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LEFT BEHIND: THE VOICES OF AT-RISK STUDENTS

By

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ABSTRACT

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In this qualitative case study, the researcher examined and described the perceptions and experiences of six at-risk urban middle school students and the dynamics of the interactions occurring among them, their schools, and their parents. Although there have been numerous research studies on at-risk students, only recently has importance been placed on the middle school level and on students' experiences told from their perspectives. This study gave students a voice.

The study findings indicated that these six students' school perceptions and experiences were shaped by three major themes: boredom, recognition, and teacher relationships. In addition, these students functioned as adults in student and adult worlds. Academically and behaviorally, they performed poorly in school, but socially they excelled. These students' parents were frustrated with their own efforts in trying to meet the educational needs of their children, and they blamed the school for their students' problems. The school staff in this study attempted to meet the academic and socialization needs of its at-risk students, but thought it could be more effective if parents were more involved in the education of their children.

Several tensions existed among these at-risk students, their school, and their parents, including blame, lack of communication and trust, and confused role expectations. The school responded to the concerns of at-risk students and parents by placing an emphasis on the development of socialization skills, leaving academic achievement as a secondary emphasis.

For schools to determine the proper balance between academic and socialization activities for middle school at-risk students, it is recommended that (a) educational reform efforts examine the relationship of socialization processes to learning; (b) the voices of at-risk students be included in research affecting them; (c) schools develop more creative ways of engaging parents of at-risk students in the educational process of their children; (d) at-risk programs for middle school students include specific academic components; (e) schools partner with community agencies to address the needs of at-risk students and their families; and (f) the roles of schools, students, and parents be clearly articulated to each group.

To my mother,

Almeda Hilliard

August 4, 1919-March 28, 1995

Whose belief in education and support of me
serve as a constant inspiration.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

As accountability of public education continues to increase, school systems across the country are increasingly under pressure to document the outcomes of the educational programs and services they offer. The increasing numbers of high school dropouts continue to make it difficult for schools, urban ones in particular, to meet their instructional and service goals. Although the goals, strategies, and ideals of American education are encouraging and the recent focus on education at the highest levels of government is promising, something tragic is still happening to many of the nation's students. Large numbers of adolescents enrolled in public schools are becoming at risk for dropping out, and we have been unable to solve this perplexing problem.

The media highlight the problems of dropping out. Political figures build their careers on the issue; educational researchers study it; school leaders try to address it on a daily basis; and recently, numerous business-school partnerships have been established to generate new ideas about and insights into this age-old problem. Blame for the problem has been placed on the school, the home, and society. But regardless of where responsibility is placed, the bottom line is still failure for far too many youths.

Although the problem of dropping out is not new, the consequences are more serious today than ever before. The nation's economy can no longer employ workers who do not

have basic reading, writing, communication, and "people" skills. When large numbers of students leave school without the minimal skill levels necessary to function in the job force, they are destined for a life of dependency and endless poverty. Not only is dropping out a labor problem, it is an ethical and social problem as well. The consequences of youths dropping out of school threaten to tear apart the social cohesiveness and very core of our nation and society.

Whereas national estimates of rates of leaving school before a diploma range from 18% to 25% of 18 year olds, estimates from large cities are often double these rates, and, for some subgroups of urban students, rates have been reported at 60% or higher (Hammack, 1986, p. 326; see also Mann, 1986, p. 311). In certain localities, Hispanics claim a 78% rate, with Native Americans as high as 90% (Kunisawa, 1988, p. 62). Rumberger (1983) pointed to yet another disturbing pattern: The school-leaver rate appears to be escalating among white middle-class youths. Asian American students, with a 9.6% school-leaver mark, represent the only exceptions (Kunisawa, 1988, p. 62). Finally, slightly more males than females leave school—53% and 47%, respectively (Beck & Muia, 1980, p. 66; Markey, 1988, p. 37). It appears from all accounts, therefore, that the population at risk transcends race, ethnicity, social class, and gender (Natriello, Pallas, & Dill, 1986; Stoughton & Grody, 1987). Why have we not been able to join forces, systems, and organizations to alleviate this national problem? Certainly it is not from lack of effort trying.

Purpose Statement

This study was intended to contribute to the current discussion of the education of at-risk middle school students by exploring the dynamics of the interactions among them, their school, and their parents. The researcher did not attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of in-

school at-risk programs, but rather focused on students' perceptions and experiences in the context of the school environment. The hope was that information learned could contribute to increasing understanding of the meaning of the term "at risk" and to improve educational programs and experiences for this population.

<center>Significance of the Study</center>

An ongoing concern of urban public school administrators is the numbers of at-risk students in their schools and the potential for them to drop out before earning a high school diploma. A study of the perceptions, viewpoints, and experiences of students labeled at risk and their interactions with school and home is important for several reasons. First, although a few of the major studies on at-risk students in the literature sought their views, researchers have had a tendency to see such information as less important, or at least to treat it as "surface" data as opposed to "underlying" data, which are assumed to be more powerful (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Second, the current definitions of the term "at risk" are vague, vary within and across schools, and do not include the views of the students labeled at risk. Therefore, much confusion exists as to which characteristics school staff actually identify as at risk when working with special-needs students. Considering the experiences of at-risk students in formulating the definition can expand on and help to clarify the term, perhaps creating new approaches to addressing the needs of this population.

Third, from a practical perspective, in order for school administrators to set up viable at-risk intervention programs, it is necessary to gain some understanding of the population with which one is dealing, an understanding that goes beyond attendance records, test scores, promotion records, and guidance referrals into the lives of students and how school fits into them (Farrell, Peuguero, Lindley, & White, 1988). Fourth, implications of this study are

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relevant to how administrators and teachers organize classrooms and educational activities to meet the needs of at-risk students. Finally, the researcher examined the importance of school policies and programs by considering the viewpoints of students labeled at risk.

There is little agreement among educators as to how to go about addressing the needs of at-risk students. This researcher sought to contribute to our understanding of the school as a place for personal growth and development for children considered at risk for school failure. Ultimately, the study will contribute to a deeper understanding of how the at-risk student perceives and experiences school. Such understanding will enhance our knowledge of how to go about designing and implementing effective programs and services for at-risk students.

Research Design

This study made use of a qualitative case study design that allowed for insight, discovery, and interpretation, rather than hypothesis testing. Typical of qualitative case study research design, the study was particularistic, which means it focused on particular situations, events, programs, and phenomena within one particular urban middle school. It was descriptive in that the end product is provided in a rich, "thick" description of the students in the study. The study was heuristic in that it illuminated understanding of the at-risk students' school experiences, and inductive in that theory was built on inductive reasoning. The single unit of analysis was each student constituting a case. Generalizations, concepts, and hypotheses resulted from close scrutiny of the data gathered from the actual context.

The researcher conducted formal and informal interviews with the principal, one assistant principal, the eighth-grade counselor, four academic teachers on one particular eighth-grade team, the at-risk coordinator, the special education coordinator, six students,

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and their parents. In addition, classroom observations of each student, examination of their official school records, and other educational documents (curriculum, grade reports, and so on) provided a profile of the students. A more detailed account of the research design and use of theory are provided in Chapter III.

Research Assumptions and Questions

Erikson (1963) introduced the concept of ego identity. To him, the ego is a central principle of organization within the individual; it must integrate growth with the structure of social institutions. Identity is that quality of the ego that emerges largely during the critical period of adolescence. Young people have to deal with physiological changes inside themselves and the adult world that lies ahead of them. Their goal is to negotiate the responsibilities and skills necessary to function in society as healthy and productive adults. At the same time, Erikson pointed out that the ego is an aspect of the organization and not an entity. Essentially, then, adolescents are trying to come to terms with themselves. However, the self is more than one individual. It is a system of interpersonal relationships (Sullivan, 1953). For adolescents to develop this system, they must be able to understand and combine several "selves." However, if they are confused about the many different roles their "selves" must play, they can become confused and frustrated. The confusion and frustration are sometimes caused by traumatic life events or inadequate support adolescents receive as they are going through this identity development. The result may be pressures that place an individual in a situation of risk in several areas of his or her life.

Because the purpose of this study was to explore the dynamics among at-risk students and their home and school environments, a qualitative methodology was chosen. The inquiry

was guided by Bogdan and Biklen (1982), Glaser and Strauss (1967), and Spradley (1979). The following assumptions and research questions guided the study.

Assumptions

1.   The concept of at risk can be considered the result of individual background characteristics of a student and the academic and social environment of the school. Therefore, it is feasible to consider the interactions among the school, at-risk students, and their home environment in order to understand the dynamics of these students' experiences.

2.   At-risk students have many of the answers to the dilemmas of the at-risk population, and they are capable of articulating these answers and willing to do so.

3.   Not all at-risk students drop out of school before earning a diploma. However, there are some experiences and behaviors they have and perceptions they hold of school that could be related to why some students do drop out. Identifying those experiences and perceptions can lead to a clearer understanding of how these students' needs can be better addressed.

Questions

1.   How do staff in this middle school define the term "at risk"? How does this definition explain the perceptions of and approaches used to address the needs of at-risk students? What approaches are used with at-risk students in this school?

2.   What are the perceptions and school experiences of students considered to be at risk in this middle school? How do students considered at risk in this school view their school status, and does it explain their school experiences–academically and socially?

3.   What are the perceptions parents hold of their students' school experiences and of school in general?

Definitions of Terms

At risk–A term used to describe students who are unlikely to graduate from high school (Slavin, 1989).

At-Risk Criteria: Student Selection (____ Public School District, 1997-98):
1.   Any student whose score on their most recent [state] reading, mathematics, OR science test was:
       • less than 50% mastery of the objectives in science
       • less than satisfactory performance in reading and/or mathematics
                                        AND
2.   Any student who meets at least 2 of the following factors:
       • victim of child abuse or neglect
       • below grade level in English language and communication skills (this includes bilingual or limited-English-proficient students)
       • pregnant teenager or teenage parent
       • eligible for free or reduced-price lunch
       • atypical behavior or attendance patterns
       • family history of school failure, incarceration, or substance abuse

At-risk specialist–Staff member in the school who is designated to coordinate various support services for at-risk students and their families; also supervises the in-school suspension program.

Disengaged–Not involved in the academic program of the school; showing little interest in or concern about succeeding academically.

Dropout–Student who leaves school before completing high school curriculum requirements and without earning a diploma.

Engaged–Actively participating in the academic program of the school.

Extracurricular activities–Sports, clubs, and other social activities occurring during or outside the school day.

Learning-disabled student–Any student who meets the school district and state guidelines for receiving special education services.

Middle school concept–Educational approach to middle school that focuses on a multidisciplinary approach to teaching academics and an emphasis on the socialization aspects and experiences of adolescents.

School staff–Teachers, administrators, counselors, and other support personnel having responsibilities for the educational program of students.

Socialization–Term used in the middle school concept involving a process by which students become a part of the school's academic and social program through interacting with teachers and peers inside and outside the school environment.

Special education program–Designed to assist those students who have special academic and/or emotional needs as defined by state criteria.

Team approach–Associated with the middle school concept; refers to a group of academic and elective teachers who plan for and teach the same group of students over an academic year.

Delimitations and Limitations

In this study the researcher explored the dynamics of the interactions among one particular urban middle school and six at-risk students and the parents of these students. The study focused on the school experiences of these six students labeled at risk and their perceptions in the context of the school and home environments.

Because the study made use of research designs associated with qualitative inquiry, emphasis was placed on the trustworthiness of the data collected rather than on issues of reliability, validity, and generalizability. Interpretations of any life experiences are contextual,

and to that end, the time frame and context wherein the study occurred influenced the outcomes of the study. There is no assumption that the outcomes are applicable to other at-risk, urban middle school students in other school settings. The definitions of the term "at risk" were accepted as described by school building staff and represented in district and state documents (see Appendix). There was no interest in identifying or evaluating any relationships between the academic performance of the at-risk students in the study and their participation in in-school intervention programs. Finally, this study was delimited to only one semester in the academic school year.

Overview of the Study

The first chapter of this work introduced the study and its approach to the problem. Chapter II is a review of related literature. In Chapter III the research methods, selection process, and setting are explained. Chapter IV is divided into three parts. Section one is a narrative of each of the six at-risk students' perceptions and school experiences, as told by them. Classroom observations of each student also are included. Sections two and three, respectively, are presentations of data from parents and school staff. Chapter V is a summary and discussion of the research findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature on at-risk students revealed a great deal of data on the characteristics and predictors of this population. Much has also been written about student engagement as a critical factor affecting the educational experience of at-risk students. There is even a substantial body of literature that identifies effective intervention strategies and dropout-prevention programs of all sizes and magnitudes. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches, with qualitative being the most recent, designed to understand and identify the at-risk and dropout student have also been taken. Much of the quantitative data attempts to explain the characteristics of the at-risk student. The qualitative data are usually derived from interviews and participant observation as researchers try to "make sense" of the students' perspective from their point of view.

Some of the critical issues pertaining to at-risk students are examined in this chapter. These issues include the problem with defining the term "at risk," the construction of student status and its relationship to at-risk students, motivation, engagement and disengagement, and an overview of intervention strategies and programs considered to be effective for this population. By considering the above-mentioned topics, the researcher attempts to point out the importance of at-risk students' perspectives of their educational experience. The information currently in the literature on at-risk students is informative, but remains incomplete. By exploring the dynamics of these students' interactions with school and their

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parents, greater insight can be gained into the meaning of at risk, as well as how the educational experiences of this population can be improved.

At Risk: The Problem of Defining the Term

Many educators during the past 10 years have used the term "at risk" to describe particular categories of students. These categories include low achievement, retention in grade, behavioral problems, poor attendance, and low socioeconomic status. Although the meaning of the term has never been precise and varies among educators, Slavin (1989), referring only to academically at-risk learners, defined at risk as referring to, on the basis of several risk factors, students who are unlikely to graduate from high school. Nevertheless, Slavin acknowledged that the probability that a student will complete high school is not the only criterion for designating a student as at risk.

Care must be taken, however, when using the term "at risk." Some educators have described the term as a new label for a phenomenon that is as old as the public school itself (Richardson, Casanova, Placier, & Guilfoyle, 1989). Others have argued that the term is a set of popular labels that stigmatizes the student. The criticism of this definition is that it suggests that students have the characteristics of being at risk instead of being in a place or circumstance considered to be at risk (Waxman, de Felix, Anderson, & Baptiste, 1991). Other criteria include consideration of the number of grades one fails, being assigned to special education, speaking a language other than English, or in terms of poverty, drug abuse, sexual activity, race, and ethnicity (Pellicano, 1987). Levin (1989) described at risk as "those who lack home and community resources to benefit from conventional schooling practices" (p. 47). Pallas (1989) formulated a definition for the "educationally disadvantaged" to describe students who have been exposed to inappropriate education in the school, home, or

community. Comer (1987) called this group "high-risk children" and defined them as students who underachieve in school and will consequently underachieve as adults. Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, and Fernandez (1989) warned that labels often mask the diversity among students, implying that schools affect students differently.

Although the challenge of educators lies in identifying at-risk learners and providing an appropriate remediation program, determining the cause of at-risk conditions can be helpful and contribute to the selection of an at-risk program (Manning, 1995). Three of the more widely accepted conditions leading to be identified as at risk described by Manning are school conditions, societal factors, and personal causes. School conditions include inappropriate instruction, competitive learning environments, ability grouping, and hostile classroom environments. Teacher alienation is another issue that needs to be addressed when considering at-risk environments. Many teachers feel burned out, isolated, and alienated (Dworkin, 1986; Firestone & Rosenblum, 1988). Teachers in urban schools especially experience a high degree of physical, psychological, and professional alienation (Wehlage, Rutter, & Turnbaugh, 1987). As Firestone and Rosenblum described it, "Because teachers and students share the same school environment and because each group is dependent on each other to meet its needs and achieve its goals, teacher alienation and student alienation feed each other."

At-risk characteristics also can result from societal factors such as children and adolescents being rushed to engage in adult behaviors and habits. In addition, Manning (1995) claimed that the existence of racism and sexism in our schools and society contributes to learners' being labeled at risk. Finally, personal causes, which include low self-concept,

lower ability, a lack of motivation, and a desire to experiment with drugs and alcohol, also contribute to the existence of at-risk conditions.

Wehlage et al. (1989) stressed that it is essential for educators to realize that a wide range of students can become at risk of school failure, that students at risk of dropping out are not necessarily those with the least intellectual ability, and that standard labels for student characteristics do not capture the nature of the interaction between at-risk students and the school. Yet it is the interaction between school and the student that plays a crucial role in an individual's decision to leave school.

Cuban (1989) believed that the description of at-risk students and their families should be familiar. His premise was that educators repeatedly relabel the same category, low-income students, and that the term "at risk" is just the latest example. In this sense, Cuban maintained that at risk merely replaced previous labels for low-income students, who were formerly labeled culturally deprived. He argued that the term is just a new label and that educators err repeatedly in their approaches to this population. He believed that the analysis is flawed and that, rather than focusing on fundamental problems requiring a deeper thinking of their policies and practices, educators adopt the latest labels and programs.

The current definition and at-risk labels are limited for several reasons. They do not clearly identify which specific factors make certain students unlikely to complete their educational experience. Second, the definition does not explain why some students succeed who have the same background and characteristics of others considered at risk. Third, the definition itself is so vague that administrators, teachers, and support staff do not agree on the characteristics of an at-risk student. Finally, the definition produces both negative and political implications that often inhibit the very thing it was intended to do—assist students who are not doing well in school to become successful. Perhaps exploring the interactions

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among at-risk students, schools, and home can increase our understanding of these students' school successes and failures and contribute to the further development of more effective intervention strategies.

The Meaning of At Risk: The Construction of Student Status

To assist at-risk students, it is critical to understand schooling from their perspective. How these students make sense of their school environment is directly related to their experience. The two predominant models in the literature that attempt to explain how student status is constructed are the epidemiological and social constructivist models.

The Epidemiological Model

Slavin, Karweit, and Madden (1989) explained that, in most educational discourse, use of the term "at risk," as viewed from the epidemiological model, is related to what may be called the disease model of school success or failure. In this sense, education is analogous to medicine, and school failure or dropping out is analogous to disease. Used alone, the term "at risk" does not have much meaning in epidemiology. The population at risk and the condition for which they are at risk should be specific. The purpose of this model is to find ways to identify categories of persons who are the most at risk for certain conditions so that something can be done to prevent or ameliorate the condition's occurrence. This identification-treatment sequence seems to be used in nonmedical areas of education, such as the study of school failure and dropping out (Slavin et al., 1989).

Another principle of epidemiology is that it is always relative. What the prevention of this condition seeks are the subpopulations who are most at risk, in comparison to others. Therefore, using the term "at risk" alone leaves unanswered: Who is at risk? At risk for

what? and In comparison to whom? In educational research, the answer is derived by a comparison of identified students at risk for failure or dropouts with those who succeed or stay in school. Because schools do not see themselves as in a position to prevent often-assumed risk conditions as student background characteristics like poverty, language differences, and minority status, they see their function as that of intervening. Examples have been programs like Head Start and compensatory education (Slavin et al., 1989).

However, epidemiologists admit that the identification of those at risk for medical conditions because of social characteristics is inexact and highly controversial, just as in the cause of social phenomena of school failure and dropping out. As a result, educational responses of at-risk students are being based on or later identified through school-related behavior such as low grades, suspensions, and absenteeism. Nevertheless, the ultimate cause of such behavior is still often attributed to background and social characteristics (Slavin et al., 1989). It appears that the epidemiological model is the predominant way of thinking about solutions to school failure today.

The Social Constructivist Model

This model is an interactive view of the term "at risk," in which the perceptions of at-riskedness are constructed within a particular social or cultural context (Richardson et al., 1989). In other words, the person considered at risk, the reasons for this consideration, and the way the school responds are seen as being constructed in the context of the classroom. The focus in this approach is not on the student alone, but on the interaction between the student and these contexts. Although this understanding of at-risk status has not permeated the popular and policy literature in the United States, a growing body of literature on special

student populations has been found within it (Coles, 1987; Mehan, Hertweck, & Meihls, 1986; Page, 1987; Smith, 1983).

In an attempt to develop a theory of student status as socially constructed, several case studies of "problem students" were conducted by Erickson (1985) and his colleagues at Michigan State University (MSU). Although the studies did not use the term "at risk," the researchers focused on students who could be identified as such. By examining students in relation to the social context of the specific school and classroom, the MSU studies indicated how each student's problem status was socially constructed within the classroom.

The two predominant models described above provide insight into the difficulties of identifying and addressing the needs of at-risk students. Depending on the theoretical orientation that one adopts (epidemiological or social constructivist), the definition of at risk takes on a certain meaning. Regardless, though, of which orientation one accepts, how students perceive themselves is directly related to their school success or failure. Other important factors include motivation, engagement, and disengagement.

Motivation, Engagement, and Disengagement

At-risk students often have been described as unmotivated and/or uninvolved with school academically, socially, or both. Those who eventually drop out before completing high school became disconnected from school in one way or another. According to Finn (1989), students disengage or become alienated from school because they cannot identify with school. Identification is an internal state with two components–belonging and valuing–that increase students' motivation to participate in school (Finn, 1989).

How to motivate at-risk learners is a challenge for today's schools. Many students feel alienated from school and therefore do not participate. Misbehavior and poor academic

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performance are often the outcomes of their disengagement from the learning process. Most educators believe that the decline in academic motivation is an outcome resulting from conflicts between the developmental needs of students and the typical schools that students experience between their elementary and middle school grades (California State Department of Education, 1987; Task Force on the Education of Young Adolescents, 1989).

During the middle grades, students usually receive few opportunities to participate in decision-making activities that affect them. Large schools and classrooms contribute to this problem. According to the National Education Longitudinal Study (Hafner, 1990), the majority of eighth graders in the United States attend schools of 600 or more students. In these environments, it is difficult for students and teachers to share personal connections. Student motivation is considered one of the most difficult instructional problems that many teachers face. Nevertheless, the relationship between students' perceptions of school and their intentional acts in school is often overlooked (Berliner, 1989). School experiences do not possess their own independent meaning. No matter how disengaged or alienated students may appear to be, they think about school and act accordingly. Thus, student perceptions of classroom processes, teacher behaviors, and school life, more than the events themselves, have consequences for how much young adolescents learn (Schlosser, 1992).

Although a number of factors are believed to influence student motivation, engagement, and disengagement in school, Grant (1989) suggested that some urban students lead lives outside school that are more interesting than the school curriculum. In addition, some students struggle to perceive school as meaningful when their families are chaotic and disorganized. However, Schlosser (1992) found that the behaviors of marginal students are, in fact, purposive, that their behaviors are constructed on the basis of their interpretations of

school life, and that their relationships with teachers are a key factor. Pogrow (1990) noted that the fundamental learning problem experienced by unsuccessful students is that "they do not seem to understand 'understanding'" (p. 392). According to Pogrow, the problem is not a function of ability, race, ethnicity, or even economic class. Rather, students who have not been successful learners have not seen adults modeling thinking processes; they are unsuccessful because they have very little idea of how to go about thinking on their own. The importance of modeling the processes of learning ties together much of the research on motivating marginal students (Schlosser, 1992).

Using Finn's (1989) Frustration-Self-Esteem and Participation-Identification models, Rumberger (1995) studied the experiences and beliefs about school held by early adolescents identified as potential dropouts, and how their experiences and beliefs differed from those of more successful students attending the same school. He concluded the following:

1.   Early adolescents at risk of failure act out their alienation from school in quiet and loud ways.

2.   At-risk and successful students have relationships with teachers described by varying levels of respect, with classroom behavior playing a main part in the respect relationship.

3.   Extended friendships and their networks affect at-risk students' identification with school.

4.   At-risk students do feel a responsibility for their own performance but do not know how to take responsibility for improving their learning.

In their research on successful schools, Goodlad (1984) and Wehlage (1989) cited four important characteristics: shared values, a sense of belonging, a sense of school

membership, and academic engagement. Clearly, the perceptions of students are critical to the development of these characteristics. In an effort to assist educators with the challenge of identifying and developing strategies for dealing with the conditions surrounding those at risk of dropping out, researchers from the National Center on Effective Secondary Schooling at the University of Wisconsin-Madison studied 14 alternative schools enrolling students at risk of dropping out (Wehlage et al., 1989). The intention of the research was to identify generalizable characteristics of school effectiveness. The key finding of the research was that effective schools provided at-risk students with a community of support. Wehlage et al. defined school as a community of support as a broad concept in which school membership and educational engagement are central. School membership is concerned with a sense of belonging and social bonding to the school and its members. Educational engagement is defined as involvement in school activities, but especially with traditional classroom and academic work. Researchers further concluded that the strength of school membership and educational engagement for students is due primarily to the way in which the school interacts with them.

Wehlage's theory of dropout prevention identifies essentials related to Richardson et al.'s (1989) work described earlier in that it extends her theory of social interaction by constructing a more complete theory of dropout-prevention approaches by hypothesizing that school membership is the foundation for educational engagement and subsequent achievement. If there is no social bonding between students and the school, it is unlikely that educational engagement will occur. Further, students who are weak school members will almost certainly exhibit a variety of passive and/or disruptive behaviors (Wehlage et al., 1989).

Educational researchers have not produced a complete model of dropout prevention. But it is clear from studies on at-risk students and dropouts that motivation and engagement are critical elements that affect these students' decisions to remain in or leave school. In addition, much of the research on motivation and engagement has focused on the high school level. More studies on middle school and elementary-age students are needed.

At Risk in the Middle Schools

Middle grades are an important, but often ignored, phase of schooling in the lives of at-risk students who eventually drop out, and attention to students' experiences in these grades might provide a better understanding of the developmental processes that lead students to leave school (Rumberger, 1995). Specifically, students' perceptions of teachers as disinterested and uncaring (Moos & Moos, 1978; Tuck, 1989; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986), unfair discipline policies (Rumberger, 1987; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986), and infrequent opportunities for involvement and success (Hawkins, Doueck, & Lishner, 1988; Howard & Anderson, 1976) have surfaced as critical elements in the process of becoming alienated from school. Researchers have found that a general decline in academic motivation begins in the middle grades, concluding that a mismatch exists between early adolescents' developmental needs and the school environments they experience upon leaving the elementary grades (Eccles & Midgley, 1988, 1989). Hirsh and Rapkin (1987) associated the transition to junior high school with a plunge in students' perceptions of the quality of school life, a plunge that does not necessarily reverse itself with time. Other researchers have found that alienation is experienced to some degree by successful students (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). A small but increasing body of research on middle grade students identified as at risk for failure (Hawkins et al., 1988; Stevens & Pihl, 1987; Strahan, 1988; Van Hoose, 1989) has demonstrated the

need to look more closely at the instructional climates and intervention strategies for middle schools.

Because middle schoolers have been the last group of at-risk students to receive attention, dropout-prevention programs for middle schools have lagged behind (DeBlois, 1989). Attitudes toward school developed in elementary school usually manifest themselves as patterns of behavior in the middle school. Bhaerman and Kopp (1988) reported that 61% of students who have been identified as at risk drop out before completing tenth grade. Clearly, this suggests that middle school students are in a serious situation. Obtaining success with middle school at-risk students is not a simple matter. Much more serious attention needs to be focused on this particular age group, including consideration of alternative programs for this population. Although Finn (1989) conducted research on successful alternative programs for at-risk students, including instructional, organizational, and interpersonal components, comprehensive research on the middle school level is still sparse.

At-Risk Intervention Strategies and Programs

At-risk students currently account for approximately one third of all elementary and secondary students in the nation, and the number is rising (Natriello, Pallas, & McDill, 1990). Traditional approaches to at-risk students have been remedial classes and pullout programs, which slow down learning. The numerous reform efforts of the past 20 years have failed to meet the needs of those individuals who are most at risk of failure (McCarthy & Levin, 1991). According to Waxman et al. (1991), the failure of many reform efforts can be traced directly to their piecemeal approaches. They have addressed only a few aspects of school or schooling and have ignored the rest.

Because the primary function of schools is to promote learning and teach students to transfer what they learn in the classroom to future situations, information about successful strategies for at-risk students is vital (Nardini & Antes, 1991). In a recent study of at-risk students, 85 middle/junior high and 93 senior high school principals at 100 sites throughout the United States provided their observations concerning strategies used with at-risk students and the effectiveness of these strategies (Nardini & Antes, 1991). The researchers concluded that although school reform is the focus of attention and schools have been remarkably flexible in experimenting with promising strategies for the remediation of at-risk students, most strategies, including expanding school budgets, have had only nominal effectiveness.

School programs use various approaches to address at-risk conditions. Manning (1993) summarized from the literature those programs perceived to be the most successful. They share seven essential qualities that can be incorporated into any at-risk program:

1. Comprehensive approaches that address more than just a single at-risk condition and enhance the success of at-risk programs. Few, if any, at-risk conditions result from a single factor.

2. An emphasis on self-concept, including a recognition of the relationship between self-concept and overall achievement.

3. High expectations.

4. Improving social skills by teaching the skills necessary for successful social interaction.

5. Teachers and learners agreeing on objectives, methods, and materials.

6. Involvement of parents and families.

7.   A recognition of the relationship between motivation and success. Learners should be encouraged to accept responsibility for their achievement and behavior.

Developed by Levin and a team of educators at Stanford University in 1986 (Levin, 1986, 1987, 1988), accelerated schools were a response to the failures of efforts to effect any meaningful long-term change in the education of at-risk students. Accelerated schools are designed to bring these children into the educational mainstream and make them academically able by the end of elementary school. This goal is accomplished by transferring the current structure of schools according to three schoolwide principles: (a) unity of purpose, which is demonstrated by the development and pursuit of a written vision statement developed by parents, community, teachers, and administrators; (b) building on strengths of all constituent groups; and (c) school-site empowerment, which allows teachers, parents, and administrators the opportunity to make important educational decisions regarding the school's curriculum, instructional strategies, and governance system, thus facilitating the educational processes.

One of the frequently used strategies to deal with at-risk students is also the least effective: flunking them (Slavin & Madden, 1989). Many urban school districts now retain about 20% of students in elementary grades, and in many such school districts the majority of students have been retained at least once by the end of elementary school. Another widely used program is the traditional diagnostic/prescriptive pullout program. At best, these programs may keep at-risk students from falling further behind their counterparts, but even this effect is limited to the early grades and is more apparent in mathematics and reading (Carter, 1984). Growing awareness of the disadvantages of pullouts has led to increasing use of in-class models where Chapter I or special education aides work right in the regular classroom. Yet such in-class models are no more effective than pullouts (Archambault, 1989;

Madden & Slavin, 1989). In addition, there is little research evidence that reducing class size produces substantial achievement benefits–until class size reaches one (Slavin, 1988).

Slavin et al. (1989) identified effective programs that fell into three broad categories: (a) preventive, which focused on kindergarten and preschool; (b) classroom change, which focused on teachers' instructional methods, including continuous-progress models and cooperative learning; and (c) remediation, which included remedial tutoring programs and computer-assisted instruction. General characteristics of effective programs included comprehensiveness, intensiveness, frequent assessment of student progress, and adapting instruction to individual needs. Nevertheless, Slavin et al. recognized that the discussion of potentially effective practices for at-risk students often has been limited in that they have focused on only one form of service. They suggested that educators keep in mind that there is only one problem to be solved–the problem of low achievement. Although it is true that this one problem has many facets, it is critical to step back from current practices to ask what should be the response of the educational system overall to ensuring all students an adequate level of basic skills in the elementary grades (Slavin & Madden, 1989). Although Slavin and Madden have produced probably the most comprehensive research on effective programs for at-risk students, their contributions are limited in that they focus exclusively on instructional and academic approaches related to learning, excluding social, personal, and environmental factors, and focus on the elementary grades.

Wehlage et al. (1989) studied 14 alternative high schools enrolling students at risk of dropping out. The key finding of their research was that effective schools provide at-risk students with a community of support. The most successful programs for at-risk students tend to link school more closely to the experiences and values of the students they serve. In

addition, by establishing a climate of trust and support, successful programs help diminish isolation and enhance self-esteem. In addition, Wehlage et al. emphasized that making major inroads into the dropout problem requires substantial reforms and initiatives by states and school systems. They identified three areas for policy initiatives: strengthened alternatives, systemic school reforms, and community partnerships. Together, these components can be seen as a comprehensive strategy including a broad range of interventions.

To set up viable at-risk intervention programs, it is necessary to gain some understanding of the population one is dealing with that goes beyond attendance records, test scores, promotion records, and guidance referrals, and should include inquiries into the lives of students and how school fits into them (Farrell et al., 1988). Unfortunately, many programs are typical of at-risk interventions in that they appear to attack the problems but fail to capture all the elements. It is clear that the needs of students at risk are numerous, the programs to serve them are diverse, and a systematic theory for understanding student engagement and disengagement is still in a primitive state (Finn, 1991). Nonetheless, recent research focusing on the perspectives of at-risk students has shed more light on the complex challenges of providing assistance for these students.

Perspectives and Experiences of At-Risk Students

Any possible solution to the problems of at-risk students must entail programs based on the perceptions of students rather than on educational theory (Farrell et al., 1988). Rumberger (1987) pointed out that there is considerable quantitative research that has addressed the causes of the problem, but Erickson (1986) suggested using an interpretive approach based on field notes to find out what is happening in a particular place. Farrell et al. (1988) concentrated on student attitudes toward school or what Erickson called the

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"immediate and local meanings of actions . . . from the actors' point of view" (p. 119). Farrell et al.'s results led to the identification of four types of social pressures that interfere with the formation of an Erickson identity: sexual, familial, peer and street culture, and occupational pressures. Farrell et al. concluded that schools, unfortunately, have not been able to deal successfully with these pressures and seem to only create more pressures. Second, they suggested that there is a conflict between the meaning systems of students and those of teachers. Although these findings are not new, they add empirical validity to the need for school improvement.

Taylor-Dunlop and Norton (1997) conducted an in-depth ethnographic study of 11 at-risk young women, aged 15 to 17, at a high school in a middle-class neighborhood in New York State. The intended outcomes of the study were to develop recommendations that would guide officials in building and sustaining a caring community and to develop a program that promoted self-esteem. Three primary themes emerged from the study: (a) the young women's desire to have adults communicate with them in a nonhurtful way, (b) to have what they learned be meaningful, and (c) to be talked "with" instead of "at."

Richardson et al. (1989) studied what happens to at-risk children in the context of a particular school in order to determine perceptions of students considered at risk. They focused on individual students to understand their nature, viewpoints, and experiences. In their consideration of the epidemiological model of prediction based on background and personal characteristics of students and the social constructivist model that suggests that students' at-risk status is constructed through interaction between the teachers' expectations and the students' actions within the context of the school, Richardson et al. were able to expand the understanding of the social construction of at-risk students in schools, and to

describe the constraints on the operation of this social construction as described by administrators and teachers as they confront the dilemmas of schooling. These dilemmas, having been imposed on the system by broader social, political, and economic factors, posed particular questions to the dilemma: If at risk is socially constructed, are there "true" at-risk students? If so, how are they to be identified?

Richardson et al. (1989) concluded their study by accepting the nature of the social construction of at-risk status. However, they rejected the analyses that place the blame for all ills in the system on the macro social, political, and economic culture. Instead, they believed it possible to work with the system to improve the lives of children through school. Their conclusions enabled them to construct an interactive view of at-risk students that included the at-risk student, teacher, parents, classroom, school, and school district in an understanding of the interactions and importance of those interactions on students labeled at risk.

But even though the current research on the causes of dropping out and the identification of factors leading to at-risk conditions in students is exhaustive, it lacks detailed examination of at-risk students and dropouts at the middle school level. Rumberger (1995), using data from the National Education Longitudinal Survey of 1988 (NELS: 88; Ingles, Scott, Lindmark, Frankel, & Myers, 1992), conducted perhaps the most recent study of middle school dropouts. He developed and tested a comprehensive model of dropping out at the middle school by drawing on both qualitative and quantitative research. Through examining the individual and school levels of interest, Rumberger was able to identify a wide range of factors predictive of dropping out of eighth grade.

Summary

Research on at-risk students has resulted in a great deal of attention to the causes or factors related to the dropout problem. This research has included both quantitative and qualitative approaches, with quantitative research focusing on the testing of predictive models of dropping out (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Rumberger, 1983) and qualitative research focusing on developing in-depth understandings of how the dropping-out process occurs in certain students (Delgado-Gaitan, 1988; Fine, 1991; Trueba, Spindler, & Spindler, 1989).

Evidence suggests that although numerous reform efforts have been instituted in America's public schools during the past 15 years, large numbers of youths are still being labeled at risk, increasing their potential to become dropouts. The medical model of labeling children at risk and focusing strategies on curing their symptoms has become obsolete. Educators can no longer address the problems of these students without understanding the dynamics of the interactions they experience with the school and home, and how they affect the learning process.

Recent research on at-risk students has included the perspectives of students labeled at risk and an examination of their school and home relationships in an effort to better understand their school experiences. Including the experiences of at-risk populations assists in developing a framework for determining the appropriate school programs and structure for students and contributes to our overall understanding of the institutional character of schools and how they affect the at-risk student.

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CHAPTER III

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This chapter provides a discussion of how and why this study was conducted. First is a description of the research methods, followed by the research design. Next is a description of the population and participant-selection process. Last, the data-collection and analysis methods are explained.

Research Methods

This qualitative case study examined the school experiences and perceptions of six at-risk urban middle school students and the dynamics of their interactions with school and home. By employing a qualitative case study approach for collecting and analyzing the data, the understanding of what school means to an at-risk student was heightened.

The main data-gathering technique was researcher observation, supplemented with formal and informal interviews and review of documents. To examine students' perceptions and experiences, the researcher focused on the classroom and the kinds of interactions that occurred between the at-risk students and other students, between the at-risk students and their teachers, and between the at-risk students and classroom activities in general (both academic and nonacademic). In addition, close attention was paid to other interactions between at-risk students and the overall school environment—outside in the hallways and

various other activities that occurred within the school day and the physical environment of the school.

Each student constituted a case; therefore, his or her behaviors, experiences, and perceptions were first individually examined and then were examined in relationship to other at-risk students in the study. The classroom was designated as the primary focus for examining students' school experiences primarily because this is where they spent the majority of their time while at school. Many of the problems presented in the literature pertinent to at-risk students are related to their classroom experiences and relationships with teachers.

Design

A case study approach was chosen because it allows the researcher a variety of strategies to capture the experiences of students in a natural setting. Interviews and review of documents complemented hours of classroom observations and were essential to understanding students' behaviors and experiences. The researcher's intention in this case study was not to generalize, but to allow a particular situation to create a sharper understanding of a phenomenon in order to gain insight into future generalizations. In qualitative case studies, the objective is to discover meanings and experiences and to understand how all the parts work together to form a whole. Patton (1985) wrote,

> It is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there. This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting–what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting–and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting. . . . The analysis strives for depth of understanding. (p. 1)

Students who are at risk for school failure experience school in a variety of ways, and their realities may be quite different from those of their teachers and administrators. Qualitative research allows the existence of multiple realities and validates experiences as a function of interaction and perception. To that end, in this study there were no predetermined hypotheses. What the researcher did was observe, intuit, and sense what was happening in a naturalistic setting (Merriam, 1989).

Ultimately, the case study allows examination of the perceptions and experiences of at-risk students, told from their viewpoints. Because of a case study's special features, particularistic, descriptive, heuristic, and inductive, the "stories" of these at-risk students are told in their own words, providing a true sense of what school is like for them. The at-risk student interacts when she or he interprets the actions of all the players within the school and classroom. These players include other students, teachers, administrators, and support staff. As each of these individuals acts, the at-risk student gives meaning to these actions, and his or her reactions shape perceptions and experiences. The development of "self," or what Erickson called an Erickson identity, is directly related to how a person perceives himself or herself and others. In turn, these perceptions shape and influence the experiences of the at-risk student. An understanding of these experiences and perceptions then creates a better view of how these students view school.

Although the study was exploratory in nature, several assumptions guided it. These assumptions were based on the researcher's own experiences working in the public schools with at-risk middle and high school students for more than a decade, as well as on an exhaustive review of the literature on at-risk students. These assumptions were:

1. The concept of at risk can be considered the result of individual background characteristics of a student and the academic and social environment of the school. Therefore, it is feasible to consider the interactions among the school, at-risk students, and their home environment in order to understand the dynamics of these students' experiences.

2. At-risk students have many of the answers to the dilemmas of the at-risk population, and they are capable of articulating these answers and willing to do so.

3. Not all at-risk students drop out of school before earning a diploma. However, there are some experiences and behaviors they have and perceptions they hold of school that could be related to why some students do drop out. Identifying those experiences and perceptions can lead to a better understanding of how these students' needs can be better addressed. As this study progressed, these assumptions, along with emerging data and careful analysis, led to the conclusions found in Chapters IV and V.

Population and Selection Process

The urban district of which Isbill Middle School is a part comprises 3 large high schools, a vocational education high school, 4 middle schools, and 34 elementary schools. The total population of students in the district is 18,182. One of the featured programs of the district is special funding and programming for at-risk students. This particular component of the district made it an appealing selection for a study on at-risk students. Specific criteria are used to determine at risk and Title I students and to identify the kinds of at-risk services for which these students qualify. The official definition of at risk and the criteria by which students qualify for programming in this district are provided in the Appendix. Funding is provided to individual schools in the district to implement the kinds of programs deemed appropriate to their needs. Also, the district sponsors a number of activities, such as

assemblies and speakers, for schools to complement their programming for at-risk students in particular and for all students in general.

All middle schools in this district had implemented the middle school concept, which included each grade level (six through eight). The team concept has several features. Teachers representing each academic area (mathematics, social studies, English, and science) and special education meet on a regular basis to plan for the academic and nonacademic activities of the group of students they teach. Elective teachers also meet together. The number of students on each team ranges from 90 to 120, depending on the number of teachers assigned to the team. Teachers work with one group of students the entire academic year. In addition, the team handles disciplinary problems of students on the team and conducts conferences with parents.

Isbill Middle School was selected as the site for this study based on a variety of reasons, including its diverse student population, size, building leadership, and at-risk programming for students. The ethnic and gender make-up of the school was .05% Native American, 33.2% African American, 4.7% Asian, 9.3% Hispanic, and 52.3% Caucasian. The total population of the school was 1,060, including 405 eighth graders, 360 seventh graders, and 295 sixth graders. One principal, two assistant principals, two counselors, a school social worker, an at-risk program specialist, and a special education coordinator comprised the administrative and support staff positions in the school. Isbill was the second largest middle school in the district, consisting of three administrators' offices, two floors, a large auditorium, one cafeteria for students, two faculty workrooms/lounges, a large gymnasium, an upstairs gymnastics and wrestling room, band and choir rooms, and several large art and vocational classrooms, laboratories, and conference rooms.

The principal had been recruited to lead the school five years ago from one of the local high schools where she had been assistant principal. She had served a total of 23 years in public schools, including in this district. Upon meeting with the researcher during the fall before the study, the principal had been extremely receptive to a study on at-risk students and indicated her interest in research and improving services and programs for students at her school. The motto of Isbill Middle School was "If every school was a safe harbor, there would be no at-risk students." In addition, an at-risk program specialist was a full-time member of this staff during the fall semester before this study, but the position was vacant during most of this study because the district had transferred the staff member to another building at the end of fall semester.

The principal assigned the researcher to an eighth-grade team. After meeting with the team, explaining the study, and obtaining informed consent, the researcher spent time observing in each of the academic teachers' and one special education teacher's classrooms. At the beginning of the study, only one special education teacher was permanently assigned to this particular team. Over the course of the study, two different special education teachers worked with the students until a permanent assignment was made. The purpose of the classroom observations was to become familiar with the classrooms, location, teaching styles, and overall classroom processes. These observations were recorded as field notes. The researcher was briefly introduced to the students in some classes as a graduate student conducting a study of eighth-grade students and in other classes was not introduced to the students.

After classroom observations had occurred, the researcher met again with the team and asked for their nominations of students to participate in the study. Throughout the study,

every effort was made to maintain anonymity of the students and school staff. However, this was extremely difficult due to the small number of participants. Great care was taken to make sure that neither students nor parents were referred to or communicated with as being at risk. All participants were assigned a code that was known only to the researcher, for purposes of data collection and analysis. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant in the study.

Selection of Students

The four academic teachers and one special education teacher were asked to nominate four to five students each whom they believed to be at risk. The researcher did not explain or elaborate on the meaning or definition of at risk, but instructed teachers to make this determination based on their own definitions and perspectives. In addition, they were instructed to provide their definition of at risk and how they had arrived at it. Next to each student's name, they were asked to provide the gender, race, and reason why they thought each student was at risk. This information was collected from each teacher and compiled into a chart. Also, teachers were asked to consider, in their nominations, those students whose parents they thought would be receptive to the study. One of the teachers expressed concern for the researcher's safety when dealing with certain students and parents and recommended that interviews take place at the school instead of in the students' homes. At the end of the study, the researcher learned that other teachers shared the same concern, and this had obviously affected their nomination of students.

Five teachers provided a total of 22 students' names. Only one student was nominated by more than one teacher. During final selection by the researcher, a special effort was made to recruit this student. Nominated students included 15 males and 7 females; there were 8 whites, 11 blacks, and 3 Hispanics. The reasons provided by teachers for the students' at-

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riskedness included academics (14), lack of motivation (7), attendance (3), behavior (5), social reasons (3), home situation (1), and a variety of others, including inability to focus, follower, street life, label of being in special education, legal, self-respect (4), and frustration with the school system. Some students fit in more than one category.

The teachers' definitions of at risk were (a) at a disadvantage compared to the average students in a variety of areas through no fault of their own; (b) not likely to finish their education because of family problems, poor academic preparation, and lack of motivation; (c) children who are socially and academically challenged to the point of being unsuccessful in school; (d) not going to complete high school for various reasons; and (e) any student who has low class grades or low standardized test scores. Teachers based their definitions of at risk on the following: experience with a lot of students, observation, reading, personal experience, past practice, and by those who have problems inside and outside of school (see Figure 1).

Using this information, the researcher compiled a chart including the additional criterion of the number of years students had attended this middle school. The researcher thought that students who had attended this school the longest could provide a more comprehensive perspective of the school. The list of 22 names was reviewed by the principal and assistant principal to identify any students who would not be appropriate for the study, based on sensitive information typically known only by administrators. Administrators deleted two names from the list for reasons mentioned above, bringing the number to 20 students. Both the administrators and teachers on the team eventually knew the final selection of six students. (See Table 1 for final student profiles.)

Any student who is at a disadvantage compared to average students in a variety of areas but due to no fault of his or her own.

Any student who is not likely to finish her or his education because of family problems, poor academic preparation, or lack of motivation.

Any student who is socially and academically challenged to the point of being unsuccessful.

Any student who is not going to complete high school for various reasons.

Any student who has low grades or low standardized test scores.

Figure 1: Teachers' definitions of at-risk students.

Table 1: Profile of the at-risk student participants.

Student	Gender	Ethnicity	Years at Isbill	Reasons Considered At-Risk
Laura Davis	F	Black	1	Poor home life, lack of self-respect
Michael Evans*	M	Black	3	Low academics, lack of motivation
Tammi Summer*	F	White	2	Low academics, lack of motivation, social and legal problems
Charles Stevens*	M	White	3	Low self-esteem
Vicki Benton	F	Black	1	Low academics
Jason Brown	M	Black	2	Low academics, poor behavior

*Enrolled in some special education classes.

Next, students were placed in three tiers of five to six using the above-mentioned criteria. Letters were mailed to all parents, briefly explaining the study and asking them to consider participating. Parents were then contacted by telephone and briefly told about the study and asked to meet with the researcher to discuss it and their participation in more detail. Most parents were interested but first wanted to consult with their child before making a

decision. Parents who left the decision completely up to their child ended up not participating in the study. The researcher was careful not to identify the purpose of the study as being to study at-risk students, but presented it as a study examining the school experiences of various eighth-grade students. The reason for this was to avoid the implication that parents and students were viewed as failures by the school system and that the school did not believe their child could succeed. In addition, the researcher thought that labeling a student as at risk would denigrate the parent and the student and perhaps distort an accurate perception of their school experiences. However, both parents and students were provided more specific information regarding their selection at the end of the study, during debriefing sessions. The concern with students being labeled as at risk and communication with them during observations and interviews, as well as the staff, and references to the study were continuous quality-control concerns for the researcher. This challenge was made much easier because of the positive relationships the researcher was able to establish with parents, students, and school staff at the outset of the study.

The researcher continued down the list of prioritized names and met with parents and students in their homes during the evenings to further explain the study, solicit their participation, and obtain informed consent. These meetings lasted approximately an hour each, and field notes were taken. Three of the students lived in homes with both parents, and three lived in apartments with a single, female parent. All parents and students were interested in the study and asked several questions. Most parents were more comfortable when they learned that the study focused on the students' school experiences and not on them or their home lives. One parent, whose child was learning disabled and diagnosed as having attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), encouraged her son to participate because she thought

the information learned might be useful to other students like him. Another parent had participated in a research study as a child and had had a good experience. Only one parent was very skeptical about the study and wanted to know how her child had been selected. This curiosity continued throughout the study. But because of her special relationship with one of the assistant principals, she agreed to participate after consulting with the assistant principal regarding the purpose and legitimacy of the study. After learning of the possibility of future loss of one student due to legal problems, a sixth was added. However, this concern did not materialize, and the study concluded with six student participants. A follow-up, thank-you letter was mailed to all participants.

To select the final five students, several criteria were used to prioritize the students as follows: ethnic diversity, gender, teacher reasons for at-riskedness, and number of years at this middle school. The initial intention was also to include at least one special education, mainstreamed student. An effort was made to include a population of students reflective of the school. In qualitative research, this process of selection is called purposeful sampling (Schwandt, 1997). The students were chosen because there was good reason to believe that they would be excellent participants for a study of at-risk students.

The final pool of students included two black males, one white male, two black females, and one white female. Although several attempts were made to include a Hispanic student, those efforts were unsuccessful. Initially, four students were enrolled in a regular education program and two were in special education. Halfway through the study, one of the regular education students was evaluated and placed in special education classes. The special education students' class schedules included four regular education and two special education

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classes (English and math). All students were enrolled in English, social studies, science, math, and one or two elective classes, including study skills.

Data Collection

Data collection and analysis were ongoing throughout the study. The primary methods of data collection were observations, interviews, and document analysis. Emerging insights and themes directed each stage of data collection, which resulted in the reformulation and adjusting of what to observe, where, the questions asked during interviews, and which materials to review. Each participant was assigned a code for data-collection and analysis purposes.

Observations

Observations occurred in the classroom and throughout the school building between January and June 1998. In the classrooms, the researcher was primarily an observer, but on a few occasions she did interact with the students. As students became aware of the researcher's presence, they acknowledged her and often initiated conversations. The researcher sat at the rear of the classrooms. Each student in the study was observed twice in each of his or her academic classes and once in the elective classes. Permission was gained from the elective teachers to observe in their classes, although they were not informed as to which students were being observed.

A schedule of student classroom observations was developed and followed until all were completed. The schedule was often adjusted according to activities occurring in the school, such as assemblies, districtwide testing, and teacher inservice days. The academic teachers were usually informed when their classes would be observed. Because all students

in the study were on the same team, a couple of them shared the same class schedule, making it possible to observe more than one student at a time, although each observation focused on individual students. This proved especially useful in that the researcher was able to identify and examine dynamics between at-risk students in the study, as well as between other students in the class. This also allowed an observation of the teacher's responses to several at-risk students in one particular class period. As time went on, the researcher also became acquainted with other students who were identified as at risk but who were not participating in the study.

Field notes were recorded in each class, noting the date, time, length, setting, participants, activities, and interactions between students and teachers. The substance of these notes began as descriptive and advanced to more focused to more selective over time (Spradley, 1980). Each student constituted a unit of analysis, and each observation focused on three particular aspects of the student's classroom experience: (a) interactions between the student and the teacher, (b) interactions between the student and other students in the classroom, and (c) interactions between the students in the study and what was generally going on in the classroom. Each class period lasted approximately 50 minutes, and the researcher usually observed the entire period. Frequently during the class and often after class, the researcher talked with the teacher and the students about what had occurred during the class period.

Students were also observed in the hallways during passing times, in the cafeteria, during assemblies, and as they participated in extracurricular activities after school. The researcher was invited to go on several recreational activities with the team and did participate in the end-of-year school picnic at a local park. During these situations, the researcher interacted informally with the students in the study. Observing in a variety of locations in the

school in addition to the classroom provided the opportunity to observe students in a variety of locations and settings, enhancing the researcher's understanding of what an entire day of school was like for students. Also, it provided an opportunity to examine students' peer relationships within the school. These observations were later recorded in the field notes. Even though the majority of students in the study were comfortable with the researcher's presence, she took great care with when and how she approached students and communicated with them. Observations were useful in developing questions that were later used in the interviews and served to clarify and validate information.

The researcher also participated in several meetings with the students' team teachers. These interactions provided insight and information regarding students in the study, as well as what was going on overall in the school. Here the researcher gained a wider perspective of the students' school environment. One meeting involved a team-parent conference on one of the students in the study. Field notes were written after these meetings.

Interviews

Each student in the study participated in three structured interviews between February and June 1998 that lasted approximately 50 minutes each. Questions were formulated to focus on the students' perceptions and school experiences, and were divided into several topics including their overall school environment, academic/classroom experiences, parental involvement, in-school at-risk or intervention activities they participated in, peer relationships, and outside-of-school activities. An interview protocol was developed for each session, and prompts were used to focus the interview. After each round of interviews, tapes were transcribed and an initial level of analysis completed. A procedure formulated by McCrackin (1988) in The Long Interview was used to analyze each interview. Key pieces of information

were summarized for each student, and areas that were unclear or needed additional clarification were noted for follow-up at the next interview. Specific attention was paid to words and terminology when it seemed that students were having difficulty understanding the questions, particularly learning-disabled students. When appropriate, certain questions were rewritten if classroom observations seemed to suggest that different kinds of questions be asked in order to understand an event or activity that had occurred.

Interview questions for the students were developed to gain an understanding of their overall perceptions of school and originated from the assumptions of the study, a review of the literature on at-risk students, and information learned from parent and teacher interviews. Therefore, revision of questions was constant. Written comments were made during each interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed promptly by the researcher. Information that was learned guided future observations and question development. Team teachers assisted in establishing a schedule for getting students out of class for each interview. All interviews took place in a room in the attendance office where school support staff and outside community service providers regularly met with students. Students were given passes by their teachers to get out of class for each interview. Students seemed comfortable with this process, and on only one occasion was there a problem when one of the learning-disabled students did not show up for a scheduled interview. The researcher worked with teachers to resolve this.

At the beginning of each interview, students were thanked for their participation in the study and reminded of its purpose. To relax them, often small talk about what was going on at school or about sports occurred at the beginning of each session. Students were briefly reminded of the topics discussed during the previous session and informed of the topic area

for that particular interview. They were reminded of their rights not to participate and were always asked if they had any questions about or concerns with any part of the study. Usually the students had no questions and did not seem uncomfortable with any part of the process. Occasionally they inquired as to which other students were participating in the study, indicating that they thought they knew. Three of the students were friends and had discussed their participation among themselves. The researcher often reiterated the importance of confidentiality, and this seemed to satisfy the students. Although the researcher was concerned that this might become a problem, it did not turn out as such. In fact, a teacher informed the researcher that one of the students told him that she was participating in the study and that she was excited that someone was "listening to her." In fact, several other students who were not part of the study often asked the researcher when she would be visiting their class or talking with them. In general, students were very cooperative during the interviews and seemed to enjoy talking with the researcher.

To contribute to creating a context for understanding students' overall school experiences, parents and teachers also were interviewed once at the beginning of the study. In addition, the researcher communicated informally with parents and teachers throughout the study to clarify and obtain additional information on the students' backgrounds or to confirm information deemed essential to understanding their school experiences. For example, several of the students were suspended from school on more than one occasion during the study, and it was useful to know what was going on. On another occasion, a student had been suspended from school for fighting for a long period of time and was awaiting placement at a different school.

Parents were interviewed in their homes before the first student interviews. Each interview was recorded and transcribed, and lasted approximately one hour. The focus was on obtaining student biographical, home, and school-history information, along with parents' perceptions of their students' school experiences. Interviews were conducted with one or both parents of the student. Only one student had both parents available for the interview. The remaining five parents were the students' mothers. Parents were extremely cooperative and seemed interested in the study and the researcher, and they welcomed the opportunity for someone to hear their concerns about their children and their schooling experiences. Most were very frustrated with the school system or with their particular child and used this opportunity to vent their feelings.

The researcher met with parents and students together at the end of the study in their homes for about one hour for debriefing, to thank them for their participation, to explain their selection, and to answer any questions they had regarding the study. The researcher also wanted to learn how the students felt about participating in the study and any concerns they had. Parents, particularly those of learning-disabled students, were extremely interested in hearing about what the researcher learned over the course of the semester. General observations were shared with them.

All teachers on the team were formally interviewed except one, who only allowed the researcher to observe in his classroom. These interviews helped the researcher understand how teachers viewed the term "at risk" and how their perceptions affected the teaching styles and interactions they employed with students in the classroom. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. In addition, several informal conversations with teachers occurred throughout the semester, which focused on how students were doing inside and outside of class. Teachers

eventually became aware of which students were participating in the study. It is possible that this might have affected their interactions with students in that sometimes it appeared that teachers paid more attention to these students when the researcher was in their classrooms. Nevertheless, their knowledge of students in the study allowed the researcher to engage in more specific conversations with them and to review students' class work in more detail. These informal discussions were guided by questions that had been generated throughout the study, were recorded as written field notes, and were used to formulate future questions and guide observations. Follow-up meetings with teachers also allowed for confirmation and clarity of information previously obtained from the students and the teachers themselves, as well as being an additional way to triangulate information from observations and other interviews. Teacher interviews and conversations usually took place in their classrooms or in the library.

The principal, one of the assistant principals, and the eighth-grade counselor were also formally interviewed once during the study. Information gained from these individuals provided an additional perspective by which to explore students' school experiences. Follow-up, informal conversations also occurred with the assistant principal and counselor. Information regarding how the school defined at risk and at-risk students, a description of the school's at-risk services for students, and information regarding school policies and procedures were the focus of these conversations. Both the principal and assistant principal were very cooperative, but the counselor remained cautious of the researcher and the study. At the end of the study, the researcher conducted follow-up meetings with the principal and assistant principal to obtain demographic information on the school, to clarify and confirm information

previously obtained from them, and to answer questions they had regarding the study. General observations were shared with them at this time.

As the study progressed, it became necessary to interview two additional staff members. The school's at-risk specialist and special education coordinator were interviewed to learn more about how at-risk students were defined and accommodated at the school, and about the kinds of intervention programs and activities available to them. The at-risk specialist also served as the in-school suspension monitor. Information regarding the special education program, specific learning disabilities, and the relationship between at-risk and special education services was gathered from the special education coordinator. Special education students constituted 18% of the students at this school and 18% of eighth-grade students. Each of these interviews lasted an hour and were recorded and transcribed. They took place in these individuals' offices. Notes were taken during these interviews, which were later used to supplement the transcripts. Both individuals were cooperative, but they remained clearly cautious about some of their remarks during the interviews.

Documents

The review of several documents included students' official school records, class work, homework, tests, the school handbook, midsemester grade reports, progress reports, suspension and attendance records, parent-teacher conference information, and official district handouts that defined at-risk students (see Appendix). This information was intended to contribute to the understanding of students' perspectives and school experiences. Documents were reviewed in the school's record room, in the teachers' classrooms, or in the researcher's home. Information gleaned was useful in triangulating information learned from participants, as well as to generate questions and focus observations (Cohen, 1980).

In addition to observations, interviews, and documents, the researcher maintained a case-study database and an ongoing diary of themes that emerged throughout the study. These reflective thoughts and ideas were useful later during analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection, based on procedures developed by Spradley (1980), Merriam (1994), McCracken (1994), and Glaser and Strauss (1967). Data gathered from observations, interviews, and documents were coded and used to develop patterns for analysis. Information from the literature on at-risk students and the study's assumptions and research questions guided the analyses. An interview method of analysis developed by McCracken was used to analyze all recorded interviews. This method consisted of first reviewing any categories that had been identified; second, analyzing each statement first on its own and then as it related to the entire transcript; third, finding out what the statements meant in relationship to the literature on at-risk students; fourth, discovering how the observations collected from each interview related to each other; and finally, taking the patterns and themes from all the interviews and analyzing them (students with students, teachers with teachers, staff with staff, parents with parents) and then examining these sets of relationships between the groups. These relationships were then graphically displayed for further analysis.

The initial analysis of field notes occurred while being typed from handwritten notes taken immediately after each observation. Notations were added that related to research questions. Patterns that emerged in these field notes were identified and became the focus of future observations and interviews. As the notes became more focused, topics were identified and categories formed and coded. For example, the identification of different types of student

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classroom behaviors led to an examination of how teachers responded to those behaviors, as well as to how the rest of the students responded to at-risk students' behaviors.

Field notes recorded from nonclassroom observations were analyzed in much the same way as classroom observations. For example, the way in which teachers talked about students' behavior during team meetings and parent conferences allowed the researcher to focus on how the teacher interacted with the students during class. Key terms used by the students, like "crowd," "boring," and "hands-on activities," were noted and provided a context for examining how at-risk students perceive their experiences. It was then possible to examine the meanings of these terms and how they contributed to students' behavior inside and outside of class. Later, specific questions were prepared before each observation and focused on certain types of behaviors and interactions. For example, when students talked about wanting more hands-on activities, observations were done in the lab or where students were engaging in group activities. Major themes that came out of these observations were then developed. Examples included behavior of teachers and students in larger classes versus smaller classes, student and teacher reactions to different types of teaching/learning styles, and differences between elective and academic classes. These analyses produced more selected observations where individual students could be considered, as well as how they interacted as a group. For example, after identifying some basic classroom behavioral patterns among individual at-risk students, these patterns were then examined as they related to other at-risk students who were not in the study, as well as to non-at-risk students. A typology was then developed for each student, describing behavioral characteristics, interactions with teachers, and interactions with other students, and displaying emerging patterns and themes. This visual display provided a picture of each student's experiences in a more comprehensive manner.

Charts were constructed of the various interactions and emerging themes among the students, teachers, and the school environment in general. Descriptive words identified these relationships. These charts were also used to develop questions for student and staff interviews. Similarities and differences were noted, and this information was discussed during conversations with teachers and students between and after classes. At the end of each week, field notes of all observations were summarized, reviewed, recoded, and categorized. Recurring ideas and themes were noted and used to direct future observations.

The researcher transcribed parent interviews. This allowed questions, comments, and additional notes to be typed directly into the transcripts, creating an initial level of analysis. The primary focus of parent interviews was to develop individual profiles on each student's academic and home backgrounds and to gain some perspective on parents' views of schooling. Later this information was used to construct questions for the student interviews that dealt with family life and parental participation in school. Interview tapes were reviewed again before debriefing sessions with students and parents at the end of the study, to make sure that all biographical and demographic information had been obtained and to follow up on information provided by parents in the initial interview.

Students' interviews were also transcribed shortly after being recorded. Typed comments, thoughts, and questions were recorded directly into these transcriptions. Notes taken during the interviews were reviewed and also included in the transcripts. Research questions and assumptions directed analysis as well. Notes from follow-up questions were then developed for future interview sessions, as well as information that needed further clarification or questions that remained unclear.

Staff and teacher interviews and informal conversations were analyzed similarly to the students' and parents' interviews by summarizing written notes taken during interviews and by developing categories for their remarks by comparing them to the questions that were developed to guide each interaction and then to each other. For example, what teachers said was examined as it related to other teachers', administrators', parents', and students' responses. Categories and major themes from these conversations were useful in helping to understand the context in which students described their school experiences. Staff's and teachers' definitions of at risk and examples of in-school intervention programs for at-risk students were compared and analyzed. Recurring themes like "lack of parental involvement," "poor student behavior," and "our whole team is at risk" provided topics that were explored further with students. This information was then discussed with teachers and students during follow-up sessions.

All documents were analyzed by exploring specific questions related to the study's research questions. Each analysis consisted of information asked on each form that sought to develop a profile and chronology of each student's school history and academic record. Specific information asked for on the analysis form included code name of the student, name of the document, date, location where document was reviewed, purpose of review, and research questions being addressed. Analysis provided an avenue for confirming information provided by participants, as well as obtaining information not gathered during observations or interviews that contributed to the development of individual student profiles. Categories were developed from each document and displayed on a large chart that provided a typology of each student's profile.

Themes discovered from student interviews and observations, and themes from parent and staff interviews, represent the findings in Chapter IV. A theory was developed from these data (guided by Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that explained the dynamic interactions occurring among at-risk students, their schools, and their homes, and is presented and discussed in detail in Chapter V.

Summary

In this qualitative case study, the researcher examined the dynamics of the interactions among at-risk students, their schools, and their homes. The study originated from the assumption that at-risk students have many of the answers to the problems plaguing them and that schools need to build on students' perceptions in order to improve their school experiences and success. Information from the literature on at-risk students contributed to several assumptions that guided the study.

A qualitative case study approach was chosen because of its aim to explore individual experiences in a natural setting. Eighth-grade teachers, according to their definitions of at risk, nominated 22 students. The final selection of students was determined by the researcher, using several criteria that sought to represent the school's population, including ethnic background, gender, reason for at-riskedness, number of years students had been at the school, and likelihood that parents would participate in the study. Six students were selected, including three females and three males. In addition to students, selected school staff and parents of students were interviewed to provide a context for understanding the students' school environment.

Data were collected through observations, interviewing, and review of students' school documents. A case study protocol including questions and a database was developed for data

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collection and analysis. The researcher collected and analyzed all data, including the transcription of all taped interviews. Analysis involved the coding and classification of data, the creation of visual representations through charts, and the development of a typology and chronology of each student. Several levels of analysis occurred throughout the study, deriving from notes taken during interviews, observations, and documents. Findings are reported in narrative form of each student's school experiences and perceptions in a series of vignettes and stories in Chapter IV. Parent and school data also are reported in Chapter IV. A theory describing the interaction of the at-risk students with their schools and their homes was developed, and it is presented in Chapter V.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This chapter is divided into three parts and contains the findings from the data collected in this study. Part one includes narratives of each of the students, including their classroom observations. Parts two and three are summaries of parent and school-staff data.

Part One: Student Stories

<u>Laura</u>

<u>Selection for Participation in the Study</u>

Laura was considered an at-risk student and nominated for participation in the study by teachers because of her home life and lack of self-respect. Her mother initially was quite skeptical about participating, but after the first interview, which involved a detailed explanation of the study, and a conversation between the mother and one of the assistant principals, both she and Laura agreed to participate. However, both remained cautious, although they were cooperative throughout the study.

<u>Background Information</u>

Laura was a 14-year-old African American who was the oldest of three children in her family. She lived in an apartment with her mother, stepfather (who was white), and younger stepbrothers (multiracial), ages 10 and 2. Her stepfather worked, and her mother was a housewife. The family had moved around the city several times after Laura began

kindergarten, resulting in her attending seven different schools between kindergarten and fifth grade and three different middle schools between sixth and eighth grades. Her mother attributed moving so often to trying to find a better school for her daughter. She reported discontent with the school system, individual schools, teachers, racism, and disrespect as reasons for her daughter's school problems.

Laura's school records indicated behavioral problems beginning in elementary school and continuing throughout middle school. These problems began by her disrespecting teachers and school staff and later led to her involvement in numerous fights and suspension from school. Laura reported that on one occasion during elementary school she was suspended for using a sock full of rocks to beat up a boy who had been harassing her younger brother.

This was Laura's second semester at Isbill Middle School. Her sixth- and seventh-grade years had been spent at two other middle schools in the district. Laura possessed an outgoing and aggressive personality. She appeared to be very popular among her peers and was actively involved in Isbill's extracurricular sports programs. She was described by her teachers as an average student with tremendous potential, but underachieving due to behavioral problems inside and outside of class. Laura was constantly involved in conflicts with teachers and students that caused her to be assigned to after-school detention. School records showed that she was suspended nine full days over the course of the semester during this study and missed parts of two other days assigned to in-school suspension. All suspensions were a result of fighting, once with a student she considered her friend. Her attendance profile showed tardiness to more than 50 classes during this same semester.

During the initial interview to solicit Laura's participation in the study, her mother indicated that she was not sure if Laura would be able to participate, pending the outcome of an upcoming court hearing in which a determination would be made as to whether Laura would continue to live with her parents or be assigned to juvenile detention for an extended period of time. The impetus for this occurred as a result of a fight between Laura and a student at her previous school, where Laura had been charged with assault and battery. As a result of this incident and others, reported by her mother, Laura had been placed on probation by the juvenile court system and assigned a probation officer who regularly checked on her school attendance and status. By the end of this study, Laura's mother was in the process of granting full custody of Laura to her grandmother, indicating that she could no longer handle her behavior and attitude.

Laura had a close relationship with her maternal grandmother and uncles. They supported, encouraged, and rewarded her for academic achievements. Rewards and recognition for academic and athletic achievements seemed very important to Laura. She took great pride in sharing these accomplishments during conversations with the researcher throughout the study.

Perceptions of School

Recognition, rewards, and respect. Throughout Laura's elementary school years, she had been accustomed to receiving numerous awards and recognition for her academic accomplishments. On the walls in her home were displayed several certificates for academic achievement. Her photograph albums contained pictures of her receiving many of these awards. She was especially proud of one taken with an astronaut who had visited her class in elementary school. Although teachers had praised Laura during elementary school for her accomplishments, she was also reprimanded regularly for poor behavior inside and outside

of class. Laura believed that her poor behavior occurred when teachers did not give her recognition for academic achievements she thought she deserved. This happened more often in the later elementary years. When Laura progressed to middle school, her academic recognition diminished, and she interpreted this as a lack of respect from her teachers. She also began to believe that teachers recognized and rewarded white students more often than black students. Her mother shared these same feelings and attributed Laura's rebelling or "acting out" in class to teachers.

After Laura entered middle school, she developed her own ways of obtaining recognition from her teachers and peers. In the classroom, she often talked back to teachers, resulting in disciplinary actions including after-school detention. Continuous fighting at school resulted in her becoming involved in the juvenile court system. It was important to Laura to be perceived as the leader among her peers, and their influence seemed to greatly affect her school experiences. The social aspects of school seemed to dominate her behavior. These aspects included popularity among her peers and recognition and respect from both peers and teachers.

Because she had attended two different middle schools during sixth and seventh grades, it appeared important for Laura to fit into the social environment at Isbill. This meant being part of a "crowd," having a good reputation, and dressing well. She described "crowds" as groups of students who hung out together and protected each other. In addition, crowds provided an arena for students to express their identities, as well as a safe environment at school. Laura explained how one became a part of a crowd:

> If you wasn't like. . . . They might . . . come eat lunch. Then after eating. . . . That's, that's mainly the first thing. Like sometimes, if your crowd's small, then you take people's people. Like your friend might got a friend that got, that know a friend, and then you say, "Tell them to come eat, eat lunch with us." Then ya'll talk and then they just start eating lunch every day and they all start hangin' around. Like there ain't no leader in the crowd I hang around with. Whoever in front is . . . it's . . . we

don't, we don't really walk straight. We walk in a circle because, like . . . I, I guess to the boys, whoever in front is whoever . . . the biggest or whatever.

Laura described some of the pros and cons of being in a crowd: "Being in a crowd makes a person know . . . like don't y'all mess with them because they stick together. One fight, they all fight." However, membership in a crowd was not permanent, and students could find themselves without a crowd: "Sometimes, they [students] feel like that crowd ain't really they friend or something, or they feel like that crowd is betraying them or something like that." Although Laura described herself as being in the middle of one of those crowds, she seemed to struggle with staying put in one: "Every time I try to get out the crowd, I've, I end up going to another crowd. And it's real hard 'cause if you ain't got a crowd here, it's like, I won't say you ain't a nobody but . . . people are faster to pick on you."

Laura explained that, in order for students to become a part of a crowd, they must be popular. The type of reputation one established determined what type of crowd he or she became a part of. Being popular meant not only being in a crowd but also dressing a certain way:

> If you ain't got good clothes, no matter how funny you are, you don't dress popular, then you ain't getting nowhere. . . . Because if you wear the best, you could be the stupidest person at school, but if you wear the right clothes, you can have . . . every friend you want. You can have any boy you want . . . mainly everything . . . clothes and how you do your hair. If you ain't got a nice haircut, you is not about to get no girlfriend. You gotta be cute. Even the ugly boys get girls if they got some good gear [clothes]. Don't care how good you look, you can't be walking 'round here wit no green shirt and some blue overalls 'cause you goin' get talked about.

Even Laura's perception of a successful student was influenced by her image of popularity. When asked what makes someone a success at school, she responded by saying, "What you wear. Your shoes is old and raggedy, oh . . . we goin' talk about you. 'Cause you got to. If you don't talk about, if you don't talk about somebody, then it's like you get talked about." Although Laura stressed that being part of a crowd and dressing well were important

aspects of school according to her peers, she denied that it was important to her individually: "Me, I really don't care. I come to school to learn. I dress how I want to."

In establishing her reputation and finding a crowd, Laura had been involved in numerous fights and suspensions in the short time she had been at this school. She perceived fighting as a way to establish and defend her reputation. In addition, she viewed fighting as a way to ease the boredom of school: "I love watching fights . . . to be able to sit there and talk about it for the whole day. Just something different to talk about." Laura had also developed a reputation at school in a positive way by helping other students do their homework:

> 'Cause everybody, like they, like I, I be like, I got a lot of rep [reputation], but they'll come to me if they need something. All the boys come to me. Don't too many girls come to me to get they homework done or nothin' like that. Yeah, I'll do your homework if you pay me. I do a lot of people's homework. I do a lot of boys' homework, but they gotta pay me.

Laura also increased her reputation among her peers by talking back to teachers. She recalled an interaction in which she gave a substitute teacher a hard time in class by talking back and not following his instructions: "Yeah, I can't remember what day it was, but he got in my face, and I told that man off. Everybody was like, 'Ooh, Laura, you're a beast.' It was traveling all around school."

In addition to being part of a crowd, popular, and having a reputation at school, Laura talked about the importance of peer recognition and how it was different from recognition given by teachers. Although she had been rewarded at this school for her academic achievements, she did not necessarily perceive this recognition as something she wanted her peers to know about. In fact, Laura shared that she and other students often hid academic recognition from their peers: "I have lied about my grades before. It's like, 'Laura, what

you got in your class?' Everybody be like, 'Aah . . . Laura got all A's.' I'm like, 'No, I don't, man! I got all C's'."

Although Isbill Middle School gave certificates and awards to students for their academic achievements (which, according to Laura, were usually hidden in their folders), Laura explained that students had their own ways of rewarding each other. Some examples were by giving each other handshakes or telling each other, "You're a beast or something like that." Students had even created their own meanings for letter grades: "You know, and then like you got a D, they be like, 'Ah . . . DYNOMITE!!' And then like the E's be Excellent. . . . And then like the A's be absent . . . then the C means congratulation, something like that."

Laura was enrolled in an honors history class and often expressed how pleased she was about this. The class created a challenge for her, something she thought was missing in her other classes, and she enjoyed the recognition for being in this class: "I was thinking, like, they're only four black people in there, three girls and one boy . . . and then, I was happy when they assigned me the enriched class. Made me all mad 'cause I didn't think I was goin' make it." At the same time, she thought that the recognition teachers gave to white students was different from that given to black students:

> A teacher'll give a white person a A for being quiet when a black person acts and talk out loud and still got the answer right. 'Cause I notice in [teacher's] class, I be having my hand up forever. White girl raise her hand up, "Yes" [referring to the teacher acknowledging her]. Now, I know you saw my hand up [Laura].

Laura believed that her participation in extracurricular and other school activities both increased her reputation and provided more avenues for her to be recognized than in the classroom. She thought that participating in sports helped her stay out of trouble, as well. She knew that fighting and getting in trouble with teachers would prevent her from participating in school activities, and as a result, she commented that she was less likely to get

into fights during the sports seasons. Laura also believed that participating in sports influenced teachers' opinions of her:

> Maybe teachers look at you different. Yeah . . . they, they see that you tryin' and then they'll be like . . . 'Well, she's not as bad as she looks,' but somethin' like that. Teachers is the one who's gonna pass me 'cause they already got they education. Now they tryin' to help us get ours.

In addition to sports, Laura participated in two school assemblies during the semester. One was an ethnic program displaying different cultures, and the other involved an anti-drug/alcohol presentation. She seemed to enjoy the attention received from participating in both. In addition, Laura participated on school and after-school local police league basketball teams. She especially enjoyed sports participation and played basketball every day during the lunch hour. Laura also was a member of two other social clubs at school and participated in programs at the local YMCA.

Participation in sports and other activities at school not only enabled Laura to receive recognition and awards that she desperately seemed to need, but it also provided her an opportunity to be in a leadership role, something she often stated as important to her. She expressed with great joy the opportunities she received in the classroom to be "the leader." She described how, in gym class, being appointed by the teacher to lead the stretching exercises before class began really made her feel important. On another occasion, while doing an oral presentation in history, she talked about how important it was that she did everything well, because other students were looking up to her. During another conversation, she talked with great pride about how she felt being able to help other students complete their homework assignments, even though she charged them money for her services. She even enjoyed a sense of leadership she perceived that school administrators had given her. She described how, because she was so often involved in fights and conflicts at school, the

assistant principal often called upon her to obtain information regarding disputes and fights involving other students. She had been told often by administrators and other teachers that she possessed leadership potential:

> [Conversation occurring in a meeting with an assistant principal]: It makes me [Laura] feel good 'cause everybody . . . "Laura, if you go and do, and do back flips down the hallway. . .," you know the halls, then of course your friends be like, "Well, if Laura can do back flipping down the hallway, I wanna do back flips down the hallway, too." Then everybody be back-flipping and then the principal and stuff be like, "Laura, come here; now why you got all them kids going down the hall back-flipping?" And I be like, "I didn't tell 'em to do it." And they [administrators] be like, "But Laura, you're a smart, little, nice girl," but I'm a tomboy, and people goin' do what, what they see you do because they know that you, it's like you're the scene [middle] of the crowd.

In spite of her outgoing personality and need for recognition, Laura was not blinded by the problems that her behavior caused on the academic side of school. She acknowledged that many of her problems in the classroom were caused by her own attitude and behavior, and she appeared to know what to do to improve her academic status. She recognized that missing so much class due to suspensions was detrimental to her grades. She explained the communication problems with her teachers as being partly their fault for not recognizing or respecting her opinions, but she understood that her behavior affected their opinions and possibly how they graded her. Laura believed that if she stayed after school every day, her grades would improve, but she rarely did this. Seemingly, Laura struggled with what to do about her need for recognition, desire to be a leader, and how to balance these feelings with the perceived expectations of her peers and teachers.

Peer relationships. Laura seemed to be in a love-hate relationship with school. This emotional roller-coaster was greatly influenced by her peers. Laura's need for acceptance from the peer group appeared to always place her "at odds" with her own feelings. There was a splitting of personality between her feelings and her thinking. She seemed to know the right

thing to do but wasn't always sure how to do it for fear of how peers might react to her. For example, although Laura loved school and was able to articulate its importance to her future career goal of being a lawyer, she said that academic achievement was not important; instead, being popular was the only important aspect of school:

> Yeah, 'cause if I don't get a good grade, I know I ain't goin' be able to do nothin'. . . . But I really don't, 'cause we [peers] don't really talk about academics though. We talk about the clothes, money, what we goin' do the weekend, what we goin' do the week after that, what we did last weekend, who we got a beef with. . . . How you got your hair, or why you put your hair like that? Do you got a pager? What's your phone number? Who you like? Stuff like that. We don't talk about academics.

Laura's peers also influenced the kinds of activities and programs she participated in. The school had a peer mediation program designed to help students resolve their conflicts. Although Laura had used this program with success and gave it high praise, she said she could not imagine herself being a peer mediator:

> Yeah, I used it once [peer mediation]. . . . It resolved the fight. . . . Uh huh, I think all schools should have it, elementary, high school. I think they should all have it 'cause it stops, 'cause it helps the kids to stay in school and still get to learn too. . . . But I couldn't be one of them. . . . I just couldn't. . . . I can't sit there and stop no fight 'cause I wanna be the first one to see it. I love watching fights. . . .

Laura was very conscious of her grades and believed she was capable of doing better, although she gave her peers the impression that she was not a good student. In a conversation with her mother regarding whether she had done the best she could on a project, Laura admitted she had not done the best she could do:

> My mom . . . like if you really want to go somewhere, and I be like, "Mom, can I please go to the sleepover?" She'll be like, "What you get on your report?" I got a C, and she be like, "Is that the best you can do?" I be like, "Naw." I could have did better 'cause I could have wrote it, typed it or I could a correct my spelling before I turned it in, and she be like, "Well, no."

Although Laura led her peers to believe that she did not care that much about school, she was aware of what she needed to do to improve her grades in each class, even though she did not

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often engage in these activities until the end of the marking period. Most of the time this involved doing extra-credit assignments.

Laura's peers also influenced her response to school rules. Although she admitted to having smoked marijuana, she said that she did not enjoy the feeling and was afraid of getting kicked out of school if she was caught smoking it. Nevertheless, she had been caught smoking marijuana at school and had been suspended for it. She openly admitted that many students at Isbill used marijuana, including people in her crowd: "Yeah, it's a lot of, half of 'em [peers] . . . oh . . . all the people I hang around with smoke weed. . . . I tried it, [but] I didn't like the way I felt. . . . If we goin' be suspended for it, that'll make me not wanna do it." In addition to being caught and suspended for drug use at school, Laura was also afraid of what else could happen:

> Like a dope man could come and be looking for his money or something . . . or if a person be selling the weed the wrong way, or anything could go wrong. Somebody come up here, beat up whoever got the weed and then whoever got the weed goin' be gettin' in trouble twice. He goin' be getting in trouble by that person that he selling the weed for, and then he goin' turn around and get in trouble by the principal. So he ain't goin' be able to go to school.

Although Laura had been suspended numerous times for fighting at school, it was important to her to have the opportunity to make up her assignments during this time. In fact, she talked about how she did not mind being suspended, especially if she was assigned to in-school suspension instead of being sent home, because there she could get her work done and not fall behind in class. "You know if you go out of school, you ain't goin' do your work. You goin' be outside running in the streets or something, or going to sleep. That's why I like ISS [in-school suspension] 'cause at least you will be in there trying to do the work."

Other peer influences included recognition of the different roles students performed at Isbill:

> We [black students], like, if we got any problems [academically], we go straight to the white kids. Everybody black, I believe every black person got a white kid on they side or some smart kid on they side to do they homework or copy off 'em . . . and every white person got a black person on their side to . . . fight for them.

In a sense, then, Laura believed that white students were smarter than black students but that black students were better able to physically defend themselves. But by working together, both groups could obtain assistance in an area in which they needed it.

How Laura communicated with her teachers seemed also to be influenced by her peers. Even though she thought that most teachers genuinely tried to help students succeed, Laura felt pressure to talk back to them and to defend her position in situations in which it appeared that the teacher had the upper hand. It was important that she not be embarrassed in front of other students in class: "Yeah, I think they [teachers] be yelling entirely too loud . . . and so if like some of my friends in there [class] from the crowd, we gotta get back loud with the teacher, or else they'll [crowd] be like, 'Oh, man, the teacher told you off'-- somethin' like that."

Overall, Laura perceived herself as not really having a lot of friends, but "associates." She thought that friends come and go. Associates were individuals from different crowds who interacted with everyone. She seemed to be in constant conflict between doing what she knew was necessary to succeed academically and fitting in with her peers. This struggle to fit in and be a part of the social scene often caused her problems in the classroom with teachers. In addition, conflicts with her peers often resulted in physical confrontations with them. Laura's school behavior appeared to be closely related to her peer interactions. Often, even when knowing better, she made decisions to behave in a manner that was popular with the crowd.

<u>Teacher relationships.</u> Laura's academic experience was reflected in her teacher relationships. In fact, her perceptions of teachers influenced her classroom experiences and overall views of the school. For the most part, Laura liked her classes and most of the teachers. However, she did not perform as well in the classes of teachers she did not like. She thought that some of them simply did not understand students' capabilities and therefore imposed on them too much classwork and homework, with insufficient time or assistance. Other teachers, however, were easier to communicate with and cared about how students were doing outside the classroom as well as inside. Laura seemed to enjoy more freedom in these teachers' classes.

Perceived teacher racism and disrespect greatly influenced Laura's views of her teachers. She was preoccupied with the status of race relations between teachers and students at Isbill. She thought that some teachers were prejudiced and that this affected their ability to relate to students. Frequently, she used examples of prejudice or racism that described how teachers perceived students: "I think white kids' gettin' a better education because, like black kids, you, they barely turn in their homework, and the white kids, even if they get it wrong, they turn in their homework."

Teacher respect was another huge issue with Laura. She described good teachers as those who were strict and stern, handled discipline problems in class, and respected the students. Her perception of respect meant that teachers did not yell at students but that they verbally recognized their academic accomplishments in the classroom: "They got attitudes 'cause they think they can yell at us but we can't yell at them. My mom always told me to respect those who respect me. But if you don't respect me, then you won't get no respect."

Laura thought that teachers who yelled at students embarrassed them. Students would then

retaliate or skip class to avoid embarrassment and to save face with their peers:

> And if, like, I and one of my friends in there [class] from the crowd, we gotta get back
> loud with the teacher, or else they'll [other students] be like, "Oh, man, the teacher
> told you off"-- somethin' like that. . . . 'Cause they [students] wanna stay in school
> but they don't wanna stay in that class. 'Cause obviously they don't like the teacher
> or the teacher don't like them, and they feel that they don't get respected by that
> teacher.

Laura's previous school experiences with teachers and administrators also affected

her perception of fairness and racism. She and her mother had regularly scheduled meetings

with school staff to address her concerns. This seemed to solve her concerns temporarily.

But often while attempting to address concerns, she and her mother were confronted with

racism during those interactions. She described part of a conversation during one such

meeting with a principal at one of her previous schools:

> That was my first time meetin' with him. But when we got up in there, he didn't
> respect my mom. You don't say "she" or you don't say "her" or that [principal
> referring to Laura]. He'll like that [referring to the principal], or whoever she is
> sitting next to you. You don't say that to a parent.

According to Laura, some teachers at Isbill disrespected not only her but her parents

as well by inaccurately relaying her academic status in an effort to make her look bad. She

viewed this as "two-faced":

> 'Cause they'll yell at you, but when your mom be here, it's a whole different story.
> It's like, "Well, I didn't . . . I didn't say that. No, that's not what happened. I said
> this and I said. . . ." "No [Laura said], you said this. You said that."
> > That teacher call my house all the time and talk that he done gave me work
> and I know I wasn't at school Monday or Friday. Then Thursday, I was in ISS, and
> Wednesday I didn't come to school for half a day 'cause I had a doctor's
> appointment, and he told the officer [security] I'm missing a whole bunch of work.
> Then I asked him if I could make up the test we took while I was gone, and he was
> like, "No." I'm like, "well, how you gonna keep calling my house saying I won't
> make it [work] up, but he tells me I can't?"

Teachers at Isbill regularly called home to report on the academic status of students who were not doing well in class. Although this activity seemed to annoy Laura, it never seemed to motivate her to complete assignments. One of her teachers made several calls home during the course of the semester, and Laura's grades remained about the same the entire semester.

Additional perceptions Laura held of her teachers came from how they approached their subjects, their individual personalities and ways of caring, and their teaching styles. She described caring teachers as those who were interested in students as individuals as opposed to being concerned about how much work they completed. Laura thought that some of her teachers had unrealistic expectations regarding the amount of time needed to complete her work. Others were more reasonable and understood her abilities better:

> I like that teacher. She give us a lot of work, too, but she give us time to do it though. Like she'll say, "Okay, yaw, this is the work for the week. You got today to do this, you got tomorrow to do that." Like a week later she might [say], "Whoever didn't finish this paper from last week, yaw go ahead and do this," and all we do, half of all they do up in there is free time because everybody get done with their work 'cause she more patient with us.

However, teachers who did not provide accommodations were described as uncaring:

> Usually I like that subject. Last year I had a B, and since this class, I think I got a D or E 'cause she push us too hard. Like today, we were given multiple-choice questions. We had to make up our own multiple-choice questions. That's 15 questions alone. Then we have to write 15 questions that are true or false. Then we were given four dittos of homework to do. That's too much to get done in one night.

Individual teachers' personalities also influenced Laura's experiences and perceptions. She described interactions between teachers and students that made her feel like teachers cared about her and about whether or not students learned. She expressed disliking for one teacher because she did not recognize the importance of meeting the personal needs of students:

> The teacher pushy. Like if you ask to go to the bathroom, she be like, "No."
> Whether it's an emergency or not, she be like, "You know I don't give passes." Like
> she don't buy no tissue paper so nobody can blow their nose, so half the time we end
> up walking out of class. I done walked out of class once 'cause I had to use the
> bathroom.

Laura believed that teachers who cared had high expectations for all students. Interestingly,

high expectations did not mean that students would be expected to do more work or do it

better, but that what teachers expected could be reasonably accomplished in the time frame

requested and that teachers recognized the efforts of students:

> 'Cause if your teachers feel that you . . . trying and they help you. Like one time,
> Miss . . . , I had, I would, I had forgot to turn in my folder the end of the marking
> period and she said, uh, . . . she just took my folder and turned it in and gave me half
> a grade, and if I wouldn't have turned in my folder I would have had a F. But she
> gave me a C.

Personalities and communication styles were intertwined to form Laura's image of

teachers. Her explanation of why she really liked one teacher was because of the way he

related to students. She called it the 90's style, demonstrated by the type of language he used

in class that was "more on the students' level":

> Like we be laughing at him or something, 'cause like when he be talking, he be like
> um, and his voice go down like that [lowered her voice], and we all start laughing,
> and he'll be like, "Check this out, see, this what we gotta do right here. Yaw gotta
> do page 526, unit 12, a outline. We got a test right heah [here] tomorrow."

Other teachers were boring in their classroom delivery, resulting in Laura's paying less

attention and not liking the class: "We be so bored. She sit there, she could be saying, 'Yeah,

go to the store.' She'll say, 'And tomorrow [long and drawn out], um, . . . we have to. . . .'

It just take her ten minutes to tell one thing, and all that time I be like . . . dang!"

Another communication style that Laura thought expressed teachers' personal interest

in students was the manner in which they dressed. She described an interaction with her

favorite teacher, who occasionally dressed very casually for class:

Oh, the way he walk. The way he dress 'cause . . . because I be talking about the way he be dressing because he had on some boots, some cowboy boots with some, a nice little khaki outfit. I'm like, "Mr. _____, that outfit is killing 'em," that means fresh, and he was like, "Thanks." I was like, "Tell me you ain't got on no boots. Tell me you do not got on them boots," and everybody started laughing. They like, "Yeah, Laura, he got on the boots." I was like, "Aw, God, he fell off." You see, any other teacher'd be like . . . "Go to the office."

Individual teaching styles also influenced Laura's ability to maintain interest in school and her motivation to succeed in the classroom. She preferred teachers who articulated assignments clearly. She liked being regularly informed of what needed to be done to improve her grades and thought it was important for teachers not only to give assignments but to help students complete them, as well. She liked teachers who allowed students to do projects and oral presentations in class. This gave her an opportunity to involve family members, something she thought helped maintain her interest in school.

Fair teachers were those who listened to her side of the story and reprimanded her in private instead of in front of the class. Laura said that she benefited from materials presented orally and visually. These strategies helped her learn and retain information. Teachers who included their own personal life examples when presenting material made it easier for her to relate to the information, but teachers with moody personalities frustrated her. Those teachers who recognized what she knew in class by providing opportunities for her to speak were the ones whose classes she enjoyed and did better in.

Laura liked teachers who made sure that students had enough time to complete assigned work and helped them with it. Helping, however, did not mean giving the answers; it meant providing opportunities for students to complete work in a reasonable time frame. These teachers provided a number of opportunities to make up work, provided extra credit, and gave partial credit for incomplete assignments or tests. A review of Laura's fall-semester

transcript showed that she had done consistently better in those classes where she liked the teacher. Also, she was never put out of those classes for disciplinary reasons. In many ways, Laura's perceptions of her teachers played a significant role in how she experienced school.

Previous school experiences. While describing her life at Isbill, Laura often used examples from her previous middle school experiences. She compared teachers, and her idea of what a good teacher was came from these images. When describing how the overall school functioned, her frame of reference was also the other two schools. For example, the opportunity to be a leader, getting to go outside more, participating in coed gym, better food, and stricter teachers were things she remembered about previous school experiences that seemed to shape her opinion about similar things at Isbill. When talking about suspension experiences at Isbill, she also referred to her previous experiences at other schools. Fighting, for example, had been considered an acceptable strategy for resolving conflicts at one of her previous schools, and she thought it was an appropriate approach in some cases.

Through sports participation, Laura seemed really to find her place at all the schools she had attended. It was the thing that appeared to keep her motivated and somewhat focused in school. She believed that sports were a unifying force that allowed students of all races to "work together," regardless of their actual physical talents. Laura's views on racism also had originated before she arrived at Isbill, and she told several stories about the encounters she and her mother had experienced in trying to address this issue in the past and present.

Laura also referred to elementary school experiences that seemed relevant to her current perceptions of school. Rewards and recognition that she had received in elementary school diminished when she entered sixth grade. Her mother's reactions to some of her pre-

Isbill school experiences had shaped Laura's current perceptions of respect and recognition. Throughout the study, her mother openly discussed these with the researcher as major issues for her. It seems impossible that these feelings and perceptions would not have affected Laura. In fact, the mother's decisions to move Laura from school to school over the past seven years had been based on her beliefs that Laura was experiencing racism and not being recognized for her capabilities and talents. These two issues clearly permeated Laura's overall perceptions and experiences at Isbill.

Classroom Observations of Laura

Laura was the most active of all the students in the study. Her bubbly personality, aggressive behavior, and unique dress made her hard to miss in class. She seemed to always want to be the object of attention from her teachers, peers, and even the researcher. In fact, she made a point of having some kind of discussion with the researcher in every class where she was being observed. She talked frequently about her extracurricular activities, home life, and court experiences. On several occasions, she invited the researcher to her basketball games, to attend a court hearing, and to help her with a history project that involved going to the library. Classroom observations of Laura focused on interactions with her teachers, other students in the class, and the classroom environment in general.

Interactions with teachers. Most of the interactions Laura had with teachers were a result of her classroom behavior. In two of her five classes, she had assigned seating at the front of the class. Teachers often reprimanded her for talking during inappropriate times. These included while the teacher was teaching a lesson or giving instructions, or when students were supposed to be working on an assignment. Other reprimands were a result of Laura's constantly being out of her seat, socializing with other students in the class,

interrupting the teacher while she was talking, not following instructions, wearing inappropriate clothes to class (the school had a dress code), not having her textbook, or, as one teacher often put it, "simply talking too much." These reprimands sometimes ended in Laura's being sent to the assistant principal's office or assigned to after-school detention, but usually teachers gave her several warnings before taking any of these actions. She seemed to be more active in classes where there was less structure.

It was clear, however, that Laura's behavior was not consistent in every class. In her honors class, she was less active and received few reprimands from the teacher. Laura had expressed many times how much she liked and respected this teacher because he could relate to the students. This teacher believed her behavior was different in his class because "she wasn't the leader." He had informed her at the beginning of the class that her behavior would not be tolerated. He added that although she behaved well most of the time in his class, he still had to send her to the principal's office at least once a week for misbehavior. Laura seemed to respect this teacher a great deal, but when he was away from the class, she usually gave substitutes an extremely difficult time by not following their instructions.

Although Laura was quite physically active, she did participate in academic-related activities in some of her classes. During one in-class quiz, she asked the teacher and received additional time to complete it. In two of her classes, where students' grades were posted, she often left her seat to check her grades. Although she usually worked on classroom assignments, she did not often finish them because she was so involved visiting with other students in the class. She regularly turned in homework in her favorite classes, but in others she did not. She would often ask teachers how to do an assignment after instructions had been given, but she did not appear to have difficulty completing them. However, on several

occasions, after having been given lists of incomplete assignments, she still did not complete and turn in the work. A few times she simply copied another student's work and turned it in to the teacher. Nevertheless, Laura appeared to be concerned about her grades and often checked on her status with her teachers.

At one time or another during the study, all of Laura's teachers expressed their frustration in dealing with her behavior in class. They were eager for her to be taken from class to do the interviews for the study. One teacher remarked how much better the class functioned when she was absent. Teachers frequently gave Laura hall passes when she requested them. She left class at least once in three of five classes during a total of nine classroom observations. It did appear that the classroom climate became more sedate and peaceful without her presence.

Interactions with students. Laura was extremely social in class, always talking with students and the researcher during the course of a class period. She considered two of the other students in the study (Jason and Vicki) her friends and interacted frequently with them in class, as well. These conversations were usually nonacademic or school related and concerned fighting, pregnancy, sex, and male-female relationships. One of her friends was pregnant, and Laura and a small group of girls spent large periods of time during one class talking about the baby, including what it would look like, be like, and so on. She seemed consumed by the pregnancy. In other classes, she openly talked with other students about sexual topics and the differences between how girls and boys relate to each other. One day during class, Laura explained to the researcher the difference between a friend and an associate. "An associate is not a friend but someone I talk to because friends will turn against you, so I don't need any friends." A "G" was considered her number-one male friend and a

"dawg" her number-two male friend. "Small stuff" was the third type of male friend. Laura used a lot of street language in class. This seemed to present her as knowledgeable among her peers. Often students stopped to join in or listen to whatever topic she was discussing.

Laura's dress frequently generated conversations between herself and other students in class. She often wore tight and/or revealing clothes to school, which got her a lot of attention from the boys. One day she wore a red, ponytail wig attached to her hair. She spent almost an entire class period playing with it and discussing it with other girls seated around her. The day after her basketball team won the district championship, she wore a floor-length, sleeveless black dress with huge rose petals on it. When the researcher mentioned how nice she looked, Laura asked her to call her mom and let her know, as well.

Laura was usually out of her seat in all classes and frequently used a loud tone when talking with other students. She would holler across the room, often telling students to "shut up" or making comments like "Laura's in the house!" She told students and the researcher when she had court dates and upcoming extracurricular events. She also made it a point to let other students know what her grades were when she received them from teachers. Once, after receiving a D on an assignment, she gave a student a high-five in celebration, and another time she announced proudly to the class that she had received a C on an exam.

Laura was also physically active with male students in her classes. She often popped them with rubber bands, rubbed their backs or necks, and tangled with them inside the classroom and out in the hallways. She spent a great deal of time in a couple of classes combing and braiding the hair of several of the female students. It appeared that Laura was preoccupied with the social aspects of the classroom, and her relationships with other students made it difficult for her to settle down and focus on the academic tasks at hand.

Interactions in the classroom. Laura demonstrated both appropriate and inappropriate behaviors and interactions in the overall classroom environment. Typically, she was late to her classes and often carried no books or supplies. Although she had assigned seating in most of her classes, she rarely sat in her seat an entire class period. She frequently moved around the classroom visiting with other students and occasionally left the room into the hallway until the teacher summoned her back inside. On a couple of occasions, she took it upon herself to answer teachers' ringing phones and relay the message instructions to whomever the call concerned. Frequently, Laura sat on the top of her desk during class and spoke loudly to other students in the class. Teachers constantly reprimanded Laura for these behaviors and occasionally assigned her to after-school detention.

However, Laura demonstrated appropriate classroom behaviors, as well. She was eager to volunteer answers and engage in academic discussions in some of her classes. Although many of her outbursts in the classroom were of a social nature, there were times when they related to grades she had received. She worked on in-class assignments and completed homework in some of her classes, but not all of them. She always seemed to be interested in the status of her grades, even though she did not usually complete assignments that were overdue, even after the teacher informed her of such. In two of her classes, which she expressed liking very much, Laura demonstrated a leadership role by organizing students. This behavior was well received by both students and teachers.

Summary

The three interviews conducted with Laura covered three broad areas: overall school environment, academic life, and school activities. As Laura discussed these areas, four major themes seemed to shape her perceptions and school experiences. First, awards and

recognition were important to her. Receiving or not receiving these seemed to influence her responses to teachers and school activities. Being a leader was an important aspect of her opportunity to obtain this recognition. Second, the relationships Laura formed with her peers were more important than any other aspect of her school experience. Being accepted into a crowd and being popular often affected her behavior and attitude toward academics and school in general. Third, Laura was greatly affected by her attitude about teachers, and the attitudes she perceived teachers had about her. Respect was a major concern, and her perception of whether teachers gave this to her influenced her views of what made a good school. She believed that many teachers were racist, and this affected her interactions with them. Finally, Laura's previous school experiences had had an unquestionable effect on the way she viewed her present school. The relationships she had developed with teachers in the past and her ideas about how students were treated carried over into her school experiences at Isbill and were reflected in many ways by her reactions to different situations she encountered.

Although Laura's school experiences and perceptions were influenced by a variety of sources, she acknowledged the effect of her own attitude toward school. She knew that her sometimes negative attitude toward teachers affected their views of her. She was cognizant of the fact that her classroom and school behaviors were not consistent with school rules and that, on most occasions, she was influenced by her desire to be a leader and popular among her peers. She liked and cared about school but could not somehow seem to negotiate the pressures or expectations of her parents, school staff, and peers. As a result, she acted out in school by talking back to and disobeying teachers, fighting, and being suspended or assigned to after-school detention on a regular basis. Suspension and detention were

detrimental to her academic status, but ironically they contributed to her popularity and acceptance by her peers.

Michael

Selection for Participation in the Study

Michael was identified as an at-risk student and was recommended for participation in the study by one of his special education teachers because of poor academic performance and lack of motivation. Other eighth-grade teachers described him as disengaged, spending most of his time drawing cartoons during classes and putting forth little effort. Michael's mother was quite interested in the study. As a child, she and her family had participated in a study with a local university, and it had been a good experience for her. She expressed wanting to know how Michael perceived school and thought this study would help her better understand his experiences. Both she and Michael were extremely receptive to participating and were pleasant to talk with throughout the study.

Background Information

Michael was a 13-year-old African American and the youngest of all students in the study and in his family. He was quiet and friendly, with a pleasant personality and sense of humor. Michael was small for his age and displayed a seemingly blank stare on his face, like one of confusion or uncertainty. His career aspiration was to be a cartoonist, and he usually carried around a portfolio of his drawings to every class. His two 18-year-old siblings, a girl and a boy, were 11 months apart and in high school. The older brother was physically disabled and had received special education services throughout his schooling. Michael's

mother and he described a tenuous relationship between the siblings and him. Michael said he felt left out and not a part of their lives because they did not include him in their activities.

The family had moved to a new neighborhood the previous year, and Michael was still experiencing problems adjusting to the new surroundings. Although he attended the same school, he and his parents emphasized the effect that moving had had on Michael. He had a difficult time finding new friends his age and often discussed his frustration about this. In addition, Michael's maternal great-grandfather had died two years before, and he had taken this very hard.

Michael began kindergarten at age four in a public school. After his parents became dissatisfied with the lack of individual attention Michael received there, he attended first grade at a private school. Unhappy with the instructional practices there, his parents moved him back to the school where he had attended kindergarten. There he completed grades two through five. By the time he was in fourth grade, Michael's mother reported that she noticed at home, and after talking to teachers, his inability to focus or follow through on verbal instructions. Although she had had previous negative experiences with her older son, she reluctantly decided to have Michael evaluated by school officials for a learning disability. It was determined that Michael had a learning disability in the area of written expression. In addition to Chapter I services he had received since third grade, his academic schedule was revised to include special education English and math classes.

Shortly after this diagnosis, Michael's mother suspected that he displayed characteristics of attention deficit disorder (ADD). Michael had trouble remembering instructions and following directions at home. His mother believed he felt a sense of confusion about this but was unable to express what was going on. Although she did not

believe that Michael was hyperactive, she decided to have their family doctor evaluate him. Subsequently, Michael was temporarily placed on Ritalin. After seeing no difference in his behavior, the physician suggested increasing the dosage, but Michael's mother decided against this. After Michael complained about having to take the medication, his mother allowed him to stop. During the interview with his mother, she expressed that although Michael was aware that he had learning problems, he was unable to explain what they were. However, when questioned, he could accurately express what was going on in his classes.

Since Michael's initial diagnosis as learning disabled in fourth grade, he had been enrolled in special education English and math classes at school. His official school records indicated numerous individualized education planning committee (IEPC) and multidisciplinary evaluation team (MET) meetings, per school district and state guidelines. In addition, his records included various state and national achievement test scores. His complete academic record described a history of academic struggles dating back to kindergarten, with problems concentrating, needing a lot of individual attention, and a progressive decline in overall achievement over the years.

By seventh grade, the status of Michael's learning disability was described as basically the same as the initial diagnosis, but with verbal and performance scores more significantly decreased and an inability to put thoughts and ideas into a conceptual framework. Problems with short-term memory and working memory were noted, along with an indication of his losing ground in math. Michael's fall 1997 MET report indicated that past strategies had not helped and that problems with visual tasks and problem solving continued. His eighth-grade fall semester transcript showed that he had passed all classes (special education). During the

semester of this study, Michael was enrolled in regular education science, history, and drama, and in special education study skills, English, and math.

Perceptions of School

Michael's overall views of school seemed to be reflected by his classroom experience as a special education student, relationships with teachers and peers, participation in extracurricular activities, and parental involvement in his education.

On being a special education student. Michael seemed to like his classes, especially science. His motivation for going to school was so that he could "go to college and get a good job." Nevertheless, he was apathetic about being in special education, did not understand why he was, and did not think he would ever get out. He shared some thoughts about his experiences in sixth grade:

> At the beginning of the year in the first semester, I had regular classes, so . . . and I was getting a, a B in there [math], so I'm not sure why they switched me . . . and then the year after that, they switched me to uh . . . English. . . . I never thought it would really help me for later in life so. . . . It's like I'm kinda eager to get out.

Michael said that, when he was first placed into special education classes, he was told that if he did the work, he could return to regular education classes. He seemed frustrated that this did not turn out to be the case, and he did not know why he was taking these classes or what his learning disability was. In response to being asked whether he knew what his disability was, he said:

> Well, not really. As far as I knew I was doing pretty good in math when they switched the classes. . . . Well, the reason I never was too encouraged [to get out of special education] is when they were talking about uh . . . if I reached like a certain goal or certain level that I would be put out, but uh . . . as far as what I knew from my teachers, I reached that level and . . . I . . . and uh . . . ended up having to stay in, so . . . basically once you're in there, usually they don't let you out.

In addition to feeling trapped in special education classes, Michael expressed that he was bored. He believed that he really did not have to work that hard to do well because the classes were not challenging to him:

> Well, the work isn't always too hard, but when it is, I'll try to do what I can to figure it out or get help. . . . Most of the stuff that we do in there is really easy, 'cause, like, if one person doesn't get it, it's like holding the whole class back. . . . So if one person can't get all the work finished all the time or anything like that, then it's hard for 'em, then they'll have to do that for the whole class.

Michael commented that he was "doing about average in [his] classes, passing." He described his study behavior as sitting at his desk at home reading the textbook for a while and reading over old notes. Other activities included watching television to obtain information on current events. At school, he enjoyed working in groups and explained how this helped him learn the material better:

> You can divide all the . . . everything you have to do on the project among different people so you wouldn't have to have the whole thing on you. Usually, from, like, reading a book, you can't get a good understanding, and when somebody else understands it, then it helps you out or you can help them out.

Group activities helped him in all classes. He particularly enjoyed working on projects and labs, doing hands-on activities: "Well, because it's, like . . . instead of reading the entire chapter, it's more like learning in, in a quick five minutes. . . . I mean, most people can look at somethin' and tell how to put it back together in not too long."

Michael described his academic experiences by comparing special and regular education classes. He was enrolled in three special education classes–study skills, English, and math–and three regular education classes–history, science, and drama. The study skills class aimed at assisting special education students to develop study skills, as well as to complete assignments from other classes. This was the third year Michael had been enrolled in study skills since entering Isbill. In his regular education science and history classes, a

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special education teacher co-taught and provided additional assistance to these students during class and outside the classroom. Michael said he was not embarrassed by this arrangement and often took advantage of this teacher by working with him on assignments.

Michael thought that the smaller classes enabled him to do better but that the main difference between them and regular education classes was that "the work was a lot easier." In addition, he said that special education teachers allowed students more time to complete their work and that this was helpful. However, he expressed that these classes were boring and less challenging than regular education classes. He defined boring as repeating the same activities over and over again: "Well, the stuff that we really do in there [special education classes] is stuff that I already know. So it's not too hard, passing the tests and quizzes or anything like that." When asked the difference between making an A and a B in a special education class, Michael responded, "Well, actually it's not too hard to get an A. It just starts to get boring, and people start to get lazy." He believed if the work in special education classes were more of a challenge, he would be less bored. Michael explained that his regular education classes were not boring because they allowed students to do reports, and they had longer periods of time to complete the assignments. In addition, he thought that if reports were assigned more frequently and on subjects that students were interested in, classes would be more interesting. He liked presenting oral reports and had the opportunity to do so during most of his classes. When asked what else would make classes more interesting, he responded, "Well, because school, what makes school interesting is being able to . . . having to think about what you're doing. Like . . . like if you can just take a glance at the problem and know what it is, then . . . it's really, nothing to do so, you know, why do it?

Michael seemed less motivated by easy tasks and preferred more challenging activities that required him to really think about what he was doing. Although seemingly frustrated with his status as a special education student, this did not embarrass Michael. He said he would seek help when he thought he needed it. He appeared concerned about doing well in school. Much of this motivation was influenced by the perceptions he held of his teachers and the teaching strategies they used to help him succeed.

Relationships with teachers. Michael considered it important to have good relationships with his teachers. He believed the first impression students made on teachers was lasting. In addition, he thought it was important for teachers to have personal relationships with students. This would demonstrate that they understood students and cared about them as individuals. When asked how teachers could express their interest in students, he explained, "Well, they [teachers] could have a conversation with them once in a while. Well, talk to them other than just about academics and stuff like that." Michael further explained that doing well in most classes was easy. A minimal amount of effort could usually result in a good grade. He said most teachers simply expected students to try to do the work and that it was not difficult to pass if they simply followed the rules and practiced good classroom behavior:

> Like, if you do the work, don't talk out when it's not time or anything, they'll usually give you a pretty good grade and everything. . . . _____ is a pretty good teacher. I mean, as long as you do what you're supposed to . . . don't break any of the rules. . . . You can get a passing grade or higher, and so . . . like if you do every assignment, even if you don't get a very great grade on it, you'll more than likely pass the . . . 'cause, you know, at least I wrote and tried it.

Michael thought he had a close relationship with a couple of teachers at Isbill. He described interesting teachers as those who could be trusted and took a personal interest in students: "I like Mr. _____ [teacher]. He's like . . . kind of a grown-up kid, you know? A

guy you would like to hang out with. . . . It's kinda like . . . somebody you can talk to, trust, you know?" Michael liked eighth-grade teachers more than seventh and sixth because they talked with students about more things than just academics. However, it was also important to him that teachers cared about how students were doing in class: "Well, like, if a teacher really doesn't care how their students do . . . like, if like when they got a bad grade, so, you know. . . . Usually they, if their first grade isn't too good, then, they like give up on 'em." He expressed frustration toward teachers who did not listen or investigate problems before taking disciplinary actions, something he had experienced a few times: "Well, a lot of times a teacher won't listen. I mean, like, if something happens and the teachers blame one of the students and they didn't do it, like, the teacher won't listen to what happened to, what the student has to say." Teachers who were fair and took the time to listen to students' points of view demonstrated a certain degree of respect that was important to Michael. He said that he usually responded to teachers by treating them the same way they treated him. "Like, if they don't listen to me, then I'm not gonna listen to them."

In essence, Michael thought teachers should be trustworthy and respectful, and have personal relationships with students. In turn, he was willing to do his best academically and to follow the rules. He described a diversity of relationships he had with teachers:

> [Teacher 1]: Well, it's kind of a, a friend, friendly relationship. I mean, if you like saw some, each other in the store or something, you would say "Hey," you know, like . . . come over and have a big conversation or something.

> [Teacher 2]: Well, me and _____ are kind of like distant relatives because he knew my sister.

> [Teacher 3]: Well, it's kinda defensive 'cause if you try and get too nice, then she will reject you, and if you don't, then she'll kind of like—well, it's hard to explain.

> [Teacher 4]: We're pretty close. She had my brother, too, so. . . .

In addition to personal relationships and caring teachers, Michael identified helpful strategies his teachers used that contributed to his learning experience:

> Well, they'll explain it [assignment] on the board instead of just passing out a sheet of paper, and some of them will read the topic of the paper. . . . Usually they, they might have a sample that they do. Like Miss _____, she helps by writing down which page it is, like she'll put an example and so you'll be able to know where everything goes.

> Well, for me, it's more like when they tell you. . . . It seems easier to . . . to be able to understand it. I mean, even if they don't repeat theirselves, if they write on the board, then, well . . . you pretty much have the insight the whole hour. When we have any questions about it, we get it from . . . just get it off the board.

Multiple teaching strategies also helped Michael learn. In addition to written work, visual explanations of assignments reinforced his understanding of materials. Michael described classroom situations and other accommodations that contributed to his ability to focus in class. These included having a quiet classroom, particularly when instructions were being given; not having too many assignments from different classes due at the same time; and having more time to complete long assignments.

Relationships with peers. The family's recent move had left Michael without the majority of his friends from the previous neighborhood to play with. Nevertheless, he did attend the same school and spent time at school with two friends from the old neighborhood. He named only four students at Isbill as his friends. All of them participated in most of the same school activities. He described what moving had been like for him:

> Well, last year we moved . . . me and my brother and my sister; we didn't wanna move, but my parents kept claiming that we needed more room and everything, and so when we moved I didn't know anybody in the neighborhood and really didn't know my way around. . . . So that was a big change for me. . . . I ended up riding around . . . finding somebody to hang out with . . . and there's these two little kids, they follow me around.

Michael appeared to get along well with peers at school and had been involved in only a few altercations since entering Isbill in sixth grade. During this study, he was suspended from school once for three days: "I've been . . . suspended 'cause they thought me and some other kids went upstairs, running around terrorizing younger classes . . . and they claim there was some sixth graders gave them our names, but . . . I don't know any sixth graders." Michael denied this accusation and expressed how unfairly he thought the situation had been handled. Although his parents became involved, the suspension stood.

Overall, Michael thought students got along well with each other and that the major problems were gossiping and fighting. He thought it was easy to get along with everyone and that "if you showed them [some students] that you weren't scared of them, they would usually back off." When asked how he thought other students viewed him, he responded, "probably just like a quiet kid that sits in the corner, or something."

Michael described a successful student at Isbill as one who was both popular and made average grades. He explained how peers could influence each other's views of and participation in school:

> It's like, each person has a group of friends that they always hang out with every day and well, it's usually like a routine where everybody knows where to meet in the cafeteria and when to go . . . where to meet up and everything. . . .
> To be popular, well, it's kinda like . . . you have to know, or assume and be right what everybody else is thinking. So if you can, like . . . if you can involve yourself with what they're thinking, then what everybody else is, then everybody starts to, you know, think, "Yeah, he's okay," or like that.

Michael indicated that most of his friends were pretty much like him and that they all got along well. "Most of my friends I grew up with. I didn't meet too many other people in sixth grade, but I started to meet a lotta more people when I started getting into extracurricular activities like football, baseball, and wrestling." When asked how students formed groups,

he explained, "Well, it's quite a few of them so, you know, they just need to find the one they fit into. Groups are usually already set when you get to eighth grade . . . 'cause everybody knows how everybody else acts . . . and they know who not to hang around with."

Being a part of a group enhanced students' popularity. Michael thought that popularity was important to some students, but not as important to others. He considered himself an average student. Like popularity, he believed that academics were more important to some students than others. Personally, he felt capable of doing a "bit better" academically. When asked to explain this, he stated, "Disencouragement—that can set somebody back a little ways. . . . Like if one students is getting a B and then another one have maybe a D, then the, the B student would, you know, tease him, like 'You're not gonna pass' . . . stuff like that." Although his friends were few, Michael did not seem to have any problems getting along with other students at school. In spite of his quiet and unassuming personality, participation in extracurricular activities allowed him to interact with a number of students outside the classroom.

Extracurricular activities. Throughout middle school, Michael had been involved in academic, social, athletic, and family-initiated activities. On a few occasions during this semester, he attended study hall after school to complete homework. His parents had enrolled him in academic enrichment programs outside of school aimed at improving his performance in math. He was actively involved in the science club, which met once a week after school. Students who participated received extra-credit points at the end of the semester.

In addition, Michael participated in the drama and chess clubs at school. The drama class put on a play during the semester of this study, and he was a member of the stage crew.

The chess club met during the lunch hour. Michael also participated in an after-school art project in which students painted a mural. He especially enjoyed this activity because it provided an opportunity for him to exercise his artistic talents. He had taken art and drafting classes in the past after school in the community and played on the baseball and football teams in sixth grade. He participated on the wrestling team this year. Michael explained that he became interested in wrestling after finding some old scrapbooks with pictures of his dad wrestling in high school. "My dad used to wrestle in high school, and he told me it was pretty fun . . . so I decided to try it."

Participating in various activities during and after school appeared to facilitate Michael's relationships with his peers. He expressed that it was easier for him to be more successful in sports than in academics. Doing well in sports was something he said he had control over, and being successful at them enhanced his popularity and attitude toward academics: "Like, if I was as good at academics as I was at athletics, then . . . because staying in shape, that's not really too hard. And like . . . it's stuff that you do and it can make you popular."

However, what Michael enjoyed most was drawing cartoons. Once during an interview he shared some of his drawings with the researcher. He drew the cartoons, and one of his friends wrote captions for each story. Michael often worked on his drawings during class. His parents were aware of this talent and encouraged him to develop his skills. In fact, Michael's parents were quite involved in his academic experiences.

Parental involvement. Parental involvement in Michael's academics was a major part of his school experiences. In addition to providing academic resources for him outside of school, Michael's mother had participated in various workshops and meetings over the years

to learn more about his disability and about other programs that could assist him. The researcher observed both parents at school meeting with teachers and school administrators on several occasions. In addition, they checked Michael's homework regularly and engaged in other academic activities with him at home. Michael often commented on his parents' involvement in his learning experiences:

> Well, my parents got me this desk I really wanted, and I just sit there and read the textbook for a while and study some old notes that will help me on the subject.
> Umm . . . my toughest class is probably history. And my dad, he was pretty good in history, so he helps me out a lot.
> [My dad] got me a few books and read past it and really helped me with it–Black Diamond: The History of African American Baseball.
> Sometimes, well, most of all the reports, we have to get some things from the Internet, and sometimes you can't find it. Well, my parents, they recently got, got it [computer], so it [finding information for history reports] hasn't been a problem lately.

Although Michael seemed accustomed to parental involvement in his academics, he experienced some anxiety about their expectation that he perform as well academically as his sister did:

> Well, my sister was pretty good . . . did, did pretty well academically, so they expect a lot out of me, and well . . . I'm not quite sure that I can reach her level . . . like she had some of the same classes and teachers I now have . . . [and] they [parents] expect me to do about as good as her.

Overall, Michael seemed comfortable with his parents' participation in his academic life. He often commented on how much he enjoyed working on projects and spending time with his father. At one point during this study, he took home weekly progress reports on each class. In addition, one or both parents always attended the special education IEPC and MET meetings to review and update them on his progress.

<u>Classroom Observations of Michael</u>

Michael was easily one of the quietest students in the classroom. Although not shy or necessarily withdrawn, he did not interact much with teachers or other students. There were no meaningful differences between his behavior in special education and regular education classes. Eleven classroom observations of Michael occurred over the course of the semester. They focused on his interactions with teachers, other students, and the overall classroom environment.

<u>Teacher interactions.</u> Although during interviews Michael stressed the importance of having good relationships with his teachers, he rarely interacted with them in the classroom. The few times he was observed talking to teachers were behavior related. Usually he showed no facial expression or emotion during or after these interchanges. For example, Michael gave no response when one of his teachers informed him that his drawing was displayed outside the classroom door as one of the best in the class.

Michael seemed to communicate the most with the special education teacher who attended his regular education classes. This teacher assisted all special education students with their regular education class assignments. He also completed student weekly progress reports. Other interactions with teachers sometimes occurred when Michael worked in groups with other students. In some classes, teachers moved about the classroom talking with students about what they were working on. Rarely was Michael observed seeking or receiving one-to-one help from teachers in any classroom. He usually worked independently on all assignments.

Teachers did, however, occasionally address Michael for disciplinary reasons. He was reprimanded for talking too much, being out of his seat, not turning in homework, and not

having class materials (paper, pencils, and so on). However, the magnitude and frequency of these reprimands did not seem any different from those of other students in the class. When reprimanded, Michael usually complied immediately unless he thought the reason was unfair. On those occasions, he did not hesitate to openly disagree with the teacher. For example, once a teacher scolded him for not completing a classroom assignment. After the teacher commented that he wasn't trying, threatened to call his mother, and said she was tired of his excuses, Michael responded, "That's because you're not listening!" To that, the teacher responded, "Tell that to your mom." Michael responded with, "She doesn't listen either!" The teacher then responded, "I wonder why?" Subsequently, Michael completed and turned in the assignment. In another class, after the teacher told him to get to work, he stated loudly, "I AM reading the story!" Both of these reactions were surprisingly different from the way he usually responded to teachers' instructions.

It seemed important to Michael that teachers listen to and treat students fairly. Overall, he got along well with them, although interactions were few. The number of interactions with special education and regular education teachers seemed about the same.

Classroom interactions with students. Similar to his classroom experiences with teachers, Michael also minimally interacted with other students. However, when he did, it was usually with students seated near him. Usually, though, he talked to the same few students in each class. In the special education classes, which were much smaller (between 8 and 10 students), Michael was more interactive with other students and seemed to move around the room more than in regular education classes. Frequently he pushed and shoved other boys playfully and enjoyed wrestling with them.

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Michael worked with other students in small groups whenever teachers allowed this. He explained during interviews how working in groups allowed him to divide up the work, obtain a better understanding of the materials, and get assignments completed on time. Often after finishing his work, he would ask aloud if other students needed to use his book. In some classes, books remained in the classrooms and were shared by students.

Several of Michael's classmates knew of his artistic talent. One student asked if Michael would sketch his picture on a skateboard. During class, Michael frequently discussed and shared his drawings with a couple of boys he considered his friends. When noticed by teachers, he was told to put the drawings away.

Michael liked giving oral presentations in class. During one of these presentations in a special education class, other students critically questioned his ideas. Michael responded with a great deal of confidence and knowledge of the topic being presented. He showed good articulation, and students responded with a clapping ovation. However, he was not always as well received by all students. During another activity in this same class, while playing a game of hangman, students mocked him by calling him a monkey. Michael did not verbally respond, but he displayed a blank stare.

In general, Michael got along well with other students in class. His behavior and the number of interactions with them were similar to those with his teachers. Although usually quiet in regular education classes, he was more active and talkative with students in the special education classes. Overall, his classroom behavior and peer interactions appeared typical for students his age.

Overall classroom interactions. Typically, Michael participated in academic activities during classes; however, this did not mean that he always completed or turned in assignments.

He usually listened attentively to directions and instructions at the beginning of the hour, maintained eye contact with teachers, and always copied everything that was written on the blackboard. He worked independently on assignments and rarely talked with students during this time. Michael was never observed requesting assistance from his teachers. Students were usually assigned book work in most classes, and Michael did not seem to have any problems beginning assignments on his own.

Michael often volunteered to give oral presentations in his special education classes for extra credit. These included impromptu discussions on current events. One of these presentations was given with a partner, the other alone. On both occasions, Michael appeared confident and knowledgeable, and presented the information clearly and succinctly. His affect and communication styles were appropriate and well received by other students in the class. His topics were interesting and initiated a discussion among the students. He seemed always to have an interesting topic to share with the class. On another occasion, he discussed ideas that would make airplane crashes less devastating by adding air bags beneath the planes to reduce injury to passengers. Afterwards, he demonstrated an ability to evaluate his own presentation and seemed to accept critical comments from his peers.

During interviews, Michael effectively articulated what kinds of activities were going on in all of his classes. He especially liked science because of the opportunity to participate in labs. He also participated in the science club after school. Although Michael appeared to be engaged in classroom activities most of the time, this behavior was somewhat deceiving because he usually did not complete or turn in the work at the end of class. He was never observed turning in any homework assignments either. Once, after Michael had taken a quiz in a regular education class, his paper showed that he had attempted only 3 of the 15

questions on the test. This test was given orally, and students wrote down their answers on a sheet of notebook paper. During the test, Michael looked lost and frustrated.

Even when Michael's body language and affect gave the appearance that he was actively involved in classroom activities, this was not always the case. He usually carried around a portfolio of his artwork and often worked on his drawings during classes. In most classes, he sat toward the back of the classroom or on the opposite side of the room from the teacher's desk. This enabled him to draw without being easily noticed. Usually, he worked on his drawings with a friend who sat near him in one of his regular education classes. Michael explained that this was the friend who wrote the captions for the drawings, which completed the comic strips. When teachers discovered this behavior, they told him to put the drawings away.

Frequently, Michael entered class without books, pens, or paper. Copies of textbooks usually were stored in the classrooms, and students used these as needed. On two occasions when a test was given, Michael had to borrow a pen from the teacher and another student. Michael also frequently slept during classes. A couple of times he was observed slumping deeply into his seat for most of the class period. At one point during the semester, one teacher moved him from the back of the classroom to the front. But once there, Michael became more talkative with other students around him and was reprimanded for this. On occasion he carried around a hairbrush and brushed his hair during class.

Michael participated in classroom discussions only in the special education classes. In regular education classes, he was much quieter and hardly ever left his seat. He often displayed a blank stare and seemed to daydream frequently. One of his teachers called him a big daydreamer, but said that he was capable of doing the work. Although his participation

in classroom activities with other students and teachers seemed minimal, Michael did positively respond when teachers focused on him individually. Their attention seemed to nudge him back into touch with what was going on in the classroom.

During interviews, Michael explained that his learning style included verbal, audio, and hands-on activities. He seemed to maintain interest in classes longer where teachers used these styles to present and teach information. He said that he was able to focus better if, while instructions were being given, the classroom was quiet. It appeared that this was, in fact, the case. When there was much activity going on, Michael looked less attentive and lost. When working on tasks individually, he did not complete or turn in assignments. However, when working with other students, he appeared to get more accomplished.

There were only a few differences in Michael's interactions with teachers, other students, and in the overall classroom environment between special and regular education classes. He talked to other students and was more involved in classroom activities in the smaller classes. Also, he volunteered for activities and moved around more frequently in these classes. He was perhaps the most actively involved in the study skills class. It was the smallest, and students appeared to have more freedom to move around. In regular education classes, Michael worked on his art more often and seemed to fade into the woodwork. His interest and participation in classes did not seem to be affected by the type of subject, although he indicated that science was his favorite. However, teacher involvement usually produced a positive effect on his motivation and participation, usually prompting him to refocus on what was going on in the classroom.

<u>Summary</u>

Michael was considered at risk because of his poor academic performance and lack of motivation. His perceptions of school were shaped by his status as a special education student, relationships with his teachers, interactions with his peers, and his participation in extracurricular activities. Michael's parents also played an active role in his educational experience by providing academic experiences outside of school and by trying to communicate regularly with his teachers.

In the classroom, Michael was quiet and usually disengaged academically. He was more comfortable with both teachers and students in the special education classes. However, he rarely completed and turned in homework assignments in either type of class unless teachers were directly involved with what he was doing. When these one-to-one interactions did occur, Michael usually responded positively.

Michael was bored and unchallenged by academics but enjoyed participating in extracurricular and other school activities. His interest and talent in drawing cartoons motivated him to continue in school. Nevertheless, he was not doing well academically. He felt trapped in special education and had lost hope of ever getting out. Although he considered the work easy, he seemed to do only the minimum necessary to pass. The consistent involvement of his parents with his schoolwork seemed critical to Michael's continued persistence in school.

<div align="center"><u>Tammi</u></div>

<u>Selection for Participation in the Study</u>

Tammi was considered an at-risk student and nominated for participation in the study by three of her eighth-grade teachers because of poor academic performance, lack of

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motivation, and social and legal problems. Tammi was repeating the eighth grade primarily because of poor attendance the preceding school year.

Background Information

Tammi was a 14-year-old Caucasian who turned 15 during the semester of the study. She had lived in the same house since age two with her mother and sister, who was two years younger. Tammi's parents divorced when she was six years old. She was short and slightly heavy for her age; her hair was brunette and cut in a bob shortly above her ears. She usually wore baggy pants, a T-shirt, and sneakers to school. Usually her fingernails were painted blue or black.

Tammi's mother reported that she and Tammi had received counseling after her divorce from Tammi's father eight years ago. Recently, they had participated in family counseling at their home because of relationship problems between them and Tammi's troubles at school. Her mother reported that Tammi got along well with her younger sister, who was quite different from her.

Tammi had a history of troubled relationships with peers at school and in the community. When the researcher arrived to interview Tammi's mother, the mother told her that Tammi had "run away again" and that she was not sure when she would return. Her mother had attended a meeting at school that day regarding a suspension Tammi received for fighting and learned that she had been diagnosed with a learning disability in seventh grade while living with her father. Her mother had not been aware of this, but thought it was unrelated to Tammi's running away again.

Tammi had been involved in the juvenile court system over the past year and a half for several violations, including skipping school, truancy, and possession of drug paraphernalia.

Her mother reported that Tammi had been rebellious since sixth grade, hung out with an older crowd of students, and often ran away from home. While living with her father, Tammi had been involved in a local gang and had been sexually assaulted. Subsequently, she had received mental health treatment at two hospitals over the past two years to deal with this experience. Her mother thought that these experiences had negatively affected Tammi's self-esteem.

Tammi's school records indicated academic and behavioral problems beginning in elementary school. She was diagnosed as having ADD in third grade and was placed on medication. By sixth grade, Tammi began performing poorly academically and socially. According to school records, she was promoted to sixth grade "with reservations." For seventh grade, her mother transferred her to a private school. Subsequently, Tammi was expelled half way through the year for poor grades, inappropriate behavior, fighting, and possession of marijuana. According to her mother, after much rebellion on Tammi's part, she allowed Tammi to live with her father in another school district. While at that school, Tammi's records showed a continued decline in academic performance, her refusal to do the work, and poor social adjustment. An evaluation for a learning disability was requested by her father, and it was determined that Tammi was intellectually competent at grade level in skills and had no specific learning disability. However, she was classified as physically or otherwise handicap impaired (POHI), and educational support services were provided. Her class schedule was altered to receive additional classroom support.

During that time, Tammi became involved in a local gang and used marijuana. After being treated at a hospital for venereal diseases and sexual abuse, she was released to the custody of her mother. Once back with her mother, Tammi received psychiatric services for a short while. She was then re-enrolled at Isbill for the second half of seventh grade. Tammi

failed eighth grade primarily because of nonattendance. Her school records contain several pages of truancy violations for the first year she was in eighth grade.

The fall-semester grades for the academic year of this study indicated that Tammi had earned two D's and four E's. During the semester of this study, she missed a total of two weeks of school, was suspended three days for fighting, and had accumulated a total of 50 tardies. In addition, she was performing under the 50th percentile on all state and standardized tests.

School officials and her mother learned of Tammi's POHI status after a fight between her and another student while Tammi was being processed to be transferred to another school in the district. Her mother argued and convinced school officials that she was not aware of this diagnosis and that it explained Tammi's behavior. Subsequently, Tammi was evaluated and placed into special education classes half way through the semester and allowed to remain at Isbill. Her class rank at the time of this study was 386/406. Her mother thought that her efforts to help Tammi had been unsuccessful, but she was hopeful that the recent information regarding her learning disability would make a positive difference in Tammi's life. Her biggest fear still remained, however, that Tammi would drop out of school at age 16.

Perceptions of School

Although she often discussed her boredom with school, Tammi generally liked Isbill because she felt familiar with the environment and her friends were there. There were some students she did not get along with well, and before this year she had been involved in numerous fights. However, she expressed liking all of her teachers and for the most part thought that Isbill was generally a fair school in how it dealt with students' discipline

problems. She expressed that she had not done well in school in previous years because she just was not interested in school and her focus was elsewhere.

Tammi frequently compared Isbill to the two other schools she had attended during seventh grade–one private and the other public. Although the schools were academically about the same, she thought that Isbill had more drug use and gangs among its student population. Also, she expressed not feeling safe at school, as evidenced by fights she had been involved in where other students had small weapons. Her boyfriend's younger brother attended Isbill, and Tammi said that he "looked out for" her. Her group of friends also stuck together and defended each other.

Tammi commented on her concern for safety at school by describing regular drug use among students at school. She thought that security needed to be increased. Although she did not seem afraid, she thought that it was too easy for students to bring and use drugs at school. She said she had not noticed this as much the previous year, but seemed to notice it more this year. When questioned why, Tammi admitted that her group of friends had changed from last year to this year, and this might have been the reason she noticed it more this year. Tammi also reported that some students brought weapons to school. Nevertheless, she insisted that neither drugs nor weapons really bothered her unless they affected her personally. Tammi did not have a lot of close friends at Isbill, but she felt comfortable with her group. Her overall views of school were shaped by her classroom experiences as a special education student, relationships with peers and teachers, and outside-of-school experiences.

On being a special education student. Although Tammi's last fight at Isbill brought to the attention of school officials and her mother that she had a learning disability, Tammi knew she had been tested and received special education services while living with her father

and attending another school during seventh grade. However, she said she did not remember this once she returned to Isbill: "I forgot. Yeah, it was weird, like . . . I forgot. I didn't even think about it. I mean, I didn't . . . I heard . . . it didn't even enter my brain. I forgot I was even in special ed. I have no idea why. It was blocked out of my brain or something." Nevertheless, being placed into special education classes did not seem to bother her: "I don't, I mean I don't care that I'm in special education. . . . I mean, like, some kids probably, probably feel stupid going in there or something. I don't really care as long as it's helping me."

Tammi was able to express in detail what her learning disability was and how it affected her ability to learn and participate in class:

> Yeah, like I'm smart, but I'm not like . . . but I have trouble staying focused. Those [special education classes] are working better for me 'cause there's less kids and less distraction. I have a hard time focusing. Like, keeping focus on one thing. So I wanna keep doing stuff . . . like I start something now, I'll go do something, then. . . . Yeah, it's hard for me to listen. I get bored and then I think about something else, or I'll write. . . . It's different. Like I won't pay attention. My mind'll be somewhere else. Or I'll be talking to somebody . . . but I'm not hyperactive. . . . I'll get up and move.

Although she admitted to not doing much homework, primarily because she could not remember to take it home, she was aware of her strengths and weaknesses:

> Classwork, I usually do. It's homework I'm not good at all because I forget to bring it home. I put it in my locker and forget and. . . .
>   Tests and classwork because I'm in the class while we're doing it and I see it, you know? Then, like, turn to page whatever and do "this and this" . . . pretty much . . . that type of stuff. . . .
>   I don't really have to study. I just skim through it and have a . . . I can remember when I just read over it. . . . If, if I read something, I can remember it. I just think about it and it just pops in my head and stuff. . . .
>   I can do well on my tests if I'm trying. Like if I skim through it, if sometimes, like, if I don't study at all, then I get like a 50 or 60. But if I just skim through it I get a 70 or higher.

Tammi also discussed the importance of the classroom environment to her ability to focus:

> Well, sometimes it's weird, like, it depends. If I'm concentrating when I'm reading, it has to be quiet. Like if I'm in a classroom, it's hard for me to read and really concentrate sometimes. There's too many noises and distractions going on. But if I'm quiet and I'm reading, then it's like I have photographic memory. I can remember what I read. . . . But if I'm distracted, then it's easy for me to hear something.

Tammi had been on and off medication for ADD since third grade but said she had not taken any kind of medication since the beginning of the fall semester of this academic year. When questioned about this during interviews, she responded that she was waiting for her mother to reschedule appointments with her physician.

Tammi liked the smaller special education classes and thought that she received more assistance and could focus better in them:

> I'm not as distracted 'cause there's less kids in there. 'Cause usually when there's more kids, I wanna talk to everybody and all that other stuff. And there's, like, only like eight or seven kids in there, so . . . also, it's easier. It's not as hard. You don't get so much, you know that you can't, you know, that I can keep track. . . . I get enough but I can keep track of the . . . not, like too much where I, like in some of my other classes before, I got too much work and I couldn't remember, like when I was supposed to turn 'em [assignments] and stuff. I'd forget when we had homework.

Although she felt positive about her recent placement in special education, Tammi expressed still being bored and disinterested in school. Because of repeating eighth grade, she had already taken most of the courses in the eighth-grade curriculum:

> Like, the electives are boring. I mean, for me . . . 'cause there's nothing, really, I mean I don't wanna take languages. That was boring. I already took it. I've already took life skills. . . . I mean, the only elective I haven't been in is gym and drama, and I was in there last year. So, I mean, there's nothing really . . . anything else, I mean, it's getting boring 'cause I been . . . done it . . . everything.

Tammi expressed that school in the past had never really interested her. Classes were not challenging. She believed that, in order for school to be interesting, it had to incorporate

the interests of students. When asked what would make school more interesting for her, she responded:

> Instead of just reading about it, like if we took field trips and stuff to, you know, to like, if we were learning about somethin', to go see, you know what I'm sayin'? To see it happen. . . . I mean, or . . . like labs, that type of stuff. I mean, instead of just reading about it in a book and writin' stuff down.

Tammi's perception of successful students at Isbill was those who turned in their homework, did well on tests, and were motivated. She defined motivated as "wanting to do good. . . . I mean, I think to be motivated to do good, you have to be interested in it." She believed that most of the special education students at Isbill were motivated to do well in school because their parents gave them money from welfare. Students in special education received welfare monies from the state to assist with their disabilities. Apparently, most students were aware of this incentive. For Tammy, boredom was also the result of a lack of motivation because of dull classes. "I mean, . . . if you're just reading a book and writing down questions and stuff, that's not exciting. It's boring. It makes you wanna fall asleep." Tammi explained, however, that her motivation sometimes came from being bored. An example was, while grounded and having nothing to do, she did her homework: "Like, if I'm out and about and I have stuff to do, I'm not gonna wanna stay home and do my homework. But if I'm grounded and I can't talk on the phone or . . . all I do is watch TV; I'll just do my homework on the computer." Tammi expressed that her feelings of boredom and lack of motivation had persisted throughout her entire middle school experience:

> I got pretty much E's [throughout middle school]. . . . Boring! I mean . . . in sixth and seventh grade I didn't even feel like coming to school ever. It was boring. I mean, it just felt like a waste of time. 'Cause I wasn't learning nothin' and just about goin' to school and sleepin'.

She explained the differences in what caused boredom in previous years and now: "I don't know; I think . . . maybe more in sixth and seventh I didn't care. But now I'm just more bored. Like, I mean, I wanna learn stuff. I think I just didn't care back then, but now I wanna learn, but . . . I mean not this type of stuff. It's boring."

Tammi described an experience this year when one of her teachers placed her in an advanced class in an attempt to motivate her. Because she had failed the regular class the previous marking period, she did not think it made sense that she should be placed in an advanced class. Nevertheless, she said that she could have done the work but mainly just did not feel like doing it. She believed that motivation did not necessarily come from being enrolled in an enriched class but that whatever was being taught had to be something that was relevant to her life:

> I think it's just different subjects. . . . not just how hard the class is. I think it's [motivation], sometimes I feel like they're not, it's not gonna help me, and some other stuff that we learn like story problems and stuff like that. . . . I mean, I would like . . . now that I have _____'s class, I think it's gonna help 'cause I do wanna open a restaurant and I think it's gonna help me in the long term . . . learning how to invest money in certain things.

Although Tammi admitted that it was difficult for her to be motivated this year in school, she did look forward to high school because there she would have an opportunity to pursue her career interests. She expressed that she would be promoted based on her age and that she was just waiting out the school year to move on. Nevertheless, Tammi did believe that retention had not turned out to be that bad for her. Although she did not learn any more academically, another year gave her an opportunity to mature and identify a career of interest:

> [Being retained helped] because . . . now they figured out, they didn't know before, they didn't look at my record and they didn't know I was special ed. or whatever. And now I'm getting more help. . . . And . . . I started, like before I kinda blew off the restaurant thing and didn't think it was a very big deal. I wouldn't make it or whatever, and now I'm starting to kinda really look at it more seriously . . . which I

probably wouldn't know if I wouldn't have stayed back. . . . I was thinking about it, and I think it might have, it probably did help me. I mean academically, no, but I mean like it's literally the same stuff as we did last year. I mean, it's not that I don't know it. . . . Yeah, and I think maybe I shoulda, it gave me an extra year to get my life together. I was out of school, too, so I could focus on more school activities. And then that was a good idea 'cause high school, you need to pay attention.

Also, the idea of going on to high school was a challenging thought for Tammi:

Well, it has to be because . . . I'm gonna be motivated because I have to get my credits. It matters next year because it's high school and you have to have so many credits. They're not gonna say, "Oh, you're this . . . this many years old . . . we're just gonna pass you," like they do in middle school. . . . 'Cause you have so many credits to graduate and . . . I don't want to flunk.

Tammi admitted, however, that boredom was not the only reason she had not done well in school in the past. She expressed that she had other things on her mind and was "trying to do other stuff." However, now that she was in special education classes, she anticipated that her grades would be better because she was more interested in her classes–two in particular, where she was involved in projects related to her career interest of owning a restaurant. She thought that projects and hands-on activities helped her to "see what was happening and not just read about it."

In one special education class, Tammi was working on developing a menu for the restaurant she planned to open after graduating from high school. She expressed how much fun the project was and how it related to her real-life goals. As a part of the project, she had to actually go out and solicit items from a grocery store and create a menu. In another special education class, students worked in groups to present projects to the class that dealt with determining and running their own businesses. They were responsible for writing and maintaining a budget and for running the business without spending all of the monies. Tammi really got into this project by designing and presenting it to the class. Because of these two projects, she stated her renewed interest in school and talked about how they motivated her

to identify a program in high school that would allow her to pursue her interest in cooking. After sharing this information with her mother before meeting with the high school counselors to schedule her classes for the next year, Tammi had looked into a career curriculum at the district's high school that she could enroll in after completing ninth grade. Tammi was ecstatic about this and credited one of her special education teachers for motivating her and supporting her interests.

Tammi maintained that working in groups and on projects helped her to learn better in her regular education classes, as well:

> If you read something out a book it doesn't stick in my head as much as if you do, like actually do it, like if we're talking about, like we did an experiment. They were talking about batteries . . . hooking batteries up to the light bulb and stuff. . . . If I just read it, it wouldn't have stuck in my head as much as . . . 'cause we just did the project and it sticks in my head more . . . 'cause I did it. And [I] actually worked at it . . . had to put it together . . . to really learn how it worked.

In addition to her experiences as a special education student, Tammi enjoyed relationships with few teachers. But she was especially close to one of her special education teachers who took a personal interest in her career in cooking.

Teacher relationships. In addition to being placed in special education classes and having the opportunity to participate in hands-on activities, Tammi explained that certain teachers and teaching strategies helped her to learn better. She had formed a close relationship with one of her special education teachers, who took a special interest in her. Tammi viewed this teacher as "the only one that really knows what's going on all the time–with me at least." Tammi said she would go to this teacher if she had either personal or academic problems.

Tammi seemed less sure about her relationships with other teachers and what they expected from her:

I think some of my teachers get frustrated 'cause they know I'm smart and don't understand why I'm not getting good grades. . . . 'Cause I never really talked to 'em about it, but . . . you can tell. . . . Like Mr. _____, he gets frustrated sometimes because he doesn't understand. And teachers have said that to me before a lot. Like . . . "On the tests you do good, why aren't you getting good grades on other stuff?"

Although Tammi was not especially close to any of her teachers, she did believe that certain styles and communication patterns they used helped make classes more interesting. She described the presentation style of one teacher she had had the previous semester:

She, when she talks, she just has expression in her voice and she just . . . like, gets to you. I mean, she doesn't just sit there and talk like this and . . . you know, she, she walks around and she moves her hands a lot and . . . even though it looks goofy sometimes, people still, like, pay attention to what she's saying.

The types of language and body movements teachers displayed reduced the boredom Tammi said she felt in most teachers' classes. She did not think there was much difference between the communication styles of special and regular education teachers. What seemed important was not the subject but the manner in which information was presented. Overall, Tammi thought that she got along well with all of her teachers, but that her ability to do well depended more on herself than on them.

Peer relationships. Tammi said that she did not have a lot of friends at Isbill. Those few students she talked to during class and in the hallways were people she described as being on her "social level." She named Laura and three other students as the main people she "hung out with." However, she explained that after school she hung out with the "big clique," a group of older students. When asked how she thought her friends saw her at school, she replied:

I guess cool or else they wouldn't be hanging out with me. I know _____, how she sees me, because she said most people, like we on the same level of thinking, like you know what I mean, like? If I was talking about something, I mean we can talk to each other about stuff, like personal stuff, because, like if you talk to _____, she ain't on

the same level as us, like she doesn't really know what's going on. You know what I mean?

Being on the same social level with Tammi seemed to mean that those students were socially mature and more aware of activities going on outside of school. "They can relate to what I'm talking about, but other people are like . . . 'Huh? I don't understand what you're saying.'"

Tammi also thought that some of her friends, like Laura, saw her as someone who tried "to beat up everybody." This was perhaps because, before her second year in eighth grade, Laura had been involved in several fights at Isbill. She seemed to brag about these experiences and viewed fighting as a casual activity that needed to be performed if necessary. During interviews, she shared many examples of situations in which she had been involved in fights at school. These were usually the result of gossiping among other female students. Nevertheless, Tammi did not view herself as doing anything other than defending herself or her friends when necessary. But she did seem to enjoy the attention or reputation she received as a result of fighting:

> I don't push people around . . . just . . . a lot of people I guess see me as, after I fought _____, everybody sees me as like . . . you know what I mean? Like, "Oh, she can fight. Don't mess with her"–that kind of stuff. . . . She [another student] just has a big mouth [laughs]. But I, like, hit her once and split open her head [laughs].

Tammi's last fight caused her to be suspended for three days. The principal reported that because Tammi's behavior was so aggressive and that she did not show any remorse, she thought it best that Tammi transfer to the district's alternative education school for the remainder of the year. Tammi reported that a friend of the girl she had fought tried to slice her with a knife during another altercation in the hallway, which was broken up by school security. Tammi said that she was not scared of fights but believed they occurred mostly because of gossip:

They just talk stuff behind my back, but they won't say it in my face. . . . Like they're my friend in my face, but then they'll go behind my back and say this and say this and "Tammi thinks she all that" and whatever. . . . But, like if, like if that one girl, _____, she had said something, she won't say anything to my face, but she said something to Laura, and Laura be like, "Why you hang out with her? She . . . something, something, something." And Laura be like, "I bet you won't say that to Tammi's face cause Tammi'll beat you up or something." She'll say something to her. I, mainly people are there to stick up for me if I need it.

Tammi and most of the students in the study talked about the number of fights that occurred at Isbill. When Tammi was asked why there were so many fights, she responded:

'Cause there's too many, too much immature people here. Most of 'em, I mean _____ [assistant principal] said it wasn't the right thing to do, but I think it was because she wasn't really doing anything about it [a fight]. I mean, she talked to their parents, but they were still going to my aunt's house and harassing her and stuff.

Tammi believed that even though the school used a peer mediation program for students to resolve their conflicts with each other, "sometimes one had to take certain measures and do stuff." Tammi shared that she had an impulse-control problem that sometimes prevented her from avoiding fights with other students. However, recently she had developed some techniques for dealing with her loss of temper:

Once, because I have a . . . impulse control problem . . . and there was a little girl and I didn't want to hurt her, so, I mean, 'cause I know I woulda, and I was gonna fight her and I left school, which was probably not very good, but my probation officer didn't get mad at me. 'Cause I had left and then, but I came back. I proceeded to take a walk.

Tammi defined anger-impulse control as a chemical imbalance in her brain. She described the difference in behavior she exhibited from an average person faced with conflict: "Some people, like, when you get mad at something, don't you think about it before you just, you know, just go hittin' people? I don't think about it and I just, when I fight, I try to kill 'em. That's . . . I have like a anger problem." Tammi explained that, in the past, she had taken medication for this, but that recently she had stopped because she did not think it was

helping her. She figured she needed to "kinda help myself, like teach myself how to control."

Tammi reported that she had not taken any medication for this problem since the beginning

of the fall semester. She described another fight in which she had been involved:

> I felt like I needed to . . . I knew what I was doing. Before I would just do it and I'd black out and I'd, like, it was weird because I wouldn't see anything around me but her. But the last time I got into a fight with a girl named _____, we're friends though. At the mall, like I was getting into a fight with her, and I guess it was with all those people around, and I didn't even . . . it's like I blacked out, and all I could see was her. It was weird.

Tammi admitted to getting into a lot of fights at school in the past but said that this

happened less her second year in eighth grade because she didn't want to get in trouble

because it would be breaking her probation if she got suspended. Other reasons she fought

were to defend her relatives or to protect herself. She commented that fighting also kept

other students from hurting her. Further, she explained that different groups of kids used

fighting to protect each other from other groups. She described the groups at Isbill as "head

bangers," "the nerd kids," and "rock-n-rollers." Her group was "the main group because it

[was] not just males and females, but both."

Tammi shared that most of the students she hung around with were into the social

aspects of school. When asked if she thought academics were important to her group, she

responded:

> I don't really talk to kids about . . . I mean, we don't really talk about it. I mean, we talk about other stuff, like what's going on outside of school. People, other people, stuff that's like . . . stuff that's happened. We don't sit there and talk about grades. . . . We talk about . . . For real? You heard what happened? and that type of stuff [laughing]. Like _____ just got locked up or whatever. Like that type of stuff.

In addition, her perception was that awards were not important to students. She had

not received any type of recognition while at Isbill:

I mean, I imagine some of 'em [get rewarded], but I mean you don't hear people talking about it, like . . . "I gotta get this reward." Sometimes _____ [teacher] does a thing where if you turn in all your homework you get a pizza party or something. . . . I mean, kids don't talk about that kind of stuff.

Because of Tammi's fighting during most of her years at Isbill, she spent a great deal of time during seventh grade and the first year of eighth grade suspended from school. She preferred to be suspended and sent home rather than being assigned to in-school suspension. She remarked that in-school suspension was uncomfortable because students had to eat cold sandwiches, could not eat in there, and got only one bathroom break per day: "Besides, I mean, it's more fun. You're at home. You can watch TV, talk on the phone, you know, relax, sleep. And you're, you're not expected to be at school." Although she had been suspended only once this year, Tammi explained that her previous suspensions had been for fighting, missing detention, or talking too much in classes. This year she had been assigned to detention on several occasions for excessive talking, but she said she rarely attended them. Overall, Tammi's behavior seemed to have improved over the previous two years. In general, she thought that school discipline rules were fair, but she believed in defending herself physically if she thought it necessary. She also had a history of poor relationships with peers outside the school environment.

Outside-of-school experiences. Many of Tammi's in-school experiences were influenced by her out-of-school activities. Because most of her friends were older and in high school, the only time she spent with them was outside the school day. In addition to being involved in a number of fights in the past, Tammi had also used drugs, been arrested, and been placed on probation for truancy from school. As a result, she was required to meet with a probation officer and attend regular meetings to discuss her behavior and school progress. Tammi had also been in trouble with the law for violating her probation in the past, for

skipping school the previous year. She explained that the school officials now called her probation officer if she was absent from any class. This seemed to keep her attending school on a regular basis.

At the time of this study, Tammi was on probation for violating a city curfew. She had come home at 1:00 a.m., and her curfew was 9:30 p.m. She anxiously anticipated the probation period ending in a few months and said that if she passed a drug test, she would be off, but if she failed it, she would remain on probation until she turned 16. Tammi described having to pay a fine every time she was picked up for a curfew violation. In the past, her mother had paid these. She was also required to go to meetings and perform community service activities. She also attended a life skills class, where other teens talked about drugs, teen pregnancy, and other topics every week. Tammi seemed nonchalant about these activities.

In addition, Tammi reported having been arrested for carrying a small amount of marijuana in a car. She also had been arrested for possession of drug paraphernalia and for carrying a marijuana scale in her possession. She had also been charged with assault and battery, involving a fight with another individual outside school. Tammi had injured the other girl so badly that it caused her to be hospitalized. Tammi explained that although she had been charged with several offenses, she had never received any actual jail time.

Tammi's physically aggressive behavior seemed to have been evident upon her entering middle school. Since that time, frequent fights, suspensions, and illegal activities outside school had surrounded her life. It was not surprising that these activities carried over into her school experiences and perceptions.

Classroom Observations of Tammi

A total of 10 classroom observations were made of Tammi during the study, including regular and special education classes. Tammi sat near the front in each of her classes and near other students she knew. Tammi's classroom observations focused on her interactions with teachers, other students in class, and the overall classroom environment in general.

Teacher interactions. Tammi usually was quiet in class and rarely interacted with her teachers. Most of the conversations she had with teachers were related to instructions or directions regarding in-class or homework assignments. The observer noted only two situations when Tammi's teachers assisted her with an assignment. She seemed to respond positively to their direction, but she did not always follow up on their instructions. Instead, Tammi often sat and stared into the classroom or talked quietly with other students around her. She did, however, seem to interact more frequently with two of her special education teachers. In one of these classes, Tammi was working on a project related to her career interest of owning a restaurant. In the other class, she frequently talked with the teacher between classes and out in the hallways about nonacademic topics. Tammi appeared to have good personal relationships with these two teachers, but she had far fewer interactions with her regular education teachers.

Occasionally, regular and special education teachers reprimanded Tammi for not participating in classroom activities, talking, or eating and drinking in class. She usually responded positively, but did not necessarily participate in academic activities going on in the classroom. Tammi stated during interviews that she generally liked all her teachers, but that basically classes were boring because she had already taken them during her first year in

eighth grade. She had even taken all of the electives available to eighth-grade students. Essentially, she was well behaved in class but seldom conversed with teachers.

Student interactions in the classroom. In her classes, Tammi interacted with only a few students who sat near her or were special education students. Even on a couple of occasions when special and regular education subject classes were combined, Tammi interacted primarily with special education students. She was particularly close to one student named Ryan, who was also repeating the eighth grade and who also had recently been placed into special education. Tammi and Ryan had every class together and sat next to each other. They often worked together on group projects in class. In her interviews, Tammi described Ryan as one of those people who was "on her social level." Ryan was considered by school officials to be an at-risk student, as well. It appeared that their relationship also extended outside of school. Tammi regularly shoved and played with Ryan and other boys in class. She was physical out in the hallways, as well. Although Tammi stated in interviews that her group or crowd was composed of both girls and boys, she preferred spending most of her time with the boys.

Overall classroom interactions. Typically, Tammi's overall classroom behaviors and interactions were not markedly different from those of other eighth-grade students. However, she was easily affected by distractions outside the classroom. Once, she spent 10 minutes observing students changing classes in the hallway. Teachers' expectations and other students' behavior also affected Tammi. In tightly structured classes, students were usually less active and more attentive. In situations where more flexibility and freedom to move about the room were allowed, students were more physically active and talkative. Although

Tammi was generally attentive most of the time, this did not necessarily mean she was actively involved in the educational activities going on in the classroom.

Tammi did more work and was more actively engaged in classroom activities in special education than in regular education classes, although activities were not that vastly different in either class. In special education classes, she participated in discussions, worked on assignments, and usually turned them in. She was attentive and exhibited good eye contact and nonverbal attention to teacher instructions and directions. Tammi worked at ease with other students in these classes and seemed to have fun with other students. She was attentive in the regular education classes, as well, but was not as interactive. Tammi was not observed participating in any classroom discussions or talking with more than one or two students seated around her. However, she was more distracted by other students' behaviors in the larger classes. For example, she talked when other students did.

Tammi exhibited other engaged classroom behaviors. She usually copied assignments from the blackboard. She followed along in the book when students read aloud in class, although usually opting to "pass" when it was her turn to read. She was particularly enthusiastic about a presentation in one of her special education classes, in which she and Ryan discussed a business they had designed. Tammi made a special effort to make sure the researcher was present on the day of this presentation. She made ice cream for the entire class as a part of the presentation, for extra credit.

Although generally engaged in classroom activities, Tammi also spent a great deal of time daydreaming. Usually in regular education classes, she sat and stared around the classroom. She did not participate in class discussions or turn in homework. A few times, she asked the teacher for paper to complete her classwork assignments. On a couple of

occasions after teachers helped her get started on an assignment, she continued to sit and look around the room after they left her desk.

In a sense, Tammi appeared to just "blend into the woodwork" in classes. Her behavior was not disruptive to teachers or students. At the same time, she participated minimally in the regular education classes and visited more freely with students in the special education classes. Tammi rarely missed class, although she was out of town an entire week before the district's spring break. Her mother had informed school officials that Tammi would be taking spring break at the same time as her younger sister. Tammi was not concerned about the time away from school and made no efforts to make up the missed work.

Summary

Tammi was considered an at-risk student because of her poor academic performance, lack of motivation, and legal and social problems outside school. In addition, her parents' divorce several years ago apparently had some negative effects on her home and school life. Repeating eighth grade and finally being diagnosed with a learning disability were the most recent major events that occurred in Tammi's life.

In spite of these traumatic events, Tammi was looking forward to high school and the opportunity to pursue a career in cooking at the district's alternative education school once she entered tenth grade. Her mother, however, worried that Tammi would not stay in school that long, but would drop out once she turned 16.

Tammi's perceptions of school were based on her experiences as a special education student, her relationships with teachers and peers, and outside-of-school activities. She was more socially mature than her peers and was bored with school. Her school experiences were

influenced by the fact that she was repeating eighth grade and knew she would be promoted because of her age.

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

Selection for Participation in the Study

Charles was nominated for participation in the study because he was perceived by teachers as having low self-esteem and difficulty accepting being in special education. During the initial interview, his mother was extremely interested in the study and encouraged Charles to participate, indicating that what he shared might be useful to other special education students in the future. She provided the researcher with her home file, which included Charles's complete special education and academic records since kindergarten.

Background Information

Charles was 14 years old; he was half Caucasian and half Native American. His father was a full-blooded Mohawk Indian. Charles was small for his age, with friendly, big blue eyes and blonde hair cut in a neat fade. He was the fifth of six children and the only male in his family. His two oldest sisters were 22 and 23 and were from his mother's previous marriage. His other sisters were 17, 15, and 11. Charles's mother reported that the siblings got along with each other fairly well, although Charles frequently got on their nerves. Charles's parents were officially divorced two days before the interview at his home. His mother worked nights, full time.

Charles had been diagnosed with ADHD in kindergarten. His mother had noticed some hyperactivity at home and consulted teachers. Charles had been taking two dosages of Ritalin in the morning and afternoon since kindergarten. His mother reported that her father

and brother also had ADHD. All of Charles's sisters had been or were enrolled in special education classes throughout their education. Charles's mother reported that, in fourth grade, he had problems focusing in school, and teachers reported behavioral problems and low academic achievement. He was evaluated for a learning disability and determined to be eligible for special education. His learning disability was defined as a severe discrepancy between ability and achievement in math, reasoning, and written expression. In addition, he was found to have emotional issues, specifically, low self-esteem. His class schedule was adjusted to include special education classes in English and math, and he was provided social work services.

Charles attended one elementary school from kindergarten through fifth grade and Isbill from sixth grade until the present. His mother reported being actively involved in his education since kindergarten. She maintained regular contact with his teachers, required Charles to bring home weekly progress reports, attended support groups and meetings for parents of children with ADHD, visited his classrooms, talked regularly with the school's special education coordinator, and maintained an exhaustive file at home of Charles's medical and academic records.

Since he entered middle school, Charles's grades had dropped each semester, with the worst being the fall of eighth grade. In sixth grade, he had been enrolled in a split regular and special education schedule. In seventh grade, he was enrolled in a split schedule the first semester and a full special education schedule the second semester. The first semester of eighth grade, he was in all special education classes, and the semester of this study he was enrolled in a split schedule including regular education science and history, and special education study skills, life management, math, and English.

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After the divorce, Charles's mother noticed a dramatic change in his behavior at home and school. He was more aggressive with her and his female teachers. She considered increasing the Ritalin and tried grounding him for doing poorly in school. However, nothing seemed to work. She expressed increasing concern that he would drop out before completing high school unless he experienced more success at school. Charles's attendance was fairly good, and his mother reported that he enjoyed the social aspects of school and seldom missed unless he was ill.

Perceptions of School

Interviews with Charles revealed that his overall views of school were centered on his status as a special education student, including classroom and academic experiences, the effect of taking Ritalin on his behavior, relationships with his teachers and peers, and the divorce of his parents.

On being a special education student. Charles had been in special education since fourth grade and stated that he preferred these smaller classes because they allowed him to get to know other students better. Although he expressed several times during interviews that he was not embarrassed to be in special education, his body language and facial expressions suggested otherwise. Most of his friends were in regular education classes, but Charles thought that his status had no effect on these relationships. In fact, he indicated that some of his friends thought he had it easy by having smaller classes. When asked whether being in special education bothered him, he responded:

> Naw. When people, when people ask me I just say "Yeah," and "What!?" like, like, and then, I don't even care what people think. If, if they bother me . . . I usually make fun of myself before somebody makes fun of me, and then they laugh about it. That's how I take care of it. . . . And yeah . . . some people just say I'm lucky 'cause every

time they walk past there [special education class], we're all, we're all, we're always up running around, talking and stuff.

Charles expressed being more comfortable in the special education classes than in the regular education classes. He compared the two:

> Like in the smaller, the smaller classes, I don't talk as much 'cause, um . . . like too shy. I don't like to talk in front of . . . but in a smaller class I can only get to know eight people or somethin'. It's easier to talk to 'em and make jokes . . . have a little more fun.
> I don't know. I don't like the big classes . . . that much at all because [pause] sometimes you . . . you don't . . . feel right, but uh . . . you're embarrassed sometimes if you're in a big class and you just can't say that much stuff and you don't wanna know all the people. . . . Like in my class, in _____'s class, you know everybody. Everybody's always having fun in there.

He explained that in regular education classes he basically just sat around and daydreamed, but that ironically he could pay attention more. He just did not do it. He thought the work was harder in these classes, and he had more difficulty. Although he seemed more comfortable in the smaller classes, his comments about the academic workload, structure of classes, and problems with academics applied to all his classes.

Charles was frustrated with his classroom experiences and discussed the problems associated with his learning disability. He described how the disability affected his behavior and ability to focus in class: "I . . . I can't settle down sometimes, and I just get . . . I can't concentrate that . . . much." He believed that he had been placed in special education because of his behavior and therefore did not see any reason to try any harder. Further, he thought that teachers were more concerned about his behavior than about whether he was actually learning anything.

Taking Ritalin was a part of Charles's school routine. He took a dosage once in the morning, shortly before coming to school, and another with his lunch. Whether or not he actually swallowed the pills influenced what kind of school day Charles had and whether he

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was able to focus and keep still in class. It usually took 45 minutes for the medicine to take effect. Charles explained that it was still difficult during this time, waiting for it to take effect. He described how it affected him and how he decided whether he would take it:

> Like in the morning, I forgot to take my pill. So . . . it seems like when I take my pill, I mean . . . some of the days I work better, but sometimes I don't feel like working, and so I don't take the pill. And I have like . . . really better days. So, I can have more fun.

Charles's schedule for taking the Ritalin had been changed a couple of times this year. However, he confided to the researcher that he took the medicine when he thought he needed it:

> 'Cause I get tired. . . . On days I take it, I work real hard. . . . I get, I try to get my work done. . . . I concentrate and then I get, go home . . . and stuff . . . and I don't feel like taking that pill. . . . When I get home, I'm too calm. I don't feel like doing anything. I'm bored. . . . And other days I don't feel like, I just wanna have . . . I don't feel like working or somethin' . . . I won't take it. . . . I mean, even if I didn't take it, I still work . . . I still do the work. I mean it; it may not be that good, though.

At other times, Charles chose to take the pill when he was interested in the classwork or activities:

> It seems like, if I need . . . just certain kinds of tests, I take my pill, yeah . . . and so I can sit there and, and look at the book or I can find something. Yeah . .. I'm not talking. And if I, if there's some kind of, like, math activity, like go, like go over tests or some other assignments that you do in class, I don't take my pill either.

Other times when he thought he did not need it, he simply threw it away:

> They'll give me the pill. I just stick it under my tongue, and then they'll think I took it and spit it out in the hallway. . . . I don't really, don't take it, usually. . . . Sometimes, in the seventh grade I used to stick it under my tongue and just go down the hallway and spit it out.

Charles also described his behavior when he had taken the Ritalin and when he had not: "Oh, I . . . like you see me like when I'm in there, I talk, I laugh, I make up more jokes, though when I'm, like if you're in there next hour, I'll sit there and I just don't . . . I don't

talk to anybody, I don't . . . do anything." When asked why he would not take the Ritalin as prescribed, Charles said that he wanted "to be funny and to make people laugh." Having fun in class was important to him. He often discussed how boring his classes were and the difficulty he had sitting still in them. He said many times that classes were "too quiet" and that it was impossible for him to sit still the way teachers often required. At the same time, he admitted that he could pay attention more in class if he had taken the medication: "Yeah, it helps me learn more. I ask questions more. I, see, I used never used to ask questions in big classes. But in the little classes I ask questions more. I take my pill and stuff."

Yet sitting still in classes was extremely difficult for Charles. He explained that it was hard for him to maintain focus and that he was easily distracted by the behavior of other students in class. He believed that having fun in class helped to alleviate the hassle of having to do the work, which he described as too hard:

> Um . . . somebody'll make a joke . . . or we'll sit there and laugh and . . . I lost attention after that. Then . . . I start having fun. . . . yeah, the work's hard and we just start having fun and forget about the hard work and stuff . . . but doing the work, I know how to do, I have no excuse for it.

Charles referred to his special education study skills class in particular as one that was too quiet for him. Although he knew some of the students in this class, it was difficult for him to be as quiet as they were and to settle down to do the work. In fact, once when the researcher was scheduled to observe Charles in this class, he came in, asked for a pass to the library, and stayed gone the whole class period:

> It just gets boring all the time . . . and sometimes, I mean if I go there I do . . . just walk around in the back hallways, and I . . . and stuff. I don't ever bring work sometimes . . . but not that much. . . . They're just like . . . like they actually do their work . . . and they sit there and it's all quiet. . . . I can't hear . . . and I can't do that . . . just like in _____'s class. I mean, that's why I'll be, be laughing and fun in there. . . . I work better, but that class [study skills], we just sit there, it's quiet and kids, they just . . . they don't really talk.

In addition to Charles taking medication, thinking that his classes were boring, and having difficulties being quiet and sitting still, he was also frustrated with asking for help. He thought that, since entering middle school, the schoolwork became more difficult each year, and he was embarrassed to ask teachers for help, even though he believed they would help him. He explained that even after teachers explained something to him, he still did not get it. This frustrated and embarrassed him:

> I try to do it [schoolwork]. I just get frustrated and I feel like talking or just foolin' around with _____ [student] or somebody. Uh . . . I just don't do the work. I mean, I'll do it. I'll get it done before the end of the hour . . . just won't be right 'cause it's . . . I always get frustrated doing it . . . sittin' there . . . quiet . . . I don't like to get up and ask. I, sometimes I wish I knew how to do the work myself, but . . . I don't . . . I just don't know how to ask.

Charles said he had given up on asking for help when he was in the seventh grade. The only time he ever asked teachers for help was when it was for an important grade.

In addition, Charles explained that as he moved through middle school, the classes became harder and harder. He found it difficult to keep up and began being more social in class. He thought that he could accomplish more working in small groups with other students. Certain eighth-grade teachers allowed students to work in groups:

> Mr. _____, his [class] is big, but I have a lot of friends in there. We talk and we help each other in our work, and it's, that's like we sit in a group and Mr. _____ doesn't mind that, and I like, I like doing that. I like sitting in a group, talking so . . . I get more like, like if I'm sittin' there and me and _____ are sittin' there laughing and we're doing the work and we're talking . . . and we take turns doing the work . . . and we got, got on that, got like one problem wrong, that was it.

Charles gave several suggestions that he thought would make his classes more manageable. These included less work, more time to do the assignments, smaller classes, and the opportunity to talk to and work with other students. He was a hands-on learner and expressed needing to be able to move around the room and interact as critical to his ability

to focus in class. In addition, the accommodations he received from the special education co-teacher for science and history in the form of reduced workloads and grading were helpful. The following comments reflected his thoughts:

> Teachers could have the classes where you could talk and maybe have a partner to talk to or somethin' to help do your work, but they don't do that. You sit there in quiet. . . . I don't even get that. . . . Why have the room quiet? I just don't understand that. . . . Kids sometimes can work better . . . when they would . . . be noisy and stuff. I mean, I like noise. I like . . . the noise and stuff . . . can't concentrate. . . . Usually when I do my homework or somethin' at home, I can't do it without the radio playing and . . . watching TV . . . somethin' going on.
>
> Not so much work. I mean . . . sometimes, yeah, I like to work to get the grades up and . . . to make me feel, sometimes feel good that I know it, that I'm doing the work. You could just . . . have the kids, like give an assignment, maybe Tuesday, and it would be due like Thursday. Sometimes that's what I like. Then you could do . . . then the next day, if it's not due, you . . . he gives you class time to . . . maybe chances just this once. . . . He gives us class time . . . we talk, you do your work and it's due the next day, and that's fun. . . . Sometimes just to have, get to talk or somethin'.

Charles was not only frustrated with his current academic experiences; he was extremely pessimistic about going on to high school the next year. In fact, he commented that he was not ready for high school and wanted to repeat eighth grade. Doing so, he thought, would better prepare him academically, as well as increase respect from his peers. He believed that other students would "look up" to him:

> I would wanna just stay back here 'cause I'm not ready for high school yet. To tell ya the truth, I'm not . . . I don't even get the special ed. work here, how to do it. I couldn't even do no high school work. . . . I'd come back and . . . be more prepared for it 'cause I already know what stuff to do and all that, and . . . just the stuff that I really, haven't really been taught . . . from havin' fun and not paying attention. . . . Maybe next year I would . . . I'm not, I mean, I know I could pass [now], but I just wouldn't be ready . . . ninth grade.

Charles did not seem to mind if his friends moved on to high school without him. He said he had already told them he wanted to stay back and was thinking about telling his mother.

Charles admitted that his frustrations and anxieties about high school were in some ways influenced by the peer pressure from his friends. He expressed that he had had less difficulty focusing and concentrating in sixth and seventh grades:

> I would pay attention more. Like when I got here in sixth grade, I didn't even know anybody. All I did was go to class, go to the classes. First stop all my classes. Did . . . did all the work. Paid attention, but I didn't know anybody. Paid attention, did all that work . . . pass class. Didn't . . . I didn't even go to the bathroom or anything.

He also believed that, by repeating eighth grade, he would be able to concentrate more on his studies and not feel pressured to do what his friends were doing:

> I wouldn't spend so much time being late for class and stuff. But it's hard to do now 'cause all my friends in the eighth grade . . . I just do it. I spend a lot of time with, out with, out in the hallway with them. But if I came back, if I stayed back another year, I wouldn't that much . . . friends and all that stuff.

Overall, Charles had been frustrated with his academic experiences for the past two and a half years, resulting in a great deal of anxiety about the future. Although he discussed with the researcher what he thought would improve his learning situation, he had not talked to his teachers or parents about these things. Instead, he resorted to disengaging from academic experiences in the classroom and spent time trying to "have fun" to deal with his frustrations.

Teacher perceptions. Charles generally liked his teachers and believed they cared about his overall success at school, especially one of his special education teachers. When asked how he knew this teacher cared, Charles responded:

> I know Mrs. _____ cares 'cause she's given me so many chances and . . . just tries to . . . tries to get us to do work, but we just don't do it.
>
> She always, she always calls me, Miss _____ always calls you up there and says, "You're doing better in class. Keep it up." And, like, she tells me that I'm one of her favorite students and . . . whatever you want to do at school, you do better in it. . . . She'll ask me, "Do you need help?" She, she'll try to explain it her best 'cause I don't, like, tell her that I don't, still understand. . . . The other teachers'll explain it, but not like those classes in regular ed. . . . 'cause I don't understand.

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Charles said that this teacher and one other he had this year were the only two he respected because they didn't "take stuff" from people. He appreciated teachers who were strict. This behavior demonstrated their caring about students. Charles did not think there were many differences between special and regular education teachers. However, he tried a bit harder in regular education classes:

> They [regular education teachers] just do the same thing they [special education teachers] do . . . pass the work out . . . and you send the work up to them and it seems like they grade it. And so I have to . . . that means I have to try to at least do homeworks more better . . . on the papers I hand in, and that, that makes me be, have, think, more harder in there . . . usually.

Yet having fun in class was important to Charles. He liked teachers who allowed students to relax and be social: "Like . . . they have, like Mrs. _____'s. I mean, we had fun with her 'cause we, we can make jokes with . . . talk, we like, not really like back . . . be mean or nothin' . . . but like to have fun and stuff . . . 'cause it's more fun." Charles believed that having fun in classes helped him to learn. He described a project in one of his special education classes that helped him learn and was fun:

> It's fun, like . . . we're doing a project right now. We have to get, she like gives us a certain amount of money, and we gotta, this ice cream thing. . . . And we're in groups. We have fun with that . . . and it's . . . it's just a lot of fun, so yeah, we're learning how to invest the money and keep it.

Charles thought that most of his teachers expected him to learn in school but that their main concern was his behavior:

> I think they just want me to settle down . . . stop being so bad . . . 'cause I'm so hyper in classes. . . . I have too much fun. They don't like that, but I do, and they just don't think, I don't think they see when I'm doing, have fun, I do get my work done. And they just don't see that. That gets me mad, and then so, then I take my pill and it doesn't help. I mean, they, they see something in my pill, that I can sit there, yeah, and not be bad, but does that help with me work? No!

Charles's views of his teachers were affected by whether he felt comfortable with them, the kinds of activities that took place in the classroom, their expectations of him, their teaching styles, and whether they allowed students to have fun in class. He respected those teachers who maintained a certain amount of discipline and perceived them as caring. He thought that these teachers motivated him to achieve.

Peer relationships. As with most students in the study, popularity and acceptance by peers were important aspects of Charles's school experience. He talked about not being popular in sixth and seventh grades, but how his popularity had increased between seventh and eighth grades. Although Charles's friends had not changed since he entered middle school, his acceptance into their peer group was recent. He explained:

> Like in seventh . . . in sixth and seventh grade, I wasn't that popular. I didn't get noticed that much. But now here in eighth grade, a lot of people know me, and . . . it's like in sixth and seventh grade I got my work done because I was not really that popular. But now that I'm in eighth grade, a little more than what I was last, um . . . last two years . . . it seems. . . . I don't pay attention to my work anymore . . . that I'm, now, that I'm popular.

Charles admitted that being popular made him not want to do his school work because "the people I hang out with [are] sometimes bad and stuff like that. And they do a lot of stuff like skipping, stuff. . . I don't do that. I've skipped once . . . and they do bad stuff." In spite of these pressures, Charles thought it was important to be popular at school in order to know what was going on: "Just to know what's going on and stuff. People's talking about fights or anything. They tell me . . . I know about it. People know me a lot more . . . a lot more people." Charles believed it was possible to be popular and get the work done, but that doing so was too difficult for him. Instead, he found solace in a small group of peers who focused on the social aspects of school. Charles said that he was part of one of the more popular groups at Isbill. His peers described him as being "cool," primarily because of his basketball

skills and experience dating the most popular eighth-grade girl who was African American. Although he had tried out for but did not make the boys' eighth-grade basketball team, Charles enjoyed playing basketball a great deal. The coach and other students often commented on how skilled he was. This also added to his popularity and recognition around school: "I'm noticed for playing good, good basketball. I'm noticed for being one of the white, the best, one of the white, bestest white boys in the school 'cause [there's] not too many that can be good ballers [players] like that." Charles said that basketball was the only thing that motivated him to go to school, and he had not considered any other type of career if he did not make the professional level.

In general, Charles appeared to get along with his peers. They considered him funny and a class clown. Attention from peers lifted his self-esteem, ego, and image. He seemed to gain a great deal of satisfaction from participating in the social aspects of school rather than in academics.

Home life. The divorce of Charles's parents left a significant impact on him, although he denied it during interviews. His mother noted several changes that had occurred in his behavior at home and school shortly after his father moved out of the house. His peer group changed, and his behavior at school and home worsened. Charles admitted that he had not done homework since seventh grade and that he spent several hours each day at the playground after school playing basketball with his friends. His mother reported that he talked back to her at home and argued more with his sisters.

Charles talked about the close relationship he had had with his dad when his parents were married. He was interested in basketball because his father was a good player. His father had bought him boxing gloves and had taken him to a gym in town on a regular basis.

Now that his father was no longer around, Charles lost the opportunity to participate in some

of these sports activities.

Charles admitted that his behavior at home had worsened, that he talked back to his

mother, and that he rarely did his chores:

> I could . . . my dad went away . . . I, I just got . . . I talked back to my mom more. I felt like I had a little more power and stuff . . . and my sisters and stuff. They started, they just started yelling at me. I yelled back. . . . I went out more and stuff. . . . I coulda, like, on those nights I usually had homework and I didn't do that. . . . I just went out and had fun . . . and didn't do my work.

A reward system that had been in place when his father was in the home had been

discontinued due to lack of funds. Charles's mother explained that she could no longer give

him money that he used to earn from doing well in school. These rewards seemed to have

been helpful in keeping Charles motivated to do well in school:

> No, I didn't do good [last marking period grades]. . . . See, my mom was gonna give me a neck . . . my mom already got me this 14-karat-gold necklace and I couldn't have it until my grades was up. My dad bought, was gonna get me my stereo, this big 'ol stereo that I wanted for a long time. . . . My grades isn't up . . . but they all said that, like, when two, two weeks before the marking period was over. I was like, "I can't get my grades up to all C's and only one D in, like, two weeks."

Charles knew that his grades were suffering this year, but he did not seem to know

how to change them. In the past, his father had usually been on top of his grades and

behavior in general:

> When my dad was there I could never talk back. I . . . did everything he told me and stuff. If he, 'cause if I was, the trash needed to be done, he would not wait for me the sec, second time. He just . . . if you didn't do it right now, I couldn't go outside. . . . Like if my friends wanted me to do somethin' bad or like, and I did it, then I'd get somethin' bad on my daily [progress report] and stuff, and they'd just show and if I didn't bring home a daily, I couldn't go boxing. If I, and if I got somethin' bad on my daily, I couldn't go boxing either.

This year, Charles had not done much homework. He said that whatever needed to be done, he just usually "did it real quick in the classroom." Nevertheless, receiving rewards was important to him, and he believed that lately his behavior had improved.

At one point during the study, Charles's father attended classes with him after teachers reported how poorly Charles was doing in class, both academically and behaviorally. Charles's mother reported that his behavior did not improve as a result of his dad's attending classes with him. His peer group had also changed, and he spent very little time doing homework. Although Charles denied the impact of his parents' divorce, it was evident that his behavior both at home and at school had worsened between seventh and eighth grades.

Classroom Observations of Charles

Classroom observations of Charles took place in both special and regular education classes. Besides Laura and Jason, he was the most physically active student in the study. He was especially active in special education classes, which had fewer students. As discussed during his interviews, Charles had a difficult time staying seated and focused on task. His classroom observations focused on his interactions with teachers, other students, and the classroom environment in general.

Interactions with teachers. Charles's interactions with teachers usually were the result of some reprimand for behaving or speaking inappropriately in class. He had assigned seating in all of his classes, usually near the teacher's desk. All teachers knew he was taking Ritalin and that it was necessary to control his behavior. However, they all had doubts as to whether Charles was taking the medication as prescribed. His two special education teachers seemed the most familiar with his behavior and could usually predict when he had not taken the Ritalin. In fact, one of these teachers suggested to Charles's mother that the dosage be

increased because it did not seem to be having much effect on his behavior. This teacher had Charles for two afternoon classes that were back to back. She also had the most difficulty controlling his hyperactive behavior. Teachers generally tried to ignore Charles's behavior or continuously reprimanded him or threatened to call his mother or send him to the office. No matter what they tried, nothing ever seemed to really change the behavior.

Charles's hyperactive classroom behavior garnered him much attention from teachers. He was often reprimanded for talking too much, including when the teacher was trying to present a lesson, during classroom discussions, or after he had been instructed to follow certain directions. During one particular class, Charles was reprimanded continuously by the teacher for chewing gum profusely, not having a pencil, arguing with the teacher, making comments after every statement she made during her presentation, and interrupting to ask for make-up work in the middle of her lecture. After each reprimand, Charles temporarily ceased his behavior, but he began again shortly with another disruptive activity.

In one of the special education classes, the teacher reprimanded Charles more than 10 times during one class period for excessive talking. Some of this talking was to other students, and at other times it was directed to the teacher. Most of the time his comments were clearly unrelated to the academic activities going on in the classroom. For example, when one teacher announced to the class that she would not be present the next day, Charles responded by blurting out, "She's going to get her leg cut off!" Sometimes, however, the content of Charles's outbursts was related to academic discussions going on in the classroom, but still inappropriate. In the middle of one teacher's lecture, Charles asked if he had any make-up work that needed to be completed. When ignored by the teacher, he turned to the girl seated behind him and started talking with her before being reprimanded by the teacher. In this same

class later on in the period, Charles asked aloud, "Where are you?" indicating that he did not know from where in the book the teacher was discussing the topic. Once during math class, he interrupted a discussion by asking the teacher for a calculator to complete his assignment.

Charles chewed gum profusely in class and was usually reprimanded for this. Other behaviors that teachers addressed in class included his talking to students around him while others gave oral presentations, being out of his seat without permission, and not having materials for class. Once he was reprimanded for not having a pen after tossing his across the room to another student.

Charles indicated in interviews that he liked his special education classes because he got to know other students better. He also appeared to interact with teachers in these classes. He especially liked one of his special education teachers and talked nonstop most days in her class. His comments generally agitated her and included asking for information that had already been given and asking to leave class to go to the bathroom. He seemed to really test her patience, and it was obvious that this teacher was frustrated with his behavior. In fact, she expressed her frustration to the researcher, saying that the only thing that would improve Charles's behavior was increasing his medication. Charles indicated during interviews that this was his favorite teacher and that he believed she really cared about his academic progress.

On the few occasions when Charles was observed actually engaging in classwork in special education classes, teachers attempted to assist him. He was receptive to their help and completed the assignments. In the regular education classes, his interactions with teachers centered on his inappropriate classroom behavior. In one of these classes, a substitute reprimanded Charles for being out of his seat. After he argued with her about where his appropriate seat was, she briefly considered removing him from the classroom, but instead

assigned him to a table at the back of the room to work on the assignment. Charles moved to the desk but refused to do any work, even after the special education co-teacher attempted to assist him. Instead, for the remainder of the period, he played with a small object that was on the shelf in the back of the room. When the special education co-teacher asked Charles where he was on the project, he responded that he was not finished with it but that he did not need any help.

Charles's interactions with teachers were usually a result of his attention-seeking behaviors. He seemed to enjoy the attention this brought him, especially from his special education teachers. Blurting out responses in the middle of class and talking back to one of the special education teachers were regular occurrences for Charles. All teachers expressed that they were frustrated with his behavior, but they realized it was related to his learning disability and inability to sit still and control himself in class. In fact, both special education teachers knew when Charles had not taken his Ritalin because his behavior became what they called "out of the box." Nevertheless, both believed that he was capable of doing the work when he tried. However, they also pointed out that Charles's behavior had gotten progressively worse since the beginning of the school year. Observation of Charles's classwork assignments indicated that he had some abilities to do the work required of him, but the biggest problem seemed to be his inability to stay focused and in his seat an entire class period.

Interactions with other students. Charles was popular among his classmates. Because of his outgoing personality and "busybody" activities in class, none of the students ever appeared disturbed or surprised by his behavior. Most of the reprimands he received from teachers were related to his talking to other students in class, usually those seated around him.

During one class, Charles sat with his hand up to his face and talked constantly to the student seated next to him the entire class period, while other students were giving their oral presentations. On another occasion during this same class, he talked to the boy sitting next to him throughout the entire film being shown.

In special education classes (math and English), there were more opportunities for students to work together in groups. Even in those classes, though, Charles was reprimanded for talking too much or too loudly. Once, while working in one of these groups, Charles and another boy rapped a song out loud during the middle of the class. Neither the teacher nor other students seemed bothered by this. Although other students visited with each other while working on group activities, Charles's behavior was always more aggressive and pronounced. For example, once when one of the special education teachers was absent from class, the substitute asked students to read aloud. Each student did this, but when it was Charles's turn to read, he did so in a very fast-paced rhythm and changed the articulation of his voice to sound animated, causing the other students to laugh at him. He enjoyed this attention.

During another special education class, Charles talked constantly with a boy across the room from him while the teacher was giving a lecture. He tossed a pencil back and forth to this same boy and displayed unusual motions in the air while swinging his arms and making funny faces. He also talked under his breath in a low tone to himself and to the girl seated behind him.

Charles frequently involved himself in other students' conversations in the classroom. He seemed always to know what was going on with everyone else. Regularly, he interrupted other students' conversations or commented on discussions he heard them having. For instance, once a boy was discussing not having enough time to do his homework when Charles

responded, "That's where you drop your drugs off at," indicating that the boy sold drugs and this was the reason he did not have time to do his homework.

Although Charles was "busy" during both regular and special education classes, his interactions with other students were more frequent in the special education classes. He talked to the same few students in both classes. The majority of students in the special education classes were also mainstreamed into his regular education classes. Therefore, he was around the same group of students most of each day. Charles pushed and shoved other students regularly on his way into classrooms and out in the hallways between classes. Other students seemed to be used to his aggressive physical and verbal behavior.

Overall classroom interactions. Charles's overall classroom experiences were not only a result of his interactions with teachers and students, but also of what else was going on in the classroom. Whether or not he had taken Ritalin clearly affected his behavior. There were marked differences in his behavior in special and regular education classes. Teachers' style and the classroom-control strategies they employed also affected his behavior. He indicated in interviews that he liked teachers who were strict, even though he gave most of them a hard time behaviorally.

Although Charles's classroom behavior was clearly hyperactive, it was magnified in special education classes. However, what was interesting was not only the differences in his behavior in both classes, but how or whether these behaviors affected his participation in and focus on the academic activities going on in the classroom. For example, even though Charles regularly interrupted the special education teachers with verbal outbursts and disruptive physical behaviors while they lectured or led discussions, his comments indicated that he was, in fact, aware of what was going on in the class. In one of these classes, during a 20-minute

period, Charles was observed throwing a pencil across the room to another student, waving his hands in the air, mumbling to himself under his breath, constantly moving around in his seat, and pounding lightly on his desk. During these activities, however, he blurted out that he was staying at home when the teacher announced an upcoming exam, indicating that he was aware of the discussion going on in class. While exhibiting the above-mentioned behaviors, he wrote down notes verbally given by the teacher, copied information from the blackboard, and maintained eye contact with the teacher.

During another special education class, Charles exhibited similar behavior. While the teacher read a poem aloud and conducted a question-and-answer session afterwards, Charles blurted out incorrect answers. Later during the same class, between rapping out loud with another student and constantly getting out of his seat to move around the room to talk to other students, he asked the teacher questions about the in-class assignment and completed and turned it in with 15 minutes remaining in the class period. The rest of the time he sat at his desk, at first quietly, but quickly started talking and making jokes with students seated around him. He spent the remaining five minutes of the class standing, shooting wads of balled-up paper at the trash can.

In his two regular education classes, Charles's behavior was slightly tamer in that he did not leave his seat as often or interact with teachers; yet, unlike in special education classes, he rarely attempted to do the classwork. Instead, he either sat in his chair staring out into the class, or talked with other students. In one regular education class, Charles talked to a boy seated next to him the entire period while the rest of the class watched a video. He stopped talking once when the teacher reprimanded him. He constantly played with a book, examined its contents, showed it to the boy seated next to him, and placed it in and out of his mouth.

Once the film was over, Charles sat quietly at his desk, did not participate in the question-and-answer period, and did not take the oral quiz that was given. Review of his paper at the end of class revealed that he had not attempted to answer any of the questions.

Charles's overall classroom behavior and interactions were consistent with the way he described his experiences during interviews. Clearly, he had a difficult time remaining seated and focused in classes. It was impossible to know which factors affected his behavior on a particular day. Whether or not he had taken his medication as prescribed, the type of activity going on in the classroom, and which teacher or class he was in all could have had an effect on his behavior and interactions. Whether he could control himself or not, Charles rarely sat still in class and only occasionally finished assignments. He seemed to enjoy being the "life of the class" by making funny comments and telling jokes to other students in class. Teachers were sensitive to his being ADHD and tolerated his behavior. Few sent him out of the classroom to be reprimanded by administrators.

Summary

Charles was considered an at-risk student by teachers because they believed he had low self-esteem about being in special education. Interviews revealed that his overall perceptions of school were shaped by his experiences as a special education student, which included academic and classroom experiences and his relationships with teachers and peers, and by the recent divorce of his parents. In addition, Charles had ADHD and had been taking Ritalin since fourth grade. Charles basically enjoyed the social aspects of school but struggled academically and had little confidence in his abilities.

Classroom observations of Charles showed the impact of Ritalin on his experiences. His interactions with teachers, other students in class, and the entire classroom environment

were a result of his inability to sit still and focus in classes. Charles's conscious decision as to whether or not he would take his medication also affected his classroom experiences. He thought that most teachers were interested primarily in controlling his behavior. Also, he had difficulty asking for help and resorted to engaging in social activities during class.

Charles's low self-esteem and lack of confidence in his ability to succeed in school had progressively worsened over the past two and a half years, and his peer group and behavior at home and school had changed and worsened. Both Charles and his mother said they were ambivalent about his future. A series of academic and family transitional issues seemed to place him in a dangerous situation that had implications for his school failure.

Vicki

Selection for Participation in the Study

Vicki was considered an at-risk student by teachers because of her poor academic performance. Her mother seemed pleased that she was interested in participating in the study. Vicki was interested from the beginning in knowing which other students were involved. She suspected that one of her friends, Laura, was also in the study. Apparently, Laura had mentioned her participation to Vicki. Vicki and her mother were told that participant information would not be revealed and that it was up to them whether or not they chose to be involved in the study. Both Vicki and her mother chose to participate and no further issues arose, although it is likely that both Vicki and Laura knew of each other's involvement in the study.

<u>Background Information</u>

Vicki was a 13-year-old African American who turned 14 during the study. She was the second oldest of four female siblings in her family; her sisters were 16, 12, and 11. Her 12-year-old sister also attended Isbill Middle School. The 16-year-old sister was a teenage mother. Vicki lived with her parents and siblings in an apartment. Her mother and father were both employed, and her mother worked nights. The family had moved around the city four times since Vicki was born and had lived at the current location for eight months. Vicki had attended three elementary and three middle schools in the city since beginning kindergarten.

Vicki's academic problems in school began early. She repeated kindergarten and did not learn to read until third grade. Her official school records indicated that she was identified with a reading problem early on in her schooling, and one teacher noted that she possibly needed testing for special education. However, there was no evidence in her files that such testing ever took place. She began receiving compensatory education or Chapter I services in fourth grade. Her achievement test scores indicated declines in academic performance each year beginning in elementary school. By sixth grade, most of her achievement and national standardized test scores were in the tenth percentile.

Vicki's grades had significantly dropped each semester since the beginning of sixth grade. For the first semester of sixth grade, she had a 2.3 grade point average (GPA) (on a scale of 4.0), the second a 1.5. First semester of seventh grade, she had a 1.2 GPA, and second semester a 1.7. The first semester of eighth grade at Isbill, Vicki earned a 1.0 GPA, including one E, one C, and four D's. At the time of this study, her class rank was 317/406. Ironically, both Vicki and her mother thought that she was doing well this year in school and expressed satisfaction with her status throughout the study.

Since elementary school, Vicki's records also showed a history of excessive absences. In kindergarten, she had 22 absences and 18 tardies. In sixth grade, she had a total of 61 absences from school. In seventh grade, she had 19 absences during the first semester. During the semester of this study, Vicki had missed only two full days of school but had a total of 60 unexplained absences from her classes and 28 tardies. The vast majority of these absences and tardies were from her physical education class, which met the first two hours of the day.

Vicki's mother indicated how much Vicki liked school and talked about how organized she was. She said that the entire family, especially Vicki's paternal grandmother, was supportive of all the girls' academic efforts. The grandmother had established trust funds for each of the girls' future education. Vicki's mother thought that this motivated them to do well in school. She commented on how close Vicki and her father were, as evidenced by his helping her with her math homework.

Of all the students in the study, Vicki was the most difficult to interview. She was extremely quiet and shy, not only in interviews but in the classroom as well. She maintained little eye contact during interviews and answered questions briefly, with few explanations. Several times the researcher was not sure whether Vicki understood terms used in certain questions and often had to rephrase the question or provide definitions of seemingly simple words like "interested" or "potential." In addition, Vicki was often inconsistent with her responses, giving one response at one time and something different at another to the same line of questions. The researcher believes this may have been due to her nervousness about being recorded. Nevertheless, Vicki was cooperative throughout the study.

<u>Perceptions of School</u>

Interviews with Vicki revealed that her overall perceptions of school centered on the school environment or climate, her academic experiences and concerns, views of teachers, and experiences at two middle schools before transferring to Isbill for eighth grade.

<u>School climate.</u> Vicki said that she liked Isbill better than the two previous schools she had attended because she had more friends, the school was larger, and she had more fun. However, she did not like some of the rules, which included not allowing students to carry backpacks to class and being assigned to after-school detention for having just one tardy. She was particularly concerned about school safety, which she believed was lacking at Isbill. She thought that too much gossiping and fighting went on between students at the school. Also, she thought that students did not respect school staff, and this seemed to bother her. When asked what her ideal school would be like, she responded, "less bad kids and probably more security." She defined bad kids as those who "started stuff," including fighting. Although Vicki had not been involved in a fight at Isbill, she was aware of the school's efforts to curtail conflicts between students. She explained the Peacemaker program, which was aimed at settling arguments between students:

> It's like, a place where, if you got a problem with somebody, uh . . . they put you in Peacemakers; then they'll call the other person that you got a problem with, and they won't tell 'em that you in there. . . . Then they take you in there for you to see who . . . to solve the problem. They'll let 'em write on a sheet what happened.

When asked what kinds of things at school made her feel unsafe, she replied, "Kids bringing knives to school . . . and, other things . . . other weapons." Vicki said she had actually seen weapons at school. When asked what she would do if she were in a situation where weapons were present, she said, "probably go tell Security or a teacher or somebody." She thought that most students, however, were probably afraid to tell on students who had

weapons at school. The attitudes of some students at Isbill also concerned Vicki: "Like, if a teacher tell 'em to do somethin', they'll get mad and start talking back to the teacher or somethin'." She thought that students behaved this way because they saw other students doing it and getting away with it.

Nevertheless, Vicki thought it was easy to do well at Isbill. She thought all one needed to do was "do their work, turn it in on time, get good grades, and mind their own business." She said that some students did not do this because they did not want to pay attention, rarely came to class, just wanted to play around, and did not even try to listen to the teacher. She thought this was because these students did not have strong guidance at home from their parents. Vicki believed that most students cared about their grades, but many did not.

Vicki was not involved in extracurricular activities or after-school programs at Isbill, although she was interested in basketball and cheerleading. She said that she was tired after school and just wanted to go home. Once home, she mostly just did her homework and babysat her infant niece. She indicated that she wanted to participate in both basketball and cheerleading next year in high school.

Overall, Vicki liked Isbill better than her previous two middle schools. Her main concern was school safety. She had several friends, including Laura and Jason, and got along with other students and her teachers. She thought she fit in well at Isbill.

Academic perceptions. Vicki believed that she was doing well academically and said that she made the A/B honor roll, although her grades for the first semester at Isbill were one E, one C, and 4 D's. Throughout interviews with Vicki, however, several contradictions like this occurred where what she said at one point was often inconsistent with what she said later on or what was found in her school records. She believed that she could do better in school,

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but because some of her classes were boring, she sometimes just went to sleep. Vicki thought that she had too much work to do and that it was too difficult. She believed one of the things that would help her was to do less writing and more drawing and projects in classes. Her favorite classes were those in which the teacher showed a lot of movies and did not give much homework. Her least favorite class was one she considered boring because "all the teacher did was talk." She described her math class as being the hardest: "In the beginning it was hard . . . because, like, . . . I barely know how to do fractions and every Friday he give us a test and I fail it." Vicki said she did poorly in this class even though her father often helped her at home with her homework, and the teacher occasionally allowed students to use their notes on tests.

When asked what she thought would help her in her classes, Vicki cited several things, including help from teachers:

> Like in math class, um . . . sometime on tests he, he give us most of the answers and then like the rest, he make us do by ourselves and like we need help with it, he'll show us how to do it. . . . Like before he give us the answers, he shows the steps and then how to do it, and then he gives us the answers. . . .
>
> She give us, like, give us labs that she bring in, like well, she, we do projects in her, inside her class like labs. Like . . . we, we gotta put like batteries and wires and light bulbs together to make the light bulb light up, stuff. . . . That and learning how to plant, plant plants.

Vicki explained that she learned best by hearing and seeing the materials, as well as by hands-on-type activities. Her study practices at home included reading the materials and reviewing word lists. Although she struggled in math, she thought she would do better if she had more homework. Vicki admitted that she did not spend much time doing homework (30 minutes or less per day) and said that only one of her classes required it. Vicki liked doing reports for her classes. She found this activity challenging and fun. In her favorite class, history, she had the opportunity to do several reports.

Vicki expressed that her parents expected her to get good grades in school but that they understood when she did not do well in weaker subjects like math. In this class, their expectations were lower than in others. Vicki's perception of a good student was one who "did his or her work, was in class on time, and paid attention." She thought she fit this description. She said that even though school was sometimes both hard and boring for her, she was motivated to attend because she wanted to pass to the next grade. Also, she stated that her mother motivated her by encouraging her and making sure she went to school.

Vicki looked forward to meeting new people in high school next year and thought that her teachers had prepared her academically for the transition by introducing her to ninth-grade-level work. Yet she expressed ambivalence about the type and amount of work that would be required. She thought the work might be too hard for her.

Vicki's views on academics were also influenced by how she felt about her teachers. She liked those who did not yell or assign much homework. Also, she was appreciative of those teachers who kept students informed of their grades and gave them opportunities to make up work: "Because, like, if, if they give us a homework assignment and we don't do it, then they tell us that uh . . . that we goin' fail and we should do it." Vicki believed that teachers wanted her to get good grades and that they had high expectations for her to do well in classes. She thought teachers also expressed their concern for students doing well by providing them extra-credit opportunities. She described her favorite two teachers as being nice, not yelling at students, and not giving so much homework. The following describes those she did not like: "They mean . . . and make, they do detention. Like if you late, you be late one day, they give you detention and it's not suppose to go like that. It's suppose to go like, if . . . you gotta be tardy three times and then get detention."

Vicki's perceptions of teachers were based not only on how they managed the academic aspects of teaching but also on how they handled nonclassroom issues like tardies. She liked those teachers who were more lenient on students and disliked those who strictly enforced student discipline regarding rules she thought were unfair. Throughout the study, Vicki expressed that she was doing well in her classes, although each of her teachers said she was barely passing.

Previous school experiences. Vicki explained that she had changed schools so much because her parents moved around the city. She had attended three different elementary and middle schools, including Isbill, since kindergarten. She shared that although she "didn't want to move, it didn't bother [her] that much." However, it was clear from her school records that Vicki's grades had seriously plummeted from the beginning of sixth grade through the time of this study. Her experiences at the two previous middle schools affected how she viewed Isbill, and teachers were at the center of her perceptions.

In sixth grade, Vicki attended Arthur Middle School in the city. She described this school as being similar to Isbill, but "more fun and nicer teachers." In seventh grade, she attended Whitman School, where she had to wear a uniform. Vicki described teachers there as being much stricter than at Arthur or Isbill. At Whitman, teachers walked students to each class and to lunch. The only thing Vicki really liked about Whitman was that each student had a computer on his or her desk. She explained that she transferred from Whitman School to Isbill because she did not like wearing a uniform and having to get up so early to travel across town to this school.

At Isbill, Vicki said she had more friends than at Whitman or Arthur Middle School. Most of her friends were from the neighborhood. She considered Laura one of her best

friends. Overall, she liked Isbill better than either of her two previous schools, primarily because it was larger. Her mother indicated during an interview that Vicki enjoyed having more choices at Isbill, including a wider variety of choices on the lunch menu and in the curriculum.

Reluctantly, Vicki admitted that changing schools had affected her grades. Although in earlier interviews she talked about having problems doing fractions in math class, she thought that she was repeating material that had already been covered before coming to Isbill: "We had to learn, I had to learn the same thing twice . . . and I already knew it . . . like fractions and stuff . . . like in math." Yet she failed math in seventh grade and again the first semester of eighth grade at Isbill.

Interviews with Vicki disclosed a number of contradictions. On one occasion, she talked about how much she really liked one of her classes; other times she said she hated it. Her attendance record showed that she had missed or was tardy to this class numerous times during the semester of this study. Her mother expressed in the interview how much Vicki disliked this class. Vicki maintained that she was doing well in classes this semester, saying she had A's, B's, and C's halfway through the marking period. However, she was one of many students who was informed that their passing on to high school was in jeopardy if they did not improve their grades the final few weeks of school. When asked how she felt about the team concept that her school employed to help students and teachers get to know each other better, Vicki first stated that the team did not do anything together. Later, she described how the group went skating and frequently participated in other fun activities during the marking period.

On one occasion, Vicki said that she failed her math test every week. Later, she said she had a B in this class. She was inconsistent in describing which teachers gave homework, and how much. Other times she complained of having too much homework, yet said she was bored. Regarding math class, she talked about how much she struggled, yet expressed frustration that she was having to learn the same thing twice after transferring to Isbill.

Vicki never appeared comfortable during interviews, and her nervousness may account for some of these inconsistencies. Nevertheless, classroom observations of Vicki helped to create a broader picture of her school perceptions and experiences.

Classroom Observations of Vicki

Vicki was not only the quietest student in the study, but perhaps one of the quietest in each of her classes. Interactions with her teachers were rare. The only students she talked to on a regular basis were Laura and three other girls who usually sat together during math class. Overall, Vicki was the kind of student who easily "faded into the woodwork." Classroom observations of Vicki focused on her interactions with teachers, students, and the overall classroom environment in general.

Interactions with teachers. During interviews, Vicki spoke favorably of most of her teachers. In the classroom, her communicating with them was observed only a few times. In two of her classes, Vicki performed a sort of "student-helper role." In one class, she asked to take the class attendance sheets to the office after roll check. In another class, she frequently handed back to students papers that had been checked. A pleasant look on her face while she performed these activities indicated that Vicki enjoyed doing these things.

On two occasions, Vicki talked with teachers about academic work she was doing in the class. During a science test, she approached the teacher and asked a question. In math

class, she discussed an assignment with the teacher at his desk. However, her experiences interacting with teachers were not always pleasant. Once during a question-and-answer session after a film in history class, Vicki looked embarrassed after not being able to answer a question the teacher asked her. The only other times Vicki was observed interacting with teachers occurred when they reprimanded her for inappropriate classroom behavior. All three of these occasions occurred when Vicki and other students were talking while they were supposed to be working on a group activity, for horseplay with another student (throwing a brush back and forth), and for quietly talking to a student seated behind her while the teacher was passing out a test. However, Vicki usually sat quietly in class and rarely left her seat. Any conversations between her and other students were initiated by them.

Interactions with other students. Aside from Laura, Vicki rarely talked to other students in her classes other than the ones she and Laura shared. The topics of their conversations were usually social and nonacademic in nature. The few occasions Vicki was observed talking to other students seated around her included when she shared her homework with a girl seated across from her. Once during the middle of history class, Vicki hollered the correct pronunciation of her name across the room to a student who was calling her by her full name, Victoria. Vicki was agitated by this and wanted the student to call her Vicki. In another class once, Vicki wrestled playfully for several minutes with a boy seated across the row from her. However, when class began, she did not talk with the boy again.

Vicki was the most social in classes with Laura. Both of them enjoyed combing each other's and other girls' hair every free moment they got. Vicki frequently wore a comb in the back of her hair, stuck into her short ponytail. She also carried her backpack occasionally from

class to class, although this was against school rules. When asked about this, she said, "Certain teachers let me do it."

In math class, Laura and Vicki regularly talked with a small group of girls seated in the back middle section of the classroom. Although Vicki was part of the group, it was Laura who usually led the conversations. Vicki always sat near Laura. She talked very little during the conversations but paid attention to what was being said. Aside from Laura in the group, Vicki usually talked directly to only one other student, Bonnie. These conversations were nonacademic in nature and centered on social issues. For example, during one conversation, Vicki told Bonnie that she had gotten herself in trouble. This comment followed a scolding that Bonnie received from the teacher for not paying attention in class. Other conversations between Vicki and Bonnie were about what a hysterectomy was and the consequences of stealing. Vicki explained both to Bonnie.

In physical education class, however, a different side of Vicki was seen. While a member of a group of seven girls practicing tumbling techniques, Vicki was lively and smiled a lot as she and the group practiced stunts and then performed them in front of the teacher for a grade. Vicki was slightly heavier and stronger than the other girls in the group and usually helped form the base of each stunt position. Throughout the class, she laughed lot, moved swiftly and playfully from activity to another with the group, and displayed a smile on her face after each performance in front of the teacher.

Overall classroom environment. Overall, in the classroom environment, Vicki behaved much like the average student. On many occasions, she was one of a few students who actually worked on classroom assignments. She rarely got into trouble for behavioral reasons. Although she did not interact much with teachers or other students, she stayed busy by digging

around in her backpack, writing on paper at her desk, or working on classroom assignments. In her book bag, Vicki carried a lipstick, brush, comb, mirror, and other personal items. She often used these during class. Vicki paid attention in classes. She always copied down everything teachers wrote on the board and listened when other students gave oral presentations. She attempted the classwork and usually turned in her work at the end of the period. However, she always worked alone on assignments, rarely asking the teacher or other students for help.

Vicki also kept abreast of her grades in classes. In one particular class where grades were posted on a file cabinet, she regularly checked them. Rarely, however, did she have any expression on her face after doing this. Therefore, it was hard to tell how she thought she was doing. However, she did inform the researcher once that she knew how she was doing in each of her classes except one. She explained that she liked to keep up with her grades in each class.

Other than the few girls she interacted with in math class, other students barely paid any attention to Vicki. On a couple of occasions during two different classes, Vicki talked out loud to herself, seemingly to draw attention from other students. But in each case, no one responded. In the first situation, after the teacher had just finished explaining how to use a protractor, Vicki said, "I don't have enough room [on her paper] to draw this." In the second situation, Vicki asked out loud, "What time is it?"

Vicki was so quiet most of the time during classes that one had to look for her to make sure she was present. She talked more with other students in classes that she and Laura were in together. However, out in the hallways, she did not spend that much time around Laura. She usually ate lunch and played chess with other girls.

Summary

Interviews, classroom observations, and a review of her official school records indicated that Vicki had struggled academically since grade school, not learning how to read until third grade. Her teachers considered her at risk because of her poor academic performance the first semester at Isbill. In addition to her attending three elementary and three middle schools, Vicki's family had moved around the city four times since she began school. Her achievement tests showed a clear decline each year she had been in school. Vicki was concerned about school safety and reported that students gossiped and fought regularly and brought weapons to school.

In spite of her struggling academically, both Vicki and her mother thought she was doing well in school. Vicki looked forward to high school and wanted to be an accountant. She was extremely quiet during classes and rarely interacted with her teachers, although she attempted and turned in her classwork assignments. Vicki considered Laura her best friend and spent most of her free time in classes talking to her. Aside from Laura, she mingled with only a few other students. Vicki was not active in any school activities but expressed wanting to participate in sports activities next year in high school.

Toward the end of the study, Vicki was informed, along with a large number of other eighth-grade students, that she was in danger of failing eighth grade if her work did not improve during the final weeks of school. When asked how she felt about this, Vicki said she was confident she would pass all her classes and be promoted. Vicki consistently expressed an inaccurate picture of her academic status, stating that her grades were good. Vicki's family seemed very supportive of her academically. Although she was anxious about the academic

workload next year in high school, Vicki looked forward to the opportunity to make new friends.

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

Becoming a Participant in the Study

Jason was considered an at-risk student and recommended for the study for academic and behavioral reasons. His official school records indicated that, since enrolling at Isbill in seventh grade, he had been suspended numerous times for fighting and getting into trouble with teachers. His eighth-grade fall semester grades included one B, two C's, and three D's. Because of the amount of time he had missed school the previous year due to suspensions, it was mandatory that he pass all classes this year to be promoted to high school. At the time of this study, his class rank was 323/406.

Both Jason and his mother were excited about participating in the study. Several times they inquired about who else was participating. Jason's mother was extremely talkative and continuously expressed an interest in the researcher's background and future aspirations. Jason was friends with both Laura and Vicki and was probably aware that they were participating in the study, as well.

Background Information

Jason was a 13-year-old African American and the oldest of six children. He and his siblings, ages 9, 8, 7, 6, and 4, lived in a house with his single-parent mother. They had moved into the house they now lived in 10 years ago. Jason's father and uncle (his mother's brother), with whom he as very close, were both incarcerated. Jason was particularly close to his maternal grandparents and temporarily lived with them the semester before this study began.

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Jason's mother described him as "hyperactive" since birth, always very social, and bratty; she said he moved around a lot and blamed others for his bad behavior. She reported having heard these same descriptions of Jason from his elementary school teachers. Since grade school, Jason had had difficulty staying in his seat and was described as "having to run around the room to burn off some of his energy." His behavior was much the same at home. However, it got him into trouble early in elementary school, and his records showed problems with truancy and hyperactivity, growing progressively worse after he entered middle school. Also, his grades dropped significantly beginning in seventh grade.

Jason attended one school for kindergarten through fifth grade and one middle school in the sixth grade before transferring to Isbill for seventh grade. His mother explained that the change of schools was to get Jason away from his friends in the neighborhood who she thought were bad influences on him. However, this did not work because these same friends also transferred to Isbill. From seventh grade on, Jason's behavior became worse. His mother described him as being "mouthier," meaning that he talked back more to her and to teachers at school.

Because of his behavioral problems in seventh grade and numerous suspensions, Jason's mother sought counseling. She reported that this helped for about a month, but on the same day Jason returned to school, he was suspended again for running in the hallway. She was frustrated and did not continue counseling, although she said there had been some improvement in Jason's behavior. However, his behavior and attitude continued to get worse at home and at school.

Jason had established a close relationship with his maternal grandparents. His mother sent him to live with her parents during the latter half of the fall semester of eighth grade

because she could not control his behavior at home or in school. She reported that his behavior improved somewhat during that time. Jason also had problems in the neighborhood and community. His mother expressed concern about the kinds of boys he hung out with—most were repeating the eighth grade, had already dropped out of school, or were older than Jason. She reported that Jason had experimented with marijuana, been in trouble with the law several times for violating the city's curfew, and had been picked up for shoplifting.

Jason's mother was extremely frustrated with her inability to control his behavior. Although she frequently described him as hyperactive, teachers reported that she refused to have Jason tested for ADHD or placed on medication. She thought that her talking to, reprimanding, and even trying to reward Jason were all ineffective. She had spent much money in the past on designer clothes and shoes for him, hoping this would improve his grades and behavior, but it did not. She believed that Jason was just "born that way" and there was not much she could do to change the way he was. She thought that he would drop out before completing high school and feared that he would end up in the penal system. She also seemed powerless to change their current living environment, which she believed contributed to Jason's negative attitude and hyperactive behavior.

Jason's grades dropped from a C average in sixth grade to a 1.5 and 0.3 during the first and second semesters after he enrolled at Isbill in seventh grade. During the fall semester of eighth grade, he posted a 1.6 GPA (on a 4.0 scale). In addition, he missed 56 days of school during the second semester of sixth grade and 44 days during the second semester of seventh grade. These absences were the results of numerous suspensions he received at both schools for fighting and being unruly in the classroom. During the semester of this study, Jason had

missed 11 full days of school, including being suspended 10 days, and had accumulated 48 absences from his classes and 42 tardies.

Despite Jason's negative attitude, friends, and behavior, his mother reported that he loved school and was upset if he had to miss for any reason. He participated on two sports teams and had several friends at school. His dream was to become a professional basketball player. Jason was well aware that passing all his classes was essential to being promoted to high school, yet his grades remained borderline.

Perceptions of School

This was Jason's second year at Isbill. He had attended sixth grade at Ricker Middle School in the city. Overall, he thought Ricker was much stricter than Isbill, but he liked the teachers at Isbill much better. Jason thought that he was an average student and had several friends. He participated on the track and basketball teams. His biggest dislike at Isbill was rules, specifically those related to fighting, talking, and running in the hallways. As a result of violating these rules on a regular basis, he spent a lot of time in after-school detention and suspended.

Jason said that his motivation for going to school was that he wanted to be a professional basketball player, and he had to be in school in order to attain this goal. He liked the social aspects of school–namely, the girls. He also liked school because his mother bought him nice clothes to wear and because he did not want to fail. Jason's overall perceptions of school were expressed during three interviews and focused on the problems he had following school rules, his academic experiences, relationships with teachers and peers, and his participation in extracurricular activities.

<u>Following school rules.</u> By his own admission, Jason had a difficult time following school rules, especially those that dealt with talking. He was assigned to after-school detention and suspended during the semester of this study for violating this rule. Jason said he had been suspended only five times this year, compared to 12 times last year. The primary reason for being assigned to detention was for talking. He realized the consequences of this behavior but said he could not control himself: "I don't get 'em [detentions] for, like, being late for class or fighting or suff. I just get 'em for being, talking in class. Talking while the teacher is talking. That's my only problem right there. Had it all through school . . . kindergarten . . . talking." When asked why he talked while the teacher was talking, he responded, "I don't know; it's just a habit. Like, like I be thinking or somethin', then I talk out, say it to my, somebody next to me." Jason expressed that it was difficult to control his talking in class because he was allowed to do so freely at home. Unless he was having a bad day at school, he found it virtually impossible not to talk in class:

> Yeah, I can control, I mean like, like I can go through . . . I just like talking a lot. Like say, we're being quiet doing a assignment. I mean, I talk 'cause I'm used to talking at home. I'll be watching a movie and I talk about the movie and stuff. My mom, "Be quiet, Jason, be quiet." Then like, say I'm having a bad day, I'll just sit down and just do my work. . . . I mean, I don't talk every day. Like, most of the time, though.

In addition, Jason was easily distracted in his classes. He believed it was impossible for him to focus in classes where there was too much activity going on:

> Well . . . in class I like to talk a lot. I get distracted easy. So then I get in trouble for getting, for distracting. Like, say, somebody talking over there and I hear it and I'll say something about it, but I get in trouble because he [teacher] heard me. So I will be the loudest because I'm shouting. Like I get in trouble over stuff like that. And like when other people playing, I, I won't, I can't sit down and just do my work. If I hear somebody talking, I'm gonna go see what they're talking about. I don't know why, I just do that. But like last year, I must have been hyper or something. And I couldn't, and every time I hear somebody talking I'd get up and stuff or go in their conversation or something. But I got good grades last year.

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The other two rules that Jason had great difficulty with were running in the hallways and fighting. He thought the consequences of violating these rules were unfair. He stated that, at his previous school, these kinds of situations would have been handled less severely:

> Like, say you're in the hall and you're running, trying to, uh . .. you can't jog. I mean, they might give you a warning, but if they catch you again you're suspended for uh . . . I think three days for running in the hallways, trying to get to class. I mean, that's a dumb rule. Well, I mean, I could see if you run a whole bunch, like they catch you and they catch you again. But if they catch you that one time, they give you a suspension. I mean, at least give you some chances, to warn you. . . . I mean, I know they said on the intercom, let's say you're, you're late for class and you're trying to hurry up so you don't get a detention. You come to school, class late, you get a detention. So you're tryin' to hurry up and get to class. You can't walk. I mean, walk slow?

Jason also considered the fighting rule to be unfair:

> I don't like that you can't use self-defense. They say that you fight, you suppose to go get a teacher. But I say, how are you supposed to go get a teacher if you getting pounded on? I mean . .. [doesn't] make sense. . . . I'd just change to, like, if you do get in a fight and the person started it, can you self-defense or defend yourself?

Jason had also been suspended for improper sexual language that he said teachers "thought" he was using and for being involved in confrontations with girls. However, he denied being guilty of these accusations:

> Think he [teacher] said I was talking, talking nasty to him, talking about jackie lacey [ejaculating] or somethin'. . . .
>   I just got suspended, I think, couple of weeks ago, for uh . . . I don't remember. Well, most of the time that I got suspended, it's over girls. Like doing stuff to girls. Like one time I got suspended for . . . _____ tried to fight me, so I slapped her face. I only hit her one time, but that was it. I got suspended for that anyway. And then the other time, they said I sexually harassed somebody, but she [the victim] said I didn't, but the teacher said I was too close or something.

Jason had many experiences with violating rules at Isbill. He thought they were unfair or that the penalties were too strict. As a result, he spent much time in after-school detention and suspended. He expressed that after-school detention had become stricter this year. Last year, students had been given more warnings or "chances." But now, students who violated

detention rules were put out or suspended. Jason said he had been assigned to after-school detention at least 15 times during the semester of this study. But compared to last year, he thought he had improved tremendously: "Last year I got in trouble for everything. The problems I've got this year, I haven't got suspended. I got suspended maybe three times this whole year, three or four times. Last year, I mean, I doubled, tripled it." When asked what made the difference between last year and this year, Jason said he thought that he had matured. Also, he expressed feeling bad about how his behavior affected his mother:

> I think maturity and uh . . . just getting sick of uh . . . like feeling bad and stuff. Like sometime my mamma cry 'cause I'd be bad, so bad in school. Like my younger brothers, they'd be doing good and I feel left out 'cause she'll [mother], I'll be at home suspended and they'd be at school and stuff. And I didn't like that.

Jason said he preferred being suspended and sent home to being assigned to in-school suspension (ISS). Students assigned to ISS had to eat cold lunches, sit in small desks, were not allowed to talk to other students, and given only one bathroom break per day. He explained the reasons that assignment to in-school or out-of-school suspension depended on the type of rule students violated. For the most part, Jason slept during ISS. However, he realized that being assigned there so often negatively affected his grades. He gave an example of one situation in which he was assigned to ISS:

> Well, I didn't cut round-up. Okay, this how it was. We was, okay, I was going to round-up and I saw _____, and he, he, I thought he was going to uh . . . Mr. _____'s class. He was like "Round-up; I'm about to go to round-up." So I'm like, "I'm about to use the bathroom." So I went up to Mr. _____, I mean I went up to the library to, to get my, I got a book out there by um . . . Michael Jordan, that magazine. And then I was going back down the round, the round-up, and the door was closed, and I was waiting by the door and the principal was like, "Get in class." So I, I, so I was pretending like I was going in but I didn't. Then that next day, the principal was like, "Jason, you got detention." And I was like, "For what?" And the principal was like, "Skipping round-up." And I was like, "I was outside in the hall. I just didn't want to get a detention." The principal was like, "Too bad, you have, you gotta have proof." So I just went to ISS.

Jason did not enjoy being in detention or suspended. Although he believed that his behavior had tremendously improved since last year, he continued to struggle with displaying appropriate behavior in class. He seemed frustrated and confused about how to change. His academic experiences also were affected.

Academic experiences. Jason accurately described what was going on in each of his classes. Whether he liked a particular class depended on his feelings about the teacher and whether he considered the class boring: "I think I'm a flunk _____. That's a hard class. I mean, it's not really hard. It, it's boring. Once you do something boring, you don't like doing it. But I try. I think this semester I got a low D, a real low D." Jason knew he was struggling academically and that there was a chance that he would not be promoted to high school. He thought that, since he had entered middle school, the work had gotten progressively harder. More was required of him. In addition, he found it difficult to stay caught up in classes because of so many suspensions:

> It's just that teacher, how she teaches it. Like how she get, today we had to do questions. We had to do 15 multiple choice and 15 true or false questions. That's a lot of questions once you look at it and you gotta look in the book and find them. That's 30 questions. . . . Well, that's not, I mean it's not really hard once you, like, if like you study, but like, say you miss a couple days and you gotta catch up, it's gonna be hard for you 'cause you're not gonna know what to do and stuff.

Jason realized that being behind in classes was a result of his own behavior. Being suspended regularly and not paying attention in class contributed to his problems:

> I was um . . . last marking period I was suspended a lot, so I didn't get too many assignments and I had ISS and stuff. I had two, I had one E, I think one E or two E's, the rest D's. But this time I'm doing better. . . . In _____, sometimes, once in a while, like I wasn't paying attention that whole week, and next week we have a test and I don't know the test. I just know some of the questions, not all of them. The teachers come up with pop quizzes test, like today he came in with a pop quiz test.

Jason explained that he had the most difficulty completing classwork assignments. He related

this to his inability to focus: "I talk a lot. Like I get distracted when I hear other people talk.

Like, say there's a conversation back there and you're trying to do your work and you hear 'em

talking, then you turn around and listen to what they talking about. That'll get me off track".

Jason thought that how teachers handled his behavior in class actually helped to get him

focused sometimes. However, each teacher handled students differently. One teacher kicked

students out of class, made them split up, or told them they could never sit together again.

Another teacher took students out in the hallway or moved them to a seat at the front of the

class. Another teacher gave students two chances and then either sent them out into the

hallway or assigned them to detention. Yet another teacher simply said, "Stop talking!" in a

loud voice, and it usually worked. Jason believed that although some of these strategies

worked better on some students than others, he preferred stricter discipline because it helped

him to settle down. He thought that most of his teachers knew how to handle his behavior, but

not all of them:

> I do good in all my other classes. Like I get good citizenship. I mean, I don't get
> hollered at. The only person, teacher that really suspend me is _____. That's the one
> that gets me suspended or ISS or something. 'Cause he, you know, everybody talks in
> his class, so he catch you and catch you and catch you, you get in trouble. But none of
> my other teachers never suspend me.

Jason said he needed "a lot of chances" to correct his behavior and did not do well with

teachers who did not provide many of these opportunities.

With regard to academics, Jason explained that he learned better and was able to focus

better when doing hands-on types of activities in class: "Yeah, I gotta take notes. . . Touching

and lab. In the lab, like see how it's done and stuff. Labs, yea, 'cause like if you miss lab, you,

you might as well know you goin' fail the test unless you stay after and do, do that lab over 'cause that lab really help you."

Jason spent only about half an hour each day after school doing homework. He usually did it when he went inside from playing. However, certain kinds of homework, like vocabulary words, he did right away after getting home. He explained that if he did not do them right away, he would forget after having been outside playing. He said that he'd "have other stuff on [his] mind," so studying vocabulary words immediately upon getting home helped him remember them the next day. Nevertheless, he believed that he had few problems with homework and that not doing his classroom work was why he was failing:

> Yep . . . I don't, I don't fail on my vocabulary tests—none of my vocabulary tests or nothing. Like my extra-credit words or stuff. I don't fail, I don't on them. The only thing that's holding me down is my classwork. I don't do my classwork. Like I do it in some classes. Like math class, that's why I'm flunking. I don't do no math . . . no classworks.

Jason believed that he was responsible for his own academic success and that no one could be blamed for his grades but himself. He was aware of after-school tutoring programs and had stayed once before with his best friend for help with math. Overall, he believed his grades in math would improve if he stayed after school more often. However, he expressed some embarrassment about seeking tutoring from adults, fearing that other students would think there was something wrong with him. He said he did not mind staying after school with other students sometimes but that working with adults (like some of the special education students did) would embarrass him and make him feel stupid. He thought that students in special education suffered a stigma, and he did not want to be perceived as needing special education.

Nonetheless, Jason talked about several things that could be done or that were being done to help him focus and improve academically. These included certain instructional

practices, stricter discipline, and accommodations teachers provided to assist students. His comments explain these suggestions:

> [On instructional strategies]: Like, say she's talking about something, then like, you know how, like say you gonna draw a picture or something in your head? Like she'll draw it on the board and show everybody how to do it and stuff, and like, we do a whole, whole bunch of 'em . . . projects or experiments to show us how to do it, so like then when we have a test on it, we already know how to do it 'cause we did a experiment on it. . . .
>
> [On teacher discipline]: They say I'm talking and they keep getting on me, you know, and turn around. Like Miss _____, then, she sat by me, so like, when I write, like if I'm doing my work and I'm thinking of a question, I like beat on my desk like a beat or something, and like she just stand there and tell me to stop. Or like I see somebody talking. I just turn around and see what they're doing or something . . . stuff like that. I get distracted, and, like, she'll tell me to stop and stuff.

Other disciplinary actions by teachers that Jason liked were moving him to another part of the class, giving him more "chances," and taking better control of the class:

> What he could do to help me. . . . He don't, he can't control the class. He's soft, like maybe he might be getting that one person [while] the whole class is talking over there. . . . I don't know; I mean, like I don't know. It seem like, like you know how special ed. classes have those, that teacher? That's how it is. It seem like we, we're all in retarded class, special ed. class. He's just . . . he, he can't control us.

In addition to teacher instructional strategies and stricter student discipline, Jason gave examples of other things that teachers did to help him, including time in class to finish homework, keeping him updated on how he was doing in class, providing opportunities for extra-credit work, and making classes more interesting by incorporating some type of fun activity with each assignment. Jason talked about a math game called Krypto that teachers had used in fifth grade that kept him interested in learning math.

Jason believed his academic struggles were directly related to his inability to focus and concentrate in classes. He had some ideas about what would help him do better, which were primarily related to teacher accommodations. He acknowledged spending very little time on homework and stayed after school only a few times for assistance with one of his classes.

Jason said that he wanted to do better in school and shared his idea of what a successful student was like. He thought he fit this description: "Like a good student? I mean, good grades, good sportsmanship, lots of friends. I mean break, I mean, don't break all the rules but maybe, you know, crack a little, couple of 'em. I mean, you can't be perfect but that's pretty much it . . . turn in work in time." He believed that although most of his success in school was related to participating in sports, certain teachers also made him feel good about himself:

> Mr. _____'s class. Like, I mean, I, I ask a lot of questions and uh . . . I pay attention a lot. I mean, like I'll tell the class to be quiet when we have a sub and stuff 'cause I know they wouldn't do it [talk] in his class while he was there. . . . And then track and basketball . . . I mean, at first I quitted basketball 'cause my mom said I couldn't play both teams. Then it made me feel good when Mr. _____ came back and asked me to play 'cause he said he needed me. . . . And track, I did all right in there. Last year I was all right. This year, I improved a lot. Then Miss _____, or that's just, that's just like my favorite class right there.

How Jason viewed and got along with teachers clearly influenced his academic experiences. Teachers' personalities, styles, and practices were a significant part of his school perceptions.

Views of teachers. Jason described school as boring, which he defined as seeing the same faces [principals and students] every day and having to follow the same rules. He thought that getting more rewards and privileges at school would ease some of this boredom. Teachers and administrators had been a source of his recognition and rewards at Isbill:

> This year, last year I was doing real bad. I was getting suspended a lot. And this year, the principal, she gave me this award, this award for doing better in class and . . . not getting in trouble. Like if I get in trouble, I just talk to the principal and she's like, "You're falling off a little bit, follow up." Like last year they [school staff], talking about I was in a fish tank and stuff. . . . I was falling out and stuff or something. They said I was, had a hole in the crack and stuff . . . falling off and stuff 'cause I was doing so bad last year. But this year, they said I'm doing much better.

As a result of numerous suspensions the previous school year, Jason had gotten to know Isbill's principal well, and he liked her a great deal. In addition, he especially liked two of his current teachers. He thought that the kinds of recognition they provided encouraged and motivated

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him to do better in school. He commented on other experiences that expressed the importance of rewards:

> I've been getting better grades. I mean, not really getting better grades, but like doing better and like making yourself feel good that you turned in your work and stuff. Stuff like that and the teachers telling ya you're doing better. Other, last year, teachers' checking up on you and stuff . . . say how you're doing good, stuff like that.

Other types of rewards he said teachers gave included giving extra-credit questions on tests, allowing students to watch movies, going skating, and going on other field trips. However, Jason thought the school still needed more rewards. He compared Isbill with the other middle school he had attended by suggesting more social activities for students:

> I mean like, like get more rewards and stuff. Like more privileges and more dances. Like at Ricker School, you be in about . . . about. . . . You had about 15 dances a school year. We have three [at Isbill]. Then we go skating maybe four times a school year. So far, we went three times [at Isbill], and that's the end of the school year. But that's it.

Jason liked the eighth-grade team he was on, although he thought some teachers were stricter than others. He described his feelings about teachers in terms of how they related to students and managed the class. He liked those teachers who gave him a lot of chances to complete assignments. Although each of his teachers was different, Jason had developed a scheme for dealing with them individually: "It depends on the teacher. Like Mr. _____, he'll give you a bunch of chances. Miss _____, she will too. Mr. _____, I mean, you gotta talk to him, like promise him stuff and stuff. "I'll move and stuff. I won't talk." Teachers affected Jason's school perceptions not only while at Isbill; he expressed this would also be the case when he made a decision about where to attend high school next year. Apparently, his mother had pretty much left the decision up to him. When asked how he would select a high school, he said, "by which school has nicer teachers."

Jason believed that how teachers felt about him also affected his academic performance.

Those he thought cared gave him a lot of "chances" and individual attention:

> Like say, okay say, I don't know. I think she likes me a lot because, like say, like say like a whole bunch of kids like sitting there just talking, talking like a group, like. I mean, she know when I talk. She knows; she's like, "Stop, Jason," and stuff like that. But usually, like Mr. _____ or Miss _____, you keep talking in her class, at least they goin' kick you out. She, like, she never kicked me out of class, only one time, but that was in . . . way in the beginning of the school year. Like she'll keep on giving me chances.

Jason said this same teacher would also take the time to help him individually if he asked for

it:

> And then, like, like I ask her like, say she about to leave or something and I be like, "Miss _____, could you help me?" Like, you know, if you's like, had to go, you wouldn't stop for nobody, but she stops for me and helps me sometime. Like she'll tell me before she leave out the classroom or something.

Another example of teachers expressing individual concern included informing students

of exactly how they were doing academically in class. This meant individual meetings with

students to find out if they were having any problems completing assignments or other

requirements. Jason thought that unhelpful teachers were those who were not strict and could

not control the class. Jason explained that, in these classes, it was more difficult to focus and

stay on track:

> Like you can't get no work done 'cause everybody talking and then you're talking with them. Like he [teacher]. . . . Like it's hard talking in Mr. _____'s class 'cause he mean. Like Mr. _____, he won't kick you, he'll just take you in the hallways and say, "You're talking, stop, come back in" or give you a detention or ISS. He already . . . I never saw nobody get suspended. Like Mr. _____, I think, I think he'll take you out in the hallway, talk to you. You might stay out there. . . . But he'll, he'll just kick you out his class. Like he, he'll take you to the office and write the paperwork and stuff, all that . . . and get you suspended. . . . Mr. _____ don't do that.

Jason said that most of his teachers encouraged him to do better in school and gave him

extra opportunities to complete his work. This meant they cared. Teachers' personalities and

classroom instructional styles affected Jason's ability to focus in class. It seemed important to him to have teachers who understood his challenge to sit still in class and to give him the extra opportunities and "chances" he thought he needed to get the work done.

Peer relationships and extracurricular activities.

> I mean, I know I'm not the perfect [student], but I got a lot of friends and stuff and uh . . . most of the kids, I mean, half of the kids are good, half of the kids are bad. It's no in-between kids. You gotta be good or bad. . . . I mean, I mean you *could* be in the middle. I mean you like could be bad at some point and be good at some point. I mean, that's how I think I am. I'm not really bad. It's just that I talk. That's what gets me in trouble a lot.

Jason was a popular student at Isbill. Because of his participation in extracurricular activities, he had a lot of friends. He considered Laura and Vicki two of his friends, and he frequently talked to them in and outside of class. Jason enjoyed his popularity at school, as well as the attention it got him from the girls. When asked how he thought his friends would describe him, he said:

> Funny. They, they always say they wish I was in they classes, but . . . they think I'm real funny but . . . I don't be funny I think. And then . . . and uh they say I brag about my clothes, but I don't brag about my clothes. . . . Yeah, like I got gear [expensive clothes] and stuff like that.

In spite of his popularity, Jason named only four boys as his friends. One, Danny, had been repeating eighth grade at the beginning of the school year and had gotten suspended to the school's alternative education program. Danny seemed to have a negative impact on Jason. Jason's mother said that Danny was the same boy Jason was with each time he had been picked up for violating the city's curfew and for shoplifting. However, Grant, another one of his friends, seemed to be a positive influence. Grant was a straight-A student and participated in the same basketball team as Jason. Jason said that during the season, he spent more time hanging around Grant and that he had even stayed after school once with him to get tutoring

for a class. Jason's mother observed that he spent more time around Grant during the basketball season and this had a positive effect on Jason's attitude. In spite of his mixture of friends, Jason thought that he was responsible for his own behavior. He did not think that anyone could make him "do bad in school."

Participation in track and basketball was important to Jason. He said that sports were one of the main reasons he stayed in school, and his goal was to go to college and become a professional basketball player. During interviews, he regularly discussed college and professional teams and players at each level. Jason was also interested in golf and often talked about how his grandfather had taken him to play putt-putt in the past. Jason acknowledged that his grades sometimes went down a bit while he was participating in basketball because it took away from the time to do his homework. However, he believed that participating in basketball helped him to do well during track season, as well as stay motivated to do well in school. He was eager to participate in both sports next year in high school. Jason had also participated in several other activities and clubs at Isbill, including drama and computer clubs and band.

Jason's overall perceptions of school were a result of the daily challenges he encountered following school rules, his classroom experiences, feelings about teachers, peer relationships, and participation in extracurricular activities. In addition, his outside-of-school experiences at least indirectly affected the way he handled following rules and dealing with the consequences of violating them. Nevertheless, he enjoyed the social aspects of school, and they provided motivation for his attendance. He was aware of his academic status but continued to struggle with maintaining focus in the classroom.

Classroom Observations of Jason

Besides Laura, Jason was the most physically active student in the study. As he admitted during interviews, it was an extreme challenge for him to remain in his seat and focus during any class period. His verbal and physical behaviors in class were problematic for teachers because of their frequency and magnitude. These behaviors resulted in Jason's being reprimanded by his teachers on a regular basis, and his often being assigned to after-school detention or ISS. Classroom observations focused on his interactions with teachers, students, and the overall classroom environment in general.

Interactions with teachers. Half of Jason's interactions with teachers resulted from his being reprimanded for talking when he was not supposed to be, blurting comments out loud, being out of his seat, and exhibiting other inappropriate physical behaviors, which occurred daily in each of his classes. Although other students seemed to be unaffected by Jason's behavior, teachers struggled to control him. Their responses to his excessive talking during class were the basis of his interactions with them. In two different classes, Jason was reprimanded three times in each for excessive talking. On occasion, teachers moved him to another seat in the classroom, stood next to his desk until he stopped talking, or made him sit outside in the hallway for a period of time. During these situations, Jason was usually supposed to be working on in-class assignments.

Jason was often manipulative when resisting reprimands by teachers. For example, in one class when the teacher told him to move to another seat because he insisted on talking to a boy next to him while instructions were being given, Jason promised the teacher in a convincing tone that he would stop talking, but he did not change seats. In another class where a substitute teacher was trying to get students to sit in their assigned seats, Jason successfully

resisted her request and convinced her to allow him to sit next to a friend at the front of the classroom. He did this by arguing that students had recently been moved to new seating assignments. When the substitute did not believe this, he insisted that the seat he wanted to sit in was "his seat." When this effort also failed, after returning to his assigned seat, Jason shouted loudly to her that he couldn't sit there because the teacher had moved him away from one of the students sitting near there the day before. He continued making argumentative remarks while standing at the front of the room near the teacher. He then asked if he could sit at the front of the room near one of his friends. Finally exhausted, the substitute gave in. Jason then winked cunningly at his friend as he opened his textbook and began working on an assignment.

Even though Jason said in interviews that it was helpful when teachers stood next to his desk and forced him to work, classroom observations did not always indicate this to be true. Once when a teacher stood over him for a couple of minutes, he worked only for that period of time. When the teacher circulated around the room, Jason resumed talking to the boys seated around him and did not complete the class assignment. When the teacher returned to his area, he ceased talking but continued again when she left. Being put out of class was not effective in getting Jason to stop talking, either. Once when he was placed out in the hallway for 20 minutes because of his refusal to stop talking and walking around the room, Jason resumed the identical behavior immediately after being allowed back into class.

In addition to being reprimanded for excessive talking in class, Jason often blurted out comments loudly without raising his hand, distracting the teacher and other students. These outbursts occurred during academic instruction and while students were working independently on classroom assignments. For example, during an oral test, Jason asked the teacher for hints

regarding one of the questions: "Was that male or female?" "How should we know that?" "Do we have to write the question?" While another teacher gave instructions when returning students' assignments, Jason asked loudly if he had any assignments to turn in. After the teacher told him that he needed to make up a test and was missing several assignments, he insisted that he didn't know anything about the test because he had been suspended the previous three days. Other outbursts occurred when Jason was moving around the room or wrestling with other boys. Once, on the way back to his seat after being reprimanded, he hollered, "Hey, man, get off me!" at a boy he had punched first. Immediately, he apologized to the teacher and sat down, but he was up again within five minutes.

During one class, Jason was distracted by a conversation students around him were having about popularity. Suddenly, he blurted out his name as being the most popular person in school. After this, he left his seat to further engage in this conversation. In this same class, later on, while the class was supposed to be working on problems, Jason blurted out, "How do you bisect a line?" Most of the time, Jason's outbursts did not cause any reactions from teachers or students. At other times, however, they caused him to engage further with students or to be verbally reprimanded by the teacher. In all classes, verbal outbursts were common for Jason and occurred regularly.

In addition to talking and verbal outbursts, constantly being out of his seat and behaving in other inappropriate ways in the classroom were additional problems for Jason. During each observation, he was reprimanded at least once in each of his classes for being out of his seat, and once as many as five times in one class. While one teacher gave instructions, Jason left his seat to get a textbook from the shelf at the front of the room. On another occasion, he stood in the doorway and talked to Laura, who was outside in the hallway, while he was supposed

to be working on a classroom assignment. Two other times, he was reprimanded by teachers for roaming around the classroom talking to other students when he should have been working on assignments.

Not only was Jason frequently out of his seat, he engaged in physical behaviors that were distracting to teachers. These included pounding lightly on the desk of a student seated near him, pounding on his own desk, flipping a pen up and down in the air, and reading through his daily planner–all while teachers were trying to explain an assignment or Jason was supposed to be working on an assignment. Another example of disruptive behavior included popping his fingers loudly during the middle of class. Immediately other students followed, resulting in the teacher reprimanding him.

In spite of the above-described negative behaviors, Jason was also positively involved in classroom activities and interacted with his teachers for academically related reasons. He frequently asked clarifying questions regarding assignments and directions, even though the teacher had sometimes just given this information. In most cases, teachers patiently reiterated the information for him. On a couple of occasions during tests, Jason approached teachers with questions, and his body language and facial expression displayed satisfaction with the responses he received. When Jason asked teachers for assignments he had missed due to absences or suspensions, he was allowed to make them up. Once when Jason turned in a completed assignment during class, the teacher complimented his work by saying, "Good job!" This positive feedback seemed to please him.

Jason appeared not to have any problems asking teachers for what he needed or wanted. Once he asked if he could work with other students on a math activity, and his request was granted. On two occasions he asked teachers if he could turn in work later that he had not

completed, and it was allowed. Several times he approached teachers for help with in-class assignments and received assistance. Jason seemed to work in class as long as teachers were in direct communication with him and when other students were not talking to him. Although these periods of work were usually short (5 to 10 minutes at a time), Jason did not hesitate to ask for assistance from teachers. He frequently discussed his grades with them, particularly in the class he knew he was failing. In that class, he regularly checked his grades, which were posted on the glass doors of a file cabinet against the wall. While doing this, he usually wrote down his grades on a piece of paper.

There were other situations when Jason interacted with teachers that were not related to academics or classroom activities. He frequently sought and received hall passes from teachers, usually to go to the bathroom. He always returned promptly to class, within five minutes. Jason volunteered to take attendance sheets and other information to the office, although teachers usually did not allow him to do so. Once, he assumed a leadership role when a substitute teacher was in one of his classes by telling the students to stop talking.

It appeared that those teachers Jason considered his favorites were more lenient with his classroom behaviors than others. Jason recognized this and seemingly took advantage. These teachers allowed him more opportunities to straighten up his behavior before reprimanding him. Nevertheless, in spite of his frequent talking, outbursts, and other physically disruptive classroom behaviors, Jason interacted regularly with his teachers, and they seemed to tolerate his behavior through verbal reprimands and other strategies, although they were clearly frustrated.

Interactions with students. Jason was popular among his peers both inside and outside the classroom. Whatever nonacademic discussions occurred in the classroom, he was usually

in the center of them or nearby. During interviews, Jason said his friends would describe him as the "class clown," and observations of his interactions with them provided examples of this behavior. In every class, whether he had assigned seating or not, he talked to students seated near him. It did not matter what types of academic activities were going on or which class he was in, Jason was constantly talking to both girls and boys about something. Although teachers usually reprimanded him for this behavior, it was not deterred.

Jason's conversations with students were not always unrelated to academics. On several occasions, he worked in small groups with other students on classroom assignments and tests. But for the most part, they talked about social activities and issues not related to school. For example, once Jason was drawn into a conversation about who was the most popular person at school, which he insisted he was. On another occasion, he discussed a student's dog with him. Most other times he talked about basketball and professional sports.

In addition to his frequent conversations with other students during class, Jason physically interacted with them as well. In one class, which the girl he liked was also in, Jason sat next to her during a film and threatened to pop her with a rubber band wrapped around his thumb and index finger by pointing it at her hands and face. During another class, while he was supposed to be working on an assignment, he traded and ate chips and candy with a boy sitting next to him most of the class period. In this same class, Jason went out in the hallway and held a conversation with a boy for several minutes before returning to his seat. When Laura entered one of his classes, he followed her out into the hallway as she left and asked her for lotion to put on his hands.

Jason made no secret of the fact that one of the main reasons he attended school was to see the girls. In interviews he talked about how they commented on how sharply he dressed

and the neatness of his haircuts. He had an earring in one ear and wore designer clothes and name-brand tennis shoes. In two of his classes, he always played with and talked to the girls. Examples of play included holding a wooden ruler under a girl's neck as if he were cutting her throat, until she resisted. Once, in physical education class, he left the half of the gym where the boys were playing basketball, went to the half of the court where the girls were playing, and threw a basketball at the back of one of the girls. In another class, Jason put his hands on three different girls on his way to throw paper in the wastebasket. Jason physically wrestled with boys in his classes, as well. These interactions usually occurred when Jason was out of his seat, walking around the classroom talking to other students. Once, when a teacher briefly left the classroom, Jason joined two other boys and a girl who were playing with a yo-yo at the back of the room until the teacher returned.

Interactions with other students were initiated both by Jason and by them. Compared to other students in the study and in his classes in general, Jason was clearly the most social and physically active. Sometimes students participated in his conversations and disruptive behaviors. At other times they ignored him. On only one occasion was Jason observed sitting quietly in class. This was a 15-minute period when he slept during a film that was being shown. After awaking, he immediately began talking to the girl seated next to him.

Outside the classroom, as well, Jason was popular among the students. Each day during the lunch hour he played basketball in the gymnasium with a large group of boys. In between classes, he was always surrounded by a group of boys and girls. Students seemed to get along well with him. Jason knew that he was popular among his peers and enjoyed the attention they gave him.

Overall classroom environment. Jason's interactions with teachers and other students were indicative of his behavior overall in the classroom. Although he was constantly reprimanded for talking inappropriately, loudly blurting out remarks, being out of his seat, and other distracting behaviors, he frequently attempted to do some of the classroom assignments. The problem was that he could not sustain focus long enough to actually complete them. Many times he began assignments, but after only a few minutes, he abandoned them either to get up and walk around the room or to engage in conversations with other students. However, once he had done these things, he usually returned to his seat and worked briefly on the assignment.

Jason usually did not bring books, pens, pencils, paper, or other materials to class. Therefore, he frequently borrowed these items from the teacher or other students, causing some of his moving around and conversations with others. Often he was the last student to enter his classes, causing distraction to teachers, who sometimes had already begun class. Jason was never observed turning in any homework when teachers collected it. He frequently chewed gum or ate candy during class, resulting in reprimands from teachers.

Jason blurted out comments in class during tests and quizzes and while he was supposed to be working on classroom assignments. These outbursts came without warning but were sometimes related to what was going on at the time. Examples included asking for clarification of questions during an oral quiz and voicing aloud the answers he got correct while students were grading each other's tests. Other situations occurred when he was talking or wrestling with students.

Other students also left their desks during class, but Jason did so far more often than anyone else did. In fact, he was reprimanded for leaving his seat without permission five times during one class period. When out of his seat, Jason moved around the room, visited with other

students, checked his grades posted on the wall, shot baskets at the trash can, physically played with other students, got tissue from teachers to blow his nose, sharpened his pencil continuously, answered teachers' telephones, erased the blackboard, and made faces at himself in the mirrors in the classrooms.

Even while he was seated at his desk, Jason was active. During a test, he doodled on his paper, put his head down, picked it up again, and made facial expressions that indicated he was confused or puzzled. While students gave oral presentations in one class, Jason continuously put his head up and down on his desk in a sort of rhythm. In another class, also during a test, he made motions in the air with his right foot for several minutes, put his head down on the desk, and tapped on the wall next to himself with his right hand. Regardless of whether Jason was walking around the classroom or seated, his behavior was constantly active.

In spite of his own behaviors and occasional distractions by other students, Jason attempted to do work in class. However, he was unable to sustain his focus and concentration for more than 10 minutes at a time. During the periods when he was working, he frequently sought help from his teachers and followed along with classroom discussions. It seemed that he was more physically active when there was not direct instruction going on or when he was not in direct contact with teachers. When teachers stood over his desk or reprimanded him for his behavior, he was temporarily productive and worked on assignments. When he completed his assignments in class, he quickly informed teachers and appeared pleased with their positive responses.

Overall, Jason's interactions and behaviors were consistent throughout all of his classes. He did not appear to be affected by the types of activities that were going on, the class, or the teacher. He seemed to look for opportunities to be in a leadership role. For the most part,

Jason's teachers tolerated his behavior, and other students seemed to be used to him. Ultimately, as Jason articulately described it during his interviews, he could not control himself in class and struggled to sit still and focus for an entire class period.

Summary

Teachers considered Jason an at-risk student for academic and behavioral reasons. He was in danger of failing the eighth grade. His perceptions and school experiences were developed by his inability to follow school rules, academic struggles, his views of teachers and peers, and outside-of-school activities involving the law. Classroom observations of Jason confirmed information he discussed during interviews. He had an extremely difficult time staying in his seat and focused on academic tasks in the classroom. Because of this, he was constantly reprimanded by teachers and often was assigned to after-school detention and suspended.

In spite of his academic and behavioral problems, Jason liked school and especially his teachers. He looked forward to attending high school next year and participating in sports. However, his mother was less optimistic about his future. Because of his poor grades, poor attitude and behavior, association with bad kids in the neighborhood, and recent run-ins with the law, she feared Jason would drop out before completing high school. Jason's perceptions and experiences in middle school seemed to be a picture of confusion and struggle for survival.

Part Two: Parent Perceptions

Laura's Parent–Mrs. Davis

She don't like them [teachers and administrators] because they're not fair. They don't wanna acknowledge 'em. By her being 14, that's too much racial inside of her to grow up in this town. It's, it's too much for her. So she done got it all since she's been in the school, but it's just made it really worse now though. It's part of her wanna give

up. Part of her like "What's the point of me explaining it to 'em when they gonna pick on me anyway?" So a lot of it has to do with the school. That will change your child, but . . . I know it changed my daughter.

In spite of her seemingly close relationship with Laura, Mrs. Davis struggled to manage her daughter's attitude and behaviors. She once described Laura as "having two, three people in her, with split personalities . . . but a person who could be a lot of fun." By this, she explained that Laura did not like to be surrounded by kids, liked to come home and get her chores done, and be out and about in the neighborhood with her friends. She described Laura as being a very independent child from an early age. Mrs. Davis also said that Laura could have a bad attitude at times, "regardless of nothing . . . she could just wake up with a bad attitude."

At the same time, Mrs. Davis was frustrated with how to handle Laura's behavioral problems that had persisted since grade school. She had moved Laura from school to school because of what she described as teachers and school staff not recognizing her academic achievements. Mrs. Davis explained Laura's behavior as the result of the school's lack of respect for her daughter. In elementary school, Laura had received numerous awards and recognition for her achievements, but once she entered middle school, these accolades stopped.

Mrs. Davis strongly believed that racism and prejudice were the main reasons her daughter's behavior in school was poor. She described Laura's sixth-grade experiences as positive, and believed her problems began in seventh grade. Laura attended two different schools in seventh grade because her mother thought there was teacher disrespect and lack of recognition for Laura's accomplishments. Although she met with school officials on several occasions, the end result was usually moving Laura to another academic team or switching some of her classes in which she had conflicts with teachers. Mrs. Davis described the prejudice she thought teachers showed toward Laura as not emanating only from white teachers. She

said that black teachers could be prejudiced, as well. Her description of prejudice was based on language that teachers used with students. She gave one example that had occurred during elementary school:

> When she [Laura] wasn't recognized for what she was doing, what she can do, it upset her . . . and then so the teachers, they didn't respect her. They wanted to put their hands in your face, talk smart to you, and she wasn't allowing them to do that. And so they would just send her to the office, and then she would call me, cryin', and I would go up there.

Mrs. Davis also thought that teachers and school staff were not fair when dealing with her daughter–a problem she said had persisted throughout Laura's schooling. "Well, at _____ [school], I didn't like it because they accuse you; they, they have you being guilty before they, you know, you automatic guilty. They never once tried to check out anything. So that's why I had her taken out of that one." However, she admitted that Laura was extremely outspoken. She had been told by teachers in preschool and first grade that Laura "talked too much and always wanted to be the leader." Mrs. Davis thought this behavior was necessary, though, in order for her daughter to receive the recognition and respect she deserved. As a result, she encouraged this behavior.

Nonetheless, Mrs. Davis did like one of the elementary schools Laura had attended. She liked this school because the principal took a personal interest in Laura and encouraged her to do well in school: "_____ is the best school that I liked because Mr. _____ is a very good principal. And he didn't go for the black, white, green, purple, none of that. He treated and respected all the children and the parents so that was the best school for my daughter." She described the principal's interest in Laura further: "Mr. _____ was on her all the time by her being a African American, and he wanted her to be the best that she could be. And he didn't

do nothing but educate her to let her know how people gonna try to stop her, but he wanted her to keep going no matter what."

Laura related to staff members at Isbill, as well as to her former principal. One of her teachers and the assistant principal had taken a special interest in her. Mrs. Davis spoke very highly of this assistant principal and the positive impact she had made on Laura: "She started working with my daughter, and um . . . since I've been working with her and she been working with me and my daughter, I like it better now." Mrs. Davis exhibited a great deal of appreciation and respect for what this particular assistant principal was doing to help Laura stay in school, and she trusted her, "That's, I don't know, and I know, and I talk to her and I have her talk to Miss _____. 'Cause I'm like, Miss _____, if it's something she'll tell you, please, by all means." This relationship with the assistant principal made Mrs. Davis feel like she had some help with Laura.

Aside from this assistant principal and one particular teacher, however, Mrs. Davis did not think that teachers at Isbill respected her or Laura. She said that they expected her to believe whatever they said about Laura and that she would not do this. She described one parent-teacher conference that made her feel that way:

> It's hard to explain because you, they call you on the phone or they send you a letter and they, they just want you to believe what they've said or what they've written. Like you don't know your child, like they know that . . . your child better than you, and I'll sit there and I let 'em talk and I listen, and then I expect the same thing from them. I want you to just sit there and listen to me. You know, and, once I let 'em know that this is my daughter you're talking about because I know my daughter. I know what she will and she will not do. Then everything changes. Then you start seeing some respect come out of them. But at first when you walk in there, it's not respect. "I want you to believe this about your daughter." That was at all of the schools.

Mrs. Davis blamed the school for Laura's poor behavior. She said the school's lack of recognition and prejudice caused Laura frustration and made her want to give up. At the same

time, however, she still expected Laura's grades to improve after changes had been made in her schedule or changes made in the teachers with whom she had problems. She did not really understand why these changes had not improved Laura's behavior. She gave several examples of her involvement with helping Laura complete her homework assignments. She believed Laura was capable of being an A student and thought the only reason she did not receive these grades was that teachers were not giving her recognition for her work. She had attended several parent conferences about this, but apparently without resolving this issue.

Mrs. Davis pointed out that Laura did better in some teachers' classes than in others. She said that Laura's relationships with her teachers strongly influenced her effort and attitude toward school. Laura also had told her that the disorganization of some classes made her not try as hard as in others. Mrs. Davis thought that Laura's participation in extracurricular activities positively affected her attitude and behavior. She said that if Laura thought she was treated fairly, she usually did well in the sports activities in which she participated.

Although Mrs. Davis admitted to worrying about Laura's education and her future, she was confident about her daughter's ability to persevere. When asked if she ever worried about Laura's education, she responded,

> My biggest concern right now is what school do I want for her ninth grade. I don't want her around just all white people. I'm caught. I'm stuck, you know, because it's like I just want her to go to school and be all she can be, but I have to get her away from around a lot of black people and I don't wanna send her into one of the all-white schools because I can't, can't deal with none of this prejudice stuff no more, and I'm just tryin' to, it's so hard. . . . It's really hard tryin' to see where my daughter is gonna be able to fit in.

Finding the right school for Laura was not Mrs. Davis's only concern. She was also worried about Laura's peers. She had transferred Laura from one middle school to another in seventh grade because she had been jumped on by a group of girls. She was concerned about

Laura's friends being "one step ahead of her." She admitted that even though she felt comfortable about Laura's current group of friends, it was extremely difficult to supervise Laura and them all of the time. She believed that the right school for Laura in ninth grade would make the difference in her being able to turn her grades around. She believed that schools that required students to wear uniforms would eliminate some of the peer pressure they felt and enable them to focus more on the academic aspects of school.

Mrs. Davis was certain that Laura knew the importance of good grades to her future. She felt positive about Laura's commitment to being a lawyer and described how excited she was about a recent report she had done on this profession.

> It's like she knows in her mind exactly what she's doing, exactly what she gots to do because you, you know, she, she did those reports on the lawyers and all that, and she came back, she was like, "I didn't know they had that many black lawyers!" and things like that. She was like, "Man, I know I'm goin' make it." It's just something inside of her; she's just telling herself, "I'm goin' make it." I'll watch her, and I'm like, "I gotta believe in her because I know she is."

Mrs. Davis was very much in touch with Laura's feelings and school experiences. She shared many of her daughter's impressions about school, particularly when it came to issues of fairness, recognition, respect, and perceived prejudice. In fact, she encouraged her daughter to be outspoken and to defend herself. Nevertheless, Mrs. Davis struggled to control Laura's behavior at home, and at the end of this study she was in the process of giving legal custody of Laura to her mother. However, her history of involvement in Laura's education and strong desire to provide the best educational opportunities possible left her frustrated about how best to negotiate the challenges of educating her daughter. Nonetheless, her belief in Laura's strong self-identity and resilience reinforced her efforts and confidence that she would succeed in school and life.

Michael's Parents–Mr. and Mrs. Evans

Maybe, and I think sometimes with my husband . . . over, over time, I've begun to kinda accept that yes, he, you know, he's been defined as having a learning disability. And that, I just didn't want to accept that. And, then trying to do everything else to say, "No, that's not it, but, but, you know, maybe I need to come down and really realize . . . there is a, an issue here that, that needs to be addressed." (Mrs. Evans)

So, on the one side, he's, I see, a very creative, creative person. Whether you're talking about doing work with your hands, drawing or whatever. Very creative, intelligent kid. He, he can sit and talk to you about the solar system and tell you about things that, maybe even the average kid, probably the average kid wouldn't know until, and they'll be factual. And then on the other side, I see a child that's not reaching his full potential when it comes to putting it down on paper or academically. (Mr. Evans)

For Mr. and Mrs. Evans, Michael's school experiences since kindergarten had been a source of frustration for all of them. After he was diagnosed with having a learning disability in fifth grade, both parents had been heavily involved in his educational experiences. They had attended workshops for children with disabilities, sought individual tutoring, helped Michael daily with his homework assignments, met regularly with teachers, bought him his own desk at home, and spent numerous hours trying to motivate him through various educational games and television shows. Through all of these efforts, however, they remained frustrated with Michael's progress and blamed the school for many of his problems.

Interestingly, Mr. and Mrs. Evans described some of the same perspectives Michael did about school. They said that he was bored with his schoolwork and felt unchallenged. They believed this was primarily because teachers did not expect much of students in special education. Based on their conversations at several parent-teacher conferences held earlier in the year, both parents thought that teachers did not expect students to improve much or to ever get out of special education. One of the reasons they thought this was true was because teachers could not clearly explain the grading system for special education students and how it compared to the regular system.

They don't, they don't. . . . You know what? It's a, a, a, it's really sad 'cause what happens is that, that they really like, they don't expect anything of 'em. If they don't give 'em any homework to challenge them. . . . (Mr. Evans)

Right. That's where the attitude changes occurs . . . the attitude changes in terms of that. . . . "Well, I'll [Michael] just do this lower level of, you know. . . . And I don't have to strive for anything." And I've asked, I said, "Okay, to get all A's in special ed. classes, what does that mean?" (Mrs. Evans)

This example was consistent with what Michael said regarding feeling that, no matter what he did, he would never get out of special education. When the parents asked school officials about getting out of special education, the reply they received was, "'Well, well,' they say to her, 'well, well, it, it doesn't necessarily mean that'; . . . uh . . . it means, perhaps, maybe they're doing well here but they, perhaps wouldn't be able to make it in regular education." The Evanses thought that the school had failed to motivate Michael and was not clear itself on what was necessary for students to be successful. They believed this had destroyed both their and Michael's confidence in the system.

The Evanses also thought that Michael and other special education students did not receive enough individual attention and that academic instruction was too group oriented. For example, they explained that IEPs were not individually designed and that this should be the case in order to meet the needs of each child. They did not understand why Michael's math skills seemed to be regressing instead of improving each year. Examination of his fourth- and seventh-grade standardized test scores supported their assessment. When they asked Michael's teachers about this at IEPC meetings, they were frustrated with the responses they received. Mr. Evans, in particular, expressed great dissatisfaction with the overall school system. He believed that it was mainly interested in receiving additional funds for special needs students and that no one was making the effort to make sure their individual needs were met.

I feel that, that, you know, nobody, nobody's a idiot. We know that the school district gets extra money for children that have problems, you know? Okay, what I'm saying, they should make sure that they have ample staffing, ample staffing, make sure that those children get the . . . you know, those children get the services that they need in class to help. If somebody has a problem staying on task, to be there. If it's teachers' aides or whatever, substitute teachers, to help in that area. Those are things that they need to do to make sure, you know, to help.

Both parents believed that teachers thought Michael lacked motivation because they did not use creative teaching techniques. The parents worked hard at home to engage Michael in educational activities and thought that the school was not doing its part. Although they realized that Michael had problems focusing and transferring information from his head to his paper, they believed that the school had done nothing to develop these skills in their son. They thought that Michael's participation in extracurricular activities promoted his self-esteem and confidence, and they encouraged this. They proudly described his involvement in the science and chess clubs and on the wrestling team.

Mrs. Evans expressed frustration about communicating with school staff regarding Michael. She gave an example involving progress reports, which had been used in the past but recently suspended by teachers.

We've, we've attempted a number of methods and we are talking with the school, talking with teachers. Just like yesterday in conference, I told his main teacher, his math and English teacher, I said, "Now in the beginning of the school year, you started out every Friday sending what kind of quizzes he was gonna have the next week so I have a good sense." And I'd write, I'd take, I'd put it up on the refrigerator so I'd know. They used to give them a planner, but it was left up to them to write it out in their book what, and see that, that's where his downfall is—written expression—having to look on the board. Okay, and put all this down as to what it, what it is. So anyway, then they stopped that. And that's, that's one of my main problems is that you start with something, then you stop at certain points during the school year and start a whole new system. So, the kids are just constantly adjusting to a new method of doing something before the school year is over.

They thought it was more difficult to teach Michael structure and consistency when they could not accomplish these things themselves when communicating with the school.

In addition to consistency in communicating assignments, they also experienced great difficulty reaching teachers and having their telephone calls returned in a timely manner. This problem had eventually been resolved when Mr. Evans telephoned the principal, who immediately followed up with Michael's teachers.

Both Michael's parents said that Michael thought he was doing "about average in school," although they were frequently on him to improve his grades. They believed these perceptions he held were related to the poor expectations teachers held of him. They struggled to get Michael to remember to bring his homework home so they could help him with it. They understood his inability to organize and structure his studies but felt overwhelmed and thought that the school did not support their efforts. At the same time, ironically, they expected him to be able to remember basic things like bringing his homework assignments home or turning them in after they had been completed. Yet, at other times, they seemed not to realize the effect his disability might have had on his ability to carry out tasks and instructions as assigned.

When asked how Michael's middle school years compared to elementary school, both parents agreed that middle school was much harder for him. They thought this was a result of not enough staffing and individual attention. They also expressed that the work got harder for Michael in middle school, even though he was in special education English and math. In spite of their efforts to assist Michael in improving his grades, he continued to digress academically.

The Evanses believed that other issues also influenced Michael's educational experiences. They had lived at their current home only about a year, and they explained Michael's reservations about moving and the effect it had on him. Although he had not changed schools and interacted with his old friends at school every day, moving had an isolating effect on Michael. He experienced difficulty finding kids his age in the new neighborhood, and Mrs.

Evans described him as having "points of alienation" regarding this. She further pointed to his relationship with his siblings, who were only 11 months apart in age, as another example of Michael's feeling "left out." Both parents described Michael as very affectionate; as a result, he took it personally if he was not asked to be a part of his older siblings' activities.

Mr. Evans explained that Michael also had been deeply affected by the loss of his maternal great-grandfather two years ago. Mr. Evans thought that Michael had experienced some anxiety when he lived away from home for a short time in the past. Nevertheless, he and Michael had talked about this, and he did not really understand why Michael should not have been able to overcome these changes and losses. He thought that anyone should be happy to be in a bigger house and that because his parents were still alive and Michael spent quality time with them, he should basically be all right. Both parents believed that Michael's personality and behavior were greatly influenced by his home and school experiences, and they struggled with how to address his lack of academic progress in school.

The Evanses admitted, however, that their attitudes and perceptions were affected by previous school experiences of their older son, who had also been in special education throughout his schooling. Because of their frustrations with their older son's educational experiences as a special education student, the Evanses had been reluctant to place Michael in special education in the first place. Their older son, who was a high school senior, had been diagnosed as POHI. They were frustrated by what they believed to be a limited curriculum that failed to challenge their son's interest in computers. They anticipated the same problems occurring with Michael and his interest in art.

In essence, then, Michael's parents were very much in tune with their son, emotionally and academically. As much as they tried to accommodate his educational needs at home, they

continually found themselves frustrated at not making progress they could see. They blamed the school for Michael's lack of academic progress and motivation. They did not believe that teachers had made serious efforts to make sure the individual needs of students with special needs were being met. At the same time, they had tremendous hopes for Michael's and his siblings' futures. They believed their son could be more successful and happier if more were done for him at school.

It seems, however, that Michael's parents also struggled with truly accepting his disability. Although they appeared to understand his limitations, they still expected him to behave as if he did not have a disability. For example, his inability to remember to bring his homework home, do chores around the house, and ask teachers for help at school seemed to be related to his disability. Through all their efforts, these parents struggled to meet Michael's needs. Nonetheless, their involvement seemed critical to the progress Michael had made in school so far and to his future educational experiences.

Tammi's Mother–Ms. Summer

> I just want a normal life. You know? I just want normalcy. And . . . it's not like that with Tammi involved. And it does create, I mean, when, when she does things, it's, it's a, you know, dominoes effect. It, it affects everyone in the home.

This statement captured Ms. Summer's feelings about her daughter. Since elementary school when Tammi stole another student's lunch, stuffed it down her pants, and lied about it, Ms. Summer said she had struggled to attain some kind of normalcy in her life and her daughter's. She blamed herself for the emotional and school problems Tammi had had since kindergarten. She felt guilty about her decision to allow Tammi to live with her father when she was in sixth grade. It was then that Tammi became involved with drugs and gangs. Yet, in spite of all her efforts to understand and relate to Tammi, she felt completely defeated and frustrated. The

night of this interview, she had just learned that Tammi had been tested and received special education services while living with her father. Tammi had run away from home again that same evening. Although Ms. Summer had sought assistance from the probate courts regarding Tammi's truancy, the problem persisted.

In spite of her struggle to maintain control of Tammi, Ms. Summer was very much in touch with her daughter's school and life experiences. She expressed that Tammi had never been interested in school and that her boredom had grown worse since she entered middle school. She said that middle school was too complicated for Tammi and feared that her continued disinterest in school would lead her to drop out when she turned 16. In spite of her efforts to motivate Tammi by complimenting her cooking skills and interest in the culinary arts, she thought that it was not enough. Tammi needed reinforcement from individuals other than her. She believed this was one of the reasons Tammi had rebelled in sixth grade and wanted to live with her father.

> It's just, it's sad for, for Tammi who needs it, who needs that [affirmation]. And that's why I believe she chose to live with him to begin with, so she could, well, "Maybe if I live with Dad, I'm gonna get special attention. I'll get what I need from my, from my father." You know, she was at that point where she wanted that transition, you know, had enough of Mom.

Even when Tammi did demonstrate some interest in something, she usually wound up feeling negative. Ms. Summer described one situation in which Tammi had baked a spinach pie on her own initiative:

> I just EXCLAIMED over it!! I mean, she did this because she was so bored yesterday. She didn't call and ask my permission or anything, or "How do I make this?" I came home and I thought, I said, "What is that wonderful smell?" And she said, "I made, you know, spinach pie, Mom." And I said, "Great!" and she said, "Sit down," and she served me, and I just exclaimed and I thought, "This is just wonderful!" And then she criticized [herself], "Well, you know, I could have. . . ." I said, "Well that's what cooking is all about, Tammi, because you find out what, maybe you'll do something different next time."

Ms. Summer believed that Tammi's lack of motivation was a result of her feeling bad about decisions she had made in the past. As a result, she had low self-esteem and associated herself with similar students. This affected Tammi's attitude and efforts at school. Tammi's negative feelings came from both inside-school and out-of-school experiences. Since elementary school, teachers had commented on Tammi's lack of motivation.

> But when teachers are saying, basically, "You are a failure," you know, "You're not applying yourself. What's wrong with you?" I mean, she's gonna surround herself with kids that are failures, too, where she feels like she fits in. And unfortunately they were gang-mentality people . . . hum . .. who have . . . used her. Because she's not, I mean, aware. I mean, in her mind, you know, she's, she feels she's being flattered, you know, that "All these boys are paying attention to me."

Ms. Summer explained that Tammi's motivation came from talking to friends on the telephone. She was also motivated when she became interested in a new boy. All of Tammi's motivation was external, and when it was not present, she became disinterested in life and school. Tammi's self-confidence was connected to the level of interest and support she felt from others.

After her divorce from Tammi's father when her daughter was seven, Ms. Summer and Tammi had received counseling. Tammi had also received counseling and mental health services over the past two years, but nothing had really seemed to change her behavior at home or in school. She continued to do poorly academically and constantly to be involved in fights. Ms. Summer thought that the only way Tammi would succeed in school was if she quit her job and literally oversaw Tammi's daily activities.

> It's been forever, and like I told teachers before, I said, the only way I see that Tammi will succeed is if I quit my job, go to school with her everyday, go to every class with her, gather her, her papers, come home, and help her with them. I said that's not a reality. I'm a single parent. It's not a real, reality in my life to be able to do that for my daughter. But that's how disorganized she is. She's not able to function, you know, with organizing like a normal kid.

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Ms. Summer was frustrated that Tammi did not take school seriously. She said that Tammi enjoyed only the social aspects of school. She had been told many times by school staff how personable and likable Tammi was. But this frustrated her because she could not understand why Tammi did not realize that she could not get through life just having fun. Nonetheless, since Tammi's diagnosis as being learning disabled, Ms. Summer thought that Tammi now had a better chance of turning her academics around. She hoped that the individual attention Tammi would receive in special education could motivate her, help her become more organized, and promote more self-confidence.

Ms. Summer was still adamant, however, about the ability of the school, overall, to meet Tammi's needs. She thought that students were basically disrespectful and that this made educating them more difficult. She described a situation that had occurred while she was meeting with an assistant principal the last time Tammi had been suspended from school that had reinforced her thinking.

> Well, I mean, I just observed it today [distractions at school]. When, when I was there for the meeting and getting Tammi back in school, I mean . . . there were just a lot of kids just wandering around and, you know, coming in and just didn't know what was appropriate behavior. . . . I don't think that kids today . . . aren't taught . . . a lot about uh . . . appropriate . . . what's appropriate and what's not appropriate. I think there's a lot of not real fine lines there . . . just from observing.

She thought this kind of environment was not conducive for a child like Tammi, who always pushed the limits. She believed that a certain amount of fear had to be involved when dealing with Tammi, in order for her to take anything seriously. "That fear element works for Tammi. Not my fear, I mean not the fear that I impose on her, because taking the phone away and all that is like not big enough to threaten Tammi. She needs to know that there are consequences to her behavior."

Ms. Summer's communication with the school regarding Tammi had always been unpleasant. She explained with anxiety in her voice that the only time she heard from the school was when Tammi was in trouble, usually for fighting. Although she attended parent-teacher conferences, these were exhausting for her because all she ever heard was how much potential Tammi had, but that she wasn't motivated.

Ms. Summer thought that Tammi was scared to go on to high school because she sensed how much more difficult it would be than middle school. When asked what she was most concerned about regarding Tammi's education in the future, Ms. Summer responded, "That she will be a dropout and have no skills to function in the real world. And that, you know, that I'm gonna have to take care of her." She expressed having talked to Tammi about her concerns many times, but it had not seemed to motivate her. Her last hope was that special education would positively influence Tammi's attitude and motivation toward school. Ms. Summer said she would continue with the family counseling, but she feared that there was only so much that could be accomplished because "Tammi just [isn't] normal." When asked what she meant by that, she replied, "Not normal in the fact that, hum . . . Tammi's what, what, how I would expect a normal response to be when, when something that, emotional has happened. I would see, see some remorse. Or, you know, even an apology or, you know, 'I'm sorry, Mom.'" Her inability to understand Tammi's thinking frustrated Ms. Summer, and at this point, she felt overwhelmed.

Since Tammi had been in kindergarten, Ms. Summer had made many efforts to help her daughter be successful in school. She had moved her from a public to a private school and had tried having Tammi live with her father and attend school in another district. However, Tammi remained bored and continuously got in trouble inside and outside of school. Ms. Summer had

been unsuccessful at motivating Tammi. Even family counseling had been ineffective. Ms. Summer was also frustrated with the school's attempts to handle Tammi, which were mostly through suspensions. Although she was optimistic about Tammi's recent diagnosis and placement into special education, Ms. Summer remained greatly concerned about Tammi's social life, fearing it would lead her to drop out of school once she turned 16. Ms. Summer, like Mrs. Davis and the Evanses, seemed to understand her child's strengths and weaknesses, yet she struggled with how to address her emotional, social, and educational needs.

Charles's Mother–Ms. Stevens

> He says he kids about it more because "If, Mom, I kid about it, I don't get made fun of." . . . It's, he says, like if I get them to laugh with, with me or, you know, instead of at me, then it's better. So, he's got a good attitude there. He knows he has problems. He knows, you know, that he's not always going to be as or good at some things.

Ms. Stevens believed that Charles's being diagnosed with ADHD since kindergarten had shaped his entire school experiences. She also believed that taking Ritalin affected his behavior both at school and at home. She was very much in tune with Charles's feelings and experiences. Because there was a history of ADHD in her family, she was familiar with the behaviors. In addition, each of her six children had been diagnosed with some type of learning disability.

Like Mrs. Evans, Ms. Stevens had been actively involved in Charles's school life since kindergarten. She attended support groups for parents of children with ADHD, met regularly with his teachers, and had even taken some classes on self-esteem. She reported that Charles loved school and had missed a total of only 12 days since sixth grade. He even wanted to attend school when he was ill. She believed that the social aspects of school, the routine, and the structure were what Charles enjoyed about school. At the same time, she knew he was

frustrated because school was so hard. She believed he felt inadequate and that he talked less about his feelings after entering middle school.

> It bothers him. It bothers him. I know it bothers him. I mean and, I, I just keep reinforcing the issue that you're just, you have a handicap. It's no different than somebody who has special needs that has to be in a wheelchair. Your handicap can't be seen, you know. But it's something you were born with, and it's never gonna change. You're, you're gonna have it and it's just something you've gotta learn to deal with.

Nevertheless, Ms. Evans thought that Charles tried to have a good attitude about his disability, even though she knew it was difficult for him. But since all of her other children also were or had been in special education, she thought this made it a bit easier for Charles.

Ms. Stevens explained that Charles's grade school years had been his best. She attributed this to his having male teachers who took a personal interest in him and gave him individual attention. She expressed that middle school was so much more difficult for Charles for many reasons, primarily social.

> Right now he is, it's, it's too much. Now we're getting into girls a little more. We're getting into peer pressure. We're getting into uh . . . being accepted. What you wear, how you act, all of that that goes along with those years. I remember even myself . . . um . . . where in junior, grade school it was, it didn't matter if you didn't have the best shoes. . . . Uh, I just think there's more pressure on him to be accepted. There's more kids, for one thing. We're dealing with more and more teachers, and kids. But I think he's just really having a hard time this year.

Ms. Stevens described Charles's attitude and behavior as worse than the previous school year. At parent conferences during the spring semester, teachers expressed seeing the changes in his behavior, as well. Ms. Evans described Charles as having a bad attitude, being angry a lot, and talking back to her at home. She thought that his dosage of Ritalin needed to be increased, but she seemed hesitant about doing this because of some of the negative side effects like weight loss and stunting of growth. Ms. Stevens thought the Ritalin was primarily useful in helping teachers control Charles's behavior. She said they had a better handle on his

behavior than she did, and she relied on them to keep her informed. "It's more for teachers. I get my feedback from, like, from the teachers. They're the ones that deal with him on an eight-hour-a-day basis. I only have him a little bit in the morning, you know, and then in the evening, he's outside. So, I don't see how he has to be when he has to sit still and learn something."

Although Charles's behavior recently had changed for the worse, Ms. Stevens did not think it was related to her divorce from Charles's father the preceding year. In fact, she said that Charles felt more comfortable without his dad being around the house. However, Charles's classroom behavior was almost completely out of hand. Ms. Stevens explained how Charles's father recently had gone to school and sat through his classes to get a handle on the behavioral problems he was having. Teachers reported to Ms. Stevens that Charles's behavior was no different when his dad was present. He still did not focus or concentrate in class. Mr. Stevens, however, had a different take on the situation. He told Ms. Stevens that "the classes were out of control. Teachers are out of control. Kids very, very, very disrespectful. He says it's no wonder Charles couldn't learn because the teachers couldn't control them 'cause kids just talk." In spite of Charles's insistence that he learned better "with noise," neither of his parents believed that this could possibly be true. They were frustrated with how to discipline him in an effort to control his behavior.

Ms. Stevens thought that Charles's primary motivation for attending school was to be with his friends. Having to be confined to sit and not allowed to move were extremely difficult for him. She hoped that having more curriculum choices in high school would help. "Yeah, like a recess or gym class. . . . When they went from grade school into this [middle school] with this kind of a child, I thought, 'Oh, no recess. He's not going to do well.' You know, that hour

of being outdoors helps him burn off a little energy kinda and sit down and then come in and be relaxed."

Ms. Stevens struggled to get Charles to bring homework home and do it. She had felt more comfortable helping him during elementary school than now because she understood the assignments better. She described his study habits as nonexistent and thought that the only way he would do his work consistently was if she sat down every night with him and did it, something she could not do because she worked nights. In the past, she and her ex-husband had tried to use a reward system to motivate Charles. But since the divorce, money was tight and she was no longer able to do this.

Ms. Stevens expressed that although her communication with teachers and school staff was good, it was not sufficient. She said that Charles used to bring home daily reports that kept her informed as to how he was doing. In elementary school, she knew his teachers better and felt like she had more influence on his classes and schedule. Middle school had changed some of this because the classes were larger and there were more teachers to deal with.

> He doesn't bring homework home now. You have to fight with him. Before he would, you know, say, "I need this" or teachers are right on top of it and they call and say, "You know, Ms. Stevens, Charles has a test. I sent this home. . . . Make sure that he studies." So then we get it out. But he's not one to, he's so different from the girls.

Ms. Stevens explained how helpful it was when Charles brought home a daily report from each teacher. But after doing this for a while, Charles would forget to bring it home or say he could not find it.

Ms. Stevens expressed that her biggest concern with school was that she did not believe that all of Charles's teachers were certified in special education. She spoke with anxiety about how this troubled her:

> The thing that does bother me is that . . . sometimes like they'll have a teacher in there doing special ed. that's not qualified. And I don't know how the, the school gets, how they can do that, how they can get these people in there just because they're teachers, but if they aren't qualified special ed, that bothers me. That's one thing that I . . . that bothers me. . . . But I don't know who to go to or who to say or what, how to fight it, you know?

But even though she expressed having a good relationship with the head of the special education department, she seemed reluctant to talk with this individual or an administrator about her concern.

In spite of her frustrations, over the years Ms. Stevens had formed good relationships with several special education teachers whom her older children had had in school. This seemed to provide a sense of security for her as she reflected on Charles's going on to high school next year. Yet she was concerned that Charles would not graduate from high school:

> That he graduates . . . I mean, that's my biggest concern. That he's gonna get to where he'll . . . wanna start skipping, you know? If it's too frustrating, it's too hard; he'll just give up. That's why I, I try and stay involved, try to remember teachers' names and what classes they're in, you know? I'm not, I'm not probably as good as I could be, but I'm better than my parents were.

Overall, Ms. Stevens thought that Charles was a fun and creative person. She felt frustrated that he continued to struggle in school, in spite of her efforts to help him succeed. She thought that a structured environment where he kept the same teacher all day was best for him. She worried that high school would be too overwhelming and that he would drop out. She hoped that more hands-on activities would be made available to him in high school, increasing his motivation. Ms. Stevens, like the other parents in this study, tried diligently to meet the needs of her son. Nevertheless, she seemed overwhelmed and frustrated about how best to do this.

Vicki's Mother–Mrs. Benton

Do you ever worry about her education?

Not at first. . . . I used to. Yeah, I used to, but then . . . when she started doing better, I stopped. 'Cause she used to fall behind. As a matter of fact, she was in the third grade before she learned to read.

Mrs. Benton's perceptions of Vicki's school experiences were that she really enjoyed school, specifically being with her friends, having more freedom and more choices (lunches, classes). Unlike all the other students in the study, she said that Vicki preferred middle school to grade school. Mrs. Benton acknowledged being worried in the past about Vicki's academics, but she thought things had improved this year. She believed that frequent moving while Vicki was in elementary school had negatively affected her grades, but that she was more stable now. "Yeah, it was a problem [moving]. . . . Yep. But once she got stable, you know, she started to do all right. Yeah, but it was, . . . the moving, yeah, had a, a big impact on her grades . . . had a big impact on her grades."

Although Vicki's grades were borderline passing, Mrs. Benton expressed that Vicki made studying and doing her homework immediately after school her first priority. She described how organized Vicki was.

> She, Vicki loves to, she loves to study. She, she . . . first thang she does when she comes home . . . she'll do her homework as first thang. She does her homework and, . . . if she has somethin' that she has to read, she'll do that. After her work is all done, that's her playtime. If there is time left to play, that's when she plays. But homework is first, comes first with her.

She said that math class was a challenge for Vicki, and that she found it difficult. She said that Vicki really liked to read and wanted to be an accountant when she grew up. Vicki's paternal grandmother played an important role in her education. She had established a trust fund for Vicki and her sisters to attend college. Mrs. Benton thought this kept Vicki motivated to do well in school.

Although Vicki did not participate in any extracurricular activities at home or in the community, Mrs. Benton wished that she did. However, she did not seem bent on forcing Vicki to do this. She said Vicki enjoyed taking care of her infant niece when she got home and was close to her 11-year-old sister. Mrs. Benton anticipated that high school would be difficult for Vicki, even though she made friends easily. "She's shy. Yep, she doesn't talk much. Yeah, so I think it's gonna be scary for her. I think she'll handle it pretty well, once she get there, I think she will—and start to make friends. But she, she does that very well. She makes friends very well." Overall, though, Mrs. Benton thought that Vicki did not worry too much about school or anything else. Because she had a close relationship with her daughters, Mrs. Benton said that all the girls knew they could talk to her about anything that bothered them, and they usually did.

> She [Vicki], she doesn't worry too much about school or even anything at . . . you know, out, outside of school. She, she. . . . If she has a problem, she'll normally, she'll come to me and she'll mention it to me, but that's something she doesn't, she very rarely does. So she doesn't worry too much and she knows she can talk to me about anything and they, they normally do.

Mrs. Benton described her communication with school staff as positive. She explained that last year she was called to have a couple of conferences regarding Vicki's academic performance, but this year Vicki was doing much better. She relied on teachers to let her know if Vicki was having any problems. She thought the improvement in Vicki's grades this year was due to her constantly talking with and lecturing her. Also, she thought the group of students Vicki had hung around with last year might have negatively affected her focus. However, she liked Vicki's friends this year and believed that Vicki was mature enough to make appropriate decisions.

> Her, right now her grades are pretty good. I kinda like, yeah, I feel better about her grades this year than what I did last year. . . . Me lecturing her, for one of the reasons.

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I think, at the, see at the beginning of the year, I think she was more, paying more attention to what was going on around her with her friends rather than, than just, you know, what she was supposed to be doing at school. So I think what she's done is she kinda let her friends go and pay more attention to her work.

Mrs. Benton believed that Vicki was well adjusted at school. She was optimistic about her success in high school, although Vicki's grades were borderline throughout middle school. She had regular communication with the school regarding Vicki's progress and was usually only actively involved if there was a problem. She viewed Vicki as an independent and mature girl who "knew right from wrong." Interestingly, she had no concerns about Vicki or her future education, despite her poor academic status.

Jason's Mother–Ms. Brown

That's just how he is!! He was like that as a baby!! Jason was just like that since he was three years old!!! And he was loved by everybody. That's just a part within him. That's just how he is. I mean, some people are just born like they are. You got to work and help 'em get out of that, though, just. . . . Yeah, so I work with Jason's attitude.

Mrs. Brown's communication with the school had been ongoing for many years. Since grade school, Jason had gotten into trouble at school for excessive talking, misbehaving, and what she called being hyperactive. She defined hyperactive in several different ways:

Like move, like to move around. Like when he was . . . once he started school, like once he got like in the third or the fourth grade . . . he was . . . like every year from kindergarten, in . . . still now in eighth Jason always the hyperist child in the class. Like they would say, "Jason's the most hyperist one I have," and "Jason's so hyper!" And they always said . . . he'll and he's still like, like the teachers just called me recently. It's hard for them to keep Jason in his seat. He just has to sharpen his pencil and just stand up next to his desk, you know? He just have to always be moving around. Go to the bathroom. Walk around the room and . . . just get up and just get up. And just, he's always been like that, his teachers say. He just can't stay still.

Ms. Brown communicated the most with school officials the previous year regarding Jason's behavior when it got so bad that he was suspended until he received counseling. She

sought help and said this was helpful for a while, but after Jason was suspended again the first day he returned to school, she became frustrated and ended the counseling sessions.

> Last year around this time, he was kicked out. They just kicked him totally out of school. He went back the same . . . and they kicked him right back out the next day. I mean, he, like, was running in the halls. He wouldn't admit that he was running in the hall. I mean, just little stuff. He was playing, goofing around in the halls and stuff. I begged the principal to let him come back if he got counseling, right? I went through all this to get Jason a nice counselor and everything. Started him going to counseling and everything, and Jason went back to school the same day and got kicked out.

Ms. Brown said the biggest problem Jason had was admitting his problems and that he had been that way since he was a child. Once they were able to get him to do this in counseling, his behavior had improved somewhat.

Ms. Brown had contact with Jason's teachers for both behavioral and academic reasons. When she suspected Jason of smoking marijuana in the mornings before school, she informed one of his teachers, who questioned him about it. She had primarily been in communication with his math teacher, who offered to stay after school to help Jason with his work. However, he never did. Ms. Brown had a positive perception of Jason's teachers and thought they were willing to help him, but that Jason was not helping himself. "He knows his teachers like him. I can tell all his teachers are nice in conference. Like when I go to conferences and stuff. He knows his teachers . . . they like Jason. I, you know, I'm not gonna try to knock school because I don't think there is nothing at school that's doing anything to Jason." She also liked the fact that teachers at Isbill communicated with each other about individual students. "His teachers all know me. They calls me enough. They been calling me for years. Oh, and I noticed that if I tells one teacher something, they'll go and tell all the other teachers. And by the end of the day, Jason knows exactly what me and his teacher talked about on the phone."

Ms. Brown especially liked the principal because she allowed Jason to return to school after so many suspensions last year.

Regarding Jason's grades, Ms. Brown thought that he was doing better in school this year than last year, but that he could do even better if he put more energy into his homework and classwork.

> Well, Jason, I noticed that Jason's grades this term has came up a little bit. I don't know exactly what grades he got in his classes, but I can tell that he . . . like he brought home a report and he got like a 85 on it. He was so glad. He says, "Mom, look at that report. I got a 85 on it." And I notice that, for one thing, Jason's grades in school are better when his attitude . . . when we get more control of his attitude. Like I haven't been having a lot of phone calls this year.

She thought the primary reasons Jason was not doing well in classes were his attitude and his behavior. However, she thought these had improved this year because Jason knew he was in danger of not being promoted to high school. "Well, I think Jason's trying more now because we have gotten his attitude better. And Jason understands that he's not goin', that he has to graduate to go off to college to get a good job. Jason knows all this. And Jason, believe it or not . . . he loves school. He never, ever misses a day."

In addition to seeking counseling for Jason's behavioral and attitude problems, Ms. Brown had tried several other approaches. She spent much time talking with him about his future and the importance of getting an education. She had tried rewarding him in the past for good behavior by buying him expensive designer clothes. She had pulled him out of sports the previous year when his attitude had gotten so bad. She even threatened to take him off his paper route, something he valued a great deal because he was allowed to keep all of the money he made from it. Finally, Ms. Brown had sent Jason to live with her parents the latter part of the first semester of eighth grade because she could not control his behavior. Recently, he returned home, and she thought his attitude was somewhat better.

Like most of the other parents in the study, Mrs. Brown thought that sixth grade had been Jason's best year in school. "He was excited about it and he wanted to prove to me that he's blending in with the bigger kids and stuff. . . . I didn't get a lot of phone calls in the sixth grade, and his grades was pretty decent in the sixth grade. I don't think he got kicked out any in the sixth grade." Jason's school records showed that this was true. However, Mrs. Brown moved Jason to Isbill for seventh grade, and from that point on his grades had declined. She thought this was greatly due to Jason's friends in the neighborhood and indicated that this was the reason for the change in schools. She said that Jason was popular among the boys in the neighborhood and that most of his friends were repeating the eighth grade. Also, she felt unable to remove him from this environment because they were the only friends he knew. "Half of 'em, majority of 'em, by the time December came, was not even in school. They'd be like in a re . . . reentry school. One of 'em is kicked out for the school year. . . . He, he took a ball, like a, a stress ball, and threw it and hit the bus driver in the back of the head." Ms. Brown was very concerned about the influence of the neighborhood on Jason, and she believed his poor behavior and attitude were related to his environment. She revealed that he had at least tried marijuana and had been picked up several times for violating the city's curfew for minors and once for shoplifting with boys from the neighborhood.

Because of Jason's behavior and attitude, Ms. Brown believed that the only way Jason would graduate from high school was if she stayed on him every day. She admitted not feeling comfortable sometimes helping him with homework, but she tried to maintain some level of discipline with him.

> Like if he come in the door, like at 3 o'clock, I'll say, "Jason, do you have any homework?" "I'm about to do my homework right now, Mom," you know, and he'll go in there and close the door. Long as I'm on him. Like if he has friends come in, over, I'll say, "Uh, no one can come in, Jason. Go—you have to do your homework."

If I'm not on him, if not, no! He'll go out the door with them guys. . . . He's gonna go in there and go right back out that door . . . and jump on the moped and be done or doing something.

Ms. Brown believed that if she could put in more time with Jason, he would perhaps do better in school, but this was difficult for her because she had five other children who also needed her attention. Yet she remained determined to do whatever she could to promote his success.

Getting him through high school. And also, keeping Jason's grades. That's hard for me since I have other children and not a lot of time. . . . Well, I don't think I, I feel like he won't. It's just a struggle to get him there. I think Jason gonna graduate as long as I'm helping him and struggling with him, but if I slack up, no. Heck no!! Jason wouldn't, Jason wouldn't be in school probably now if it wasn't for me on him like I am.

Although Ms. Brown felt responsible for Jason's academic success, she did not think he was trying as hard as he could in school.

Jason is getting bad grades. Like in _____, he got a D. That's because Jason's just not trying. And he don't want to try and it's just too much; it's just too much effort in that class. Like his projects and he has to do work and stuff, and so, then he always have a D because he's not putting no effort in science.

She also thought that he behaved poorly in certain teachers' classes just to get on their nerves. But he behaved appropriately in the classes of teachers whom he liked.

Like in _____ class. He probably likes his _____ teacher. He just feels like he can get away, a jump, with acting up more in his _____ class. And the other teachers is not goin' put up with it. And he thinks, maybe, I think he thinks he can run over his _____ teacher. Like, he knows that it, the other teachers doesn't call me as much with that pencil-sharpening thing 'cause Jason is not doing that in their classes.

Ms. Brown said that participating in extracurricular activities, namely sports, had a positive impact on Jason's grades and attitudes. She noticed that his attitude was more positive and his behavior better during the sports seasons. He even hung out with a different set of boys

during this period of time. But as soon as the sports season was over, he went back to hanging out with his regular neighborhood friends.

Ms. Brown's perceptions of Jason's school experiences were influenced by his poor behavior in school, which had persisted since elementary school. Jason's behavior at school was similar to the way he behaved at home and was what his mother described as "hyperactivity." She believed that Jason loved school but was sometimes unwilling to admit to his poor behavior. In spite of her various efforts to improve his attitude, she did not think she had been successful. Ms. Brown's communication with school staff was related primarily to Jason's behavioral problems. However, she felt comfortable with school staff and teachers and believed that everyone was doing whatever they could to help Jason succeed. Yet she remained frustrated with his academic progress in school and the friends with whom he continued to associate with in the neighborhood. She placed responsibility on herself for improving his grades but struggled with how much she could comfortably help him. The entire interview with Ms. Brown revealed her frustrations and feelings of helplessness regarding controlling Jason's attitude and behavior.

During debriefing sessions with Ms. Brown at the end of the study, she revealed that Jason had failed the eighth grade. He had run away from home for the past three days, living with friends in the neighborhood. When he did come home, he and his friends stayed up all night rolling dice and eating up everything in the refrigerator. When Ms. Brown attempted to discipline him, he would run away again. She expressed concern for the safety of her younger children in the home when he was around. She also said that Jason had begun stealing expensive items and selling them for money. She expressed tremendous anxiety and frustration

and believed that the only thing that could influence Jason's behavior at this point was something dramatic happening to him.

Summary

These parents' views and perceptions of school were varied and based on the kind of contact and communication they had with the school over the years. For the most part, they thought that teachers and administrators were not meeting the needs of their children. Mrs. Davis thought that Laura needed more recognition and respect for her academic efforts, and because the school was not giving enough, her behavior was poor. Mr. and Mrs. Evans and Ms. Stevens thought that the school was not meeting their children's needs because the special educational programming was not individualized enough. Mr. Evans said that the special education program was a joke because it did not expect much of Michael and it failed to motivate him. This caused Michael to be disinterested in school and bored. Ms. Stevens thought that Charles had had good teachers in the past, but now she did not believe the academic environment was structured enough for him to learn. In addition, she had serious concerns about his special education teacher's competence. Both the Evans and Stevens families had other children in special education, and their perceptions were shaped by those experiences, which were both negative and positive.

Ms. Summer did not think the school environment was structured enough for Tammi. She thought that students were out of control and that tight discipline was necessary for her daughter to succeed. Ms. Brown and Mrs. Benton had the most positive views of school. They cited support received from teachers and school staff when their children were struggling, behaviorally and academically.

Aside from Ms. Benton and Ms. Brown, the other parents were unhappy with the level and amount of communication between the school staff and them. They were frustrated with a lack of follow-through from teachers regarding the academic progress of their students. Ms. Stevens, Ms. Evans, and Ms. Summer talked about the effect of inconsistencies in receiving progress reports on their abilities to monitor their children's academic performance. All parents had attended parent-teacher conferences, but the only ones who had positive experiences were Ms. Brown and Mrs. Benton. Mrs. Davis thought she spent her time in these sessions forcing teachers to respect her daughter. The Evanses had tried, without resolution, to find out exactly what was necessary for Michael to progress and get out of special education. Ms. Summer said she had been frustrated with conferences for so long that she dreaded attending them because teachers always told her how talented and likable Tammi was, but also how unmotivated she was.

These parents' previous experiences with school were also related to their children's behavioral problems. Seldom did they receive positive feedback regarding their students' academic accomplishments. Their overall perceptions and views of school were strikingly similar to those of their children. They used the same words their students did to describe school. During interviews, Laura frequently talked about "only respecting teachers that respected [her]." Michael said he was bored because he was "unchallenged." Tammi commented that the school was "too loose on students" and needed to "crack down on kids bringing marijuana to school." Charles said he was "overwhelmed with the work load" and explained how difficult it was for him to sit still all day long in the classroom. Jason described his own behavior as "hyperactive," and he admitted to having trouble controlling himself. And Vicki expressed liking the "freedom and flexibility" she had at school. Not surprisingly, parents

and students had similar overall views of school, but the meanings of these views were not necessarily the same.

All parents expressed knowing how their children were doing academically. Mrs. Davis was frustrated with Laura's grades and believed she was capable of doing much better. Mr. and Mrs. Evans were equally frustrated with Michael's grades but were not sure if he was as concerned as they were. They said he thought he was doing "about average work." Ms. Stevens and Ms. Summer said it was like pulling teeth to get Charles and Tammi to bring their work home, but knew they were struggling because of teacher reports. Ms. Brown thought that Jason was doing better compared to last year, but was still in danger of failing the eighth grade. Only Mrs. Benton thought that Vicki was doing well, ironically, in spite of the fact that her grade reports showed her to be barely passing.

These parents believed that how their children behaved in school was directly related to their interest in school and feelings about their teachers and experiences. They echoed what the students said about liking the social aspects of school, but also said they viewed school as boring. Most thought that their children's poor behavior was due to negative academic experiences they were having at school and from no fault of their own. This was especially true for Laura, Michael, Charles, and Tammi. Ms. Benton blamed Jason for his hyperactive behavior. There were no behavioral issues with Vicki.

Nonetheless, each of these parents had very specific concerns about their children's education. Michael's parents said they wanted him to be able to make good money in the future. They had discussed with him his interest in being an architect or a cartoonist and the importance of being motivated and focused. They wanted him to do whatever he thought made him happy and hoped it involved getting a college education: "We want him to have a career,

not a job." Their main concern was that Michael obtain the skills in school to allow him to pursue a career of his choice. They were worried that his experiences in special education would not prepare him for life. Laura's mother said her most immediate concern was where Laura would attend high school next year. She wanted her to experience a more diverse environment. If the choice were up to her, she would send Laura to school in Paris because she had heard there was no racism in the schools there. Mrs. Davis was also concerned about the pressure peers placed on each other in school nowadays as related to clothes, hairstyles, and so on. She was considering sending Laura to a school that required students to wear a uniform to eliminate these kinds of pressures. She thought that Laura could "be all she could be" if she did not have to deal with racism and peer pressure at school. Ms. Summer, Ms. Stevens, and Ms. Brown all feared that their children would drop out before completing high school. Each of these parents thought that if they did not individually stay on their children daily, either the children would lose interest in school or negative peer pressure would cause them to drop out. Mrs. Benton was the only parent who did not express any concerns about her child's future education, in spite of Vicki's borderline grades.

Although these parents felt frustrated with various aspects of the school's efforts to assist their students and blamed the school for most of the students' behavioral problems, they failed to take responsibility for situations they could control with their children. For example, Mrs. Davis, Ms. Stevens, Ms. Brown, and Ms. Summer were frustrated with the school's approach to disciplining their children, but they could not control them either. At the end of the study, Mrs. Davis's frustrations with Laura had led her to give full custody of Laura to her mother. Jason and Tammi frequently ran away from home, and their parents' efforts through the juvenile court system had failed to produce any positive changes in them. Ms. Brown and

Ms. Summer used reward systems with Jason and Charles, but they had been ineffective. In addition, it did not seem to help that Mrs. Davis and Ms. Brown allowed Laura and Jason to make adult decisions about their lives. Jason was allowed to ride the city bus to the mall alone and was not required to return home until 9:00 p.m. on week nights. He was also allowed to keep all the money from his paper route and to choose which high school he would attend next year. He made all of these major decisions even though his mother knew he hung out with negative peers in the neighborhood, had been picked up for shoplifting and violating the city's curfew, and had experimented with marijuana.

Mrs. Davis allowed Laura to behave in any manner she wished at school because, basically, she supported her daughter's belief that teachers were prejudiced against her. She knew Laura spent only a minimum amount of time on her homework every evening (30 minutes), but allowed her to stay out late in the evenings as well, as long as her chores and homework were done. She knew Laura had been on probation for several months because of fighting in the community and was frequently suspended from school for the same reason. Yet she believed that Laura's immediate group of peers were good people for her to hang around with.

Ms. Summer and Ms. Stevens admitted that Tammi's and Charles's behaviors at home were troublesome. Charles talked back to his mother and never did his homework. Tammy did not do any homework either, yet both of these parents thought that other children at school showed no respect for adults and that school needed to be more structured.

All parents expected the school to do a better job with their children academically, but except for the Evanses, there was no tangible evidence of their efforts to ensure that their students developed good study habits and practices. Ms. Stevens and Ms. Brown admitted

feeling uncomfortable helping Charles and Jason with their homework; however, they did not force them to stay after school to receive the extra help they needed. And although the Evanses provided the greatest amount of parental support for Michael, it is questionable as to whether or not they were realistic about his learning disability and what it meant for him academically. Mrs. Davis, Ms. Summer, and Ms. Brown all said they thought the only way their children would succeed in school was if they put all of their attention on them. But the only reasons they gave for not doing this was that they worked or had other children who also needed their attention. Confusingly, Mrs. Benton did not have any concerns about Vicki's academic status, although her grades were barely passing. She thought that Vicki was capable of getting her homework done on her own, and she relied on the school and teachers to let her know if there were any problems.

It was clear that the primary method of communication parents had with school staff was through parent-teacher conferences or for discipline reasons. Yet, even when parents had other, serious concerns, they were reluctant or failed to call the matter to an administrator's attention. Aside from the Evanses and Mrs. Davis, who had a close relationship with one of the assistant principals, Ms. Stevens and Ms. Summer had issues that seemed to need an administrator's attention. However, they did not pursue those concerns. They remained frustrated with the responses they received from teachers.

Finally, although all of these parents acknowledged problems with their children, beginning in elementary school and worsening by sixth grade, they were unable to recognize or minimized other traumatic life events that had happened to their children that had nothing to do with the school. Mrs. Davis did not associate Laura's constantly getting into fights in the community with her inability to get along with her peers in school. Instead, she kept moving

Laura from school to school. The Evanses knew that changing neighborhoods, the death of Michael's great-grandfather (to whom he had been extremely close), and being placed in special education were significant events in his life, but they failed to realize the impact these things had on him. Instead, Mr. Evans thought that Michael should have been able to adjust. Ms. Summer blamed herself for what had happened to Tammi when she lived with her father in sixth grade, but she blamed the school for not finding out that Tammi had been diagnosed and labeled as a special education student earlier, even though Ms. Summer herself did not know this until Tammi's last suspension. Ms. Stevens knew that Charles was suffering from low self-esteem as a result of being in special education and that he was rebelling as a result of her divorce from his father. But she rationalized his behavior by explaining that his disability was "just something he would have to live with and that it shouldn't be that bad because all his other sisters and people in [her] family had also been ADHD or in special education." She also thought that Charles was actually happier since his dad was not around because he was more relaxed and did not have to worry about his dad hitting him. Ms. Brown gave no explanation for changing Jason's school after sixth grade, other than to get him away from his friends in the neighborhood. She rationalized that his behavior was the way it was because he was "just born that way," and she would have to work with him to get him through it.

All of these students had experienced traumatic life events by the time they reached middle school, and their parents' inability or failure to recognize the effect of these events perhaps contributed to their children's adjustment to middle school. Seemingly, in spite of these parents' well-intentioned efforts to meet the needs of their children, they struggled to understand their role and the school's in accomplishing their goals. Instead, they supported their students' views and perceptions and blamed the school for their problems.

Part Three: Perceptions of Teachers, Administrators,
and Support Staff

<u>Teachers</u>

Six teachers, four regular education and two special education, comprised the team of

which the six students in the study were a part. One of the regular education teachers did not

participate in the interview process, and one of the special education teachers' only involvement

was providing information regarding the academic status of special education students, who

were mainstreamed in two classes. One formal interview was conducted with each teacher and

followed up with several informal conversations throughout the course of the study. This

section includes teachers' comments regarding their definitions and perceptions of at-risk

students, views on parental involvement, school at-risk programs and services, and the

academic and behavioral characteristics of at-risk students in the study. First is a brief

description of these teachers' backgrounds, including their own descriptions of their teaching

styles.

Teachers' Backgrounds and Teaching Styles

Teachers in the study had a combined total of more than 40 years' experience in the

public schools. They included two African American males, two African American females, one

Caucasian male, and one Caucasian female. All had taught eighth grade the majority of their

tenure. Four had taught in this school district since beginning their teaching careers. This

group of teachers was considered one of the best teams in the building because of their

reputation for working effectively with at-risk students. Although these teachers were modest

about this, one in particular said he purposely asked each year to have the toughest kids on his

team because those were the types of kids he had gone to college to teach. Overall, these

teachers described their teaching styles as direct and had high expectations that each student

put forth his or her best effort to succeed. Each of the regular education teachers had taught

at the high school level and thought that eighth grade should be the training ground for high

school. They said that it was important for students to have personal responsibility, respect,

structure, and consistency in order for them to do well. Observations in these teachers'

classrooms indicated that the quality of their relationships with students was important to their

overall success with them. They described their teaching styles as follows:

> Teacher 1: In your face. I'm very vocal. I talk with my hands. So I give 'em a show. I try to give them respect, and I expect respect in return.

> Teacher 2: There has to be a lot of structure in the classroom. And then you can go ahead and work on the content.

> Teacher 3: To prepare students for high school. Kids receive an assignment, tell 'em the day it's due, that's when it's due. It's no ifs, ands, and buts about it.

> Teacher 4: Honest. I don't play with the kids, you know? I don't baby-sit them. I feel like they learn more when they're quiet, when they're listening.

> One of the African American male teachers was especially popular among the students.

When asked why he thought this was true, he responded,

> One, I'm the same every day. Two, I give 'em discipline, and three, they can see me at the local convenience store. I live in the neighborhood, you know. So, the kids know I'm real. So, I guess, in a nutshell, discipline. The kids know, when I say discipline it makes no difference if it's one of my boys that I kick it with all the time or one of the girls that baby-sit for me. If they do something wrong (pound on the desk), I'll send them outta here or send 'em home or put 'em through the discipline program just as if it's somebody who, who we really don't get along. So, and the kids see that and kids say, "Okay, he's not biased."

At the same time, this teacher spent time with students outside of school, helping those who got

in trouble. He thought this was the key to his relationships with them:

> I talk to the kids as if we was out there in the streets. And they say they know that I'm real. They know that I care. And they know that, hey, when all else fails, you can page me. Mamma won't come get ya, I will. And they, they know that. And, and many a

kids, that's why the principal lets me walk around with my little pager right here around my belt. 'Cause if she know that, that one of my kids get in trouble, I'm leaving the school. I'm going down there today.

Why Students Are Considered At Risk

Teachers were asked their perceptions of why certain students were considered at risk. There was no consensus, but they named parental involvement, home life, students' behavior, academic disabilities, and society as their main reasons. Unanimously, the level of involvement from parents and the home environment were given as reasons why students become at risk for school failure. Level of involvement by the parents meant whether or not they attended parent-teacher conferences. It also referred to how much parents were actually in touch with what was going on in their children's lives outside of school. Single parents and working parents were perceived as not being as involved with their children. Home environments that were not conducive to learning were described as those in which substance abuse or other dysfunctional activities were going on. In addition, one teacher considered low socioeconomic status as not being conducive to learning. Finally, nonsupportive home environments were defined as those in which parents did not participate in or encourage students to do their homework.

Poor student classroom behavior also was mentioned as a reason why students might be considered at risk. Poor classroom behavior meant not attempting to do the work, even when the student was capable. These students appeared unconcerned and did not respond to negative consequences. They told the teachers they did not care about school and/or that it was unimportant to them. Students having academic handicaps or learning disabilities were the only ones a few teachers considered to be legitimately at risk because these conditions were no fault of the students. All teachers considered these students to be trying their very best.

Two teachers believed that society's view of at-risk students was a key reason they were labeled at risk in the first place. Interestingly, both of these teachers were African American males. They felt strongly that the stereotypes society placed on students of color, particularly African American males, did these students more harm than good. Specifically, they thought that at-risk labels did little to motivate this population and more to destroy their self-esteem. One of these teachers said that society uses the term "at risk" for those students (of all colors) who "do not fit the norm," behaviorally or academically.

Essentially, these teachers discussed various reasons why students might be considered at risk. Teachers' perceptions and views of parental involvement and home life were a result of information they said they had obtained from observing at-risk students, talking with them about their home life, and interacting with parents. A further understanding of their perceptions regarding these students was gained by exploring their approaches to teaching at-risk students, their experiences with this population, and a consideration of the similarities and differences between at-risk and non-at-risk students.

Approaches to Teaching At-Risk Students

It was not surprising that teachers' views of what makes students at risk were related to their approach to teaching these students. However, they did not think their approaches to teaching these students were any different from those with non-at-risk students. They offered no instructional approaches used with either group that were more effective than others. Instead, they discussed classroom management techniques, personal teaching styles, and high expectations as the strategies for their approach to these students. Each teacher believed that all at-risk students could learn. One teacher thought this was possible, however, only if the right circumstances and environment were in place. That is, the classroom was highly

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structured. In this situation, individual attention could be given to each student, flexibility could occur, and each student could seek his or her own individual potential. Another teacher's style was aggressive and demanding in that she refused to accept a student's handicap as a reason not to achieve. High expectations were critical to her philosophy of teaching, and she found positive results from this approach. One of the male teachers said he approached all students the same, and that was by challenging them not to accept themselves as at risk. By using personal examples of his life and spending one-on-one time with students, he strove to impress upon them that they could be anything they wanted to be if they worked hard and set goals. His style was demonstrated in the classroom by setting high expectations and his no-nonsense approach to homework and classwork assignments.

The approaches these teachers used to teach at-risk students were more nonacademic in nature. They considered a structured classroom, high teacher expectations and standards, individual attention, mutual respect, attitude and desire, parental support, and the belief that all children can learn to be the cornerstones for teaching at-risk children. However, there were two major differences these teachers talked about that did exist between at-risk and non-at-risk students. These were self-esteem and attitude.

Differences Between At-Risk and Non-At-Risk Students

Teachers said that at-risk students exhibited lower self-esteem than non-at-risk students did. They appeared to be more afraid to try, rarely volunteered in class, and displayed little confidence in their academic abilities. They asked few questions in class and did not seem to be affected by their failing grades. At-risk students also rarely did and turned in homework. One teacher noted that the attitudes of non-at-risk and at-risk students were also different. He believed that at-risk students were more "street smart" and that one of the reasons school staff

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were not successful with these students was that they were out of touch with today's adolescents. Another teacher believed that attitude was also related to students' levels of motivation. She believed that at-risk students were those who had skills but no motivation or parental support, were not concerned about their grades, and basically did not care about school. At the same time, she thought that school staff's attitudes about at-risk students were also an important issue. She said that many of these students felt disrespected by staff and did not feel a sense of genuine concern about them. A final difference between the two groups was described as being related to students' academic abilities. Learning-disabled students were considered to have additional challenges because of their handicap and the effect of medication on their behavior and abilities. Therefore, it was more difficult for these students to have higher self-esteem.

One teacher explained that one of the differences between middle and high school at-risk students is how much attention schools give to those who are not attending or doing well. In middle school, there is much more effort to find out what is going on when students are consistently absent. Another teacher did not see the differences so much in what the school did or the students' behavior, but in how he approached teaching. He thought it was more important how he taught, rather than what he taught. The structure, approach, expectations, and consistencies were most important, not the subject material. However, another teacher thought there was no difference in at-risk students at different grade levels. If students were not learning and mastering the materials at grade level, it would be impossible for them to be successful at the next level.

Overall, regarding their views on differences between grade levels of at-risk students, all teachers considered the attitudes of students toward the school, how teachers taught, the

importance of personal responsibility, and accountability as the most important factors relevant to dealing with at-risk students. Teachers next were asked about their perceptions of how at-risk students viewed themselves and their school experiences.

How Students Viewed Themselves and
Their School Experiences

Three of the four teachers believed that at-risk students exhibited low self-esteem and found school difficult. One teacher described them as "frightened children who felt thrown aside who knew that things weren't what they should be." These feelings resulted in students not seeking the help they needed because they were too embarrassed. They were also perceived to feel that no one cared, that teachers looked down on them and did not respect them. Another teacher thought that at-risk students knew they were at risk and, as a result, had poor self-images. She believed they felt defeated, without hope, and lacked the ability to succeed in school. She further suspected that these students thought that no one was really helping them, yet she was convinced that they wanted to improve but just did not know how to fix their problems. Low self-image, this teacher thought, was the biggest difference between at-risk and non-at-risk students.

The teacher who was the students' favorite believed that these students truly enjoyed school and the positive interactions they had at Isbill with teachers. He explained how much individual time he spent with at-risk students and thought this motivated them to want to come to school. He believed that teachers like him were the reason these students attended school. He said that the social aspects of school involving students and teachers (playing basketball together and having dances) helped to boost the self-image and esteem of these students, in particular.

All teachers commented on the importance of these students' having positive self-esteem and its relevance to their chances of succeeding in school. Although most thought that these students felt defeated and helpless, at least one believed the opposite. All, however, thought that the academic performance and behavior of these students were good indicators of their school experiences.

Academic and Behavioral Performances of At-Risk Students

Teachers expressed both student- and parent-related reasons for the academic and behavioral performances of at-risk students. When asked how these at-risk students were doing academically, teachers gave letter grades, described individual students' efforts, and discussed their attitudes. They also made positive comments about most of these students' efforts. Their major concern was that students were not getting enough work done and turned in to be passing. For example, one student was described as conscientious, but gave no extra effort; another as failing, but more capable; and another as working hard, but with skills not up to grade level. When asked what most at-risk students needed to do to improve their academics, teachers gave a variety of responses, including better classroom behavior, more parental involvement, doing more homework, and taking their medication.

When describing at-risk students' classroom behaviors, teachers described them as either very loud and disruptive or extremely quiet and unnoticeable. The poor behavior of students included not completing assignments or attempting the work and being disruptive in class. When asked what they thought the major reasons were for these students' not doing well in school, teachers cited lack of parental support, personal agendas of parents, and poor student effort. Lack of parental support was described as not supervising students' activities, not reviewing their homework, and allowing them too much freedom at home. Personal agenda

of parents was a belief a couple of teachers had about why their students had been placed in special education in the first place, which was for parents to obtain monetary benefits from the government.

Teachers viewed the academic performance and behavior of at-risk students as related to each other. Academic performance, they thought, was affected by students' classroom behaviors and the level of support by their parents. They believed that students would do their homework if parents were more involved with their studies. The majority of information teachers said they had learned about at-risk students had come either from the students themselves or from information they had gathered from parents during conferences or telephone conversations. The level of parental support continued to be the key issue for teachers.

Teachers' Perceptions of Parental Support

All of the teachers who participated in this study believed that parental involvement made a positive difference for at-risk students. They explained the different types of parental involvement that occurred at Isbill. There were parents who attended conferences of their students who were doing fine in school. Second, there were parents who appeared at school only when their children were in trouble, to defend them; and then there were those who showed up at meetings and conferences when there were problems, promised their support, and then never followed through.

One teacher reported that 40% to 50% of parents attended their students' conferences at Isbill. However, only between 2% and 3% of at-risk students' parents attended these meetings. In spite of this, teachers said several strategies had been used over the years to encourage parental involvement. These included mailing grade information to the home, calling parents, sending grade information home by the students, and faxing information to parents'

places of employment. However, none of these strategies seemed to be effective with the at-risk population. One teacher believed that it should be mandatory for parents to attend school conferences. She also believed that a support group for parents, to teach them how to help their students, would be helpful; she had suggested this idea to the principal, but nothing had come of it.

Two teachers believed that although parents should be primarily responsible for their students' education, teachers really had more influence and knowledge about how to do this because students spent more time with teachers than with their parents, in many cases. They viewed parents as being responsible for making sure their children got to school. Yet they stressed that the school needed the involvement of more positive parents. Another teacher believed that the school staff should have more frank conversations with parents when sharing information about students' academic status because some parents seemingly had low expectations of their children.

Although the particular views on parental involvement were varied, teachers saw this as important and said they would welcome more. Nevertheless, no visible efforts had been made to address this concern. Teachers' views on at-risk students concluded with their responses to how students could get out of the at-risk category.

Getting Out of the At-Risk Category

All teachers believed it was possible for students to overcome their at-riskedness, given parental support and involvement. Some exceptions to this belief were referenced to special education students whose learning disabilities might make it necessary for them always to receive special services. In addition to parent support, teachers also suggested various school and community programs and services. These included a mentoring program for at-risk youths

and involving more ministers at school. Essentially, these teachers thought that parents should be primarily responsible for the academic success of their children, but each recognized that it was important for someone, anyone, to be available to these students to help steer them in the right direction. And in a lot of cases, these individuals would have to be teachers.

These teachers also expressed their opinions about current school at-risk program services and intervention activities. They believed that these programs worked if parents got involved in them and made sure their students attended. They believed that for some students these programs worked better than others did and that the students' attitudes and levels of motivation, and not necessarily a program, ultimately determined success. Teachers were supportive of these programs and thought that, for some students, the attention students received was very positive because that was what many of them needed. However, they thought that only a few of the highly at-risk students actually participated in these activities and programs–some because they simply did not care, and others because they received no encouragement from home.

Administrators and Support Staff

In addition to teachers, two administrators and three support staff members were interviewed regarding their perceptions of and experiences with at-risk students at Isbill. This section contains the combined reflections of this group, referred to as staff, concerning at-risk students and the programs and services available to them.

Defining At Risk

Defining the term "at risk" and identifying the population were important to understanding the students in the study and their school experiences. School staff were in a good position to comment on these issues because, besides teachers, they had the most knowledge of and interaction with these students. Essentially, they agreed that all students could be at risk at some time or another during adolescence. At risk was defined in several ways, including anything that detracted a student from being able to focus totally on his or her social, emotional, educational, and psychological growth, or for academic, social, or family reasons. Any student whose needs were not being met could be considered at risk, whether the reasons were educational or familial.

This staff perceived some students as being more at risk than others. They identified those who acted out as obviously at risk and said students behaved this way because they were masking due to poor academic abilities. They were students who were scared to succeed, to break away from their peers, because of the need to fit in. One staff member estimated that at-risk students comprised 60% of the population at Isbill. These students were also described as not being able to deal with life's obstacles that made some of them at risk. Others had become at risk because of their parents and, in some cases, their teachers.

This staff defined what they viewed as characteristics of at-risk students in several ways. Lack of parental involvement referred to parents' lack of active involvement in their children's education, as well as not taking care of their physical needs. Teachers were described as capable of making students at risk by not having high expectations for their academic or behavioral performance. At-risk students were also considered those who simply fit society's categorical descriptors, including low socioeconomic status. Black males, especially, and

minority students in general were considered to be the most at risk because of negative stereotypes of these populations. At-risk students were also described as those who had little parental support and who sought recognition and guidance from their peers. One staff member remarked that at-risk students were those who had "hard core" parents. Hard core meant they were single, worked many hours away from the home, were incarcerated, or were substance abusers.

The staff struggled to agree on the reasons why learning-disabled students should be considered at risk for school failure. Responses included: (a) yes, they are at risk if psychological or physical development has put them not with the norm; (b) yes, but they can achieve if their needs are met; (c) yes, but not to the same degree as other at-risk students because of their support structures; and (d) yes, to those who are not making academic progress and not participating in their education either because of low self-esteem or bad home situations. It was generally agreed that any factors that make a regular education student at risk for school failure could also make a special education student at risk. Simply being in special education alone did not make one at risk. Overall, the staff thought that parental involvement and support were key to the success of learning-disabled students and that these students could be successful in school. Although they could be considered at risk for failure, the likelihood was greater that they could succeed more easily because of support structures that non-special-education at-risk students did not have in place.

Staff Perceptions of Students' Views

Like the teachers, this staff also reflected on how they thought at-risk students perceived themselves in the school environment. And also like the teachers, there were various opinions. Aside from special education students who exhibited feeling a stigma about being labeled as

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such, the majority of the staff thought that at-risk students did not necessarily perceive themselves as being likely to fail. This is true for several reasons. First, these students are good at masking, and they fit in because they are popular. Many have outgoing personalities, wear the latest designer clothes and shoes, and are extremely popular in their peer group. Others are quiet and reserved, but they fit in with the crowd and no one notices them. From an academic point of view, staff thought that these students do not really know what is happening to them. That is, they might be aware they are not doing well in the classroom, but this is not as important to them at this time as fitting into a crowd and being accepted by their peers. In fact, one staff member pointed out that these students see themselves as "deviant" and like it. They are proud to be part of some kind of a group. Socially, school staff perceived these students as enjoying school. They pointed out that for a lot of at-risk students, school is the only place where they can have fun, feel important, and be safe. Overall, they believed that at-risk students do not perceive themselves as destined for failure in the sense that school staff might perceive them. These students have placed the emphasis of schooling on its social aspects because they feel comfortable participating and competing in this area. And usually, they have experienced a great deal more success socially than academically. Most staff members thought that students' views of themselves were also related to their parents' perceptions of school.

Staff Perceptions of Parental Influence

Each of the staff members believed that adequate parental support and involvement were lacking in the lives of these at-risk students. They based this belief on the fact that these parents rarely attended parent-teacher conferences or encouraged their students to participate in programs aimed at improving their academic experiences. Most staff thought that the parents of many at-risk students had not been successful in school themselves. Several had been in

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special education and had negative learning experiences. Other views included a shift in society's perception of the value of education. For instance, most parents in this community worked for a large industry in which they had been able to make a good living right out of high school. It was speculated that parents might have been passing on this perception of success and work to their students, giving them the impression that the value of an education was not that significant if one could still find high-paying jobs immediately upon completion of high school, without furthering one's education.

There was no consensus, however, on the ability of parents to become actively involved in the academic aspects of their children's school experiences. Most parents, it was thought, had bought into the social aspects of school and resorted to buying their children "things," so that they could fit into the school culture. Other views, however, reflected that parents did, in fact, value education but were just not as actively involved with their children in the traditional way the school recognized as involvement. For example, one staffer who had lived in the community for more than 20 years and had taught 80% of the parents of students at Isbill said that parents discussed education at church and in the local grocery stores, even though they did not regularly attend school events and functions.

All staff members were frustrated with the school's efforts to get parents actively involved in the education of their children. They thought that numerous resources were available and that they had reached out to the parents, with no significant response. One staff member thought that his role was to go beyond informing parents of services available, by helping parents help their children. His approach included talking with parents about what they could do on a daily basis to monitor their children's work, as well as how they might provide reinforcement and positive feedback for their children's efforts. He further believed that

although overall parental involvement was high at Isbill (between 50% and 60% of parents attended conferences), parents of at-risk students rarely were involved unless their students were in trouble. Staff seemed to be interested in improving relationships and communication with parents and frustrated that their efforts had not been that successful. Nevertheless, they shared various ideas regarding what might improve at-risk students' school experiences. They also discussed current in-school programs and services designed to meet these students' needs.

What Would Help These Students Out of the At-Risk Category?

This staff discussed several ideas about how at-risk students could overcome this status. Most of these ideas included increased parental involvement. Others, however, called for changes within the school itself. Parental involvement included educating parents regarding the special education process and program. It also encompassed actively getting involved with the parents by going out to their homes and working with families to meet their needs.

The administrators emphasized more what the school could do to assist these students. This included extending the school day and providing additional academic and socio-emotional activities and experiences for these students. In addition, providing for smaller class sizes was also seen as important. Improving the quality and involvement of teachers in assisting this population was also emphasized. It was thought that too many teachers were interested in just teaching their subjects and not students. The principal was seen as a key person in helping to make sure that teachers understood adolescents and went beyond just their subject areas to identify and address the maturation and emotional needs of at-risk students. The awareness and experience of the principal, and administrative support from the downtown office, were equally essential to provide leadership on issues related to the education of these students. Given these

suggestions of what the school could do and what was needed from parents, an examination of current building programs and services for at-risk students provided insight into how the perceived needs were addressed through actual services available to these particular students.

Current Intervention Programs and Activities

Programs described by the staff as being for at-risk students were also available to all students. They consisted of both academic and social activities, including tutoring and after-school educational opportunities and sports programs. Some programs occurred during the lunch hour, which several students participated in, including those considered at risk. The majority of them, however, involved academic tutoring. The staff said that extracurricular activities like sports were the most popular among students and that they helped students feel good about themselves. Group activities were discussed as being important to middle school students in general, but to at-risk students in particular. Participation in group activities was viewed as positive, because they helped students not to be afraid to try something. And if they did try and did not succeed, they would not feel as defeated. For example, one staff member recalled how one student told her that she and her friends were trying out for the cheerleading squad, even though they knew they probably would not make the team.

One staff member pointed to the group of at-risk students whom he regularly pulled out of class to work with. He said that these students did not feel embarrassed to be called to his office, and they openly named other students who should also come out of class, calling them "bad" and flashing gang signs on their way out of class. He thought this boosted their image, not because they were being called out to meet with him, but because they were part of a group of students. He thought that most at-risk students got their self-esteem and confidence boosted from their peers.

Another staffer clarified that even though she thought middle school students liked group interactions, they did not want to be embarrassed or called out of class by an administrator. She believed they wanted the help and attention but that it was embarrassing to be singled out. She said that middle school students did not like to stay after school for anything because it implied something negative. However, she explained that this was not the case with sports and other social activities. Students did not consider sports or club participation as negative and were not embarrassed to stay after school to participate in these types of programs. Aside from academic and extracurricular programs and activities, Isbill also had a peer mediation program designed to promote students' participation in resolving their own conflicts. However, although the students in this study were aware of this program, only a couple of them had used it, and most said they would never participate in it as a facilitator.

Specific services were also available for special education students who qualified for these services by law. The primary staff member in this program was the school social worker, who worked individually with students who had socio-emotional needs. Other services/resources included a speech/language therapist, an occupational therapist, an adaptive physical education teacher, a study skills teacher, and a special education co-team teacher who co-taught in the regular education classes into which special education students had been mainstreamed.

The primary source of assistance for at-risk students at Isbill was provided by the at-risk specialist. Staff described this position as a powerful one whose aim was to work individually with students and their parents, teachers, and the community to meet the needs of students defined as at risk according to the state guidelines. However, an interview with this individual, who had just begun this position during the course of the study, revealed that his role did not

really entail the comprehensive activities described by the staff. Primarily, he coordinated the in-school suspension program three days a week and worked individually with students the other two days of the week. Individual work with students included bringing in speakers and other adults to talk with these students and referring them to outside community resources. In addition, he worked with the students' teachers and parents to meet their needs. However, he was extremely frustrated with the limitations of this position and thought that it could be much more effective if it were full-time at-risk specialist, the way it had been the year before. This had included the at-risk specialist providing a number of activities and programs at the school, working closely in the community with parents and community agencies, and providing for the monetary and physical needs of at-risk students. He explained that the faculty at Isbill had voted to have the position become a full-time ISS coordinator for the upcoming year and that the position in its current form would not continue. Administrators had explained that faculty make major decisions in the buildings in this district, including everything from curriculum to the handling of other programs and services. Apparently, they thought that ISS was more effective than having an at-risk specialist.

All staff members thought that there were adequate numbers of programs and services to meet the needs of at-risk students at Isbill. However, they believed that lack of parental involvement and encouragement hindered the effectiveness of these programs. They also cited lack of transportation and parents' lack of basic parenting skills as problems. They described a "wrap-around" approach as necessary to meet the needs of this at-risk population because once one problem was fixed with them, another one sprang up. Only one staff member stressed the importance of teacher training to deal with the needs of these students. Everyone else

stressed student participation in the programs that already had been made available and increased parental involvement as the keys to meeting the needs of at-risk students.

Summary

Teachers, administrators, and support staff gave similar reasons as to why they considered certain students to be at risk for school failure. These included lack of parental involvement, poor home life, academic learning abilities of students, and the negative label placed on certain groups by society. However, all groups believed that these students could learn and be successful, given the proper support and attention. Unanimously, more parental involvement was seen as the key to improving the school experiences of this population. Only teachers pointed to students' behavior as one of the reasons for their being considered at risk. Staff viewed students' negative behaviors as a way of masking academic and other deficiencies. Teachers viewed this behavior as exhibiting low self-esteem, resulting in their disengaging from classroom activities. Staff discussed the importance of understanding adolescent developmental stages and cited this as a primary reason that all middle school students could be considered at risk at some point, simply because of the life changes they experienced. One staff member suggested that teachers could make some students at risk because of their interest in teaching their subject areas more than individual students.

Both teachers and staff believed that learning-disabled students were considered to be at risk, but they were quick to point out that they were not as at risk as other students because of the numerous services and types of assistance available to them. Staff who worked with special education students emphasized that the same characteristics that made a special education student at risk also made regular education students at risk. There seemed to be an idea of "levels of at-riskedness" that permeated the discussions of both teachers and staff.

"Hard-core" at-risk students were described as those whose parents were single, abused drugs, worked long hours away from the home, were incarcerated, or were not involved in their child's school life. Special education students were considered at risk only if they were not participating in their own education, failing, and lacking parental involvement. Overall, there was not a consensus on how special education students fit into the at-risk category.

Teachers and school staff differed on how they thought at-risk students viewed their school experiences. Most of the teachers thought that these students knew they were at risk, and this was why they had low self-esteem and acted out. They believed these students wanted to do well but did not know how to change their situations. As a result, they did not engage in classroom discussions or turn in homework and classwork assignments. Teachers believed these students felt helpless and had given up. Staff, on the other hand, thought that these students did not view themselves as at risk. They said they were popular among their peers and enjoyed the social aspects of school. Although staff described extremes of at-risk student behavior—outgoing and loud, quiet and mousy—the majority of these students sought attention because this was how they received affirmation from their peers. Staff also thought that parents fed into the priority students placed on the social aspects of school by buying them "things." Staff said that those at-risk students who did view themselves as different enjoyed a positive association with a group of peers to whom they could relate.

Both teachers and school staff stressed the need for parental involvement as the key to improving the academic experiences of at-risk students. However, teachers viewed parental involvement in different contexts, including supervision and participation in their student's academic life and attendance at parent-teacher conferences. Teachers were split in their thoughts about whether parental involvement could make the difference between whether or

not a student would ever get out of the at-risk category. Staff also stressed the importance of parental involvement but emphasized the effect of how and whether families valued education and their influence on at-risk students. They suggested that society's impact on families in recent years may have made it more difficult for parents to provide the appropriate support necessary for at-risk students to succeed in school. This is why they believed parents put too much emphasis on the social aspects of their children's experiences (designer clothes and shoes). It is conceivable that both teachers and staff were correct in their insights regarding parents. However, neither group had developed effective strategies for getting the parents of at-risk students more involved in their school lives in a proactive manner.

It was no surprise that both teachers and staff thought that parents were the key to getting at-risk students out of this category. Teachers recommended more involvement from community programs and agencies. Both groups thought that the school offered sufficient programs and activities but that the primary problem was that students who needed these programs did not participate because of lack of parental support. Although this school employed an at-risk specialist, his responsibilities were split between working individually with these youths and coordinating the in-school suspension program. It was clear that he felt frustrated with the limitations placed on this role.

Staff defined "levels of at-riskedness" of students in need and emphasized a wrap-around approach as necessary to meet their needs. Wrap-around meant the school, home, and community all working together to meet the needs of the student and his or her family. However, communication and coordination of intervention programs and services among these groups seemed to be lacking. Nonetheless, both teachers and staff agreed that extracurricular activities, and sports in particular, provided a positive experience for at-risk students. They

placed a great deal of importance on how these activities promoted self-esteem in such students. Apparently, group activities were perceived as important to middle school students in general, and social and athletic activities provided these opportunities.

Overall, the perceptions teachers and staff had of at-risk students influenced how they communicated with and addressed the needs of this population. In addition, the power of the building staff influenced the priority they gave to all programs. The overall view regarding this population at Isbill was that at-risk students were really not that different from non-at-risk students. To some extent, the same view was taken of special education students. At risk appeared to be an amorphous term, which was difficult to categorize and equally difficult to address.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, FINDINGS, DISCUSSION
AND RECOMMENDATIONS, AND REFLECTIONS

This chapter contains a summary, conclusions, findings, discussion and recommendations, and reflections of this study. The summary section recaps the purpose, relevant literature, and research methods of the study. The conclusions section represents several levels of analysis that comprise the summaries of each of the participants' school experiences and perceptions, an explanation of the dynamics of interactions occurring among at-risk students, their homes, and their schools, and the results of the tensions found to exist among these three groups. The findings section is a summary of the major findings and presents the theory that was developed in this study. In the discussion section, the researcher explores the impact of the major findings of this study and discusses these in terms of their implications for the education of at-risk students. Recommendations for further research are also included in this section. The final section is a reflection of the researcher's thoughts and experiences during the study.

Summary

The Problem

The increasing numbers of dropouts make it difficult for schools, urban ones in particular, to meet their instructional and service goals. The consequences to individuals,

families, and society are more serious today than ever before. Our school systems are not graduating certain populations of students. These individuals are continuously being labeled as at risk and leaving school underprepared to function effectively in society as adults. Dropping out is a symptom that is a result of more basic educational processes that need close examination. Many students who leave school without graduating display a variety of problem behaviors. They are clearly not benefiting from the school's efforts.

Efforts to educate these at-risk populations should include a refocusing from the problem of dropping out to an examination of what causes students to become at risk in the first place, the relationship between being at risk and dropping out (if any), and what can be done to improve the educational experiences and services for this at-risk population. In addition, because most of the research on dropouts and at-risk students is based on high schools, there is a need to focus more attention on the middle school level, as this is where many of the problems and behaviors begin. Finally, it is difficult for schools to address the needs of at-risk populations because defining the term is too amorphous. As a result, it is challenging for educators to develop, implement, and evaluate programs for this population.

<u>Purpose</u>

The main purpose of this study was to contribute to the current discussion of the education of at-risk middle school students by examining and describing the perceptions and experiences of six urban middle school students considered to be at risk for school failure and the dynamics of their interactions in the school and home environments.

Although there have been numerous research studies on at-risk students, only recently has importance been placed on students' experiences told from their perspectives. This study gave students a voice. Also, the researcher sought to provide specific information for

educators regarding the school experiences of at-risk students that could contribute to the development and implementation of effective intervention approaches necessary for the success of these students.

Research Survey

Research on dropouts has resulted in a great deal of attention to the causes or factors contributing to students' decisions to leave school without earning a high school diploma. A review of the literature on at-risk students revealed a great deal of data on the characteristics and predictors of this population. There is no consensus among educators that being at risk necessarily leads to dropping out. However, it is clear that certain behaviors, experiences, and characteristics contribute to this possibility.

Evidence suggests that although numerous reform efforts have been instituted in America's public schools throughout the past 15 years, large numbers of youths are still being labeled at risk and dropping out before earning a high school diploma. Educators no longer can attempt to address the problems of these students without understanding the dynamics of their interactions occurring with the school and home, and how they affect the learning process. Considering the school experiences of at-risk populations assists in developing a framework for determining the appropriate school programs and structures for these students and contributes to our overall understanding of the institutional character of schools and how they affect the at-risk student.

Several lenses, or research survey topics, helped to guide this study:

1. At risk: the problem with defining the term.

2. The meaning of at risk: the construction of student status.

3. Motivation, engagement, and disengagement.

4.   At risk in the middle schools.

5.   At-risk intervention strategies and programs.

6.   Perspectives and experiences of at-risk students.

Over the past years, educators have used the term "at risk" to describe particular categories of students. These categories include low achievement, retention in grade, behavioral problems, poor attendance, and low socioeconomic status. Although the meaning of the term has never been precise and varies among educators, current approaches to educating at-risk students are the result of several shifts in thinking, and a new way of defining these students is needed to permit changes in school policy and practice necessary to address these students' needs (Pallas et al., 1989). One of the more commonly accepted definitions in the literature was formulated by Slavin (1989) and refers to, on the basis of several risk factors, students who are unlikely to graduate from high school. However, the probability that a student will complete high school is not the only criterion for designating a student as at risk.

One of the major concerns regarding the at-risk label is its implication that those at risk have the characteristics of being at risk instead of being in a place or circumstance considered to be at risk. Although the challenge of educators lies in identifying at-risk learners and providing an appropriate remediation program, determining the cause of at-risk conditions can be helpful and contribute to the selection of an at-risk program (Manning, 1995).

The current definition and at-risk labels are limited in many ways: They do not clearly identify which specific factors make certain students unlikely to complete their educational experience, they do not explain why some students who have the same background and

characteristics as others considered at risk are successful, the definition is too vague, and it produces negative and political implications that often inhibit the very individuals it was intended to assist.

How students perceive themselves is directly related to their school success or failure. Therefore, it is important to understand how students' at-risk status is formulated and by whom. The Epidemiological and Social Constructivist Models, as discussed by Slavin et al. (1989), represent two different views. The purpose of the Epidemiological Model is to find ways to identify categories of persons who are most at risk for certain conditions so that something can be done to prevent or ameliorate the conditions' occurrence. The Social Constructivist Model is an interactive view of the term "at risk" in which the perceptions of at-riskedness are constructed within a particular social or cultural context (Richardson et al., 1989). The focus is not on the student alone, but on the interaction between the student and these contexts. Although both models provide insight into the difficulties of identifying and addressing the needs of at-risk students, the importance of student motivation and engagement should also be considered.

According to Finn (1989), students disengage or become alienated from school because they cannot identify with it. Identification is an internal state with two components, belonging and valuing, that increase students' motivation to participate in school (Finn, 1989). Misbehavior and poor academic performance are often the outcomes of student disengagement from the learning process. Most educators believe that the decline in academic motivation is an outcome resulting from conflicts between the developmental needs of students and the typical schools that students experience between their elementary and

middle school grades (California State Department of Education, 1987; Task Force on the Education of Young Adolescents, 1989).

Rumberger (1995), using Finn's (1989) Frustration-Self-Esteem and Participation-Identification models, studied the experiences and beliefs about school held by early adolescents identified as potential dropouts, and how their experiences differed from those of more successful students attending the same school. In their research on successful schools, Goodlad (1984) and Wehlage (1989) identified important characteristics of successful schools that included academic engagement. Although research has not yet produced a complete model of dropout prevention, it is clear from studies on at-risk students that motivation and engagement are critical elements that affect these students' decisions to remain in or leave school.

Middle grades are an important, but often ignored, phase of schooling in which at-risk students are in danger of dropping out. Bhaerman and Kopp (1988) reported that 61% of students who have been identified as at risk drop out before completing tenth grade. Although Finn (1989) has conducted the most comprehensive research to date on successful alternative programs for at-risk students, including instructional, organizational, and interpersonal components, comprehensive research on middle school at-risk students is still lacking.

The numerous reform efforts of the past 20 years have failed to meet the needs of those individuals most at risk for failure (McCarthy & Levin, 1991). According to Waxman et al. (1991), the failure of many reform efforts can be traced to their piecemeal approaches. They address only a few aspects of school or schooling and ignore the rest. Slavin et al. (1989) pointed out that the discussion of potentially effective practices for at-risk students

has often been limited because they focus on only one form of service and remind us that there is only one problem to be solved–the problem of low achievement. And although this problem has many facets, we must step away from current practices and ask what "should" be the response of the educational system to ensuring that all students reach basic levels of achievement? Recent research focusing on the perspectives of at-risk students has provided more insight into the challenges of how to address the needs of these students.

Research on at-risk students and dropouts by Farrell (1988), Taylor-Dunlop and Norton (1997), Richardson et al. (1989), Altenbaugh (1995), Delgado-Gaitan (1988), Fine (1991), Turbo et al. (1989), and others represents a growing trend toward including the voices of at-risk students when studying this population. This research has contributed to the development of a more complete framework for determining the appropriate school programs for educating at-risk students.

Research Methods and Setting

Qualitative research methods were used in this study. Observations, interviews, and document reviews were the procedures used to collect data. Data were collected and analyzed in search of patterns discovered from the perceptions and experiences of the at-risk students, their parents, and school staff. Several levels of data analysis occurred, which resulted in findings reported as related to the students' perceptions and experiences described in detail in narrative form, and of school staff and parents in summary form. A theory describing and explaining the dynamics of the interactions occurring among all three groups was the outcome of these analyses.

As the study progressed, a shift to a more focused research question occurred. The primary research question for this study was: What are the perceptions and school experiences

of these six at-risk middle school students, and what are the interactions occurring among them, their school, and their families? In other words, what are the dynamics of the interactions among at-risk students, their schools, and their families?

The following assumptions guided this study:

1. The concept of at risk can be considered the result of individual background characteristics of a student and the academic and social environment of the school. Therefore, it is feasible to consider the interactions among the school, at-risk students, and their home environments in order to understand these students' experiences.

2. At-risk students have many of the answers to the dilemmas of the at-risk population, and they are capable of articulating these answers and willing to do so.

3. Not all at-risk students drop out of school before earning a diploma. However, there are certain experiences and behaviors they have and perceptions they hold of school that could explain why some students do drop out. Identifying those experiences and perceptions can lead to a clearer understanding of how these students' needs can be better addressed.

The setting for this study was a large school district in an urban city in the Midwest. The specific site for this study was a middle school with a student body of 1,060 students, including 52.3% white, 33.2% black, 9.3% Hispanic, 4.7 Asian, and .05% Native American. The more than 70-member faculty was headed by one principal and two assistant principals. Staff participating in this study consisted of the principal, one assistant principal, one counselor, the special education coordinator, the at-risk program specialist, and five academic teachers, including special education, from one particular eighth-grade team. The at-risk program specialist had neither the professional training nor the experience that implied direct

responsibility for this position and had been appointed to the position during the middle of the second semester of this study. The special education teacher had served in that capacity since the previous fall, but also was not qualified or trained for the position. This particular building was chosen as a site for the study for a variety of reasons, including its diverse student population, size, building leadership, and staff philosophy regarding at-risk students.

Initially, a team of eighth-grade teachers, based on their definitions of at risk, nominated students for participation in the study. The researcher, considering students' gender, type of risk, ethnic background, and number of years enrolled at this school, made the final selections. The principal, one assistant principal, and the academic team teachers were aware of the final selections. Pseudonyms were used to respect the privacy and protect the identity of all research participants.

Conclusions

Students

Various family, school, and societal situations shaped these six at-risk students' school experiences and perceptions. Each student had loving and caring parents who were involved at different levels in their education. Many of these parents' views regarding teachers, schooling, and education in general were reflected in the conversations held with these students. These students also had experienced traumatic life events before and during middle school that negatively affected their self-esteem and confidence. Four of the six students had changed neighborhoods and schools several times, two had experienced parental divorces, and three had experimented with drugs and been in trouble with the law. Three had diagnosed learning disabilities, and three were on probation with the juvenile court system. Three had experienced some sort of abuse in their lives. One student had experienced the

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death of a close relative, and another had an incarcerated parent and uncle to whom he was very close.

All of the students had records of academic failure and behavioral problems dating back to elementary school. Each student stated that school was boring and that the classwork was too difficult. Three exhibited poor classroom behaviors, including being disruptive in class to teachers and bothering other students. Three were constantly involved in fights at school and regularly suspended. All students except one had poor attendance records.

These students had difficulty following rules at school, and three often had encounters with teachers for talking back or were often sent to detention after school or suspended. The school's treatment of these students' behaviors was the opposite to how parents treated them at home. The school treated them like children, and their parents treated them more like independent adults. These students frequently made decisions that affected their own lives, including what to do with money they had earned, which high school they would attend the following year, and how much time they needed to spend on their homework.

Essentially, three themes shaped these students' school experiences and perceptions: boredom, recognition, and teacher relationships. These students used several descriptors to define boredom. For some, boredom meant that the work was too hard. Others explained that doing something they did not want to do made them feel bored; therefore, they went to sleep. Some described classwork as boring because it was unchallenging or repetitive. All of these students said school and several classes were boring because they were not having any fun. In other words, boring was a way to describe something that did not interest them. One student said that seeing the same faces, eating the same food, and participating in the same activities every day at school was boring. Most of the students thought there were not

enough fun activities at school. Listening to teacher lectures and going through the routine of daily school activities was boring to these students.

These students used boredom as an excuse for withdrawing from the classroom experience. They blamed the teachers, assignments, and the school for not entertaining them or maintaining their interests. They said teachers were boring because they spoke in monotone voices. The assignments were uninteresting, and the school did not have enough dances or other social events. They created their own worlds that focused on the social aspects of school. Being popular and a leader among their peers gave them a sense of recognition and respect. None of the students associated being bored with their own behaviors, abilities, or attitudes. Instead, they explained their subsequent acting out as responses to a boring situation, resulting in a lack of concern about their academic status. They concluded this syllogism with the belief that their own lack of concern about academics was someone else's fault and not their own. This was evidenced by the fact that although all but one of the students were barely making passing grades, they believed they were doing about average in their classes.

These students dealt with boredom in both passive and active ways. Three of them did not participate in classroom activities. Three behaved aggressively in class and were constantly disruptive. Half of the students were frequently in the assistant principal's office, suspended, or assigned to after-school detention.

Most of these students' recognition came from their peers and as a result of participating in extracurricular activities. They were popular among their peers, and each student expressed that what he or she enjoyed most about school was its social aspects. Peers regarded them as student leaders. However, these students sought recognition from school

staff in more negative ways than positive. They were usually the most outspoken in class and were often reprimanded by teachers and administrators for poor classroom behavior and for fighting. Unfortunately, these students received little recognition at school for academic reasons. These students received positive rewards from participating in extracurricular activities at school. They were members of sports teams and clubs, and they participated in school assemblies—often assuming leadership roles.

Although these students described generally positive relationships with their teachers and school officials, they disliked many of the school rules related to discipline. They thought it was important to have positive relationships with teachers, although the majority of their interactions were for disciplinary reasons. Although these students indicated liking most of their teachers, this did not mean they always behaved appropriately in these classes. Students seemed to like certain teachers because they let them get away with certain behaviors in class and sent them to the office for disciplinary reasons less often than did other teachers.

These students formed opinions about teachers based on the way they communicated with students. Students considered respect an important issue in how teachers communicated with them. Several had been taught by parents to respect only those individuals who respected them. They perceived being treated with a lack of respect when teachers did not allow them to express themselves, used a loud tone when speaking to them, or did not listen to their side of the story when conflicts arose.

One of these students believed strongly that prejudiced and racist teachers were the reasons for her lack of school success. Throughout her schooling, she thought she had been treated unfairly and not recognized for her efforts and achievements because of her race. She and her mother said that since elementary school, this student had dealt with prejudiced

teachers and been denied the academic accomplishments she deserved. As a result, she and her mother had become more disenchanted with the entire system and changed schools several times throughout elementary and junior high school. The result had become strained relationships between this student and her teachers and a lack of trust between her parents and school officials.

Although each of these students struggled academically, most commented that the majority of their teachers cared about whether they learned. They believed that they were able to stay on top of classes because teachers helped them with their work. They said that the more chances and opportunities they were given to complete their work, the better. These students said that some teachers understood their capabilities as students better than other teachers did and helped them complete assignments.

These students expressed that some teachers were concerned about students' personal needs and social development and not just their grades. The manner in which students described their favorite teacher was evidence of this. Talking with this teacher was similar to communicating with their own parents. They said that expressing themselves to him did not result in disciplinary actions. They knew this was the one teacher they could depend on, regardless of the situation in which they found themselves.

Numerous contradictions existed in what these students expressed about their perceptions and school experiences. For example, they said they were bored but enjoyed immensely the social aspects of school. They all expressed doing at least average in their classes, but academic records showed all of them to be doing below average to failing overall. They liked teachers who were, in their terms, fair and enforced the rules; however, they created most of the behavioral problems in these classes. All of them thought their academic

workloads were too heavy, but none of them did homework for more than half an hour each day after school, and they rarely stayed after school for tutoring or other forms of academic assistance. Although seemingly aware of their academic deficiencies and behavioral problems at school, they considered themselves average students overall and either blamed others for, did not accept responsibility for, or were unable to improve their academic status.

Essentially, these students:

1.   Exhibited limited perceptions of the meaning of academic achievement.

2.   Were frustrated with their academic failures, and created their own worlds with different rules and structures to negotiate the challenges of school and adolescence.

3.   Had previous adult life experiences that surpassed those of the average eighth grader, and they struggled to exist in a student world that was very different from the one they lived in outside of school. These outside experiences made it difficult for them to understand the student role and resulted in their poor academic performance and negative behaviors.

Parents

The parents of these at-risk students thought that the school was not meeting the individual needs of their children. They were frustrated with the level and type of communication they received from school officials regarding their students' academic status. They were equally frustrated with their own efforts to help their children in school. Half of these parents feared that their children would drop out before completing high school unless they stayed personally involved in their daily school lives.

Parents stated that the only time the school communicated with them was when their students were in trouble. Although all of them reported attending parent-teacher conferences,

they said these were uncomfortable because their students were always discussed negatively. In spite of their concerns, however, only one parent had sought recourse beyond teachers, to administrators. These parents were also frustrated with written communications the school employed to keep them abreast of their students' academic progress. They thought this system was inadequate and that schools should be more responsible for making sure grade information got home in a more timely manner, rather than relying on students to do this.

Although these parents expressed serious concerns about their children's academic and school behaviors, they did not demonstrate an understanding of the academic demands necessary for school success. They supported their children's views that school was boring and that it was an unfair place. Although they knew their students spent little time on homework, they did not force them to seek additional assistance from teachers. Few parents regularly helped students with their homework. These parents also lacked an understanding regarding the process of schooling and the increased difficulty in learning abstract materials that naturally occurs as children progress in school. All but one parent said their students had experienced much greater success in elementary than middle school. They said that middle school was too confusing and hard for their children.

It is questionable whether these parents had accurate perceptions of their students' disabilities and capabilities or were capable themselves of assisting them. Parents attributed their students' increased academic difficulties since entering middle school to peer pressures, larger classes, and lack of individual instruction from teachers. They believed that teachers did not motivate students, held low expectations for them, did not respect them, and in some cases were racist.

Parents thought that the school was not structured enough, was inconsistent with its policies, and could not effectively explain how it measured academic success. However, these parents were unable to control their own children's behaviors outside the classroom. Half of them had been in trouble with the law and were on probation with the juvenile court system. Two frequently ran away from home. Although most of the parents used material and monetary reward systems to control their children's behavior, this did not eliminate the problems.

In addition, parents gave these students a significant amount of freedom at home. This was confusing for students in the school environment, where they were under the authority of teachers and school officials. Often they ended up in trouble in the assistant principal's office for talking back to staff members or for other behaviors acceptable to their parents at home. Finally, these parents did not make the connection between their students' nonschool experiences and the impact on their learning. Each student had experienced traumatic live events, including death and divorces in the family, and although some parents had tried to address these events in various ways, they either ignored or minimized the effects these events had had on their children's school lives.

In spite of these parents' well-intentioned efforts to meet the needs of their children, they struggled to understand their role and the school's in educating their children. They supported their students' views and perceptions and blamed the school for their problems.

Essentially, these parents:

1.   Were frustrated with what they perceived as the school's inability to meet the needs of their children.

2.   Did not recognize the academic limits of their students.

3.   Were frustrated with their own inability to raise their children.

4.   Did not make the connection between their students' out-of-school experiences and their school problems.

5.   Struggled to understand their role in providing for the educational needs of their children.

School Staff

Although the school staff at Isbill used several descriptors to define the term "at risk," they agreed only on the vagueness of the term. They believed that any middle school student could be considered at risk at any point during adolescence. In addition, they were undecided about whether a student could actually get out of the at-risk category. Ultimately, they thought this depended on the level of support these students received from home and that the success of these students rested largely with their parents.

This staff viewed at-riskedness of students in terms of levels. Those students whose parents were incarcerated, abusing drugs, single, working long hours, in a lower socioeconomic class, or not involved in their children's education were considered to be more at risk than other students. The staff considered learning-disabled students to be at risk only if their parents were not actively involved in their education.

This staff described a "wrap-around" approach as the most effective strategy for dealing with these students. That is, the school, home, and community all worked together to meet their needs. This approach included special education, at-risk programming, and extracurricular activities designed to meet these students' needs. School staff thought that these intervention strategies would be more effective if parents were involved. The staff also believed that a group approach to these students was the best way to meet their needs

because students at the middle school level prefer group activities. Such activities were perceived as promoting self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as developing important social skills.

The only differences this staff believed existed between at-risk and non-at-risk students were that at-risk students had worse classroom behaviors and lower self-esteem. Staff approaches to dealing with at-risk students were not any different, instructionally or administratively, from those with at-risk students. In fact, one staffer said his goal was to convince these students that they were not at risk. Only one staff member thought a student's at-riskedness could be related to school. She advocated more teacher training on how to deal with this population. She actually believed that some teachers made certain students become at risk for school failure because these teachers were more interested in teaching their subjects than in making sure individual students learned.

Staff associated the level of parental involvement of at-risk students with the value parents placed on education. Parents who did not regularly attend parent-teacher conferences or help students with their homework were considered not to value education. Staff believed that many of these parents, because they had grown up in a different technological era, did not fully comprehend the importance of an education today and feared that their children shared these perspectives. Staff members' definition of valuing education also included how parents supervised their children and whether they encouraged them to participate in programs designed to assist them in school.

This staff believed that:

1. All middle school students are at risk at one time or another.

2. They were meeting the needs of all their at-risk students.

3.   Parental involvement is the key to the success of at-risk students.

4.   Meeting the social and developmental needs of at-risk students is as important to their overall success as is meeting their academic needs.

5.   The educational approach to educating at-risk students should be no different from the approach used with non-at-risk students.

Findings

The at-risk students in this study were functioning as both adults and children. At home they were given adult responsibilities and choices. For most of them, this created problems in dealing with authority in the school environment, where they were treated as children. In addition, these students had serious academic deficiencies that had existed since elementary school. Several students had actually decreased in academic performance over the years. These students had both positive and negative school experiences. The positive ones were a result of their social interactions with peers and their relationships with certain teachers. The negative experiences were in the academic arena and resulted from their difficulties meeting teacher and school expectations. These frustrations caused students to disengage from the classroom experience and place more emphasis on the social aspects of schooling.

Parents of these at-risk students either did not understand or were not adequately prepared to deal with the educational and psychosocial developmental needs of their children. They supported their students' behaviors and views on schooling, reinforced the social aspects of school, and blamed the school for their children's inability to meet academic expectations. In addition, parents believed that teachers lowered their academic standards and did not expect much of their students. These parents were also frustrated with their own

efforts in dealing with their students, but they did not know what to do to address their concerns.

The school staff in this study recognized their at-risk students' academic weaknesses and social strengths. They felt the pressure from parents and students to address the academic and social needs of this population. This staff responded by providing academic accommodations and socialization activities and programs for all students. Students were allowed to turn in work later than it was due, were given extra and partial credit for incomplete assignments, and received help with their work. Socially, these students were encouraged to participate in sports and other school activities. Although this school's staff was comfortable with its efforts to address the needs of its students, they strongly believed that these students could be more successful if their parents were more involved in their education.

The dynamics of the interactions among these at-risk students, their school, and their parents revealed several tensions that have implications for the education of these students. These tensions include blame, limited communication, lack of trust, and confused role expectations among these three groups.

The results of this researcher's examination of the dynamics among at-risk students, their schools, and their homes, coupled with the students' perceptions and school experiences, point to the school's responses to addressing both the academic and socialization needs of a group of students with limited interest in school, serious academic deficiencies, and inadequate support from some parents. This school staff was attempting to balance meeting the realities of these students' academic abilities with the expectations of their parents, and perhaps society, by emphasizing socialization experiences it considered equally relevant to

students' survival and success. This approach demonstrates a new way of defining the education of at-risk students that places the importance of educating this group beyond academic requirements and expectations into the socialization arena by recognizing and reinforcing the importance of self-esteem and belonging to the survival of these students. In this school, socialization skills were developed and reinforced in several ways, including (a) the promotion of student participation in extracurricular and school activities, (b) the assignment of at-risk students to certain teams of teachers, (c) the assignment of suspended students to the in-school program as opposed to sending them home, (d) teacher tolerance of continuously disruptive student classroom behaviors, (e) the provision of numerous academic accommodations, and (f) the participation of students in a peer mediation program.

A theory developed in this study is represented in Figure 2. The figure displays the themes of the six at-risk students' perceptions and school experiences and the dynamics of the interactions occurring among them, their school, and their parents.

Discussion and Recommendations

What, then, does this reformulation of the definition of education mean for at-risk students, their parents, and the schools they attend? What can be done to address the tensions discovered to exist among these three groups that will improve the educational experiences of this student population? How are the findings from this study similar to or different from those of other research involving at-risk students? Last, given the results of this study, what are the recommendations for further and future research that will shed light on the education of at-risk middle school students?

The newly formulated definition of the education of at-risk students as described in this study evokes a series of issues for these students, their schools, and their families. For

STUDENTS
- Boredom
- Recognition
- Positive Teacher Relationships

ADULT STATUS

- Disinterest in Learning Academic Material
- See Little Value in School
- Resent Authority → Problems with Authority → Withdraw From Academics

Excel Socially → Direct Energy Towards Extracurricular & Other Activities

PARENTS
- Frustrated
- Blame School
- Support Students

SCHOOL
- Provides Accommodations
- Blames Parents
- Emphasizes Socialization Activities

Resulting In → Lack of Communication

Lack of Trust

Confused Role Expectations → School Counters Trying To Balance All Needs & Concerns But There Is No "One" Answer
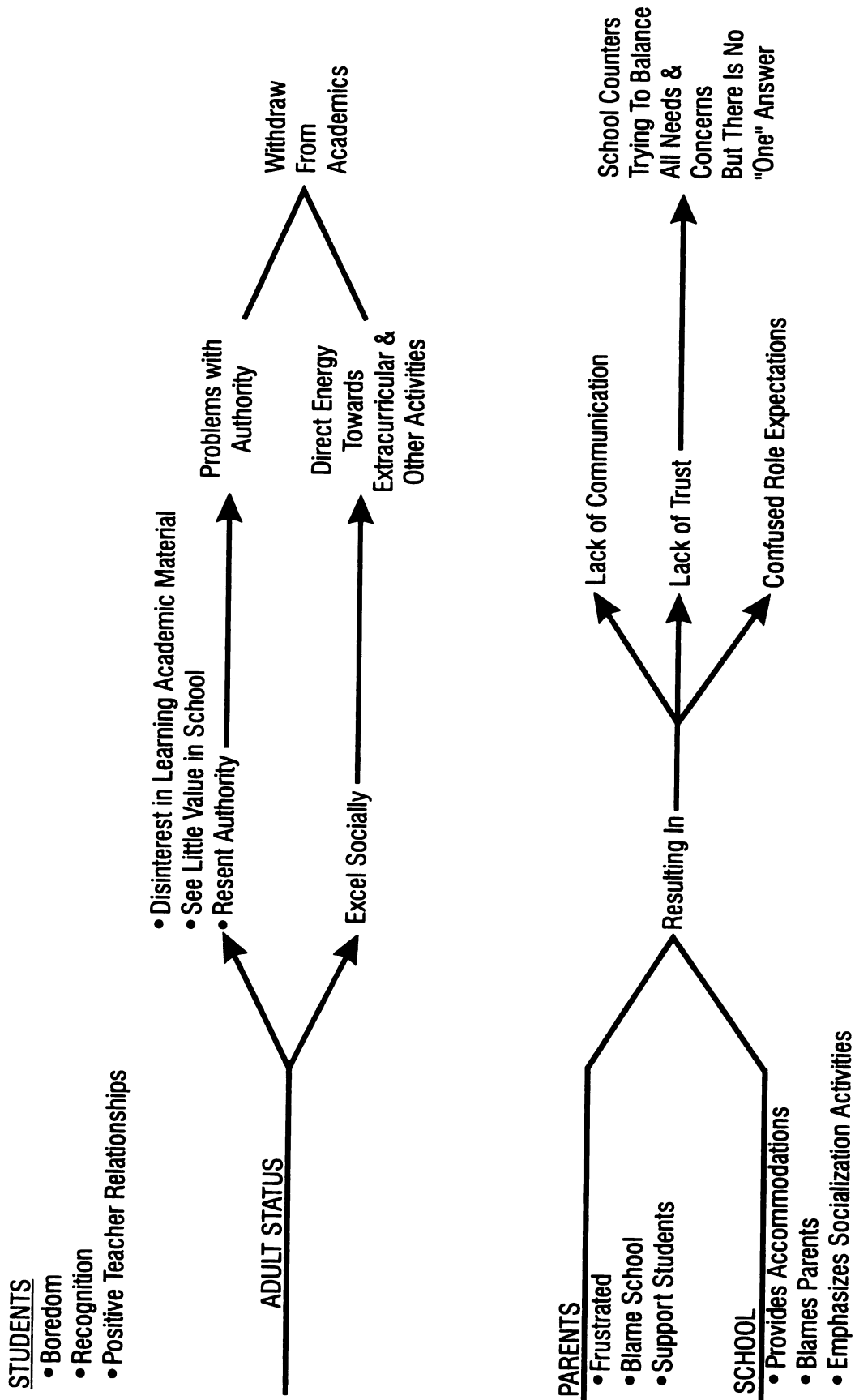
Figure 2: Dynamics of the interactions among at-risk students, their school, and their parents.

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students, this approach provides greater opportunities for recognition, building close relationships with teachers, and identifying with school. However, because of numerous academic accommodations made by teachers, students do not obtain a realistic representation of their academic status and challenges. This inaccurate view may decrease at-risk students' motivation and level of engagement because they think they are doing well in school when actually they are not. This may be one of the reasons why teachers find it difficult to motivate at-risk learners. These students do not see a need to work harder and blame others when they are not learning. Another issue is the manner in which students are rewarded as related to their behaviors. When there is more emphasis on and recognition of nonacademic accomplishments than academic ones, mixed messages may give students the impression that social activities are more important than academic ones.

A third issue of this approach is that it does not place expectations on at-risk students to demonstrate responsibility for their own learning. Although all of the students in this study offered several specific examples of what would improve their academic performance, no avenues existed for them to demonstrate involvement in their own education. Instead, these students relied on teachers and accommodations to help them through classes. Because they felt little pressure to be accountable for their own learning, it is conceivable that this contributed to their boredom, acting out, and disengaging from classroom activities because they did not feel challenged enough.

This study supports the findings of several other studies that have emphasized the importance of at-risk students' having a sense of belonging in the school environment (Finn, 1989; Goodlad, 1984; Taylor-Dunlop & Norton, 1997; Wehlage et al., 1989) and the value of positive relationships with teachers to overall school success (Lipsitz, 1984; Moos &

Moos, 1978; Schlosser, 1992; Tuck, 1989; Wehlage et al., 1986). Both of these factors also have been found to contribute positively to addressing the issue of student boredom (Farrell et al., 1988; Fine, 1985, 1986; Rumberger, 1987). In addition, like similar studies on academic engagement and disengagement, this study raises the question of whether and how academic accommodations affect students' levels of motivation and involvement in school (Finn, 1988, 1993; Miller et al., 1988; Nystrand et al., 1989; Wehlage, 1989).

To determine the appropriate balance between academics and socialization in schools for these students, more research is needed and should occur with the following questions in mind:

1.   What types of academic accommodations contribute to or take away from students' motivation and/or participation in school?

2.   What is the relationship between boredom and motivation?

3.   What can be learned about students' participation in socialization activities that can be useful in the classroom to promote academic success?

This school's emphasis on the socialization experiences of at-risk students affected parents' views of education. Although the parents in this study expressed that their students' participation in extracurricular activities provided good experiences for them, they were more concerned about their academic status and attitudes about school. For example, the academic accommodations provided by teachers to help students were viewed by parents as lowered expectations. This approach further alienated parents from involvement in the educational process of their children because it failed to provide avenues for this interaction to take place. In addition, the impression that schools prioritize socialization activities over academics was

reinforced. Finally, parents viewed this approach to education as benefiting only the short-term needs of their students and doing little to prepare them academically for high school.

Although a good deal of research on parental involvement in schools exists in the literature (McLaughlin, 1987; Miller, 1987; Rumberger, 1995; Staff, 1990), the results from this study supported other research findings that emphasize the need for increased parental involvement. Additional, more specific research on the parents of at-risk students is needed with the following questions in mind:

1.   What are the perceptions that parents of at-risk students hold toward schools?

2.   What can be done to increase the level of involvement of these parents with schools?

3.   What can schools do to educate parents about their roles in the education of their children?

The emphasis that staff placed on socialization skills and experiences in this study demonstrated the importance they placed on students' adaptation to the school environment. They thought that it was necessary for schools to provide a safe place and that stability had to be established before students could even begin to learn. By employing this approach, the view that it was more important to keep students in school with adult supervision than to have them suspended or outside school without parental supervision was clearly demonstrated by school officials. The longer students were inside the school environment, the greater the opportunity for them to learn important social skills.

This school staff took on a parenting role for their students. However, as this role expands past academics, it becomes more difficult for school staff to provide their basic function of educating students because of limited training, resources, and internal systems to

deal with socialization issues. This approach also adds to the confusion students and parents seem to have already regarding the school's role in educating students. But the most important result of this approach is that the academic needs of these at-risk students continue to be unmet, leaving them unprepared for the rigors of high school.

This study contributes to recent efforts in the literature of researchers who study the roles that schools should play in establishing the proper balance between academic and socialization activities (Ogden & Germinario, 1988; Stage, 1988). Schools that emphasize socialization over academic skills should seriously consider the impact of this approach on all students, particularly at-risk students. Serious considerations for schools include:

1.   More specifically defining their at-risk populations and using this information to develop more specialized programs for this population that balance both academic and nonacademic components.

2.   Partnering with community services to address the social needs of at-risk students and their families.

3.   Defining the parameters of their role and making it known to students, parents, and the community.

4.   Establishing specific standards for the academic achievement of at-risk students, including input from parents and students.

5.   Establishing and regularly reviewing school policies that have adverse effects on at-risk students, particularly those dealing with class attendance, suspensions, detention, and school-to-school transfers.

Although this school's approach to educating their at-risk students resulted in some positive outcomes for all groups involved, unfortunately, it did little to address the tensions that existed between the groups, leaving these basic questions unanswered:

1.　　What, if anything, can be done about the blame that at-risk students, schools, and parents place on each other?

2.　　How can the communication and involvement levels between school and parents be increased?

3.　　How can higher levels of trust between school and home be established?

4.　　What are the roles each group should play in the education of at-risk students?

These are only a few of the important but unanswered questions related to the interactions among at-risk students, their schools, and their parents. The following are recommendations for action:

1.　　Schools need to design and implement more creative ways of making their mission known. The formulation of such a mission statement should include input from a variety of students, parents, school staff, and the community. This statement should be displayed prominently throughout the school, and guide all activities and programs.

2.　　Schools need to continuously reexamine their communication efforts with parents. Feedback should be solicited from parents regarding how to increase their level of participation and support.

3.　　Schools need to design and implement elementary to middle school transition programs so that students, parents, and teachers meet early, in order to establish positive relationships as well as articulate school goals and expectations. This would create an

opportunity for parents to share pertinent past school and life experiences of their students with teachers and school staff.

4.   Schools need to communicate to parents and students what is expected of them regarding their involvement. There need to be means of support and reinforcement from the district office for schools in which parental involvement is low. Examples include (a) providing funding for schools to add parent components to their at-risk programs, (b) holding schools more accountable for parental involvement, (c) supporting research that assists in evaluating the effectiveness of at-risk programs, and (d) continuously reexamining school policies on student attendance and retention, with particular attention to their adverse effects on at-risk students.

Although it sounds like the majority of responsibility for solving the problems of at-risk students rests on the schools, this is not the intention. By design, schools are in the position to initiate the largest amount of change in the lives of young people. Certainly, they should be awarded the resources necessary to be successful, but the entire responsibility of educating children cannot rest completely on the schools. However, schools are in the best position to initiate and demonstrate leadership because of their experience and knowledge in dealing with young people and because of their historical existence in the community.

Schools could also be more proactive in linking research regarding at-risk students to school reform efforts. With this in mind, the following topics/studies could be reviewed and/or pursued regarding their implications for middle school students who are at risk:

1.   Explore the effect of the middle school concept on the academic achievement of at-risk students (Gable & Manning, 1997; Georgiady & Romano, 1994; Kanthak, 1995; Lipsitz et al., 1997; Seghers et al., 1997).

2.   Identify the components of effective at-risk programs for middle school students (DeBlois, 1989; Hawkins et al., 1988; Schlosser, 1992; Stevens & Pihl, 1987; Strahan, 1988; Van Hoose, 1989).

3.   Investigate what affects the motivation and school involvement of at-risk students (Alderman, 1990; Ames, 1990; Eccles, 1988).

4.   Determine what is the proper balance between academics and socialization activities for at-risk students (Ogden & Germinario, 1988; Stage, 1989).

5.   Investigate how recent educational reform efforts have addressed the needs of at-risk middle school students (McCarthy & Levin, 1991; Nardini & Antes, 1991; Slavin et al., 1989; Waxman et al., 1991; Wehlage et al., 1989).

6.   Replicate this study in different settings to address the issue of generalizability of its findings and conclusions.

Reflections

The final part of this report contains some of my thoughts and feelings about conducting my first research study. Without question, this has been the most stressing, yet rewarding, activity in my life. I had several interests in conducting this study. Personally, completing a terminal degree has been a goal of mine for more than ten years. Professionally, I have always been interested in how to help make public school systems better for all children, urban in particular. My more than ten years' experience in the public schools and five in higher education working with different groups of at-risk students stimulated my interest in conducting this study. In addition, my desire has been to develop the research skills necessary to becoming a scholar. I have not been disappointed.

Balancing my feelings about public education in general, developing relationships with participants in the study, and dealing with my own personal biases were great challenges for me throughout this study. On many occasions, I could really relate to teachers and school administrators as they dealt with the overwhelming day-to-day challenges they faced. Some days, I empathized with the students as I could actually see and feel the struggles they encountered in battling the ordeals of adolescence. I felt great concern when visiting with parents and hearing their stories of frustration trying to raise their children in today's crazy world. Many days, after returning home from the research site, I felt overwhelmed, yet I was always motivated to return the next day.

As an aspiring school administrator, I came to appreciate the importance of what it means to be an effective school leader in the twenty-first century. This study has inspired my interest in the study of principals and how they affect the lives of their students and faculties in more ways than through just instructional leadership.

The challenge of educating at-risk students will remain. I personally feel more equipped to continue taking on the challenges of this population because of the knowledge, confidence, and faith I have gained as a result of conducting this study. I am also proud of the efforts urban school leaders have made and continue to make in trying to meet these students' needs.

APPENDIX

AT-RISK AND TITLE I CRITERIA
STUDENT SELECTION

At-Risk: Students qualify for at-risk services in the following way:

1. Any student whose score on their <u>most recent [state]</u> reading, mathematics <u>OR</u> science test was:

    *less than 50% mastery of the objectives in science
    *less than satisfactory performance in reading and/or mathematics
                                    AND
2. Any student who meets **at least 2** of the following factors:

    *victim of child abuse or neglect
    *below grade level in English language and communication skills (this includes bilingual or limited English proficient students)
    *pregnant teenager or teenage parent
    *eligible for free or reduced-price lunch
    *atypical behavior or attendance patterns
    *family history of school failure, incarceration or substance abuse

Title I: Students can qualify for eligibility on the basis of any one of the following criteria:

*   at or below the 29th percentile on the Metropolitan Achievement Test in reading and/or mathematics

*   unsatisfactory performance on the state's reading, mathematics, or science test(s)

*   less than satisfactory performance on the city's curriculum monitoring system test(s)

*   below grade-level performance in classroom work

*   kindergarten students automatically eligible

*   pre-k experience during the previous two years, e.g., Headstart and Readiness Preschool

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