Investigator's Signature: _____

Child's Name: _____

Parent or Guardian's Signature: _____

Date: _____

**GEORGIA
SOUTHERN
UNIVERSITY**

**COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, TECHNOLOGY AND HUMAN
DEVELOPMENT**

MINOR'S ASSENT

Hello,

My name is Judy S. Sapp; I am a graduate student at Georgia Southern University and I am conducting a dissertation research project called: "Barriers to High School Student Academic Success".

You are being asked to participate in the project that will be used to learn about what students think present barriers to high school student academic achievement, including high school graduation. If you agree to be a part of the project, I will ask you to participate in a group discussion about the research topic. The type of group discussion is called a focus group, and it will take about sixty to ninety minutes to complete. You do not have to answer any research project questions you do not want to answer.

Your participation in this project is voluntary. You can refuse to do the project even if your parents say you can. You can stop whenever you want by telling me you no longer wish to participate. There is no penalty for deciding not to participate in the study.

None of the teachers or other people at your school will see your answers to the questions I ask you. All of the answers that you give will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my office. Only other students in the focus group and I will know your individual answers. I will not put your name on answers that you give me, so no one will be able to know which answers were yours.

All interview audiotapes will be erased after my research is completed and my dissertation has been approved and accepted by the College of Graduate Studies.

If you or your parent/guardian have any questions about this form or the project, please call me at (912) 368-6966 or my advisor, Dr. Linda Arthur, at (912) 478-0697. Thank you!

****

If you understand the information above and want to participate in the project, please sign your name on the line below:

Yes, I will participate in this project: _____

Child's Name: _____

Parent Signature: _____

Investigator's Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX D

QUALITATIVE ITEM ANALYSIS

Qualitative Item Analysis

	Questions	Research Question	Supporting Literature	
1	Tell about your own high school experience.	1	Gleason & Dynarski, 2002 Rumberger, 2001	Individual Factors
2	What role do individual student characteristics play in the success or failure of high school students?	1	Battin-Pearson et al, 2000 Gleason & Dynarski, 2002 Lehr et al, 2004	Individual Factors
3	What role does student motivation play in the success or failure of high school students?	1	Battin-Pearson et al, 2000 Gleason & Dynarski, 2002	Individual Factors Family Context
4	What effect, if any, do a student's individual interpersonal behaviors have on their academic achievement?	1	Battin-Pearson et al, 2000 Gleason & Dynarski, 2002 Rumberger, 2001	Individual Factors
5	What role does student outside of school activities play in academic achievement/success?	1	Battin-Pearson et al, 2000 Gleason & Dynarski, 2002	Individual Factors
6	What role do personal relationships play in the success or failure of high school students?	1	Battin-Pearson et al, 2000 Gleason & Dynarski, 2002 Lehr et al., 2004 Rumberger, 2001	Individual Family Community School
7	What role do families play in the success or failure of high school students?	1	Battin-Pearson et al, 2000 Gleason & Dynarski, 2002 Lehr et al., 2004 Rumberger, 2001	Family Context

8	What role do student family responsibilities play in the success or failure of high school students?	1	Battin-Pearson et al, 2000 Gleason & Dynarski, 2002 Rumberger, 2001	Individual Factors Family Context
9	What community or home characteristics promote or hinder student success?	1	Battin-Pearson et al, 2000 Gleason & Dynarski, 2002 Lehr et al., 2004 Rumberger, 2001	Family Context Community Context
10	What role do high school teachers play in the success or failure of students?	1	Battin-Pearson et al, 2000 Gleason & Dynarski, 2002	Educational Context
11	What can high school teachers do individually or as a group to contribute to the success of individual high school students?	1	Battin-Pearson et al, 2000 Gleason & Dynarski, 2002	Educational Context
12	What role do mandated tests, such as end-of-course tests (EOCT) and the Georgia High School Graduation Tests (GHSGT) play in the success or failure of high school students?	1	Battin-Pearson et al, 2000 Gleason & Dynarski, 2002 Lehr et al., 2004	Individual Factors Educational Context

13	What can high schools do to help students attain high school academic success, that is, to earn a high school diploma?	1	Battin-Pearson et al, 2000 Gleason & Dynarski, 2002 Lehr et al., 2004	Educational Context
14	What can high schools do to help students who come to 9th grade with minimal or poor academic skills?	1	Battin-Pearson et al, 2000 Gleason & Dynarski, 2002 Lehr et al., 2004	Individual Factors Educational Context
15	What role do high schools play in the failure of high school students? (Is there anything that high schools could/should be doing to help, that they are not doing?)	1	Battin-Pearson et al, 2000 Gleason & Dynarski, 2002 Lehr et al., 2004	Individual Factors Family Context Community Context Educational Context