A Study of Perceptions of Achievement Factors for At-Risk Students in Comparison to Honor Students at a Northeast Tennessee High School.

Christopher Michael Hampton
East Tennessee State University

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A Study of Perceptions of Achievement Factors for At-Risk Students in Comparison to Honor Students at a Northeast Tennessee High School

A dissertation presented to the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by Christopher Michael Hampton August 2007

Dr. Louise MacKay, Chair
Dr. Kathy Franklin
Dr. Patricia Robertson
Dr. Terry Tollefson

Keywords: At-Risk, Socioeconomic Status, Self-concept, Self-efficacy, Intrinsic Motivation, Achievement
Student success and motivation are issues that baffle parents and educators. Various factors go a long way in explaining why these educational phenomena occur. Current research has confirmed that issues such as parental involvement, home life, attitude, intellect, and teacher and student relations and rapport have an impact on motivation and future success of students. This research project focused on students' perceptions of factors that affect their success and achievement. These factors were categorized into four areas: intrapersonal influences, parental influences, educational influences, and external influences. These areas were explored in an attempt to promote an awareness of the factors necessary for student success.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of honor and at-risk high school students regarding achievement factors. The method of acquiring information for this phenomenological study was exclusively through indepth interviews. The study was limited to 16 students at a specific Northeast Tennessee high school. Sixteen students were selected from a stratified purposeful sample. Eight students were selected from the top 10% of their class and eight students were selected from the bottom 10% of their class. Each interview contained semistructured and open-ended questions. The questions were prewritten but flexible in interview presentation.
The results of this study should promote an awareness of the factors that foster success and those that are detrimental to the success of all students. This awareness might motivate educators to work harder at preventing students from “slipping through the cracks.”
DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to those family and friends who helped to make the completion of this project possible. To the best friend a person could ever have, Kristina Mayo, who encouraged me to undertake this endeavor when I really did not think I could sustain the effort to do it. You are one of the most wonderful persons I have ever known and I am a much better person for having known you. To my mother, Karin Davis, you contributed far more to me than you will ever know. Thank you for being resilient and persevering through all that you endured. To my grandmother and great grandfather, Marion Hensley and Charlie Simerly, Jr.; all that I am and all that I will be is in large part due to the unconditional love and support that you so unselfishly provided to me. Your love and spirit of kindness and generosity will forever live in my heart and soul. To Dr. Ronnie Gross, you were my mentor before I ever knew what a mentor was. Thank you for helping me to develop skills that were necessary to realize my potential. More importantly, thank you for taking me to the side in October of 1992, as a freshman in college, and encouraging me to get it together.

I would also like to thank the countless others in my life who made this achievement a reality. I want to especially thank Dwayne Harris, John Hampton, Rex Hampton, Beth Hampton, Patsy Riddle, Judd Porter, and Earl Lovelace. In one way or another, your contribution to my life, career, and this study was far more significant than you will ever know.

Finally, I would like to thank all of the students who have come into my life throughout my career as a teacher, counselor, and administrator. I feel like I have taken a piece of each of you with me and I am grateful for all that you have done to help me to be better at what I do. I hope to never stop learning from each and every one of you every single day.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge all those individuals who provided professional and academic expertise in order to make this study a success. It gives me great delight to know that these bright, compassionate, and qualified individuals have dedicated their lives for children.

I would like to share my heartfelt appreciation to Dr. Louise MacKay, who is one of two of my original committee members. More importantly to me, Dr. MacKay offered to chair my committee when the opportunity came available. I will be forever indebted for her kindness and genuine demeanor. Her expertise as a teacher, administrator, and professor provided an invaluable contribution to this project. I would also like to acknowledge the expertise of Dr. Patricia Robertson for her passion and commitment to equity for all persons. Dr. Robertson has inspired me since our initial meeting in 1996 and this inspiration has been an agent of change in both my personal and professional life. I would like to acknowledge the efforts of Dr. Terry Tollefson whose comments and suggestions have enhanced my study from the beginning to the end. I would also like to recognize the last minute efforts of Dr. Kathy Franklin who agreed to serve on my committee and offered valuable enhancements to this body of research. Finally, I would be remiss in failing to acknowledge the contributions that were made to my professional career, this body of research, and the well being of countless children by Dr. Nancy Dishner. More importantly, Dr. Dishner never allowed me to quit. This project will culminate a 7-year roller coaster ride that I would have never completed without the dedication and insistence of Dr. Dishner. Not only was Dr. Dishner a mentor and advisor, but I will forever consider her a lifelong friend.

Most importantly, I would like to acknowledge the students in this study. The honesty, candor, and vulnerability that these students offered proved invaluable to this research study. The experiences of these students, both positive and negative, have proven to be the keystone for the foundation of my career. I will never forget these 16 young people.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This research study was born out of my work as a high school counselor. Through that position, I had the opportunity to work with some of the most outstanding and academically talented students imaginable; this also provided me the opportunity to work with some very unmotivated and underachieving students as well. After 1 year as a teacher, 5 years as a counselor, and 4 years as an assistant principal, I have formulated ideas as to why some students are more successful than others. I sought to build a research base to support or disprove my theories. My primary goals in relation to this study were to review current research and conduct indepth interviews in an attempt to uncover some of the factors that lead to student achievement or lack thereof.

Student success and achievement are paramount in education in the current era of accountability. Signed by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002, The No Child Left Behind Act provided historic educational reforms based on stronger accountability for results, more educational freedom for states and communities, encouragement of proven educational methods, and more choices for parents (U.S. Department of Education, 2004a). Students, teachers, administrators, and school systems as a whole are held accountable for the success of all students. In addition to pass-fail and percentile ranks, student achievement is now disaggregated by ethnicity, socioeconomic status, special education status, and gender. Teachers and school systems are assessed on student achievement and yearly gains. Thus, it is crucial to determine factors that motivate students to succeed as well as factors that might inhibit student achievement. Based on a synthesis of the research on the subject, I defined the following factors as the major influences for exploration: intrapersonal influences, parental influences, educational influences, and external influences.
Intrapersonal influences include self-efficacy, personal attributes, intrinsic motivation, goal orientation, gender, ethnicity, and resiliency. Parental influences include parental relationships with children, home life, cultural exposure, expectations for success, involvement in school, education attainment, and socioeconomic status. Educational influences focus on teacher influences and the structure of the learning environments. Lastly, external influences focus on peer influence, neighborhood socioeconomic status, and social-emotional factors.

Composite Case Studies

In an attempt to provide examples of the need for further research in the area of student achievement, the following composite case studies are being presented. These three case studies are a representation of types of individuals I have encountered in my 10 years as a teacher, counselor, and administrator.

Mike

Mike is a 40-year-old headmaster at a prestigious private school in the southeastern portion of the United States. He is Caucasian. He earned a bachelor’s degree in education at the age of 21, a master’s degree in education at 23, and recently completed a doctoral degree in education. He has just completed his 17th year as a professional educator. During his tenure in education, he has served as a teacher, counselor, assistant principal, and headmaster. He serves as a leader in several professional educational organizations. He lives in an upper-middle class neighborhood in a suburban industrial community. Mike’s background is as follows:

Mike was born to a single mother who was 16 years of age when he was born. His mother eventually dropped out of high school and earned her General Equivalency Diploma (GED) at the age of 32. Mike did not meet his father until he was 17. Mike’s father was a high school dropout who also earned his GED later in life. Mike’s mother married his stepfather when Mike was 4 years old. Mike’s stepfather was a high school dropout as well. He never
pursued his GED. Mike was reared in a lower middle-income neighborhood in a small rural town. He lived in six different residences from birth to age 18. The shortest time of residence was 6 months and the longest was 8 years. Mike’s mother worked as a nursing assistant and in the food industry. Because she had four children, she did not work outside of the home for several years. Mike’s stepfather worked as a laborer and technician. He was unemployed for approximately 4 years because of various injuries that ultimately resulted in permanent disability. Neither parent expressed much concern about Mike’s educational interests. His stepfather encouraged a vocational trade that would allow Mike to earn a decent living. Both parents discouraged college because of the perceived cost.

Mike’s maternal grandparents played an active role in his childhood, often providing his school supplies, clothing, etc. They were both high school graduates with middle-income jobs. Mike spent most weekends with his grandparents and their children, four of whom were still of high school age. It was this portion of Mike’s family with whom he would share report cards and any relevant educational dreams.

Mike started kindergarten at the age of 5 years. This was his first educational experience. He attended the same school from grades kindergarten through eight. He attended the same high school for all 4 years as well. While he maintained that most teachers were supportive of him, some were not. Mike remembered several teachers who discouraged him academically. One even chuckled when he expressed interest in becoming a teacher. Mike participated in several activities and sports throughout his educational experience. In addition, he gradually assumed several leadership positions with school activities. He graduated from high school with an honors diploma and near the top of his graduating class.

Even though the odds seemed to have been against him, Mike has attained success. He stated that he was able to visualize success and could not imagine living the rest of his life in the same manner he had been reared. He noticed the lifestyles of those with whom he was surrounded in various school activities and knew that he wanted a similar life. Not only did
Mike realize the lifestyles of those counterparts, he generally surpassed each of those in educational and professional attainment.

*Alan*

Alan is a 27-year-old manufacturing laborer. He lives in the southeastern portion of the United States and is Caucasian. Alan dropped out of high school at the age of 17. He earned his GED at the age of 20. He has worked sporadically in the food industry, construction, and manufacturing. His longest stint of employment is his current job. He has held this position for 3 years. He has been unemployed approximately 2 years since dropping out of high school. He has been married since age 19 and has three children. He and his family currently live in a mobile home park in a small rural town.

Alan was born the third of five children. There were three boys and two girls. His parents were both high school dropouts. His father earned a GED later in life and obtained some technical training. His father was the family’s only source of income.

Alan was reared in a lower middle-income neighborhood in a small rural town. He lived in three different residences from birth to age 18. The shortest time of residence was 6 months and the longest was 10 years. Alan was neither encouraged nor discouraged in relation to educational attainment. His parents always regarded him as smart and were somewhat impressed with his mechanical prowess and his ability to take apart and rebuild the most complex of projects.

Alan’s extended family did not play a particularly significant role in his development. He occasionally spent weekends with grandparents or attended religious services with them on holidays. Additionally, Alan did not perceive his relationships with his siblings as being close. Even in adulthood, they very rarely communicated, with the exception of an occasional birthday or holiday.
Alan started kindergarten at the age of 5 years. He attended three schools during grades kindergarten through eight. Alan repeated the first grade. He attended the same high school for 3 years. Alan recalled being picked on by teachers. One went so far as to express that she felt he would one day end up in jail. Alan participated in most sports throughout elementary and high school and was most successful at baseball. He was named to several all-star teams.

The odds were stacked against Alan to some degree. He stated that the reasoning behind embracing his current lifestyle was that it was one in which he was comfortable. After all, he had lived in this position for his entire life. He expressed that it was not a challenge to get to this point in life. Alan claimed that he has now surpassed both of his parents in regard to income. For him, that defines success.

Elise

Elise is a 24-year-old Caucasian food-server in a large metropolitan city in the northeast portion of the United States. She has recently dropped out of college for the third time.

She was born the younger of two children to professional parents. Her mother is a business executive for a bank. Her mother earned a masters degree in Business Administration. Her father is a PhD chemist with advanced degrees from two prestigious universities. Elise was reared in an upper-class income neighborhood in a large urban city. She lived in two different residences from birth to age 18. At the age of 15, her family moved to a suburban southern town. Both parents expressed a great degree of concern in Elise’s educational interests. Both parents encouraged a career in the medical field because of her aptitude for math and science.

Elise started kindergarten at the age of 5 years. This was her first educational experience. She attended two private schools from kindergarten through eighth grade. She attended a private high school for 2 years and because of family relocation a public high school for the last 2 years. Elise claimed it was obvious that her teachers encouraged her and were supportive of her educational and co-curricular activities. Elise stated that teachers often called her home to offer
commendation for her school-based successes. Elise participated in several extracurricular activities including sports throughout her educational experience. She received several science and math awards and was an all-state athlete in two sports. She was an accomplished dancer. She was considered a leader in several different organizations. She graduated from high school with an honors diploma and near the top of her graduating class. The first college she attended was a private liberal arts college in the Northeast. She earned a partial academic and a partial athletic scholarship. She left school midway through the first semester with a chronic illness. She began her second school the next semester at a small public university in the southeastern portion of the United States. Because of her outstanding high school record, she earned a full scholarship at this institution. She lost her scholarship after 2 semesters because of poor grades and withdrew from this school after 2 years. The third college Elise attended was a small community college in the Northeast. She stayed for 2 semesters and decided not to return. At this time, Elise is very unsure of any future endeavors. Her parents have removed all financial support for her education, as she has not taken advantage of her many opportunities.

Even though the odds seemed to have been stacked in her favor, Elise has failed to prove successful in any of her attempted educational endeavors since high school. She stated that she is unable to get a grip on what it takes to get over the hump. She still wants to be successful and complete her college education but seems to lack the self-discipline to make that happen.

Background of the Problem

My experience as a high school counselor revealed what I perceived to be a significant degree of disparity in achievement among students at opposite ends of the academic spectrum with whom I regularly observed and interacted. The students who were ranked in the top of their respective classes were almost always very homogenous in their socioeconomic and familial backgrounds. My experience was such that the students who were ranked in the bottom of their respective classes were also from very homogenous backgrounds. It was all too obvious to me,
however, that this homogeneity was very different for each group. It was during my first year as a counselor that I decided to examine this disparity in greater detail in an attempt to close this gap in achievement that seemed to have very little to do with academic ability.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions served as focal points of the study:

1. How do the perceptions of at-risk students compare with honor students in regard to the level of their parents' involvement in school, expectations for students' success, and attainment of education?

2. How do the perceptions of at-risk students compare with honor students in regard to level of educational support such as teacher support, faculty involvement, and the structured learning environment?

3. How do the perceptions of at-risk students compare with honor students in regard to peer and external influences such as community support and resources?

4. How do the perceptions of at-risk students compare with honor students regarding self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, achievement goals, gender, and ethnicity?

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to determine if a relationship exists between student achievement and motivation and the students’ perceptions of intrapersonal influence, parental influence, educational influence, and external influence. The intention was to then examine the perception of factors that led to limited success and achievement for the students who struggle near the bottom of their respective classes. Through a variety of interventions, these factors might be successfully mitigated to promote academic achievement and long-term success for all students.
Significance of the Study

Student success and motivation are issues that baffle parents and educators. Various factors go a long way in explaining why these educational phenomena occur. Current research has confirmed that issues such as parental involvement, home life, attitude, intellect, and teacher-student relations and rapport have an impact on motivation and future success of students. This research project focused on students' perceptions of factors that affect their success and achievement. These factors were categorized into four areas: intrapersonal influences, parental influences, educational influences, and external influences. I explored these areas in an attempt to promote an awareness of the factors necessary for student success. Specifically, the results of this study should promote an awareness of the students' perceptions of factors of success within the educational community. This awareness might motivate educators to work harder at preventing students from “slipping through the cracks.”

The findings from this study should lend evidence to the knowledge base on student success and motivation. In addition, the results might provide insight regarding early intervention and best educational practices for students in prekindergarten, elementary, middle, and high school regarding approaches to education and factors that significantly impact students' success.

Limitations and Delimitations

1. This study was delimited to a stratified purposeful sampling of 16 students from a Northeast Tennessee high school.
2. This study was delimited to eight students in the top 10% of this specific class and eight students in the bottom 10% of this specific class.
3. This study was delimited to those students who had previously entered into an academic relationship with me.
4. This study was limited by the original nature of the qualitative interview, focusing on students' perceptions and experiences within each interview.
5. This study was limited by the fact that I was the only person who analyzed the data that were gathered from the qualitative interviews.

**Definitions of Terms**

1. *Achievement*: An academic or school-related act accomplished successfully, especially by means of exertion, personal skill, practice, or determination (Linnenbrick & Pintrich, 2002).

2. *At-risk*: Characteristics that identify students who have a high likelihood of academic failure because of status characteristics such as socioeconomic status of students and their parents, parent education attainment, household income, and the neighborhood in which they live (Finn, 2006).

3. *Intrinsic Motivation*: The motivation to engage in an activity for its own sake and for the personal desire to do so (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002).

4. *Resiliency*: The process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances (Howard & Johnson, 2000).

5. *Positive self-concept*: Positive self-concept measures the degree to which students like and feel positively about themselves and perceive themselves as persons of worth (Marsh, 1992).

6. *Self-efficacy*: The belief about one’s competence on a prospective task (McCabe, 2006).

7. *Socioeconomic status*: Relating to or involving a combination of social and economic factors including, but not limited to, household income and neighborhood of residence (Payne, 2005).

**Assumptions**

This study was based on the following assumptions:
1. Students in this study expressed their honest perceptions and life experiences within the scope of each specific interview.

2. Interviews were guided by specific research questions.

3. Students expounded on the interview questions in any direction they seemed to believe would provide beneficial information to me.

Overview of the Study

This study is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 contained an introduction to the concept of student achievement and motivation by presenting three composite case studies. Chapter 1 also included the background of the problem, significance of the study, research questions, limitations and delimitations, definitions of terms, and assumptions.

Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature. Initially, intrapersonal influences of student success and achievement are explored. Next, parental influences on student success and achievement are investigated. Educational influences on student success and achievement are then explored. Finally, external influences on student success and achievement are discussed.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology that includes research design, a discussion of the participants, methods of data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness of the study. Chapter 4 contains a presentation of data analysis. Chapter 5 provides a summary of findings, implications, and recommendations for further research.
Educators have been baffled for years concerning the disparity among students in regard to academic achievement. Many theories have been presented on the topic. The intent of this literature review was to examine four broad areas of research that have offered assistance in the explanation of factors that have promoted student achievement or lack thereof. These areas were: intrapersonal influences, parental influences, educational influences, and external influences. I chose these four areas after extensive research in the area of student achievement and through his experience as an educator in the public education system.

**Intrapersonal Influences on Student Achievement**

Intrapersonal influences, as defined by me, are those influences that have existed within each individual. The intrapersonal influences to be reviewed include self-efficacy, personal attributions, intrinsic motivation, achievement goals, gender, ethnicity, and resiliency.

Much of the early research on student achievement and learning was separated into cognitive and motivational factors and pursued along distinct lines of research that did not integrate cognition and motivation (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). Students’ affective characteristics, such as academic self-concept and achievement motivation, were considered significant predictors of subsequent academic achievement. For example, those self-beliefs have been found to predict the grade performance and achievement test scores of elementary- and secondary-school students (House, 2002). However, during the last 3 decades, there has been a significant amount of research on how these two factors have interacted and influenced student learning and achievement. A portion of this research has been touched upon throughout this literature review.
An important factor that has lent itself to student achievement is self-efficacy. Similarly, the importance of students' self-efficacy and self-reflection for effective instructional design has been discussed in relation to student success (House, 2002). McCabe (2006) defined self-efficacy as one’s beliefs about one’s capabilities to perform a particular task. Self-efficacy has been assumed to be situational and contextualized, not a general belief about self-concept or self-esteem. For example, a student might have had a high self-efficacy for doing math but low self-efficacy for science or other subject areas, depending on previous successes and failures (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). Self-efficacy has been related positively to higher levels of achievement and learning as well as a wide variety of adaptive academic outcomes such as higher levels of effort and increased persistence on difficult tasks in both experimental and correlational studies involving students from a variety of age groups (Bandura, 1997; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Students with positive self-efficacy beliefs have proven to work harder, persist, and eventually achieve at higher levels (Linnenbrink & Pintrich). This generalization seems to have applied to all students, as it has been relatively stable across different ages and grades as well as different gender and ethnic groups (Bandura; Pintrich & Schunk).

Accordingly, two important aspects have been stressed in regard to attempts to enhance positive self-efficacy beliefs in students. First, self-efficacy is not self-esteem and the two constructs should not be confused. Secondly, self-efficacy beliefs should be accurate or calibrated to actual accomplishments (Bandura, 1997). For example, a novice swimmer should have self-efficacy beliefs that match his or her respective skills; these beliefs must not be so overly positive that his or her attempt to swim causes serious injury or death. Students should not overestimate or underestimate their capabilities for schoolwork; rather, they should have a fairly accurate belief in their abilities (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002).

Attribution theory, which has focused on attempts to understand why events occur, has been another important line of research on achievement (Graham & Weiner, 1996). According to Weiner (1986), attribution theory stated that when failure or success occurred, individuals
would analyze the situation to determine the perceived causes for the failure or success. These causes are then categorized into three dimensions: stability, locus, and controllability (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). Using these dimensions, the perceived cause can then be categorized. Weiner suggested that for success, it is adaptive to have attributed the success to stable, internal factors such as ability, skill, or talent as these factors should be present for future tasks. Attributions to unstable but controllable internal factors such as efforts were especially adaptive in that effort could have been modified based on the demands of the situation. In examining failure, attributions to factors that are unstable seemed to be most adaptive (Linnenbrink & Pintrich).

As explained by Weiner (1986), attribution theory had not suggested a direct link of adaptive attributions to academic achievement and other academic enablers, although, some indirect links had been made via other psychological processes. For example, adaptive attributions were considered to be associated with higher expectancies for success, enhanced academic self-efficacy, and positive effects such as pride (Weiner); however, these outcomes were, in turn, associated with engagement and study skills as well as actual achievement (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002).

McCoach and Siegle (2001) compared high achieving and low achieving adolescents’ attitudes toward school, teachers, goal-valuation, motivation, and general academic self-perceptions. Specifically, these researchers determined whether high achievers differed from low achievers on these and to ascertain which factors were the best predictors of students’ status as either a high achiever or a low achiever.

It is likely that every teacher has known at least one student who failed to perform at the level of his or her ability. These were the students who came to class unprepared, appeared not to study, and were not affected by parents and teachers' pleas to perform. These students have been commonly known as underachievers (McCoach & Siegle, 2001). Underachievement was most commonly defined as a "discrepancy between potential and performance" (Reis &

McCoach and Siegle (2001) supported the notion that high achieving students exhibited more positive academic self-perceptions, motivation-self-regulation, goal valuation, attitudes toward school, and attitudes toward teachers than did low achieving students. However, academic self-perceptions and motivation-self-regulation appeared to be stronger predictors of academic achievement status than were attitudes toward school and attitudes toward teachers. The goal valuation factor was highly correlated with motivation and self-regulation; therefore, although goal-valuation did not make a strong contribution to the logistic regression model, it was moderately correlated with self-reported grade point averages. Further, McCoach and Siegle's results showed that students who were highly self-motivated and self-regulated and who had positive academic self-perceptions were much more likely to be high achievers than were students who possessed lower academic self-perceptions and lower motivation-self-regulation. The researchers did not indicate whether increasing students’ academic self-perceptions and motivation-self-regulation translated into achievement gains for low-achieving students (McCoach & Siegle).

Intrinsic motivation has been defined as motivation to engage in an activity for its own sake and for the personal desire to do so (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). Thus, the interest within each person was vital to the decisions that he or she has made. This personal desire reflected an individual’s interest in a particular topic and is often measured by self-report of how much a person enjoyed the particular activity. Personal interest has the potential to influence academic achievement and has been positively associated with achievement and the use of deeper cognitive strategies (Linnenbrink & Pintrich). Therefore, it is logical to assert that the more one has been internally motivated towards a specific area or subject, the more one’s attention, persistence, and achievement in that area would have developed. For educators and
caregivers, it has been important to note that allowing children to work on topics they have found to be personally interesting might have helped them to be engaged in such a way that they used better strategies for learning and ultimately achieve at higher levels (Linnenbrink & Pintrich).

Another perspective for achievement that has been discussed is Achievement Goal Theory. This has been one of the most popular theories within recent motivational research (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). This theory has proposed two general goal orientations that concerned the purpose individuals pursued when they approached and engaged in a task. These goals have been simply referred to as mastery and performance goals. Mastery goals have oriented learners to develop new skills, try to understand their work, improve their levels of competence, and achieve a sense of mastery based on self-referenced standards (Ames, 1992). In contrast, performance goals have oriented learners to focus on their ability and self-worth, determine their ability by outperforming others in competitions, surpass others in achievements or grades, and receive public recognition for performance (Ames).

Ames (1992) suggested that mastery goals have fostered a host of adaptive motivational, cognitive, and achievement outcomes whereas performance goals have generated less adaptive or even maladaptive outcomes. The point of the theory was that when students are focused on trying to learn and understand certain material and trying to improve their performance relative to their own past performance, this orientation helped them maintain their self-efficacy in the face of any potential failure. Adversely, when students were concerned with being their best, getting higher grades, or focusing on how they perform in comparison to others, there was a possibility of more negative affect and anxiety, that resulted in the diminishing of the student’s cognitive capacity, task engagement, and performance (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002).

There has been a great deal of literature on gender and ethnicity concerning student achievement. Specifically, females, Hispanics, and African Americans have been the focus of many research studies, such as in protective mechanisms for nonCaucasian students, African American and Hispanic academic disidentification, increased frequency of underachievement
and an over-proportionate rate of high school drop-out rates by African American and Hispanic students, and achievement disparities among genders.

Ethnicity has been discussed alongside student achievement for many decades. Crocker and Major (1989) identified some protective mechanisms individuals from non-Caucasian ethnicities have employed when faced with psychologically threatening situations. One was to selectively devalue or psychologically disengage from potentially harmful domains. In the context of school, Steele (1992) labeled this mechanism as academic disidentification. This has occurred when students have attempted to devalue the perceived importance of academic performance in an effort to protect their perceptions of self and their perceived role within their ethnicity.

An important predictor of whether students have remained in school or dropped out has been their ability to identify with academics. Griffin (2002) noted that African American and Hispanic students have demonstrated higher levels of academic disidentification than have Asian and Caucasian students.

Researchers such as Ford and Harris (1996) and Lisella and Serwatka (1996) have suggested that African American adolescents have been at heightened risk for remedial instruction, school suspension, course failure, and school dropout. Factors identified as contributing to limited academic performance among these youth have included academic tracking, limited teacher support, cultural mistrust, and disidentification with the academic culture of school (Finn, 1989; Oakes, 1985; Steele, 1992). Building on the last point, Ogbu (1991) and Steele agreed that African American and Hispanic students demonstrated higher levels of academic disidentification relative to Asian and Caucasian students. Poor performances in school were perceived to directly harm a student’s self-perception or lead the student to disidentify from academics in order to protect or maintain his or her perception of self-worth and value. Both academic identification and self-perceptions have been viewed as important factors in preventing students from leaving school prematurely (Griffin, 2002).
Griffin (2002) reported that African American and Hispanic students seemed to have placed less importance upon academics than did either Asian or Caucasian students when the relationship between academic accomplishments and various global measures of self was examined. Additionally, both groups have developed subcultures that illustrate cultural opposition toward academics (Ogbu, 1991). Because of the current "war on terrorism," Arabs and Arab Americans have recently been the subject of increasing discrimination in the United States, which has had a trickle down effect on adolescents in these groups (Greenblatt, 2003).

Researchers have confirmed that dropout rates are higher for African Americans and Hispanics than for Caucasians and Asians (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2006) reported, as of 2004, Hispanics between the ages of 16 and 24 had a dropout rate of 23.8%. African Americans during that same period had an 11.8% dropout rate, and Caucasian students had a 6.8% dropout rate. Data were not reported for students of Asian descent for the same period.

Additionally, a majority of African American students scored below the basic level in five out of seven subject areas on the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests, as compared with 20% of Caucasian students (Greenblatt, 2003). The U.S. Department of Education (2006) reported the percentage of students at or above selected mathematics proficiency levels by age, sex, and race-ethnicity for 2004. The percentage of 17-year-old Caucasian students who scored in the highest two categories, as determined by the National Assessment of Educational Performance test, was 77.5. Using the same criteria, African Americans were represented with 26.9% and Hispanic students were represented with 34.6%. When examining the reading portion of the NAEP exam for 2004, it was found that 45% of Caucasian students scored in the highest reading category, whereas 17% of African American students and 20% of Hispanic students scored in the highest reading level. The disparity among these scores was startling and should bring great concern to both of these populations.
Implementation of the *No Child Left Behind* Act of 2001 began during the 2002-2003 school year and was designed to address such inequality (U.S. Department of Education, 2004a). It requires schools to have 100% proficiency among all students in math, reading, and language arts by 2014. All students must also meet specific rates for graduation.

The U. S. Department of Education (1997) indicated that both African Americans and Hispanic students tended to have shown detachment from academics, or academic disidentification, at levels that exceeded that of Asian and Caucasian students. Griffin (2002) pointed out that the implication of differential academic disidentification across these groups was that academic performance in school has played a less important role in shaping school-related decisions for African American and Hispanic students. An additional finding of the study by the U.S. Department of Education (1997) was that Hispanics had the weakest relationship between academic achievement and dropping out of school. This suggested that Hispanic students were more disidentified from academics than were African American students when considering whether to drop out of school.

Just as researchers have focused on minority students and their academic achievement, the gender of students has also received a great deal of attention. Honora (2002) strongly suggested that gender and achievement differences played significant roles in adolescents’ goals and expectations. Higher achieving girls expressed more future goals and expectations and considered more long-term goals than higher achieving boys and lower achieving girls and boys. Goals and expectations seem to have been shaped by family and significant others who served as models for what to expect in the future (Honora).

Honora’s (2002) research with African American adolescents on gender and minority achievement produced the following: (a) girls as a whole were more goal-oriented than were boys in the areas of education, employment, marriage, and family and (b) higher achieving girls listed the highest percentage of goals followed by higher achieving boys, lower achieving boys, and lower achieving girls.
Nearly 3 decades after winning battles for equal access, women’s activists were seeking reform of what they perceived as an education system still weighted against females (Clark, 1994). Research by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) focused on the perception of declining self-esteem, a gender gap on standardized tests, and research indicating that girls have received less attention from teachers than have boys. More girls have applied to women’s colleges than ever before and some schools have experimented with girls-only science and math classes.

Surveys have shown that many girls growing up in America have retreated inside themselves. Many experts have linked this phenomenon to declining academic performance as girls go through puberty. Clark's (1994) research has shown that girls and boys entered school roughly equal; however, 12 years later, girls had fallen behind in key areas such as math and self-esteem. Such research has ignited a great deal of support for research and advancement for educational gender equality. However, by the time the AAUW report was released in 1992, the much discussed gender inequality gap was lessening. Actually, according to a U. S. Department of Education (2004b) press release, the gender differences on standardized math tests in elementary and high schools have been small since 1990. The AAUW study reported that girls scored as well as boys in math at age 9, but then fell behind by age 17. Possible causes included lower expectations for girls, a lack of encouragement, and too few female role models. However, Campbell (2000), in more recent research, pointed out that by 1999, the average math scores on standardized tests that favored boys in the 1970s had disappeared and the science gap had declined significantly. Glazer (2005) went on to add:

Girls now receive better math and science grades than boys; right up through college. Today they constitute more than half of the biology majors, almost half of the math majors and half of medical school enrollments. Girls take more high school classes than boys do in chemistry, biology, and most types of math. Although boys take more advanced classes in physics and advanced calculus, the differences appear to be shrinking rapidly (p. 4).
Glazer continued by pointing out that the speed with which girls have closed this academic gap further proved that the original deficiencies were the result of socialization rather than biological differences.

The AAUW (1992) researchers pointed out that female self-esteem was especially vulnerable. A 1990 poll of 2,400 girls and 600 boys found that 60% of elementary school girls and 67% of boys agreed with the statement, “I’m happy the way I am.” However, when high school students were asked the same question, the percentage of girls who were happy with themselves dropped to 29% compared with 46% for boys (AAUW). Additionally Clark’s (1994) research has shown that boys, in order to seek the teacher’s attention, called out in class eight times more often than did girls. The evaluations of teachers in classrooms suggested that more attention was consistently paid to boys than to girls, worsening as the weeks within a given school year went by, and producing an overall attention gap as high as 14%. Caucasian males were most likely to receive attention, followed by minority males, Caucasian females, and then minority females (Clark, 1994). Ravitch (1998) argued, however, that when these male individuals were called on, it was actually a form of reprimand. Glazer (2005) reported that women made up 56% of college enrollees. Indeed, the U. S. Department of Education (2006) projected that by 2012, women would account for 60% of all those holding bachelors degrees. This projection, along with additional research, has most recently ignited claims that boys are now the gender that has been shortchanged in American classrooms.

The final perspective of intrapersonal influences on student achievement was academic resiliency. Many research studies have focused on promoting academic motivation; however, fewer have concentrated on academic resiliency or the ability to deal with academic setbacks, excessive pressure, and stress (Martin, 2002). Resiliency has been further defined as the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances (Howard & Johnson, 2000). Without some level of resiliency to challenges, the motivated student’s gains could be lost. The research on resiliency for broader life events has
shown that resilient people have a number of protective factors in their lives. These factors reduced the impact of negative events, helped individuals avoid problematic situations, and promoted positive and successful choices (Martin). Specific factors that have directly impacted resiliency in students have been identified as: (a) approach to schoolwork; (b) beliefs about themselves; (c) attitudes towards learning, achievement, and school; (d) study skills; and (e) reasons for learning (Martin). These five components of motivation have provided many opportunities for practical application regarding student achievement and motivation. The interaction of these five concepts has helped to create a model of achievement motivation that when properly implemented has boosted and promoted success for volumes of underachieving students.

**Parental Influences on Student Achievement**

Research has clearly shown that children's academic performance was higher at schools that had high parental involvement (Clark, 1995). Clark (1995) pointed out:

Three factors over which parents exercise authority - student absenteeism, variety of reading materials in the home and excessive television watching - explain nearly 90% of the difference in eighth-grade mathematics test scores across 37 states. (p. 1)

Improvements in parental recognition of these factors have explained why parental involvement has emerged as one of the most important new developments in educational reform. Parental influences have been defined as those influences on student achievement that have been directly affected by the actions of parents or guardians. Influences that were explored in this literature review included relationships with parents and parental expectations for achievement and direct parental involvement in their children’s schools. Each of these factors was explored in an attempt to discover how the various influence levels have impacted student achievement.

Academic achievement in adolescents has been related to the quality of the relationship with parents and with parent involvement in academic studies (Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992). Approximately 75% of eighth graders surveyed in the National Education Longitudinal
Study of 1988 expected to achieve a college degree; however, fewer than 30% planned to take college preparatory classes. Parent-adolescent congruence in academic expectations was found to be stronger in mother-child comparisons than they were in father-child comparisons (Bornholt & Goodnow, 1999). Smith (1991) also reported that adolescent expectations were related to perceived parental expectations, particularly the mothers’ expectations.

Finn and Rock (1997) examined students who were identified as being resilient because of their level of academic success despite minority status and low socioeconomic status. An internal locus of control was identified as a primary factor that led to these students having success as opposed to their non-resilient peers. Locus of control was defined as the tendency of people to ascribe achievements and failures to either internal factors they control, such as effort, ability, and motivation, or external factors that are outside their control such as chance or luck (Miller, Fitch, & Marshall, 2003). Gonzalez (2002) presented research suggesting that students with an internal locus of control achieved at a higher level, were more involved in school and extracurricular activities associated with school, and had more advanced opportunities in regard to career choices. Additionally, students with an internal locus of control were more likely to experience pride for their successes and accept responsibility for relative shortcomings. Lynch, Hurford, and Cole (2002) indicated that powerful ramifications were associated with locus of control and they recommended further study to examine developmental contributions to internal and external locus of control. Specifically, Lynch et al. implicated parenting styles as having an impact on student locus of control. Parenting factors such as consistency of discipline and warmth were identified as being closely associated with internal locus of control; thus, parents who had not encouraged age-appropriate independence, might have children who develop an external locus of control (Morton & Mann, 1998). This style of parenting could lead to parental enabling. Parent enabling has taken place when children fail to take responsibility for their actions because of over-involvement by parents (Lynch et al.). Enabling has come in the form of
over-protectiveness, assuming responsibility for a student’s schoolwork or tasks, or coming to the student’s defense when consequences at school are imposed.

One of the main objectives of the National Educational Goals 2000, which is now more commonly known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, was to increase parental involvement in order to promote the social, emotional, and academic growth of children (U.S. Department of Education, 2004a). Parental involvement has been seen as a marriage of commitment and active participation from parents to the school and to the student. This involvement defined the family’s role as educators and the importance of family involvement on students’ success in schools. Clark (1995) defined parental involvement as anything from joining the PTA, helping with homework, taking an active role in school governance, and serving on various school boards and committees. Educators have long considered parental involvement as one of the most prominent predictors of student academic success. Parental involvement has been recognized as increasing student morale, attitudes, and academic achievement across all subject areas (Smith, 2001). Therefore, parental involvement should be seen as a primary goal of schools and communities.

The initiation of the parental involvement movement has been traced to 1897 and the founding of the organization that became the modern-day National Parents and Teachers Association. In the midst of the progressive era in American social reform, two women founded the National Congress of Mothers in Washington, D.C. President Theodore Roosevelt served on the initial board of directors. The group challenged the standards of the day by offering opportunities to volunteer in schools to all mothers, rather than just the well-to-do mothers. Clark (1995) reported that by 1912, the group had become such a fixture in strategies for improving public education that a school superintendent would comment in a federal education report:

Schools are better off without factional politics, fanatics, and faddists. We cannot expect the highest good in municipal or state government until public opinion demands it, and
public opinion must be created, and the parent-teacher organization is the power to form the right kind of public opinion. (p. 7)

In 1924, the group changed its name to the National Congress of Parents and Teachers. Two years later, the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers was founded. The two organizations merged in 1970. Some of their initial work involved launching the first hot lunch programs in schools, conducting health surveys, promoting the Salk polio vaccine, and campaigning against smoking. In 1947, the National PTA established a 3-year project at Northwestern University to train teachers in effective home-school relations. By 1958, its membership ballooned to 11 million members (Clark, 1995).

During the civil rights era of the 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson included legislation containing parental involvement provisions in his War on Poverty. Chief among these was the 1965 Elementary and Secondary School Act that included grants for low-income schools. This was the enabling legislation for Head Start and the Bilingual Education Act (Clark, 1995).

The 1970s brought an array of academic research on the link between parental involvement and student achievement. The 1980s ushered in the current period of active school reform. In 1983, the federal report, A Nation at Risk, devoted only one paragraph to parental involvement. As research mounted, attitudes changed among teachers and school administrators as well as parents. It was now time for a partnership and collaboration and teachers were much more receptive to parental input and involvement in school curricula and activities (Clark, 1995).

In March 1994, Congress passed the Goals 2000 education-standards legislation with a parental involvement component (Clark, 1995). According to Clark (1995), one section read:

> Every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children. Every state will develop policies to assist local schools and local educational agencies to establish programs for increasing partnerships that respond to the varying needs of parents and the home, including parents of children who are disadvantaged or bilingual, or parents of children with disabilities… and parents and families will help to ensure that schools are adequately supported and will hold schools and teachers to high accountability. (p. 7)
The history of parental involvement has provided valuable insight as to how support for student achievement developed. It also provided the groundwork for extensive promotion of parental support for student achievement.

Clark's (1995) research on parent involvement from the early to mid 1990s showed that parents were rated as highly involved in only 46% of the schools attended by students who were expected to graduate from high school as the class of 2000. Additionally, research has shown that support steadily declined as children grew older. Statistics have also shown support went from 73% of parents active in their children’s schools when children were in the age range of 8 to 11 and dropped to 51% by age 16 (Clark, 1995). Several reasons were cited for this lack of support. According to a 1992 National PTA survey of 30,000 parents, time was cited by 89%, followed distantly by such barriers as “nothing to contribute” (32%), and lack of childcare (28%). There was additional evidence that supported the fact that parents felt that teachers didn’t make enough effort to understand their children, that teachers kept parents at bay with educational jargon, and that teachers were more concerned with preserving their professional prerogatives than with helping students (Clark, 1995). When elementary and secondary school teachers were asked the most important ways parents could help students do well, 76% said attend a conference, 67% said help with homework, and 65% chose telling the child regularly that doing well in school was important (Clark, 1995).

Today, parents have been given the option to choose the education for their children in some states through vouchers, magnet, charter, and private schooling. Parents have become more vocal in what they expect from schools and stated a desire to be heard when decisions were being considered by schools or school districts (Ramirez, 2000).

Wheeler (1992) and Ramirez (1999) demonstrated that it was not uncommon for barriers to parental involvement to stem from teachers. These barriers have come by way of stereotypes that teachers might have concerning socioeconomic status, single-parent families, and at-risk children. Ramirez (2001) also found that when the issue of parental involvement came up, many
teachers were apprehensive and often suggested parental involvement to be limited to school functions or at-home activities. Many teachers stated that parents were not professionally equipped to be on curriculum or other school-related committees. According to Clark (1995), such attitudes had a potentially adverse effect on parent involvement, thus possibly influencing student achievement negatively. Despite some inherent tension between teachers and parents, many surveys have demonstrated that teachers value parental input, sometimes placing it ahead of such goals as smaller class size and more teacher control (Clark, 1995).

*Educational Influences on Student Achievement*

Student achievement has been impacted on several fronts. However, one place most associated with student successes and failures would be the school each student attends. Within each school and school system, factors existed that played pivotal roles in students' success.

The United States faces a projected need for two to three million kindergarten- through 12th-grade teachers within the next decade (Goldhaber, 2002). More important than the shortage of teachers has been the concern for the quality of individuals to fill the positions. Crucial to addressing these issues has been the research that demonstrated how much influence teachers have had on student achievement and the specific teacher qualities and skills that have led to increased student achievement (Goldhaber).

Teacher qualifications have received a great deal of attention that focused on teacher qualities that seemed to impact student achievement. Goldhaber’s (2002) research reported that college graduates with high test scores, as measured by the ACT or SAT, were less likely to take teaching jobs, that teachers with high test scores were less likely to stay in the teaching profession, and former teachers with high test scores were less likely to return to the profession. Goldhaber referred to research dating back to the 1966 release of *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (the Coleman Report) that reported student performance was only weakly related to school quality. The report concluded that among influences schools could control, teacher
quality was found to account for a larger portion of the variation in students' test scores than all other characteristics of schools, excluding the composition of the student body (peer effect). The *No Child Left Behind* Act of 2001 has sought to isolate teachers’ contributions to student performance and assess how much of each individual student's achievement has been credited to teacher effect. Economists Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (2002) reported that variations in teacher quality accounted for 7.5% of the total variation in student achievement. This accounted for a much larger share than any other school characteristic. Their research presented a weak correlation between a teacher's degree level and years of experience consistently and positively influenced student learning. However, a meta-analysis study in 1996 by Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine concluded that school resources were related to student achievement and that these relationships were enough to be educationally important. Additionally, resource variables that attempted to describe the quality of teachers, such as teacher ability, teacher education, and teacher experience, showed strong associations with student achievement (Greenwald et al.).

Additionally, Goldhaber (2002), reported that only 8.5% of the variation in student achievement was due to teacher characteristics. He suggested that the vast majority (approximately 60%) of the differences in students' test scores were explained by individual and family background characteristics. All of the school influences, including school, teacher, and class-level variables, both measurable and immeasurable, were found to account for approximately 21% of the variation in student achievement. This 21% was composed mainly of characteristics that were not directly quantified in the analyses. Goldhaber's research also suggested that only 3% of the contribution teachers made to student learning was associated with teachers' experience, degree attained, and other readily observable characteristics. The remaining 97% of their contribution was associated with qualities or behaviors that could not be isolated.

Part of the explanation for the mixed findings was that experience and degree level mattered only in certain circumstances. For example, Goldhaber (2002) suggested that there was
little evidence that experience beyond the first couple of years in the classroom made one a better teacher.

Subject-matter knowledge was another standard by which teachers' quality was measured. Goldhaber (2002) found the evidence was somewhat mixed, but it suggested that teachers’ knowledge of their subject matter as measured by degrees, courses, and certification in the area being taught was associated with high performance. Studies using more detailed measures of teachers’ education levels and coursework in subject areas showed, at least in math and science, that academic preparation positively influenced students' achievement. Having an advanced degree outside of math and science did not appear to affect students' achievement. Taking additional courses in one’s subject had some effect, but it depended on the level of courses each teacher was teaching (Goldhaber).

Other teacher attributes studied included standardized test scores, tests of verbal ability, and the selectivity of the college attended. This evidence and the estimated relationships were relatively weak (Greenwald et al., 1996). In their meta-analysis, Greenwald et al. found that teachers’ academic skills were shown to have a positive relationship to student achievement in 50% of the studies that were analyzed; this was a much higher proportion than for teachers' education or experience.

Good teaching was clearly important to raising student achievement. The measures of teacher quality that have been primarily used to screen teacher candidates and determine salary were certification, experience, and education level. These have all been researched, but results have provided little empirical evidence that these characteristics were associated with higher student achievement (Goldhaber, 2002).

Another important issue that has played a significant role in preparing good teachers has been the practice of allowing individuals to pursue alternative routes for teacher certification. Forty-one states had some type of alternative that has replaced the need for prospective teachers to go back to college for a major in education. In 1998-1999, more than 24,000 teachers were
certified through alternative routes in the 28 states that kept these data and it is estimated that more than 80,000 teachers have entered teaching by way of nontraditional avenues during the past decade (Berry, 2001). The primary criticisms were that these shortcut programs often allowed for only 4 to 8 weeks of training in classroom management and a simplified course of instruction in creating lesson plans (Berry). An additional criticism of alternative routes for teacher education programs was that studies have demonstrated that both knowledge of subject area as well as teaching and learning acquired in teacher education are strongly correlated with teacher performance in the classroom (Berry).

A key component to student success has been identified as the quality and productivity of the learning environment. Students who had resided in middle-class and affluent communities generally have had adequate to generously funded schools located in safe communities (Cuban, 2004). These characteristics have typically provided a combination of home support, parental involvement, school resources, community resources, and instructional supplies. Cuban further explained that whereas middle-class and affluent students have had a bounty of resources, those students who attended rural and urban schools have faced much more divergent learning environments. These students have often lived in neighborhoods that threatened their health and safety and lacked the resources to support their aspirations.

According to House (2002), considerable research has shown that both student characteristics and instructional activities have contributed to learning outcomes. School learning environments must be structured with high expectations for achievement and behavior and for positive relationships among students and teachers to ensure safer, more inclusive, higher-achieving schools. Personalizing the educational instructional environment and structuring an engaging classroom environment are keys to producing a safe and high achieving learning environment. Recommendations for personalizing the student environment have included looping, block scheduling, and the establishment of tutoring, mentoring, and advising programs (Kaplan, 2000).
Looping has allowed a single teacher to work with the same group of students for multiple years. This extended time together increased teachers' and students’ understanding of expectations, learning styles, academic strengths, and needs. These ongoing interactions have allowed teachers to recognize and provide conditions that have maximized each student’s achievement. Additional benefits included fewer transitions and adjustments during breaks, an informal mentoring relationship with teachers, and a heightened awareness of student characteristics so as to be more aware of changes or problems (Kaplan, 2000).

Kaplan (2000) suggested that block scheduling has provided a safe, high-achieving learning community. This has allowed students to have longer periods of class instruction with advantages for student safety and learning both inside and outside of the classroom. Increased learning time has given students extended time within the regular school day to master skills and knowledge. Students have had time to practice new learning and to receive specific feedback about their understanding and correctness and to apply promptly the feedback to increase learning (Kaplan). Additionally, longer classes have given students longer periods to work with their classmates, thus, increasing respect and better peer relations.

Tutoring, mentoring, and advising programs have also fostered small, safe, inclusive learning communities. These have allowed for one-on-one relationships to meet students’ needs for belonging, respect, and competence. These interpersonal interactions have focused on students' success and built trust. The relationships, extra time, and extra help have further motivated students in academic achievement, personal development, and confidence. According to Kaplan (2000), the more personalized learning experiences that are created for all students, especially those at risk for disruptive behavior and low achievement, the greater the likelihood of creating a safe and nurturing school climate that directly supports student learning.

It is unlikely that schools can be safe and high achieving unless excellent teaching and learning occurs in most classrooms. Successful learners have ownership or psychological investments in their schoolwork and become academically engaged when they find their
schoolwork interesting and worthwhile. Engaged students show more time on task, persistence, concentration, enthusiasm, and care for their work. In order for this to occur, Kaplan (2000) suggested teachers use research-based best practices that actively engage all students in the learning process. School leadership that provided ongoing, instructionally focused professional development activities, frequent classroom observations, and teacher conferences supported teachers’ efforts to increase student safety, learning, and achievement (Kaplan).

Such interventions assumed that the students and teachers have the same goals and desires for success. Intelligent, hard-working students affected their peers through knowledge spillovers and through their influence on academic and disciplinary standards in the classroom. Alternately, misbehaving students disrupted the classroom, thereby disrupting the learning environment (Hoxby, 2002). Unfortunately, many students seemed to not be interested in achievement; thus, quality alternative education programs have been paramount to educating those students who might not have been motivated to succeed. Suspension, expulsion, retention, chronic failure, and alienation all contributed to these unacceptable dropout and incompletion rates. Drucker (1989) contended that schools needed to change and begin to focus on preparing students for the future. He reasoned that the United States is in a social and technological revolution that will force the reinvention of education and accordingly the act of teaching. Drucker continued by saying that knowledge is the new capital base and wealth-producing resource. In order to prepare for this society, education is crucial. Cassel (2003) stated:

One million of the two million prison inmates are high school dropouts and for many of them incarceration equates to a loss in resourcefulness that will never be regained. First, and most important for all inmates, “truth and credibility” of the individual is lost forever and secondly because 80% of inmates are addicted to alcohol or drugs, and the success rate of addiction rehabilitation is low (15%), much manpower is lost. High schools must take immediate action to prevent such dropouts before there is such a contagion of being a prison inmate. (p. 650)

School systems must take the appropriate steps to prevent students from dropping out of high school. Key to this concept has been identifying those students who are at-risk for dropping out of school. Cassel pointed out that there were significant indicators for potential dropouts. These
included, but were not limited to, a lack of personal development skills, extensive discipline referrals, poor grades, low scores on standardized achievement tests, low-socioeconomic backgrounds, minority students, and low motivation. Identification and remediation of these students is crucial to schools and the economic integrity of their relative communities. Rather than addressing improvements for school systems and identifying students with “at-risk” characteristics, many states have created alternative schools for “problem” individuals thought to degrade general education quality (Gregg, 1999).

The first alternative schools were designed to promote education and provide academic options for students who were not successful in regular education programs (Kershaw & Blank, 1993). However, the purpose of many new alternative schools has been correctional rather than education focused. Unfortunately, many alternative programs have lacked focus and purpose and did not have a high rate of academic or behavioral success (Gregg, 1999). Primary issues included the impact of large schools and classes, inadequately trained teachers, ineffective school leadership and organization, and segregation of problem students within schools. Additionally, Gregg examined alternative education programs that appeared to prove beneficial in student success and achievement.

According to Gregg (1999), large classes and schools exacerbated the problem further by making it easier for marginal students to fall through the cracks and for their academic, behavioral, and social needs to be overlooked. Children who repeatedly fail academically and socially have proven to be more apt to give up or become alienated and antisocial (Gregg).

Raywid's (1990) research focused on effective characteristics of alternative schools. These schools were simply categorized as Type 1, 2, and 3 schools. Type 1 schools offered full-time, multiyear, education options for all students. They provided a full instructional program so that students could earn credits they need to graduate and students chose to attend. Other characteristics included flexibility, student autonomy, a caring staff, small school size, small classes, and a personalized approach that builds a sense of affiliation and features individual
instruction, self-paced work, and career counseling. Schools within schools, magnet schools, charter schools, and job-based schools have been examples of Type 1 schools (Raywid, 1994).

According to Raywid (1994), Type 2 schools have been most easily distinguished by discipline. They aimed to segregate. They contained and attempted to reform disruptive students. Students have not typically chosen to attend but rather are placed in such schools for specific periods. Placement has been typically short-term and the curriculum has been limited to a few basic courses or students are required to work on assignments supplied by their “home” schools. Examples of these schools included “last-chance schools” and “in-school suspension.”

Type 3 programs provided short-term but therapeutic settings for students with social and emotional problems that create academic or behavioral barriers to learning. Type 3 programs often have offered counseling, access to social services, and academic remediation. These programs served targeted populations and students have had the option to decline to participate (Raywid, 1994).

Mixed signals about the purpose of alternative schools might have confused implementation efforts. The determination of whether or not a program was supposed to have improved student outcomes or to have separated disruptive students from mainstream classrooms has yet to be determined. Schools need to have a clear understanding of what they expect to accomplish because implementation policies differed widely according to their purposes (Raywid, 1994).

An additional issue with alternative schools was that teachers might not have received training in behavior management and instructional strategies to help students with different learning needs. School systems, as organizations, might not have employed clearly defined and appropriately supported high standards for behavior and achievement (Raywid, 1994).

Gottfredson (1994) reported that improved school organization-management, governance, culture, and climate reduced overall student disruption as effectively as individual treatment programs. Aleem and Moles' (1993) research on secondary schools identified three
dimensions of school climate that contributed to disciplined, productive, learning environments. These included a strong emphasis on the academic mission of the school, firm, fair, and consistently enforced discipline standards, and an ethic of caring that guides staff-student relationships. This combination transcended individual student differences to produce desired academic and behavioral outcomes.

A final aspect of this research was to focus on problems that have threatened to segregate poor, disabled, and minority students in alternative programs. According to Armstrong and Barber (1997), preliminary studies in two states cautioned that alternative schools have become “dumping grounds” for undesirable or unwanted students. Minority and special education students were more likely to be suspended and expelled; therefore, they might be disproportionately placed in alternative schools as well. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act permitted schools to place exceptional students in alternative settings as long as they continued to have access to the general curriculum, received the special education services set forth in their IEP's, and were provided services to address problem behaviors. Alternative programs that lacked high academic standards, clear and fairly administered entrance and exit criteria, and the right to due process might have violated students’ educational and civil rights (Gregg, 1999).

**External Influences on Student Achievement**

A substantial amount of research has been devoted to external influences and their impact on students' achievement. Factors addressed in this review include peer influence and the influence of significant others, socioeconomic factors, and social-emotional factors.

Numerous studies (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Gauvin & Rogoff, 1989; Radziszewska & Rogoff, 1991; Tudge, 1992; Watkins & Wentzel, 2002) have documented positive relations between children’s relationships with peers and a range of social and intellectual enablers including motivational orientations reflected in goals and values and skills related to self-
regulation, social interaction, and problem solving. The findings of these studies illustrated how learning has been linked to the social contexts within which children have learned and highlighted the notion that the development and use of academic enablers have been highly dependent on the characteristics of and opportunities provided by learning contexts (Bronfenbrenner).

Researchers (Watkins & Wentzel, 2002) have suggested that popular status among peers and high levels of acceptance has been linked to successful academic performance, and rejected status was linked to low levels of acceptance and academic difficulties. These findings were consistent with respect to classroom grades although peer acceptance has been related positively to standardized test scores.

In addition to being socially accepted by peers, students often interacted with classmates in collaborative learning environments. In this scenario, the student collaborators were likely to be acquaintances but not necessarily friends. Researchers have also suggested that this collaborative relationship encouraged social interaction and was related to academic and intellectual outcomes (Gauvin & Rogoff, 1989; Tudge, 1992). Collaborative problem solving has also been related to high levels of engagement, use of advanced strategic thinking skills, and specific academic gains (Radziszewska & Rogoff, 1991).

To the extent that behavioral styles accounted for positive associations between peer relationships and academic outcomes, the quality of peer relationships was likely to play a relatively small role in promoting social and academic competence in the classroom. However, a growing body of research provided some evidence that the nature of students' relationships with their peers might have contributed to their academic performance indirectly by way of motivational outcomes (Watkins & Wentzel, 2002). For instance, being accepted by peers has been related positively to satisfaction with school, perceived academic competence, and pursuit of goals to learn and to behave in socially appropriate ways (Wentzel, 1994). Additionally,
being rejected by peers has been related to low levels of interest in school and disengaging altogether by dropping out (Parker & Asher, 1987).

One explanation is those students' perceptions of their relationship with peers rather than actual levels of acceptance were the most accurate predictor of motivation (Watkins & Wentzel, 2002). Perceiving positive relationships with peers was likely to promote a student’s sense of emotional well being and social relatedness. In contrast, perceiving negative relationships or rejection was likely to lead to emotional distress and subsequent disaffection with and alienation from classroom activities (Wentzel, 1999).

Watkins and Wentzel (2002) offered evidence that sustained the notion that feeling supported by peers and emotional well being was associated with school-related motivation and related emotional distress to peer rejection and a perception that peers were unsupportive. These researchers also reported that negative emotional states have been related to negative attitudes, poor adjustment to school, and ineffective cognitive functioning (Watkins & Wentzel).

The literature on peer support underscored the important role that students’ perceptions and interpretations of their peers’ behavior played in their active pursuit of appropriate classroom goals. It was additionally suggested that children who were socially rejected tended to believe that others were out to harm them when in fact they were not; rather, these children had chosen to pursue inappropriate and antisocial goals in social situations (Dodge & Feldman, 1990).

Literature on urban education has recently begun to focus on the increase of concentrated poverty in inner-city neighborhoods and the educational failure of youth often associated with living in these neighborhoods. Ainsworth (2002) identified characteristics that influenced educational achievement and the mechanisms that mediated these associations. Ainsworth found that not only did neighborhood characteristics predict educational outcomes, but also that the strength of the predictions often rivaled those associated with more commonly cited family and school factors. The following quote from Oscar Lewis’ 1971 *Four Horsemen: Pollution, Poverty, Famine, Violence* appeared in Payne’s (2005) *A Framework on Poverty*:
The economic traits which are most characteristic of the culture of poverty include the constant struggle for survival, unemployment and underemployment, low wages, a miscellany of unskilled occupations, child labor, the absence of savings, a chronic shortage of cash, the absence of food reserves in the home, the pattern of frequent buying of small quantities of food many times a day as the need arises, the pawning of personal goods, borrowing from local money lenders at usurious rates of interest, spontaneous informal credit devices organized by neighbors, and the use of second-hand clothing and furniture. (p. 58)

Ainsworth (2002) reported that dropout rates in severely distressed neighborhoods were more than three times higher than were those in nonpoverty neighborhoods and that the jobless rate for young high school dropouts in these areas was often over 80%. Ainsworth explained that the social isolation and lack of organization typical of inner-city neighborhoods resulted in several major social problems including a prevalence of delinquent subcultures, the weakening of basic institutions, and the lack of social control. All of this contributed to the high rate of educational failure in inner-city neighborhoods. Ainsworth described five mechanisms through which neighborhood characteristics affected educational achievement. These were: (a) collective socialization, (b) social control, (c) social capital, (d) differential occupational opportunity, and (e) institutional characteristics.

Neighborhood characteristics influenced collective socialization processes by shaping the type of role models youth were exposed to outside the home. Ainsworth (2002) asserted that neighborhoods where most adults have steady jobs fostered behaviors and attitudes conducive to success in both school and work. Therefore, children in advantaged neighborhoods were more likely to value education and work hard because that is what was modeled for them by neighborhood adults.

In neighborhoods in which many adults do not work, Ainsworth (2002) argued that life had become incoherent for youth because of the lack of structuring norms modeled by working adults. For example, typical inner-city culture contained many elements of mainstream culture, including an achievement ideology that suggested that if one worked hard in school it would pay off in terms of a good job. What made inner-city residents different from other Americans was
their inability to realize such ideals through legitimate means because of restricted opportunities and other social constraints (Massey & Denton, 1993). Thus, with fewer positive role models in their neighborhoods, children might have been less likely to learn important behaviors and attitudes that lead to success in school because of a lack of exposure to them and because they had no direct evidence that these attitudes and behaviors were useful or desirable. Greenblatt (2003) contended that separation of races, because of inner-city demographics, had negative financial consequences for African Americans. This, for instance, might have prevented African Americans from having access to social networks that might have led to good jobs. He maintained that inner-city residents had unequal access to suburban jobs located near non-ethnic residential areas. High crime rates in these neighborhoods also impeded financial success for African Americans.

Capponi (1997) added that poor citizens were typically as confined by their poverty as if they lived in a maximum-security prison. There was little to no exposure to other ways of life unless their neighborhood went through gentrification.

Additionally, neighborhood levels of social control or the monitoring and sanctioning of deviant behavior might have influenced the educational performance of neighborhood youth. Children in such communities had fewer choices about how to spend their time in constructive ways and therefore were more likely to take part in deviant activities (Ainsworth, 2002).

A third avenue through which neighborhood context might have influenced educational outcomes was the amount and quality of social capital that existed in a given community (Ainsworth, 2002). Educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged students were such that these students attended schools with fewer certified or experienced teachers, fewer appropriate facilities, and a less rigorous curriculum than did those students in middle class and more affluent schools (Viadero, 2006). Ainsworth’s research reported that children who lived in advantaged neighborhoods were more likely to be exposed to helpful social networks or adults who provided positive resources, information, and opportunities that were educationally
beneficial. Subsequently, children in impoverished neighborhoods were disadvantaged not only by smaller social networks but also by networks that were less beneficial than those in more advantaged neighborhoods as a result of the social position of partners, parents, and friends.

Ainsworth (2002) also emphasized the importance of occupational opportunity in structuring the lives of youth. While most students were taught that they could be successful if they worked hard enough, the degree to which this is supported by the experience of adolescents varied by neighborhood. If students were motivated to succeed in school because they believed that education would pay off in the form of good jobs, those beliefs might have affected their academic effort.

The last mechanism by which neighborhood context was found to have influenced educational outcomes was the neighborhoods’ effects on institutional characteristics such as those found in the schools students attended. For example, neighborhoods affected school quality through the inability of inner-city neighborhood schools to recruit and retain good educators. Resulting strains deteriorated the schools' atmosphere and abilities to control student behavior (Jencks & Mayer, 1990).

According to Viadero (2001), sociologist James Coleman started a national argument in 1966 when he issued a landmark study concluding that differences in students' academic achievement had more to do with background characteristics, such as family income, than with anything that went on in schools. Researchers such as Bradley and Corwyn (2002), Degarmo (1999), and Payne (2005) have delved into various components of socioeconomic status and their respective influence on student achievement.

Educators have long suspected that poor children fell behind even before they started school. Socioeconomic status remained a topic of great interest for those who studied child development. This interest was derived from a belief that high family socioeconomic status afforded children an array of services, goods, parental actions, and social connections that potentially rebounded to the benefit of children and a concern that many children of low
socioeconomic status lacked access to these same resources and experiences, thus putting them at risk for educational problems throughout their school careers (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1993).

For over 70 years, research on the relationship between socioeconomic status and intellectual-academic competence has accumulated (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). McCall (1981) presented evidence that the association between socioeconomic status and cognitive performance began in infancy. Studies have documented that poverty and low parental education were associated with lower levels of school achievement and IQ later in childhood (Bradley & Corwyn). Mercy and Steelman (1982) found that socioeconomic status measures used in the health examination survey (family income, maternal education, paternal education) predicted intellectual attainment, with education being the best predictor. Degarmo (1999) found that each socioeconomic status indicator (income, education, and occupation) was associated with better parenting, which in turn affected school achievement via skill building activities and school behavior.

Data from the *National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and the National Household Education* (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002) indicated that children from poor families had less access to a wide variety of different recreational and learning materials. They were less likely to go on trips, visit a library or museum, attend a theatrical performance, or to be given lessons directed at enhancing their skills. Access to such material and resources could have mediated the relationship between socioeconomic status and children’s intellectual and academic achievement.

An additional portion of the observed relationship among socioeconomic status, cognitively stimulating experiences, and children's well being reflected parental attitudes, expectations, and styles of interacting with children (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Adams (1998) identified eight major differences in patterns of socialization for children from different social classes. Among these differences, the emphasis given to verbal skills, independence, achievement, and creativity was paramount. Parents of high socioeconomic status engaged children in more conversations, read to them more, and provided more teaching experiences
(Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), whereas parents of low socioeconomic status were less likely to purchase reading and learning materials for their children, less likely to take their children to educational and cultural events, and were less likely to regulate the amount of television their children watch (Bradley & Corwyn). As a result, children from families of low socioeconomic status experienced more frequent school failure.

The relationship between socioeconomic status and cognitive attainment has proven to be complex, with different components of socioeconomic status contributing to the development of particular cognitive skills in different ways with some components of socioeconomic status serving to moderate the effects of other components. Socioeconomic status also appeared to affect school attendance and numbers of years of schooling completed. The impact on years completed appeared to be less than the impact on school achievement (Bradley & Corwin, 2002). Even so, socioeconomic status remained one of the most consistent predictors of early high school dropout, with evidence that suggested it was connected to both low parental expectations and to early initiation of sexual activity (Battin-Pearson, 2000).

Associations between children from low-income, ethnically diverse families and participation in out-of-school activities and academic achievement have also been studied. Children’s participation in extracurricular activities has been assumed to promote skills that were beneficial to academic achievement. Research on youth generally indicated a positive relationship between the amount of participation in extracurricular activities and academic achievement and educational attainment (Camp, 1990; Gerber, 1996; Marsh, 1992). Interest in how children have spent their time before and after school had increased recently in the context of family employment patterns that have led to fewer adults at home or nearby when children were out of school and fewer parents were available for volunteer roles in traditional youth-serving organizations, such as scouting (Lerner, Zippiroli, & Behrman, 1999). Posner and Vandell (1999) found that third- through fifth-grade students from low-income, urban households who attended after-school programs operated by schools and other organizations
spent more time on academic and extracurricular activities, while children in informal care settings spent more time watching television and “hanging out.”

Powell, Peet, and Peet (2002) studied the frequency, number, and length of participation in out-of-school activities and the type of activity among 60 first-grade students from low-income, ethnically diverse families. The findings indicated that boys were involved in more activities, especially sports. The girls in the study spent more time on homework and chores. The researchers also pointed to the benefits of examining indicators of the intensity of out-of-school activities. Among the three dimensions of participation in out-of-school activities examined in this study, the frequency of participation was most consistently associated with report card grades. Length of participation in literacy-oriented activities, but not in other activities, was positively associated with report card grades. The number of out-of-school activities was not associated with grades in this study. Powell et al. further suggested that there was a point at which the amount of time devoted to out of school activities became a hindrance to the academic performance of children.

An additional component of socioeconomic status and its influence on student achievement was student perception. According to Howard (2001), students often described the different ways in which educational achievement was understood by the poor versus the affluent and how these understandings have seemed to reflect their educational experiences. In his research, Howard examined the relationship between class status of students and their educational experiences by developing a meaning for educational achievement through the understandings of poor and affluent students. The research was conducted in an affluent private high school and an impoverished inner-city school.

The findings from Howard's (2001) study provided a dimension for understanding the differences in achievement patterns between the poor and affluent by how drastically different the informants defined their individual communities. The community at the inner-city school was characterized by a lack of membership, unity, and identity. Conversely, the private school
was defined by a strong sense of membership, unity, and identity. This created a strong contrast between the social landscapes at the two schools (Howard).

The role of each community provided a direction for the educational experiences of each student. The community of the private school brought the members and stakeholders together for a common purpose. This purpose was to meet the educational needs of the students. The separation within the community of the inner-city school prevented the establishment of a common purpose for the educational experiences of students. The needs of the students were lost within the division of the community and students tended to not have a rewarding relationship with their education (Howard, 2001).
Chapter 3 presents the methods and procedures used for conducting a phenomenological study examining the perceptions of 16 at-risk and honors students in a Northeast Tennessee high school in regard to factors of academic achievement. This chapter describes the research design, the sampling techniques, and the procedures for data analysis.

Research Design

Qualitative research is grounded in the assumption that features of the social environment are constructed as interpretations by individuals and that these interpretations tend to be transitory and situational. Qualitative researchers develop knowledge primarily by collecting verbal data through intensive study of the specific instances of the phenomenon, the case, and subjecting these data to analytic induction (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggested that qualitative research relied on the use of multiple methods and that it involved an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. In other words, qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings and attempt to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. Qualitative research can be thought of as an umbrella concept under which several forms of inquiry are covered and through which interpretation and meanings are sought with as little disruption as possible of the natural setting (Merriam, 1998).

The phenomenological method of qualitative research concentrates on the meaning of the lived experience for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon. This method has its roots in the philosophical perspectives of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (Woodruff-Smith & Thomasson, 2005). It is primarily used in the social and human sciences,
especially in sociology, psychology, sociology, nursing, and education (Creswell, 1997). It is a methodology that entails the use of thick, rich descriptions and explanations.

Creswell (1997) outlined five major procedural issues in using phenomenology. The five caveats were: (a) understanding the philosophical perspectives behind the approach, especially the concept of studying how people experience a phenomenon; (b) writing research questions that explore the meaning of that experience for individuals and asking individuals to describe their everyday lived experiences; (c) collecting data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation; (d) performing phenomenological data analysis; and (e) better understanding the essential, invariant structure, or essence of the experience while recognizing that a single unifying meaning of the experience might exist.

To explore the research questions, I developed a phenomenological study that relied primarily on data collected during interviews. The selection of participants was done through a stratified purposeful sample. Gall et al. (1996) defined a stratified purposeful sample as including several cases at defined points of variation with respect to the phenomena being studied. By including several cases of each type, the researcher can develop insights into the characteristics of each type as well as insight into the variations that exist across types.

This phenomenological study focused on the perceptions of 16 students from a Northeast Tennessee high school. Eight of the students were selected from the top 10% of the graduating class of 2005 and eight of the students were selected from the bottom 10% of the graduating class of 2006. The 16 students were selected from a stratified purposeful sample. I conducted an in-depth interview with each of the 16 students. The research was conducted in the spring semester of 2005 and continued through the fall of 2006. The purpose of the study was to examine perceptions of achievement factors for honor and at-risk students.
Selection of Participants

The participants of this study were chosen exclusively from students from the same Northeast Tennessee high school. Sixteen students were selected from a stratified purposeful sample of students from this specific school. Eight students were selected from the top 10% of the class of 2005 and eight students were selected from the bottom 10% of the class of 2006.

This study was initiated to demonstrate a range of evidence of the students' perceptions of factors that influence the academic achievement of honor and at-risk students. Once completed, each participant’s interview data were examined for common themes and patterns across participants, and the findings reported as collective data.

My intent was to learn as much as possible about the perception of factors that both positively and negatively influence school achievement. Therefore, the sample selection was purposeful. Because of the need to study students from divergent achievement groups, the selection was also stratified. Students were selected from defined groups from which it seemed the most relevant information could be learned.

Each of the 16 participants in the study was asked to individually attend an initial meeting with me to have the scope of the study as well as possible consequences explained to him or her. During the initial meeting, students were asked to listen to and read the informed consent notification so that they understood the purpose of the study, the nature of the questions they were to be asked, and to understand that participation was voluntary. Students were also given the study narrative and a letter for their parents explaining these details. Parents were given the option, through the correspondence, to contact me by phone or in person if they had questions or concerns. No parents made contact. Additionally, an informed consent document was signed, in accordance with the Institutional Review Board Protocol, as required by East Tennessee State University (see Appendix D). Additionally, the participants and their parents were assured that they would have complete confidentiality in regard to their responses and that
reasonable precautions were in place to safeguard them from any negative consequences that might occur during the interview process (see Appendix D).

Methods of Data Collection

The method of acquiring information for this phenomenological study was done exclusively through indepth individual interviews. The study was limited to 16 students who attended at a specific Northeast Tennessee high school. Sixteen students were selected from a stratified purposeful sample that included eight students from the top 10% of the class of 2005 and eight students from the bottom 10% of the class of 2006. I gained permission for the research by contacting the director of schools and the high school principal. Following the contact, a formal letter was sent to both individuals explaining the protocols of the study (see Appendices A & B).

Each interview contained semi structured and open-ended questions. The questions were prewritten but flexible in interview presentation. The questions were derived from a previous research study of the same nature (see Appendix C). The responses from the previous study assisted me in determining the categories of inquiry, the effectiveness of the questions, the most effective order for asking the questions, and the need for any follow-up inquiries.

The interviews were conducted at the school site, and I audiotaped the responses. Interview sessions were scheduled at the convenience of the students participating in the study. The data from the interviews were transcribed, analyzed, and compared throughout the study.

Analysis of Data

According to Bogden and Biklen (1992), data analysis for interpretive research is a matter of systematically sifting through research transcripts, field notes, and other accumulated materials and arranging the resulting data so that their usefulness to the researcher increases. This is done by continually comparing all of the data gathered during the study. Strauss and
Corbin (1998) described this process as following four stages. These included comparing incidents applicable to each category, integrating categories and their properties, delimiting the theory grounded in the data, and writing the theory. As the social phenomena were recorded and classified, they were also compared across categories.

The analysis focused on the students’ perceptions of factors that positively and negatively influence achievement for at-risk and honor students at a specific Northeast Tennessee high school. These factors were primarily determined via the literature review and student interviews. The interview questions were born out of the research questions, which helped define the purpose of the study. The research questions were as follows:

1. How do the perceptions of at-risk students compare with honor students in regard to the level of their parents' involvement in school, expectations for students' success, and attainment of education?
2. How do the perceptions of at-risk students compare with honor students in regard to level of educational support such as teacher support, faculty involvement, and the structured learning environment?
3. How do the perceptions of at-risk students compare with honor students in regard to peer and external influences such as community support and resources?
4. How do the perceptions of at-risk students compare with honor students regarding self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, achievement goals, gender, and ethnicity?

The primary tool that was used was the QSR NUD*IST version 4.0 software to assist in identifying and coding patterns and relationships in the data collected. By coding the interview data and transcribed field notes, I placed the data into categories. The purpose was to determine what underlying patterns, themes, or connections existed within the identified categories.
Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness in a naturalistic inquiry relates to persuading the audience that the findings are worth paying attention to or that they are meaningful. In order to establish trustworthiness, the researcher must provide for the credibility, transferability, dependability, and reliability of the study.

In order to establish the credibility of this study, I used multiple methods. First, through prolonged engagement, I became familiar with the school's culture and established trust. This corresponded to the purposes of prolonged engagement as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Additionally, I used member checks for establishing credibility. According to Lincoln and Guba, member checks allow data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions to be evaluated for accuracy by the participants of the study.

Transferability is dependent on the provision of descriptive data (Patton, 1990). Whereas, quantitative research focuses on the establishment of external validity, a qualitative study depends on the specific context and perceptions of the members studied. Therefore, it was vital for me to provide thick, rich description and detailed development of the interviews. This will allow anyone wishing to apply the findings of this study to his or her respective study to make an informed decision as to the appropriateness of doing so.

Dependability was established by conducting an audit trail. This entailed auditing the various stages through which the research proceeded and the techniques used at each stage. Confirmability was demonstrated by keeping a record of all taped interviews, transcripts, and reflections.
The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of at-risk and honor students in relation to their specific educational achievements. The setting was in a large high school of approximately 1,800 students. Eighty-five percent of the high school graduates in the class of 2005 and 68% of the graduates in the class of 2006 continued their education beyond high school. The high school graduation rate was 85.2% for the class of 2005 and 92.3% for the class of 2006 respectively.

Specifically, I examined the perspectives of each student related to the following four research questions:

1. How do the perceptions of at-risk students compare with honor students in regard to the level of their parents' involvement in school, expectations for students' success, and attainment of education?
2. How do the perceptions of at-risk students compare with honor students in regard to level of educational support such as teacher support, faculty involvement, and the structured learning environment?
3. How do the perceptions of at-risk students compare with honor students in regard to peer and external influences such as community support and resources?
4. How do the perceptions of at-risk students compare with honor students regarding self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, achievement goals, gender, and ethnicity?

Each interview was audio-recorded; in addition, I maintained field notes. The interviews were later transcribed and used to reflect, rethink, and examine for patterns and themes.

The 16 students interviewed were selected from a stratified purposeful sample from the top 10% of the class of 2005 and the bottom 10% of the class of 2006. It was my intention to have both groups from the class of 2005 but time constraints of the school year prevented the
students in the bottom 10% from being selected. This did change the original scope and title of the study. The East Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board approved these changes in the fall of 2005. Each participant in the study was asked to individually attend an initial meeting with me to have the scope of the study, as well as possible consequences, explained to him or her. Additionally, an informed consent document was signed in accordance with the Institutional Review Board Protocol as required by East Tennessee State University (see Appendix D). All participants were asked to listen and to read the informed consent notification so that they understood the purpose of the study, the nature of the questions they were to be asked, and to understand that their participation was voluntary. Additionally, the participants and their parents were assured that they would have complete confidentiality in regard to their responses and that reasonable precautions were in place to safeguard them from any negative consequences that might occur during the interview process (see Appendix D).

Demographics

All of the students in the top 10% group were seniors in the class of 2005. It is important to note that this high school has both a standard grade-point average and ranking system as well as a weighted grade-point average and ranking system. The standard grade-point average is based on an A being worth 4 points, a B being worth 3 points, a C being worth 2 points, a D being worth 1 point, an F earning no points. The weighted grade-point average allows for the addition of .04 points for honors classes and .05 for advanced placement classes to the standard grade-point average. Thus, students who take honors and advanced classes have the opportunity to have a cumulative grade point average that exceeds 4.0. Following is a brief and confidential description of each participant who was identified in the top 10% of his or her class:

1. Mitchell was an 18 year-old Caucasian male. He was ranked number 8 in his class. His weighted grade point average was 4.71.

2. Lisa was a 17 year-old Caucasian female. She was ranked number 9 in her class. Her weighted grade point average was 4.69.
3. Leah was a 17 year-old Caucasian female. She was ranked number 13 in her class. Her weighted grade point average was 4.61.

4. Hayley was a 17 year-old Caucasian female. She was ranked number 15 in her class. Her weighted grade point average was 4.57.

5. Christy was a 17 year-old Caucasian female. She was ranked number 16 in her class. Her weighted grade point average was 4.53.

6. Jana was an 18 year-old Caucasian female. She was ranked number 26 in her class. Her weighted grade point average was 4.45.

7. Kevin was a 17 year-old African American male. He was ranked number 30 in his class. His weighted grade point average was 4.40.

8. Heather was an 18 year-old Caucasian female. She was ranked number 36 in her class. Her weighted grade point average was 4.32.

I felt that it was important to point out the gender and ethnic distribution of the 36 students who comprised the top 10% of the classes of 2005 and 2006. Of the students in the top 10% of the class of 2005, 50% were male and 50% were female. Additionally, for the top 10% of the class of 2005, 35 (97.2%) were identified as Caucasian; 1 (2.8%) student was identified as African American; no students were identified as Asian; no students were identified as American Indian; no students were identified as Pacific Islander; and no students were identified as Hispanic. The ethnic breakdown for the school for the 2004-2005 school year was 89.3% Caucasian, 1.2% Asian, 7.7% African American, .1% Native American, .2% Pacific Islander, and 1.5% Hispanic.

The gender breakdown of the students in the top 10% of the class of 2006 was 19 (52.8%) males and 17 (47.2%) females. Additionally, for the top 10% of the class of 2006, 34 (94.4%) were identified as Caucasian; no students were identified as Asian; 2 (5.6%) of the students were identified as African American; no students were identified as American Indian; no students were identified as Pacific Islander; and no students were identified as Hispanic. The ethnic breakdown for the school for the 2005-2006 school year was 88.4% Caucasian, 1.2% Asian, 8% African American, .1% Native American, .4% Pacific Islander, and 2% Hispanic.
All of the students in the bottom 10% group were seniors in the class of 2006. Following is a brief and confidential description of each participant who was identified in the bottom 10% of his or her class:

1. Danny was a 17 year-old African American male. He was ranked number 340 in his class. His grade point average was 1.92. This student did not attempt any weighted courses.

2. Krista was a 19 year-old African American female. She was ranked number 330 in her class. Her grade point average was 2.12. This student did not attempt any weighted courses.

3. Eric was an 18 year-old African American male. He was ranked number 322 in his class. His grade point average was 2.16. This student did not attempt any weighted courses.

4. Dennis was an 18 year-old Hispanic male. He was ranked number 337 in his class. His grade point average was 2.03. This student did not attempt any weighted courses. This student failed to earn enough credits to graduate with his class. He did return to high school for an additional semester and earned his diploma.

5. Anna was a 17 year-old Caucasian female. She was ranked number 336 in her class. Her grade point average was 2.04. This student did not attempt any weighted courses.

6. Jennifer was an 18 year-old Caucasian female. She was ranked number 343 in her class. Her grade point average was 1.81. This student did not attempt any weighted courses.

7. Kristina was a 17 year-old Hispanic female. She was ranked number 338 in her class. Her grade point average was 1.95. This student did not attempt any weighted courses.

8. Nikki was an 18 year-old African American female. She was ranked number 357 in her class. Her grade point average was 1.75. This student did not attempt any weighted classes.

I believe it is important to point out the gender and ethnic distribution of the 36 students who comprised the bottom 10% of the classes of 2005 and 2006. Of the students in the bottom 10% of the class of 2005, 55.6% were male and 44.4% were female. Additionally, for the bottom 10% of the class of 2005, 28 (77.8%) were identified as Caucasian; no students were identified as Asian; 6 (16.7%) were identified as African American; no students were identified as American Indian; no students were identified as Pacific Islander; and 2 (5.6%) were identified as
as Hispanic. The ethnic breakdown for the school for the 2004-2005 school year was 89.3% Caucasian, 1.2% Asian, 7.7% African American, .1% Native American, .2% Pacific Islander, and 1.5% Hispanic.

The gender breakdown of the students in the bottom 10% of the class of 2006 was 30 (83.3%) males and 6 (16.7%) females. Additionally, for the bottom 10% of the class of 2006, 29 (80.6%) were identified as Caucasian; no students were identified as Asian; 7 (19.4%) were identified as African American; no students were identified as American Indian; no students were identified as Pacific Islander; and no students were identified as Hispanic. The ethnic breakdown for the school for the 2005-2006 school year was 88.4% Caucasian, 1.2% Asian, 8% African American, .1% Native American, .4% Pacific Islander, and 2% Hispanic.

The Interview Process

The interview process was semi-structured with open-ended questions. The questions, although prewritten (see Appendix C), were flexible in interview presentation. Each question was posed and then possibly followed up with several more depending upon the direction the responses took during the interview. This allowed both the individual being interviewed and me the opportunity to explore additional areas that might have otherwise been excluded. The participants of this study were chosen exclusively from students attending the same Northeast Tennessee high school.

Depending upon the responses of the students and their opportunity to expound upon any question, they touched upon many areas related to school, personal life, family, peers, work, and community. Each interview was scheduled without a time limit. Most interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour.

As the data were collected from the interviews and field notes, they were coded using the QSR NUD*IST 4.0 software. Patterns and relationships began to emerge from the data related to several categories. The categories identified during the study were compared in regard to (a)
Intrapersonal characteristics, (b) parental influences, (c) educational influences, and (d) external relationships.

**Intrapersonal Characteristics**

Intrapersonal influences, defined for this research from the review of the literature for this study, are those influences that exist within each individual. Intrapersonal characteristics emerged as a category in the following ways: (a) self-efficacy, (b) personal attributions, (c) intrinsic motivation, (d) achievement goals, (e) gender, (f) ethnicity, and (g) resiliency.

**Self-Efficacy**

The importance of a student's self-efficacy and self-reflection for effective instructional design has been discussed in relation to student success (House, 2002). McCabe (2006) defined self-efficacy as one’s beliefs about one’s capabilities to perform a particular task. Self-efficacy is assumed to be situational and contextualized, not a general belief about self-concept or self-esteem. For example, a student might have high self-efficacy for doing math but low self-efficacy for science or other subject areas, depending on previous successes and failures (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). Self-efficacy has been related positively to higher levels of achievement and learning as well as a wide variety of adaptive academic outcomes such as higher levels of effort and increased persistence on difficult tasks in both experimental and correlational studies involving students from a variety of age groups (Bandura, 1997; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Students with positive self-efficacy beliefs have proven to work harder, persist, and eventually achieve at higher levels (Linnenbrink & Pintrich). This generalization seems to apply to all students, as it is relatively stable across different ages and grades as well as different gender and ethnic groups (Bandura; Pintrich & Schunk).

The students in this research study were asked to talk about their self-efficacy and self-confidence. The students were asked about their beliefs in their abilities to perform specific
academic and personal tasks and their overall level of self-confidence. The replies of the students in the bottom 10% are addressed first. In regard to a time when they were not confident, seven of the eight students in the bottom 10% group referenced school. Five of the eight recalled a romantic relationship as being a time when they were very confident. All eight students began their replies by saying they were confident; however, they all contradicted that statement at some point in their answers.

Eric, a large young man with short brown hair, entered the room with a smile and chose the chair second farthest from me for our interview. He was dressed in baggy denim jeans and an untucked striped Sean Jean t-shirt. He maintained a mostly positive demeanor throughout the interview process; however, there were several questions he chose to pass on and his demeanor would often change to very serious and somber with some of the more difficult questions. Eric began by describing his overall level of self-confidence:

I guess I’m pretty confident. You know, I feel good about most things. I know if I tried harder at school that would all work out. I hang with my friends and they all like me. I’m not always hittin’ it with the girls but hey, this is [Name]; they been knowin’ me forever man, those type won’t give ya boy a chance.

When asked to describe a time when he was most confident, Eric shared:

A time when I was very confident was when we all rolled up in the recording studio down in, uh, [Place]. You know [Classmate's Names] they were all talking about their flow. Well, ‘ol Eric shut the door and it just rolled. I was freestylin’ and it was bumpin’. I killed man. I tell ya what--I’m gonna burn ya a copy and let ya hear it. It was off the hook man.

When I asked Eric to describe a time he did not feel self-confident, he replied:

Let’s see, when I wasn’t so confident. That has to be at school, man, class stuff. I just ain’t about the books, studying, you know. I never have been a school guy. I think I could probably do college if I wanted to, but man, my ACT was 15. Yeah, I guess that is a better answer. The ACT is good example of when I have been less than confident. When my mom heard my brother was taking it, guess what--me too. So yeah, that is when I was not so confident.

Dennis entered the room wearing baggy cargo shorts and an untucked black t-shirt. He also wore glasses that he took off and put back on several times during the interview. He chose
the seat nearest me to begin our interview. When I asked about his overall level of self-confidence, he answered:

Overall, I would have to say I’m not too confident. I was confident when I was younger and I guess I have gained confidence as I have gone through high school, but from like 5th grade through 9th or 10th grade, I tell ya, not good. I think [name] has really helped me with this. She is my first girlfriend and I’m what, almost out of high school.

He smiled and then began to describe a time when he was most confident:

I would say the time when I was most confident was at the prom last year. I guess I felt like I looked good. I had on clothes that were as nice if not even nicer than most everybody else. I had a pretty girl on my arm (smiling). It was like how you always think of a prom. Everything worked out good, just like a movie. That was one day that I can probably say I felt good for the whole 24 hours.

I asked about a time when he was not confident and he shared:

Let’s see about a lack of confidence. Oh, I’d say the whole 9 months of 9th grade. You remember. I cried all of the time. If I was at school, I was miserable. I never really missed school until that year, but I hated it so bad. I failed five, six, or maybe all of my classes that year. No wait, I passed wellness, but that was not by much and I wouldn’t have passed that class if it wasn’t for Coach [Name]. That is why I won’t graduate this year.

Kristina's long brown hair was pulled into a ponytail and tied with a green ribbon. She was wearing jeans and a black t-shirt that promoted the school's soccer team. She maintained good eye contact throughout most of the interview but often looked away when answering questions that made her uncomfortable and became teary-eyed more than once during the interview. She chose the seat closest to me and I began by asking her to describe her overall level of self-confidence. She answered:

I don’t know. Sometimes I feel okay and sometimes I feel crappy. Overall self-confidence--so how confident am I about myself? Well at work, I’m very confident. I do a good job and my managers all like me. At home, I get along with my mom and my brother, and usually my sister. I am comfortable there, so I guess it’s good there. At school, I don’t know, I’m just so over the high school drama. I don’t even have any friends here anymore. Girls just want to talk about each other all the time. Who slept with who and blah, blah, blah--I guess I’m average with confidence.

She continued:

I was very confident the first 3 months or so that I dated [Name]. He made me feel like a princess. I am a poor girl who lives in [Neighborhood]. He is a rich boy; a football,
soccer, a wrestling star, and is the smartest person I know. I just felt like everyone was looking at me when I was with him. I mean I got noticed and that never happened, I mean ever. I had boyfriends before, but [Name] was all into me. His life revolved around mine and he always told me how lucky he was that I was interested in him.

Kristina became tearful as she described her lack of self-confidence:

Along the same lines. I feel so bad about myself now. I have been with [Name] for 15 months. I don’t know. I want him to love me like I love him. He says mean things to me and I get mad and he leaves; but I always stop him and apologize because I’m afraid if he leaves, he won’t ever come back. I’m pretty sure he has cheated on me, but Mr. Hampton, I will never find anyone like him again. So, to answer the question, every time I am with him, I lose all confidence. He is so smart, he knows everything, and he talks like an adult, so I can’t really even argue with him. I know what I want to say, but he is so good at, well, I don’t know--big words. He squashes my points and ultimately I just have to just be quiet and he wins again.

Anna had long blonde hair that was pulled into a ponytail and tied with a white ribbon. She appeared relaxed throughout the interview, was dressed in jeans and a hooded school sweatshirt, and carried a backpack and a purse. She chose the seat farthest from me. Anna began the interview by saying:

I guess I am pretty confident overall. I don’t want to be arrogant or full of myself, but I’m not ugly; I’m not dumb; I’m not poor; so, I guess I don’t have anything to feel sorry about. I guess every teenage girl has low self-esteem at times. Mine comes and goes.

A time when I was confident was when the [Name of dance team] went to Nationals when I was a freshman. We were so good and worked so hard. When we got there, it was like people knew who we were because of how good our squad had done in the past. We had an awesome routine and hit it all the way through. We finished fourth and that was good enough to be on ESPN. I only danced at school for 1 more year after that, but that time was great.

She continued by sharing a time when she was not very confident:

A time when I wasn’t confident? Algebra II. That would have to sum it up. I hated that class. It was so hard. I don’t know how it was so hard last year and now this year I am making A’s. I think it was the teacher to be honest; I mean if you want me to just tell you, I don’t think she knew what she was doing. Now Mrs. [Name] takes time with me. She teaches me, not like teaching algebra II to the class, she actually teaches me. But that would have to be one example of me not being confident. Oh and going to the gym. I mean I’m solid; I have a lot of muscle, so I weigh like 165. But I’m a size 5 or 6. That’s not bad. However, I work out with, like, size 0’s and extra smalls, so I do get intimidated. No belly-showin’ at the gym.
The students in the top 10% group were asked the same questions about self-efficacy and self-confidence. All eight students answered the questions positively. All eight referenced an academic situation as a time when they felt very confident. Interestingly, the students in the top 10% group were not as detailed or expressive when replying to this inquiry.

Leah entered the room wearing a big smile and carrying a full backpack as she chose a seat that was third of four chairs farthest from me. She was very expressive and maintained excellent eye contact throughout the interview. When I began by asking about her overall level of self-confidence, Leah offered:

I’m confident. I can do nearly anything I focus on. I mean some things I will never do, like I know I won’t ever be an Olympic swimmer, but I am a good swimmer and I swim on my school’s team, so I know I do my best.

She continued by describing:

A time when I was very confident? Let’s see, that’s would have to be earlier today. My AP calculus test. I studied hard; I mean I worked really hard. I was frustrated through the preparation phase but ultimately I was very well prepared.

When asked to describe a time when she was not very confident, she paused for a moment and then answered:

I was not so confident last night at dance class. The Triple Pourette. I mean, it wasn’t good. I practiced all week. I could do it by myself and when I had to do it by myself in front of everyone else, I just fell apart. I knew that would happen. I knew I’d fall apart. That happens all the time. To beat it all, guess who the dance instructor is, yep you guessed it, my mother. How is it that the instructor’s daughter can’t hit the step?

Hayley, with short, curly brown hair and glasses, seemed comfortable during the interview session. She maintained good eye contact and was most responsive when she spoke of her family and extracurricular interests. She answered the question regarding overall confidence with a short, but thorough answer, saying, "I’m pretty confident overall. Not much to elaborate on. I’m me and am okay with that." She also gave a brief answer about a time when she felt very confident, describing, "I am very confident at school. I have always been confident at school. I am very confident when I lead youth retreats." She then extended her arms up as if
doing a cheer, and added, "Yeah for me. I am all there all the time." I then asked about a time when she was not as confident, and she shared:

I was not confident my first day as a ninth grader. I got lost, not once, not twice, but all day long. I was overwhelmed. I didn’t know what to do (Laughing). I would have called my mom to come get me but I didn’t know how to get to the office.

Kevin was a 17 year-old African American who seemed timid when he entered the office, but appeared to relax as the interview progressed. He chose the seat farthest away from me and placed his full and heavy-appearing backpack in the seat next to him. He maintained good eye contact throughout the interview but paused often to contemplate his answers. When asked about his overall confidence level, Kevin simply stated, "I have high confidence." I asked him to explain, and he answered, "I am most confident in situations where I am prepared. For example, school is an area where I am confident. I feel like I can be 100% the best if I can prepare ahead of time." I then asked about a time when he was not very self-confident and he explained:

I am not very confident with spur of the moment type activities. Public speaking is a perfect example. I can’t do it even if I am prepared. In English class, we had to prepare a 4-minute speech. I worried about that all week and all night long. I was glad when it was over.

Lisa was a slender and petite young lady with long, curly brown hair. She was dressed in pastel Bermuda shorts and a short-sleeved t-shirt that barely reached the top of the waistband of the shorts. Upon entering the room, carrying a combination of notebooks, textbooks, a calculator, and a small purse, Lisa chose the seat farthest away from me. Although she maintained eye contact throughout the interview, she often would look away as she contemplated her answers. She was very reserved throughout the interview and did not elaborate greatly beyond the questions asked. I began by asking about her overall level of self-confidence. She replied, "I am pretty confident. My parents tell me quite often that I am full of myself. I take that as a positive. I don’t think we are in agreement as to how positive it is." She explained when she was most confident, saying, "I am always confident in math courses. It has always
been something I have always been good at. Math has never been a problem for me." She continued by answering my next question:

On the other hand, I guess English is an area of concern. I don’t like the discussions and I don’t like the readings. I mean, for me, it’s like, get to the point. In math, you usually have a right answer and everything else is usually wrong, except for some calc, but in English, it’s whoever interprets it--well, unless that is not how the teacher interpreted it. Come on, give me a break already.

Students in both groups appeared to focus on self-confidence rather than self-efficacy. Both constructs were explained and students were free to answer beyond the explanation.

*Personal Characteristics, Intrinsic Motivation, and Achievement Goal Theory*

The students in both groups were asked a series of questions related to personal characteristics, intrinsic motivation, and Achievement Goal Theory.

For the first question in regard to personal characteristics, I asked students to discuss a person or persons whom they most admire and the characteristics that have led to that high level of admiration. All eight of the students in the bottom 10% group identified their mother as the person whom they most admired. Additionally, it is important to note that all eight students were from single-parent homes where the mother was the primary caregiver.

Jennifer entered the room with a smile and kept her positive demeanor throughout the interview process. She immediately chose the seat closest to me and sat with one leg under her body in a relaxed posture. She placed a notebook binder and several books on the seat beside her. She maintained good eye contact throughout most of the interview. She then began talking about her mom:

I don’t know, let’s see here. Can it be a family member? Then it would absolutely have to be my mom. She has had a hard life; I mean a really bad life. She has had to take care of three kids herself and that is why I admire her most. She has put her life on hold, really; she has completely forgotten totally about her life so that we could maybe have a good life. She is very unselfish.
Danny, wearing denim shorts and an untucked polo shirt, entered the room and chose the seat farthest away from me. He maintained excellent eye contact throughout the interview and appeared to be comfortable as he expounded upon many of the questions and was expressive throughout the interview process. Danny also said his mom was the person he most admired. He explained:

Mom would be the person I most admire because she has beaten a lot of odds. She has come through a lot and still finds a way to provide for her family. It has been a tough struggle but she has never given up.

Anna answered this question by stating:

My mom is the person I most admire in this entire world. She has been there for me more than anyone else. She has always gone to bat for me. She is understanding and is always there to give a helping hand. I can talk to her about anything and that means a great deal to me.

The students in the top 10% group responded to the question of the person they most admire as well. The responses varied within this group. Three female students whose biological parents were all still married responded that their father was the person they most admired. Three students, two males and one female, responded that their mother was the person they most admired. Two students, both females, identified a grandparent as the person they most admired.

Christy entered the room wearing a long skirt that extended below her knees. She had on high heels and a white button-up blouse that was tucked into the skirt. She seemed very comfortable throughout the interview and maintained excellent eye contact. She was also expressive in her speech using animated hand gestures. She was the current student council president and had spent some time with me in that capacity during the school year. She had several books tucked under her arm at her side as she entered the room and chose the seat farthest from me. When asked about the person she most admired, Christy quickly answered:

That would be my mom’s dad, Poppy. He grew up in poverty. He fought in the war; you know, the greatest generation that we are hearing about all the time now. Despite all of that, he is always happy and smiling. He has a good heart. I mean, he didn’t do anything great, he wasn’t wealthy, but he is happy and genuinely cares. That is so much more important, I mean, really more than anything else.
Lisa observed:

I have to say my dad. He didn’t grow up well at all. He had to work all the way through school. He had to put himself through college and help with his brother and sisters. He didn’t have a dad and my mom says that is why he works so hard to take care of us.

Kevin added:

Oh, it would have to be my mom. She has really been through some stuff. She has overcome and is still overcoming all kinds of stuff. She has had to struggle to raise two kids as a single mom without always a lot of help from our dad. Plus, she’s a teacher on top of that. So, really, she has to worry about us and everybody else’s kids as well.

Leah immediately said, "Grandmother." Then after a long pause, she continued:

She left [Name of Country] and came to the United States. She traveled all over the world. She learned the language in every country she visited. She is 65 now and exercises every day, gardens, and is cool. She has so many stories to tell and makes everything a learning moment.

The examples from the students in the top 10% group of people they admired consisted primarily of individuals who had overcome situations of struggle to achieve happiness and success and had provided a better way of living for the following generations.

Students were then asked to describe the specific attributes that they most admire or idolize in other people. The students in the bottom 10% group responded with a variety of answers. The most common answer was provided by three students. Those students replied with honesty as the attribute that they most admired. Other answers from this group included personality, attitude, personal responsibility, the ability to communicate, and self-confidence. One student chose to pass. This group did not elaborate extensively. Most students replied with one or two short sentences.

Students in the top 10% group responded differently. This group was much more elaborate in their responses. The most common answer was a strong sense of humor. Three students included a sense of humor in their responses.

When I asked her to describe specific attributes that she admired in people, Hayley responded, "I would have to say enthusiasm. Also, people who can share their faith. People who know who they are and aren’t afraid of it."
Leah added:

I admire people who have a sense of direction and who know what they want to do with their lives. I admire people who take a risk and who are confident. Also, people who take what life gives them and don’t take it for granted.

The aforementioned question was followed with asking the students in each group to describe personal characteristics that they least admire. The students in the bottom 10% group again responded with short sentences. Three students answered by saying "dishonesty." Two students passed on this question. Danny answered by saying, "Well, due to problems in the past I’d have to say dishonesty. I don’t think I should say anything further."

Jennifer responded by saying, "I don’t know what to call it other than drama. You know people who do any and every thing they can to start fights. The girls here are almost all like that."

The students in the top 10% group also answered the question about attributes that they least admired. Similar to the students in the bottom 10% group, these students answered simplistically and gave brief answers. Three students in this group passed on the question. Two students answered saying "dishonesty." Another student stated that she "didn’t like laziness."

Jana, a slender young lady with an athletic build and wavy, long, blonde hair, wore jeans and a tucked in black school t-shirt that promoted the school's female volleyball team. She maintained good eye contact and smiled throughout the interview. She responded by stating:

I dislike arrogance and haughtiness. I was so distraught that I didn’t get into a social club in 9th grade. Ultimately, I became friends with girls in all different groups; however, the collective arrogance of the groups disgusts me. It’s like, I’m better than you are because I have one of these sweatshirts and hang with this group of girls. It’s disgusting. I’m glad I learned this in high school. It will save me a lot of money in college since I know that is what the sorority scene is all about.

Christy said:

Well, I can’t think of a specific person, but you know, people who rub you the wrong way. People who have personalities that are, well, either full of themselves or people who have a better-than-thou attitude. I don’t much care for people like that.
Students in both groups were also asked to describe a personal characteristic about themselves that they least liked. The students in the bottom 10% group shared a variety of responses. Three students stated that they would not change anything about themselves. Two students in this group stated that low self-esteem was something that they would change. One student said immaturity is something he disliked and would like to change. Another student stated his poor decision-making ability is something he would change. One student passed on this question. Dennis added, "Least about myself? Nothing really, you have to like yourself." Jennifer agreed by adding, "Well, none that I can think of. I love myself."

The students in the top 10% group shared a variety of responses as well. Three students replied that they would like to have more self-confidence. Two students stated that they did not like the fact that they were selfish at times. Two students stated that they could not think of anything with which they were dissatisfied. One student stated that she disliked the fact that she is so rigid and would like to be more flexible.

Mitchell, wearing knee-length cargo shorts and a polo shirt, came into the room carrying a backpack that appeared to be full and heavy as he placed it on the floor beside him as he chose the seat farthest away from me. Mitchell maintained excellent eye contact throughout the interview and appeared to be comfortable and relaxed. When asked about his least liked personal characteristic, he stated, "I don’t really dislike anything about myself. I have high self-confidence and self-esteem. I’m not insecure about anything." Jana responded, "I can be, well, not lately, but I can be selfish. I really need to work on seeing things from other points of view." Leah stated, "I really need to be more confident in my social skills and making a wide variety of friends."

According to Ames (1992), Achievement Goal Theory proposes two general goal orientations that concern the purpose individuals pursue when approaching and engaging in a task. These goals are simply referred to as mastery and performance goals. Mastery goals orient learners to develop new skills, try to understand their work, improve their levels of competence,
Intrinsic motivation has been defined as motivation to engage in an activity for its own sake and for the personal desire to do so (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). Thus, the interest within each person is vital to the decisions that individual makes. This personal desire reflects an individual’s interest in a particular topic and is often measured by self-report as to how much a person enjoys the particular activity. Personal interest has the potential to influence academic achievement and has been positively associated with achievement and the use of deeper cognitive strategies (Linnenbrink & Pintrich). Therefore, it is logical to assert that the more one is internally motivated towards a specific area or subject, the more one’s attention, persistence, and achievement in that area will develop. For educators and caregivers, it has been important to note that allowing children to work on topics they find personally interesting might help them to engage in such a way that they use better strategies for learning and ultimately achieve at higher levels (Linnenbrink & Pintrich).

In relation to Achievement Goal Theory and intrinsic motivation, students were asked to describe their goals 1 year, 5 years, and 10 years from now. Each student in both groups responded; the answers from students in the bottom 10% group are presented first.

Krista, a 19 year-old African American, entered the room with a large smile that continued throughout much of the interview. She had long, brown hair with dark pink highlights. She maintained good eye contact throughout most of the interview but often looked away when answering questions that seemed uncomfortable. In describing her goals, Krista offered:

In a year, college and maybe a job; I don’t know.
Five years from now, I’m sure I will be in jail. I’ll eventually get busted for slingin’ (laughs). Gotcha! I for sure will be out of [Name of Town]. I want to be working, but I’m not really sure what I want to do. On my own doing well is good for now.

In 10 years? I don’t know, the same as 5 years I guess. I don’t wanna get married; I don’t want kids; I guess, just be doing good in my job and being happy.

Nikki entered the room empty handed and chose the seat closest to me. She had short, brown hair and was dressed in jeans and a maroon pullover jacket. She made good eye contact and smiled throughout the interview. Nikki discussed her goals saying:

Let’s see, in 1 year I plan on being in beauty school and having a job. Working my way up the line. Hopefully I will be out of the house and on my own.

In 5 years I’d like to be established with a steady client-base. I hope to live in A-T-L, you know high-end. I’d have my own apartment, wheels, working on a good man. You know they ain’t none of that in [Name of Town].

In 10 years I will have my own salon, house, marriage, kids, the whole ball of wax. I’ll be living the phat; you know phat with the p-h, life. I’ll probably try to move my mama in with me; you know pay her back for what she’s done for me. You know me, doin’ it up right.

Eric stated:

In the next year I hope to be doing something with my life besides being around [Name of Town] just out or in trouble like most of my friends. I don’t plan on being like that. I will do whatever is necessary to avoid that.

In 5 years, hopefully, I will have a nice job, house, and car. Just be working and successfully. Who knows I might have a couple of platinum albums by then.

In 10 years, hopefully, I will be rich and have my own record label. I hope I can give back to my community.

Jennifer added:

In a year I can see myself trying to get through beauty school. Hopefully I can do it.

In 5 years, let’s see, I will be 23. At 23, I’d like to be getting ready to open my own salon.

In 10 years, wow, who knows? I’d guess I’d like to be married, have a family, be working. Hopefully not dead by then.

Anna said:

One year from now, attend college, have a job, and a good head on my shoulders. I want to go to ETSU or MTSU.
In 5 years, I’d like to be graduated from college, have my career path set, and own my own house. You know, be out from under mom and dad’s finger.

In 10 years, I guess I’d like to be the head of a business, probably advertising, have a family, and be happy.

Dennis stated:

My goals 1 year from now would include college, probably Nashville Diesel College. Five years, well I’d like to work for a dealership, working on cars, the detailing part. In 10 years, I’d guess the same as 5 years. Probably not married, eh, hopefully living back out West, probably California. Really haven’t thought about things that far down the line.

Danny contributed:

In 1 year I plan to be in the Navy, working on moving up in rank. Also working on a degree.

In 5 years, I would have finished my degree and working on a military career. Seeing the world and doing my own thing are high priorities.

In 10 years, I guess it will be time to settle down. Ya know, have a family, a kid or two, house, probably a dog. You know the TV family is what I’d like to have.

Kristina stated:

In a year, I hope to be at Northeast State getting my requirements out of the way. Hopefully still with (omitted boyfriend’s name). I guess I will probably still be at home and hopefully still working.

In 5 years I hope I will have finished college or at least almost finished. (Omitted boyfriend’s name) should be finished by then and we can be together in the same place and maybe talking about marriage.

Ten years from now (omitted) and I will be married, have our careers established, have a home, maybe even talking about kids, who knows. Ten years is really a long time away, I guess I can hope.

Students in the top 10% were much more specific in their future goals, specifically the 5 and 10 year goals. The responses for the top 10% group are provided below.

Heather, a petite young lady with shoulder-length, sandy blonde hair, often looked away as she answered the interview questions. When asked about her goals, she contributed:

My goals a year from now would be to be in college. I am not sure what I want to study but I know I will be enrolled at UT-Knoxville.
I expect in 5 years I will still be in school, graduate school that is. I’m not sure where but am pretty sure that that is where I will be.

I guess in 10 years I hope to be in a good paying job, married, at least hopefully married, and stable.

Hayley commented:

A year from now I should be finishing my freshman year at UT-Chattanooga. I imagine I will be registering for summer school. I’m sure I will be excited as well, because I will have yet another school year behind me and headed toward another camp experience as well at some point in time next summer.

In 5 years I should be a college graduate and hopefully working in a good job. I also expect that I will be continuing my education and starting graduate school.

In 10 years, hmmm, let’s see. I am quite certain that I will be working steady in my career, spending time with my family and maybe considering starting a family for myself. I had better be completely finished with all of my education. Keep your fingers crossed for me and my parents that I will be.

Leah stated:

One year from now I will be in my May term at Transylvania College. I hope that I will be doing well and have good grades

In 5 years I fully expect that I will have completed my 2nd semester of graduate school. It is also possible that I could be just graduating depending on whether I do a year abroad. My brother did a semester abroad and he fully enjoyed it. It actually proved to be very beneficial to his career decisions.

Depending on my final career choices, I will either be gainfully employed in a successful career or in a medical residency. I don’t think I am quite ready to talk about family or really deep life-grounding decisions.

Lisa added:

In 1 year I want to be and expect to be doing well in college. I will be at Texas A&M studying chemical engineering. I will be looking forward to coming home and spending some time with my family.

Five years from now I will be out of school and should be in a good job. At least that is what I hope for.

In 10 years I want to be in upper management within my career field. I would possibly like to be working in an international capacity.

Christy said:
Let’s see, I will be done with my 1st year of college. I better have a 3.5 grade point average. That’s what I have to have to keep my scholarship. I will be getting ready to come back to Tennessee for a few weeks before starting a year abroad that is a requirement of my scholarship.

Five years from now I will be in my 1st year of vet school. There won’t be time for anything more than that.

In 10 years I will be Dr. [Name]. I will own my own practice and doing research. I may be married and perhaps discussing starting a family.

Jana commented:

My goal for 1 year from now would be finishing my 1st year in biomedical engineering at UT-Knoxville. I’m sure there will not be time for anything other than school. College is usually over by this time in May, so at least I have some fun downtime to look forward to.

I should be finished with my undergraduate degree and starting vet school or medical school.

Ten years seems so far away but I guess 10 years ago I was like what, eight, and that seems just like yesterday. I should be a vet or a medical doctor or an engineer designing medical equipment. Maybe married, maybe not. I don’t have a boyfriend now, so to think about marriage is somewhat extreme.

Kevin said:

In a year I will probably be done with my 1st year of college. I will have more experience with life. Not sure of my major, but I will be attending UT-Knoxville.

Well in 5 years I hope to still be alive. If so, I will still be young and having fun. I’m sure I won’t be settled down. I hope to be finished with college and pushing toward financial security.

I should be married and probably having kids or at least will have them soon. I will be better established in my career and have a house somewhere.

Mitchell contributed:

I will be in college doing well. I will have good grades at UT. I will be studying biomedical engineering and due to my AP credits I will be well into my program.

Five years from now I will be out of undergrad. (Laughing) I am not sure what I will be doing with it. I may be in engineering school or in medical school.

Ten years from now will depend on whether I pursue medical school or engineering. If engineering, I will be out of school. If medicine is the route I choose, I will be in a residency program. I hope to be getting married in the immediate time frame.


**Gender**

Gender and single-sex education continue to be hot topics in the educational world. The high school where these students attend has introduced an all-female engineering design course and a feeder middle school has recently implemented same-sex classes across the curriculum. Additionally, a neighboring high school began teaching all female algebra classes. These gender-related adjustments mirror similar trends across the country.

The gender breakdown within the bottom 10% group of students was five females and three males. Six of the eight students in the bottom 10% group, four females and two males, stated that gender had not played a role in regard to their education. Danny added:

> I think with gender, it has a lot to do with what’s expected. My experience has been that males are expected to be aggressive leaders, so with that I believe they sometimes get more opportunities.

Jennifer stated:

> At school, no of course not. It is probably more of a benefit at school. The problem is at home. My mom is like, whatever you do, don’t get pregnant, it will ruin your life. She and my stepdad try to use reverse psychology on me. They are like, you can go to college, have a nice house, blah, blah, blah. I mean, I know better than to do that crap, I mean, I’m not stupid. I guarantee you that those kinds of things were never mentioned to my brother.

Students in the top 10% group were also asked about gender. The gender breakdown within this group was six females and two males. Five of the eight students contributed a lengthy response. Three female students stated that gender had not been a significant issue in regard to their education. Christy contributed:

> I think gender has played a role with me because I have often been viewed by teachers and adults in general who don’t know me as being a dumb blonde. Those who view me in this way can’t take me seriously. I take offense to that and trust me, it happens all the time. Some people play it, you know, use it to their advantage. I still don’t like it.

The gender breakdown within the top 10% group included two males and six female students. Two of the females stated that they had some discriminating treatment based on their gender. The remaining six said they did not feel strongly that gender had or had not played a significant role in their education.
Kevin said:

I’m not really sure. As a male, I’ve had more opportunities to do stuff. Like my dad favors me more and lets me do more than my mom does. I know I get away with more with my dad and I think it’s probably because I am a guy.

Mitchell added:

I have really never given thought to it. If it has, I can’t tell; I mean, it hasn’t been overwhelming. To me, nowadays, it seems to be the same for each gender. So, I wouldn’t say it has helped or hurt. I’ve never been separated out.

Leah stated:

I wouldn’t say that it has. To some degree I know I am a girl and some things are different. I can accept that knowledge in a general manner; however, I’m gonna do and try whatever strikes my fancy. I’ve always been that way and have always been pretty successful.

The last student in the top 10% group to comment on the topic of gender and its impact on education was Jana. Jana stated:

I have gotten stuff from different people about being stupid because of being a girl. That hasn’t happened recently because I am generally with the same group of friends and they know me. I honestly have thought about starting over in college and having to prove myself again. It has also crossed my mind when applying to college and for scholarships. Regardless, my name is unisex, so I don’t think I could use it as an excuse anyway.

**Ethnicity**

Similar to gender, ethnicity has been widely researched in regard to student achievement. Students in the bottom 10% group were asked if and if so, to describe how ethnicity played a role in their lives and their education. The ethnic breakdown for the students in the bottom 10% group was four African American students, two Caucasian students, and two Hispanic students. One African American student passed on this question and both Hispanic students and both Caucasian students stated that they did not feel that ethnicity had played a role in their education or in their lives outside of school. Three of the four African American students did comment as to how ethnicity has impacted their education. Danny stated:

My race, I think, you know has played a big role because of stereotypes against trouble making. It is just assumed that we, Black people, are all slow and looking to do
something wrong. It has been worse here in Tennessee. In Virginia, I never heard the “N” word. It is something I have heard here. People here don’t really even know what that word means and that is probably more of an insult. I don’t think that White kids in my classes are ever confronted with this issue. This has definitely been something that has bothered me.

Krista added:

How much time do you have? You know, Mr. Hampton, people here can be so stupid. What’s the deal? It’s like, ya know, I talk in my classes, but I’m not the only one; but hey, in my classes it seems like I am the one who gets noticed. I wonder why that is? Now I know that I’m louder, ya know, we tend to be louder, but they're some White folks in class at this school who don’t seem to get as much attention. I’ve learned to pick my battles. I wouldn’t say I am discriminated against and I’m not saying that I haven’t been, but I am saying that things are just different. I’m sorry, I just, you know, get worked up and go off over this topic.

Nikki contributed:

Ya know it’s all good. Hey, it’s what ya make of it. I mean some people like me and some don’t, but what you gonna do? I say let the haters hate. While they hatin’ on me, I’m gonna pass right by ‘em. I know high school is important, but 10 years from now it’ll all be good ‘cause I’m gonna get mine. I’m gonna work hard, do my thing, you know, I’m gonna get mine.

Students in the top 10% group were also asked the ethnicity question. The ethnic breakdown of this group was seven Caucasian students and one African American student. Five of the Caucasian students commented that they did not feel that ethnicity had played a role in their educations and lives. Jana stated:

I don’t know that race has played a role. As a person in the majority it is really hard to say. I almost feel guilty to even assume that it could have. I do know, however, if I were Black, I would have a full-ride scholarship at UT based on my ACT scores and GPA. As a White girl, I am still waiting to hear if my scholarship will be a full or partial. The standards are different. I guess I would see it as reverse discrimination, but again, I’m sure I have advantages that I am not even aware of.

Leah said:

I have not had an issue with ethnicity. My mother is from [Country] and came to the United States. Her family is from all over the world, so my ancestry is not pure. I mean I look White and am perceived as White and identify as White, but I know that race is a nonissue for me and my family.

Kevin, the only African American in the top 10% group, contributed:
I am in the upper classes and almost always, actually always, the only black kid in my classes. Most of my friends have gone down the wrong route, but I hang out with them anyway. I guess I figure I can be positive for them. It is hard—like, they joke sometimes and tease me. They try to imitate me and act like they are talking all proper.

**Resiliency**

Academic resiliency is the ability to deal with academic setbacks, excessive pressure, and stress (Martin, 2002). Resiliency has been further defined as the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances (Howard & Johnson, 2000).

The students in both groups were asked to discuss their perceptions of why they persevere when the “going gets tough” and obstacles are present. Several students in the bottom 10% requested clarification as to what this question was addressing. Three students provided answers that dealt with financial satisfaction, three students answered that personal satisfaction and peace is something for which they strive, and two students stated that making a specific family member happy is what drives their actions. Danny added:

> I am motivated by accomplishment and satisfaction. Specifically, I like beating the odds. By accomplishment, I don’t necessarily mean school accomplishment. That isn’t always what I value most. It may be that I work harder for social satisfaction and school is something I just have to do, at least for now.

Eric stated:

> Well, I have to work hard at a restaurant for my pay. I don’t think it is worth it, but it is the best I can do right now. So, a paycheck would motivate me. That is why I come here everyday. To get up out of Pizza Hut and move onto a paycheck that can support what it is that I really want. You know me, I gotta be pimpin it up big time and I can’t be doing that now. Everything I do is with that in mind.

The students in the top 10% answered the resiliency question differently but not as expected. Three students in the top 10% group passed on the question, electing to not answer what motivated them to persevere. Another student answered that family, specifically his parents, motivate him; two students stated that a combination of self and parent influence serves
as motivation, and one student answered that her motivation came solely from within. Kevin contributed:

My first motivation would be my parents pushing me, but mostly, it’s me. I decide for myself what I want to do and how willing I am to work for what I want. I know what I want now and have a good idea about the future.

Lisa stated:

I want to do good for myself. I have goals and plans and I know what it takes to be successful. My parents are generally happy with a rate of success that doesn’t satisfy me. My hard work is based on my goals; it would be much easier to stop at making my parents happy.

Mitchell added:

My parents are my greatest impetus. Both have been successful as an engineer and a teacher. My friends motivate me some at school. I wouldn’t call it competition, but keeping up with those around me is very important.

**Parental Influences**

Parental influences include a variety of facets by which parent involvement affects student achievement. Patterns of parental influence that emerged from the interviews included: involvement in school, parental education attainment, and expectations for success.

**Involvement in School**

Researchers show that children's academic performance is higher at schools that have high parental involvement (Clark, 1995). Clark went on to define parental involvement as anything from joining the PTA, helping with homework, taking an active role in school governance, or serving on various school boards and committees. Educators have long considered parental involvement as one of the most prominent predictors of student academic success. Parental involvement has been recognized as increasing student morale, attitudes, and academic achievement across all subject areas (Smith, 2001).
The students interviewed were asked how they would describe their parents' involvement in their school. Some of the students in the lower 10% answered with the following responses. Krista simply stated, "Uh, I don’t know. I guess not."

Dennis answered:

My dad is not really [involved] unless it is to pay for yearbooks or pictures. My mom was into it when we were younger but now she doesn’t get involved unless we fail or get suspended or something like that.

Anna contributed:

Mom is way more involved than dad, but both would probably do anything to help. The school doesn’t really have much for them to be involved with and to be honest Mr. Hampton, I figure the less they are here the better off I am.

Jennifer provided the following:

Mom helps with homework when she can or if I really struggle or like if I have a project. I don’t have much homework, so I guess that isn’t very often. She comes into the cosmetology salon to get her hair done. Stuff like that.

The students in the bottom 10% group were also asked if they were read to as a child and if their parents helped them with their schoolwork. Based on the interviews, siblings played a more important role in this aspect of support. These students attributed it to lack of parental presence or work obligations that prevented involvement. Eric offered:

My sister probably read to me every now and then. Not really though, no one really read to us. My mom always worked two, sometimes three jobs and we didn’t have a dad. My sister kept us most of the time. She always had her own homework, so we just kinda got it. My brother helped me and still does have to help me.

Jennifer echoed some of Eric’s sentiments in the following response:

Yes, by my older brother. My mom or dad never read to me. My real dad left when I was little so I’ve always taken up with my brother. I haven’t seen him in a long time. I am looking forward to graduation so I can see him.

Krista stated the following:

Uh-huh, by my mom and my brother and my grandmother. My grandmother loved reading to me. My brother would play school and he would be the teacher and try to act like teachers and stuff. Mom read when I was real little. Mr. Hampton, shoo, you know I don’t take no homework home.
The question for Krista was clarified by asking her if her mother helped with homework when she was younger. Krista answered, "Oh yeah, I guess. I don’t remember much, because I’ve never really had teachers who give lots of homework and stuff but I’m sure she did."

This group was asked a follow-up question concerning the reading habits of their parents. Several students replied in the affirmative in regard to whether or not their parents read often. The type of reading materials was quite different from the reading choices the students in the top 10% discussed for their parents. After a long pause, Kristina said, "...hmmmm, Dad doesn’t. Mom reads, I don’t know, I guess, romance novels or whatever they are called. Some magazines, spiritual type stuff. That is pretty much it." Danny contributed, "Yeah, my mom reads romance books, monthly magazines; she gets the Oprah Winfrey magazine in the mail. So she reads stuff like that." Jennifer stated, "Yes they read the newspaper and magazines. My mom mostly reads magazines. She buys one every time she goes to Wal-Mart. My stepdad reads the newspaper every day."

The students in the top 10% group were also asked about their parents’ involvement in school. These students were more detailed in their responses. Some selected responses from the students in the top 10 group are as follows. Mitchell stated:

My parents have generally been very hands off. A few times when I was trying to do some things that involved exceptions or special permission, like taking an AP class out of sequence, they were advocates. However, they haven’t been directly involved. I mean, of course, they came to open-house and PTA stuff. I have traditionally had it together enough to avoid the necessity of their involvement.

Kevin stated very emphatically:

Mom was always involved. From PTA to orientation to emailing teachers, I mean, she always knew what was going on. Dad on the other hand, well he doesn’t really get into that so much. I don’t really think he’d even know where to start.

Heather provided:

Dad, being a doctor and all, has been way too busy. Mom, on the other hand, helped out all of the time. Mom was room mother, troop leader, it seemed like she was always at school. As we have gotten older though, she really hasn’t been too involved. Pretty much with me, she just makes sure I am taking the right classes and doing well in school. She is still heavily involved with my sister at her school.
Christy contributed:

Mom tried to find time, but not so much now that I am in high school. I have proved, pretty much, that I can handle school stuff on my own, so really there is no great need for her being overly involved.

These students were also asked about their whether or not their parents read to them and assisted with their schoolwork. All eight students answered affirmatively to the questions. Some expanded further and those responses are included below. Jana provided:

Read to, yes, but not as much as I read to myself. I loved to read and read a great deal through elementary school. My parents were always buying me books. Homework, studying, and sports have taken up so much of my time since middle school that I haven’t had time to read for pleasure since I was in elementary school.

Leah responded enthusiastically, saying:

Yes, parents, grandparents, cousins, my older brother, pretty much reading was one of the things we did all the time. Someone is always starting a new book at my house. We have quite the collection of novels. It was the same with homework. Mom usually helped me but my brother was always a contributor as well.

Christy offered:

Yes, my mom would read to me every night. My parents tucked me in every night and that is when they would read to me. As far as homework goes, my mom always sat down with me to ensure that it was done, but rarely did she have to help me with it.

This question was followed up with asking each student if their parents read often and if so, what they mostly read. Each of the eight students answered affirmatively to this question. Mitchell replied:

Dad reads quite a bit. Magazines, mostly of the travel genre, are what I see him with most often. He also reads the Wall Street Journal. He gets into some scientific stuff as well. Mom is a casual reader, you know, more for entertainment purposes.

Leah added:

Yes, both parents are avid readers. Mom reads Sci-fi and fantasy stuff. Dad reads mostly self-help stuff. He reads a great deal of medical journals to stay up-to-date on work-related topics.

Hayley stated, "Yes, my parents read a lot. Mom likes Grisham novels. Dad is the philosopher-type. He reads Thoreau and even Plato. We don’t have a T.V. but we have a house full of books."
Parental Education Attainment

In referencing the literature review, studies have documented that poverty and low parental education were associated with lower levels of school achievement and IQ later in childhood (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Mercy and Steelman (1982) found that socioeconomic status measures used in the health examination survey (family income, maternal education, paternal education) predicted intellectual attainment, with education being the best predictor. Degarmo (1999) found that each socioeconomic status indicator (income, education, and occupation) was associated with better parenting, which in turn affected school achievement via skill building activities and school behavior.

Along these lines, the students in this study were asked a series of questions regarding their parents’ education attainment and occupation. The replies from the students in the bottom 10% are addressed first. Five of the eight had at least one parent or guardian who graduated from high school. Four of the eight had at least one parent or guardian who attempted college. Two of the eight had at least one parent or guardian to graduate from college. Anna replied, "Both attended college but neither finished. My stepdad did actually graduate from ETSU." Jennifer added, "My mother was 17 years old and dropped out due to being pregnant. My dad and stepdad were dropouts too. My stepdad can barely read or write, but works hard, so it’s all good." Eric offered, "My mom, well she’s really my grandma, has a degree in [field omitted]. Nobody else in my family has come close to that. Most haven’t even finished high school." Dennis contributed:

My mom went to the University in [Name of Country], but then came here and worked in a bank. I don’t think she finished her degree but coming to the United States was far more important. She can do more here without a degree than she could do there with one. My dad was from here and he has his GED. He did that rather than finishing high school so he could go into the military.

In regard to occupation, the responses varied. Five of the eight students responded that at least one parent was employed. The remaining three indicated that there was not a working
parent in the home. Jennifer said, "My mom is a retail worker at Wal-Mart on [Street]. My stepdad does construction and paving." Kristina offered:

My mom is disabled and my dad is a sub contractor for [Name]. He does about anything to houses. They are divorced so his income is spread thin between two families. I live with mom though, so it’s a bit thinner on this side.

Krista added:

My mom doesn’t work. She is disabled. I don’t know what my dad does, he works somewhere in Virginia. He used to work with my grandfather who owns a air conditioning thingy; you know a place that puts air conditioners and heaters in houses.

The students in the top 10 % answered the same questions on parent education attainment and occupation. All eight students said both parents graduated from high school. Six of the eight students said both parents earned a 4-year degree or higher. The other two students identified one parent who had earned at least a 4-year degree or higher. Leah responded, "My dad is a M.D. He received his degree from [University] Medical School. Mom has a B.S from the University of [Name] in English and a masters from [Name] University in Management."

Hayley explained, "Both of my parents have graduate-level degrees. Both went to [Name]. Dad received his undergrad degree from the University of Tennessee in [City] and mom’s was from Vanderbilt in education." Lisa stated, "Dad has a bachelors and mom graduated from high school but didn’t go to college. I have a sister who has an art degree from the University of [Name] and another sister who is in college in [City].

Jana added:

Dad has a college degree and was in grad school but then entered the military and never finished grad school. Mom graduated from high school and attended a junior college while dad was in the military. I’m not sure if she finished or not, I don’t think she did. I have a sister who graduated from MTSU. She is in grad school at the University of [Name]. She plans on being a college professor.

These students had differing answers in regard to employment as well. All eight students said they have at least one parent in the home who is employed. Two of eight stated that their mom works for fun and that their father’s income supports the family. Christy stated:
My dad is an entrepreneur. He financially backs ideas. He recently purchased a [Omitted]. My stepmom is a stay-at-home mom. She does own her own business, but this is more for fun. My stepdad is an industrial engineer and a V.P. of a [Omitted] company in Virginia. My mom has a nursing degree and messes some in real estate.

Heather added, "Dad is a doctor. Mom just recently got a job for fun. I'm not really even sure what she does." Kevin replied, "My mom is a teacher and my dad is retired."

Jana contributed:

I can never remember my mom working. She talks about stopping work when I was born. Dad did own a business. When I was three or four he sold it. He now owns and manages real estate and works as an accountant on the side. My mom has talked about when she managed a retail store and was a part-time secretary in college.

Expectations for Success

Approximately 75% of eighth graders surveyed in the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 expected to achieve a college degree; however, fewer than 30% planned to take college preparatory classes. Smith (1991) reported that adolescents' expectations were related to perceived parental expectations, particularly the mother's expectations. Thus, it is of utmost importance for parents to show concern for achievement and support students' academic endeavors.

The students who took part in this study were asked about their perceptions of their parents’ expectations for their achievement and academic success. Both groups of students answered this question. All eight of the students in the bottom 10% group answered this question by affirming that their parents had positive expectations for them; however, they were vague in their description of these expectations. Anna stated, "My mom and stepdad have high expectations for me. They want me to go to college and expect me to do my best at whatever I try." Jennifer added, "They want me to try my best. Not to be perfect, but to be a good kid who tries and makes them proud." Dennis explained, "Ah, as long as I’m happy they will be happy. I know they want me to do well for myself. I guess my dad’s expectations are higher. He wants me to go to college." Kristina contributed to this question, saying, "My mom wants me to do
well and be happy and content with life. She tells me all the time to do what makes me happy; that’s all that matters.” Krista said, "I don’t know about my mom. I don’t really know about my dad’s expectations either. It’s not something we ever talk about."

All eight students in the top 10% also answered that their parents’ expectations were high and positive. However, many contributed more details as to what those expectations were. Leah demonstrated her good sense of humor as she laughingly stated the following:

My parents want me to do whatever it is that will make me fulfilled in life. They expect me to be successful. That doesn’t necessarily mean that I have to be a doctor or lawyer, but to be something that, well I guess, that will make a difference in the world. They don’t let me off the hook though. I’m artsy and they know that I’d be a starving artist who lives in their basement forever if they didn’t insist on me completing my education, having skills for employment, things like that. Dad says that he wants me to be happy but until I graduate from college, he will define what that is.

Christy added:

Yes, they have very high expectations. I have done well in school and they expect that I will continue to do well in school. For my parents, it is not if I go to college--but when I go to college.

Educational Influences

Educational influences focus on the impact of the educational environment. Specifically, the patterns that emerged from the interviews focused on teachers' influence and the structure of the learning environment.

Teacher Influence

Goldhaber (2002) found that 8.5% of the variation in student achievement was credited to teacher characteristics. He found that the vast majority (approximately 60%) of the differences in students' test scores were explained by individual and family background characteristics. All of the school influences including school, teacher, and class-level variables, both measurable and immeasurable, were found to account for approximately 21% of the variation in student achievement. This 21% was composed mainly of characteristics that were not directly quantified
in the analyses. Goldhaber's research also showed that only 3% of the contribution teachers made to student learning was associated with teachers' experience, degree attained, and other readily observable characteristics. The remaining 97% of their contribution was associated with qualities or behaviors that could not be isolated.

Throughout the interview process, many of the students commented about a variety of issues that reflected directly upon past and present teachers. One question posed to all participants was, “What do you think about teachers and principals?” The students in the bottom 10% group offered the first series of answers. The students in the top 10% will be discussed at the end of each section. Anna, a 17 year-old stated, "I think some teachers should be more qualified and do a better job. They should be more qualified for getting hired. This is the foundation for the rest of your life, so it is the most important job." Eric shared, "I think they have probably the hardest job because they are not only teachers but also babysitters. Especially the ones who really care. Others just come to do a job. They don’t make a difference at all."

Danny commented:

These people say they are there to help but I don’t find that to be true. I mean I have heard teachers say to other teachers that the class is so much better when this kid or that kid doesn’t come. I mean, if they really cared they’d help that kid, you know, relate to that person who obviously doesn’t come to school for a reason.

Jennifer said:

Some teachers are mean but others you can tell care about you. They really push you and try to get you to turn stuff in. Some may act like they don’t care; but really, inside they do and you know it.

The previous question led to asking several of the students how their teachers would describe them. Jennifer passed on this question. The remaining seven in the bottom 10% did respond. Eric admitted, "I hope they would describe me as a good student who isn’t the smartest and who is at times lazy, but who usually tries his best." Krista was hesitant in answering and was told again that she could pass on any question. She did add the following:

I don’t know who to pick. Let’s say my printing teacher. He would say nice and sweet but not all, you know, would say that. This question makes me feel so stupid; I mean I
don’t like to think about what they think about me. That’s probably the best answer I have.

Students were then asked if any of their teachers have really made a difference in their lives. Krista, Kristina, and Nikki all said no. Jennifer passed on this question. Of the four who did comment, three mentioned specific high school teachers and one referred to elementary and middle school teachers. Danny added the following:

Yes, my English teacher this year. He goes the extra mile and encourages people to go for it. He hasn’t given up on me and I have (laughing) given him every reason to do so. I mean, he stays late, comes early, offers rewards, treats, almost bribes us to learn. He wants it more than some of us do.

Anna stated:

Yes, my 9th grade world geography teacher. Uh, he just has a good heart. I don’t know, he showed me a lot by his personality and by how he views life. I tell ya, he will do anything to help you. He really takes care of the kids in his classes. I hate that he’s not here anymore.

Eric added:

Yeah….I had a couple. My third-grade teacher and my seventh- and eighth-grade teachers. Back in third grade, I could barely read and she stayed after school to work with me and get me caught up. She really tried hard and never fussed or made me feel like I owed her anything. I didn’t have to give anything in return. She had my brother too and he was a good student, a good reader, and it never mattered. It was never he could or did this or that like many teachers have done.

Lastly, the interviews led to the question of whether or not these students have felt like teachers have personally cared about them and their well being. The students in the bottom 10% group were split in their opinions. Of the eight, four said yes and four said no that they did not think that their teachers personally cared about them or their well being. Nikki, an 18 year-old African American, elaborated most by contributing:

You know, yeah, some have, well most have. No one has ever diss’d me. I keep it real; you know I’m gonna do my thing and at the same time I’m gonna learn and get what I need to. But some teachers, you know, will stay after school; give you extensions because they know about things in your life that ain’t so easy. I have some who read tests to me because you know; I don’t read all that well. So, if they didn’t care, why would they do those things?
The students in the top 10% group answered the same questions asked to students in the lower 10% group. The first questions in regard to teacher influence addressed what the students generally thought about teachers and principals. All eight students in the top 10% group commented positively about their opinions of teachers and administrators. Mitchell and Heather offered mixed opinions. Mitchell said:

I have extreme opinions. There are teachers who I love. I can think of four or five teachers who are great. I can name just as many who are terrible. My mom is a well-respected teacher, so I have an idea of what it is to be a good teacher and I have had some who simply don’t make the grade.

Heather offered:

There have been some who I have really liked and some that I haven’t cared for. Some don’t even take the time to learn your name. I have mostly liked my teachers over the years and have been fortunate to have many good ones.

The students in the top 10% group were also asked how their teachers would describe them. All eight students in the top 10% group responded positively. This was different from the bottom 10% group because only one student from this group passed on the question and the other seven commented that their teachers would describe an area that needed improvement. Jana explained, "They would say outgoing, that I talk a lot. My teachers would say that I am smart and do well in all of my classes. I’m pretty sure it would be mostly positive." Mitchell added the following:

I suppose they would mostly comment that I am hard working and do my best in class. I have succeeded in school and I think they would comment on that success. They would say that I am positive and in regard to behavior that I am a positive role model.

Students in the top 10% group were also asked if any of their teachers have made a real difference in their lives. Of the eight students in this group, seven responded favorably that teachers have made a difference in their lives. Only Heather stated otherwise. In contrast, only four of the students in the bottom 10% group said they felt that teachers had made a positive difference in their lives. Of the seven in the top 10% group who commented favorably, five
referenced high school teachers and two students cited teachers from elementary, middle, and high school. Leah added the following:

In fifth grade, I had no self-confidence. My fifth-grade teacher was so positive and instilled a sense of confidence in me that I still have today. My eighth-grade teacher was simply amazing. He encouraged my love for learning and for that I will always be indebted to him. My AP English teacher last year taught--well, taught me to be instinctive if that makes sense. She taught me to trust myself and my abilities. She was an instructor in the truest sense. She made me understand what I could improve upon and why I needed to improve. Being good was not enough; she wanted all of us to be the best.

Jana added:

My 10th- and 11th-grade chemistry teacher--she is crazy hard. However, she made me enjoy chemistry and science altogether. She is why I have pursued three different AP science courses in high school. This has given me an idea of what college will be and what it will require. She really has taught me what loving to learn is all about. I am a student worker for an English teacher who also happens to be my volleyball coach. She gives me someone who is a teacher, but not my teacher, to talk to. She takes time to discuss and care.

The last interview question in this section regarding teacher impact was whether these students have felt like teachers have personally cared about them and their well being. The students in the bottom 10% group were divided. Of the eight, four said yes and four said no that they did not think that their teachers personally cared for them. The students in the top 10% group answered differently. All eight of the students in the top 10% group answered this question positively. Christy stated:

Absolutely. My teachers have always been so hardworking and have always gone the extra mile to ensure my success. In doing so, they have always forced me to try hard. I would say that the personal attention I have received is paramount to my success in school. I will always hold my teachers in high esteem for the sacrifices they not only make for me but for all students.

Learning Environment

School learning environments must be structured with high expectations for achievement and behavior and for positive relationships among students and teachers to ensure safer, more inclusive, higher-achieving schools. Personalizing the educational instruction environment and
structuring an engaging classroom environment are keys to producing a safe and high achieving learning environment (House, 2002). One interview question that directly related to the learning environment was, “What are your earliest memories of school?” Four of the eight students in the lower 10% group mentioned an experience from kindergarten. I expected that kindergarten experiences would generally be positive. Danny stated:

My earliest memory was kindergarten. I remember the day we had to go take a test to see if I could start. I was only four so it was up to the test if I could start. I remember being excited. I knew all of my colors, could count some, maybe to 10 or 20, and could read and write my name. I didn’t know what advanced was but that was what the teacher told my mom I was. I was one of the youngest in my class all the way through school because I did so good on that test in kindergarten.

Jennifer relayed a different memory from kindergarten. She added:

I remember the first day of kindergarten. It was very different and there was only four other girls and all of the boys picked on me. Everyone had someone to play with and I never had anyone to play with. I was probably a little bit heavy then, not like I am now, but heavier than the others in my class. I got made fun of quite a bit. I liked school and I did good but whenever the teacher wasn’t around, it was bad. I got over it though. That stuff don’t bother me anymore.

Of the eight students in the bottom 10% group, the other four students all said their earliest recollections went back to fourth grade. I thought it was interesting that four went back to kindergarten and that four specifically mentioned fourth grade. Three of the four students who related back to fourth grade had negative memories. Krista stated:

Fourth grade is the earliest and it’s bad. Do you want me to tell you specifically? Actually, I don’t remember all of the details, but it was in Virginia. It ultimately ended with me throwing a chair at the teacher (laughs). My mom was at the school later but I didn’t even get suspended. I did have to sit in the front of the class from that point on. I really think if I had been in this school system all along I would be in better shape for school.

Eric stated:

In elementary school, I will always remember and will never forget. It was in fourth grade and we were taking turns on computers. Computers were a big deal then, it wasn’t like now when we do everything on computers. There was a boy who would always get people in trouble. One day I was on the computer and he said it was his turn. I said it was my turn and I just started. He then fell down and hit his head on a chair. He told the teacher it was me who pushed him down. I got paddled for nothing. That kinda ruined
me a little bit. When you are that young and you get punished for something you didn’t do—that just, I don’t know, I can’t shake it from my head. No one would believe me (shaking his head) and that has been pretty consistent since then. I mean, to this day, I can tell you; I didn’t do nothing to that boy. By now, yeah, I would just say I did it, but man, I didn’t. That boy eventually moved away but I would love to meet up with him as an adult, not to fight or anything, but to ask why he did that.

The students in the top 10% group were also asked to discuss their earliest memory of school. Four of the eight commented on kindergarten, three commented on preschool, and one shared a memory from second grade. All of the memories were positive. The students in the bottom 10% group had four positive early memories and four negative memories. Only one of the memories from the bottom group had to do with learning, whereas all of the top group's comments revolved around what they learned or were learning. Some comments from students in the top 10% group follow. Lisa stated:

I can remember all the way back to prekindergarten in Texas. I specifically remember arts and crafts. I also remember learning about rhyming words and writing stories using rhyming words. My mom still has her Mother’s Day card from that year. We used the rhyming words to make those cards.

Kevin added:

My earliest would definitely be kindergarten. I remember getting to ride in the electric company’s power bucket when we were learning about careers. I remember playing Red Rover and falling and hitting my head. I also remember learning to read and being one of the best readers in class. My teacher would let me read for the class all the time.

Students in the top 10% group were also asked to talk about their fondest memory of school. All eight students offered positive memories. Mitchell made the following comments:

That’s a rough question as I have had many good memories of school. One would be in middle school, eighth grade specifically. It was the Science Olympiad. Some of my best friends and I participated and won on the state level. Most of my good memories have to do with friends or teachers. I guess I am lucky to have so many good memories.

Leah added:

My fondest memory of school would have to be from fifth grade again. Space week. We did space stuff all week. It was a week full of hands-on activities. We had a space bubble, glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling in all of the classes. Our class was decorated like the moon so we even had class in space. It really was great. It appealed to my creative side.
Christy commented:

High school as a whole has been great. The 12th-grade year has been a blast. I gave up cheerleading because I wanted to focus on school and I was elected student body president. I have been allowed to do a lot of things and make an impact, albeit a minor impact, on many issues at school.

The students in the top percentage group were also given an opportunity to discuss their least favorite memory of school. All eight students in the top 10% group answered the question. Hayley offered the following: "It would have to be fifth grade. I failed my first and only test that year. I made a 17." Leah added, "Second grade--doing timed math tests. I was ahead of everyone in my class. I got made fun of for being smart. I went home and cried because I just didn’t understand why doing good was bad."

Christy, who earlier had referenced being a high school cheerleader and student body president, said:

Middle school was so bad. No one liked me. I had my student council posters defaced. Kids said horrible things about me. They were all lies. I don’t know why kids in middle school didn’t like me but they didn’t. High school couldn’t have gotten here soon enough.

The students in the top 10% group were also asked whether they liked or disliked school. All eight students described their experiences as positive and said that they have always liked school. I was surprised that none of the eight went into detail as to the degree of liking school. This differed from the bottom group in that two in the bottom group definitely disliked school.

Students in the top 10% group were given the opportunity to discuss their discipline records. Only two of the eight acknowledged any discipline issues in school. This was different from the bottom 10% group who all admitted to discipline issues, many of which had been extreme and resulted in suspension from school. The two students in the top 10% group had their discipline issues in middle school. None of the eight had high school discipline referrals. I have been able to successfully confirm this information. Leah discussed her discipline issue from seventh grade:
When I was in seventh grade, I received a check on the board for talking in class. Looking back on it, it was, well, silly. However, I was very upset about it. I vowed at that time to never get in trouble again and have been very successful.

Jana went on to say:

My first referral was in sixth grade for leaving my book at home. I had to stay in from P.E. I also had a referral in eighth grade for chewing gum. That is pretty much the extent of it. (Laughing) I guess I was a real bad kid before coming to high school.

The last question for the top group also tied in with learning environment. This was the question related to the students' plans beyond high school. This question provided some insight into whether the positive and negative experiences up to this point for each student had influenced his or her willingness to voluntarily continue education. All eight students went into detail about their postsecondary plans. The top group of students were much more specific about their plans and all had been accepted already to college. Christy commented:

I will be going to Mississippi State in the fall. I have been awarded the top scholarship there. It will pay for all of my tuition, books, room, and board. It is based on leadership, interview, and of course, academics. Only five students outside of Mississippi receive this award. I plan to study veterinarian medicine. I am really excited, but sad that I will be leaving Tennessee. It is really hard for me ever imagine coming back here.

Hayley added, "I have been accepted to UT Chattanooga’s Honors Program. It is a full ride scholarship. I plan to major in art education and minor in history. I ultimately want to teach. I want to give back."

Mitchell stated:

I have been accepted to several colleges. My first pick is Vanderbilt, but I don’t want to burden my parents with paying for my bachelor and masters degree. UT has offered me the bicentennial scholarship, which will pay all of my tuition and books. My parents have planned to pay for my education, but a scholarship will allow them to pay for my master’s degree. I plan to study engineering and minor in math education. I might want to fall back on teaching some day.

None of the students in the bottom 10% group had the resources that the top group discussed. The fact that the bottom group is in the bottom 10% group of their class makes it obvious that scholarship monies are not likely to come their way.
External Influences

External influences are those factors outside of the family that impact student achievement. The patterns that emerged in regard to external influences from the interview process and research focused on peer influence and socioeconomic status.

Peer Influence

Numerous studies (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Gauvin & Rogoff, 1989; Radziszewska & Rogoff, 1991; Tudge, 1992; Watkins & Wentzel, 2002) have documented positive relations between children’s relationships with peers and a range of social and intellectual enablers including motivational orientations reflected in goals and values and skills related to self-regulation, social interaction, and problem solving. The findings of these studies illustrate how learning is linked to the social contexts within which children learn and highlight the notion that the development and use of academic enablers are highly dependent on the characteristics of and opportunities provided by learning contexts (Bronfenbrenner).

As the interviews developed, many of the students commented about a variety of issues that reflected directly upon peer influence. One question posed to all participants was, “How do you choose your friends?” The students in the bottom 10% group offered the first series of answers. Krista replied:

I guess how they act. I only want to be with people who act good, I guess. Sometimes, I end up hangin’ with people from the view [vernacular for a local housing project]. It’s hard to always be with people who do good when you’re hangin’ there. Those are, I guess just people I know, not necessarily my friends.

Eric contributed:

I don’t really know. I guess I have really never chosen my friends. I was just always cool with whoever was around. I guess my friends more or less have chosen me. I guess you’d call them friends of convenience.

Dennis commented:

Pretty much all of my friends are people I have gone to school with for a long time. I don’t really get new friends, just acquaintances. You know that you always keep a close
circle; you know those who you trust and then just be nice and cool with anyone new. You know that you really can’t trust just anybody.

Jennifer added with a laugh:

Most friends that I meet, I usually don’t like them until we get to know each other. I end up butting heads and then becoming so much alike that we become friends. There are very few who I would say are my friends though. I have my school friends and then there are just a few people who I see outside of school. I also have my work friends, but of course, I only see them at work. Rarely do the two worlds cross.

The follow-up to the initial friend question involved getting to know what these students and their friends do together. The responses varied greatly depending on the respondent. Some students answered with simple, one-sentence answers and some elaborated with more detail.

Anna offered the following response:

We hang out at my house or a friend’s house. This is [Name of town]; there isn’t much else to do. We go out to eat a lot and this will sometimes involve my parents as well. We spend a lot of time doing a lot of nothing really. I wouldn’t say we do anything productive, just you know, do nothing being friends.

Dennis contributed:

When I hang out with my friends, we play music. I am in a band and we either do that or watch movies. I don’t really know what else we do. I try to spend time with my family too and I have some friends who are at my house so much that I guess they would count as family and friends. Most of my friends are at school and we don’t usually have rides to each other’s houses so I guess we spend time doing school together.

Kristina added:

I am so focused on getting out of school now that I guess I don’t think in terms of friends. My goal at school is to get through each day and pass my classes. When I leave school I go to work. Work is like school, I mean, my goal is to get through each shift and go home. If I do have free time, I spend it with my boyfriend. We are together all the time, usually at my house. His parents aren’t cool with us just laying around watching TV or playing PlayStation, so we do that at my house. He is my best friend so that is how we spend our time.

The students in the top 10% group were asked the same two questions. This group expounded on the question. Additionally, most of the students in the top group referenced the academic aspect of school, whereas, the students in the bottom 10% group saw school as a place to meet and socialize. Students in the top group also were able to identify characteristics and
personal attributes that were cornerstones to the friendship. The students in the bottom group often chose friends because of place and time conveniences, not for their characteristics and attributes. Christy stated:

I don’t know if I can define or explain how I chose my friends. Situations and circumstances have been such that we have been thrown together and it has worked. I would say that other than my two half-sisters, all of my real friends have come about during my high school years. My best friends are a group of, oh I’d say 10 girls. We basically have all of our classes together. That is the common ground. They are all good girls and we have a good time being together.

Jana went on to answer with the following:

All of my friends seem to have been my friends for a long time. I don’t remember choosing them. Most have been friends since sixth grade. We have many of our classes together and several have played volleyball with me for years and years. We have fun together and that bond remains to today.

Leah added:

My friends are all people who I can talk to. People who are my friends, who make up my group of friends, worry about each other. These are people who I know would be there for me. Nice people and honest people. They are like me and I guess that’s why we are friends. Reliable.

Mitchell contributed:

They are people I can trust. The people I have been around are generally those who have been my friends. They are my biggest influence and I would hope that I have been that to some of them. Since sixth grade, I have been in higher, more advanced classes, so I have seen basically the same 20-25 people every day for 7 years now. It is a very homogenous group. We don’t get to see many people who aren’t like us except at lunch, and even then the same people always sit together.

Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status remains a topic of great interest for those who study child development. This interest derives from a belief that high family socioeconomic status affords children an array of services, goods, parental actions, and social connections that potentially rebound to the benefit of children and a concern that many children of low socioeconomic status
lack access to these same resources and experiences, thus putting them at risk for educational problems throughout their school careers (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1993).

Many of the interview questions were intentionally written to give me greater insight to each group’s socioeconomic status and the influence of this status. In addition to socioeconomic status, this section will focus on home life and culture. Some of the students chose to elaborate more into this area and it was clear that many students did not feel comfortable in that direction.

The first question asked in regard to socioeconomic status was for students to tell me about their family and specifically if the students’ biological parents were married. Eric passed on this question. The only information that he wanted to offer was that his grandmother had raised him. The other seven students in the bottom 10% group answered very generally in regard to this question. None of the eight had biological parents who were still married.

Krista answered:

I have a brother and a mom. My brother is in the Air Force. You know him, he went to school here. He lives in [Name of Town] now. My mom is nice. I’m mean to her at times, but she just gets to me. We are not close but we are close enough. My parents are not married to each other. My mom is single. My dad is married.

Dennis stated:

Uh, I have two sisters, two older brothers, half-brothers that is. I have a cousin who lives with my mom, me, and my two sisters. My parents are no longer married. My mom doesn’t date and my dad has a girlfriend. She doesn’t really have anything to do with us or us with her. She’s just kinda there.

Jennifer commented:

I have a very big family. I grew up with three sisters and one brother. I am closer to my brother than anyone. He is 22. They are very protective of me since I am the baby. Being the baby makes it hard sometimes. There are areas where my older brother and sisters messed up. My parents know to watch me close in those areas. That makes it very tough to be a teen sometimes. My mom and dad split years ago. I have a stepmom who is 26 and a stepdad who is 40. My real dad and stepmom don’t live here and he hasn’t really ever been involved. My stepdad has raised me and made sure I was provided for.

Danny added:
My father died in 2001. My parents were married until that time. I live at home with my mom and older brother. My sister lives in Virginia. That is about it as far as my family goes. We are close, but live all over the place. We rarely are together as a whole family.

Anna described her family as:

Ummmm, my mom, dad, stepdad, two older brothers, my dad’s girlfriend or should I say his soon-to-be wife, their baby, and another sister on the way. My oldest brother lives here and works for my stepdad. My other brother works in Myrtle Beach. Both of my stepparents are somewhat involved but my stepdad is really my hero. He is always there for me.

Students were also asked to describe the parenting and discipline style of their parents. Anna went on to say, "My mom is the disciplinarian. My dad doesn’t know enough about me, I mean, he isn’t around enough to discipline me. It was even like that when I was little."

Eric added:

She didn’t play man. My grandma is old-school. My grandfather was there some, he made sure it stayed old-school. It was yes sir, no talking back, etc. Respect was the name of the game. You open doors for ladies and all that.

Kristina stated:

Mom is not strict. She tries to take it easy on us. We try not to make her mad or think about stuff when she don’t have to. There are times, however, that she will tell our dad. They aren’t married, they don’t even like each other, but if she calls about something we’ve done, boy he takes care of it. My dad used to use a firm hand to spank us, but he hasn’t done that in a long time either.

Krista said:

Since I turned 18, I can pretty much do whatever I want. Before then it was rules, rules, rules. I didn’t really get into trouble. It was a whole lot of talk. When I was little, I would get spanked or stuck in a corner. With my dad I never really had consequences. I’ve never really lived with him though.

The next question asked in regard to socioeconomic status was, “What are some of the activities that members of your family do together?” The answers from the students in the bottom 10% group are discussed first. Eric was the only student who chose to pass on this question. Danny answered, saying, "Pretty much, if we are together, it is watching TV. Sometimes we will get into a game of cards, but mostly TV."

Krista added:
Well, it’s just me and my mom since Aunt [Name] went back to Virginia and my brother is in Georgia. We eat out a lot. We watch movies and TV. Sometimes rent a movie. We used to go to the movies but it’s been a long time since we did that.

Dennis offered, "Uh, let me see, we sometimes go to the lake on the weekends and picnic. We go grocery shopping; we do yard work, household chores."

Students were then asked to talk about the homes and neighborhoods in which they grew up. Neighborhood characteristics influence collective socialization processes by shaping the type of role models youth are exposed to outside the home. Ainsworth (2002) asserted that neighborhoods where most adults have steady jobs foster behaviors and attitudes conducive to success in both school and work. Therefore, children in advantaged neighborhoods are more likely to value education and work hard because that is what was modeled for them by neighborhood adults. Responses from students in the lower 10% group are provided first.

Jennifer answered:

I lived in another town until I was two. My mom and stepdad moved here when I was two. We have lived in the same place since moving here. It is a quiet neighborhood, you know, simple with no drama. I don’t remember the house I was born in. The first house we had when we moved here was built for us. We didn’t have any heat and I shared a bedroom with my brother and sister. It was cramped, but it all got better from there.

Eric added:

I’ve always lived in the same house in [Name of Town]. I guess it’s kinda hard to talk about because when you are in school, you are a [Area] kid. You’re judged differently. I have been automatically stereotyped because I lived in [Area]. This was especially in elementary school. You have no White friends. I mean, it’s nowhere half as bad as people think it is. Just because we live in a house and not an apartment, it doesn’t mean that people didn’t make assumptions. It felt like people were treating me and my brother differently. Maybe they didn’t; but it sure did feel like it. Sometimes I think they do and don’t know it.

Krista contributed:

Crazy. Like where I was born, Virginia. It was just like a good neighborhood. I moved to Tennessee when I was 11 or 12. I have moved twice since coming to [Town]. Um, I lived on [Street] and now I live in [Area]. [Area] is like, well, you know the projects. Drug dealers, prostitutes. It’s no big deal if you live there, but it’s different from anywhere else I have ever lived. As far as houses go, its pretty much been apartments and rental homes. Big enough for our family. Not rich or anything like that.
Kristina stated the following:

Ah, uh, the neighborhoods have all been friendly, lots of kids. Just like, we’d move so often, I would just have to readjust back and forth all of the time. I was born in California. We moved to East Tennessee when I was in first grade. We moved to [Town] when I was in fourth grade and my parents split up. We moved to another part of town and we’ve been there since. We have only lived in houses; the typical has been two to three bedrooms and one bath. Average houses I guess. Not anything like my boyfriend’s, you can get lost just going to the bathroom at his house.

The students in the top 10% group were asked the same questions. Again, these students elaborated more. Six of the eight students in this group stated that their biological parents were still married. One of the six replied that both biological parents are single and one replied that both are remarried. In regard to family activities, these students had many more cultural activities and vacations to discuss. Of the eight in the top 10% group, six mentioned church as a family activity. None of the students in the bottom group mentioned church or religious activities. Additionally, it was obvious that these students had lived in more affluent neighborhoods and nicer homes. This benefit, research shows, gives these students an added advantage throughout the learning process. When asked to describe her family, Heather replied:

My parents are married. I have a brother who is 15 and a sister who is 7. We don’t have extended family in Tennessee. My parents moved here for my dad’s job so we only get to visit with our grandparents and cousins. We are close knit though.

Leah answered:

My family consists of my mom, dad, my older brother who is in college, and my younger brother who is in ninth grade. We have several aunts, uncles, one set of grandparents, and more cousins than you can count. Most of my extended family is in Texas. My mom and dad have been married for 26 years and they act like they just met. They never fight and they don’t let us fight. They will allow us to have family discussions to solve our problems, but we can never raise our voices and we have to always be respectful.

Kevin added:

My mom and dad are divorced and single. I am the only child, so our immediate family is not very big. I do have several aunts and uncles and cousins. I hang out with my cousins all the time. All of my family is in [Town]. You know just average stuff.
This group was given the opportunity to discuss the discipline style of their parents as well. Students in the top 10% group spoke more of expectations than consequences. Jana offered:

My parents were usually very straightforward. Mom was more so than dad. They’ve never spanked me. I can’t remember much about discipline. I remember when I was like 10. My mom told me to clean my room and I didn’t. She took the phone away from me for what seemed like forever because when she came home, my room looked horrible. That is as bad as I can recall.

Christy stated:

My parents are strict, but not too strict. For example, I couldn’t car date until I could drive. I always have to call to say when I leave one place and when I arrive at the next. My parents call it trust, not rules, and I have to respect that.

Leah offered:

My parents have been strict but not oppressive. The typical punishment would be getting grounded, but honestly that hasn’t happened much. Mostly we have our family discussions and work things out. Now, having said that, this style of parenting hasn’t worked for my younger brother. They have had to be, how should I say it, more tangible.

When asked about activities in which the family participated as a group, Heather answered, "We go to church together, dinners are almost always together, movies, board games, barbecue at the pool, pool parties in the summer, and we do family vacations together."

Hayley replied:

We do church together a couple of times per week. I personally go on hikes with my dad at the park. We don’t have a TV and never have, so we don’t occupy our time with that. We do play cards, read a great deal, and work at the church and at the park. Most of what we do is as a family.

Mitchell stated:

My sister is in college, so we all spend time with her when we can. If I don’t have something going on at school, we always have dinner together. We go and visit my grandparents as a family. We do things with my grandmother and great aunt. They are a big influence. I have pretty much always had two or three sets of people looking over me. My aunt taught me how to make a cake. I garden with my dad, just hanging out essentially, in the garden. Much closer to my mom, we spend a lot of time shopping and talking.

Leah smiled and then added:
We do bunches and bunches. We swim, go to movies, eat dinner, we are a very close family. For example, yesterday, my mom and older brother picked me up from my AP chemistry test. We went to lunch, talked, had a great time, and then (intentional frown) they brought me back to school. We do concerts when we can, shows, you know my mom is involved in the theater. We travel a great deal. I will miss that when I go off to college.

In regard to the neighborhoods and homes in which they grew up, the students in the upper 10% group offered quite a different perspective from those in the bottom 10% group.

Leah contributed:

We moved to [Town] when I was 3 years old. We have lived in [Area] for 15 years. It is a very good neighborhood. It has grown a great deal since we moved there. I remember always playing in the back yards of all the neighbors and no one cared. It was so friendly. Our physical house is spacious. It’s kinda like a big circle. Plenty of space if you needed it. I think that is why we are so close, because we didn’t have to always be on top of each other.

Christy added:

Well, let’s see, I have lived in five neighborhoods. I lived in Knoxville early on, then we moved to [Name] Estates, then [Name] Estates when I was in middle school, then, let’s see to [Name] Acres, which is where we lived until last year. We now live in [Name]. This is more or less a retirement neighborhood. Of course, five neighborhoods means five houses. We lived in just a normal two-story brick house in Knoxville. It was very normal. Then we moved to a ranch house with a pool, then to a huge house, too big to take care of. It had three full floors and the biggest pool. When we moved to [Name], it was an older cottage with a red roof. Very cute, brick, two-stories. Not the biggest house, but it was in a very nice neighborhood. The house now is a simple split foyer. Downsizing now that I am gone.

Mitchell added:

I grew up in [Town] until I was four. We have always lived in an upper-middle income neighborhood. We have had a nice house with a big yard. My neighborhood is very friendly. Everyone waves. We are close with the neighbors and all of the neighbors talk a lot. When we first moved there all of the kids and families were older. I’m now older and there are quite a few younger couples with kids.

Kevin stated:

I grew up in [Name] with my mom. It was a very nice area. You know, it is what you see on TV. Now I live with my dad in [Name]. That is very different. More people are out and about doing their own thing.
CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Summary of the Study

This research study was born out of the disparity in achievement among students at opposite ends of the academic spectrum with whom I regularly observed and interacted. As a school counselor, it was customary for me to have a meeting with a student to help narrow his or her list of potential colleges from a list of seven or eight top-tier and Ivy League institutions down to the standard Duke, Vanderbilt, and Yale choices. Depending on the student’s major, he or she also might consider Stanford and Georgetown as back-up choices. These students would often include their parents in our meetings and it was not uncommon for me to be informed that finances would not be a major issue, as the parents had planned for the expense of their child’s education.

Conversely, I might follow those meetings by conferring with a student who was failing many if not all of his or her classes, having poor attendance, having no plans beyond the day, not to mention after high school, and on top of all of this, having no parent or guardian with a commitment to attend the meeting.

Notwithstanding, the top students with support systems in place continued to earn good grades, were accepted into colleges, and moved on from high school into potentially bright futures. At the same time, the students in the bottom of their classes and with limited support systems continued the trend of failure and ultimately dropped out of high school, resigned to pursuing a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) or failed to earn anything at the end of 4 years of high school.
This scenario created a great deal of frustration for me and led to the formulation of the research questions that formed the basis of this research study. This study provided invaluable insight into the students' perceptions of factors that promote students' academic success as well as students' perceptions of factors that are detrimental to academic success. The results of the qualitative interviews are discussed in order of the research questions.

Findings

Research Question #1

How do the perceptions of at-risk students compare with honor students in regard to the level of their parents' involvement in school, expectations for student’s success, and attainment of education?

Research has clearly shown that children's academic performance was higher at schools that had high parental involvement (Clark, 1995). Clark went on to define parental involvement as anything from joining the PTA, helping with homework, taking an active role in school governance, or serving on various school boards and committees. Educators have long considered parental involvement as one of the most prominent predictors of student academic success. Parental involvement has been recognized as increasing student morale, attitudes, and academic achievement across all subject areas (Smith, 2001).

Academic achievement in adolescents has been related to the quality of the relationship with parents and with parent involvement in academic studies (Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992). In regard to parent involvement, the perceptions of the students in the bottom 10% group were that their parents were generally not very involved in the daily aspects of high school. Much of this lack of involvement could be attributed to the students choosing not to involve their parents in the routine activities of high school. Additionally, many of the students in the bottom 10% group were in single-parent homes with financial issues that resulted in parents working
during the day and the students working after school, thus leaving little time for discussion of or involvement in school activities.

Students in the top 10% group generally had parents who were very involved in elementary and middle school. Several students discussed the roles their parents played within their schools including class mom, volunteer coach, and providing clinic and clerical assistance at school. Most students in the top 10% group commented that their parents were not as involved in school activities since they had enrolled in high school. Students commented that their parents were currently allowing them to take the lead in their education and if problems were to arise, they knew their parents would get involved.

Clark’s (1995) research supported the students' perceptions in regard to parental involvement in school. Specifically, this research showed that parents were rated as highly involved in only 46% of the schools for students who were on track to graduate in the class of 2000. Additionally, this research has shown that parental support declined as the students got older.

One of my initial thoughts was that parents of students in the bottom 10% group were not active in assisting with homework or studying at home. The results of the interviews showed that students in the bottom 10% group often did not bother to take homework home and this trend continued from year to year beginning in elementary school. It was affirmed that when these students did take homework, study materials, or school projects home, their parents were not readily available to assist with these tasks. An unexpected revelation from the interviews revealed that in families with older siblings, it was these siblings who played a significant role in helping to complete schoolwork.

Again, the students in the top 10% group had parents who were greatly involved in schoolwork and study habits in the earlier years of their children's education. Based on the interviews, it appeared that this level of involvement prepared these students well for the academic responsibility of being high school students. The students in the top 10% group stated
that their parents allowed them to manage their school responsibilities unless they indicated they needed help.

Many students in the bottom 10% group had a history of low standardized test scores in reading. This fact led to my interest in the reading background of all the students. Many students in the bottom 10% group were not consistently read to as children. When these students were read to, it was more likely to have been by a sibling or grandparent rather than a parent. These students were also asked to discuss the types of reading materials available in their homes. Students in the bottom 10% group discussed a wide variety of reading materials, including magazines, romance novels, and newspapers. They were vague and nonspecific in regard to these reading materials.

All eight students in the top 10% group had a history of scoring in the top 2% of all students on standardized reading test scores. When discussing reading with this group of students, all eight commented that both parents regularly read to them when they were young. These students spoke specifically about the types of books and times that this reading took place. Many of the students in this group spoke specifically about their "joy for reading" that was instilled by their parents. These students also acknowledged that their parents were active readers and there was a wide variety of reading materials in their homes. These students differed from the bottom 10% group in that they spoke of specific authors, magazines by name, books by genre, and listed professional journals as items of literature in their homes.

The education attainment of the parents of the students in the bottom 10% differed greatly from the students in the top 10% group. Five of the eight students in the bottom 10% group had at least one parent who had graduated from high school. Four had at least one parent who had attempted college and two of the eight had at least one parent who had graduated from a 2- or 4-year college. For this group of students, parental education attainment did appear to influence employment. Five students had at least one parent who was employed. The other three had parents who were unemployed.
All eight of the students in the top 10% group stated both parents had graduated from high school. Six reported both parents had earned 4-year degrees. The remaining two students reported one parent had earned a degree and one parent had not earned a postsecondary degree. Six students in the top 10% group stated that both parents were employed. Two of the six with both parents in the work force stated that their mothers’ job was for fun and was more of a hobby. Two students had one parent who was employed and one parent who was not.

Parental expectations for student achievement were another area for which I expected a divergent perspective from each group. All eight students in the bottom 10% group stated that their parents had high expectations for their success. However, these students were vague as to these expectations. All of these students referenced their parents wanting them to be happy but did not provide a definition of this happiness. These students described happiness as if it was a destination and that the journey toward happiness did not really matter. No student in the bottom 10% group referenced parental expectations of education attainment or career opportunities.

As did the students in the bottom 10% group, all eight students in the top 10% stated that their parents had high expectations for their futures. The top 10% group differed in that these students referenced specific goals and expectations in regard to education, career, personal development, and values.

Research Question #2

How do the perceptions of at-risk students compare with honor students in regard to level of educational support such as teacher support, faculty involvement, and the structured learning environment?

In regard to educational support, the students in the bottom 10% group had mixed perceptions. These students shared that they felt some teachers were good and offered good support, whereas others did not. Some students said they felt that their teachers did not care about them and some teachers did not even know their names. Many mentioned that their
reputation had preceded them with some teachers. Additionally, one student in this group commented that his appearance led teachers to form negative opinions about him and he was thus provided less support within the classroom.

The students in the top 10% group were more positive concerning perceptions of their teachers. Seven of the eight commented favorably and one student commented negatively. The student who commented negatively added that she had teachers who had not learned her name.

In regard to whether or not teachers have made a difference in the lives of these students, the students in the bottom 10% group offered mixed answers. Three of the eight in the bottom 10% group stated that they did not feel that their teachers had made a difference in their lives. One student passed on this question. Three commented that they did have teachers who had made a difference in their lives. These students used the following phrases in describing those teachers: "respectful to me as a person," "won’t give up," and "attentive to my needs."

The students in the top 10% group were mostly positive when discussing whether their teachers had made a difference in their lives. Seven commented that their teachers had made a difference. Five of those seven referenced specific high school teachers who had made the most difference. Two of the seven students referenced teachers from the elementary, middle, and high school level. One student said she felt that teachers had not made a difference in her life.

As to whether or not their teachers cared about them, the students in the bottom 10% group were split as well. Four commented that they did not feel teachers had personally cared for them. Conversely, four students commented that they did feel that certain teachers had personally cared for them. Those who said their teachers had cared about them cited these teachers as showing their care through specific actions and went on to explain that they thought these teachers understood them and their situations.

All eight students in the top 10% group did express that they felt at least one teacher had cared about them personally. These students stated specifically that teachers have put forth effort that was beyond their expectations and have helped to ensure their academic success.
Students in the bottom 10% group stated that their learning environment was both positive and negative. These students stated they felt as though they had been picked on in school, felt lonely at times, were unfairly disciplined, and were often mistreated by adults and students. Only one student referenced learning as an important aspect of her collective educational learning environment. Four students stated their earliest recollection of school was kindergarten and four stated that their earliest recollection of school was fourth grade. All eight students in the bottom 10% group had extensive discipline records during high school.

The statements made by the students in the bottom 10% group mirrored Kaplan’s (2000) findings that school learning environments must be structured with high expectations for achievement and behavior and for positive relationships to develop among teachers and students to ensure safer, more inclusive, and higher-achieving schools. Personalizing the educational instructional environment and structuring an engaging classroom environment are keys to producing a safe and high achieving learning environment.

Additionally, Cassel’s (2003) findings supported the perceptions of students in the bottom 10% group in that there were significant indicators found for potential dropouts and academic struggles. These included issues such as lack of personal development skills, extensive discipline referrals, poor grades, low scores on standardized achievement tests, low socioeconomic backgrounds, minority student status, and low motivation.

All eight students in the top 10% group commented positively about their collective educational environments. All mentioned their positive learning experiences as specific reasons for feeling positive about their environments. Seven of the eight students commented that their earliest memories of school were kindergarten or earlier. The eighth student referenced a memory from second grade. None of the eight students had any discipline referrals during their high school years. Only two students had discipline referrals during their elementary or middle school years.
Research Question #3

How do the perceptions of at-risk students compare with honor students in regard to peer and external influences such as community support and resources?

Regarding peer and external influences, the students in the top and bottom group differed in many of their perceptions. Students discussed issues such as how they chose their friends, how they spent time with friends, traits that they admired, and socioeconomic influences.

Students in the bottom 10% group stated they chose their friends based on their actions and where they lived; some said they preferred those who were in their classes at school. Activities that they enjoyed with their friends were hanging out, listening to music, playing video games, and watching movies.

The students in the top 10% differed in the scope of their responses. These students cited personal attributes of their friends as the primary reasons for having chosen to associate with them as opposed to circumstances that put them in physical proximity to hang out with certain students. The students in the top 10% group also listed having classes together, having played sports together, and having activities in common.

Researchers (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Gauvin & Rogoff, 1989; Radziszewska & Rogoff, 1991; Tudge, 1992; Watkins & Wentzel, 2002) have documented positive relations between children’s relationships with peers and a range of social and intellectual enablers including motivational orientations reflected in goals and values and skills related to self-regulation, social interaction, and problem solving. The findings of these studies illustrated how learning was linked to the social contexts within which children learn and highlighted the notion that the development and use of academic enablers were highly dependent on the characteristics of and opportunities provided by learning contexts (Bronfenbrenner).

Both groups offered feedback regarding the traits they most admired in other people. Of the students in the bottom 10% group, three of eight commented that honesty was the trait they
most admired. Others in this group cited personality, attitude, responsibility, and self-confidence.

The students in the top 10% group were more expressive in their responses. Some of the most admired traits discussed by students in the top 10% group were faith, sense of direction, risk taking, and self-confidence. These students also commented on traits that were least desirable. Students in both groups stated dishonesty was the trait they deemed least desirable.

The socioeconomic indicators for these two groups differed greatly. One primary indicator of family socioeconomic status is the number of individuals contributing to the family’s resources. None of the eight students in the bottom 10% group lived in a household with both biological parents. One student lived in a household with a grandparent who was the head of the household. The primary residence of the other seven was with their biological mother as the head of household. The students in the bottom 10% group listed the following, in addition to their mothers, as being members of their primary household: stepfathers, siblings, stepsiblings, half siblings, and grandparents.

The students in the top 10% group had different family dynamics than did those in the bottom 10% group. Seven students in the top 10% group lived in a home with two parents. Six of these eight students lived in a home in which their biological parents were still married. One student lived with a single biological mother and said his biological father was still single as well. One student lived with a biological parent and a stepparent. Her other biological parent was also remarried. In addition to parents and stepparents, these students listed siblings and stepsiblings as others who comprised their family units.

Data from the *National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and the National Household Education* (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002) indicated that children from poor families had less access to a wide variety of different recreational and learning materials. They were less likely to go on trips, visit a library or museum, attend a theatrical performance, or to be given lessons directed at enhancing their skills. Access to such material and resources could mediate the relationship
between socioeconomic status and children’s intellectual and academic achievement. The responses from the 16 students in regard to the impact these types of activities had on their achievement provided further support for this research. Specifically, some of this support is echoed in the following summary of interviews.

The students in the bottom 10% group stated that as a family they enjoyed watching television, renting movies, and had participated in a variety of community and church-related activities. The consensus answer among the group was that the family members did not spend much time together and when they did, the prevailing activity revolved around television-related entertainment.

Students in the top 10% group stated that their families enjoyed a wide variety of activities. These activities included: church, barbecues, picnics, holiday parties, birthday parties, vacations, concerts, plays, sporting events, and movies. The students in the top 10% group talked a great deal about the value that their families place on spending time together.

The students’ perceptions were supported with pieces of research in the literature review. Specifically, Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) reported that parents of high socioeconomic status engaged children in more conversations, read to them more, and provided more teaching experiences; whereas parents of low socioeconomic status were less likely to purchase reading and learning materials for their children, less likely to take their children to educational and cultural events, and were less likely to regulate the amount of television their children watched. As a result, children from families of low socioeconomic status experienced more frequent school failure (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002).

Additional indicators of socioeconomic status are the homes and neighborhoods in which students reside or have resided. Ainsworth (2002) found that not only did neighborhood characteristics predict educational outcomes, but also that the strength of the predictions often rivaled those associated with more commonly cited family and school factors. Ainsworth went on to report that dropout rates in severely distressed neighborhoods were more than three times
higher than were those in nonpoverty neighborhoods. Many students in the bottom 10% group talked of having moved often. Four of these eight students lived in low-income housing at the time of their interview. Two of the students lived in a rental house and two lived in homes that their parents were currently purchasing. Seven students had lived in low-income housing at some time in their lives.

Students in the top 10% group described their neighborhoods in greater detail. Many of the neighborhoods listed by these students were affluent ones in the town where their high school was located. Additionally, these students had greater stability in regard to resident longevity in their current house. None of the students in the top 10% group had ever lived in low-income housing and all eight said they were living in a house that their parents were purchasing. These students were far more thorough in describing their homes. They talked about amenities such as swimming pools in addition to the physical location of their neighborhood. These students also mentioned neighbors and neighborhood activities in which their families participated. Ainsworth (2002) supported the perceptions relayed by the students in the top 10% group by asserting that neighborhoods where most adults had steady jobs fostered behaviors and attitudes conducive to success in both school and work. Consequently, children in advantaged neighborhoods were more likely to value education and hard work because that is what was modeled by neighborhood adults.

Research Question #4

How do the perceptions of at-risk students compare with honor students regarding self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, achievement goals, gender, and ethnicity?

Adaptive attributions were considered to be associated with higher expectations for success, enhanced academic self-efficacy, and positive effects such as pride; however, these outcomes were, in turn, associated with engagement and study skills as well as actual
achievement (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). Responses from the participants support this research.

All students in the bottom 10% group stated that they would not change anything about themselves. However, four of the eight acknowledged personal traits that they would like to improve upon. These included: low self-esteem, immaturity, and poor decision-making skills. Seven students described their lack of confidence regarding school; five stated that they lacked confidence in regard to personal relationship issues.

Five of the eight students in the top 10% group listed personal traits they would like to improve. These students answered confidently throughout their interviews; however, lack of self-confidence was the answer that three of these students offered. Two students in the top 10% group stated selfishness as being a trait that they would like to improve. The students in the top 10% group answered the question in such a way that it was apparent they viewed negative attributes and traits as being something outside of themselves and they did not seem to use this negativity to define themselves. On the other hand, it was observed that students in the bottom 10% group used negative traits as self-definitions rather than as specific traits that were small parts of these students.

All eight students in the bottom 10% group stated that their mother was the person whom they most admired. All of these students had been or were currently living with their mother as a single parent. Many of the students in the bottom 10% group referenced their mother as a friend.

Three of the eight students in the top 10% group stated their father was the person they most admired. All three were female students whose biological parents were still married. In addition, three students, two males and one female, stated their mother was the person whom they most admired. The last two students stated the person they most admired was a grandparent. Students in both groups said the reason they admired the person they named was because that person overcome obstacles to make life better for others.
All 16 students were asked to discuss their short- and long-term goals. Specifically, they were asked to discuss their goals 1 year, 5 years, and 10 years in the future. The students in the bottom 10% group were very casual and nonspecific in their responses. Four of the eight stated that their goal 1 year from the interview included being enrolled in college. Two of those four named specific colleges and the other two were undecided in regard to where they wanted to go to school. One of the eight students stated that military would be in his future. Another stated that getting out of the town he lived in and doing more than just hanging out was his goal in the next year. Two acknowledged that they were not sure as to what the next year would hold.

Seven of the eight students in the top 10% group stated that they would be enrolled in college 1 year from the interview. These students differed from the bottom 10% group in that they stated specific colleges and majors for their college careers. One stated that he would be enrolled in college but was not specific about the college or a specific major. This student added that he looked forward to spending the next year relaxing and hanging out without stress.

The students in the bottom 10% group responded to the question of their 5-year goals in general and nonspecific answers. Three students stated responses that included jobs, homes, and cars. All three specifically used the word "success" to describe what they wanted 5 years from now. Four students referenced jobs and nothing more. One student stated that family and personal relationships was her primary goal for the next 5 years.

The students in the top 10% group answered the 5-year goal question with specific details as well. Four of the eight students in the top 10% group responded by stating that their plans included being enrolled in a graduate school program, law school, or medical school. Two speculated by stating that they would be entering the workforce and working toward financial security. Both of these students mentioned specific jobs. One student answered that she would be working toward attaining a career, house, and car. Another said he was hoping to be finished with college and having fun.
The last question that focused specifically on future goals addressed goals for 10 years in the future. Five of the eight students in bottom 10% group stated that they wanted to have a family and a job. Some of these students were specific in regard to their jobs. One of the five stated, with a serious expression, that she hoped she "wasn't dead." Two of the eight stated that their primary goal for 10 years from the interview was to have a job. One pointed out that he planned on being a wealthy entertainer and giving back to his community.

Four of the eight students in the top 10% group stated that their goals 10 years from now included a specifically named career and a family. Again, these students were very detailed in their responses. Three stated specific careers and said that career advancement was their goal 10 years from the interview. One of the students commented that finishing medical school was his primary goal within the next 10 years.

The students in the bottom 10% group included five females and three males. These students were asked if and how their gender had impacted their lives. Six of the eight students, four females and two males, stated that they did not believe their gender had a positive or negative impact on their lives. One student commented that he felt like he had more opportunities in life being a male because of the social perceptions that define what a male is and does. One female stated that gender had at times benefited her at school because girls were generally understood to be the better behaving gender. She added that her gender was a detriment at home because of her parents’ experiences with older siblings and aunts who had gotten pregnant as teenagers.

The students in the top 10% group included six females and two male students. The same gender-related question was posed to these students. Six of the eight students, four females and the two males, stated that gender had not significantly impacted their lives. Two female students stated that gender had impacted their lives. One female student stated specifically that she was viewed by many as a dumb blonde and that she often felt she had to prove her
intelligence and abilities, whereas boys at school never had to live up to that pressure or expectation.

Both groups of students were asked if ethnicity had ever played a role in their lives. The ethnic breakdown of the bottom 10% group was four African American students, two Caucasian students, and two Hispanic students. Four of the eight, two Hispanic and two Caucasian students, stated that ethnicity had not impacted their lives for the positive or negative. One of the eight students, an African American male, chose to pass on this question. Three African American students stated that their ethnicity had played a major role in their lives. They went on to describe that the impact had usually been negative and it influenced their lives at home, in the community, and at school.

The ethnic breakdown of the top 10% group was seven Caucasian students and one African American student. Five of the eight students, all Caucasian, stated that ethnicity had not impacted their lives. Two of the eight, one Caucasian and one African American student, stated that ethnicity had impacted their lives. The Caucasian student stated that she was disadvantaged in regard to scholarship opportunities because of not having minority status. The male student echoed the responses of the three African American students in the bottom 10% group in regard to his ethnicity negatively impacting him at home, in the community, and at school.

According to Griffin (2002), it appears that African American and Hispanic students have placed less importance upon academics than have either Asian or Caucasian students in regard to the relationship between academic accomplishments and various global measures of self. The percentage of African American and Hispanic students who appeared in both groups added support to this research. In addition to the demographics, the student responses provided and added substance to this research perspective.
Implications for Stakeholders

My primary motivation at the initial undertaking of this research project was to identify factors based on the students' perceptions that promoted student success as well as perceptions of those factors that proved detrimental to student success. My hopes were such that I could encourage the development of the factors that would lead to success for students who had been unsuccessful in school. This research study began in the spring of 2001. Since this undertaking began, popular educational research has coined a phrase to describe the intention of my goals from 2001. This phrase, “closing the achievement gap,” is no stranger to the ears of educators throughout the United States.

Because of the goals and potential outcome of this study, the implications to stakeholders are vast. Primary stakeholders, for the sake of this research study, include parents or guardians and the educational community.

The achievement of academic success for all students was the major impetus behind this research study. Therefore, the implications for those who have the greatest opportunity for influence on students are of vital importance. One group that has the greatest potential for student influence is the parents or guardians.

A suggestion for parents and guardians would be to get involved in their children’s school from the earliest opportunity and continue throughout high school. The level of involvement should naturally decrease as students get older and assume a greater level of responsibility for their own work.

One key to this transition is making sure that students are taught proper time management skills, study skills, and communication skills that would allow them to assume some of the responsibilities that parents have typically assumed.

It is also recommended that parents maintain regular contact with their children’s teachers. This allows the parent to maintain knowledge of their child’s progress, rather than depending on the teacher to keep each parent aware of all of the issues of each of their many
students. This also assists parents in being aware of subtle details and changes that might be warning signs for more serious issues in the future.

Parents would be well served to promote literacy from infancy through adulthood. In addition to reading to their children, parents should make available a wide range of rich literary materials. Exposure to abundant literature will assist students in the transition to more formal educational experiences. Additionally, the skill of decoding that is required for reading is vital to all academic areas.

The interview responses from the students also led to the suggestion that parents promote and maintain high, healthy, and realistic expectations for their children. Based on the interviews with these 16 students, these expectations promoted the formulation of goals that each of the students had for their future.

The educational community is another vital stakeholder in regard to student achievement and success. Many of the parent recommendations often are suggested based on the false assumption that parents know how to accomplish these tasks and simply choose not to act on this knowledge. However, it is important to note that this is often not the case. Many parents in poverty situations struggle daily to survive and may have never been exposed to effective parenting techniques and skills. This leads to the first recommendation of community parenting classes for parents who meet criteria for having students who are at-risk for social and academic struggles. It would certainly benefit local school systems to sponsor these courses in conjunction with the local department of children’s services. This would perhaps be a requirement that is tied into the public assistance programs.

A recommendation for the educational community would be to have schools and teachers who welcome parent involvement and understand the importance of good communication. This would allow parents to be involved in the day-to-day education of their children. Additionally, the connection with the home could strengthen the level of support the child receives and might decrease the likelihood of students falling through educational cracks. It is important to note that
many parents do not have access to email or the internet and regularly maintained phone service is not a given. Therefore, it would be a recommendation for the educational community to be creative in the avenues of communication. Some schools have been successful in implementing their annual open-house day on a Saturday in an attempt to accommodate parents. Schools have also offered supervision for younger siblings on parent conference days so that parents can be involved in their children's education. Additionally, many schools suggest or even require that teachers conduct home visits and conduct alternate open house and parent conference meetings within the neighborhoods of students who typically are not represented at school functions. All of these are opportunities for educators to reach out to the community and promote success for all students.

In addition to embracing and communicating with parents, the educational community, specifically teachers, is encouraged to foster positive and supportive relationships with students while maintaining high and reasonable expectations for their success. Based on the interviews in this study, this relationship fosters interest in school and might prevent negative feelings and perceptions that students with low levels of academic achievement often experience. Villegas and Lucas (2007) contended that to teach subject matter in meaningful ways and to engage students in learning, teachers needed to know about the lives of their students.

In an effort to improve student achievement, the educational community needs to explore options beyond the school day and offer opportunities for students whose parents maintain working hours beyond those of the typical school day. These opportunities could be through after school academic and enrichment activities. These opportunities offer safe and supportive environments that give students academic support during a time where it might not typically be provided.

Seven of the eight students in the top 10% group attended a prekindergarten program. Researchers such as Garcia, Jensen, and Cuellar (2006) suggested that high quality prekindergarten programs improve school readiness for young students and decrease
achievement differences among ethnic groups at kindergarten entry. Additionally, perceptions from students in the bottom 10% group of this study showed that there was a lack of focus on literacy in the home and the students in this group said they were not regularly read to during their preschool years. This is often a product of the socioeconomic status that limits the resources that parents can make available to their children. Therefore, it is a recommendation that a universal prekindergarten program with an emphasis on literacy be implemented for every school system in the United States.

It is crucial that the educational community ensures that all schools are clean, safe, and free from bullying, name-calling, and discrimination. Several students who participated in this research study stated that many of such issues had taken place at different times in their educational experience. The educational community can support a positive educational environment through the facilitation of clear and consistent discipline policies and procedures. These clear and consistent expectations help establish the culture and climate that significantly impacts academic achievement.

According to Gay, Dingus, and Jackson (2003), 90% of U.S. public school teachers were Caucasian and attended school in middle-class, English-speaking, predominately White colleges and universities. Therefore, many Caucasian educators might not have attained the experiential and educational background that would prepare them for the growing diversity of the students in their classes (Ladson-Billings, 2002; Vavrus, 2002). With this knowledge, schools should provide and promote cultural competence through shifting instructional strategies to meet the diverse learning needs of all students. This could better enable schools to embrace and implement a culturally diverse and accepting environment. Interviews from both student groups in this study indicated that students encounter other students who are insensitive and uneducated to a variety of characteristics in regard to ethnicity and gender.

Lastly, the educational community should have a longitudinal focus on career counseling and long-term planning. Approximately 75% of eighth graders surveyed in the National
Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002) expected to achieve a college degree; however, fewer than 30% planned to take college preparatory classes. This research supports the need for career counseling and this was clearly illustrated through the students’ interviews in this study. Many of the students in the bottom 10% group had little or no definitive or realistic plans for their futures. Many of their career and college expectations were unrealistic to the level of academic preparation they had attained to this specific point of their education. Preparation for many of the careers in which the students in the bottom 10% group expressed interest required educational planning beginning at the middle school level. However, many participants said they felt that their career preparation began late in high school or later.

Recommendations for Further Research

This research study culminated with a much broader and deeper understanding of characteristics that influence student success and achievement. Moreover, this study provided the same quality of understanding for those perceptions of characteristics that negatively influence student success and achievement. In light of this understanding, it is clear that the breadth and the depth of this research study barely scratches the surface of factors that have an influence on student success. Therefore, there are recommendations for further research in this field of study that should lead to greater knowledge and thus better and more equal opportunities for all students.

The first recommendation for further research is the need to conduct a longitudinal study that follows students from various socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds and across a variety of geographic regions from preschool through their postsecondary years. This type of study would allow researchers an opportunity to get a first hand view of factors that determine success, whereas the current research study only allowed for the reporting and examination of student perceptions of factors of success.
The responses of the African American students in this research study showed that several of these students had negative perceptions of their educational environment and support. Further longitudinal and short-term research that focuses directly on factors of achievement for African American students and other non-Caucasian students would add evidence to the current body of research in regard to assisting these students in realizing academic success at the same rate as Caucasian students.

An additional recommendation is to include parents, guardians, teachers, counselors, administrators, and community leaders in both the longitudinal study as well as the snap-shot studies such as this one. This would add reliability and validity to the results rather than relying solely on the perceptions of students.

This study was based on a small sample size and there were no known students representing minority groups such as students with disabilities or students who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender in this study. Therefore, it is recommended that research be conducted that focuses specifically on students of these minority groups. This type of research would provide a wider scope for educational opportunities for a broad spectrum of students.
REFERENCES


Goldhaber, D. (2002). Mystery of good teaching: The evidence shows that good teachers make a clear difference in student achievement: The problem is we don’t really know what makes a good teacher. Education Next, 2, 50-55.


APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Letter of Request to the School Principal

Mr. Earl Lovelace  
Principal  
Dobyns-Bennett High School  
1800 Legion Drive  
Kingsport, TN 37664

October 31, 2003

Dear Mr. Lovelace:

Please accept this letter as a formal request to conduct research interviews with students at Dobyns-Bennett High School. In addition to being a faculty member at Dobyns-Bennett, I am also a doctoral student at East Tennessee State University. The research interviews will be the foundation for the completion of my doctoral dissertation. My doctoral dissertation is a phenomenological study examining factors that influence success among at-risk and honors students. My interviews will be limited to members of the class of 2004. I am seeking to interview eight students in the bottom 10% of the class of 2004 and eight students in the top 10% of the class of 2004.

The interviews will be semi-structured to allow for a broader range of responses from the participants, and hopefully, will allow me to examine the intrapersonal, external, parental, and educational factors of student success and motivation. Each interview will be tape recorded for accuracy. Once the interviews have been conducted and transcribed for this study, the tapes will be erased. Additionally, each participant’s name, as well as the name of the school, town and other identifying features, will be changed to insure the confidentiality of participant’s statements. Participants will be free withdraw consent and discontinue participation at any time during the study. All student participants will also have a signed informed consent and a parental consent to participate. The students interviewed will not include any students with whom I have previously worked with in a counseling or administrative capacity.

At the end of the study a report will be generated to communicate the findings of the study. This information could prove to be beneficial to Dobyns-Bennett High School and the Kingsport City School System. Copies of the report will be made available to you.

Please feel free to contact my doctoral advisor, Dr. Nancy Dishner, or me, if you have any questions or would like to discuss the matter further. Dr. Dishner’s office number is (423) 439-7629.

Sincerely,

Chris Hampton  
Doctoral Student  
East Tennessee State University

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APPENDIX B

Letter of Request to Director of Schools

Dr. Richard Kitzmiller
Director of Schools
Kingsport City Schools
1701 East Center Street
Kingsport, TN 37664

October 31, 2003

Dear Dr. Kitzmiller:

Please accept this letter as a formal request to conduct research interviews with students at Dobyns-Bennett High School. In addition to being a faculty member at Dobyns-Bennett, I am also a doctoral student at East Tennessee State University. The research interviews will be the foundation for the completion of my doctoral dissertation. My doctoral dissertation is a phenomenological study examining factors that influence success among at-risk and honors students. My interviews will be limited to members of the class of 2004. I am seeking to interview eight students in the bottom 10% of the class of 2004 and eight students in the top 10% of the class of 2004. A formal request has already been requested of Mr. Earl Lovelace.

The interviews will be semi-structured to allow for a broader range of responses from the participants, and hopefully, will allow me to examine the intrapersonal, external, parental, and educational factors of student success and motivation. Each interview will be tape recorded for accuracy. Once the interviews have been conducted and transcribed for this study, the tapes will be erased. Additionally, each participant’s name, as well as the name of the school, town and other identifying features, will be changed to insure the confidentiality of participant’s statements. Participants will be free withdraw consent and discontinue participation at any time during the study. All student participants will also have a signed informed consent and a parental consent to participate. The students interviewed will not include any students with whom I have previously worked with in a counseling or administrative capacity.

At the end of the study a report will be generated to communicate the findings of the study. This information could prove to be beneficial to Dobyns-Bennett High School and the Kingsport City School System. Copies of the report will be made available to you.

Please feel free to contact my doctoral advisor, Dr. Nancy Dishner, or me, if you have any questions or would like to discuss the matter further. Dr. Dishner’s office number is (423) 439-7629.

Sincerely,

Chris Hampton
Doctoral Student
East Tennessee State University
APPENDIX C
Student Interview Protocol

Intrapersonal Influences

If you had to describe yourself to someone on the Internet, who cannot hear your voice, see you physically, and who doesn’t know anything about you, what would you write?

What are your goals for one year from now? 5 yrs? 10 yrs?

Tell me about the things that motivate or encourage you to do things?

Tell me about your overall level of confidence?

Tell me about a time when you were very confident and another time when you weren’t?

Has and if so, how has your gender played a role in your life?

Has and if so, how has ethnicity played a role in your life?

Who do you most admire? Why?

Is there someone you really dislike? Why?

What personal characteristics do you most admire/idolize in other people?

What do you like least about yourself?

If you could, what characteristic would you most like to change about yourself?

External Influences

How do you choose your friends?

What do you most often do when you spend time with your friends?

What are some activities you participate in without members of your family?

Are there some activities that members of your family do together?
Tell me about the neighborhood(s) you grew up in?
Tell me about the home(s) you grew up in?

Did families/individuals within your neighborhood(s) participate in activities together?

What were some of the community-based activities that you can remember?

Tell about your memories of how you and your family celebrate holidays and special occasions?

Other than your parents/guardians, tell me about any additional family members or close friends that played an important role in your life?

**Educational Influences**

What are your earliest memories of school?

What is your fondest memory of school?

What is your least favorable memory of school?

Have you basically liked or disliked school? Why?

Tell me about your discipline record?

What do you think about teachers/principals?

How do you believe your teachers would describe you, in general?

Have any of your teachers really made a difference in your life?

In general, do you think your teachers have cared personally about you?

What do you perceive as the role your parents have played in your education?

What are you plans beyond high school?
Parental Influences

Tell me about your family.

Describe the parenting/discipline style of your parents/guardians?

Are your biological parents married?

Do you have a stepparent? If so, what role have they played in your life?

What kind of work do your parents do?

How would you describe your parent’s expectations of you?

What is the highest level of education attained by your parents/guardians?

How would you describe your parent’s involvement in your school?

Do your parents read often? If so, what do they mostly read?

What cultural activities (plays, concerts, movies, etc.) did your family participate in when you were younger?

Can you recall being read to as a child? If so, who read to you?

Were reading materials readily available in your home?

What would you change about your life if you could?
EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Chris Hampton

TITLE OF PROJECT: *A Study of Perceptions of Achievement Factors for At-Risk Students in Comparison to Honors Students at a Northeast Tennessee High School*

The purpose of this notice of INFORMED CONSENT is to explain a research project in which Mr. Hampton is requesting the participation of your child. It is important that you read this material carefully and decide if you wish for your child to participate. By no means is there any pressure for your child to participate in this research.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study will be to determine if a relationship exists between what your child thinks about their achievement/motivation and factors such as (1) intrapersonal influence, (2) parental influence, (3) educational influence, and (4) external influence.

DURATION

Your child will be asked to participate individually in one informal interview session. The interview will involve questions and issues regarding your child’s thoughts and feelings about parental, interpersonal, external, and educational factors of their achievement. The interview will take no longer than 60 minutes. Your child will be given an opportunity to share any additional information with Mr. Hampton through an informal questionnaire. The questionnaire will be mailed individually to each participant. It will also allow Mr. Hampton to make sure his understanding of the responses in the interview is accurate.

The interviews will take place during the time period of February 2005 and December 2005.

PROCEDURES

You and your child will be asked to sign this Informed Consent Form. The child will then participate in an individual qualitative interview. Qualitative interviews are face-to-face interviews that will give your child an opportunity to verbally discuss their lived experiences in regard to the questions asked. The questions will allow your child to give specific details within each answer. The interview will include questions addressing each of the four factors of academic achievement (intrapersonal, parental, educational, and external).
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Chris Hampton

TITLE OF PROJECT: *A Study of Perceptions of Achievement Factors for At-Risk Students in Comparison to Honors Students at a Northeast Tennessee High School*

The questionnaire will provide your child with the opportunity to share any additional information with Mr. Hampton. Your child has the right to decline response to any posed question. Your child’s name will not be used in reporting the results of the questionnaire. Each child will be identified with a “made-up” name for the purpose of this study and the report thereof. Dory Creech, a representative of the Kingsport City School System sat in each of the interviews through May 2005. Mrs. Creech is no longer a faculty member at Dobyns-Bennett High School. Ms. Julie Peters, the faculty member who has assumed Mrs. Creech’s position, will now fill this role.

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

It is possible that your child will feel uncomfortable due to the nature of some of the questions posed. Please understand that your child will have the option to decline an answer for any or all of the questions. Additionally, your child can withdraw from this study at any time with no penalty. By participating in the interviews, however, it is believed that your child will benefit by gaining a better understanding of some of the factors that have influenced their academic achievement.

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS

If you have any questions, problems, or research related problems at any time you may call Chris Hampton at 423-378-8415 or Dr. Nancy Dishner at 423-439-6162. You may also contact the chairman of the Institutional Review Board at 423-439-6055 for any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant. If you have questions or concerns about the research and want to talk to someone independent of the research team or you can’t reach the study staff, you may call an IRB Coordinator at 423-439-6055 or 423-439-6002.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Every attempt will be made to see that the results of this study are kept confidential. The results of this study will be published as a doctoral dissertation. The actual name of your child will never be printed. You and your child’s rights and privacy will be maintained. The East Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board and research related personnel from the ETSU Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis have access to the study records. Mr. Hampton’s records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above.

Version: May 6, 2007

Subject's Initial______
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Chris Hampton

TITLE OF PROJECT: A Study of Perceptions of Achievement Factors for At-Risk Students in Comparison to Honors Students at a Northeast Tennessee High School

COMPENSATION FOR MEDICAL TREATMENT

East Tennessee State University (ETSU) will pay the cost of emergency first aid for any injury, which may happen as a result of your child being in this study. ETSU makes no commitment to pay for any other medical treatment. Claims against ETSU or any of its agents or employees may be submitted to the Tennessee Claims Commission. These claims will be settled to the extent allowable as provided under TCA Section 9-8-307. For more information about claims call the Chairman of the Institutional Review Board of ETSU at 423-439-6055.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

The nature, demands, risks, and benefits of the project have been explained to be as well as are known and are available. I understand what my child’s participation involves. Furthermore, I understand that I am free to ask questions and withdraw my child from the project at any time, without penalty. I am also aware that my child will be presented with an assent form outlining their rights and the research protocol of this study. I hereby consent to my child being presented the assent and to their signing the form. I sign this informed consent form freely and voluntarily. A signed copy will be returned to me.

My study record will not be revealed unless required by law or as noted above.

_________________________________________
SIGNATURE OF VOLUNTEER               DATE

_________________________________________
SIGNATURE OF PARENTS OR GUARDIAN (if applicable)   DATE

_________________________________________
SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR               DATE

Version: May 6, 2007

Subject's Initial______
VITA
CHRISTOPHER MICHAEL HAMPTON

Personal Data:  Date of Birth:  February 26, 1974
Place of Birth:  Johnson City, Tennessee

Education:  Unicoi County High School
Erwin, Tennessee

East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN;
Special Education, B.S., 1995
Counseling, M.Ed., 1997

Professional Experience:
Special Education Teacher
Dobyns-Bennett High School, Kingsport, TN;
August 1998-May 1999

School Counselor;
Dobyns-Bennett High School; Kingsport, TN;

Assistant Principal;
Dobyns-Bennett High School, Kingsport, TN;
July 2003-Present

Honors And Awards
Target Teacher Scholarship Recipient,
May 2000

Presenter Tri-Cities Quality Convention;
Kingsport, TN;
“Data Analysis Tools to Drive School Wide Improvements”
May 2005

Presenter National Convention for American Society for Quality
Miami, FL;
“Data Analysis Tools to Drive School Wide Improvements”
November 2005