MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOM TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS ON THE NEEDS OF AT-RISK STUDENTS: A

PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Gaye Boothe Walk

Liberty University

A Dissertation Proposal Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

Dr. Kenneth Tierce, Committee Chair

Dr. Verlyn Evans, Committee Member

Dr. Frank Jones, Committee Member

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of middle school classroom teachers regarding the impact of formative assessments on the needs of at-risk students. A phenomenological approach was used to gain understanding of how the teacher works with at-risk students and how the steps of formative assessments meets the needs of at-risk students. The theory framing this study was Albert Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory and the self-efficacy belief system. Data collection took place with 12 middle school teachers and included a questionnaire, individual interviews, and a focus group. The study was guided by three research questions. First, how do middle school teachers perceive the steps of formative assessment? Second, what are the middle school teacher's perceptions of the formative assessment theory and its practices? Third, how do middle school teachers perceive the impact of formative assessment on the needs of the at-risk student? Data analysis methods followed Moustakas' (1994) model of transcendental phenomenology. Trustworthiness was verified through triangulation of data, member checking, and peer checking. Each participant's identity was kept confidential using pseudonyms and by keeping the location of the study confidential to protect their privacy.

Keywords: at-risk, feedback, formative assessment, middle school, phenomenology, self efficacy, social cognitive theory.

Dedications

To my husband Bob of 41 years, there are no words that tongue can tell how much your love and support has meant to me. What we have together and what we do together cannot be matched anywhere. This is for you as much as for me. I am blessed beyond measure to have you in my life. To my children, Jennifer, Eric, and Angela, and to Calvin and Chad who came to me later, I love each of you. Thank you for your support and pride in me; you will never know how much it has meant. To my father, Curtis Boothe, I pray you are looking down from Heaven and are pleased with your baby girl. You are the reason I started this journey so many years ago. To my sister Charlotte who knew me when and believed in me when. Finally, to Sarah, Emma, Ava and Audrey, I hope you see what hard work and perseverance can do. Dreams can come true with hard work, listening to God, and with the love of family. I hope you are proud of your Grammy. Grammy is proud of you.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI)

Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT)

English Language Learners (ELL)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Georgia Milestones State Test or End of Grade Test (EOG)

Georgia Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Ohio State Teachers Efficacy Test (OSTET)

Weight School Assessment (WSA)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Students who do not perform at grade level are deemed at-risk of not completing high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Balfanz, Bridgeland, Fox, DePaoli, Ingram & Maushard, 2014; Jackson & Andrew, 2000; Jimerson, Pletcher, Graydon, Schnurr, Nickerson, & Kundert, , 2006). To assist at-risk students, the Georgia Department of Education has made a multi-year push for formative assessment at all levels of education. The state of Georgia also currently tracked each student's productivity and growth from year to year through the Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS). Metro Atlanta Public Schools (pseudonym) currently used this computerized program to assign each student to a teacher in the academic areas of language arts, math, science, social studies). This chapter includes background information pertaining to the study, situation to self, the problem statement, purpose statement, and an explanation of the study's significance. The research questions are stated, and terms significant to the study are also defined.

Background

The public-school system in the United States was created so each student could have a free education (Mulcahy, Mulcahy, & Saul, 2014). However, with no master plan for that educational system, it has been a work in progress from its inception in the 1800s to the educational system known today (Balfanz, et al., 2014). The following subsections attempt to provide the broad overview of the historical, social, and theoretical roots for the present study requisite to an understanding of the impact of formative assessments on at-risk students.

Historical Context

Schools in America began with the arrival of colonists who believed schools should educate their citizens to build a new life (Mulcahy et al., 2014). These schools taught the basics of education and the basic beliefs of the puritan life brought over with the colonists (Balfanz, et al., 2014). After the Revolutionary War, Thomas Jefferson suggested that the new nation needed an education system and proposed that tax dollars be spent to do so (Lounsbury, 2009). The changes to the education system suggested by Jefferson took almost a century to enact (Mulcahy et al., 2014).

The first public schools, often in rural areas, relied on the small one-room school houses to educate the students who were gathered from neighboring farms (Ravitch, 2016). As families began to move into urban areas, the schools began to take on the forms of elementary, secondary, and post-secondary, although each branch was independent of the other (Lounsbury, 2009). The evolution of education over time has been accompanied by numerous reform efforts, starting with teacher education criteria, graduation criteria, integration of schools, and the Individuals with Disabilities Act that provides educational opportunities for children of all learning needs (Bowers, 2010).

Since the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, a national push has been made to improve the educational system, with each presidential administration adding subsequent layers that have been enacted throughout the country (Mulcahy et al., 2014). During the Clinton administration, social promotion was ended, resulting in an era of grade retention (Ravitch, 2016). President George W. Bush's administration followed t and ushered in the era of high stakes testing with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 that sought to hold schools more accountable for the achievement of their students (Santos, 2012; Shelly,

2012). In 2015 President Obama's administration sponsored the Every Student Counts Act, which challenged the United States education system to raise graduation rates to 90% by the year 2020 (Santos, 2012; Shelly, 2012).

Social Context

The United States Department of Education reported that the graduation rate in 1970 was 78% and dipped to a low of 72% in 2001 (Aud, Wilkinson-Flicker, Kristapovich, Rathbun, Wang, & Zhang, 2013). In 2010, nearly 1.3 million high school students did not complete high school (Balfanz et al., 2014). Bornsheuer, Polonyi, Andrews, Fore, & Onwuegbuzie (2011) noted that this graduation deficit resulted in a loss of valuable working individuals that equates to billions of dollars lost in earnings through the lifetime of those students and in turn with long-term effects on society in general.

Education reform acts seek to ensure that America's students perform to the highest ability necessary to meet the needs of society (Ravich, 2016). Yet, students continue to not meet grade level standards and are at risk for not completing their education through to graduation or do not graduate with their peers (Balfanz et al., 2014). For example, the national push to raise graduation rates to a 90% level has led to increased consideration of those who could fail to graduate with their peers (Balfanz et al., 2014). Moreover, current literature showed that students at-risk for failure to graduate need to be identified far earlier than in their high school years and indicators can be seen as early as late elementary school and middle school (Belsitio, Ryan & Brophy, 2005; Bradley & Lenton, 2007; Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2012).

Moreover, studies have reported the effectiveness of formative assessments in meeting students' learning needs in general (Brookhart, Moss, & Long 2009; Hattie, 2008; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Treagust, Jacobowitz, Gallagher, & Parker, 2001). Likewise, the

literature on formative assessments illustrated a strong need for the use of formative assessments in the classroom with all levels of students (Hattie, 2008; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Beginning with the student's knowledge on a given standard, formative assessment takes the student through prescribed learning targets based on state and county standards (Hattie, 2008). Additionally, formative assessment starts at where the students' learning should be, rather than where the grade level expectations reside, and takes them to the point of mastery in order to move them to the next classroom task or standard (Brookhart et al., 2009; Doubet, 2012; Fisher & Frey, 2010; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Paris & Paris, 2001; Treagust et al., 2001).

Theoretical Context

Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory provided the theoretical framework for the study. Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory emphasized how the cognitive, behavioral, and personal environment interact to determine an individual's motivation and behavior (Crothers, Huges, & Morine, 2008). From the social cognitive perspective, individuals are constantly self-organizing and self-regulating and becoming contributors to their own life circumstances (Bandura, 1997). The reciprocal effect of the social cognitive interaction can be seen in what Bandura (1989) termed the triadic reciprocal determinism model. The triadic reciprocal determinism model illustrates the interaction among behavioral factors, personal factors, and environmental factors. These factors do not always interact in equal strength or at the same time; however, they have a significant effect on the outcome of long-term development (Wood & Bandura, 1989).

Situation to Self

My interest in at-risk students comes from working with middle school students as a teacher in language arts and social studies for 23 years and, more recently, from using formative assessments to meet the needs of at-risk students.

The state of Georgia and Metro Atlanta County Public Schools (pseudonym) has recently placed an emphasis on the use of formative assessments. Schools receive intensive professional development training on the use and techniques of formative assessments. In addition, school administrators emphasize the need to see those techniques in use when conducting classroom observations. However, even with this influx, knowledge, skill, and monitoring, students still fail to meet grade level standards.

The philosophical assumption for this study was ontological. The perceptions of the participants in this study differed on the use of formative assessments with at-risk students and were influenced by their own backgrounds and personal experiences. The study was also viewed through the lens of social constructivism. According to Creswell (2013), the primary purpose of the researcher in social constructivism is to interpret the views of the participants about the situation in which they live and work. My goal was to take those views and find the essence of the experience based on the words the participants. Through the use of questionnaires, interviews, and a focus group, the words and views of the participants were used to discover the lived experience of using formative assessments while working with the at-risk student.

The information and insight gained from this study will contribute information that can be shared with other educators and administrators not only at the study site, but also at other schools and school systems. The insights could also help develop professional development to assist educators working with lower performing students.

Problem Statement

Schools are consistently held to a higher standard of student achievement through testing (Balfanz et al., 2014). In addition, there is a national movement toward standards that many states have adadpted called Common Core, with new testing that requires students to think and apply levels of knowledge and thinking into an application phase higher than previously required (Ravich, 2016). In Common Core, students are asked to read and apply knowledge in written format in both a constructed response format and in an extended response format (Musoleno & White, 2010). Both the constructed response format and extended response format require students to take information from a written text and apply information into a written response that not only applies knowledge from the text, but also background knowledge that can be applied to that context (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). In the state of Georgia, the End of Grade (EOG) test is used as an indicator not only of student growth but also for matriculation to the next grade (Georgia Department of Education, 2017). Students who are working below grade level are at risk of not passing to the next grade and in turn can be at-risk of completing high school with their peers.

Students who experience failure in elementary and middle school are also at greater risk of becoming high school dropouts (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Bowers, 2010; Orther, Akos, Rose, Jones-Sanpei, Mercado, & Woolley, 2010; Slaten, Elison, Yough, & Shemwell, 2015). One indicator of future hardships in high school is having a difficult elementary experience and being retained in elementary school (Bowers, 2010). Approximately 50% of the students in Bowers' study who dropped out in high school reportedly had a difficult third-grade year, or were retained during the elementary level. Additionally, other studies have reported 90% of high school dropouts experienced a difficult seventh-grade year (Freemen, Gum, & Blackbourn,

1999). Some of the additional indicators of a student being deemed at-risk include poor academic performance in reading and math, low socioeconomic status in the home, behavioral problems that keep students out of class, and attendance in school that is less than 85% of the school year (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Henry et al., 2012; Kronholz, 2011).

The at-risk student needs to be identified and worked with so that further complications do not compound in years to come (Henry et al., 2012). In addition, the monetary cost for individuals who drop out before graduation can run into the billions of dollars (Balfanz et al., 2014). Moreover, keeping students in school through to graduation could save tax dollars that could be spent on funding for welfare programs, unemployment benefits, and crime prevention (Buckley, Storino & Sarni, 2003; Henry et al., 2012).

Research suggests that the process of formative assessment allows the educator and learner to move through four levels of learning that include the learning task, processing of the task, self-regulation, and the self as a person (Brookhart et al., 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Morrissette, 2011; Popp, Grant & Strong, 2011). After formative assessment, the student can build a sense of self-efficacy and a stronger sense of educational success. Therefore, the problem of this study was the impact of formative assessment on the needs of at-risk middle school students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand middle school teachers' perceptions of the impact of formative assessment on the needs of at-risk students at a Metro Atlanta middle school. At this stage in the research, formative assessment can generally be defined as "that aspect of assessment that supports rather than certifies students' learning acquisition" (Morriessette, 2011, p. 248). Formative assessments take students through

levels of learning to fill gaps of knowledge to the point of mastery (Brookhart et al., 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The theory guiding this study was Bandura (1977)'s social cognitive theory.

Significance of the Study

This study was designed to understand the lived experience of middle school teachers and their perceptions of the impact of formative assessment on the needs of at-risk students. The site of the study placed a strong emphasis on formative assessment. Yet, students were continuing to fail grade level standards. This study can provide understanding of formative assessments and how those assessments could meet the needs of the at-risk student. A synthesis of the literature by Hattie (2008) provided evidence of the effectiveness of formative assessment in moving students through learning phases. Likewise, studies by Balfanz et al. (2014), Belsito et al. (2005), and Bowers (2010) have all shown the importance of early identification of at-risk students. Gaining an insight regarding the perceptions of middle school teachers on the use of formative assessments and the impact those assessments have on the specific needs of at-risk students can provide valuable insights for teachers and administrators alike. The results of this study provide data that can have an impact on educators who are responsible for implementing effective strategies to reach students who are not performing at grade level standards. Additionally, classrooms and schools can use the findings of the study to provide curriculum development for the study site and other middle schools in general.

Research Questions

This transcendental phenomenological study of middle school teachers' perceptions of the impact of formative assessment on the needs of at-risk students at a Metro Atlanta Middle School will be guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are teachers' perceptions of the needs of at-risk students?

By paying attention to indicators of students being at risk, educators, administrators can reach out and allow students to change inner dialogue to promote future growth in academic areas (Munoz & Dossett, 2004). The inner dialogue can be defined as those personal internal messages that are played over within a person that come from both positive and negative experiences (Bandura, 1997). The at-risk student comes to this distinction long before he or she is given this official designation of being at-risk (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Balfanz, et al., 2014).

Additionally, numerous studies have shown that at-risk students have specific needs that, if not addressed, will hinder their further educational attempts (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Balfanz et al., 2014; Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007; Zimmerman, 2008).

RQ2: How do middle school teachers perceive formative assessment in general?

Formative assessment "refers to the frequent quantitative measures of specific skills" (Dorn, 2010, p. 326) and is "that aspect of assessment that supports rather than certifies students' learning acquisition" (Morriessette, 2011, p. 247). Formative assessment involves a range of formal and informal assessment procedures broken down into learning targets by the teacher to modify teaching and learning activities to improve student attainment of information. Those formal and informal assessments place the student as an active participant in the learning process to allow the building of self-efficacy and the reprogramming of the student's inner dialogue to effectively imagine themselves as viable in the classroom. However, the teacher needs to view formative assessments differently from summative assessments or other tests indicating learning at the end of a lesson. Formative assessment leads to summative assessment and allows students to show growth through the steps and effectively learn the content by the final summative assessment step. Classroom teachers who know the clear steps in the process can lead their

students from where they begin as learners to mastery in their final summative assessment (Brookhart et al., 2009; Hattie, 2008; Heritage, 2007).

RQ3: How do teachers perceive formative assessments impact the needs of the at-risk students?

Dorn (2010) states, "When teachers base decisions on whether children's performances improve by a reasonable amount—children with low achievement can close a large portion of the achievement gap" (p. 326). The cognitive decision to differentiate instruction to meet learning gaps on a particular learning target allows the student to begin the process through which the students become a part of an educational society in which their experiences have been negative (Marzano, 2010). In addition, Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory describes an agent as "someone who intentionally influences functioning" (p. 175). The process of formative assessment allows dialogue to take place and teachers to become agents of change (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) leading to self-efficacy and lifelong learning (Brookhart et al., 2009). Developing a sense of self-efficacy allows the learner to believe that one is capable of working inside the classroom in an effective manner with peers. Self-efficacy allows the learner to build confidence in one's own ability to achieve the intended results within the classroom setting while also building a sense of belonging within the educational system.

Definitions

1. *At-risk students*- Those students who are at-risk of not completing high school through to graduation (Bowers, 2010).

2. *Formative assessment* - That aspect of assessment that supports rather than certifies students' learning acquisition (Morriessette, 2011). Formative assessments take students

levels of learning to fill gap of knowledge to the point of mastery (Brookhart et al., 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

3. *Formative feedback-* Input from others that, together with students' own internal input, helps students decide where they are with regard to the learning goals they need or want to meet and what they will attempt next (Brookhart et al., 2009).

4. *Self-efficacy-* An individuals's belief about one's capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect one's life. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how individuals feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave (Bandura, 1989).

5. *Summative assessment-* A means to gauge, at a particular point in time, students' learning relative to content standards. Summative assessments can include state assessments, district benchmarks, interim assessments, end-of-unit or chapter tests, and end-of-term or semester exams, and are scores that are used for school accountability (Phelps, 2010).

Summary

This transcendental phenomenological study allowed the voice of the middle school teacher to be heard. The problem studied was the impact of formative assessment on the needs of the at-risk student. The impact of formative assessment on the needs of at-risk students have not yet been fully addressed in the literature and this study sought to bridge that gap in research. Belstio et al. (2005) and Bowers (2010) stated the importance of early identification of a student being at-risk. Therefore, gaining the insight of the middle school teachers regarding the use of formative assessment with at-risk students can be valuable not only to the teacher but also to local school agencies. The theory guiding this study was Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory which posits that meeting the specific needs of students requires a person who can act as

an agent of change; the teacher can be that agent of change, which in turn will allow the student

to have greater academic success.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The theoretical framework for this study was Bandura's (1989) social cognitive theory. Viewed through the lens of the social cognitive theory, Chapter Two of the present study includes a review of literature that includes the identification and needs of at-risk students, the characteristics of formative assessment, and middle grades education. Chapter Two concludes with a summary of the review that includes identification of remaining gaps in the literature needing further investigation.

Theoretical Framework

Albert Bandura's (1989) social cognitive theory posits that individuals develop over the course of their lifetimes through their interactions with society. The social cognitive theory further postulates that an individual can assume an agent-like perspective to change circumstances that will allow them to develop and adapt in given situations (Caprara, Pastorelli, Regalia, Scabini, & Bandura, 2005). Through the social cognitive view, individuals are continually self-organizing and self-regulating, becoming contributors to one's own life circumstances (Caprara et al., 2005).

The social cognitive theory emphasizes how the cognitive, behavioral, and personal environment interact to determine motivation and personal behavior (Crothers et al., 2008). The reciprocal effect of this interaction can be seen in Bandura's (1989) triadic reciprocal determinism model. The triadic reciprocal determinism model shows the interaction among behavioral factors, personal factors, and environmental factors. These factors do not always interact in equal strength or at the same time; however, they have a significant effect on the outcome of long-term development (Wood & Bandura, 1989).

Social cognitive theory includes four levels needed to achieve the goal of self-efficacy: self-observation, self-evaluation, self-reaction, and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Through self-observation, students can become informed about what is appropriate and help assess their progress towards a learning goal (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). Self-evaluation allows individuals to compare their current performance towards a goal. The process of formative assessment is meant to break down learning goals so that students can receive feedback on their learning progress (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Schunk, 2005). This feedback on the task process and how they are working through a task gives students the opportunity to see what they have accomplished and how to move forward (Kaftan, Buck, & Haack, 2006; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; William, 2011). According to Bandura (1997), "People gain satisfaction when they achieve goals that they value. When individuals achieve these goals, they are more likely to continue to exert a high level of effort" (p. 15). Self-reaction to one's performance can be motivating (Bandura, 1989). If students see their progress as acceptable, then they will have greater motivation to continue with a learning task. Self-reaction to the achievement or lack of achievement of a goal allows students to re-evaluate that goal and their attainment of it (Bandura, 1989). However, at-risk students often have a difficult time overcoming failure and continuing toward a goal (Clark, 2012). The educator who becomes the outside agent of change can become the individual the student listens to as to why the at-risk student has not progressed academically. (Bandura, 1989; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Self-efficacy refers to one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy in students is their belief in being able to accomplish a goal using their own skills or capabilities. Students who have a high level of self-efficacy are more likely to engage in higher levels of challenge, while those

who do not have a high level of self-efficacy reach what some scholars have termed a self-fulfilling prophecy (Williams & Williams, 2010). This self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when at-risk students have strong doubts in their own capabilities, which in turn prohibits them from taking on more difficult tasks or taking the necessary risks to start a positive trend in their educational trajectory (Lichtinger & Leichtentrit, 2016).

Related Literature

Since 1982, several Western nations have sought educational reforms designed to "enable as many students as possible to achieve academic success" (Morriessette, 2011, p. 247). The Clinton presidential administration declared an end to social promotion based on age, which brought about a period of increased grade retention. President George W. Bush followed suit with the support of Congress, creating the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, focusing attention on schools needed to create and sustain a high level of achievement for all groups of children from elementary through high school and to close the achievement gap. Schools became accountable for student progress through high-stakes tests that attempted to show whether each school and school district was meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). To ensure that a school's students were meeting national standards, more emphasis was placed on academic achievement to reach AYP. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that in 2009, approximately 27% of America's high school students decided to leave school before graduation or did not finish the normal four-year rotation (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

In 2008, the Every Student Counts Act was enacted to ensure that all states use the same calculations when reporting high school dropout rates. To achieve this standard, the Obama administration placed in motion the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which was signed into

law in 2015. The ESSA legislation went into full effect in the 2017–2018 school year (United

States Department of Education, 2016). The ESSA legislation holds schools accountable for

increasing graduation rates by 3% each year. In his 2009 State of the Union Address, President

Obama set the goal of a 90% graduation rate by the year 2020 (Balfanz et al., 2014). In 1970, the

graduation rate was at 78%. According to the sweeping *A Nation at Risk* report (1983), the

graduation rate had dipped to 74% by that year. By 1994, the rate had slipped to 73% and then to

72% by the time NCLB was passed in 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The U.S.

Department of Education reported a graduation rate in 2008 of 75%, up from 72% in 2001. That

is a 3% increase in graduation rates; however, that percentage falls far short of the 90% goal set

for 2020 (Balfanz et al., 2014). The national level of graduation rates will need to rise at a rate of

5% per year to reach that 2020 goal, which will require meaningful and sustained improvement

(Balfanz et al., 2014). The United States Department of Education (2013) reported that in 2010

nearly 1.3 million high school students did not complete high school through to graduation. That

1.3 million high school students failing to complete high school equates to 337 billion dollars in

lost earnings throughout these students' lifetimes, equaling approximately $260,000 per person

in lost wages (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010). In the 2014–2015 school year, the U.S.

graduation rate was reported to be 83.2% nationally and 78.8% in the state of Georgia (United

States Department of Education, 2013). If graduation rates are increased to the proposed 2020

levels, the estimated income added to the U.S. economy could reach $310 billion. Increasing the

graduation rates and post-secondary education of male students by as little as 5% could lead to a

combined savings of $8 billion in increased wages and a reduction in costs related to crime

(Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).

The Every Student Counts Act scaled back the NCLB's government mandates and restrictions and gives school districts more leeway in managing schools and assessments. States are now able to develop and convey the goals that fit their districts' needs; however, peer reviewers are still in place to ensure those goals are being met in an ethical and mindful manner. Part of the accountability system is a test comprising key areas of reading and math. Subgroups of English-language learners, special education students, and minority subgroups are also broken down to see what each school, school system, and the state as a whole are doing to meet the needs of all students (United States Department of Education, 2016). Should a school fall to within the lowest 5% of districts levels, it would then be contacted by state and district staff to develop an evidence plan for raising performance levels. If a school continued to remain within the lower 5%, it would be in jeopardy of being taken over by the state (United States Department Education, 2016). The state of Georgia instituted the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI). This index is an annual reporting tool that currently allowed not only the state, but also school districts, community, and schools to see the education level of the students. It also provided a means by which to provide a roadmap to evaluate where students are and how to proceed to ensure that all students are learning and ready for post-secondary education. Through Metro Atlanta County Public Schools, this index was part of each school's Weight School Assessment (WSA). A school placed within the top five percent of schools were able to acquire additional monetary gain that could be utilized to purchase additional resources for the school. This CCRPI placement put added pressure on administrators to move classrooms into higher brackets of learning thus leading to additional stress put on the classroom educator.

Education reforms, bills, and laws are created to ensure that America's students perform to the ability thought necessary to meet the needs of a viable society. Nevertheless, there are

students who consistently fall behind academically and are at risk for not moving to the next grade (Balfanz, et al., 2014; Converse & Lignugaris-Kraft, 2009; Jimerson, et al., 2006; Kronholz, 2011; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Continued academic failure can place students at-risk of completing high school with their peers. The term *at-risk student* came into the educational vernacular in the 1990s. The term *high school dropout* was used for students who did not complete secondary education starting in the mid-1950s continuing on through the 1980s. "At-risk broadly refers to a person's inability to apply and adapt to his or her environment. Failure to adapt to and be successful in the classroom puts someone at-risk of developing pathology" (MacMath, Roberts, Wallace, & Chi, 2010, p. 87). Sagor and Cox (2004) defined at-risk students to include "any child who is unlikely to graduate, on schedule, with both the skills and self-esteem necessary to exercise meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure, culture, civic affairs, and inter/intra personal relationships" (p. 1). The definition of an at-risk student has been corroborated by numerous other studies (Belstio et al., 2005; Bauwens, Hourcade, 1992; Bowers, 2010; Henry et al., 2012; MacMath et al., 2010).

High stakes testing require schools to administer testing at grade levels in the state of Georgia starting at Grade 3 and continuing through Grade 8. Every public school's performance is based on the results of the test of all students ranging from special education students, minorities, low income and English language learners (ELL). Along with this accountability of schools, comes the accountability of the teachers through a new evaluation system, which ties each student's progress with their specific teacher. Teacher's year-end performance is thus tied to each teacher's evaluation that can result in a pay grade increase, bonuses, or failure to secure a contract for the next school year. Due to the increased pressure from state, county and local administrators, teachers are exiting the education field (Santos, 2012; Shelley 2012). Educators

who choose to remain in the classroom are looking for teaching practices that can help their students to be successful in all ranges of learning.

Previous research has focused on the topic of at-risk students who were in grades nine through 12 only. However, researchers have seen the need to seek indicators that would lead educators to identify potential dropouts prior to their decision to exit high school early (Belsito et al., 2005; Bradley & Lenton, 2007; Henry et al., 2012; Rush & Vitale, (1994).

Rush and Vitale's (1994) article on factors showing elementary students to be at risk identified indicators including falling behind in meeting local and state standards and "not acquiring the knowledge, skills and dispositions to become productive members of society" (p. 325). Prior to NCLB, students were only required to complete a set of courses with at least a D average, attend school for four years, and receive a high school diploma. However, at the onset of the 2000s, the era of high-stakes testing was set in motion, with high school completion dependent on a very difficult test of knowledge gained during secondary education (Musoleno & White, 2010). Previously in United States history, a high school dropout could reenter the workforce, make a successful living, and become a productive member of society. However, today's increased use of technology and need for high-level thinking and problem-solving skills impede the dropout's ability to enter life-sustaining professions. It is estimated that a high school dropout will cost society billions of dollars including, unemployment costs, subsidized housing, reoccurring incarceration, and medical benefits for and one's children (Bowers, 2010; Jimerson et al., 2006; Musoleno & White, 2010). Additionally, the children of dropouts have high rates of following the trajectories of their parents, adding to the problem, which continues to put stress and strain on society and the economic makeup of the country (Henry et al., 2012). Because of the ESSA mandate on the increase of graduation rates, education administrators and local public

school officials are held accountable for the those graduation rates. This has lead educators to search for indicators of students being at-risk.

Indicators Of Being At-Risk

Students who eventually make the decision to drop out of high school prior to graduation do not make that decision in the span of a day. Rather, research indicates that strong distress signals are sent out as early as elementary school (Neild et al., 2007; MacMath et al., 2009). By paying attention to such indicators, educators, administrators, and LEAs can begin to develop strategies within the school system and for professional development that will begin to meet these students' needs. When students leave school early, the school no longer has influence on them and can provide no more resources and services to their families (Henry et al., 2012). Identifying warning signals while students remain part of the school setting gives educators more of a chance to reach and help both the students and their families (Henry et al., 2012).

The strongest indicator of a student being at risk is having been retained at any grade level during elementary through secondary school (Bauwens & Hourcade, 1992; Bowers, 2010; Jimerson et al., 2006; Rush & Vitale, 1995: Somers, Owens & Piliawsky, 2009). Retention in the third and seventh grades has become known as an indication of high need in studies done on high school dropouts (Freeman et al., 1999). One study that looked at the records of student dropouts found that 50% had heightened difficulty in the third grade, and 90% had difficulty in the seventh grade (Freeman et al., 1999). These grades levels are high performance years, and often the strain of high-stakes testing and continuing gaps in learning lead to student performance difficulties.

Retention of any grade also leads to poorer social adjustment in the classroom. Retained students are typically older than their peers. It becomes evident to other students that the at-risk

student is repeating a grade, which leads to complex social hurdles that must be surmounted. At-risk students often feel the need to compensate for the age difference with inappropriate classroom behaviors (Bowers, 2010; Henry et al., 2012; Jimerson et al., 2006). Such negative behavior leads to behavioral consequences. The consequences then lead to negative attitudes towards school and teachers, entailing a cyclic digression that can include loss of instruction and loss of time in the classroom when the consequences mandate out-of-class penalties. Those negative behaviors often build walls between students and teachers (Belsito et al., 2005; Bowers, 2010; Henry et al., 2012; Jimerson, 2011).

This digression leads to a level of student disengagement from both the learning process and people in the education setting (Kronholz, 2011). Disengagement lays the groundwork for struggles in all academic subjects and, consequently, on standardized tests that often influence whether a student can progress to the next grade level (Balfanz et al., 2014; Belsito et al., 2005; Henry et al., 2012; Freeman et al., 1999). Student engagement has been defined "as including both school-related behaviors such as attending, studying, participating, staying out of trouble, as well as having a social connectedness to the school, and believing school is important and relevant, students believing they can succeed in school" (Orthner, et al., 2010, p. 224). Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver (2007) defined student disengagement "as the process of detaching from school, disconnecting from its norms and expectations, reducing effort and involvement at school and withdrawing from a commitment to school and to school completion" (p. 223). Disengagement becomes a normal progression to the final decision to formally drop out of school (Azzam, 2007; Balfanz et al., 2007; D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Henry et al., 2012; Simpson, Bramble & Panda, 2008). Students who are disengaged are more likely to fail academically, as well as to experience numerous negative out comes (Li & Lerner, 2011). The

failure to engage in school can lead a student to act out problem behaviors with friends who behave likewise (Wang & Fredricks, 2014), which in turn leads to alienation from school (Morrison, 2002; Wang & Fredricks, 2014). The resulting negative behavior interferes with positive interactions with teachers and families, which in turn results in a confounding of negative behaviors and disengagement (Wang & Fredricks, 2014), leading to the decision to drop out of school (Balfanz et al., 2014; Henry et al., 2012; Wang & Fredricks, 2014).

Other indicators have been found to impact the likelihood of a student being at risk of not completing high school. In a study completed within the Chicago City School District, of all students who did graduate from high school, African American students were at a rate of 52.3% with females at 59.8% and males at 44.2% (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Additionally, Latino students graduated at a total rate of 59.4% with females at 66.8% and males at 52.8%. Their White counterparts graduated at a rate of 73.5% with females at 80.3% and males at 67.3% (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Another study done across the state of Florida for the 2002–2003 school year indicated that, of the students retained in that school year, only 24% of African Americans were retained, compared with 8% of White students, and 19% of Hispanic students (Jimmerson et al. 2006).

Of those subgroups, twice as many males were retained as females. Being part of a single-parent home, having a family member living on public assistance, or having a sibling that has previously dropped out rank among the top indicators of being at risk to not complete high school (Bowers, 2010; Freeman et al., 1999; Jimerson et al., 2006). The dropout rate for students living in poverty is about 10 times greater than the rate for students living in an upper-income family (Orthner et al., 2010). Some students come from homes where the parents recall their own negative experiences as students and believe the same experiences await their children (Balfanz

et al., 2014; Belsito et al., 2005; Henry et al., 2012). Consequently, a cyclic event continues into a generational trend. Each indicator adds additional stress to students' lives that is lived out in the school setting (Henry et al., 2012). When a family has a positive outlook on education and school, that outlook then transfers over to their children. Such students remain optimistic even when hurdles are reached because their family is optimistic (Christenson, 2004). That parental support and optimism transfers into setting boundaries and rules for the school week, helping with homework and assignments, creating a positive dialogue with the school, and monitoring students' progress consistently (Christenson, 2004). When parents are engaged in the learning process, then they can help their children work through difficulties and change their inner dialogue from a negative outlook to a positive one. Just like their at-risk student, parents often have a negative dialogue from previous experiences (Balfanz, et al., 2014). The ability of educators to change that dialogue will take patience and education and will come with time and effort.

A study on the Philadelphia school system followed a cohort of students starting their sixth-grade year to determine their dropout status six years later (Neild et al. 2007). The group then went back and looked at sixth grade data for any signals that could be used as indicators. The data indicated that if a sixth grader had a failing grade in either mathematics or English, and a school attendance rate of less than 80%, this student held a much higher risk of not completing high school than their peers. Add with that behavior issues in one or more classes, the risk rose significantly. (Neild et al., 2007). A student who possessed more than one indicator had an even greater expectancy of dropping out of high school (Neild et al., 2007). Of the sixth graders whose attendance was below 80%, only 17% graduated with their peers or within one calendar year of their graduation date. A study done by Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani (2001) found

that those students on the path to dropping out had an average absence from school of 27.6 days

annually in contrast with 11.8 days by those students who were graduation bound. For students

with a failing course grade in either math or English, this became a defining predictor of dropout

status even more than low standardized test scores. The benchmark of poor behavior or a poor

conduct grade, even when it was the only factor, was a 71% predictor of failing to graduate on

time or within one year of the expected graduation date (Balfanz et al., 2014). Such continuous

minor behaviors, even when they failed to warrant office referral, were a predictor of increasing

disengagement and a lack of ensuing focus on academics (Azzam, 2007; Balfanz et al., 2007;

D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009).

There are two clear paths toward dropping out of high school or failing to graduate with

peers. One path is rooted in academic struggle, primarily in math and English. Retention in any

grade is challenging, but a course failure in middle school becomes a problem that is more

insurmountable (Balfanz et al., 2014; Belsito et al., 2005; Munoz & Dossett, 2004). The second

path is rooted in behaviors that include failure to attend school on a regular basis, and classroom

disruptions that lead to low conduct marks and more time out of the classroom (Balfanz et al.,

2007).

A necessary dialogue has commenced within the educational community on how best to

intervene with such students before they have traveled too far down the path towards becoming a

high school dropout (Belsito et al., 2005; Bornsheuer et al., 2011; Dianda, 2008; Kronholz, 2011;

Slaten et al., 2015). Should a student make it to their ninth-grade year, continue working below

grade level, and creating behavioral issues in the classroom, one has a limited chance of

following through to graduation. The move from middle school to high school is arduous. With

the lack of self-efficacy, a poor start in the middle school setting becomes catastrophic (Balfanz

et al., 2014). Identifying these students early gives both students and educators an advantage in rebuilding academic knowledge and students' feelings about school and education.

Needs Of The At-Risk Student

At-risk students have spent years consistently losing confidence in their capability for future success (Knesting, 2008) and, therefore, have a pronounced need for a strong relationship with someone in the school setting. Studies have shown that when a student feels that they are part of a caring and supportive interpersonal environment at school, they have a heightened level of positive feelings towards academics and satisfaction in learning (Klem & Connell, 2004; Knesting, 2008). Marzano (2003) called this relationship the keystone to an effective student–teacher relationship. If a teacher has a positive relationship with a student, then that student is more apt to accept the rules and procedures of the classroom along with any disciplinary actions that need to take place (Marzano, 2003, p. 91).

A relationship with someone in the school system who believes that they can succeed has also emerged as a critical factor supporting at-risk student's ability to complete high school (Knesting, 2008). The simple act of listening to students and about their fears and creating an environment where they begin to feel safe sharing, where they will not be taunted or laughed at, and where someone cares about them outside the classroom, meets students' primary needs (Bauwens & Hourcade, 1992; Belsito et al., 2005; Buckley et al., 2003). When a teacher asks about life outside school or takes an active part in outside activities, the conversations then begins to build a sense of authenticity of the relationship being developed between the educator and the student (Slaten et al., 2015). The student can then begin to see that education is for them and not separate from them (Bauwens & Hourcade, 1992; Bradley & Lenton, 2007; Jimerson, 2001; Knesting, 2008; Slaten et al., 2015).

The impact of a meaningful relationship with someone within the school setting allows students to have a sense of belonging at school (Slaten et al., 2015). In a study by Slaten et al. a(2015), at-risk youth who participated in the study considered establishing genuine relationships to be a key to continued education success. Those at-risk youth felt judged by peers and school personnel alike. The study found that students who felt no personal attachment to someone within the school building creates a significant obstacle to becoming engaged in education (Slaten et al., 2015). Student–teacher relationships help improve classroom behavior by reducing aggression and increasing rule-abiding behavior (Alderman & Green, 2011; Murray & Pianta, 2007). Students invest both academically and behaviorally in teachers whom they perceive to care enough about their education to help them succeed. (Rubie-Davies, Peterson, Irving, Widdowson, & Dixon, 2010).

It is equally important that at-risk students have access to what is called a "highly qualified and effective" teacher. According to Strong (2007), a highly qualified and effective teacher combines "the essence of good classroom management, organization, effective planning and the personal characteristics of a relational individual" (p. 17). This can be especially true when working with academically disadvantaged students. Strong's (2010) meta-analysis *Effective Teachers=Student Achievement: What Research Says* stated that students influence their own achievement in the classroom by about 50%. Other factors that influence student's success includes aptitude, motivation, effort, and prior achievement in other grades (Strong, 2010). Home life follows, having a 5%–10% influence, including family support, parental involvement, attitude toward education, and economic advantages and disadvantages. The school has the same 5%–10% influence as the home, including resources, facilities, and the learning culture present in the building itself. The principal or local school administrator would be

included within the school setting data. Peers have an equal 5%–10% influence. However, teachers account for approximately 30% of the influence on student achievement. Thus, apart from the students themselves, their teachers account for the biggest variance in student achievement (Strong, 2010).

Strong (2010) found that, in studies involving upper elementary and middle level students who started the school year at approximately the same level, given the variance between a highly effective teacher and a less effective teacher after just one year of instruction, students with a highly effective reading teacher gained on average 18 points on test scores. Moreover, the students who had a less effective teacher lost approximately 20 points on average, going from a 40th percentile to a 20th percentile. Likewise, following one year of instruction in math, students starting at the 50th percentile who had a highly effective teacher reached the 70th percentile. However, the students starting the year at the 50th percentile who had a less effective teacher declined to the 39th percentile (Strong, 2010). Teachers are thus the strongest influence on achievement besides students themselves.

Strong (2010) further stated that "an effective teacher is effective with all students, regardless of their socioeconomic statue background; conversely, an ineffective teacher is ineffective with all students" (p. 41). Should students have a highly effective teacher for a sequence of three years, they could expect to gain 52 to 54 percentile points on standardized testing. However, should a student have two years with a low quality teacher and one year with a highly effective teacher, a gain of only 13 percentile points could be expected. Marzano (2003) stated that a "most effective" teacher could make a 53 percentage-point difference in a student. The cumulative effect over three years is an 83% percentile gain with a 'low effective' teacher having just a 29 percentile-point gain" (p. 73).

A highly effective teacher not only knows his or her content area and is well experienced and versed in that content (Balfanz et al., 2007; Strong, 2010) but also takes that content and connects it to real world situations, breaking down the material into bites that reach the students where they are, making the learning relevant to students' lives and outlook (Archer, 2010; Bridgeleand, Balfanz, Moore, & Frian 2010; MacMath et al., 2009; Orthner et al., 2010; Thornton & Sanchez, 2010). A highly effective teacher also has high self-efficacy, leading them to believe that they can make a difference in students' lives (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

Through daily interactions with students, teachers repeated convey evaluations of work and behavior, both directly and indirectly (Bandura, 1997). There is a power of "casual evaluations to shape students' efficacy beliefs" (Bandura, 1997, p. 225). Likewise, interactions with peers provide both negative and positive feedback. Exposure to peers modeling cognitive skills boosts children's sense of efficacy and achievement more than viewing teacher modeling. That positive modeling of both the educator and the peer student can influence the at-risk student to move closer to desired classroom expectations and grade level expectations (Bandura, 1997). However, awareness of gaps in achievement can also lead to anxiety and frustration. The teacher thus needs to bring students' focus to what is important and how they are progressing with their particular learning tasks and goals (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kaftan et al., 2006).

At-risk students need to begin to build self-efficacy skills to promote a healthy outlook on their educational career. Self-efficacy is a key component of social cognitive theory. Bandura (1997) defines self-efficacy as one's beliefs about one's capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect one's life. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave (Bandura, 1997). Students

who have strong doubts about their capabilities, which in turn keeps them from taking on more difficult tasks, cannot move through learning units with a positive outcome (Williams & Williams, 2010). The teacher as a change agent can be that modem that links the need for education to that of the desire to education (Bandura, 1997).

Another term used is resiliency or "the ability to cope with stress; a positive capacity of an individual to respond under pressure" (Thornton & Sanchez, 2010, p. 456). This resiliency or the belief in oneself having the ability to cope with classroom productivity leads to self-efficacy. Without the proper support of key people in the educational spectrum, at-risk students will become overwhelmed, lose motivation, and ultimately, give up on school (Thornton & Sanchez, 2010: MacMath et al., 2009).

There has been a shift in the way educators and researchers alike delve into the subject of student learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Instead of looking at learning as a means by which a student acquires knowledge, researchers now look at learning "as a process whereby students actively construct their own knowledge and skills" (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006 p. 199). Previously, terms such as "student-centered learning" were used to describe a way of guiding students through the learning process. Over the last two decades, a "parallel shift in relation to formative assessment and feedback" has begun to emerge (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 200).

Formative Assessment

The term *formative assessment* was coined by D. R. Sadler as a means of changing the emphasis from a teacher-directed measure to a student–teacher shared activity (Brookhart et al., 2009). When Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues developed the progression of learning levels from basic to higher-order thinking in 1971, it allowed for the provision of formative

assessments to ensure that students have the appropriate level of understanding for where they are in the learning process (Brookhart et al., 2009; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

A process of breaking down the material can be seen in what is called formative assessment, "that is, that aspect of assessment that supports rather than certifies student's learning acquisition" (Morrissette, 2011, p. 247). The breaking down the material lends to process of taking learning goal and backing down the learning into manageable steps so as to see if the student is gaining necessary knowledge in order to move onto the next learning objective. Ideally, the feedback from formative assessment affords at-risk students the opportunity to step back and master material that was lost during their educational journey and to pick it back up in steps, allowing them to start a new inner dialogue that can change the landscape of their education (Brookhart, 2008; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Morriessette, 2011; William, 2011). When used properly, "formative assessment is one of the most powerful tools available to guide classroom decisions" (Black & William, 2010, p. 81).

The issuance of assessments is designed to "provide feedback on how the student performed after instruction" (Fisher & Frey, 2015, p. 5). Butler and Winnie (1995) provided the following description of the value of feedback: Feedback is information with which a learner can confirm, add to, overwrite, tune, or restructure information in memory, whether that information is domain knowledge, meta-cognitive knowledge, beliefs about self and tasks, or cognitive tactics and strategies. Brookhart (2008) defined teacher feedback as "input that, together with the student's own internal input, will help the student decide where they are in regard to the learning goals they need or want to meet and what they will tackle next" (p. 25). Such feedback must be connected to learning in context and addressed to that context in a personal manner that addresses students' needs. Feedback on its own gives little or no meaningful help to at-risk

students (Clark, 2012; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kaftan et al., 2006; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Previously, teachers provided information, students took that information, and teaching was deemed successful based on an assessment given at the end of the unit of study. The spirit of formative decision-making is that the teacher can make decisions based on and in response to early feedback, and adjustments made to the learning phases can dramatically improve the outcome of the at-risk student long term (Dorn, 2010). Dorn (2010) suggested that teachers have structured formative assessments and respond by intentionally basing instructional decisions that would allow students with low achievement to see a progression in learning and in turn success in acquiring education skills. This cyclical process of assessing and teaching to gaps can reduce a large portion of the student's achievement gaps.

John Hattie (2009) synthesized more than 500 meta-analyses involving 180,000 studies to determine the effect of feedback on student learning. Those studies covered the experiences of approximately 20 to 30 million students with various influences on student achievement. The analysis included numerous means of giving feedback and various forms of feedback, including cues, reinforcement, video or audio prompts, computer-assisted feedback, goals, student evaluations, correctives, delayed versus immediate feedback, rewards, punishments, praise, and programmed feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The analysis included more "than 100 factors influencing educational achievement and covered various aspects of those typically identified, such as attributes of schools, homes, students, teachers, and curricula" (Hattie, 2008, p. 52). The average effect of schooling was 0.40 and provided the benchmark for influences on students' learning and achievement. Feedback was in the top 10% of the larger influences on achievement with 0.95. Rewards and teacher praise had a mere 0.12 effect, with programmed instruction

having a negative affect at -0.04. The greatest effect was seen in special education students at 1.24.

Students need to be taught the language and mindset of feedback and how to take that feedback and create goals for moving forward. The mere transference of information through a learning assignment neglects the importance of developing the means through which students can develop what Bandura termed self-efficacy or self-regulation of learning (Nicol & Mcfarlane-Dick, 2006). "Research shows that feedback both regulates and is regulated by motivational beliefs. External feedback has been shown to influence how students feel about themselves (positively and negatively) and what and how they learn" (Nicol & Mcfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 201). Often, at-risk students believe that education is important for every individual, but perhaps they are not qualified to obtain such an education (Knesting, 2008). At-risk students' lack of a sense of self-efficacy can be overcome by changing their inner dialogue from negative to positive. Providing a positive environment in which to develop long-term resiliency and self-efficacy traits will allow students to find a level of success (MacMath et al., 2010; Thornton, 2010).

The formative assessment process. Effective teaching not only involves dispensing knowledge and information to students but also accessing their understanding of this information to ensure that it is understood and can be used in various ways including higher-level thinking (Hattie, 2008; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; William, 2011).

The formative assessment process allows the educator and learner to move through four levels of learning. Hattie and Timperely (2007) distinguish those four levels of feedback as (a) about the task, (b) about the processing of the task, (c) as self-regulation and, (d) about the self as a person. These levels provide students the opportunity to receive information from the teacher,

learn how to access and evaluate the information, and move forward to the next level or go back and assume the responsibility of gaining that information (Bell & Cowie, 2001; Brookhart et al., 2008; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). At-risk students come to a course or school year with the end goal in sight and become overwhelmed by the process. Breaking learning situations down into manageable bites through feedback so they can see success can help change their inner dialogue and allow them to succeed for the first time in an education setting (Hattie, 2008; MacMath et al., 2009; Thornton, 2010).

The first form of feedback is asking, "Where are you going?" This provides the teacher an opportunity to see exactly where the at-risk student is in relation to the information or skills they need to achieve a task. To have a teacher provide basic and defining feedback provides the at-risk student the opportunity to engage and make goals for where they are rather than for where they should be and to accept that feedback leads to becoming self-regulated learners. Feedback allows learners to reduce their learning gap and to move forward with an achievable goal in sight (Hattie, 2008). Specific feedback needs to be given to the student on the related task especially in a timely manner (Fisher & Frey, 2015). The feedback needs to be specific and to point out to how the work was effective or how the work could be made more effective. Feedback that contains personal judgments on students' efforts is the least effective for students' long-term success (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Nicol et al., 2006). Feedback on how they can change or look at something in light of a particular task provides the greatest growth advantage (Fisher & Frey, 2015). Likewise, vague writing such as "good job" or "way to go" does not show what was particularly effective or what needs to change (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Feedback on the processing of a task or that explains how one is doing allows students the opportunity see what they have done and how to move on (Kaftan et al., 2006; Nicol &

Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; William, 2011). Feedback also provides the teacher the opportunity to find learning gaps and approach the next step considering what the students' need, not where they should be on the educational continuum. The feedback process allows students to see the learning in steps and figure out the reasons for their previous errors (Doubet, 2012). The continual process of formative assessment and feedback, once again, moves the learner from an external learner to an internal learner and begins the quest on development of self-efficacy skills.

The at-risk student has had years of inner dialogue leading to a low self-efficacy perspective. The use of self-regulation or using of one's own thoughts to determine required knowledge can be hugely lacking in at-risk students (Locke & Latham, 2002; MacMath et al., 2010; Thornton, 2010). "Self-regulation involves interplay between commitment, control, and confidence. It addresses the way students' monitor, direct, and regulation actions toward a learning goal" (Hattie, 2008, p. 45). What effective feedback communicates to a student is a sense that the teacher cares about one's progress and is invested in the learning process (Brookhart et al., 2008; Hattie, 2008). At-risk learners have only modest experience with strategies that involve self-regulation. They typically depend on external feedback, which plays into their negative self-feedback and extends to their view of education (Brookhart et al., 2008; Hattie, 2008).

Four extensive literature reviews support the claim that formative strategies that include questioning techniques along with student self-assessment, peer assessment, and feedback that does have a grade attached to the assignment can more than double the speed by which a student can master material (Bell & Cowie, 2001; Black & William, 1998; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Volante & Beckett, 2011). Grading the formative assessment with the summative assessment in mind can lead to negative feedback (Bell & Cowie, 2001; Volante & Beckett, 2011). When a

student sees a grade, they see it as the final reflection of their work on the assignment (Hattie, 2008; William, 2011). Even when detailed feedback is given to a student along with a grade, the grade becomes the focus, not the feedback. When the grade is lower than expected, students can shut down and begin that inner dialogue that negates efforts to build self-efficacy. Instead, when students receive only feedback, they concentrate on the feedback and what is being said (William, 2011).

Teachers are compelled by school systems to provide grades for parents to communicate success or failure of the student on what is being done in the classroom. A student who gets a B and then moves to an A on a particular assignment is often seen as successful, but when the student who originally receives a failing score moves to a C, he or she has shown more growth. However, their grades do not reflect this tremendous growth (William, 2011). Even the student may not see the growth, but rather compare the C to the A obtained by the other student.

Assessments need to be designed to support learning and to give feedback on the level at which a particular student is working, not in comparison with the classroom norm (Brookhart et al., 2009; Hattie, 2008; Kaftan et al., 2006; William, 2011). Teachers can collect evidence of the skills obtained that comport to the standards covered over the grading period. The evidence collected can be included in the grade book as either 0 for no mastery, 1 for some evidence, or 2 for strong evidence (William, 2011, p. 122). While covering all aspects of the standards over a grading period, each category can be divided and graded in this way. "Perhaps the most profound impact of such a grading system is that it pushes both the teacher and student into thinking about longer-term learning" (William, 2011, p. 123). This evidence should tell the teacher whether a student is ready for the summative assessment of the learning unit. Should the student not perform on the summative assessment as predicted, the teacher could speak with the student to

seek disconnects between learning and the assessment results. The student then sees the teacher

as invested in one's learning and not just the class as a whole (Kaftan et al., 2006; Nicol &

Mcfarlane-Dick, 2006). This continues the conversation between two invested individuals that

can propel the learner forward. Clymer and William (2007) found that when this system of

grading was used in an eighth grade science classroom, students became more engaged and

began monitoring their own learning progress. The students asked more questions of their

teacher and of their peers. When the end assessments were made, traditional scores rose

significantly.

The needs of middle school at-risk students are different from students at the elementary

level or even at the high school level. These students are truly in the middle of their educational

careers and are on the verge of moving forward or falling decidedly further behind in the system.

The middle school concept was derived to meet the needs of the middle learner. It is therefore

important to understand the middle school concept and make up and how it pertains to at-risk

students.

Middle School

The public school system of the United States was created so each student could have a

free education. However, there was no master plan for that educational system, and it has been a

work in progress from its inception in the 1800s to the present day United States Department of

Education. The first schools were based on an elementary, secondary, and post-secondary plan,

although each branch was developed independently (Lounsbury, 2009). Initially the schools went

with an eight-four plan, meaning that students would stay in the elementary setting for eight

years and then move to high school for four years. In 1909, the first junior high school was

developed in Columbus, Ohio, and adopted the six-three-three plan of six years at the elementary

level, three at the junior high level, and three at the high school level. This plan gained influence,

and in 1946, the six-three-three plan became the predominant educational pattern in the United

States (Lounsbury, 2009).

The middle school movement grew out of the frustration of a core group of educators

with the junior high norm prior to and extending into the 1960s. The junior high model was a

smaller version of the high school model, in which students moved from academic area to

academic area in grades seven through nine. Each teacher had expertise in a particular area of

study and worked in academic departments. The teachers shared relatively few students in

common, so if problems arose, they were dealt with in the context of a particular subject. In

1963, William Alexander first used the term middle school while speaking at Cornell University.

The need for this particular group of students to be viewed and taught differently made perfect

sense to these educators. If students needed to be in a high school setting, then why not place

those students in a high school. The educators, however, saw that the students at this middle

level of education had needs that differed from the elementary level and the secondary level.

Those specific needs are the academic development but also the social and emotional

development of these middle level students. By concentrating only on academic development, a

huge part of students' development was being ignored, hampering not only their educational

development but also their development as a whole person (Greene, Caskey, Musser, Samek, &

Olson, 2008; Lounsbury, 2009; McEwin & Greene, 2011).

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s laid the foundation for social change that

allowed such educational innovations to take place. In 1965, the number of middle schools was

near 500 and growing. By the 1970s, that number increased to over 2,000 schools aligning

themselves with the middle school model. In 1983, the five-three-four structure of organization,

which placed students in grades six through eight in a setting known as a middle school, became the predominate pattern (Lounsbury, 2009; McEwin & Greene, 2011). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there are currently over 13,000 middle schools in the United States.

The formation of middle school was based on the needs of adolescents falling between ages 10 and 15 (Greene et al., 2008). This age is marked by a rapidly changing persona. The changes mark the end of childhood and the beginning of adolescence. The typical middle school student can vary in height and maturity, but also in one's ever-changing brain development, leading to new insights on how to effectively meet the needs of this age group (Lounsbury, 2009; McEwin & Greene, 2011). Changes in middle school students' thinking becomes evident in questions showing that their worldview is separating from that of their parents and into a more individualistic belief system (National Middle School Association, 2003). The children who leave elementary school are not the teens who enter high school. These children grow both in physical form and in mental concepts, values, and beliefs. Parents are many times in flux as to how to maneuver through this period. It is because of this ever-changing period that the middle school was developed (Hill & Tyson, 2009; McEwin & Greene, 2011).

Middle school development focused on three main factors: First, an educational setting was needed that specially addressed the needs of adolescents. Second, the school setting needed to provide a stable environment that would provide a smooth transition from the nurturing elementary level to the middle school level and eventually to the high school setting. Finally, a setting was needed for the implementation of innovated practices that would meld with the changing world these teens experience (George, Lawrence, & Bushnell, 1998; McEwin & Greene, 2011; Ryan, Kuusinen, & Bedoya-Skoog, 2015).

Middle school teaching teams are created with an educational focus. Standards are in place for academic reasons; however, other needs do not just end with the standards (McEwin & Greene, 2011; Williams, Rosen, & Kirst, 2011). Maintaining emotional and social stability while moving from the more restrictive environment of elementary school can be difficult for students at this age (Orthner et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2015). These needs can be met with the key component of the success of the middle school concept: the creation of small communities within the school (Greene et al., 2011). These small communities consist of a team of teachers who have a similar interest in the students and can work together to meet any needs that arise (McEwin & Greene, 2011). When a student shows difficulty in academics or behavior, the team of teachers identify the problem and start to determine the reasons for it before it takes a toll on the student's academic record through failing grades or losing classroom instruction time (Marzano, 2003; McEwin & Greene, 2011; Slaten et al., 2015). Teachers working together to find the effective means by which to work with a student as a collective approach can be a stimulus that can help move the student to success sooner rather than later. With at-risk students, finding a face in the education setting that they know is an advocate for their best interests can be starting point that keeps them engaged in school and on the road to gaining missed learning (Alderman & Green, 2011; Buckley et al., 2003; Klem & Connell, 2004). Finding four individuals who work together in a caring atmosphere can lead to a positive outcome to create change.

The middle school curriculum not only promotes academic standards, but also recognizes the specific needs of students (National Middle School Association, 2010; Prosser, McCallum, Milroy, Comber, & Nixon, 2008; William et al., 2011). According to the National Middle School Association (2010), educators who value the approach of interdisciplinary studies and integrative

learning and base lesson off of pedagogical research-based information show strong growth within their classrooms. Those educators who value the student as a whole being sensitive to individuality and varied learning styles can see student respond positively to learning in the classroom (National Middle School Association, 2010).

The curriculum is often developed as units of study or projects that involve cross-curricular studies linking together not only standards-based teaching but also topics relevant to both the student and teacher (National Middle School Association, 2010). Because of middle grade students drive toward independence, providing varied opportunities for them to make choices based on the curriculum and goal setting based on their individual needs help them to develop as learners and individuals (Greene et al., 2011; McEwin & Greene, 2011; National Middle School Association, 2010). The learning goals set through the formative assessment process not only give credence to middle school learners but also build the self-efficacy needed to make them productive long-term learners who reach graduation and have post-secondary accomplishments (Henry et al., 2012; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Thornton & Sanchez, 2010).

The middle school movement has come under fire in the last decade for being out of date and lacking effectiveness. In 1989, *Turning Points—Preparing American Youth for the 21ˢᵗ Century* was published; the project was supported by the Carnegie Corporation. The project interviewed experts in the field of education and examined the emotional and educational needs of adolescents. The project clearly followed the direction of the middle school movement by advocating small communities of learners, teaching core educational standards, empowering classroom teachers to make decisions based on students' educational needs, and staffing schools with teachers who were trained experts in dealing with young adolescents. Finally, the project

determined that schools should develop a strong home–school connection to engage parents in the learning process. Ten years later, the first *Turning Points* (Jackson & Andrews, 2000) was followed with a decade-long study of the middle school movement and what worked and what did not. That publication, *Turning Points 2000*, once again provided educators, policymakers, administrators, and community leaders research on what the goals of middle schools should be. Those goals, once again, targeted and reiterated the needs discussed in the previous publication. According to the findings, the best practices of effective middle school education include staff members who are trained in teaching middle school age children, teachers who are highly qualified in their area of instruction and maintain strong relationships with students in the community of learning. Additionally, the use of varied instructional methods that target students' learning needs, that provides a sense of the student feeling both physically and emotionally safe within the academic setting is valuable. Also, a shared school governance that involves both teachers and administrative staff to make informed decisions about school policy, and a home–school–community connection that supports students' learning.

A large-scale study of middle grade practices by Kirst and Balfanz titled *Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades: Why Some Schools Do Better* (2010) sought to determine why some middle schools met students' academic needs more than other schools having a similar student makeup: low socioeconomic background, ethnic makeup, English language learners. The economic downturn of the previous few years led school systems to look at what worked while cutting school budgets drastically. The study covered 204,000 students across 303 schools in California and included scores of benchmark tests and surveys of superintendents, administrators, and teachers. The findings showed that the strongest practice emphasized a strong culture of improving academic outcomes on every level. When the overriding emphasis on

student academic achievement comes from the top down, the student is the one who benefits. In schools that have district-level expectations of student's achievement and make policies accordingly, those expectations reach down to the school level where decisions are made by administrators that in turn include expectations of student achievement. Teachers then look at practices that will bring more success and lead to student achievement on benchmarks. Holding the adults accountable for student outcomes seemed to ensure that efforts would be made to ensure that student learning was taking place on all levels. This one domain of the study had the greatest influence on student outcomes (Kirst et al., 2010). This certainly did not excuse the students or their families. In fact, the study found that when students' parents were more actively involved in the process and were informed of their children's progress or lack of progress, it led to a stronger outlook on educational outcomes.

The study had the following finding: curriculum and instruction need to be closely aligned with state standards, particularly in math and language arts (Greene, et al., 2011). Assessments, both formative and summative, need to be used to improve teachers' instruction (McEwin & Greene, 2011) with the student in mind, so they can be proactive in intervening with students in need. Highly effective teaching practice forms a strong lynch pin of student outcomes (Greene et al., 2011; McEwin & Greene, 2011; Strong, 2010; Trish et al., 2011).

One finding of the study was that the environment of the school and the organization of time instruction did not show a strong improvement in student outcomes (Greene et al., 2011; McEwin & Greene, 2011). Students wanted to go to the building and classroom where they felt valued and where they felt the adults wanted to be there. For at-risk students, knowing someone wants to be there for them and to be part of the solution rather than moving them aside, becomes

a dynamic in their educational outcomes (Buckley et al., 2003; Greene et al., 2011; Jimmerson et al., 2006; Klem & Connell, 2004; MacMath et al., 2009; McEwin & Greene, 2011).

Summary

Chapter Two included a discussion of Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory as a theoretical framework for this research study. The education needs of all students are important in the classroom; however, at-risk students also have basic needs that must be met for them to succeed in the educational setting. In the middle school classroom, teachers need to be aware of those basic needs. Formative assessment places the decision-making process not only in the hands of the classroom teacher to develop learning opportunities that focus on the student's level of content understanding, but also helps to enable the at-risk student to begin to develop necessary skills to further their education. Similarly, an understanding of formative assessment and how the feedback progression can be used as a tool to meet students' needs can help alleviate the added stress of end-of-grade tests. The literature proposes that formative assessments should be increased into the middle school classroom (Hattie, 2008). Other scholars note that students who are not ready at the end of middle school will likely not be successful in the high school setting (Slaten et al., 2015). To date, no research has connected the needs of at-risk students with the benefits of formative assessment. Also, no research has been done on middle school teachers' perceptions of at-risk students in conjunction with formative assessments. Tying together these important topics can offer new information on at-risk students and allow teachers to see how practices that are already in place can be an immediate and cost-effective means to reach all their students.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand middle school teachers' perceptions of the impact of formative assessment on the needs of at-risk students at a Metro Atlanta middle school. Chapter Three of the present study begins with a discussion of the research design and the research questions. Chapter Three also explains the study setting and describes the study participants; the research procedures and my role as the researcher are also described. In addition, all data collection tools were delineated and the data analysis method, which follows Moustakas' (1994) model of transcendental phenomenology, is explained. Finally, the chapter includes a discussion of the study's trustworthiness and ethical considerations, before concluding with a comprehensive chapter summary.

Design

This was a qualitative study using the transcendental approach, which Moustakas describes as "a design for acquiring and collecting data that explicated the essences of human experience" (1994, p. 26). Although the term *phenomenology* was used by Kant as early as 1765, Moustakas (1994) grounds his theory in the work of Edmund Husserl who "developed a philosophic system rooted in subjective openness, a radical approach to science" (p. 24). Moustakas states, "The process leads to an unfolding of phenomenal consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one's immediate awareness and experience" (1994, p. 25). Creswell (2013) further explains that the focus of phenomenology is on the wholeness of an experience and in bringing the essences of an experience to the forefront. In addition, the transcendental *epoche* approach, meaning to refrain from judgment, requires researchers to set aside prejudgment to the extent possible. By viewing the data through a

nonjudgmental eye, it can be seen fresh and the researcher is open to see the results in its entirety
(Creswell, 2013).

      A qualitative study allows for the deep examination of a topic under the lens of a careful
examiner. In addition, a qualitative design seeks to focus on the views a group of individuals had
in connection with a particular problem. Specifically, a phenomenological research study seeks
to discover the lived experience of individuals who have experienced a problem or situation
(Creswell, 2013). With regard to teachers working with at-risk students, no research to date has
listened to the voices of classroom teachers and their perspectives on the use of formative
assessments. Studies have quantitatively shown the impact of relationships between teachers and
at-risk students and of formative assessments. However, no qualitative studies have listened to
the voices of teachers to learn about their experiences using formative assessment to meet the
needs of the at-risk student. Therefore, in this study, the experience of the teacher who not only
works with the at-risk student—but also works with formative assessments—was viewed and
studied following the transcendental approach described by Moustakas (1994) as "a design for
acquiring and collecting data that explicated the essences of the human experience" (p. 26).
Through the nonjudgmental eye of the researcher and stepping back with that fresh eye to view
that true lived experience to gain the understanding of what the two functions of formative
assessment and the needs of the at-risk student coincide within the classroom in the lived
experience of the participants revealed. It is that lived experience that gives the study its value
and form.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were:

RQ1: What are teachers' perceptions of the needs of at-risk students?

RQ2: How do middle school teachers perceive formative assessment in general?

RQ3: How do teachers perceive formative assessments impact the needs of at-risk students?

Setting

The setting of this study was a school district located in Metro Atlanta, Georgia. Metro Atlanta County Public Schools (pseudonym) is the largest school district in Georgia. More than 178,000 students were enrolled during the 2016–2017 school year. Metro Atlanta Public Schools has 136 schools, 79 of which are elementary schools, 28 are middle schools, and 21 are high schools.

Georgia Middle School (pseudonym) has approximately 1500 students and has met AYP for the past seven years. The demographics of the students are as follows: 77.9% White, 17.8 Black/non-Hispanic, 1.5% Hispanic, 1.7% Asian, and .2% American Indian. The school has a 43% free and reduced lunch rate, with the county's overall poverty rate being 31% (Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2016). On the Weighted School Assessment by the county that ranks schools on the basis of teacher/student growth, local school goals as well as school climate surveys taken from students, teachers and parents, the middle school that is the setting for the study dropped from 14th in the county to 28th, putting it at risk of higher scrutiny. Five years previously, the school had been third in the county according to the Weighted School Assessment. The school has an administrative team of one principal and four assistant principals.

The state of Georgia and Metro Atlanta County Schools has placed an emphasis on formative assessment that also includes two years of mandatory professional development courses for teachers. The administration had been clear that they wanted to see the use of formative assessments in the classroom during their observations. All curriculum areas have been instructed to build a system of formative assessment within their content area. This background on formative assessment made this site perfect for this study. All educators at the school who were there for the last three years had a working knowledge of formative assessments and the steps to follow in the process.

Participants

The participants in this study were 12 middle school teachers who taught students at-risk of falling behind academically. In a transcendental phenomenological study, it is important to gather participants who have experienced the same phenomenon. In my study, the phenomenon was the use of formative assessments with at-risk students. In addition, the participants in the study "need to be carefully chosen to be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon in question, so that the researcher, in the end, can forge a common understanding" (Creswell, 2013, p. 62). By interviewing a number of participants, "we can connect their experiences and check the comments of participants against those of others" (Seidman, 2013, p. 27). The participants of the study were selected from a pool of middle school teachers who had been teaching for at least five years in the public-school setting and had at least five years working experience at the study site. Teachers at the study site had received extensive professional development on formative assessment over the past two years. Teachers who came to the study site without the extensive formative assessment training were not considered for the study. Additionally, participants were selected from the four academic content areas of language arts,

social studies, science, and math. Students who are were the formative assessment program were selected at random through a computerized program called Synergy and placed with teachers with whom they had no previous experience. The study site follows the typical middle school concept and included teams of grade six through eight students distributed among four academic teachers. The study participants were selected from the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade levels to gain a diversity of perspectives from teachers who had experienced the study phenomenon. Participant selection criteria were not limited by race or gender in order to get a wide array of experiences from the participants.

The teachers had access to grades and test scores from previous years and were encouraged by the administration to review permanent files. Each teacher could view the following criteria: had failed a portion of the Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) in either reading or math; had failing grades; worked below grade level in academic subjects; and, received previous scores on the Georgia Milestones State Test or End of Grade Test. By viewing these different points of data, teachers had a broader working view of the student that was coming to their classroom.

<div align="center">**Procedures**</div>

Following a successful proposal defense, and after gaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the collection of data commenced. Participants were sent an email soliciting their participation in the study along with the consent form (Appendix G) and questionnaire (Appendix C). To indicate their willingness to participate, the participants were asked to complete the attached consent form and screening questionnaire. Completed items were instructed to be returned to the researcher via school email within one week. If the candidate desired not to participate, no response was necessary.

To protect the participants' identity, pseudonyms were assigned. After completion of the questionnaire, participants who showed limited knowledge of formative assessments and lack of use in the classroom was removed from the lists of candidates. From the list of candidates, a final list was garnered to move forward with the study. Each participant then took part in a face-to-face recorded interview. The interviews were held in each participant's classroom to give a sense of familiarity and comfort to each participant. Finally, six participants came together in a focus group that was video and audio recorded. The focus group took place in a staff development room at the study site.

Data collection, transcription, and analysis were ongoing. The data was analyzed using the phenomenological analysis method created by Moustakas (1994), in which each interview or questionnaire was read through in its entirety in order to first get a full grasp of the data. Next, the documents were read again while I made notations in the margins of the documents. These notations were helpful in developing the emerging themes of the study.

Trustworthiness was verified through achieving triangulation of the data using multiple sources, member checking, and peer checking. Each participant's identity was kept confidential using pseudonyms, and by keeping the location of the study confidential to protect their privacy. Finally, all information gained through the study process was and will be kept in a secure location at my home and will only be used for further research.

The Researcher's Role

I was perfectly suited as a human instrument for this research study. I firmly believe that God called me to the teaching profession and gave me a heart for the at-risk student. I view each student as being placed in my classroom for a reason and not by chance. It is up to me to reach out to each student and motivate him or her to learn and think.

My educational background includes a degree in middle grades education from Georgia College and State University. I also hold a master's degree in teaching and learning from Walden University. My specialist degree is in brain-based learning from Nova Southeastern University. I have been teaching at the middle school level for 23 years, entirely in the state of Georgia, and primarily at the seventh and eighth grade levels, concentrating on language arts and social studies.

The past eight years of teaching have been the impetus for this study. I have a collegial relationship with each potential participant. I hold each of them in high esteem as people and educators. However, my role as a researcher in the qualitative process included the challenge of bracketing my own background, opinions, and beliefs from the study. In this phenomenological study it was important for the voices of teachers who work with at-risk students on a daily basis to come to the forefront. It was their voices and their lived experiences that were the guiding presence in this study. As Creswell (2007) noted, the interest of the researcher is null. Or, as Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004) observed, the phenomenological process allows the stories to come from the participants and not from the researcher.

Data Collection

Data was collected for this transcendental phenomenological study using a questionnaire, individual interviews, and a focus group. The use of multiple data sources achieved triangulation of data and provided a more accurate description of the lived experiences of the teachers working with at-risk students and the impact of formative assessments on the needs of those students. The process of data collection in a transcendental phenomenological study goes far beyond the listing of methods; it is a development through which the meaning behind a phenomenon is gathered and how best to explain the lived experience of the participants is determined (Creswell, 2013).

Therefore, in this study the following methods of data collection were used based on the transcended phenomenological approach:

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used to collect demographic information on each potential participant including their background knowledge on the use of formative assessments within the middle school classroom. It was important that each participant met the selection criteria, had a working knowledge of formative assessment, and used formative assessments within the classroom on a regular basis. Questionnaires were emailed to each participant. Participants were asked to complete and return the questionnaire to me within one week. Although the questionnaire was used as a screening tool, it was also useful in giving clarity to the other data collected through interviews and the focus group. A sample of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix C.

Interviews

Moustakas (1994) stated, "The phenomenological interview involves an informal interactive process and utilizes open ended comments and questions" (p. 114). In addition, interviewing is considered one of the basic modes of inquiry that shows to recount the lived experiences of the participants (Seidman, 2013). Finally, the purpose of an interview is not to "test a hypothesis but rather the understanding of the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2013, p. 9). Therefore, the interview questions for my study were developed from a close examination of the literature related not only to at-risk middle school students but also formative assessment and its practice (Fisher & Frey, 2015; Hattie, 2008; Kaftan et al., 2006; Morrissette, 2011). An initial interview was done with each

participant. Each participant was interviewed in his or her classroom at the study site and the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Those questions were as follows:

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. What is your definition of an at-risk student?

2. How do you believe a student becomes at-risk?

3. What is your understanding of formative assessment?

4. What aspect of formative assessment do you find beneficial?

5. What aspect of formative assessment do you find negative?

6. How do you perceive formative assessments impact the academic growth of middle school students?

7. How do you perceive the formative assessment process impacts the at-risk student?

8. How do you perceive the formative assessment process impacts a student's academic success?

9. What other thoughts do you have on the subject of at-risk students?

10. What other thoughts do you have on the subject of formative assessments?

Questions one and two were developed specifically for the at-risk student and correspond to research question one. Questions one and two and were developed to gain an understanding of the participants' understanding and views on at-risk students. Questions one and two were also developed to be straight-forward in order to facilitate understanding. Furthermore, questions one and two were designed to allow the participants to think about at-risk students in general terms, how they become at-risk, and how their academic needs are fulfilled.

Questions three through six sought to discover the participants' perspectives and knowledge of formative assessments and are aligned with research question two. The use of

formative assessment at the study site has been a professional development focus for the past two years. Questions three through six were developed in a scaffolding manner. For example, question three asks about the fundamental basis for formative assessment. Then, questions four and five, asks the participants to further delve into their overall view of formative assessment by exploring the positive and negative aspects of their experiences. Finally, question six asks about the long-term impact of formative assessments on student academic success. It was important to ask questions that ask the participants to reflect on their perspectives of how formative assessment can impact academic change.

Questions seven and eight, regarding the impact of formative assessment on the needs of the at-risk student, were designed to align with research question three. After completing interview questions one through six, the bridging of the topics at-risk and formative assessment is designed to allow the participant to reflect on how the two interact to impact the at-risk student. Question nine was specifically written to bring in the topic of self-efficacy and changing the way the at-risk student begins to think differently about their success in the classroom. Changing the inner-dialogue of the at-risk student is a necessary task for further positive outcomes within the classroom setting (Clark, 2012; Munoz & Dossett, 2004; Thornton & Sanchez, 2010).

Questions nine and 10 were designed to give closure to the interview session and allow the participants the freedom to share additional information not discussed during the interview session.

Focus Group

Creswell (2013) noted that focus groups are "advantageous when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information" (p. 124). Therefore, one focus group session of six of the study participants was held during the study. The focus group participants were asked open-ended questions to learn more about each participant's experiences in working with at-risk students and how formative assessments could meet their needs (Appendix E). The focus group questions were developed from an examination of the literature on the subject of how best to gain a full understanding of participant experiences. The focus group questions were open-ended questions developed to gain a fuller understanding of the experience of each participant who works with at-risk students using formative assessments.

Standardized Open-Ended Focus Group Questions

1. What challenges do at-risk students bring to the classroom?

2. How would you advise a new teacher on how to develop a continual academic success of at-risk students?

3. What information would you share with a new teacher on using formative assessment with at-risk students?

Focus group question one allowed the participants to address the impact of at-risk students on the classroom learning environment as a whole.

Focus group questions two and question three were designed to allow participants to think in a deeper manner about the subject of at-risk students and formative assessments. This question also asked the participants to reflect on what was most important to convey to an outside party and allowed the participants to view personal beliefs and productive measures for working not only with at-risk students but also formative assessment.

The focus group session took place outside the school day, at the study site, in a staff development room. A staff development room was used rather than an individual classroom to avoid bias toward one individual or grade level. The interview time did not exceed 60 minutes so that participants would not feel overwhelmed or overtaxed. The interview was audiotaped and videotaped to ensure utmost accuracy of the data. Recording of the focus group session allowed me to hear the words of the participants directly, to find themes that evolve from the words of the participants during the study, and to code interview transcripts to look for themes and trends.

Data Analysis

The use of the transcendental phenomenological approach was a valid aspect of this study to explore the lived experience of those who use formative assessment while teaching at-risk students. Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data collected for analysis. The process of collecting data, analyzing data and reporting on the findings of that data are not completely separate events. Each phase of the research process is actually interrelated and go on simultaneously in what Creswell (2013) called a "data analysis spiral" (p. 204). The totality of the process is not done in a linear fashion but rather entering into the analysis phase finding themes through a constant process of reading and rereading the material collected. Through the careful acts of collecting and analyzing the data, a true picture and essence of the phenomenon can be reported.

All data was organized into computerized files. The data was printed out to facilitate in-depth reading and memoing. The transcripts were read in its entirety several times to allow myself to become immersed in the whole of the interviews before the process of searching for themes began (Creswell, 2013). Memos were written into the margins of the transcripts in short phrases and thoughts that came to the mind throughout the reading. Those memos were not notes

of overall themes, but they were useful to developing the larger information to form initial categories of themes.

After reading all transcribed data and making notations, the next step was to create codes or categories of themes that began to take shape during the reading and rereading of the data. Those codes began with many categories that were then clustered together into common themes (Seilman, 2013), which were the broad units of information could be compiled into a common idea (Creswell, 2013). A common thread flowed through the significant statements, building a description of standard statements (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). Therefore, through the reading and re-reading of the data in my study, broad ranges of categories were condensed into manageable themes. From these themes, an integration of the true meaning and essence of the phenomenon was created (Seilman, 2013). The final interpretation of the data came from searching the codes to find the themes that lead to the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2013) and then a textual description of the experiences of the participants was developed into a final narrative describing the essence of the experience (Seilman, 2013).

Trustworthiness

The following measures were used to address the trustworthiness of my study.

Credibility

The credibility of a study is "the truthfulness of particular findings" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). In addressing the credibility of a study, a researcher attempts to show a true picture of the phenomenon under study (Shenton, 2004), free of bias. To ensure that the results of this study were credible and truthful, participants were provided with copies of their interview and focus group transcripts for their review. If any corrections were needed, I made necessary changes and adjustments to the transcripts. Additionally, participants were allowed to view the

results of the questionnaire and its findings. No participant disagreed with the findings, therefore

no corrections and adjustments were made in the analysis of data.

Dependability and Confirmability

The dependability of a study is achieved when the researcher creates a study that can be

replicated in another setting (Shenton, 2004). Therefore, to maintain dependability in this study,

methods were used to ensure that the data collected was in fact decoded in a factual and correct

manner. Triangulation and audit trails were used to show dependability. To aide in the essence of

dependability, not only triangulation and audit trials were used, but also other means of

accountability.

The use of a peer check provided an added set of eyes with an outside perspective on the

data collected. Two educators who hold advanced degrees and are held in high esteem within the

school setting acted as peer reviewers. They were used to provide an added perspective on the

data collected and to ask hard questions about all interpretations of the data (Creswell, 2013).

The use of a peer check allowed me to share overall themes. I met with the peers on a weekly

basis. The thoughts and feelings of the debriefing sessions were kept in a journal throughout the

process so that the researcher's thoughts and insights of the peers could be kept on record to

ensure a true possible process of epoch (Creswell, 2013).

Triangulation of data ensures that the "use of different methods in concert compensates

for their individual limitations and exploits their respective benefits" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.

221). The use of a questionnaire along with individual interviews and a focus group ensured that

dependability issues were addressed. Moreover, the collected themes were seen from these three

vantage points rather than only one.

An audit trail provided a transparent description of the steps taken within this study from its conception to the report findings. All processes taken throughout the study are documented and will be retained so that the study can be seen as "free from bias in the procedures and the interpretation of results" (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavich, 2010, p. 501). Transcripts of each interview and focus group, as well as each survey, was kept in a secure location to protect the participants and their privacy.

I have divulged prior bias or assumptions, as they resulted from past experiences that could proved prejudicial or have impacted this study. This disclosure allows the reader to have additional information on anything that could have clouded the reading and interpretation of this study (Creswell, 2013). The truth of the voices of teachers of at-risk students was of the utmost importance, not the preconceived ideas of this researcher. The use of a peer check acted to keep the researcher's bias out of the results and firmly on the phenome of the participants.

The term *confirmability* refers to the degree to which others can confirm the findings of the study, and that a neutral and non-biased description of the participants' views were provided (Creswell, 2013). It is important that my own thoughts and feelings did not come into play in the findings of the study, but rather that I "refrain from judgment, abstain from or stay away from every day, ordinary ways of perceiving things" (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004, p. 22). Researchers must take steps so their findings, not personal biases, emerge from data (Shenton, 2004). To ensure confirmability, the use of peer checks helped to ensure sure that personal bias was limited and acknowledged. Peer checks allowed an outsider to ask hard questions about methods, meanings, or interpretation of data and act as a sounding board in the midst of the research process (Creswell, 2013). The feedback from the peer checkers for my study was kept in a journal notebook to be used in a reflective manner.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which the study findings can be transferred to other settings (Golafshani, 2003). In a qualitative study, transferability occurs when the researcher provides details both when developing the study and when discussing the themes found through the study (Creswell, 2013). The transferability of my study will allow teachers and administrators to apply the study results not only to their own classrooms but also other school settings where there are at-risk students. To ensure the transferability of this study, participants were asked to review their interview transcripts and the questionnaire to make sure that all information was transcribed properly. After the focus group, the participants were asked to read a copy of the transcribed meeting to ensure that their own contributions were correctly transcribed from the recording. A thick description was provided to enable others who were interested in the research to judge whether the findings are applicable to another classroom settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

<div align="center">

Ethical Considerations

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Absolute consideration was provided to protect the rights of participants. Each participant was provided an informed consent form that outlined the study and included a clear statement of their right to withdraw from the study at any point. In addition, the informed consent outlined the confidentiality that took place, including the use of pseudonyms for the participants and the study site to assure that no one could trace the participants' statements back to them (see Appendix E). Additionally, the participants were given the right to review transcripts following data collection.

Permission was sought from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure participants' rights (see Appendix A). Additionally, permission was granted from the Metro Atlanta County

Public School System for the right to research at one of their schools. All documents for this study were held in a secure location under lock and key. Only the researcher had access to that information.

The participants' confidentiality was ensured to the utmost. The names of the participants were changed to ensure privacy. Teachers were sharing their own views on at-risk students and their own teaching practices, and care was taken to code all information in such a way that comments could not be connected with any individual.

As a Christian who holds the Word of God in the highest regard, I consider it important that all aspects of the participants be held to the highest forms of ethical and moral behavior that can only shed a positive light on the One served. The Bible teaches that truth should be upheld at all cost. Even if the participants' own words showed a direction that was not thought to be true at the outset of the study, that message was given in all truth and honesty so that others in the educational community can learn from those truths.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand middle school teachers' perceptions of the impact of formative assessment on the needs of at-risk students. Chapter three described the study design, how data was collected and analyzed, and how the research was treated in a trustworthy manner. It was important that the needs for a study were clearly defined and that gaps in the current research were plainly described. My study included a complete framework for the study and how approval from the Institutional Review Board was gained prior to contacting participants and collecting data. A detailed description of the setting and participants was provided in the chapter and an explanation of how the research was handled in a trustworthy manner was explicated.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand middle school teachers' perceptions of the impact of formative assessment on the needs of at-risk students at a Metro Atlanta middle school. Chapter Four of the present study begins with a description of each study participant. Chapter four also explains the data analysis findings from data collected through a questionnaire, face-to-face interview, and focus group. Themes found through the data analysis method following Moustakas' (1994) model of transcendental phenomenology are discussed as related to each research question. Finally, the chapter concludes with a comprehensive chapter summary.

Participants

Twelve educators participated in the study. The study site was a middle school that followed the typical middle school set up in that it covers Grades 6, 7 and 8. There were four teachers from each grade level. Of the four participants per grade level, there was one from each academic area covering the following: language arts, math, science and social studies. Participants were asked to take part in the study by completing a questionnaire on their knowledge of formative assessments. There were a possible 32 participants at the study site that involved those teachers who took part in an intensive professional development for two years on formative assessment. Each of these study participants had a strong knowledge of formative assessments and a willingness to take part in the study. By agreeing to take part in the study, each participant completed and signed a consent form (Appendix G) and completed the questionnaire (Appendix C).

Table 1

Participant Overview

Name	Years of Experience	Certification	Current Grade Taught/Subject	Years at the Study Site
Charlotte	35	T6	6/LA	15
Tom	42	T6	6/MA	15
Jennifer	21	T4	6/SC	10
Chad	11	T4	6/SS/MA	7
Susan	12	T4	7/LA	12
Pam	6	T4	7/MA	7
Paula	17	T6	7/SC	17
Donna	19	T4	7/SS	15
Amber	21	T5	8/LA	13
Rebecca	21	T5	8/MA	8
Angela	16	T4	8/SC	10
Calvin	10	T5	8/SS	5

Charlotte

Charlotte has been in education for 35 years and holds a T6 teaching certificate for K-12 grades. Charlotte's teaching experience started in the state of Washington before coming to Georgia to teach at Georgia Middle School. Her first 20 years teaching was in the kindergarten classroom. For the past 15 years, she has taught sixth-grade language arts. She finds a great correlation between the needs of kindergartens and sixth-graders. Charlotte currently teaches standard language arts classes with one collaborative special education class. Charlotte indicated through her questionnaire that she uses formative assessment weekly in her classroom as a means by which to check where students learning is on a specific learning target. She also stated that formative assessments are super focused on one learning target and not a broad assessment of learning. That broad assessment is for the summative assessment.

Tom

Tom has 42 years of experience that cover both math and science at the middle school level. He has taught math for the past 35 years. Tom holds a T6 teaching certificate in middle school math and science. Tom has been at the study site for 15 years and is held in high regard by his peers. Tom currently teaches three accelerated math classes and one standard math class. Tom indicates through his questionnaire that he uses formative assessment in his classroom daily, and in a broader form, each Friday for a check to see where students are with their learning targets after a week of instruction. Tom said that he uses quick checks with white boards in order to see at a glance where every student is and if mistakes are made. He can then redirect that student in their learning. Tom says, "The use of formative assessments is used as a diagnostic tool that can reveal areas of weakness and strength. They let me know which students are ready for enrichment and which students need remediation" (Personal communication, March 5, 2018).

Jennifer

Jennifer has 21 years of experience at the middle school level. Jennifer has taught at Georgia Middle School for 10 years teaching both eight grade science and now sixth grade science. Jennifer holds a T4 teaching certificate in middle school science. Jennifer recently gained her gifted certification for the state of Georgia. Jennifer first taught in Virginia and moved with her family in 2005 to secure employment. Since coming to Georgia Middle School and the extensive formative assessment training, she indicated that she uses formative assessments in her class at least once a week depending on the unit of study being taught. Jennifer indicated on her questionnaire, "The primary objective for using formative assessments is as a learning check of the standard or learning target being covered. This information allows me to group students according to mastery which allows some students to move to an extension activity or remediation for other students." Jennifer teaches three standard classes and one collaborative special education class.

Chad

Chad has been at the study site for seven years. He has been in the field of education for 11 years. Education is a second career for Chad. He holds a T4 teaching certificate in middle school education in the fields of math, science and social studies. He is also certified to teach English language learners (ELL) and gifted classes. Chad is teaching on a three-member team and teaches three classes of science and one class of social studies. Chad teaches one class of gifted science and the other classes are standard classes. Chad indicates that formative assessments are used two to three times per week in his science and social studies classes.

Chad uses formative assessments to assess what the students understand and where areas of misconception lie. At that point, he is able to repeat instruction, clarify material, or adjust content.

Susan

Susan has been teaching for 12 years. Her entire teaching career has been at Georgia Middle School (pseudonym). Susan holds a T4 teaching certificate in the areas of language arts and social studies. She has taught at all three grade levels in either language arts or social studies. Susan currently teachers three seventh-grade accelerated classes and one standard language arts class. Susan indicated that she uses formative assessments at least once a week in various forms. She stated, "

> The primary objective of using formative assessments in my classroom is to see the
>
> student's areas of strengths and room for growth on a particular standard or concept we
>
> are focusing on in class. It is also used to reinforce or remediate on a concept previously
>
> learned. It allows me to focus on individual and group needs of my students to ensure
>
> their mastery of the standard.

Pam

Pam has been teaching in the middle school classroom for six years. She holds a T4 teaching certificate. Pam previously taught in a preschool setting before getting her teaching degree. Currently, Pam is teaching seventh-grade math that includes both accelerated math and standard math. Pam states that she uses some form of formative assessment in her class daily. The use of formative assessment allows her to "figure out what the students know." She is then able to use that information to guide her instruction and find the needs of her students in various forms.

Paula

Paula has been in the field of education for 17 years. Teaching is a second career for Paula. She left the business world and moved to education with her love of science. Of those 17 years, all have been at the study site in seventh-grade science where she teaches two accelerated classes. She holds a T6 teaching certificate that covers all areas of academics. Paula uses formative assessments in her classroom approximately two to three times weekly. These formative assessments take the form of quick quizzes, tickets out the door or quick writing activities. All the formative assessment data is used to see if the students are ready for the summative assessment. If that data shows that students are not ready for the summative assessment, then re-teaching is needed to reinforce learning.

Donna

Donna is currently teaching seventh-grade social studies on a gifted/blended team at Georgia Middle School. She teaches two classes of gifted students and two standard classes. Donna holds a T4 teaching certificate in both special education and social studies and language arts. She started her career in special education in Georgia. She moved to Georgia Middle School 15 years ago and has taught both sixth-grade social studies and language arts. She taught seventh-grade social studies for the last four years. Donna indicated that she uses formative assessments in her classroom two to three times a week. In regards to formative assessment, Donna states, "Formative assessment is used to gage student understanding of specific learning targets and to drive the instruction going forward. The data collected based on the formatives helps me to fill any gaps in understanding prior to a major assessment. It helps me identify children who may need more individualized help on certain learning objectives. The data also

guides me on which topics may need to be addressed as a whole group. As a curriculum group, it sometimes guides communication in our group in terms of best practices and forming common lessons."

Amber

Amber uses formative assessment to drive her instruction. Those formative assessments take place two to three times a week. Amber is currently teaching eigth-grade language arts. Amber currently teaches four standard language arts classes. For the previous two years, she was part of an eighth-grade team that was grouped by their lower math class. Additionally, within those classes, there were students who were part of the Student Support Team process at the Tier 2 and Tier 3 level (levels comparative to support for students who are failing multiple content areas) to provide accommodations to help those students succeed. She has 21 years of experience. Amber started her teaching career outside the state of Georgia but has been at the study site for 13 years. Amber holds a T5 certificate that is pre-K through middle grades. Amber states that the information she gains through formative assessments, "I am able to identify specific areas of weakness that I need to teach or reteach."

Rebecca

Rebecca has taught eight-grade math at the study site for eight years. She currently teaches two classes of accelerated math and two Algebra 1 classes. Rebecca has a total of 21 years of experience. Of those 21 years, 20 have been teaching math. Rebecca holds a T5 teaching certificate in math and social studies. Rebecca indicates that she uses formative assessments two to three times weekly. The use of formative assessments, "allows me to check for student understanding of a concept and to identify areas of misunderstanding. I need to know if the students are ready for an assessment."

Angela

      Angela is an eighth-grade science teacher who holds a T4 teaching certificate in science Grades 6-12. She currently teaches two eighth-grade standard science in the collaborative setting and teaches two classes of accelerated science which is a ninth-grade high school level class that students can obtain high credit while in the eighth grade. Angela is also gifted certified and is the department chair for eighth-grade science. Angela has been teaching for 16 years. Ten of those years have been at Georgia Middle School in both sixth grade and eighth grade. Angela feels strongly about the use of formative assessments. She indicated on her questionnaire that she uses them almost daily in all her classes. Angela states, "Formative assessments allows for me to see where each of my students are on a particular learning target. This data allows me to group students accordingly, but also, to pin point missing areas of knowledge that need to be gained in order for that student to be successful."

Calvin

      Calvin has been teaching for 10 years starting his career in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. Calvin holds a T5 teaching certificate in the area of social studies. He and his family moved to Georgia during the economic downturn to secure a job for himself and his wife. He has been at Georgia Middle School for six years and has taught seventh-grade social studies and is now teaching eigth-grade Georgia Studies. Calvin is the grade level chair for eighth-grade social studies. Calvin's initial response to the questions on formative assessment was positive. He indicated that he uses some sort of formative assessment in his classroom approximately two to three times weekly. Calvin also indicated that the use of formative assessment "allows me to gauge student mastery of academic standards which in turn allows me to individualize instruction to meet the needs of all students."

Results

This study was based on three research questions that addressed the middle school teacher's perspective of formative assessment and the needs of at-risk students. The themes and subthemes that emerged through the data collection are described below. How each research question was answered and an explanation for each follows. Those questions are: First, how do middle school teachers perceive the steps of formative assessment? Second, what are the middle school teacher's perceptions of the formative assessment theory and its practices? Third, how do middle school teachers perceive the impact of formative assessment on the needs of the at-risk student?

Theme Development

The questionnaires were sent out first and the initial interviews followed. As the transcripts of the interviews were compiled, I began to read and reread the transcripts making notes with each reading. Once the interviews were completed, six participants were invited to participate in a focus group. The focus group met in a neutral location at the study site. Following the completion of the focus group transcript, I began to immediately analyze the data. I read and reread the data creating memos in the margins until I began to see themes emerge. I physically manipulated the data into a possible five themes. Through the data analysis process, five themes emerged. Within those five themes, 15 subthemes developed. The main themes included the academic value of formative assessment, the difficulties of implementing formative assessments, the causes that place students' at-risk, needs of at-risk students, and the value of formative assessment when working with struggling students. The themes and subthemes are listed below in Table 2, along with the codes that built those themes.

Table 2

Codes and Themes

Theme	Subtheme	Codes
Academic Value of Formative Assessment	Nature of Formative Assessment	Small checks
		Frequent
		Gain understanding
		Check mistakes
		Feedback
		Nongraded
	Tailors Instruction	Specific needs
		Group students
		Reteaching
		Enrichment
		Build confidence
	Long Term Value	Show growth
Difficulties of Implementing Formative Assessment	Time	Curriculum pacing
		Reteaching
		Collection of data

		Constant nature
	Class Size	Large classes
		More struggling students
	Use of Formative	Common to curriculum area
	Assessments	Expectations
		Apathy of students
Causes that Place Students At-risk		Unstable home life
	Environmental	Economics
		Trauma
	Previous School	Gaps in learning
	Experience	Past teachers
		Lack of identification of learning disability
	Mental Health	Anger
		Depression
		Apathy

		Drop-out
	Long Term Effects	Cyclic
		Cost to society
Needs of At-Risk Student		Caring teachers
	Relationships	Listening
		Trust
		Safe environment
		Find gaps and strengths
	Building Confidence	Showing growth
		Setting goals
Value of Formative Assessments when Working with Struggling Students		Gaps in learning
	Tailors Instruction	Catches mistakes
		Slows down the unit
		One-on-one conversations
	Build Relationships	Trust
		Needs are important
		Apathy
	Confidence	Inner dialogue

Themes one and two, academic value of implementing formative assessments and difficulties in implementing formative assessments, answered research question two: How do middle school teachers perceive formative assessment in general? Themes three and four, causes that place students at risk and needs of at-risk students, answered research question one: What are perceptions of the needs of at-risk students? Finally, theme five, value of formative assessments when working with struggling students, answered research question three: How do teachers perceive formative assessments impact the needs of at-risk students?

Theme One: Academic Values of Formative Assessment

The first theme provided an understanding for the second research question, "How do middle school teachers perceive formative assessment in general?" Each participant had been through a two-year professional development on the use of formative assessment in the classroom. Each teacher identified the academic values of formative assessment. Teachers shared not only their understanding of formative assessment but also the characteristics that come from the use of formative assessment in the middle school classroom. These values became evident in the questionnaires as well as both of the individual interviews and the focus group.

Tailors instruction. The first subtheme in the academic value of formative assessment was the manner that formative assessment guides teachers to tailor instruction to meet student's needs. This value was mention by all 12 participants. Donna said,

It is that frequent little mini assessments that kind of gauge where a student is at any given point of their learning. Formatives are a good gauge of what students understand at a moment, so that I know where to fill in gaps.

Chad stated, "They (formative assessments) are real quick procedures for teachers to see if the student is really truly grasping what is being taught" Likewise, Tom said, "Formative assessments are a check point in how we are doing. What is going on? Do we get it?" These participants voiced a value of formative assessments to guide instruction toward a learning goal.

Several participants voiced the value of having check points in student's learning that allowed the teacher to see where gaps of learning were or mistakes that are being made by students. Tom shared,

> We have a weekly quiz every Friday, so we have that formative assessment once a week. So, I can look at data. We say this is what we learned this week, and now where are we? The benefit of the question is that I know where we are. I know exactly where we are. On a less formal thing, I teach math and we use white boards every day. Every time they hold a white board up, that is a formative assessment. I can see at a glance where everybody is. The benefit is I have my finger on their pulse; I know exactly where we are. It tells me who is struggling. It tells me what kinds of errors they are making. It also tells me what I need to do to fix it. When I see the need, then I address it at that time. Not only does it show me who needs remediation, it also tells me who needs enrichment. Then they can go off in another direction.

Tom was able to gather information and data that guided how he approached his instruction going further. Jennifer echoed his sentiment and said,

> Formative assessments are no more than a periodic check of how students are making progress like a timeline where in we make those timely checks and make sure that we are heading in the right direction. Formatives are basically a check on how they are

progressing towards a summative assessment. Toward reaching those targets that we have

created for them.

Pam also reported that she uses formative assessments as a means to gauge where students are

in a learning target.

I know now what they know and where they are at. As a class, if they are not where they

should be, then I need to reteach the whole class. If a few people don't get it, I can pull

that small group and the others can go on. Why should they have to learn something they

already know it? They would then need to be enriched. They would either move on to the

next topic, or I can do a mini lesson, and they would move on, or they would be enriched.

With this information, Pam knew where each student was before getting to the summative

assessment. Angela additionally shared, "It allows me to differentiate with the students. That has

been a huge culture change with the gifted kids." Taking that information allowed Pam to create

specific lessons that helps the gifted students who show mastery to move on or to "dig deeper

into a learning target." Although it allows for the differentiation for gifted students, Pam also

states the benefit when working with special education students.

With my special education students, it is really the day-to-day process of it. It helps me

see well you got this or you don't. And so, when we get to the test, I am comfortable. I'm

confident knowing they know what they are supposed to.

Pam also shared that in preparing for a major writing piece, she would do a formative before that

will be for practice. That allowed her to give immediate feedback individually to students so that

they could acquire the skills needed before that major assessment.

Calvin equally shared how formative assessments help to keep students on track as they

progress through a unit.

I can catch those mistakes early on and correct them before we get to the unit test. I can

see if anyone is missing information, which means, I need to go back. I need to figure out

how to reteach the material. It makes it an easier process if I can nip it in the bud right as

we are going through the unit.

Calvin also shared that for those struggling with material, "It slows down the unit and gives them

time to master a learning target." That information gained through formative assessments also

shows Susan the needs there are for her language arts classes. Susan stated, "It helps me to

narrow down what I need to work on while still keeping in mind what they have already

mastered." Whether the task is a writing assignment or reading comprehension, the use of

formative assessments leads Susan and Calvin to necessary needs for students as they progress

towards a learning target. Rebecca likewise sees the use of formative assessment valuable in

teaching math content. Rebecca says,

For my class, it helps me catch those misunderstandings that they have on a concept

because especially in algebra kids can understand the new piece I am teaching them, but

they still have gaps and they are making mistakes that are not related to the new concept.

So that formative assessment for me is helping me to get that piece together and

understand wait a minute, 'I do get this, I'm just making simple mistakes that I need to

learn to correct.'

Rebecca like Calvin and Susan finds that the opportunity to see gaps in underlying concepts

allows for the teacher to go back and remediate in hopes of making the next level of teaching

more successful.

Charlotte shared that often the formative assessment indicates that there may be a

problem with her instruction delivery. Charlotte said,

Formative assessments are checkpoints as to whether learning has stopped or learning is

progressing. Sometimes it is not about student learning, but sometimes it is about my

instruction because if I do a formative and a chunk of my class doesn't show that growth,

then I'm thinking in my head that I need to instruct but in a different way because

obviously the first way was not affective. So, formative assessments are a checkpoint to

dictate to me either my instructional style or to identify those who are at-risk for not

learning the material just assessed.

This is a benefit also stated by Pam. She says, "If a few people don't get it, I can pull that small

group. But if it the whole class, then I need to go back and reteach in a different manner."

Jennifer also says, "The instruction is made based on how it was reached by the students and are

they learning the content."

Amber's insight on the use of formative assessments at the middle school level is that it

can be most beneficial to the middle school student. Amber said,

At any level that is going to allow the teacher to assess the standards that we really need

to focus on in the classroom. Having the middle school model allows us to individualize

more. With the team model, we are able to track the students' better working on a team.

That teaming model allows for teachers to get to know the students better. That formative

assessment along the unit allows for the teacher to get to know that student better and

address gaps of mastery that show up.

That aspect of the middle school model also allows for the building of relationships when using

formative assessments.

Builds relationships. The benefit of building a relationship with students through the

formative assessment process was mentioned by eight out of 12 participants, which led to the

next subtheme related to the academic value of formative assessments. The opportunity to have a one-on-one conversation with students using feedback from the formatives helps to develop that trusting relationship. Angela noted that those relationships build a stronger academic community. She said,

> Formative Assessments has the benefit for the students in that it builds a relationship with them first because they have to trust you first. They have to trust your judgment and your feedback. They have to understand that you are not trying to penalize them or trying to pick them apart but rather you are trying to move them forward. By building that relationship and them learning to accept my feedback. That it is just me wanting to help them to be the best they can be. That leads to a stronger learning team.

Amber also shared that the formative assessments and the feedback allows, "For the teacher to get to know that student better." It is what the specific needs of the student that is the most vital. When the student knows that the educator has their best interest in mind, the relationship begins to take a shift. Amber said,

> The process of formative assessment and the relationship that can be built with a student can be a more personal relationship. Because the student is also seeing that the teacher has his or her individual needs. It is not just whole group instruction with one focus.

> Rebecca uses one-on-one conversations with her math students that allows for individual communication with a student rather than a whole class. Rebecca said,

> For me, the way I perform them it is the one-on-one conversation I have with each student. I can go through and talk with each of them about what they missed and how they can go back and rework that problem. That way that student knows, I know you and what you need and you are important.

Pam also noted to how the one-on-one conversation with students and giving individual feedback about their work helps toward building a stronger relationship. Pam said, "Those kids who I am working with one-on-one and working through problems know that I know their needs and I care enough to help them with that." Pam also shared that rather than addressing a whole class, those individual conversations show the student they are important to this class and their needs are important. All of the participants who mentioned the building of relationships also mentioned the fruit of that relationship is the trust that is built. As Chad stated, "Without that trust, the feedback just lands on deaf ears."

Charlotte has found that in her 35 years of teaching, the relationship and trust factor becomes important for real learning to take place. She also shared that formative assessments allows for her to create an atmosphere of trust and caring. Charlotte states,

> If I am consistent and committed to formative assessments and that feedback to students, it can only be very beneficial to students. I will be finding out where they need help. I will then be sitting down with them and talking to them. That in turn shows them, you know, I care, I'm there for them. They aren't just a number. With that they also see me differently and say, hey she cares. It really shows them I care about them greatly. They also believe that I believe that they can really do this. With that knowledge, they are willing to work and move on.

Jennifer also expressed the value of that one-on-conversation when creating goals for learning with her students. She states, "Sitting and talking with them and sharing their scores on previous tests, we can then begin to set those goals for themselves. Often, they set those goals higher than I would. But by having that conversation, they know I care." Chad added that the true buy in for

the goals is to give them some help, but ultimately for by in, those goals need to come from them and that in turn becomes important to them.

      Long-term value. With the building of relationships and success, the participants shared that they could see as the long-term value that comes with formative assessments. Primarily, a sense of confidence builds through the formative assessment process. Confidence was mentioned by nine out of the 12 participants.

      As students begin to have gaps of learning identified and have instruction tailored towards those needs they begin to have a sense of success that leads to a confidence within the classroom. Rebecca said, "Formative assessment for me is helping students to get the pieces together and understand. Then you see them say, wait a minute, I do get this. I was just making simple mistakes. If I correct that, I can be successful.'" Likewise, Calvin says, "It gives them a lot of confidence. So instead of consistently failing tests or quizzes, they are seeing success. That success boosts them to stay on track and build confidence and self-esteem."
This same sentiment was shared by Angela. Angela states,

      I'm glad I embraced the change. I feel like it has made me a better teacher. I feel like my

      test scores have really soared but not just the test scores, but the kids have really

      blossomed. And it is to just see them and that confidence build and grow.

Accentually, Angela shared, "To grow their confidence is to see them move forward."

      Paula uses the formative assessment process to motivate students to study, which in turn allows them to feel more successful. Paula utilizes a series of what she calls "Pop Quizzes." The pop quiz is not unannounced, but rather if students succeed, they get a lollipop as a reward. Paula stated,

One thing I do with my pop quizzes when it is all over, we trade and grade. I start out with all those who have missed five or less stand up. They get a quick recognition. Four or less stay standing. They look around at each other, and they are clapping for each other. They get really excited for who is still standing, and who will be standing when I say zero. That is impactful no matter what socio-economic status, background or mental health or anything. They applaud each other when they see each other still standing. That really motivates them. If so and so can do it, I can do it too. Especially, if there is recognition for missing five or four.

Paula further stated,

It is a very quick turnaround for them to see if they are making progress. It is a quick motivator and a quick gratification. Quickly they are gratified for something they have learned where as if we didn't have formative assessments, they would just rock along and rock along and there would be no eagerness for them to find out what do I really know. We give study guides at least a week and a half early. They don't do them until the end of the unit. It is no motivator for them to get it done to see what they don't know. But formative assessment with some type of positive reward is something that is tangible for them here and now. They are willing to put forth the effort before the test comes. The more they are successful; the more their confidence builds. Get a little confidence the first time. I am more lenient at first. They might be able to miss one and still get it. That motivates them because I tell them now tomorrow you can't miss any. They go home and study more and more for those quizzes which is just going to help them in the long run.

With this process of formative assessments, Paula has seen a rise in test scores and students willing to put forth the time engaged in learning the material.

Susan sees the boost of confidence in particular with her standard education students. These students often struggle with writing and have negative feelings about the writing process. Susan said,

> I had a boy who made a 75 on an essay. He put it on the success board. Kids were like why are you putting a 75 up there? He said, because I always made 50s. I made a 75. My next goal is to get an 80. Now he did not hit that. He is still at a 75, but I told him, at least you didn't go backwards. Celebrating those successes and setting those reasonable small goals that they can achieve is so important and beneficial. If you go from a 60 to 75 you are moving up as opposed to getting a 90. They can't do that yet. But they can reach a 75. That builds confidence to move forward and try harder topics.

This feeling was also shared by Amber who has had a true shift in looking at data. Amber said,

> A big shift for me this year, rather than focusing on a number or score they got on a test, for example the interim. Rather than looking at who is distinguished or who is proficient or needs growth, I am looking at the percentage of growth. Because if you have a kid who goes from 15 to a 52, that percentage of growth is actually greater than a kid who goes from an 80 to 84. Yet, we have always celebrated the kid who has an 84 has a higher grade. But instead of looking at those numbers but looking at the percentage of growth, I can share those with the students. It actually levels the playing field for them. They see the growth made and are now to looking to grow more.

Angela agreed with those feelings and stated,

> If we share that with them and that kid who made the 50 but share that with them that they moved from a 15 to 50. You made more growth than most of this class did. That

gives them that feeling of success. Even though they did not make the distinguished

mark, they get to see, oh wow, I did do something.

By sharing those successes with the students, the participants began to see a change in the

student's inner dialogue from a sense of failure to a sense of success. Donna said, "If we give

those frequent formatives, we see the bigger picture of that student. There is higher opportunity

of academic success if we do that. With one success, others will come." Charlotte shared a

similar statement, "My other belief is that success breeds successes. First, I need for them to see

that success. That comes through the formative assessments." Jennifer sees the same benefits in

her science classroom. Jennifer said, "When they begin to see that they are learning the concept,

that gives them a boost they are encouraged and motivation level and definitely they see this is

helping." (

All 12 participants spoke of the academic value of formative assessment. The

relationships and trust that was garnered through the process led to success and confidence

building within the students. This all came about by tailoring the instructions towards the

specific needs of the students. With the value of formative assessment process, the participants

also shared the difficulties of doing formative assessments in the middle school classroom.

Theme Two: Difficulties of Implementing Formative Assessments

The second theme that emerged provided insight into research question two, "How do

middle school teachers perceive formative assessments in general?" Teachers shared not only

their understanding of formative assessment, but also how properly implementing formative

assessments had challenges in the middle school classroom. These challenges became evident in

both of the individual interviews and the focus group. Only one participant did not share any

challenges with the use of formative assessments. That participant was Tom. When asked, "What aspect of formative assessment do you find negative?" Tom stated,

> Nothing. I have been doing Friday quizzes before formative assessment was ever brought up. It just made sense. It is a tool and very necessary. Valuable. It is our deal, it is what we do. We have to do it. The point is formative assessment is not a faddist train, it has been with me forever. It came natural to me. I just needed to check, where are we? Here is what we learned this week. Who's got it? It just a natural flow. And it makes sense

> However, the other 11 participants found negative aspects in utilizing formative assessments.

Time. Of the 11 participants who found negative aspects in utilizing formative assessments, they indicated that time was a hurdle to effectively implementing the formative assessment process within the middle school classroom. One such obstacle is the pacing of the county curriculum calendar. Pam said,

> It is a lot of work, and it takes a lot of time. But the benefits outweigh the time. When used correctly, formative assessment can really grow kids. The problem is a lot of us in middle school don't have the time to be able to go back and reteach. We are trying to teach so much material before the state test. With the pacing of that, there simply is no time to go back reteach.

Pam shared, "We can find from the formative assessment that these kids failed this and we need to reteach them, but it is so hard to find time because everything is so crammed in the year. That is the hardest thing." Donna shared similar sentiments,

Without a doubt, the hardest part of formative assessments is the time. I know

theoretically it is important to give immediate feedback but the reality is that there just

isn't time. We are on this topic, and we have to move onto another topic to keep pace.

Each participant shared that one value of formative assessment is giving the individual feedback

to students. With the lack of time due to curriculum pacing hinders that ability. Jennifer said,

"Time is a restriction that does limit us as to how often we get to use it." Charlotte referred to the

curriculum pacing as a treadmill. She stated,

It is the tread mile treadmill we are on that just doesn't allow for that time to really act on

the information. I just keep telling myself to do what I can and prioritize. The more

important is do the steps. Use the formative assessments to determine where the

weaknesses are and that is all you can get done, just make sure you do it well. The other

choice is to not do it well and just going and keep pace with the pacing calendar. When

they get to the end, they won't know anything.

The ability to pinpoint students' weaknesses and strengths was a strong value for each

participant. Calvin shared the frustration of not being able to use that data to guide the

instruction. Calvin stated,

Formatives are an excellent tool and resource but the problem is time. To do it well and

do it correctly, you need to look at each individual student's scores and how they are

doing on each substandard. Then come up with an individual plan for them and where

they are struggling. It can be a good tool to catch any mistakes they made before they get

to the summative to help build that confidence to give them the tools they need to be

successful on the test. But, the challenge is the time. How to fit all the standards in and to

gather that data at the same time.

Chad shared the frustration of collection of data and using that data to meet needs. Chad said,

"That is data so informative and vital. But, taking that data and looking at that data and seeing student needs takes time, and we are always pushed to move forward toward the next common assessment."

The constant nature of the collection and data along with the pacing of curriculum was something Angela shared. Angela said,

> The constant nature of it and having to track it. That in itself is not negative because it is valuable data just the energy it takes. The constant nature of it the data. The having to reflect on it. It is just very busy. That part of it is the hardest to get used to. It takes a lot of time and energy even though it is so useful. I have to decide, where do I spend that energy in the most productive place.

Paula shared similar thoughts, "It takes time to set up, it takes time to grade. It is for every standard and every learning target."

Amber shared the need for scaffolding in meeting student's needs. However, with that scaffolding comes time. Amber said,

> A struggle I really had the last several years with having the team that was more of an at-risk group, they would demonstrate the skills in class but then when we would have these common assessments that were written on such a high level and my students were at a lower level could not demonstrate mastery. It was more because I was not reaching them at their level. We need to first meet them at their level and give them that opportunity for success otherwise it is just you are failing and failing. Scaffolding starting with data and where the student is and then slowly bringing them to that language and that level to get them to that level of mastery by the end of the year. But starting first with some

scaffolding to first to meet them where they are. But I was forced to move too quickly and not meet those needs and re-teaching those skills.

The time factor for Rebecca in re-teaching and data collection was something she also struggled with. Rebecca said, "Taking the time to sit with those students on a consistent basis and checking and rechecking them to see that mastery. At some point, we have to move one. That is so hard for me." With the constant nature of the data collection, along with the curriculum pacing, the increased size of classes possesses an inherent negative impact on formative assessments.

Class size. With the increase of class size over the past five years, the frustration of meeting the needs of all students has also increased. Over the last five years, increases in classes have gone from average of 25-28 students to average of 32-35. In the middle school classroom, a content area teacher could have between 115 and 125 students under their tutelage. Donna said,

A challenge I feel like we are dealing with is the sheer numbers of students we are dealing with. That is negatively impacting the way we interact with the students who have a need. If we have one or two in a classroom, we can spend time focusing on those kids. But, when we have 10 to 12 struggling students in the same classroom, then it is hard to help them one-on-one.

Amber also shared thoughts on struggling students and class size,

Something that would be beneficial for at-risk students and really all students is smaller class size. That at-risk that is part of a smaller group can also have the opportunity to stand out in a positive way. Every student, even at-risk students, are going to have strengths as well of as their weaknesses. And to have those strengths recognized and give that student a chance to shine is going to be one step on a positive path. Building confidence, a sense of pride so that they want to come to school because that feels good.

However, with 33 or more students in a classroom, how does that happen? Then the student is on a continuous loop of failure.

That sentiment was also shared by Calvin and his experiences in the classroom,

The other challenge with any assessment that we do whether it is formative or summative is so many struggling students we can't tell is it that they don't understand the content or is it the reading and writing levels. I have students where I can ask a question orally, and they can spit them out. However, they sit down to take any type of test or formative assessment and they don't do well. In a perfect world, I would be stopping and working with them until they get it. But with 32 or 33 in class, that becomes a real problem not only for me but also for them.

Angela equally shared the impact of having a collaborative special education class with numerous struggling students. Angela stated,

When a teacher has multiple lower classes because they have been grouped together by math level or they have struggled in the past grades so they have them on a tier 2 or 3 mediation plan, those numbers are daunting. It then becomes, how do I meet all their needs. For me, I want to fix them all. I want for all of them to feel successful. The frustrating thing is, I know I can't. That keeps me up at night.

With the increase in class size, the participants' notes that not using formative assessments in a productive manner or for the correct motive has a negative impact on the results that could be obtained through the formative assessments process.

Use of formative assessments. Several participants commented on the proper use of formative assessments and the expectations seen within the classroom. When formative assessments are given and nothing is done with the data, that formative assessment is

meaningless. One such aspect is when formative assessments are done as a common assessment for a grade level academic area. Amber shared that the language arts department has a common formative assessment planned for each week. Amber said,

> Each week our curriculum group has a formative assessment planned so that we can come together to see where students are. That sounded like a good idea, but if I am not using that information for my students, I am just giving them work to do. Formative assessments are about the student and not the grade level. I like having the freedom to design the formative assessment at the time appropriate for my students. And that may not be the same as where every other class is.

Amber's feelings about the common assessments are also shared by Pam. Pam said, "If we use a formative assessment as a common assessment and are not given time to reteach what we find, what was the intent of the formative to begin with? We are just going through the motions." Susan additionally shared about formative assessments used as common assessments per grade level. Susan says,

> Formative assessments need to be done in a manner that is not especially for common ones, is not done all the time. That as a group, we are targeting a special standard it should be left up to the teacher what is best for the student not to say that all of you need to be doing more of this. Well my students are different than the teachers down the hallway. Why do I have to do the same formative assessment as them if I know they have shown me they have mastered that concept. That to me is wasteful, and I could be doing a formative assessment on something that would useful to my kids not someone else's students.

Chad also shared,

When we do common formative assessments, we are charting the gifted students with the special education students, or those students who are working their hearts out. It is not about what that student knows, it is about how many students do you have that have mastered that formative.

Each participant shared that the true meaning of formative assessment is to gauge where each student is. That information gives the true value to the assessment. Susan shared, "Some formative assessments are not a one size fits all. Some formative assessments meet different students' needs as well as teachers."

Jennifer also shared concern for the motivation of the teacher giving the formative assessment. Jennifer questions, "Are the teachers that are using the formative using it as a timely check. If they are not, but simply going through the motions because it is expected from administration then they are wasting classroom time." Charlotte also shared thoughts on the instructor's motivation. Charlotte said,

That formative assessment is very dependent on the instructor giving it. They ultimately, I ultimately, have the power to do with whatever I want. I can choose to throw it away. I can let them stack up on my desk. But, when I do that or a teacher does that, we take away what it really is and it says to the student, why do I care about this. It really depends on the teacher. If the teacher attends to that and is committed to that, then formative assessment is beneficial at any level.

The participants concern for the motivation of the teacher towards formative assessment also transfer over to the student and the student's belief in the benefits of the formative.

Chad sees the need of teachers being comfortable with the style by which a formative is given. Chad has used multiple types of formatives in his classroom but has found that some do not lend itself to his type of instruction. Chad said,

> We need to comfortable with which formative we give. There are some that for myself, I just can't stand and really give me no valuable information. Such an essay or a ticket out the door. That does not tell me anything. But If I give what I call a quiz even though I don't grade it, but I am going through it and I am watching what the students are doing and their answers. I can immediately see they are missing steps. But it is my subject that I teach, and it is the way I think and my own style. So that fits me. I don't have to just sit there and read and read.

The motivation of the instructor and how they use formative assessments was a key in the use of the formative assessments. The participants also shared that a negative with formative assessments is the apathy seen in the students.

When students are not vested in the learning process that can be a deterrent towards formative assessment being effective. Calvin shared, "When students are vested in their learning, I think that formatives can be extremely effective. But when they aren't, it is like hitting a brick wall. It feels as though all I am doing is fighting a losing battle."

Paula sees the apathy seen in students towards formative assessment is the short-term outlook of the middle school student. She shares,

> They are so short term focused. They are not thinking about high school or their grade point average or even college. They are thinking about, what is going to happen after school, or texting their friends. It is not about school.

Chad also shared that lack of forward focus.

Chad stated,

> Moving them to a point to where they can stand on their own two feet in the classroom is
> so hard. We have allowed them to reassess and reassess and their motivation for learning
> has just taken a down turn. What the formative often tells me is that the student just
> doesn't care. They can do this; they just don't want to put forth the effort.

That lack of effort can be seen in the motivation levels of the students. Jennifer stated, "It depends on the motivation level of the students. If they care, they are motivated. They are going to prove whether it is graded or not. If the student knows it not for a grade, they don't try." Charlotte sees that apathy toward the formative assessment differently. Charlotte said,

> Now through formative assessment I may find out what that road block is but until I can
> address what the road block is, and that is not necessarily through formative assessment.
> Everything comes through that filter of the barrier and until I can address that barrier
> formative assessment is not going to work.

Those negative aspects of formative assessments were stated by eleven of the participants. The participants also had an understanding of causes that would place a student at-risk.

Theme Three: Causes that Place Students At-risk

The third theme that emerged provided insight into research question one, "What are perceptions of the needs of at-risk students?" Teachers shared not only their understanding of those causes but also how those causes hinder success within the middle school classroom. This information became evident in the individual interviews and the focus group. All 12 participants spoke about their perceptions of what causes a student to become at-risk. All twelve participants spoke on their perceptions of what is an at-risk student and causes that could put a student at-risk. Those perceptions differed with the participants. Sagor and Cox (2004) defined at-risk

students to include "any child who is unlikely to graduate, on schedule, with both the skills and self-esteem necessary to exercise meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure, culture, civic affairs, and inter/intra personal relationships" (p.1). The definition of an at-risk student has been corroborated by numerous other studies (Belstio et al., 2005; Bauwens &Hourcade, 1992; Bowers, 2010; Henry et al., 2012; MacMath et al., 2010).

Environmental. The category of environmental causes was seen in thoughts shared by all 12 of the participants. The environment could encompass the home life of the student, economic situation of the family unit, and some kind of trauma that could have happened within that family unit. Calvin shared an overview of what he defined as an as-risk student. Calvin said, "An at-risk student is struggling to stay on grade level. One who is struggling to comprehend material. That could be for a variety of different reasons. Whether it is academic deficiencies or problems at home." Tom had similar thoughts when asked about what his definition of an at-risk student. Tom said, "Anybody who has and any kind of issue that is going to keep them from meeting their potential or meeting my expectations." Amber also shared,

> I would say an at-risk student is one who is struggling in any one of different ways. They could be academically at-risk or it could be a student who has issues outside of school that are compacting the child's progress in school. A student who is struggling with content for various reasons. Certainly, environmental issues at home is a main cause.

Those environmental issues of home life were a key component to the cause of students becoming at-risk. Those environmental reasons are also seen within previous research done on at-risk students. Angela shared both a professional definition, but also a personal experience with her own family. Angela said,

I would start with the kids that don't have the nuclear family at home that have either income issues or they have divorce that comes up. But any kid that does not have the "Leave It to Beaver" family. I guess you would call it. Those would have some kind of risk. As far as other factors in their life, if a family member loses a job or they suddenly have a different income or something happens catastrophic to the family, major death in the family that also puts them at-risk. My own kids were there at one point. When I was going through my divorce, their teachers would talk to me quite often about it. About the lack of focus and missing material. They could not concentrate on what was happening at school because of what was happening at home.

Angela's experience with dealing with family issues outside of school and seeing the effect on her own children gave her a new understanding of at-risk students and what they go through just to make it through a school day. Likewise, Paula also shared the unstable home life or trauma has a strong effect on what happens within the classroom setting. Paula said,

There are lots of things that go into an at-risk student. It might be that their social economic level is low. It could be they are having domestic problems at home. Parent might be divorcing. It might be a divorced family. It might be students who are experiencing medical issues with their family. Some kind of trauma. Something that is going on in their personal life usually can cause a negative affect here in the classroom.

When a student goes home to an unstable home life, outside learning or concentration is hard to overcome. Rebecca likewise said, "Students are going to be at-risk for home and socioeconomic issues. Those kinds of backgrounds that make it hard for them." Jennifer shared, "A lot falls back on the adults who are responsible for the student, so if the child is neglected and does not have

that support they can't perform at school." Charlotte called these outside difficulties as barrier to a student's learning. Charlotte said,

> The at-risk student who is not progressing like they should be for whatever reason. Those could be environmental, issues can put a student at risk. Poverty can put a student at risk. It is not always about whether they can get it or not. The at-risk student is the student who has a barrier. Not necessarily learning but a barrier of anger, a barrier of environmental deprivation, a barrier of financial they don't have the books at home, nobody takes them to the library, they don't have parenting. There is a barrier in place.

Charlotte continued on how students who have a barrier to learning. She shares that until that barrier is identified and worked on, learning cannot progress. Charlotte said,

> My belief system is that with an at-risk student there is something that is blocking that learning, I don't know if the formative assessment will work until the blockage is broken down. Now through formative assessment, I may find out what that road block is but until I can address what the road block is, and that is not necessarily through formative assessment. Everything comes through that filter of the barrier and until I can address that barrier formative assessment is not going to work.

Those thoughts were also shared by Amber during the focus group. Amber said,

> When we hear the term at-risk students the preconception is to assume behavior issues in the classrooms. But I think that most times the behaviors that are seen in the classroom is a defense mechanism for whatever those students are dealing with. It is breaking down that defense and getting to the root of what is causing that student to be at-risk.

Outside influences of home life whether it be through divorce, some kind of trauma, or socioeconomic issues can have a profound impact on the student. When these situations start early in a student's education, those students often find themselves losing ground quickly.

Previous school experience. When students have a difficult early educational experience, gaps of learning can start to appear. Those difficulties could come in the form the problems seen at home, or past teachers who influence how students sees themselves within the learning community. Calvin stated, "Often times students fall behind their peers and are constantly trying to play catch-up." Rebecca sees this within her math classes,

> Years of missing basic concepts. Math builds on itself. If in sixth grade you did not quite get fractions, in seventh grade you don't get integers. It is hurting them when they get to eigth grade. It is going to build up. The longer they go not understanding a concept, the more at-risk they are going to become.

Those missing skills are not only seen in math but also in other subject areas. Donna shares, "I think what is important for all kids but especially that at-risk kids is they do not have the same tools so to speak in order to understand what they need to do on a daily basis." Those missing skills as Amber shared, "Those needs may be greater and there may be more areas where the student needs help. Taking into account how their previous school and teachers were, that has a diffident impact on how they will be successful in middle school."

Past educators who have a negative impact on students early on, also have a negative impact on students when they get to the middle school level. Rebecca said, "In math you are looking at someone who did not understand them previously that now they are building on a shaky foundation." Likewise, Pam shared, "If they get a teacher who doesn't care about them. Then they say, why try. My teacher doesn't care about me. Why should I?"

Missing content or gaps in learning could also come from not being taught properly from a previous teacher. Susan said,

I believe well there are several scenarios, but I believe that the more so at-risk can be just from that perspective of it isn't that they can't do but maybe along the lines that a teacher didn't or very poorly didn't effectively explain a concept and just rushed on. Then they are constantly trying to catch up. That student just fell further and further behind and just becoming that self-doubting person. I couldn't do this in third grade; why do I think I can do it now.

Chad shared similar thoughts,

Teachers can cause it because of their attitude toward that student. Perhaps they allowed other students to make statements about the student. Perhaps they simply pushed them off in a corner. Then they come to our classrooms and expect the same behavior or attitude.

Experiences in past classrooms start to program the inner dialogue within the student. Inner dialogue can be defined as changing the way the at-risk student begins to think differently about their success in the classroom (Bandura, 1989). Changing the inner-dialogue of the at-risk student is a necessary task for further positive outcomes within the classroom setting (Clark, 2012; Munoz & Dossett, 2004; Thornton & Sanchez, 2010). The words that teachers say to a student can have a profound impact on what they accomplish or don't accomplish in later grades. Pam puts it simply, "My teachers doesn't care about me." Charlotte said, "The barrier can be followed back to such a fear of failure because five years before they were told they couldn't do this."

Perhaps that fear of failure or that attitude comes from a lack of identification of a learning disability. Angela said,

Not catching a learning disability early on and almost having them fall through the cracks puts them behind. I have had several this year in the eighth grade who have finally been identified. So, to me they have been at-risk for the past eight or nine years.

Chad sees that when an educator sees the possibility of a student having a learning disability and not acting on that can place a student at-risk. Chad said,

It could be a certain subject that they are struggling with, and it could be a learning disability that no one has diagnosed or has taken the time to go through the proper paperwork. That paperwork is time consuming, and so many teachers just want to move on. But that lack of identification places that student at-risk for being successful in later grades or to making it to the next grade.

Tom sees students who are working below grade level due to ability factors. Tom says, "Some people are slow learner for various reasons. Maybe it is learning disability or low IQ scores. This places them below average and thus places them at-risk." The identification of learning disabilities later has an impact on students' belief that they can succeed within the classroom. Also, mental health issues impair the students' ability see the learning community as a positive influence.

Mental health. Middle school can be a trying time for students who come to this part of their life changing physically and emotionally. Students are often pushing boundaries placed in life by family. They are also finding a new sense of who they are as a person and where they fit within the school community. Paula said, "So many mental health issues come about in puberty. Their hormones are changing so much at this stage. It then becomes apparent they have other issue coming on. That certainly places them at risk." Pam also shares, "With middle school

students they have so many social issues with friends at school. This could be brought on by psychological issues such as depression that just compound the problem." Susan shared,

> When they get to middle school and they are so into friends, and those friends fall out, they can begin to feel rejected which in turn leads to depression. They are walking around in a cloud and can't think about what I am teaching them about writing.

Charlotte sees students who have anger issues within her classroom. Charlotte said,

> I'm thinking about students that I have this year that have so much anger and they can't leave it at the door. That then becomes a barrier to their learning and it puts them at-risk in my classroom. Because something has happened at the home and they can't get past it. They just drag it all day.

Anger or depression can lead to a sense of apathy for the student who is often capable of learning. Chad shared in the focus group,

> This year I have run into some students even in the gifted program that are at-risk. It makes you wonder what has happened. Why is this taking place because they should be excelling instead there is an apathy almost in their study habits that is causing them to be at-risk. So that student is struggling not because of incapability, but that they are at-risk for not even attempting.

Susan also shared,

> Having a student who should be performing at an A but they are getting 70s at best, that student is at-risk. For some reason the apathy they have developed just keeps them from moving on to be successful. With a lot of at-risk students, it is laziness. It is not that I can't do it, but what I won't do. Those students are quite capable and are very intelligent.

But they refuse to do anything. So, they would be classified as at-risk because they won't

do anything, and they are so apathic.

Charlotte's impression of at-risk students who are capable of passing, but continue to not perform within the classroom or show mastery of learning targets almost always goes back to that barrier of anger or some other kind. Charlotte said, "All they see is through that filter. Whether it is anger, or past experiences, or trauma at home, that is all they see. They could be brilliant. But with that barrier in place, we are just going through the motions." With each grade level or school year that goes by, the students who processes those barriers of home, school, or mental health can see long term effects that could possibly affect their lives long-term as well as societies as well.

Long-term effects. With students continually falling behind in classroom learning and with the affects that accumulate because of this, falling to complete high school with their peers is a real possibility. Paula said,

Long term, if they continue to be at-risk, I'm sure they will drop out of high school. They

could then become wards of the state because of a lack of ability to support themselves. It

will be the tax payer's responsibility to care for them which just costs all of us.

Pam shared the same thoughts, "They are unfortunately going to go onto high school and most likely not finish unless something drastic happens." Tom also shared, "If that trend keeps on happening, they will be struggling forever, and eventually they will probably some will drop out of school. When they finally wake up, they are surviving by the skin of their teeth." Jennifer shared the same sentiments, "If they continue like that, they will wind up being drop outs. I don't know how long they can continue to move on that way." Donna see a long-term affect going into a cycle of such behaviors. Donna said,

One thing, I feel like one of the biggest reasons this is important if statistics show that if a child is at-risk and they fail or they get left behind chances are they are going to have a cycle and their kids are going to be that way too. If we can catch those at-risk kids and allow them to be successful we are ending poverty cycles. We are ending even abuse cycles, and so much that we are facing more and more in or society.

Jennifer also shared her concern for society when teachers see so many at-risk students in their classrooms. Jennifer said,

With at-risk students, I am worried. I see with each batch of students, I am seeing more and more students who are at-risk. We are identifying more and more that appear that have that no care attitude and in that risk level. I don't know how that will impact our society or the next generation to take over. That is really alarming where we are heading.

Susan goes on to share in the focus group,

I see it more as a self-esteem issue that they get into that mindset of well I can't do it now but I can work at it; it is more of I just can't do it. I'm not worth it. I'm worthless and then that takes them down a totally different path than what they originally thought. So more than dropout rate, you have early pregnancy, maybe teen suicide, and drug use to cope with that feeling of inadequacy.

Angela also shared within the focus group,

They carry that on when they have kids and it continues or they make the complete opposite and say I don't want my kids to go through this. But with the drop out, if they don't graduate, they don't go to college and today a bachelor's degree is what is equal to what we had as a high school diploma. It is really just a sheet of paper. You have to go on and get that degree.

With each participant came the insight on their perceptions on what causes a student to become at-risk for completing their education. But what also came about is the perceptions on what the needs of the at-risk student to begin to make them a success in the classroom and long term.

Theme Four: Needs of the At-Risk Student

The fourth theme provides an understanding for the first research question, "What are teachers' perceptions of the needs of at-risk students?" Teachers shared not only their understanding of those needs but also how meeting those needs can benefit the at-risk student and their success in the classroom. This information became evident in the individual interviews and the focus group. Eight participants spoke about their perceptions of what those needs were and how they could be met in the middle school classroom.

Relationships. One of the key elements of reaching the at-risk student seen in previous research of building a relationship with someone at the school. That same key was spoken about by several of the participants.

Amber stated in both her individual interview as well as in the focus group about the need for that relationship. In her individual interview she said,

> At-risk students, in my experience, the biggest positive impact is to develop that positive connection with the student developing that one-on-one relationship that they know they have someone in their corner that they have someone they can talk to whether it is about academics or whether what we target with our advisement program having that person they can come to not just necessarily just with school work but also across the board. They have that ally.

Amber went on to share in the focus group,

Making that connection is so supportive because a lot of times these students that by the time they get to middle school, they don't have the motivation to be successful for themselves. But if you can make that connection with them where they do not want to disappoint you, there is a better chance for success in the classroom.

Calvin also shared in the focus group,

We give them a safe environment. Someplace where they can grow and feel comfortable and have someone who has their back and are supportive. That they do not have that elsewhere. That is what we can do for them and create that buy-in that we will be there to support them.

The focus group brought out a great deal of the perceptions of the needs of at-risk students. Chad shared,

We need to be an example to them. Show them that you make mistakes and mistakes are necessary and that way they can feel comfortable making a mistake finally. When they see we make mistakes and we are open enough to share that says to them it is ok for them to make mistakes. It isn't fatal. It is something in the learning process.

Donna shared much the same idea of the importance of having a positive relationship with the at-risk student. Donna said,

When that kiddo knows that I care about them and I am concerned about them as person that makes such a difference. I can talk and talk all day, but until I have that relationship with them and they know I care, they are not going to care about anything that I say.

Angela saw the same benefit of that relationship in her science classes. She said, "For the kids is that you have to build a relationship with them first. Because they have to trust you. They have to trust your judgment and your feedback."

Charlotte shared a personal example of how that personal relationship and providing that safe environment made a huge influence on a student as well on herself. Charlotte said,

So many, many times I might not find out what the barrier is but as soon as I develop a relationship of trust and a relationship of I care about you and they buy into that, they will attempt new learning they thought they could never attempt before. I had a student several years ago who just could not read. I sat with him and talked with him and got to know him. Gradually, he started processing. But the best thing was when he was in the eigth grade, and at the beginning of the year, the teacher gave the students a questionnaire. And one of those questions was, who is your favorite teacher and why. He said, Mrs. R. because she made me believe I could. That got me through another 15 years of teaching. That more than formative assessments will get the at-risk student to move forward. Those truly at-risk with a barrier have to have someone to say, "I believe in you." And I took the time, and they attempt new learning because they believe I would never ask them to do something and fail at it. They had to believe that.

Building that relationship of trust and caring proved to be a powerful experience not just for the student, but for Charlotte as well.

Building confidence. In building the relationship as seen in Charlotte's story, the ability to have the student trust the teacher enough to try new challenges can build a sense of confidence the not seen and will begin to change a negative pattern the at-risk students have known in their educational experience. Amber shared how building confidence can change the at-risk student,

Every student, even at-risk students, are going to have strengths as well of their weaknesses. And to have those strengths recognized and give that student a chance to

shine is going to be one step on a positive path. Building confidence, a sense of pride they want to come to school because that feels good.

Amber also shared experiences of building that relationship and also building that confidence when working with at-risk students and low performing students for the previous two years. Amber said,

The last several years, I was part of that team that was more of the at-risk group of kids. I made it my purpose to find something that they were good at. You know all students have strengths and weakness. If we continue to look at only the weakness, we are just pushing the problem along for someone else, and they are just falling further and further behind. But by finding strengths, they can gain some confidence and start to think of themselves as different. Different in being successful. They really start to look at themselves in a different light.

Charlotte also shared how that confidence growing is so important. She said,

All I can do is that while they are in my classroom, I can show them that someone does care and does believe in them. I can offer them a little piece of success because that is really the only way to get them to move forward.

Charlotte also shared earlier that her belief is that success breeds success. Charlotte said, "If I take that one thing, I make them believe that they can do it and not just reteach them. I know this because I have seen it throughout my career." Jennifer likewise shared, "They have to believe that they can at least meet standards where they can pass. If they don't, there is little hope. It goes back to the family and the school to cater to those needs of the students." Angela also shared how building confidence with struggling and at-risk students makes a difference of success or failure. Angela said,

At first, they are just so scared to even try. I just try and reassure them and talk them

through that. But once they see a success and I call attention to that, then you really start

to see them want to have more and try more. They are willing to push a little further go a

little further, try something new.

Susan likewise sees the growth in academics when confidence is garnered. Susan shared,

As a language arts teacher, even though they are struggling with theme, I can see them

doing better. I point that out to them. Maybe they started out as a 20% and when we

tested again, they jumped to a 55% and then it goes up to a 65%. We started to really just

call those to attention. Before you know it, they are working harder than I ever thought.

Calvin shared in the focus group session how paying attention to building the confidence of the

at-risk student is so important. Calvin said,

If we see at the beginning of the year maybe they are not great at writing but they can

answer those questions in class in front of the other student, then while we are

hammering writing, I make a point of asking them question that I know they know. That

way, they can shine in class in front of their peers and in the long run maybe handle that

writing in a more positive manner.

Chad also shared in reaction to Calvin's comment, "Just letting them know, hey, I do know

something. I am good at something. And them knowing that you know; that goes a long way."

Being mindful of the needs of at-risk and struggling students sets a foundation for

moving through the process of learning in particular formative assessment. The participants also

shared how formative assessment has a definite value when working with such students.

Theme Five: Value of Formative Assessments When Working with Struggling Students

The fifth theme that emerged provided insight into research question three, "How do teachers perceive formative assessment impact the needs of at-risk students?" Teachers shared not only their understanding and insights of the value for those students who are deemed at-risk and also those who struggle within the classroom. This information became evident in the individual interviews and the focus group. All twelve participants spoke about their perceptions on how formative assessments help those students to be successful. What became evident through the interview process was that the participants saw the value of using formative assessments with at-risk students very similar to the value of using formative assessment overall. They shared much the same reasons for the value as they did for the academic value of formative assessments.

Tailors instruction. As in the case of the first theme, a benefit to the use of formative assessment is the ability to tailor instruction to specially meet the needs of students. The instruction can be used to allow students to have remediation on a learning target, but also allows for students who have proved their ability can have enrichment on the subject. The participants, however, shared how important this was to the struggling students. Donna sees the value with her students that she sees as at-risk or moving toward that status. Donna shared,

> I think it is important all kids but especially those at-risk students. They do not have the same tools so to speak in order to understand what they need to do on a daily basis. When I can assess more frequently and be able to drive instruction and meet with kids one-on-one, I can meet those personal needs.

In Donna's social studies classroom, it can become evident quickly those students who do not have a foundation for growth. Pam and Rebecca both shared how that weak foundation

affects students with gaps in learning within the math classroom. Pam shared, "When it comes to math, not having those basic skills really prevents kids from moving on. If they can't multiply and divide, how are they going to go on and do an algebra problem." Rebecca's experience was much the same. Rebecca said, "Missing years of basic concept to build upon places them more and more at-risk, at least in math, of remaining at-risk." When asked how do you attempt to fill in those gaps, both teachers shared the value of finding those gaps and providing remediation for those gaps. Pam said,

Those are the students that I am sitting with one-on-one or pairing up with what I call a "mini me." After a formative assessment, they can go to another student expert in the class for more remediation before we move on to the next activity.

Pam sees that building a sense of trust and integrity within the classroom allows for students to conference with each other and provide feedback to other classmates. Rebecca also shared, "I'm having a one-on-conversation with them. We work and rework the problems together until they get it." That constant nature of working with a student and giving attention on the specific academic needs of that student, is the foundational way to fill in those gaps. Tom, who also teaches math, said, "Formative assessment acts the same way as with any student. It becomes very clear where the gaps are. They will have the benefit of remediation and re-teaching and extra practice."

Jennifer sees the formative assessment process as one where the student can begin to see their own mistakes and their own gaps of learning. Within her science classroom, she sees students who are often negative about the formative assessment practice. When they are pulled on numerous occasions for remediation, they might begin to feel like a failure. Jennifer said,

"When they begin to see what they are missing, and what they need to work on, then that gives them a boost. When they begin to see those gains, then they work harder."

Build relationships. Conversations with students during the feedback process is seen as a value to the formative assessment process. Several participants shared how the one-on-one discussions and point out not only their gaps in learning but also where their strengths are build a stronger relationship and trust. When trust is garnered, students will work harder. Charlotte shared that in her 35 years of teaching either in kindergarten or sixth grade, sitting and talking to students and gaining that trust adds more value than anything else. She went on to share,

> Ideally, I am sitting and talking with them and really looking at them, so that they know I'm there for them. It might be writing, it might be reading. Whatever it is, they know I'm there for them and with that comes the trust. With that trust now, they see learning in a different realm.

That building of trust can only happen with the one-on-one conversations. Amber shared some of the same sentiments. Amber said that in her classroom and particularly with the at-risk students, when she can sit and work with them on an individual basis at the beginning of the year and gain that trust, she often sees long term positive impacts. Amber said,

> The process of formative assessment and the relationship that can be built with a student can be more personal relationship. Because the student is also seeing that the teacher has his or her individual needs. When I find out those academic needs, I also find out more about them. I work with them personally so that they know I care about their learning. Through those conversations about grammar or writing or anything, I find out about them. I can then build on that. I can ask about them and share about me and my family. I then begin to knock down walls. But it all starts at a point of non-threatening positive

feedback. Formative assessment allows me to start to see them at an academic level. The conversation allows me to them on a personal level and then they see me as a person. One who cares about them.

Amber often sees that with that time built through the initial academic focus pays off in the long run. Those at-risk or struggling students often perform higher in her class than they do in other classes.

Angela sees the process of formative assessment as building a sense of trust because the students realize she is not going to give up on them. Susan said,

They know I'm going to be constant about it and say ok well you didn't get this last time lets redo this, and then we are going to do it again and again and again. That is stability for them. It really does make a difference for those with a special education issue or a home issue, whatever it may be. It is that consistency of having that teacher come at you again and again. Knowing, I am not going to give up on them.

It is that constant small check-ups through the formative assessment process allows for the building of trust between her and her students.

Tom has the reputation as an educator who can get students to perform that others teachers are not able to. Tom attributes that success with the one-on-one work he does with the students and showing them that he cares about them and their needs. Tom said, "They know that I know. They know we aren't going to leave you behind. We are going to check and recheck and work and rework until we get it. That is, it." When Tom's students know that he knows their needs and that he cares enough to continue to work with them and continue to check up on them, builds a relationship of trust and caring.

Chad sees the use of formative assessment in building bridges. He said,

They often come in expecting to fail because they have always failed or someone in the

past has made them believes they couldn't do it. So, when I slowly show them through

these checks that I see they can do it then they are going to try more and trust me more.

That beginning of changing the at-risk student's inner dialogue comes from what several

participants saw was the building of confidence through the formative assessment process.

Confidence. Several participants saw a need for at-risk student was building confidence

within the student and changing that inner dialogue from a negative and more apathetic voice to

a more positive one. Participants also shared that this need can be met many times through the

process of formative assessments. Six participants shared how sharing with students' specific

data was a means of showing the students that they were growing and being more successful.

That sharing of information is a vehicle to build a sense of confidence within the student. Angela

shared how she uses starting data and growth numbers to build that confidence during the focus

group sessions. Angela said,

We share that with them and that kid who made the 50 but share that with them that they

moved from a 15 to 50. You made more growth than most of this class did. That gives

them that feeling of success. Even though they did not make the distinguished mark, they

get to see, oh wow I did do something. Give them a chance to be successful in even little

things they will begin to take bigger risks and try to be successful in others.

This sharing of data was also shared by Amber. Pretest and interim data at the county level are

placed in brackets of beginning, developing, proficient, or distinguished. The administration at

the school looks at the growth of each student and shares that information during conversations

with the teacher. Amber previously looked at those students who fell into the distinguished

category and often based her own success on how many students fell in that category. However,

looking at individual student growth numbers brought a different perspective for her. She then began to share that individual growth with all her students. She has found that in showing growth of those lower students, she has seen greater success that she has in the previous years. Amber said,

> If I share with a student you got a 52 on the mid-term, that says to them I failed. But If I share with them their starting score of 15 and moving up to a 52, that is almost what a 40% growth move. You can just see the change in their faces and their body and how they present themselves. Then that conversation starts with what they want to make at the semester final. Then they know they have something to work for and something they know they have already done.

Susan also shared during the focus group her thoughts on this sharing of data. She said,

> Sharing those numbers with those kids who are expecting to fail is game changing. No, you didn't make a 90. But look at what you did do, you move from a 60 to 75. I even share with my standard class their percentage of growth from pretest to interim to post test. Usually all they see if the numbers of the gifted classes. But I point out to them that their percentage of growth was actually higher than the gifted classes. You can see the change.

Jennifer also shared during the focus group that looking at the data of her low performing students and giving them an incentive to do better on the next test has come with success. Angela said,

> I sat with each of them and talked about their starting scores. We set a goal together on how much they wanted to grow. I emphasize that they need to be practical. I have a board that they can have their name added to. When the next test comes up, we look again and

see what their growth was and if they met their goal, their name goes on the board.

Seeing their name up there is grand to them.

Susan also shared,

I do the same with reading goals. Yes, my gifted kids will read about 1,000 pages in a month. But getting those struggling kids to read 300 pages in a month is something. If they reach their goal, they get their name up. You see kids checking for their name when I put them up. They just beam.

Celebrating those small goals begins to change how struggling students see themselves within the school community.

Paula uses data from her pop quizzes to motivate students to study material covered in class. The quick recognition of those pop-quizzes builds confidence, but also pointing out to those students who have struggled how they have come also builds that confidence to try harder and to help develop a can-do attitude. Paula said,

First, they get recognition for missing five or less. The next time when they miss three or less and are still standing you can just the pride. And when they finally make it to the end standing, it just makes them to want to have that again and believe boy I can do this. Now when it starts to show up in the bigger tests or quizzes, that really makes a difference.

Paula sees that with the smaller success she also sees struggling student putting forth the effort to be successful on the summative assessment.

Pam shared that in the area of math, each test whether it is an interim or semester final is in her terms a formative because there is knowledge to be gained on what needs to be worked on. Pam said,

If we are looking long term to what is expected on the End of the Grade test, those other

tests become formative information. When we look at how each student is moving along

and I can show them that growth or what needs to be taken care of, those numbers

become invaluable. Then I am saying, look where you were and look where you need to

go. It also gives them something to keep their eye on. Something to work for.

Through the tailoring of instruction and the building of relationships that builds confidence in the

at-risk or struggling students are what the participants saw as a value for the formative

assessment process for those students. Each of the themes supported the three research questions

guiding this study.

Research Question Responses

RQ1: What are teachers' perceptions of the needs of at-risk students?

The first research question for this study was designed to discover the perceptions of the

needs of the at-risk student in the middle school classroom. The themes of the causes of students

becoming at-risk and the theme of needs of at-risk students answered this research question.

Several subthemes emerged with those two themes during the one-on-one interviews and the

focus group session. Environmental causes, such as an unstable home life, home economics and

some kind of trauma, whether that be a divorce or a family member losing a job, can cause a

student to be at-risk. Several participants mentioned that as a reason for a student becoming at

risk. When a student is over-loaded with stress from home, that stress carries over to other areas

of their life. As Charlotte commented about the at-risk student, "They don't have the time or the

energy to deal with what I'm teaching them because that barrier is so personal and big. They

drag it around with them all the time." The emotional baggage that many at-risk students come to

school with was also mention by Angela, "If a family member loses a job or they suddenly have

a different income or something happens catastrophic to the family such as a death in the family can also put them at-risk."

Likewise, the participants mentioned how previous school experiences caused students to become at risk. When students have a negative school experiences, it can lead to gaps in learning that will be crucial for future learning that places the student behind their peers. Amber shared during her one-on-one interview how falling behind in skills begins to become a cumulative problem. Amber said, "It maybe they have a year where they fall behind and that gap continues to widen." That may be bolstered through negative messages sent through previous teachers. Those teachers who start to plant a negative message that the at-risk student carries around with them for years. Chad said, "Teachers can cause that because of their attitude toward Students who go an extended period of time with a learning disability that is undiagnosed not only leads to failure within each grade but the negative attitude about their own competence within the classroom. Angela shared how this school year she has had students who have finally been identified with a learning disability. Those students were falling through the cracks of the system. Angela said, "Being identified in the eighth grade really places them at-risk for the past eight years almost nine years." Such long-term effects can influence the mental health of students that develop a sense of apathy about the school setting and a depression that they will never succeed. Paula mentioned such side effects of the mental health of the middle school at-risk student. Paula shared, "In middle school their hormones are changing and all that as gone on before just really plays itself out. That just compounds them already being at-risk." With each participant reflecting on what causes a student to be at-risk, the participants also saw specific needs within the at-risk students that was important to address for long term success.

The second theme to answer the first research question was the needs of at-risk students. Beyond a doubt the importance of having a positive relationship with someone within the school setting was the most mentioned within this theme. Amber said in the focus group,

Making that connection is so supportive because a lot of times these students they don't necessarily that by the time they get to middle school they don't have the motivation to be successful for themselves. But, if you can make that connection with them where they do not want to disappoint you, there is a better chance for success in the classroom.

Making that connection in a positive manner with a teacher or someone within the school setting can begin to change the inner dialogue that has been a negative theme for too long. Building of relationships also brings about a sense of trust that can help the at-risk student to begin to take chances with more learning goals. Angela also shared in the focus group,

Along with what you were saying, you have to give them opportunities to be successful. You have to identify areas that you know they are strong in and you have to give them a chance to be successful in even little things. They will begin to take bigger risks and try to be successful in others.

That sense of success brings about a change of their inner dialogue. It was clear for this theme that the positive impact starts with a relationship with the student.

RQ2: How do middle school teachers perceive formative assessment in general?

The second research question for this study was designed to understand how the middle school teachers perceive formative assessment. The themes of the academic value of formative assessment and the difficulties of implementing formative assessments. The values that were brought out in regards to formative assessment was geared toward how formative assessments looks at each student and their individual needs as to where they are in regards to a particular

learning target. All 12 of the participants noted the formative assessment process breaks down learning to check to see where students are at the time of learning. Tom said, "Formative assessment is a check point in how we are doing. What is going on? Do we get it?" That check point was echoed by all of the participants. With those constant checks allows for the teachers to meet specific needs of students. Those needs could be remediation or it could be enrichments. Rebecca shared in her one-on-one interview,

I perform them it is the one-on-one conversation I have with each student. Because we go through and talk about what they missed and they go back and they rework. I make them rework it until they get it right. So that one-on-one conversation and me seeing their work in the moment with them.

Along with the remediation Amber shared,

I would group students according to what their possibly their weaknesses are and work with those small group on those weaknesses. Or group students according to their strengths and then look at enrichment for those particular groups. We did that recently with an essay. I pulled the students who had scored higher on certain aspects of the essay and then I worked with individually to see how they could take it to the next step. It is always about personalizing for the student according to his or her needs.

Using the data to see where each student is, not only those who do not understand, but also those who have shown mastery was valued by the participants. With that providing instruction on immediate needs allow for all range of students to grow and build a strong confidence. Rebecca shared what she sees on this topic in her eighth-grade classroom. Rebecca said,

Formatives helps it improve especially if what I'm trying to do get them to understand that underlying concepts and they can be successful, I'm hoping it makes that the next

piece they can be successful. So that formative assessment for me is helping me to get

that piece together and understand wait a minute, I do get this, I'm just making simple

mistakes that I need to learn to correct.

With the value of formative assessment clearly placed, the 11 out of 12 participants shared how there were difficulties to implementing formative assessment to its fullest.

Time was mentioned by 11 out of 12 participants during the one-on-one interviews. Formative assessment provides the teacher that information as to where that particular student is within the learning target. However, the pacing of curriculum calendars often prohibits the time to step back and reteach that necessary skills to fill in gaps of student learning. Pam shared a similar sentiment as the other participants did. Pam said,

In an ideal world, those are the kids I am working with one-on-one, when those other kids

get it. But again, with time I don't always have the opportunity. In an ideal world those

kids won't be at-risk because I have the time to spend with them that they need. But

unfortunately, we don't get the time that we need.

Charlotte referred to the crunch of curriculum pacing as a "tread mill in her interview." That pressure to move on toward the summative county assessment provides a great deal of pressure. However, another block is the sheer size of number of students in a classroom. Amber shared in the focus group, "When you have 33 students in a classroom, it is so hard to meet the needs of all those students or to individualize what each student needs." With the increase in class size, having a common formative assessment that is a one size fits all for a grade level was seen as something that does little to influence real growth with students. Susan shared, providing that context for the larger classes earlier will help the reader here too,

That as a group, we are targeting a special standard it should be left up to the teacher what is best for the student not to say that all of you need to be doing more of this. Well my students are different than the teachers down the hallway. Why do I have to do the same formative assessment as them if I know they have shown me they have mastered that concept? That to me is wasteful, and I could be doing a formative assessment on something that would useful to my kids not someone else's students. That is also pitting the gifted against the standard or special ed kids. That is not a fair comparison.

With the value and difficulties of formative assessment, the participants also had a strong view on the value of formative assessments when working with struggling students.

RQ3: How do teachers perceive formative assessments impact the needs of at-risk students?

Teachers shared not only their understanding and insights of the value for those students who are deemed at-risk or who struggle within the classroom. This information became evident in the individual interviews and the focus group. All twelve participants spoke about their perceptions on how formative assessments help those students to be successful. What became evident through the interview process was that the participants saw the value of using formative assessments with at-risk students very similar to the value of using formative assessment overall. The process of formative assessment is a frequent check of student's learning. When gaps of learning are found, the teacher can take that opportunity to meet those needs. Calvin said, "It slows down the unit. For those students who are at-risk and struggling to learn, I think it gives them the second or third opportunity to master the material before the test." By slowing down the unit, formative assessment also gives the teacher the opportunity to meet with the student one-on-one. That conversation of expectations, of learning can begin to develop a relationship of trust

with the at-risk student. It is through that trust that they can begin to take risks with their own learning and begin to develop a confidence they might not have seen before. Charlotte shared,

> Ideally, I am sitting and talking with me and really looking at them, so that they know I'm there for them. It might be writing, it might be reading. Whatever it is, they know I'm there for them and with that comes the trust. With that trust now, they see learning in a different realm.

With the confidence built, comes a different dialogue within the at-risk student that can move them to a productive place.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand middle school teachers' perceptions of the impact of formative assessment on the needs of at-risk students at a Metro Atlanta middle school. Chapter Four of the present study gave an overview of each of the participants. In this chapter, the results of the study that were garnered from a questionnaire, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group interview, were organized into five themes that relate to each of the three research questions. The themes were: the academic value of formative assessments; the difficulties of implementing formative assessments; causes that place students at-risk; the needs of the at-risk students; and, the value of formative assessments when working with struggling students.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand middle school teachers' perceptions of the impact of formative assessments on the needs of students at risk of not completing high school. The participants in the study were 12 teachers with five to 30 plus years of experience, in all grade levels and content areas. This chapter presents a summary of the findings and a discussion of the results. In addition, the empirical and theoretical implications of the study are explicated, the limitations of the study are described, and suggestions for future research are articulated.

Summary of Findings

Data for this study was gathered using a questionnaire, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group. In analyzing the data, five major themes became clear: 1) the general academic value of formative assessments; 2) the difficulties of implementing formative assessments; 3) the causes that place students at risk; 4) the needs of at-risk students; and 5) the particular value of formative assessments when working with at-risk students. All participants in the study shared a positive attitude about formative assessments and a working knowledge of the use of formative assessments. In addition, although a majority of the participants acknowledged difficulties with implementing formative assessments, their attitudes regarding the overall utility of formative assessments remained positive. Participants were also generally knowledgeable about the causes and needs of at-risk students; however, participants had mixed perceptions about the impact of formative assessments on at-risk students.

The first research question examined teachers' perceptions of the needs of at-risk students. This was addressed by the third and fourth major themes that emerged from the study:

the causes and needs of at-risk students. All participants perceived that environmental causes, often including an unstable home life, were the determining factors in placing students at risk. Additionally, 75% of participants noted that having a positive relationship with someone in the school setting, such as a teacher, was vital for the success of at-risk student, and that it was crucial for these students to have a sense of trust in a teacher who believed in their abilities.

The study's second research question examined how the participating teachers perceived formative assessment in general. This was addressed by the first and second themes that emerged from the study: the academic value of formative assessment and the difficulties of implementing formative assessments. All participants felt that the academic value of formative of assessments was positive, and all mentioned that the ability to tailor instruction to meet the needs of student learning was an important element. However, all of the participants, with the exception of one, observed that the time required for optimal implementation of formative assessments was a major difficulty. Another implementation hurdle was the curriculum pace set by the county academic calendar; teachers felt that standardized testing schedules and other curriculum deadlines prevented them from using the formative assessments to provide appropriate remediation and effective feedback in their ongoing instruction.

The study's third and final research question examined how teachers perceive formative assessments' impacts on the needs of at-risk students. This was addressed by the final major theme that emerged from the data: the value of using formative assessments with struggling students. All study participants noted the positive impact that formative assessments had on struggling students and spoke at length in interviews about their success using formative assessments with struggling students. All participants noted that the one-on-one conversation of the assessment process itself helps builds a positive relationship with the student which in turn

helps cultivate a sense of safety and trust. All participants also perceived that establishing trust leads students to take academic risks that in turn leads to increased confidence.

Discussion

Theoretical Literature

The study results confirmed that Bandura's (1989) social cognitive theory is applicable to formative assessments as used in middle schools. Social cognitive theory includes four levels needed to achieve student self-efficacy—that is, their belief in being able to accomplish a goal using their own skills or capabilities. In the context of this study, student self-efficacy indicated that the student was able to manage learning situations in the school setting. Participants in this study shared how close teacher observance and feedback on student work allowed the students to see where they were in the learning process; students were then better able to self-evaluate their own learning and goals. The student-teacher conversation inherent in the formative assessment feedback process can therefore initiate changes in students' self-reactions and inner dialogues, those personal, internal messages that are played over within a person that can come from both positive and negative experiences (Bandura, 1997), and lead them towards self-efficacy regarding their ability to accomplish typical classroom learning tasks.

Moreover, previous research has indicated that student attitudes begin to change when success is achieved on learning targets (Hattie, 2008). Angela shared that "to grow [students'] confidence is to see them move forward." In other words, a sense of self-efficacy can only be achieved when a person begins to feel and experience success, and participants in this study felt that formative assessments were an important part of this process.

Empirical Literature

Formative assessments and the needs of at-risk students have both been well studied as separate topics; however, they have not been as well studied in combination, and this study sought to bridge that gap (Allensworth, 2005; Balfanz, et al., 2014; Bowers, 2010; Hattie, 2008; Hattie & Timperley 2007; Jimerson, 2001; Slaten et al., 2015). The first theme to emerge from this study's data indicated that the results of this study were in broad agreement with previous research indicating numerous positive aspects of formative assessments, particularly regarding how they act as catalysts for positive learning outcomes. Tom shared the following feelings on the process:

> The benefit is I have my finger on their pulse; I know exactly where we are. It tells me who is struggling. It tells me what kinds of errors they are making. It also tells me what I need to do to fix it. When I see the need, then I address it at that time. Not only does it show me who needs remediation, it also tells me who needs enrichment. Then they can go off in another direction.

The second broad theme to emerge from the study's results related to the difficulties of implementing formative assessments and included the barriers to effective implementation as identified by participants. Only one participant reported no negative feelings about formative assessments. All other participants indicted that time was a huge hurdle when trying to effectively implement formative assessments and provide the degree and level of feedback necessary. Previous research has identified four levels of feedback that are important for helping students achieve progress: feedback which provides students the opportunity to receive information from the teacher; feedback which teaches students how to access information; feedback which teaches students how to evaluate information; and feedback which teaches

students how to move forward to the next level or go back (Hattie & Timperely, 2007).

However, the rigid pacing of county curriculum calendars, particularly the need to constantly

advance toward pending interim assessments and end-of-semester tests, forces teachers to move

at a pace where they find it difficult to stop and reteach or give effective feedback to students

who need it. Donna stated, "Without a doubt, the hardest part of formative assessments is the

time. I know theoretically it is important to give immediate feedback but the reality is that there

just isn't time. We are on this topic, and we have to move onto another topic to keep pace."

    The third theme of this study addressed participants' perceptions of the causes that place

students at risk. These causal factors are a topic that has been studied extensively (Allensworth,

2005; Balfanz et al., 2014; Bowers, 2010; Freeman et al., 1999; Jimerson, 2001; Jimmeson, et

al., 2006; Wang & Fredicks, 2014). Moreover, at-risk students come to this distinction long

before they are given the official designation of being at risk (Allensworth, 2005; Balfanz, et al.,

2014). Research shows that being part of a single-parent home, having a family member living

on public assistance, or having a sibling that has previously dropped out of school, rank among

the top indicators of being at risk to not complete high school (Bowers, 2010; Freeman et al.,

1999; Jimerson et al., 2006). The results of this study indicated that all participants were broadly

aware of and agreed with these indicators of risk. One participant shared:

    There are lots of things that go into an at-risk student. It might be that their social

    economic level is low. It could be they are having domestic problems at home. Parent

    might be divorcing. It might be a divorced family. It might be students who are

    experiencing medical issues with their family or some kind of trauma. Something that is

    going on in their personal life usually can cause a negative affect here in the classroom.

Overall, study participants noted that when a student goes home to an unstable home life, outside learning and concentration is hard to achieve. One participant stated that "students are going to be at-risk for home and socioeconomic issues. Those kinds of backgrounds that make it hard for them."

Another factor that participants felt to be indicative of student risk was previous school experiences. Participants stated that negative early school experiences play a role in initiating negative student attitudes and inner dialogues. Participants also mentioned having previously ineffective teachers as a risk factor, along with a history of missing school and having gaps in learning, which in turn lead to difficulties with further productive learning. These beliefs are all supported by research (Bowers, 2010; Hattie, 2009; Somers et al., 2009). However, one important risk factor related to negative previous school experiences that was not mentioned by any participants was a student being retained in a grade. Research indicates that having been retained at any grade level during elementary through secondary school is in fact the strongest indicator of a student being at risk (Bauwens & Hourcade, 1992; Bowers, 2010; Jimmerson et al., 2006; Rush & Vitale, 1995: Somers et al., 2009). This retention begins a path of student disengagement, which can be defined as "the process of detaching from school, disconnecting from its norms and expectations, reducing effort and involvement at school and withdrawing from a commitment to school and to school completion" (Balfanz et al., 2007, p. 223). Without that commitment to school, simple tasks such as taking notes, studying for tests, and being a productive part of the classroom cannot take place.

The fourth theme to emerge from this study concerned the needs of at-risk students. Numerous studies have shown that at-risk students have specific needs that, if not addressed, will hinder their further educational attempts (Allensworth, 2005; Balfanz et al., 2014; Neild et al.,

2007; Zimmerman, 2008). Participants in this study broadly agreed with prior research that the most important need for at-risk students is having a positive relationship with someone inside the school (Converse & Lignugaris, 2009; Jimerson, et al., 2006; Murray & Pianta, 2007). Such relationships allow students to have a sense of belonging at school and are key to continued education success (Slaten et al., 2015). This belief was shared by study participants, as Angela stated that

> At-risk students, in my experience, the biggest positive impact is to develop that positive connection with the student developing that one-on-one relationship that they know they have someone in their corner that they have someone they can talk to whether it is about academics or whether what we target with our advisement program having that person they can come to not just necessarily just with school work but also across the board. They have that ally.

Calvin shared a similar view:

> We give them a safe environment. Someplace where they can grow and feel comfortable and have someone who has their back and are supportive. That they do not have that elsewhere. That is what we can do for them and create that buy in that we will be there to support them.

> In addition to having a positive relationship with someone in the school setting, research has indicated a need for at-risk students to build confidence, which can in turn allow the student to change their inner dialogue to promote future growth in academic areas (Munoz & Dossett, 2004). The participants of this study also agreed with this need. Amber stated that

> Every student, even at-risk students, are going to have strengths as well as their weaknesses. And to have those strengths recognized and give that student a chance to

shine is going to be one step on a positive path. Building confidence, a sense of pride

they want to come to school because that feels good.

Angela stated that

At first, they are just so scared to even try. I just try and reassure them and talk them

through that. But once they see a success and I call attention to that, then you really start

to see them want to have more and try more. They are willing to push a little further go a

little further, try something new.

It is also worth noting that among participants in this study, those who taught standard-level

classes provided the most replies regarding the needs of at-risk students. Participants who

primarily taught advanced or gifted-level classes provided more limited responses. This could be

due to a lack of regular exposure to students who struggle in the classroom. Conversely,

participants who taught in collaborative settings provided more in-depth responses.

The fifth and final theme to emerge from this study, concerning the value of formative

assessments when working with at-risk students, brought some of the most interesting findings.

Research suggests that the process of formative assessment provides students with the

opportunity to receive information from the teacher, to learn how to access and evaluate the

information, and to move forward to the next level or go back and assume the responsibility of

gaining that information (Bell & Cowie, 2001; Brookhart et al., 2008; Hattie & Timperley,

2007). At-risk students approach a class or school year with a goal in sight but may become

overwhelmed by the process; breaking learning situations down into manageable bites through

feedback can allow them to see success, which in turn can help change their inner dialogue and

allow them to succeed, possibly for the first time, in an education setting (Hattie, 2008; MacMath

et al., 2009; Thornton, 2010).

Overall, participants in the present study saw the value of using formative assessments with at-risk students as equal to the value of using formative assessments overall. The ability to tailor instruction through small checks allows the teacher to see progress (or lack thereof) for the student. When teachers and students sit down to go through assignments and feedback, teachers begin to develop relationships and dialogue with at-risk students that builds a sense of trust and safety for the students. When learning gaps are found, the teacher can take the opportunity to meet those needs. Calvin noted that "it slows down the unit. For those students who are struggling or at-risk, I think it gives them the second or third opportunity to master material before the test." Charlotte said that

Ideally, I am sitting and talking with them and really looking at them, so that they know I'm there for them. It might be writing, it might be reading. Whatever it is, they know I'm there for them and with that comes the trust. With that trust now, they see learning in a different realm.

However, similar to the findings from the fourth theme, participants who taught in predominately accelerated or gift classroom had somewhat different perceptions from participants who primarily taught in standard or collaborative classrooms with academically challenging students. Teachers in the former category felt that the formative assessment process was equal in effectiveness for all students and did not see an added value for at-risk students. These teachers gave limited explanations for how the needs of at-risk students could be met through the formative assessment process. However, participants who primarily taught in standard or collaborative classrooms presented a clearer understanding of how the formative assessment process can help at-risk students.

Implications

Theoretical

This study has a variety of implications for teachers using formative assessments in middle school classrooms that contain at-risk and struggling students. The main outlines of Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory, which serves as a critical theoretical foundation for working with formative assessments and meeting the needs of at-risk students, was described by participants. Participants also indicated their understanding of the need to keep the foundational beliefs of formative assessments predominately in focus so as not to lose sight of their overall purpose. By purposefully including formative assessments in instruction planning, the participants are ensuring that they will meet the needs of all levels of students.

Empirical

Data provided by the present study largely agreed with previously documented research about using formative assessments in middle school classrooms. However, as framed by this study, there exists a gap in the literature between the research on formative assessments and how, specifically, formative assessments can meet the needs of at-risk students. As teachers described their outlook on formative assessments and at-risk students, a division became apparent between teachers who do and do not have a large population of struggling students in their classrooms. Those who do not saw a limited correlation between the formative assessment process and meeting the needs of at-risk students, whereas those teachers who do have a large population of struggling students in their classrooms had a clearer understanding of how using the formative assessment process in the classroom could particularly help meet the needs of at-risk students.

Study participants also described their difficulties with implementing formative assessments in their classrooms, leading to a better empirical understanding of why formative

assessments are not used more widely or effectively. However, despite the difficulties expressed by the teachers who participated in the study, each participant stated that they continue to use formative assessments because they see true value in the process. Nonetheless, understanding implementation barriers and challenges, along with their implications for all stakeholders, is important for improving the effectiveness of formative assessments.

Practical

Participants expressed multiple challenges with practical implications for teachers using formative assessments, particularly difficulties related to time and calendar pacing, as well as class size. Administrators and other policymakers must consider these implications when making decisions that have a direct impact on classroom teachers. Time restraints, in particular, have a measurable impact on teachers' ability to give proper feedback to students, and to productively use the data collected through formative assessments. Furthermore, at-risk students may be working below grade level despite being fully capable of the learning tasks; even gifted students can be at risk. Teachers, even those working in gifted or accelerated settings, need to be fully aware of the needs of at-risk students, because being able to effectively identify those students and be aware of their needs is vital for their success. Administrators need to provide necessary professional development to educators on the variety of needs of at-risk students.

Delimitations and Limitations

The primary delimitation of this study was the decision to limit participants to teachers who had gone through the two-year formative assessment professional development at Georgia Middle School. Furthermore, teachers who did not use formative assessments at least once a week in their classrooms were excluded from the study. These delimitations were set because it was important that each teacher in the study not only had a working knowledge of formative

assessments, but also had practical experience using formative assessments with student of all levels. However, a significant limitation introduced by these needs is the fact that all participants were teachers at a single site, Georgia Middle School. At this particular site, the administration expects that teachers use formative assessments on a regular basis, which may have had an impact on the perceptions and responses shared by the participants.

Recommendations for Future Research

The current study sought to find common themes in the reported benefits and challenges of using formative assessments among a group of middle school teachers who value formative assessment. Overall, participants indicated difficulties in effectively implementing formative assessments due to time restrictions and class size. Given that these constraints are common to teachers in many different educational settings, a study of teachers who use formative assessments effectively in standard classrooms where these contains are present could provide practical solutions. Case studies of effective teachers could also provide strategies that other teachers can implement in their own classrooms. Additionally, while this study examined teacher perceptions of formative assessments and their use with struggling students, further research is needed regarding the perceptions of administrators who have sought to implement formative assessments at their schools. Their experiences supporting teachers who struggle to implement formative assessments due to time restrictions and class size could be of significant practical value. Finally, while this study examined teacher's perceptions of formative assessments and their impact on the needs of at-risk students, valuable research could be conducted on the at-risk gifted student and the teacher's perceptions of causes and the needs of those students.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand middle school teachers' perceptions of the impact of formative assessment on the needs of at-risk students at a Metro Atlanta middle school. The study overwhelmingly found that all participants valued formative assessments in their classrooms. However, all but one of the participants felt that adjustments are needed to loosen time restrictions, which are a barrier to effective implementation of formative assessments. If teachers are under a constant strain of calendar pacing and class size, they may ultimately move away from the process for the sake of time.

Additionally, the study found that all participants had a good understanding of the causal factors of risk; however, teacher perceptions of how the formative assessment process impacts at-risk students were mixed. Participants who taught in standard classroom settings provided fuller descriptions and had more insights regarding how the formative assessment process benefits at-risk or struggling students. In contrast, participants who primarily taught more accelerated or gifted classrooms had a narrower view of the impact that formative assessments have on at-risk students. However, at-risk students are found in both standard and gifted classrooms and being able to effectively identify those students and address their needs is vital for their success. The most important implication to emerge from this study, therefore, is the need for all teachers to be able to identify students at risk and to meet their needs, regardless of classroom type.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

IRB Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 23, 2018

Gaye B. Walk
IRB Approval 3148.022318: Middle School Classroom Teacher's Perceptions of the Impact of Formative Assessments on the Needs of At-risk Students: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Gaye B. Walk,

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

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

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

The Graduate School

APPENDIX B

Recruitment Letter

Dear:

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of my research is to understand middle school teachers' perceptions of the impact of formative assessment on the needs of at-risk students. I am writing to request your participation in my study.

If you have been a teacher at McConnell Middle for the past five years, have five or more years of public school teaching experience, currently use formative assessment in your classroom, are 18 years of age or older, and are willing to participate, you will be asked to complete a questionnaire as an initial screening, complete a recorded, individual interview, and take part in a focus group. You will have the opportunity to review all transcribed interviews to establish that your words transcribed were as you intended. If you identify any needed changes, you will be asked to meet with me to discuss clarifications. The estimated time commitment to complete all research activities will be about three and a half hours. Your name and other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To indicate your willingness to participate, please complete the attached consent form and screening questionnaire. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Completed items should be returned to the researcher via school email within one week. Should you desire not to participate, no response is necessary.

If you qualify for the research based on your responses to the screening questionnaire, I will follow-up with you to schedule an interview.

Sincerely,

Gaye Walk
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University

APPENDIX C

Name _____

1. Years of teaching experience

2. Type of teaching certificate held

3. Fields of Concentration

4. What grade level do you teach now?

5. What academic subject do you teach?

6. How long have you taught this academic subject?

7. How long have you taught at this school?

8. Do you use formative assessments in your classroom?

9. Approximately, how often do you use formative assessments in your classes?

Once a week   2-3 times weekly   Daily   Other

10. What is the primary objective for using formative assessments in your classes?

11. How does the information gathered through formative assessments affect your teaching?

APPENDIX D

Individual Interview Questions

1. What is your definition of an at-risk student?

2. How do you believe a student becomes at-risk?

3. What is your understanding of formative assessment?

4. What aspect of formative assessment do you find beneficial?

5. What aspect of formative assessment do you find negative?

6. How do you perceive formative assessments impact the academic growth of middle school students?

7. How do you perceive the formative assessment process impacts the at-risk student?

8. How do you perceive the formative assessment process impacts a student's academic success?

9. What other thoughts do you have on the subject of at-risk students?

10. What other thoughts do you have on the subject of formative assessments?

APPENDIX E

Focus Group Questions

1. What are teachers' perceptions of the needs of at-risk students?

2. How do middle school teachers perceive formative assessment in general?

3. How do teachers perceive formative assessments impact the needs of at-risk students?

Appendix F

Review of Transcripts Email

Attached you will find the file of your individual interview and (if applicable) the focus group transcript. Please review these files to make sure that the true intent of your answers was made through the transcription(s). If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me and we will meet at your convenience. If there are no changes to be made, simply reply to this email stating that you agree with the transcribed data.

Thank you for your time with this study.

Gaye Walk

APPENDIX G

Teacher Participant Consent Form

MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOM TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF
FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS ON THE NEEDS OF AT-RISK STUDENTS: A
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Gaye B. Walk
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study that investigates middle school teacher's perception of using formative assessment when working with the at-risk student. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a middle school teacher who is working with at-risk students. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Gaye B. Walk, a doctoral candidate in the Education Department at Liberty University is conducting this study.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to discover how the teacher views working with at-risk students and their particular needs and how formative assessments could possibly meet those needs.
Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following: a) complete a consent form, b) participate in a confidential face-to-face interview with the researcher, c) complete a confidential questionnaire, and d) participate in a focus group that will consist of 6 or more middle teachers from your school and the researcher.

 The face-to-face interview and focus group will be audio recorded. The face-to-face interview will take place once at a specified location within the school during office hours and will be approximately 40 minutes in length. One questionnaire will be given to you to complete once during school hours at a specified location within the school and the allotted timeframe will be less than 20 minutes. The focus group will take place second with the individual interview taking place last. If you cannot complete the surveys at that time, I will schedule another time and date to complete the surveys. The focus group will take place once during school hours at a specified location within the school and the allotted timeframe will be 60 minutes.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:
The risks are no more than would be encountered in everyday life
The benefits to participation are that teachers who participate in the study will become more aware of the needs of the at-risk student and how formative assessment can meet those needs.

Liberty University will not provide medical treatment or financial compensation if you are injured or become ill as a result of participating in this research project. This does not waive any of your legal rights nor release any claim you might have based on negligence.

Compensation:
You will NOT receive payments, reimbursements, or incentives by participating in this study.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. I will protect the identities of each participant using methods that will conceal the identities of each participant, such as by using pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants and location of study. All information, including audio recordings, obtained throughout the study will be placed in a safe and secure location where only individuals involved in the research study will be able to access the data. All consent forms, data, and audio recordings will be destroyed or erased after three years. One limit of the study is confidentiality of information obtained during the focus group meeting. I cannot ensure that other group members will not reveal the identities of other participants who were involved in the focus group or topics discussed during the session.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:
The researcher conducting this study is Gaye B. Walk. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ███████████ You may also contact her advisor, Dr. Kenneth Tierce, via telephone at ███████ or email him at ███████████

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.
Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

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

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

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

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____