

STUDENT VOICES: SELF-EFFICACY AND GRADUATING HIGH SCHOOL

A Dissertation by

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## STUDENT VOICES: SELF-EFFICACY AND GRADUATING HIGH SCHOOL

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## DEDICATION

To all the students to whom we are yet to hear

People who regard themselves as highly efficacious act, think, and feel differently from those who perceive themselves as inefficacious. They produce their own future, rather than simply foretell it (Bandura, 1986, p. 395).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

This sequential mixed methods study explored the role self-efficacy plays in students' persistence to graduating high school. Framed within social cognitive theory, data collection included a self-efficacy scale, open-ended survey questions, and personal interviews. Data analysis consisted of descriptive statistics, comparative means of quartiles, and constant comparative methods for qualitative data. Findings were supported by the literature on self-efficacy and showed a relationship between student self-efficacy and locus of control, as well as increased academic persistence in high self-efficacy students. The higher self-efficacy quartiles of students were also found to have enhanced problem-solving skills to overcome obstacles affecting their ability to persist in school. No significant correlations were found between self-efficacy and grades or standardized assessment scores. Implications for practice in school settings are discussed.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Research Problem

It is well documented that many students are at-risk of dropping out of high school (Suh & Suh, 2007; Swanson, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2007) and dropping out has many negative consequences to both individuals and society (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009a; Barton, 2005; Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). During the past few decades, the educational attainment and skills of young adults have become increasingly important factors affecting their future employment success. Some researchers believe the current schooling system reproduces poverty and affluence across generations, creating a two-tiered social order where those in positions of power and wealth remain so and those at the bottom of the social range have little hope of ever changing their lives (García & Guerra, 2004; Ronda & Valencia, 1994; Valencia, 1997). One factor contributing to this cycle is the label “at-risk” (Aronson, 2001).

The advantages of higher lifetime earnings have risen considerably since the mid 1970s leaving young adults who fail to complete high school in precarious economic positions with bleak futures (Sum & Harrington, 2003). Besides the loss of human capital, the cost of dropouts in dollars is staggering. Dropouts from the class of 2008 alone will cost the nation more than \$319 billion in lost wages and more than \$17 billion in Medicaid and expenditures for uninsured health care over the course of their lifetimes (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009a). If educators truly believe that aptitude is evenly distributed among various groups, we must admit the achievement gap is a sign of our failure to serve all students (Aronson, 2001). Educators must understand how their “problem-based language that emphasizes the deficits of at-risk students

and their parents” is detrimental to their success (Calabrese, Hummel, & San Martin, 2007, p. 275).

The evidence on dropout rates is mixed and controversial with a variety of measures and data sources of widely varying estimates on the incidence of dropout in United States’ schools (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009a; Sum & Harrington, 2003; Swanson, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Regardless of the actual dropout rate figured, both the public sector (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009a; Council on Virginia's Future, 2008; Failing grades, 2008; Swanson, 2008) and researchers (Fine, 1991; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Suh & Suh, 2007; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007; Sum & Harrington, 2003; Warren, 2005) agree that dropping out of school carries a high price. Academic failure among at-risk students from varying groups may be affected by an array of factors that comprise the broad categories of schooling, family, community, and the student (Calabrese, et al., 2007). In a report prepared for The Business Roundtable, Sum and Harrington (2003) contended that as many as 30% of American teenagers are failing to graduate from high school with a regular high school diploma. Meeting the needs of such a large number of students may require more than auxiliary programs designed to address the perceived needs of at-risk students (Groth, 1998; Montecel, Cortez, & Cortez, 2004). This study attempted to understand the problem of dropout from a different perspective, that of *successful* at-risk students.

Contrary to stereotypes, many at-risk students successfully graduate high school (Bakker, Denessen, & Brus-Laeven, 2007; Jussim, 1989). Aronson (2001) called these resilient students “social pioneers” because they “conquer unknown territory” (p. 10). In spite of the most adverse circumstances, some at-risk students manage to survive, and even thrive, both academically and socially, into adulthood (Condly, 2006). What attributes do these successful at-risk students, who

have persisted as learners and completed high school despite social or academic obstacles, share? How can this group of students help us understand how to better serve those who do not?

I believe one of the reasons at-risk high school students succeed is, because, in spite of the odds, they have constructed knowledge about themselves as learners and that knowledge has affected their school persistence and their perception of their ability to reach the goal of high school completion. I also believe their self-knowledge is different from those who drop out and do not complete high school, and that self-efficacy plays a role in the dynamics of at-risk students' successful completion of high school.

#### *Personal Statement*

At-risk students are of specific interest to me as I have been one. I had no money to go to college, but worked my way through by waitressing and with the help of Stafford loans and Pell grants. What gave me the endurance to stick it out and complete not just high school, but college? Why was I so determined throughout my life to do more, even when the odds were against me?

I now work as a public school administrator in alternate education and see hundreds of students who have dropped out or have otherwise been unsuccessful in traditional schools and yet continue working their way through and graduate. Some make it and some do not. Why? Perhaps social cognitive theory and self-efficacy research can help me understand these phenomena for myself as well as for the thousands of students yet to come through the doors of high school who also are at-risk of *not*—*not* learning, *not* succeeding, and *not* graduating.

#### *Purpose and Objectives of the Study*

Although research on dropping out is extensive and well documented, progress to curb the phenomena has stagnated (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001; Sum & Harrington, 2003;

Swanson, 2008). Much of the research focuses on profiling future dropouts and applying intervention programs rather than making changes to the essence of what we call “school” in America (Addis, 1991; Franklin, Streeter, Kim, & Tripodi, 2007; Groth, 1998; Montecel, et al., 2004). The purpose of this study was to understand deeply, through student voices, the less tangible aspects of student dropout verses student completion of high school.

The objectives of this study centered on understanding and describing how urban high school students construct knowledge about themselves as learners and how that knowledge has affected their school persistence and perception of their ability to reach the goal of high school completion. Rather than evaluating intervention programs for students at-risk of not completing high school, this study sought to understand the phenomena of successful at-risk students and their construction of “self” for effecting meaningful change in urban high schools.

#### *Research Questions*

Despite the abundance of research on dropouts, there is little understanding of the phenomena of at-risk students who persist to high school graduation. In seeking to understand at-risk students’ school persistence, this study asked (a) how have successful at-risk students constructed their understanding of themselves as learners, and (b) how does this understanding affect their school persistence and self-efficacy? The questions are important to understand so we, as educational researchers, can place ourselves outside the boundaries of tradition and explore how classrooms or schools might be fundamentally different in order to facilitate higher success rates among at-risk youth. The answers to these questions are of considerable practical importance to educators and will expand knowledge in a little researched area of high school dropouts—successful at-risk students who did not drop out. I believe they have something to teach us, and I came to this study ready to listen, with open “researcher” ears.

### *Theoretical Frameworks*

The theoretical frameworks used in this study created a backdrop for the understanding of student voices on learning and self-efficacy. There has been recent expansion of research traditions in education to include new ways of knowing and thinking about teaching, learning, and the contexts in which they occur (Miller, Nelson, & Moore, 1998). “Each view enfolds a different understanding of the positioning of educators, learners, and learning and of the relationship between theory of learning and the practice of teaching” (Fenwick, 2000, p.265). The student voices in this study have been set in both historical and social perspective, as both Bandura (1986) and Crotty (2003) remind us it is within these contexts that individuals make sense of their worlds. Framed in social cognitive theory and self-efficacy, I make sense of and construct mine. Guba and Lincoln (2005) support the blending of theory when they stated, “indeed, the various paradigms are beginning to ‘interbreed’ such that two theorists previously thought to be in irreconcilable conflict may now appear...to be informing one another’s arguments” (p. 192).

#### *Social Cognitive Theory*

Stemming from social learning theory, social cognitive theory relies heavily on the concept of learning indirectly through modeling (Bandura, 2000; Gladden, 2002). Further developments in social cognitive theory have suggested that learning will most likely occur if there is close identification between the observer and the model and if the observer also has high self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Pajares, 1996). Bandura’s social cognitive theory (1986) defines self-efficacy as the belief in our ability to succeed in specific situations. This concept of self-efficacy is at the center of Bandura’s social cognitive theory, which emphasizes the role of observational learning and social experience on development. Self-efficacy can play a major role



in how students approach goals (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992), as well as tasks and challenges (Zeldin & Pajares, 2000). I theorize it is through these interactions with self and others that individuals construct themselves as learners.

### *Constructivism*

Educational constructivism can be divided into personal and social constructivism. In personal constructivism, it is the individual person doing the constructing or the processing of cognitive and memory structure. Social constructivism, however, involves a group doing the constructing. The theories of Vygotsky (Smagorinsky, 2001) and Bandura (1982, 1986, 2009, 1995) are both important in describing these learning procedures. Bandura's social cognitive theory introduced new ideas and concepts which marked “an evolution from neobehaviorist to constructivist ideology” (Simon, 2001, p. 60). The social constructivist view of learning consists of three broad principles. The primary principle is that each individual forms his or her own representation of knowledge and as a result, there is no single, correct representation of knowledge (Harris & Graham, 1994; von Glasersfeld, 1996).

The second principle is that learning occurs when, during active exploration, the learner uncovers a deficit in their knowledge or an inconsistency between their knowledge representation and their experience. This principle has been attributed to Piaget (Phillips, 1995). The third principle, contributed by Vygotsky, is that learning occurs within a social context and interaction between learners and their peers is an essential part of the learning process (Popkewitz, 1998; Smagorinsky, 2001). According to an ontological approach, learning changes not just what the learner knows, but also who the learner is (Wortham, 2004). Students construct not just knowledge, but knowledge and beliefs about themselves as learners. One of the ways students construct themselves as learners is through experiences in self-efficacy.

## *Self-Efficacy*

Research on students' success and motivation has focused on the effects of self-efficacy and failure attribution (Klassen & Lynch, 2007; Toland & Boyle, 2008; Vispoel & Austin, 1995). In this theoretical perspective, increased motivation to learn is linked to developing ways to learn (O'Neil & Drillings, 1994). This study focused on self-efficacy, which includes aspects of attribution and sources of self-efficacy. Bandura points to four principal sources of information affecting self-efficacy; (a) enactive attainments such as mastery experience, (b) vicarious experiences including modeling, (c) verbal persuasions as well as other social influences, and (d) physiological states (1982).

*Enactive attainment.* "Enactive experiences communicate direct and powerful feedback" (Goddard & Skrla, 2006, p. 218) to students, classrooms, and schools. Actual successes and failures play an important role in student and teacher thought about capabilities (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990), however, effects of enactive attainment on students' efficacy beliefs can be less a function of the actual events than of what their group members make of those events. This demonstrates the influence of labels such as at-risk on social groups and individual students (Goddard & Skrla, 2006).

*Vicarious experiences and modeling.* The label "at-risk" supports teachers' stereotyping of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and this behavior "discourages critical reflection on the processes of schooling" (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990, p. 328). Zeldin and Pajares (2000) studied self-efficacy beliefs and their influence on academic and career choices and found verbal persuasions and vicarious experiences were critical sources of self-efficacy beliefs. Both of these forms of self-efficacy support and can be missing in the lives of at-risk students and affect their career choices (Jackson, Potere, & Brobst, 2006).

*Verbal persuasions and social influences.* At-risk students who feel their teachers are interested in them and expect them to succeed as well as listen to them, praise their effort, and care, are more successful in school (Muller, 2001). Studies have shown that enrichment activities can increase students' self-efficacy, however, they are often missing from at-risk students' curriculum and instruction (Stedtnitz, 1986). Verbal persuasion alone is not likely to induce meaningful organizational change; however, when used with models of success and positive enactive experience, it can influence the collective efficacy beliefs of a school (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2004).

*Physiological states.* At-risk students' self-efficacy beliefs are also informed by emotional and physiological states such as arousal, anxiety, mood, and fatigue (Goddard, Hoy, et al., 2004; Usher, 2009). Physiological reaction or state refers to:

How students feel before, during, and after engaging in a task. If, for example, a struggling learner feels queasy and highly anxious about beginning a reading assignment, believing that he or she will fail, the learner might disrupt the class to escape the assignment. Typically, such escape behavior reduces anxiety, causing more escape behavior. (Margolis & McCabe, 2006, p. 220)

According to Bandura's theory, people with high self-efficacy are more likely to view difficult tasks as something to be mastered rather than to be avoided. Educational research has supported this theory (Coutinho & Neuman, 2008; Witkow & Fuligni, 2007) and expanded it to support improved problem solving skills (Sharma, Petosa, & Heaney, 1999; Usher, 2009), career choice and development (Betz & Hackett, 2006; Jackson, et al., 2006; Metheny, McWhirter, & O'Neil, 2008), and parenting practices related to schooling (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey, et al., 2005; Walker, 2008). Social cognitive theory is applied today in many different fields including health care, marketing, and business, as well as education.

Self-efficacy can be described as individuals' belief in themselves as “producers of experiences and shapers of events” (Bandura, 2000, p. 75). Psychologist Albert Bandura (1986) has defined self-efficacy as an individual’s belief in his or her ability to succeed in specific situations. He goes on to say “among the different aspects of self-knowledge, perhaps none is more influential in people's everyday lives than conceptions of their personal efficacy” (Bandura, 1986, p. 390). One must not confuse self-efficacy with self-esteem. “Perceived efficacy is a judgment of capability; self-esteem is a judgment of self worth. They are entirely different phenomena” (Bandura, 2006b, p. 309).

Efficacy judgments the most useful for students are those that slightly exceed what they can do at any given time. This has important ramifications to the field of education, particularly classroom instruction. Bandura (1986) explained:

Perceived self-efficacy is a significant determinant of performance that operates partially independently of underlying skills. Children’s high perceived self-efficacy as learners is associated with a high investment of cognitive effort and better learning from instructional media children consider difficult, but it is associated with less investment of effort and poorer learning from media they believe to be easy. (p. 394)

An individual’s sense of self-efficacy can play a major role in how goals, such as graduating, are approached as well (Urda & Maehr, 1995).

### *Literature Review*

Through student voices, this study explored aspects of self-efficacy as it related to student learning and persistence to graduation, exploring how schools could be *different* to support more students *successfully* along the way. First, it is important to understand who is at-risk and why.

#### *The Nature of At-riskness*

The *War on Poverty* in the sixties gave rise to the enactment of the *Title I of the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA)*, which revolutionized the federal

government's function in education. Congress has reauthorized the ESEA several times since its original passage, most recently in 2002, as the No Child Left Behind Act. The law consists of five titles, the first and most important is Title I, which provides guidelines as well as funding for educating at-risk children and youth (Landsberg, 2004). The term at-risk has become the catchall term used to describe students who are in danger of failing academically and not finishing school for one or more of several reasons.

Social constructionism is primarily concerned with explaining the processes people use to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (Gergen, 1985). The term “at-risk” became an educational buzzword when it was used symbolically in the 1983 report on the state U.S. education, *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) to describe an “economically and culturally endangered society” (Placier, 1993, p. 380). Policymakers across the nation hurried to implement new programs for these so-called at-risk students. Crotty (2003) warned, however, “our definitions and classifications displace what they stand for in our experience of them so that, rather than concepts pointing us to realities, realities are relegated to being mere exemplifications of concepts” (p. 81). Crotty’s words help us understand at-risk is a category created by policy makers and educators to account for low performing students. The construct, originally intended to be helpful, has come to symbolize inherent deficits in students and has hampered progress toward meeting the needs of a diverse group of learners (Ronda & Valencia, 1994).

#### *At-risk as a Deficit Model*

Though intended to provide equal access to education, the label at-risk has instead resulted in intervention programs, which most often include remediation and loss of access to college preparatory courses. The label has even led to loss of access to general education

programs in some cases. At-risk students have been placed with mildly handicapped students in special education programs (Kauffman & Pullen, 1989) and denied access to honors and advanced placement opportunities. The deficit model of at-riskness has become engrained in educators' thinking during the last 20 years and affects many choices educators make daily about instruction, programs, and access. Lubeck and Garrett (1990) found the social construction of at-risk children allows educators to blame parents for their student's difficulties and to ignore problems in the school. When working with at-risk students, some teachers plan with only low reading skills in mind to accommodate students personal and social disadvantages, however, Stern (1992) argues this strategy has resulted in "misguided sympathy, [and] veritable neglect" (p. 51). Researchers have clearly shown this type of labeling can create self-fulfilling prophecies in students (Jamar & Pitts, 2005; Weinstein & Middlestadt, 1979) and holding high expectations for all students can raise student achievement, even in groups of students who have not been successful before (Johnson, 1998; Landsman & Lewis, 2006).

#### *Effects of the At-risk Label on Student Achievement*

The United States educational system is failing a substantial proportion of students who do not master school-defined, age appropriate subject matter (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009a; Barton, 2005; Swanson, 2008). Educators have embraced the idea that large numbers of children are at-risk for academic failure. The notion of at-risk is highly flexible and ranges from a focus on a particular student in poor circumstances to a broad concern over poor and minority children in general and can refer to at-riskness as a personal attribute or as a social condition (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990). Lubeck and Garrett purported the dominant conceptualization of at-riskness encourages educators to stereotype children from disadvantaged backgrounds and "the pervasiveness of the at-risk ideology and the certainty of what should be done discourages

critical reflection on the processes of schooling” (p. 328). Stereotyping of parental involvement (Bakker, et al., 2007), diverse cultures (Sheehan & Sites, 1989), and race (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002) by teachers have all been shown to affect student achievement negatively.

The term at-risk reflects a deficit model in researchers as well as educators. “At-risk students are those who lack the home and community resources to *benefit* [italics added] from conventional schooling practices” (Levin, 1989, p. 47). The idea that at-risk students are not likely to benefit from conventional schooling can lead to “push out” as well as dropout. Another common response to students’ labeled at-risk is remediation. “After targeting a student as high risk, educators must identify the exact cause of the at-risk behavior and match the appropriate *remediation* [italics added]” (Hoover, 1989, p. 109). Levin (1989) predicted the nation’s at-risk students would form the underclass of a “dual society,” and indeed, twenty years later it has (p. 21).

### *Teaching and Instruction of At-risk Students*

Successful teachers of at-risk students share some characteristics. These teachers provide (a) rigor, upheld through academic demands and high expectations placed on students; (b) relevance, created through central instructional themes; and (c) relationships, built on a foundation of belonging, coaching, and caring. These three attributes have all been shown to help create optimal classroom climates for at-risk students' learning (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Muller, 2001; Peterson, Bennet, & Sherman, 1991).

*Rigor.* Some at-risk students drop out because they are simply bored with school (Finnan & Chasin, 2007). Minority students, who have historically been labeled as at-risk, are underrepresented in gifted and advanced courses (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Hébert & Reis, 1999; Schultz, 2002). This type of deficit thinking held by some educators about diverse

learners can hinder student progress and school completion (Ford & Grantham, 2003). In contrast, schools characterized by high levels of collective efficacy and high expectations of all students, show higher levels of student achievement (Ford & Grantham, 2003; Goddard & Skrla, 2006; Schultz, 2002).

*Relevance.* Knesting and Waldron (2006) found interactive factors that appear critical to student persistence to graduation including; goal orientation, willingness to play the game, and meaningful connections. Stern (1992) also argued that many at-risk students feel high school classes are totally irrelevant to their current and future lives and the key to successful instruction lies in involving at-risk students, allowing them to make meaningful connections through participation in planning, implementation, and evaluation of instruction.

*Relationships.* Teachers are an important source of social capital for at-risk students (Croninger & Lee, 2001). The academic consequences for at-risk students who feel their teachers are interested, have high expectations, listen to, care, and praise their efforts, is substantial and positive (Muller, 2001). In an evaluation of 100 at-risk prevention programs, Dryfoos (1991) found *individual attention* to be the single most effective intervention. In another study, Peterson, Bennet, and Sherman (1991) found that uncommonly successful teachers of at-risk students took time to respond to student problems. In doing this, some teachers focused on short-term success, while others emphasized long-term goals and the future success of students.

### *Successful At-risk Students*

The term “successful at-risk students” sounds like an oxymoron, however, these students exist in greater numbers than one might at first suspect and I believe educators, as well as researchers, can learn more from this population than the current lack of research implies. Jessor (1993) suggested that research on successful adolescence in high-risk settings is becoming more



complex and problem-based. Previously excluded subpopulations of adolescents are now beginning to catch the attention of researchers and multidisciplinary studies are beginning to explore adolescence in the context of not just family, school, and neighborhoods, but within economic, political, and cultural environments. Clearly, there are many factors affecting at-risk youth and one study, or one perspective alone, will be unable to explain fully the “problem” of successful at-risk youth.

*Internal factors.* Studies of resilient at-risk students began to appear in the literature in the early nineties and identified factors contributing to their resiliency. Researchers found that most successful at-risk youth had an internal locus’ of control, accepted personal responsibility for their successes and failures, and had relationships which aided in their success (Westfall & Pisapia, 1994). Other factors affecting success are efficaciousness in math, a positive outlook toward school, and positive self-esteem (Borman & Rachuba, 2001).

*External factors.* Greater engagement in academics is an important component of academic resilience (Cooper & Crosnoe, 2007). Engagement has been found to positively influence at-risk students (Finn & Rock, 1997) and this positive influence can continue into college (Banks, 2000; Horn & Chen, 1998). Other external factors contributing to the success of at-risk students include clear and high expectations set at home and school as well as supportive teachers and staff (Tate, 2000). Many at-risk students lack successful role models in the school (Wilson, 2002) and, according to Bandura (1986), increased self-efficacy, through *vicarious experience*, is most effective when the role model is similar to the learner.

Achievement goal orientation, learning style, self-efficacy, and metacognition are all predictors of student performance, however, self-efficacy has been found to be the strongest predictor of student success (Coutinho & Neuman, 2008). Self -efficacy helps students not only

cope with obstacles in their lives, but also to excel academically (Pearson, 2008). “Among the different aspects of self-knowledge, perhaps none is more influential in people’s everyday lives than conception of their personal efficacy” (Bandura, 1986, p. 390). What role does self-efficacy play in at-risk students’ completion of high school?

### *Dropouts*

Research on school failure has used demographic variables such as ethnicity, poverty, and limited English proficiency to distinguish between students who are at-risk and students who are not at-risk of dropping out (Battin-Pearson, et al., 2000; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Suh & Suh, 2007; Worrell, 1997). Other risk factors found to have a high correlation to dropping out include mobility (Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005), early academic failure (Denti & Guerin, 1999; Reschly & Christenson, 2006; Stearns & Glennie, 2006), and family factors such as early employment and lack of parental involvement (López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Stone, 2006). The research on *who* drops out is abundant, though the actual number of dropouts has proven difficult to determine.

### *Counting Dropouts and Calculating Graduation Rates*

Addis (1991) warned that dropout rates and other measures of success are elusive and must be standardized before programs can be designed to meet the needs of students. Indeed, there are many methods of counting—or not counting—dropouts, which leave stakeholders at a loss as to which measures are accurate. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2008) figures dropout rates in two ways. *Event rates* are the percentage of students in an age range who leave school in a given year, and *status rates* are the percentage of students in an age range who are not enrolled in school and who have not completed high school. The Center reports that among public high school students in the class of 2004–05, about three-fourths graduated on

time. This number is based on an estimate of the incoming freshman class and the number of diplomas awarded four years later. This is usually referred to as the *cohort method* of calculation. *The Condition of Education Report* (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008), however, figures the dropout rate as representative of the percentage of persons in an age group who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school diploma or equivalent credential such as a General Educational Development (GED) certificate.

So, one wonders, how *exactly* is the National Center for Educational Statistics counting dropouts and what kinds of diplomas issued count toward graduation rates? Not surprising this federal report claims, "measures of progress show an increase in the high school graduation rate since 2000 and a decline in the status dropout rate" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008, p. xii). Researchers can, and do, use data directly from the NCES website (U.S. Department of Education, 2007) to figure dropout rates themselves. Researchers need to keep in mind the data there have been reported by individual states who receive their data from individual districts, who receive their data from individual schools' self-reports which may, or may not, be accurate and truthful.

In March of 2009 (Richmond, 2009) the Alliance for Excellent Education released a brief that describes how federal policy has progressed from calculating an agreed-upon high school graduation rate to present-day methods, which use commonly defined rates as part of an accountability system for the purpose of promoting school improvement. The brief, *Every Student Counts: The Role of Federal Policy in Improving Graduation Rate Accountability*, includes an analysis of graduation rate regulations and makes recommendations on how to maximize the usefulness of graduation rates to identify and intervene in low-performing high schools. The Alliance for Excellent Education also released individual state briefs that outline

each state's current high school graduation policies and describes how new regulations could impact those policies. The release of these briefs coincided with two members of Congress introducing the *Every Student Counts Act (ESCA)*. This new bill, if passed would mandate a graduation rate calculation that is consistent across states and require reporting of subgroup graduation rates as well as set meaningful graduation rate goals, and remove incentives for schools to push out low-performing and at-risk students. "For graduation rates to measure high school performance meaningfully, it is important that they are calculated in a way that is transparent and comparable across schools, districts, and states" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009b, p. 1). If reporting were indeed standardized and transparent, hidden problems affecting marginalized at-risk student populations could be publically addressed.

#### *Reasons and Risk Factors for Dropping Out*

There is no single reason why students drop out of high school. Respondents reported different reasons including a lack of connection to the school environment, a perception that school is boring, feeling unmotivated, academic challenges, and the weight of real world events (Eash, Bennett, & Dell, 1968; Fine, 1991). However, indications are strong these barriers to graduation are not insurmountable (Jessor, 1993). Rumberger and Larson (1998) have created a conceptual framework for studying student mobility factors which are useful to classify dropout risk factors as well. These categories include student background, engagement, both social and academic, as well as educational performance. Student mobility has been found to be both a symptom of disengagement and an important risk factor for high school dropout (Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Sinclair, Christenson, & Thurlow, 2005). Furthermore, it has been found that schools, which are effective in promoting student learning, are not necessarily effective in reducing dropout or transfer rates (Rumberger, & Palardy 2005).

Student employment has also been cited as a reason for dropping out of school (Randolph, Fraser, & Orthner, 2006; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). McNeal (1997) reported that type of employment, in addition to intensity of employment, has a significant negative effect on students' school completion. Traditional odd jobs such as lawn mowing or babysitting were helpful to students but "regular" employment such as a job that required punching a time clock were found to have detrimental effects on school completion.

### *Predictors of Dropping Out*

A University of Washington study compared the capability of five different theories to predict dropping out (Battin-Pearson, et al., 2000) which they felt had direct implications for prevention. Their findings indicated poor academic achievement was the most accurate predictor of school dropout. This finding correlates with other researchers (Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Suh, et al., 2007) and categories used in the Student At Risk Identification Scale (SARIS) (McKee, Melvin, Ditoro, & McKee, 1998). The SARIS consists of two subscales, one from student records to be used by school administrators and one that is a self-report. The instrument has been shown to statistically predict students at-risk of dropping out with an accuracy rate of 91% as opposed to multiple earlier studies on dropouts, which often focused on delinquent behavior and intelligence tests to predict dropping out (Keller, 1991). Poor academic achievement has been shown to be the strongest predictor of dropping out of school in numerous studies (Barclay & Doll, 2001; Bridgeland, et al., 2006), closely followed by mobility (Rumberger & Larson, 1998).

Researchers now have a richer understanding of dropping out as a process, rather than as a single event (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). As complex as individual circumstances may be, for almost all young people, dropping out of high school is not a sudden act, but a gradual process of disengagement and attendance patterns are a clear early

sign (Lessard, et al., 2008). The many individual steps students take during their exit from school can start in the primary grades. Through a life-course perspective Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani (2001) frame dropping out as the culmination of a long-term process of disengagement from school.

Conversations about the connection of race to academic failure have also filled the literature on dropouts (Valverde, 1987). Studies have become more granular over time by studying subgroups of different student populations, particularly Hispanics (Valverde, 1987) and African Americans (Whisenton & Loree, 1970). Ronda and Valencia (1994) found that some Chicano students labeled at-risk actually formed a counter-culture around the shame and unity created by this label. During their study, the researchers came to believe the at-risk category itself masks larger institutional problems and communicates deficiencies to the students who have been categorized at-risk.

### *Deficit Thinking*

Deficit thinking in education is a system of beliefs that allow educators to alleviate themselves of blame for student failure. “At its root, deficit thinking holds that students who struggle or fail in school do so because of their own internal deficits or deficiencies.” (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008, p. 2523) An entire body of research on deficit thinking became closely tied to dropout research as strong correlations between deficit thinking and poor academic achievement, including dropping out, has been found (García & Guerra, 2004; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). In a review of literature on deficit thinking at the time, Valencia (1997) described six features that characterized deficit thinking in education: (1) blaming the victim; (2) oppression; (3) pseudoscience; (4) temporal changes; (5) educability; and (6) heterodoxy.

*Blaming the victim.* First, “deficit thinking is a person-centered explanation of school failure among individuals as linked to group membership” (Valencia, 1997, p. 9) and involves the system in power blaming the victims for their failure. Valencia was influenced by Ryan’s (1971) seminal work *Blaming the Victim*, which pointed out the rational steps in which institutions blame victims. The steps are: (a) social problems are identified by the institution; (b) studies are completed to determine differences between advantaged and disadvantaged individuals; (c) identified differences are defined as the cause of the social problem; and (d) the institution designs intervention to correct differences (Ryan, 1971, in Valencia, 1997).

*Oppression.* The second feature of the deficit thinking model is oppression, which historically has included compulsory ignorance laws that banned teaching slaves to read or write, school segregation, and more recently, high stakes testing. Valencia believes high stake testing, such as exit exams, are a “hurdle, [that] exacerbates the attainment of school success in a terrain where obstacles, inequities and adverse conditions abound” (Valencia, 1997, p. 3). Such oppressive government policies ignore institutional problems and inequities by placing the burden of improvement solely on local school districts and individual students.

*Pseudoscience.* More than sloppy research, pseudoscience is disseminated and believed by large audiences, sometimes even considered “common knowledge,” though in fact; attempts to verify the purported theories are inadequate. Ruby Payne’s (2005) *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* represents a classic example of deficit thinking and pseudoscience. In Bomer, Dworin, May, and Semingson’s (2008) critical analysis of Payne’s work, they wrote, “We found that her truth claims, offered without any supporting evidence, are contradicted by anthropological, sociological and other research on poverty. We have demonstrated through our analysis that teachers may be misinformed by Payne’s claims” (p. 2498).

*Temporal changes.* In describing the temporal nature of deficit thinking, Valencia explained deficit thinking is shaped by the current climate, rather than the current climate shaping deficit thinking. It is not the framework of deficit thinking that is fluid; it is the “transmitters” (race, poor genetics, poverty, limited proficiency in English) and deficit thinking’s impact on educational practice that change over time.

*Educability.* The deficit thinking model supports interventions or *prescriptions* for targeted populations of students on the basis of race, poverty, or culture. These prescriptive placements, in classrooms or curriculum, often provide an uninteresting, unchallenging education where failure is attributed to students, and success to the adults. These student failures, despite intervention, are blamed on deficits, limitations, deficiencies, or shortcomings of individuals, families, and cultures, not the educational system (Valencia, 1997).

*Heterodoxy.* The tension between the deficit-thinking and the anti-deficit thinking paradigms during the evolution of deficit thinking come into play because the dominant classes have an interest in defending their place in society while the dominated classes have an interest in pushing back. This battle plays out daily in schools between students, teachers, and the structure of school.

Not only does the deficit thinking model contain descriptive, explanatory, and predictive elements, it is also a prescriptive model, and, as shown in the Ruby Payne example, influential in shaping both educational policy and practice. Deficit thinking can lead to unequal access to curriculum and instruction as well as lower expectations from parents, school staff, and society (Jussim, 1989; Raudenbush, 1984). Deficit thinking, which holds that poor schooling performance is rooted in students' cognitive and motivational deficits, can be linked to the structure, practice, and failure of schooling for large groups of students.



### *The Structure of School*

In her book, *Framing Dropouts*, Fine (1991) brought to light the politics and structures of urban public high schools and their contribution to dropping out, a perspective which has been validated in other studies (Lee & Burkam, 2003). In a later book, Weis and Fine (2003) explored school structures that promoted exclusion such as policies, politics, and practices through the voices of marginalized students and exposed the effects of class, race, and gender on school experience. The culture and structure of high school has been shown to influence teachers' instructional practices and contribute to schools' dropout rates (Patterson, Hale, & Stessman, 2008). One of the ways this is done is through expectations.

### *Expectations*

There have been numerous discussions on student achievement and school failure over the past four decades. Patterns of teacher behavior have been shown to vary with their expectations of student ability (Taylor, 1979). A study of 234 fourth through sixth graders demonstrated low achieving students were the recipients of more negative feedback, teacher direction, schoolwork, and rule orientation than high achieving students (Weinstein, Marshall, Brattesani, & Middlestadt, 1982). The high achieving students also reported receiving higher expectations and more opportunity and choice than did the lower achieving students.

In a study that reviewed achievement research of minorities, Wiggan (2007) argued “although the theory of teacher expectancy provides some insights about how negative teacher expectations and stereotypes can suppress achievement, it does not articulate broader social issues that influence students at home and at school” (Wiggan, 2007, p. 318). Weinstein (2002) explored the contexts in which expectations played out in her book, *Reaching Higher: The Power of Expectations in Schooling*. Drawing upon a generation of research on self-fulfilling

prophecies, Weinstein argued that educators' expectations of children are too low. Additional findings by Weinstein have shown that children who engage in self-monitoring are more likely to resist the effects of low teacher expectations. Self-monitoring is an important aspect of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995).

### *Self-efficacy and Dropping Out*

Bandura (1986) argued that individuals create and develop self-perceptions of capability that become instrumental to the goals they pursue and to the control they exercise over their environments. Central to this view is the understanding that individuals possess self-beliefs that enable them to exercise control over their thoughts, feelings, and actions (Pajares & Schunk, 2001). In a study of the academic achievement and performance among African American girls, Pearson (2008) found that teachers' willingness to reject deficit thinking was critical in raising these students' self-efficacy. Researchers Worrell and Hale (2001) studied the impact of hope in the future and school climate as factors supporting completion of high school. Results of their study revealed students who dropped out rated school climate lower than graduates did, and graduates rated the importance of attending college higher than dropouts. The authors suggested further study within the risk and resilience paradigms of dropout research.

### *Dropout Prevention and Recovery Programs*

Many school districts across the nation have specialized programs for dropout prevention or recovery (Groth, 1998; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Toby & Armor, 1992). Specialized programs to prevent or recover dropouts require special staff development to be successful (Keller, 1991). Many dropout prevention programs use remediation or incentives, however some have begun to use negative sanctions as well such as West Virginia's "no school, no drive" law (Toby & Armor, 1992). These specialized programs can fail due to inflexibility and lack of

funding (Neumann, 1991). Though most dropout prevention programs address the needs of middle school or high school students, some suggest prevention programs should start in the elementary years (Denti & Guerin, 1999).

While there are no simple solutions to the dropout crisis, there are supports, which can be provided within the academic environment (Bost & Riccomini, 2006; Wood, 1994) as well as at home (Anguiano, 2004; Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005) that would improve students' chances of staying in school. While most dropouts blame themselves for failing to graduate, there are things they say schools can do to help including increasing the collective efficacy of schools (Goddard, LoGerfo, & Hoy, 2004).

### *Student Voices*

As researchers have become more aware of the “realities” their texts create, they became more cognizant of having readers “hear” their informants (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). A student-based inquiry approach can be used to generate data that enriches efforts to improve quality instruction and other school issues (Wiggin, 2007). “We are changing our ideas about what counts as knowledge and whose knowledge counts. We are beginning to blur the boundaries between researcher and the ‘researched’” wrote Oldfather (1995, p. 131). A purpose of this study was to highlight the voices of students and describe the personal experiences of high school students who were at-risk of not graduating high school, but are still attending or have graduated, despite the odds against them. There is a rich history of using student voices to tell the stories of schools and classrooms (Fine, 1991; Irby, 1993; Scott, 1995; Weinstein & Middlestadt, 1979). Student voices are used to refine research findings and make them “real” to audiences as well as provide access to data otherwise lost to researchers (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Lessard, et al., 2008). Oldfather and West (1994) used the metaphor of music when they wrote about student

voices creating “a pathway for making explicit the tacit understandings that enable us to make our way as researchers without fully orchestrated scores” (p. 22). Having worked in the field of education for 20 years, I was content to work without a, “fully orchestrated score” as the students and I explored the role of self-efficacy in their persistence to graduate high school.

## CHAPTER 2

### Research Design and Methodology

This multi-phase sequential study (Creswell, 2008) explored the complexities of high school completion and failure through diverse student voices. Even though there is an increasing openness to interpretive and critical paradigms as well as a wide range of methodologies, the field of educational research is still evolving with varied levels of acceptance and understanding of emergent design and the process of analytic induction (Miller, et al., 1998). In this study during the first waves of data collection, it was more useful to distinguish between research methods that yielded structured and unstructured data, than between methods that were quantitative or qualitative (De Vaus, 2002). The waves of data collection served the following purposes: (1) created an initial purposeful sample (Merriam, 2002), (2) generated localized interview questions, (3) provided a broad picture at how a number of at-risk students reported their self-efficacy, and (3) located “intense” cases for follow up (Creswell, 2007). Additional data gathered were items from students’ school records including, mobility, attendance, demographics, academic performance, and assessment scores. This study was approached with “curiosity, not conceit” (Crotty, 2003, p. 52) to ensure the multiple student voices were not only heard, but used to guide this study of at-risk students who were persisting to high school graduation in a large, urban school district.

#### *Research Site: Central City ISD 100*

Situated in the center of the United States, Independent School District 100 in Central City, Midwest, is the largest school district in the state with 50,000 students. It is also the third largest employer in the city of Central City, which contributes to its prominence in local news and politics. Central City’s median household income is \$42,536. The racial and ethnic

composition of Central City's population is comparable to that of the United States as a whole. Current trends indicate the fastest growth rate to be among Asian/Pacific Islanders and persons of Hispanic origin. The demographics in the city of Central City are as follows: white 68.8%, African American 11.2%, Hispanic 13.3%, Asian 4.5%, and 1.5% other (RICIC L.L.C., 2009). In contrast, Central City Public Schools percentage of racial/ethnic minority students enrolled is 38.1% white, 20.0% African American, 23.9% Hispanic, 5.4% Asian, and 2.5% American Indian. In addition to the public school districts, there are dozens of private and parochial schools serving preschool through high school students in the Central City area. Central City also has fifteen colleges and universities including Central City State University, University of Midwest-School of Medicine, Friends University, Newman University, and the Central City Area Technical College (City of Wichita, 2009).

The opening of alternative schools and programs had the intention of raising the district's graduation rate while providing a self-paced curriculum to students, but it has not been enough. To illustrate, though the district's overall graduation rate has fallen only 2.1 percentage points in the last year, the alternative high schools averaged a 30.8% drop in graduation rates (Kansas Department of Education, 2009). The district's dropout survey contains data very similar to other nationwide reports that list students top reasons for dropping out of high school as (a) truancy, (b) failing grades, (c) deficient basic skills, (d) and lack of engagement (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009a). These attributes were used to create a local profile of students at-risk for dropping out of the district's comprehensive high schools.

#### *ISD 100's Comprehensive High Schools*

The research in this study took place at all seven comprehensive high schools in the Central City School District. To maintain confidentiality, the name of the school district has been

changed and numbers are being used rather than names for the actual schools. I found significance differences in their mission statements, demographics, and academic achievement. Overall, the schools showed a slight decline (.2- 3.5 percent) in graduation rates from the 2008-2009 school year. The newest high school, No. 2, has the highest graduation rate (86.9%) and High School No. 7 has the lowest (63.6%) (KSDE, 2009). High school student demographics, graduation rates, and assessment data described below are from the 2008-2009 academic year.

Central City High School No. 1's mission is to provide a collaborative community where all students and staff are actively engaged in learning. It is also home of the district's only high school International Baccalaureate program. The pride students and staff take in this school is evident in multiple ways from the respectful way students move through the halls during passing period to the display of school improvement documents on their website. Not only was High School No. 1 the first Central City high school, having opened in 1923, it is also the district's largest school with a student population of 2,124. The 59% economically disadvantaged school population is made up of 39% white, 22% African American, and 22% Hispanic students. This diverse student population's state reading scores have risen from 60% to 75% in the last four years while state math scores improved from 49% to 68% in the last three.

The mission of No. 2 High School is to provide a positive learning environment for every student, offering each the opportunity to gain proficiency in skills necessary for future goals. The school serves 1,593 students and uses an advocacy blog to elicit feedback from students about how things are going at school. They also have a school newspaper called *The Highlighter*, published online as well as in print. *The Highlighter* hosts a College Cafe for students to connect with resources and information they need for college planning. Just over half of High School No. 2's student population is white and the school's poverty rate is 40%, one of the lowest in the

district. High School No. 2's reading scores have gone up and down each of the last four years resulting in a net gain of eight percentage points, ending at a 68% high last year. Math scores have risen from 53% to 64% in the same period.

High School No. 3, with 1,796 students, is rich in history and pride with its pioneer and Native American theme. High School No. 3 is also one of the few high schools in the United States that teaches canoeing in physical education class. The mission of the No. 3 High School Community is to prepare all students with the knowledge and skills to grow into productive and responsible members of society. High School No. 3 is currently the only Central City high school that requires a senior project. Seventy-one percent of High School No. 3's students qualify for free or reduced lunch and nearly half of the students are Hispanic. High School No. 3's reading scores have also gone up and down during the last four years with a net gain of 11%, resulting in a 58% proficiency rate. Math scores followed a similar pattern with a 47% ending proficiency.

The Mission of No. 4 High School is to provide a safe, positive learning environment where all students are challenged to achieve their personal best and become responsible, productive citizens in a changing world. High School No. 4's 1,526 students have access to a large selection of honors and advanced placement courses. At a poverty rate of only 32%, High School No. 4 is not an economically disadvantaged school as defined in Central City. Sixty-seven percent of the student population is white and reading proficiency is at an all time high of 85%. Students have also been improving in math; 75% of students are proficient.

High School No. 5 wishes to engage their 1,533 students in a challenging curriculum so they will become responsible, productive citizens who value differences and can adapt to a changing world. High School No. 5's graduation rate fell (-3.5%) last year and is down nearly 8% in the last five years. High School No. 5 is 59% white, and 56% poverty. Their reading



scores have risen from an extreme low of 46% five years ago to 67% during the last school year. High School No. 5's current 42% math proficiency has risen from 34% proficient three years ago.

High School No. 6 High School's 1,696 students believe a significant part of the high school experience is being part of a team, facing challenges, pursuing a common goal, and experiencing success in victory and growth in defeat. A diverse athletic program provides such opportunities at this school. High School No. 6 was one of the only two high schools to have lowered (-2.3%) its dropout rates this last school year. High School No. 6 houses the district's highest African American student population of 35%, balanced with 32% white and 19% Hispanic students. Reading scores have been static with a 61% proficiency rate last year; however, math scores have climbed from 32% to 42% in just three years.

High School No. 7 is the smallest of Central City's comprehensive high schools with 1,061 students; though, it has the district's highest chronically absent rate (43.1%) and lowest graduation rate (63.6%). The mission of High School No. 7 is to provide each student with a safe learning environment and an equitable opportunity to develop competencies necessary to become a productive member of society. High School No. 7's poverty rate is the highest of the seven comprehensive high schools at 78% and nearly half of the students are white. High School No. 7's reading scores took a leap last year, going from 37% to 52% proficient. Math proficiency scores are now at 40%, nearly doubling from 22% in 2006.

Art Magnet is the only magnet high school in ISD 100. The magnet themes at Art High School include visual art, science, and law. Attending students are exposed to a solid academic core with a heavy emphasis on mathematics and language arts and are expected to not only graduate from high school, but to graduate from college. *U.S. News and World Report* has

ranked Art Magnet among the top high schools in the country, giving it a bronze ranking. None of the students in the study attended Art Magnet High School; it does not have a credit-recovery learning center as part of their program.

### *Alternative High School Settings*

Central City Public Schools has a large alternative high school program that includes three small alternative high schools and four “learning centers.” The alternative high schools are Alternative High School No. 1, Alternative High School No. 2, and Alternative High School No. 3. The learning centers include Learning Center No. 1, Learning Center No. 2, Learning Center No. 3, Learning Center No. 4, and six credit recovery rooms located inside of high schools. All of these alternate programs are funded with at-risk dollars.

The alternative high schools serve 100-150 students each in physically traditional, though small schools. The school day is divided by periods where students spend time in different teacher classrooms for different subjects. Students in each classroom, however, are not working in the same place in the curriculum, and in many cases, not even on the same class. For example, the math teacher may have ten students during the first period of the day, but seven may be working on different levels of algebra, and three may be working on geometry. Students work in a self-paced manner in these classrooms towards a high school diploma. Traditional attendance is required at all of the alternative high schools and students there participate in all district and state testing.

The learning center program has two branches, the stand-alone dropout recovery programs and the credit recovery rooms inside of high schools. The stand-alone sites are programs, not schools, and students who attend are not bound by mandated school days in the traditional manner. The centers are open from eight o’clock in the morning until five o’clock in

the evening at four sites and from eight o'clock in the morning until six-thirty at the Learning Center No. 3 location. Students create their own schedules there and are expected to attend at least fifteen hours a week. The curriculum is web-based and students work self-paced through the courses needed to complete their high school diplomas with help from the two certified high school teachers that work at each location. There is little direct instruction and the teachers fill the role of facilitator and coach more than the role of teacher. Though these centers produce approximately 100 graduates each year combined, they are often just another step in the slow process of dropping out for hundreds more each year.

The credit recovery rooms offer core high school courses through web-based curriculum for which students are charged seventy-five dollars each to retake. Scholarships are now available for students, if requested by school staff, for those who cannot pay. All of the students in this study were taking at least one learning center course through their school for credit recovery in the fall of the 2009-2010 school year, though some students transferred to a alternative, or dropped out to attend a dropout recovery school before the study ended. See Table 1 for school attendance distribution of participants.

Table 1

*School Attendance Distribution*

School	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
HS No. 1	7	6.1	6.1	6.1
HS No. 3	58	50.4	50.4	56.5
HS No. 2	20	17.4	17.4	73.9
LC	14	12.2	12.2	86.1
Alternative No. 1	1	.9	.9	87.0
Alternative No. 2	2	1.7	1.7	88.7
HS No. 5	5	4.3	4.3	93.0
HS No. 6	2	1.7	1.7	94.8
HS No. 7	6	5.2	5.2	100.0
Total	115	100.0	100.0	

### *Data Collection Strategies and Analysis*

Data collection strategies encompassed a survey instrument to gather both quantitative and qualitative data on student levels and sources of self-efficacy. The survey questions explored students' self-efficacy towards learning, academic support, and adult relationships. These areas have been identified by students as reasons affecting their decision to drop out (Bridgeland, et al., 2006; Swanson, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2007). This data also aided in the identification of high self-efficacy at-risk students for interview participation as well as helped refine interview questions and narrow the scope of the in-depth student interviews. The survey instrument was piloted with students during July through September 2009.

#### *Student Academic Self-Efficacy Scale*

The primary purpose of the *Student Academic Self-Efficacy Scale* was to locate more precisely high self-efficacy at-risk students who were poised to graduate high school, for participation in in-depth interviews and to refine the interview questions asked. It also served as an additional data point to support the study's validity through triangulation of data (Patton, 2002). Following the survey, students were given a score based on their levels of self-efficacy. The survey was designed specifically, as Bandura (1986) suggested, to assess students' self-efficacy in school settings, doing specific tasks that have been shown to lead to academic success. He advised, "Measures of self-percepts must be tailored to the domain of psychological functioning being explored. This methodology permits microanalysis of the degree of congruence between self-percepts of efficacy and action at the level of individual tasks" (p. 398). As the study progressed, the survey data became essential; not only in locating high self-efficacy students, but also in answering the research questions themselves.

*Instrumentation.* Self-efficacy plays a critical role in both academic success and school completion (Caprara, et al., 2008; Hsieh, Sullivan, & Guerra, 2007). It is also important for educators to be aware of factors that help generate and foster self-efficacy beliefs of their students. This information is valuable in helping teachers tailor their instructional strategies and in ways that are supportive of their students' self-efficacy and achievement. Such information can also assist in the evaluation of programs and intervention strategies, which influence the self-efficacy beliefs of students (Usher & Pajares, 2009). An understanding of the sources of self-efficacy beliefs in my sample assisted in forming questions for the qualitative wave of data collection.

Researchers have not reached consensus on how best to measure the sources of self-efficacy in academic settings (Usher & Pajares, 2009), however, there certainly is no shortage of advice on the matter. In choosing an instrument to measure the self-efficacy beliefs of at-risk students, careful consideration was given to possible instruments and individual questions. Usher and Pajares (2009) have argued,

Because conclusions drawn from empirical investigations of the sources are only as reliable as are the items from instruments on which data are gathered and results obtained, items developed directly from the tenets of social cognitive theory are likely to produce results that are able to expand and refine these tenets. (p. 92)

Self-efficacy beliefs are also particularly sensitive to contextual variation (Pajares & Schunk, 2001). Because of this task-specific nature, measures of self-efficacy should be sensitive to the setting in which the task or behavior occurs (Bandura, 1993). In Bandura's (2006b) *Guide to Creating Self-Efficacy Scales*, he warned researchers to avoid ambiguity about exactly what is being measured, therefore items should be tied to "situational demands and circumstances" (2006b, p. 307). However, "generic self-management strategies developed in one realm of activity are serviceable in other activity domains" (2006b, p. 308). Because self-efficacy is

concerned with perceived capability rather than intention (Bandura, 2006b), survey statements have been phrased in terms of “I can do” rather than “I will do.”

Smith and Guarino’s (2005) principal self-efficacy survey and Klassen’s (2004) *Sources of Self-Efficacy Scale* were initially considered for use. Smith and Guarino’s Likert-type scale used weak and strong to denote varying levels of self-efficacy in school principals. This instrument was dismissed as impractical because all questions would require rewording for student use. Another instrument developed by Klassen (2004), focused on students, but only in the area of mathematics. It was also dismissed as having too narrow of a focus. In the end, an abridged form of the Self-Efficacy for Learning Form (SELF), called the SELF-A (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2007) was used.

The SELF-A was designed to measure college freshmen’s self-efficacy for school success and completion, which is what this study sought to measure, but for high school students. In their study, Zimmerman and Kitsantas (2007) found “special value for educators who are interested in assessing students’ perceptions of efficacy regarding their self-regulation of academic functioning” (p. 162). For a complete listing of the survey’s mean and standard deviation computed for each item, see APPENDIX A: SELF-A.

To improve reliability and validity (Krosnick, 1999), the Likert-type scale consisted of (a) 0% = Definitely Cannot Do It, (b) 20% = Probably Cannot Do It, (c) 50% = Maybe, (d) 80% = Probably Can Do It, and (e) 100% = Definitely Can Do It. Do to layout restraints, these were listed at the top, then simple percents were used to indicate each level of the scale (see APPENDIX B: Web-Based Self-Efficacy Survey).

The open-ended survey questions were placed after the SELF-A in the survey instrument and allowed me to capture students' understanding of themselves as learners and other factors affecting their self-efficacy towards school completion. An important type of self-efficacy, enactive attainment, focuses on students' beliefs about their ability to self-regulate learning (SRL), which refers to such processes as goal setting, self-monitoring, strategy use, self-evaluation, and self-reactions (Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2007). Usher and Pajares (2009) wrote, "most individuals do not quickly dismiss their experiences of mastery (or of failure). Indeed, successful performance in a domain can have lasting effects on one's self-efficacy" (p. 89). For this reason, the question, "how did you overcome this?" was added to the end of each of the open-ended questions on the survey instrument. The open-ended questions on the survey measured students' self-efficacy to communicate, control emotions, encourage, evaluate, focus, influence, learn, make decisions, model, motivate, prioritize, set goals, solve problems, and use resources (see APPENDIX C: ANOVA for Self-Efficacy Scores).

*Pilot survey.* The process of piloting, or pretesting surveys identifies questions respondents have difficulty understanding or interpret differently than the researcher intended (Krosnick, 1999). During the summer of 2009, the survey was piloted with 15 participants who were not part of the current study. Data from the pilot was used to edit a scale to measure level, generality, and strength of student self-efficacy. Following the pilot, the survey was adjusted based on participant feedback and item analysis.

*Pilot analysis.* After the pilot was completed, the following adjustments were made to the Student Self Efficacy Survey: (a) question numbering was corrected, (b) a new question, "please leave this item blank and don't mark any bubbles" was added, and (c) a vocabulary test was

created and added to the end of the survey, and (d) open ended questions were broken into two parts.

To create the vocabulary test, all of the questions were copied into a word processing program and read through, searching for words that may not be in students' current vocabulary. The words lecture, effective, ensure, potential, forthcoming, abstract, essential, associate, and clarify were chosen and a short multiple choice vocabulary quiz was created and added to the end of the student survey instrument.

Each of the open-ended questions had two parts. The first asked participants to describe a situation and then the second part asked them to explain how the situation was overcome. During the pilot not everyone responded to both parts – some participants did not describe a situation or felt they did not have one to describe. For those who answered both parts, it was clear where the response to one question ended and the other started. Both parts of the question were moved to separate text boxes so that participants would be forced to respond to both parts of the question, making analysis easier.

Two questions were added to allow participants an opportunity for open sharing and to indicate if they were interested in continuing with the study via a follow-up interview. After testing the vocabulary section with a few people, two vocabulary word choices were changed, one that was a low use high-level vocabulary word and one that could have been argued to be a valid answer.

The last survey reliability question was addressed. Concerns over possible response bias prompted the change of items 2, 4, 10, and 12 to read in the negative. Combined with the item to be left blank, a record created by a respondent who simply marked items down the page without considering each response carefully would be easy to spot and would be removed from the data



set before analysis. The final survey contained 19 items that measured the construct of self-efficacy (Zimmerman & Kitsanas, 2007) and four open-ended questions.

*Survey participants.* The potential for web-based surveys to effectively and efficiently survey the entire population of a given group allows the researcher to limit the effects of sampling error (Sills & Song, 2002). Thus, in an attempt to avoid sampling error, this survey covered the entire population of ISD 100 high school students taking a credit recovery course. ISD 100 has approximately 13,000 high school students enrolled in their seven comprehensive high schools, alternative schools, and special programs. Only students who were taking a course for credit recovery were included in the survey sample of approximately 1000 students. The response rate dictated the actual number of participants included in the study as shown in equation (1) (De Vaus, 2002).

$$\text{Response rate} = \frac{\text{Number returned}}{\text{N in sample} - (\text{ineligible} + \text{incomplete})} \times 100 \quad (1)$$

Current students from the 2009-2010 school year participating in a credit recovery class were sent home with a consent form to gain parental permission for participation in the study. These students` fit the local at-risk profile for dropping out of school because they had failed at least one class required for graduation. Students who returned a signed consent form were asked to complete the survey while in class via a computer. Due to student mobility, graduation, and dropout, upon data analysis, the sample contained not only at-risk students, but also students who are attending alternative high school programs, recent graduates, and recent dropouts.

*Survey procedures.* The survey instrument was web-based and coded with a database identification number to allow for the locating of select students for follow-up interviews and to connect the participant responses to demographic and academic performance data the district maintained on students. On October 15, 2009, a meeting with high school learning center

facilitators was held. Facilitators were supplied with packets of consent forms, salmon colored for minors and white for students 18 or above. They were also showed how to direct students to the call for participants which was posted on the Internet (See APPENDIX E: Call for Participants).

### *Academic Data*

A document analysis of school history for students who participated in the survey was added to the data set. Survey records were matched to demographic, academic, and assessment data via student ID numbers. To protect student privacy, student names were not included from the student information data extract and names were never combined with the survey responses.

All students who completed the survey instrument were included in the data set. Data collected from the student information system included (a) number of credits attempted, (b) number of credits earned, (c) number of credits counting towards a diploma, (d) ethnicity, (e) age, (f) gender, (g) academic transcripts, and (h) Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) reading and math scores (if available), and (i) state assessment scores.

NWEA's Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) tests are state-aligned computerized adaptive assessments that provide accurate, useful information about student achievement and growth in the areas of reading comprehension and mathematics (Northwest Evaluation Association, 2009). ISD 100 uses this assessment tool as a diagnostic for student placement and intervention in the areas of reading and mathematics. This data was included in the academic data to provide a more complete profile of student academic performance than course grades alone can.

### *Qualitative Data Collection*

Informants entered into this research project voluntarily after the study was approved by both the University's institutional review board and the Public School District where the study was conducted. Only currently enrolled ISD 100 students who were currently taking a high school credit recovery class either in a comprehensive high school or learning center were invited to participate. Participant and guardian consent was received for students and confirmed in writing via a consent form before students participated in the survey, interviews, or document review stages of data collection (see APPENDIX F: Consent Form).

*Selection.* For the purpose of participant selection, the term at-risk has been defined as students who are at-risk of high school non-completion because they have failed one or more classes required for graduating. Student's identification numbers allowed me to anonymously identify the students and provide access to demographic and data during data analysis. At the next stage of data collection, students with high self-efficacy ratings on the survey were selected for their potential to disclose unusually rich perspectives and insights about their self-efficacy and its relationship to school completion. The survey analysis yielded a purposive sample of six high self-efficacy at-risk students to participate in the personal interview stage of data collection.

Data from both the self-efficacy survey and document reviews were analyzed using descriptive statistics. During analysis, records were sorted by level of self-efficacy to aid in locating high self-efficacy students for the in-depth interviews. The open-ended survey questions provided context to the survey data, offering a more complete picture of self-efficacy for each at-risk participant. A full description of the process of administering and analyzing data from the survey is included in Chapter 3.

## *Interviews*

After initial analysis of student surveys and documents, tentative interview questions were further developed to better explore the emerging themes from the survey data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted following the interview protocol (see APPENDIX G: Protocol for Individual Interviews) with six students who the researcher felt had potential to disclose unusually rich perspectives about their self-efficacy and its relationship to school completion. This determination was based on students' open-ended responses to survey questions, which had been designed to explore students' self-efficacy in relation to obstacles to graduation and strategies used to overcome them, as well as students' willingness to be interviewed. All of the students selected had high self-efficacy scores from the SELF-A section of the survey instrument.

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) wrote, "data are both the evidence and the clues. ...Data ground you to the empirical world and, when systematically and rigorously collected link qualitative research to other forms of science" (p. 117). One-on-one interviews were chosen over focus groups to allow more risk-taking in communication, prompting students to move, "beyond surface talk to a rich discussion of thoughts and feelings" (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 80). Merriam also noted, "the quality of the interview is determined by the relationship we establish with our co-investigators" (Merriam, 2002, p. 140) therefore, the interviews took place at students' schools and were both comprehensive and methodical, allowing students time to open up and get to the "meat" of how self-efficacy shaped their school careers.

## *Qualitative Data Analysis*

In the spirit of the research tradition phenomenology, I attempted "to remove from myself manipulating or predisposing influences and to become completely and solely attuned to just

what appears, to encounter the phenomenon, as such, with a pure state of mind" (Moustakas, 1999, p. 88) as much as possible when working as a researcher/participant in the field of education. Data analysis in this study was both ongoing and sequential with a continually narrowing scope (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The interviews were analyzed using Glaser and Strauss' (1980) constant comparative method. "Because the constant comparative method is concerned with generating and plausibly suggesting" (p. 104), it was appropriate to my study as I gave voice to successful at-risk students.

Emerging themes from the open-ended survey questions were explored and used in conjunction with the quantitative findings for refining the student interview questions. Bandura (2006b) wrote, "constructing scales to assess self-regulatory efficacy requires preliminary work to identify the forms the challenges and impediments take" (p. 311). Identified participant obstacles from the open-ended survey questions were used to build the open-ended interview questions. All interviews and student journals were transcribed prior to the data analysis. There was an "interaction between data collection and analysis" (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 114) in which tentative themes emerged to make meaning of the experiences of students. The descriptive themes were adjusted as interview questions and other data, including academic data, were added. Triangulation of data (Erlandson, et al., 1993; Merriam, 2001; Patton, 2002) was ongoing as multiple student voices began to take shape and sound as one. It was in this way that the essence of being a successful at-risk student evolved.

### *Limitations*

The participants in this study were carefully chosen to ensure they fit the profile established for *successful* at-risk students (Creswell, 2007). The richness of the study relied on their voices to effectively articulate their experiences as representative of the phenomena being

studied (Merriam, 2002). The methods and methodologies of this type of research are sometimes called into question by both quantitative and qualitative researchers who use different methods (Merriam, 2002) and are not comfortable with participants' construction of, "their own social reality" (Gage, 1989, p. 5).

Another limitation was that the study was conducted with participants from only one school district in the Midwest. It is possible that studies conducted in other school districts, in other parts of the nation or world, would show different findings. The number of participants in the study was limited by the district's at-risk high school student enrollment taking a credit recovery class and by the number of participants who agree to be part of the study. This study is also limited to the experiences of high school students and recent high school graduates, not college students or younger learners.

### *Research Quality*

Denzin (2008) stated, "standards for assessing quality are forms of interpretive practice that enact a politics of evidence and truth" (p. 448). Educational research has been accused of being weak or absent of theory, containing large error margins, and having "opaqueness of data and sources" (Feuer, Towne, & Shavelson, 2002, p. 26). The National Research Council purports that all quality research, including educational research, should: (a) pose significant questions that can be investigated empirically, (b) link research to relevant theory, (c) use methods that permit direct investigation of the questions, (d) provide a coherent and explicit chain of reasoning, (e) yield findings that replicate and generalize across studies, and (f) disclose research data and methods to enable and encourage professional scrutiny and critique (Feuer, et al., 2002, p. 7). Carter and Little (2007), however, argued that good quality qualitative research should

attend foremost to epistemology, methodology, and method. The current study has blended both modes of thinking.

When ensuring quality in qualitative research, Merriam (2002) wrote, “there are ways to ensure for rigor in the conduct of the [qualitative research] study” (pp. 22-24). Merriam went on to explain that rigor is demonstrated through internal validity, reliability, external validity, and ethical research practices. Though this study is rooted in the work of Albert Bandura and other psychologists specializing in social cognitive theory and self-efficacy, it seeks to foster a deeper understanding of the role of self-efficacy in students graduating high school and highlights the self-efficacy of students through their individual and collective voices. The rigor of this study has been demonstrated in the following ways.

*Validity.* Important to the internal validity of this study is the acceptance of student as co-researchers (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Oldfather & Thomas, 1998). If we as qualitative researchers are “closer to reality” than other research instruments (Merriam, 2002), students should be considered even closer. The data presented in this study has been triangulated (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) in many ways including multiple research sites, data sources, data collection methods, and researcher/participants. It is not possible to statistically generalize finding from this study (Merriam, 2002). Patton (2002) however, promotes thinking of context-bound “extrapolation” rather than generalizations about the findings in qualitative studies and this study achieves that goal by exploring self-efficacy and its role in at-risk students’ persistence to high school graduation.

*Ethics.* Though at first glance, ethics in qualitative research seem to be obvious; ethical dilemmas should be expected when working in schools with large amounts of data and students (Merriam, 2002). My first responsibility as a researcher, and as an educator for that matter, has

been to see that students are unharmed. I did not conduct research with students in attendance under locations over which I have direct authority, which alleviated some ethical concerns. A detailed account or “audit trail” of methods, procedures, and decision points as well as notes regarding meetings with members of my dissertation committee were kept throughout the study (Erlandson, et al., 1993; Merriam, 2002).

The inconsistent results of dropout prevention and reduction initiatives across the nation highlighted the need for this broader theoretical framework in research on the topic of dropouts (Groth, 1998). It is hoped that through the descriptions of the phenomena of successful at-risk students, this study will enlighten researchers and educators both to the possibility of success for all student through their voices. As Usher and Pajares (2008) note, this is indeed important research.

If Bandura (1986) is correct that self-efficacy beliefs constitute the key factor of human agency, then investigating the genesis of those beliefs and the factors that either nurture or deteriorate them is warranted. Findings from this line of inquiry will make substantive contributions to educational theory, thinking, practice, and policy (Usher & Pajares, 2008, p. 791).

Even with the diverse opportunities to complete a high school diploma offered by ISD 100, too many students are not finding success. The very last stop—the dropout recovery schools, averaged a 37% dropout rate during the 2008-2009 school year. Though 127 finished their diploma while attending that year, another 326 dropped out again, empty handed.



## CHAPTER 3

### Survey Administration, Analysis, and Findings

The previous chapter described the study design, methodology, and sample, linking them to the research questions. This chapter is organized to flow through the multi-phase sequential nature of the study (Creswell, 2008), revealing findings along the way, so the reader can better understand the findings as they unfolded.

#### *Administration of the Student Survey on Self-efficacy*

The survey was administered online to students attending various high school learning centers for the purpose of credit recovery from October 15, 2009 to November 30, 2009. Of the 237 students who started the survey, 155 completed it for a 65.4% completion rate. Of the students who did not complete the survey, 12 declined the consent and 66 stopped when asked for their student ID. It is unknown if this is because they did not know it, or did not want to be identified in this way. Another seven stopped when they reached the SELF-A, leaving 155 participants. Question 17 on the adapted SELF-A was a planned "non-response" item, which read, "Please leave this item blank and don't mark any bubbles." A total of 37 students answered it and their data was removed from the rest of the SELF-A data set. Two skipped the vocabulary test at the end and one was removed because he was an adult learner over the age of 30, who was enrolled as a community student in the learning center, not a high school student.

The final 115 student records were imported into the software program SPSS (Nie & Hull, 2006). The following variables were added to the data set from the district student information system my matching student IDs; (a) gender, (b) school, (c) birth date, (d) and race and were coded (see APPENDIX H: SPSS Data Codes). Survey respondents ranged from 15 to 24 years of age with 45% being 17 year olds and 39% being 18 year olds (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Age in Years*

Age	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
15	4	3.5	3.5	3.5
16	9	7.8	7.8	11.3
17	52	45.2	45.2	56.5
18	45	39.1	39.1	95.7
19	2	1.7	1.7	97.4
20	1	.9	.9	98.3
23	1	.9	.9	99.1
24	1	.9	.9	100.0
Total	115	100.0	100.0	

The sample was made up of the following races; 1% American Indian, 1% Asian, 15% African American, 44% Hispanic Culture, 3% Multi-Racial, and 36% Caucasian (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Race Distribution*

Race	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
American Indian	2	1.7	1.7	1.7
Asian	1	.9	.9	2.6
African American	17	14.8	14.8	17.4
Hispanic	50	43.5	43.5	60.9
Multi	4	3.5	3.5	64.3
White	41	35.7	35.7	100.0
Total	115	100.0	100.0	

Though 72% of the respondents were classified as juniors and seniors by attempted credits, only 59% had enough credits earned towards a diploma to graduate at the end of the school year without gaining additional credits through a learning center or summer school. All of the respondents were enrolled in at least one credit recovery course at the time the survey was given.

SurveyMonkey (Goldberg, 2010) was the online tool used to administer the survey. Each survey section was administered on its own page to avoid confusion and to ensure participant

responses on one section did not influence the next. A short vocabulary test was inserted at the end, using words from the previous section to eliminate concerns that participants' data was invalid due to lack of understanding the questions in the first place.

### *Student Self-Efficacy Survey*

To retrieve the data, I used Survey Monkey's "download to relational database format" feature and opened the data table in SPSS. I created two temporary variables in my data table prior to analysis called *ValidRating* and *ValidVocab*. I used these fields to mark records invalid if participants failed the vocabulary test or rated self-efficacy question number 17, which was to be left blank. Thirty-seven records were found to be invalid because the respondent failed to leave the "blank" item blank in the self-efficacy scale items and three participants failed the vocabulary test. An additional participant was removed from the sample because he was a returning adult, age 43 and did not fit into the age group being studied. This left 115 participants in the survey sample.

Participants rated themselves on an eleven point percentage scale for each self-efficacy question with the scale, 0% = Definitely Cannot Do It, 20% = Probably Cannot Do It, 50% = Maybe, 80% = Probably Can Do It, and 100% = Definitely Can Do It. Four of the self-efficacy items to be rated were reverse worded to help eliminate concerns of response bias that came up after conducting the pilot survey. Upon import into SPSS, the values for these four items were transposed so that a high rating resulted in a low score on the individual item. Possible scores on each of the 19 items ranged from 1-11. The item scores were then auto summed in SPSS, resulting in possible scores ranges of 19-209. This became the new computed variable, *Self-EfficacyScore*.

### *Document Reviews*

Central City Public Schools keeps detailed records of students' academic performance in the form of grades, standardized test scores, and benchmark tests. Together, with data from the Student Self-Efficacy Survey, complete student records were included in the analysis.

#### *Standardized Test Scores*

Standardized reading and math scores were gathered for each participant, when available, from the school districts' data warehouse. NWEA RIT scores have the ability to measure a student's achievement and academic growth, independent of grade, to the performance of students from schools across the country (Northwest Evaluation Association, 2009). The researcher feels that these scores may be a more accurate measure of student performance than course grades, which can be affected by both student effort and teacher bias (Jussim, 1989). Of the 115 students in the current study, standardized test scores were available for 104. The 11 students without scores may have moved into the district and missed the testing window, or may have been absent at the time of testing. The most recent test score for each participant was used, even if it was not the highest score entered into the student data warehouse. Lack of practice in reading or mathematics could account for the dip in scores over time that was seen with some students test data.

Students' MAP RIT Scores were compared to the results of the 2008 NWEA RIT Scale Norms Study, which included data from over 2.8 million students from 6,905 schools in 1,123 districts located in 42 states. RIT norms for the study were determined from a stratified sample of students representing the national school age population at each grade level. The RITs by quartiles expressed as grade level equivalents for both reading and mathematics were sixth grade, ninth grade, and 12+, respectively.

### *Transcript Data*

Every student's transcript was printed and the following data was added to each participants record in SPSS; (a) GPA, (b) credits attempted, (c) credits earned, and (d) credits earned counting towards the 22 required for graduation. Each student had an up to date transcript on file. Students are able to earn credits via learning centers throughout the year for failed courses, so the number of credits earned was checked periodically during the study. In addition, one participant graduated at mid-term, and three dropped out before completion.

### *Quantitative Analysis and Findings*

The SELF-A instrument used in the current study has been previously validated (Barker & Musick, 1994; Klassen & Lynch, 2007; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 2007). It was found to have a .894 Cronbach's Alpha inter-item correlation in the current study. Cronbach's alpha is a measure of internal consistency; a coefficient of reliability rather than a statistical test and is an appropriate measure of internal reliability for the SELF-A as shown in equation (2).

$$\alpha = \frac{N \cdot \bar{c}}{\bar{v} + (N-1) \cdot \bar{c}} \quad (2)$$

Spector (1992) identified four characteristics that make a scale a summated rating scale: (1) A scale must contain multiple items that will be combined or summed. (2) Each individual item must measure something that has a quantitative measurement continuum. (3) Each item has no “right” answer. Lastly, (4) each item in a scale is a statement and participants are asked to give a rating for each statement (see Table 4).

Table 4

*SELF-A*

N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Variance	Skewness	Std. Error
115	144	57	201	143.10	905.129	-.399	.226

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run in SPSS with the dependent variable, *EfficacyScore*, for school attended, race, and gender. Results are shown in Table 5. There were no differences based on school attended, race, or gender. See APPENDIX C: ANOVA for Self-Efficacy Scores, for analysis of variance (ANOVA) tables for school, race, and gender.

Table 5

*Tests of Between-Subjects Effects*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	17808.155(a)	35	508.804	.471	.992
Intercept	604141.790	1	604141.790	559.020	.000
GenderCode	222.230	1	222.230	.206	.651
SchoolCode	5641.149	8	705.144	.652	.731
RaceCode	2301.363	5	460.273	.426	.829
GenderCode * SchoolCode	140.473	3	46.824	.043	.988
GenderCode * RaceCode	2320.733	3	773.578	.716	.545
SchoolCode * RaceCode	6101.727	9	677.970	.627	.770
GenderCode * SchoolCode * RaceCode	2448.252	3	816.084	.755	.523
Error	85376.593	79	1080.716		
Total	2458253.000	115			
Corrected Total	103184.748	114			

a R Squared = .173 (Adjusted R Squared = -.194)

Once the self-efficacy score was computed for participants, bivariate correlations were compared to standardized assessment results, which included NWEA MAPs that produce RITs for reading and mathematics, and Midwest State Assessment scores for reading (KSAR) and mathematics (KSAM), when available. This was done to explore the relationship between self-efficacy and academic learning. Results were, (a) reading RIT  $-.092$ , (b) mathematic RIT  $-.024$ , (c) KSAR  $-.025=9$ , and (d) KSAM  $.048$ . No significant correlations were found between self-

efficacy and academic achievement, though results from assessment correlated with each other (see Table 6).

Table 6

*Self-Efficacy Correlations to Standardized Assessment Scores*

		Efficacy Score	Reading RIT	Math RIT	KSAR	KSAM
Efficacy Score	Pearson Correlation	1				
	Sig. (2-tailed)					
	N	115				
Reading RIT	Pearson Correlation	-.092	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.355				
	N	104	104			
Math RIT	Pearson Correlation	-.024	<b>.479</b>	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.813	.000			
	N	104	104	104		
KSAR	Pearson Correlation	-.029	<b>.644</b>	<b>.520</b>	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.765	.000	.000		
	N	105	99	99	105	
KSAM	Pearson Correlation	.048	.435	.648	.542	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.621	.000	.000	.000	
	N	109	101	101	104	109

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) have been bolded.

Students earn a high school diploma by completing a required number of credits in the areas of English, mathematics, social studies, science, fine arts, and physical education. All 115 transcripts were collected and entered into the SPSS dataset as attempted credits, failed credits, earned credits, and graduation credits (some students had extra credits from electives that did not count towards a high school diploma). The credit variables were then tested for correlation in the same way the demographic and assessment data had been tested. Results were as follows, (a) attempted credits .109, (b) failed credits -.026, (c) earned credits .119, and (d) graduation credits .140. It became apparent that if a connection between self-efficacy and graduation existed, it was

more complex and connected to something that was not usually measured at school. The statistics for all grade variables are shown in Table 7.

Table 7

*Credit Details from Student Transcripts*

		Efficacy Score	Attempted Credits	Earned Credits	Failed Credits	Grad. Credits
Efficacy Score	Pearson Correlation	1				
	Sig. (2-tailed)					
	N	115				
Attempted Credits	Pearson Correlation	.109	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.245				
	N	115	115			
Earned Credits	Pearson Correlation	.119	<b>.906</b>	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.206	.000			
	N	115	115	115		
Failed Credits	Pearson Correlation	-.026	<b>.187</b>	<b>-.247</b>	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.786	.046	.008		
	N	115	115	115	115	
Grad. Credits	Pearson Correlation	.140	<b>.909</b>	<b>.962</b>	-.152	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.137	.000	.000	.106	
	N	115	115	115	115	115

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) are bolded.

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed) are bolded and italicized.

*Academics and Self-Efficacy Correlations.* Although there were correlations between all transcript data, including the computed variables adjusted rigor and adjusted GPA, there were no correlations between any data obtained only from a transcript and self-efficacy.

At this point in data analysis, the researcher was curious why no correlation was apparent between student achievement and self-efficacy. While member checking with a student, it was pointed out to the researcher that all courses were not created equal, and that general courses in high school were designed so that all students could succeed. Because the school district in this



study does not weight grades, each of the 115 transcripts were individually analyzed and assigned a rigor score for the purposes of this study.

The scoring system was as follows, one and one half points for advanced placement courses, one point for honors, higher math, and higher science courses as well as fourth year foreign language courses, and one-half point for third year language courses and Composition and College Reading (ECCR), as opposed to English IV. This raw number was then divided by the number of credits attempted to figure an adjusted rigor score that was then added to the students' GPA to achieve an adjusted GPA score. The statistics for all grade variables are shown in Table 8. Although there were correlations between all transcript data, including the computed variables *adjusted rigor* and *adjusted GPA*, there were no significant correlations between any data obtained only from a transcript and self-efficacy.

Table 8

*Academics and Self-Efficacy Correlations*

		Efficacy Score	GPA	Rigor Score	Adjusted Rigor	Adjusted GPA
Efficacy Score	Pearson Correlation	1				
	Sig. (2-tailed)					
	N	115				
GPA	Pearson Correlation	.095	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.310				
	N	115	115			
Rigor Score	Pearson Correlation	.007	<b>.494</b>	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.943	.000			
	N	115	115	115		
Adjusted Rigor	Pearson Correlation	-.022	<b>.478</b>	<b>.953</b>	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.818	.000	.000		
	N	115	115	115	115	
Adjusted GPA	Pearson Correlation	.068	<b>.954</b>	<b>.715</b>	<b>.718</b>	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.469	.000	.000	.000	
	N	115	115	115	115	115

Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) have been bolded.

*Analysis of Responses to Open-Ended Questions*

All of the survey respondents had failed at least one course required for graduation. The open-ended questions explored self-reported obstacles that students faced while attempting to complete high school. The questions were, (1) describe something that made it hard for you to be successful in school, (2) describe something that made it difficult for you to set and meet goals such as graduating from high school, and (3) describe something that got in the way of you solving a personal problem that was interfering with your ability to graduate high school. Specifically these questions explored (a) general obstacles to school success, (2) goal setting, or lack of, and (3) students' ability to focus on the goal of graduating high school, despite personal

problems. A final question, “is there anything else you would like to share concerning your personal beliefs about yourself and your ability to complete school,” was asked at the end of this question group. Data from this question was analyzed together with the obstacles and strategies questions.

Each of the first three open-ended questions was delivered via the online survey directly following the self-efficacy instrument and had two parts. The first part asked the participant to describe a situation that was an obstacle to earning credits and graduating and the second part asked the participant to explain how they overcame the obstacle or situation. Six large text boxes were used to invite detailed answers. Each box required the participant to enter text to move on to the next. Responses ranged from one to over 200 words each. Responses were read through three times before themes were proffered and coding began.

The extensive analysis of obstacles and strategies, as they related to self-efficacy, took place over a period of three months using SPSS and Microsoft Excel. Because participants tended to answer the questions through a dialogue that crossed individual question boundaries, each record was coded by comparison across all categories, rather than as categories tied to individual survey questions. In this way, if a student mentioned goal setting when answering the question about personal issues, it was captured. Reflective conversations took place, both at work and at the dinner table, as the researcher sought clarity in understanding the secret lives of high school students. The importance of particular issues in their lives as school is traversed is overwhelming to some, and merely hiccups to others.

### *Obstacles*

After careful, multiple readings, discussions, and reflection, seven broad obstacle themes were formed across all open-ended survey questions collected from 115 survey participants.

Based on participant response, these themes were: (1) personal behaviors, (2) lack of support, (3) time management, (4) other people, (5) unexpected events, (6) poverty, and (7) denial. Each of these seven broad categories contained subcategories. For example, the subcategory “unexpected events” included pregnancy, illness, and death of a loved one. See APPENDIX I: Obstacles to Graduation, for a complete listing of subcategories. Variables were added in SPSS for each main theme and responses were read over a final time and keyed into SPSS by subcategory under each theme variable.

When formatting students’ personal responses from the self-efficacy survey for reporting, spelling and capitalization were corrected and minimal punctuation added to increase readability. It was not the researchers intention to change any meaning or word choice students used to describe their experiences, however incorrect usage of word sets such as *there*, *their*, and *they’re* were made treating them as spelling corrections, rather than word choice.

*Personal behaviors.* Social learning theory proposes that behavior is determined by an interaction between social and environmental influences and cognitive mediators such as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Almost half of all participants in this study recognized their own personal behaviors as being a factor affecting their school success. Though some students mentioned boredom, effort, and motivation, focus was by far the most prominent personal behavior participants felt was affecting their success; nearly a quarter of all students said they struggled to maintain academic focus at school. One student shared, “I fall asleep in class a lot, so I miss the assignments. And I miss how to do them; I’m normally only awake during note taking.”

Boredom and lack of school engagement can be affected by racial discrimination (Smalls, White, Chavous, & Sellers, 2007), lack of access to supportive adults (Woolley & Bowen, 2007), teaching styles (Walker, 2008), and academic self-efficacy (Pajares, 1996). One student wrote,

It seemed as though everything was too repetitive and I quickly got bored with it and gave up with school. My father leaving my life took a big toll on me. I really lost sight of things for a long time after that and hit a rough patch of skipping school and getting in trouble when I did show up.

Contextual variables such as parental support, teachers, poverty, and self-variables such as effort, focus, and self-efficacy, frequently have complex relationships with one another and are often closely related to one another and together play a role in student engagement (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003). In connection to being motivated enough to meet a goal, one student stated, “Nothing changes from goal to goal; the 'problem' is persistent in all school related situations.” Indeed, self-efficacy and goal orientation are key to academic effort and motivation (Bandura, 1989; Caraway, et al., 2003). Students’ self-efficacy for self-regulated learning are related to motivation and achievement across content areas, including reading and math, for students of all ages and grade levels (Bandura, 2006a; Pajares & Schunk, 2001). “I just tell myself to keep moving forward, and that I can improve. I have a set goal to graduate from college with a degree in music theatre performance.” Participants’ believe in their ability to set and meet goals in their personal lives often flowed over into their ability to set academic goals, increasing their achievement, which in turn increased their academic self-efficacy. This phenomenon has been seen in the literature as well (Zimmerman, et al., 1992).

Unfortunately, distractions often disrupt students’ progress toward graduation when the student lacks clearly articulated goals. For this student the “problem” was, “boys. They got me far, far back in school.” Though she has a self-efficacy score of 148, just above the mean, this

young woman has failed 7.75 credits and has a GPA of .90. Though important in student success, self-efficacy does not work in isolation to affect student achievement and completion.

Though outcome expectancy plays an important role in predicting behavioral intentions initially, self-efficacy has been shown to be more influential as individuals get closer to the end of their goals (Gao, Xiang, Lee, & Harrison, 2008). As students in the current study approached the required 22 credits required for graduation, the role of self-efficacy became more apparent, regardless of age. For example, a 17-year-old male with only 2.75 credits and a .41 GPA stated, “I started sitting at the front of the room.” Though this strategy may prove helpful, it is not a large step toward taking responsibility for his educational outcomes. Another student, 18 years old, who is just one-half credit from graduation shared her wisdom, “The only thing that is stopping you from becoming someone in life is yourself, because the limit is the sky.” Both students were planning to graduate high school. The male’s self-efficacy score was 155 and the female student’s was 150, both high scores. Though they had similar self-efficacy scores, the female student near graduation was able to make the connection between not just her outward personal behaviors, but her internal thinking and motivation to succeed. The male, on the other hand, has not made that leap, and at 18 years old, is still a long way from achieving the credits needed to graduate from high school.

*Lack of support.* Participants discussed lack of support in many contexts. Academic difficulty was the most common and was expressed with statements such as, “the levels of the courses,” “not understanding, some of how the teachers are lecturing, because as much as I try to follow along I can’t quite figure it out;” and “math has always been one of my weakest subjects, from 5th grade on, I still struggle deeply in math.” When describing lack of support by his family, which was another common theme, a young man explained his failed courses, “Family

issues at the beginning of my sophomore year screwed me up quite a bit in my honors classes.” Sometimes lack of support was more about relationships and understanding than about academics. Another student wrote, “It’s truly difficult to get everything done every single day. And I’ve had some days where I just wanted to give up high school.” Often students are simply overwhelmed by life and school work.

*Time management.* Though not recognized by students as often as personal behavior or lack of support, time management is an important factor affecting school completion and was related to student self-efficacy in this study. Bandura (1993) recommends that educators assist students' in increasing their levels of academic self-efficacy by directly teaching students self regulated learning strategies such as time management. Student (1) employment, (2) family responsibilities, (3) homework, and (4) social lives all vied for students’ time and were mentioned by the participants as obstacles to graduation. Students explained, “It is sometimes hard to be successful in school when you work a job after school, and don’t have time for sleep or homework.” “Setting goals in school is not hard—accomplishing them is [and] sometimes if we have many things going on with trying to graduate and senior project everything is thrown in at once.” Self-efficacy has been directly associated with time management and the improvement of student achievement (Bembenutty, 2009). Notice this student’s ability to set long-term goals and associate goal attainment to effort. “I want to have the things I want (for example, kids, marry, my career, house, etc.) I am going to work hard and I’m going to graduate.” Her self-efficacy score was 165. Other students have not yet been able to make the connection.

Something that made it difficult to set and meet goals were friends, and the lack of caring. I could have gone eight hours a day listening to the teachers rant on and on and on about the same things each day or new things that I wouldn't have known because I never listened. I would always be texting in class, if I went, or passing notes to friends or talking. Myself made it difficult to not only set, which I never did, but to actually follow through with those goals and reach them!

It is perhaps not surprising her self-efficacy score was 89.

Regular employment, rather than “odd jobs,” have been shown to increase dropout rates (McNeal, 1997) and employment was a topic often mentioned by students in this study. Students who began a job in order to pay for learning center classes sometimes struggled to find time to finish the classes, or they fell behind in regular classes creating a cycle of credit recovery and debt. One student shared, “My counselor told me that I would have to take classes in the learning center and summer school to graduate and during the time my family didn’t have enough money to pay for learning center and summer [school].” For many the \$75.00 per class is a burden.

Family responsibilities reported varied from being helpful to self-preservation. Students wrote, “I was living with my boyfriend and he went to the military so I had to pay bills and get a full time job so it took me away from finishing high school.” “I stress at home because I have to clean the house, take care of my mom, and usually get dinner ready, and with all that I still have to make time to do homework and take a shower.”

Homework, however, was, by far the loudest complaint from students. Their cries were often of frustration that teachers seemed unaware of their other responsibilities, from home, work, or the teacher across the hall. Many students’ inabilities to manage homework effectively were rooted in time management, as these students proclaimed, “It’s hard after school because I have homework to do and I have two kids to take care of.” “Piles of homework! I got a job and I get a load of homework. Its stressing and I end up giving up, especially since I don’t have a computer.” Of course, there were also those who had the time, but preferred not to give up their free time. “I have difficulty doing homework for any class just because I get home and don’t want to do it because there is other, funner stuff to do.” This student lacked motivation, not time. However, for many of the students in this study, time was a serious issue affecting their ability to



graduate and employment was a family responsibility, not a frivolous pursuit to purchase a new video game. You can hear the exhaustion in this student's voice, "It is sometimes hard to be successful in school when you work a job after school, and don't have time for sleep or homework."

Social lives are extremely important to most high school students, and students in Central City are no exception. Hard lessons were learned by many; as in other life issues, time with friends must be managed as this student discovered after failing needed courses. One wrote,

I overcame this by learning that not everything is going to be fun and games with my friends but to stay on schedule with my classes or I will be expelled from school. I want to get a better career and stay on a steady job.

Another shared a lesson learned, "I chose to focus on myself, I make sure that if my so called friends are up to doing no good, I simply walk away...tell them, have fun with that."

When considering personal behaviors, or self-regulated learning, and their relationship to self-efficacy, it is helpful to think of the cycle that is created from students' beliefs in their efficacy for self-regulated learning, affecting their perceived self-efficacy for academic achievement, which in turn influences the academic goals they set for themselves, which influences their final academic achievement. This, of course, brings the student full circle, with their academic achievement affecting their self-efficacy for self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, et al., 1992).

*Other people.* Fifty-four percent of students in the study mentioned other people as an obstacle to school success and progress towards graduation. Surprisingly, other people most often mentioned were not friends. Sub-categories of "other people" as an obstacle to graduation included, (1) family, (2) other students, (3), teachers or the school, and (4) friends. More than any other group of *others*, family was most seen as an obstacle to school success by this group of

at-risk students. This high self-efficacy male shared the extent to which family relationships get in the way of school, despite other positive factors.

Well around the beginning of the second nine weeks last year, I got into a lot of arguments with my step father over stupid things. On November 16, I got into a big argument with my step dad causing me to be taken out of my home and put into foster care due to being abused. It was very hard for me to do school work and be successful at school because all I did was stress about am I ever going to go home, and am I ever going to mend my relationship with my mother and step father.

This student seemed to have insight into exactly how poor family relationships can affect school performance. Another student shared, “Sometimes, going through family obstacles and just listening to negativity brings people down and our self-esteem [suffers].” Once a student recognizes the stressors in his life, as this student did, practicing and mastering problem-solving steps, as well as role models applying those steps, may help build student self-efficacy in overcoming barriers (Sharma, et al., 1999).

When discussing the internal self-efficacy standards adolescents should be developing to mediate peer influences, Pajares (2006) explained, “The challenge is to ensure that these internal standards are rigorous without being debilitating, realistic without being self-limiting, fluid without being wishy-washy, consistent without being static” (p. 347). This is no small order, as anyone who has ever worked with teenagers knows. Thankfully, many students eventually realized they needed to choose new friends as this student did. “I left all those friends and made new ones that I think are better than years before.” Others argue the system is the problem, not friends, as their ability to graduate passes them by, as evidenced in this student’s comment,

One thing I struggled with was balancing school with my life outside of school. I also struggle when teachers constantly throw work at you that overloads you. It seems they forget you have other classes giving you work and an outside life that holds obligations and responsibilities.

Teachers and the school, as a system, are real barriers to some of the at-risk students in this study. One of the system problems was inflexibility of the school day. This student stated, “I knew that I was never going to complete high school with an eight hour day on top of two jobs.” In their book, *Beyond Silenced Voices: Class, Race, and Gender in United States Schools* (2005), Weis and Fine discussed what they referred to as “school barriers.” They discovered one of the barriers, “selective flexibility,” hindered students’ success when educators accommodated course-placements requests of mostly white, Asian, upper-income, high-track, and high-achieving students, but not low-track low-achieving students, many of whom were Latino. In the current study, where 43.5% of students were Hispanic, some found it difficult to have class change accommodations made. This student, who felt trapped in upper-level courses, said a big obstacle to him was,

Not understanding some concepts being taught in different classes and feeling frustrated when you try to get help but you still don’t get the subject you start feeling hopeless and just give up slowly each day because you think there is no point to keep on struggling to catch up and do good if you know at the end you are going to fail.

Some students feel personally persecuted by teachers, “Teachers being unfair. That’s the only thing ever stopping me.” Others distrust the system to the point of finding other programs to complete their diplomas. One student is overcoming his obstacles to graduation “By taking the Learning Center and not trusting the school's structure.”

*Poverty.* The category of poverty included other responsibilities such as supporting family members by working, or lack of transportation such as a car or bus money to get to school. Only a dozen participants mentioned poverty as an obstacle to their school success, and even then, it was not an outward admission, but came through in their stories nonetheless. One young woman shared, “I never knew what was going to be wrong if we had to move or just a ride home with good tags on the car or money to put in the gas.” High school teachers are often

unaware of issues that affect students' attendance and academics. When they are made aware, some teachers respond with decreased expectations, which can create a self-fulfilling prophecy of school failure, supporting a cycle of poverty (Diekmann, Tenbrunsel, & Galinsky, 2003; A. E. Smith, Jussim, & Eccles, 1999; Weinstein, 2002). Other teachers remain oblivious to students' lives and theirs, though sometimes only city blocks apart, have little in common.

*Unexpected events.* The unexpected events in this study included pregnancy, serious illness, and death of a loved one. Though these obstacles tended to cause the loss of at least an entire semester of credits for high school students, time healed and they caught up rather than dropping out as often portrayed in the literature of at-risk youth (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). For some students, the unexpected actually gives purpose to school and motivates students to work even harder to graduate. One student explained, "Well, I know for sure I'm going to finish school. I have to do it for my unborn baby and my family; they believe in me and so do I."

Another student whose father committed suicide over the summer said,

I guess I just found it in myself that I couldn't let things in my life hold me back from doing what I want to do and being who I want to be. I have such big dreams and these obstacles have just been steps to push me to want it so much more.

Though he had suffered a tremendous loss, this student was able to re-establish his goals and move on to achieve them. He had a 162 academic self-efficacy score, which places him near the top quartile.

*Denial.* It could be argued that some students had no obstacles; however, the entire sample had failed at least one class required for graduation, therefore an obstacle did exist, even if the student could not easily identify it. The "denial" obstacle was checked during coding if a student simply stated there were no obstacles (none, didn't have any) or, they didn't know what the obstacles were (?, I don't know), or they did not provide an answer (NA). Attribution theory

may help explain this behavior. The theory focuses on students' beliefs about why they succeed or fail. These beliefs in turn affect motivation and achievement (Vispoel & Austin, 1995). Indeed, students' inability to identify an obstacle was associated with the lower quartile of student self-efficacy scores.

### *Strategies*

The second half of each open-ended question about obstacles to graduation asked, "How did you overcome this?" Strategies were analyzed in the same manner as obstacles, with emerging themes compared to student responses in a repeating and refining method until themes were solidly established. Emergent strategy themes from student responses included (1) internal change, (2) situational change, (3) received help, and (4) passive. Each of these themes had sub-themes, leaving 18 possible meaning codes for each statement. See APPENDIX J: Strategies to Overcome Obstacles for a graphic showing the relationship between the themes and sub-themes.

*Internal change.* Time management, increased focus and ability to prioritize, seeking help, increased motivation or improvement of attitude, and setting goals or making plans were all internal changes that students made in an effort to overcome obstacles to graduation. Statements students made about internal changes included, "study more often," "trying harder to be on time," "put my foot forward and took a chance," and "I put a lot of effort in to it." Credé and Kuncel's (2008), meta-analysis found study habits, skills, and attitude equal to standardized tests and previous grades as predictors of academic performance. They were so confident in their findings, they stated, "Overall, study habit and skill measures improve prediction of academic performance more than any other noncognitive individual difference variable examined to date and should be regarded as the third pillar of academic success" (p. 425).

Students who are high in the meta-cognitive and self-regulatory habits mentioned and classified as “internal behaviors” are characterized by more awareness and involvement in their own learning. A student confirmed,

I believe that you shouldn't let anything or anyone stop you from reaching your goals especially when it comes to school. I think that learning is the best thing in life and you only become higher in power by getting smarter. Your intelligence is something that you will always have and nobody can ever take it from you and what you decide to do with it in your life is on you.

These students were also able to plan and monitor both their progress and the effort required to meet their goal of graduating high school, as this student did.

I didn't really have any specific plan for what I wanted to do after high school. Now that I do (since Jr. year), I have been trying to focus harder, and harder on work. Especially my Senior year, which I realize is extremely crucial.

Students like this are able to match the task to the study behavior required to succeed. In addition, self-regulated learners seek assistance from peers and teachers, which in this study is a key difference between medium high and students who possess high self-efficacy, effective time management skills, and are goal directed (Zimmerman, 2008).

*Situational change.* Participants overcame obstacles through changing their situations. They did so by changing schools, changing classes, changing their learning strategies, changing friends, or changing their living arrangements. An example given by a student exemplifies the role of external change as a catalyst for internal change. “I moved back in with my mother, and learned not to let the actions of others influence how I act.” Other students used a change in venue as a way to break free of old habits that were associated with specific groups of students, who were perceived as obstacles, as one student explained,

I use to have bad grades because I would hang out with the wrong friends and let them get in my way. The friends I was hanging with never did their work and that made it hard on me. I changed school and every since then I have been passing all my classes.

Though this student solved the current problem, it was not an internal change. She still sees the obstacle as other people, not her own inability to resist negative peer pressure. When another student was failing because of a negative relationship, he “broke it off.” Rather than removing himself physically from the situation, he had the strength to remove himself from a relationship that had become an obstacle to his success.

Self-efficacy has been found to have a mediating affect on adolescents undergoing social change (Pinquart, Silbereisen, & Juang, 2004). Almost nothing disrupts a teenager’s social life more than moving and changing schools. This student from the lowest self-efficacy quartile shared,

[I had] depression, from moving away from my hometown. I worked my way up to success my first [two] grades of high school, then I was moved to a new state, in a new city, in a new school, with new people and a new life to start over.

Though the Pinquart, Silbereisen, and Juang study focused on large-scale social change, students in the current study followed a similar pattern when changing schools or living arrangements. A student with high self-efficacy actually initiated this type of change as a problem solving strategy.

It was a real wakeup call when I got my report card at the end of my junior year. I moved back in with my mother and even went to the extent of enrolling myself back into school as a junior again. Although, after a week in school, I found out that I hadn't totally destroyed my chance at being able to graduate in 2010 and so I now know that I absolutely *have* to do well and make up all my credits so that I can graduate on time.

Not only did she change her family, she changed her school and grade level to succeed.

*Received help.* The *received help* category was fundamentally different from the subcategory, *sought help* in that *received help* implies that someone else intervened (passive) as opposed to the individual deciding that help was required and seeking it for him or herself (active). Examples included, “I have a friend in class that will snap me out of it if I start to show

signs of not paying attention.” Often the help came from family. “I overcome this because I have a lot of support from my parents. They help me taking care of my kids to do my homework but not always, because I have responsibility.” When teachers affected students positively by offering moral support or assistance, students sometimes attributed their success to the persons who assisted, rather than to themselves. “[I succeeded] by having very supportive teachers telling me that I could do it.” Overall, when they succeeded, this group of students felt it was because of the help they received, not because of the effort, they put forth themselves; however, they remain grateful for the assistance. “I want to say thank you to the teachers that have gotten me where I am at today,” wrote one student.

*Passive.* Students’ passive strategies included “wait it out” as well other statements that implied lack of student-initiated action to overcome identified obstacles such as “ignore it,” and “I really haven’t overcome it. I have got better at it but not fully.” Sometimes students spoke of just giving up, “Quite frankly to be honest, I never ‘overcame’ the situation, I ran from it.” Essentially, this group of students was allowing life to happen and felt much if it was beyond their locus of control. Locus of control in academics refers to the extent to which students believe that they can control events that affect them and their success in school. The theory is that individuals with a high internal locus of control believe that events result primarily from their own behavior and actions while those with a high external locus of control believe that fate or others, such as family, teachers, friends, or simply the system, primarily determine their success or failure. It is important to note that locus of control falls in a continuum, rather than as simply internal control versus external control and the relationship is most likely influenced by additional variables (Carr, 2001). The initial theory focused primarily on the individual,



however, more recent studies have moved toward identifying “generalized locus of control expectancies” for certain populations (Kormanik & Rocco, 2009, p. 467).

*Combined variable analysis.* After a peer review during analysis, it was discovered that in an attempt to granularly describe the phenomena, some themes had become too narrow for meaningful analysis. To explore this thought, I grouped like themes, creating four additional categories, which became new variables in the SPSS database of survey data. The first two additional categories were created to test a hypothesis about similar data. These two additional categories, *Main Obstacle* and *Main Strategy*, were hand coded after a fourth read of participant responses to the open-ended questions, each taken as a whole. Coding of the *Main Obstacle* included just, (1) self, (2) others, (3) random, and (4) denial. *Main Strategy* options included (1) change self, (2) change situation, or (3) passive. Reading over the responses, I chose a main obstacle and main strategy used by each student, even when other minor strategies may have been mentioned as subcategories. The sub-categories had already been captured in the previous coding, this time I was seeking a “big picture” view of the participants by seeking broader themes for analysis. As an example, one student's open-ended responses combined into a single paragraph read:

Not understanding the materials and a disruptive class. Problems outside of schools. Having a child at a young age. Just stay quiet and try to listen to the teacher as much as I can. When coming to school put outside problems in the back of your head and try to listen in school. Got a job [and] put the child in daycare and attend school as much as possible.

In this example, *Main Obstacle* was coded "others" (other students, her child) and the *Main Strategy* was coded "passive" (stay quiet, put problems in back of head, attend school, listen).

See Table 9 for a complete count of strategies used by each quartile of participants.

Table 9

*The Dependent Variable Efficacy Score by Variable Main Obstacle across Quartiles*

Quartile	Main Obstacle	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Q1	Personal Behavior	104.50	6	9.375
	Lack of Support	101.81	16	15.328
	Other People	93.00	3	33.407
	Poverty	82.00	1	.
	Total	100.65	26	16.529
Q2	Personal Behavior	132.67	6	7.339
	Lack of Support	133.57	14	7.240
	Other People	132.80	5	9.094
	Poverty	131.00	2	7.071
	Total	133.04	27	7.192
Q3	Personal Behavior	154.00	17	5.895
	Lack of Support	150.10	10	4.909
	Other People	155.25	4	8.732
	Poverty	147.00	1	.
	Total	152.72	32	6.108
Q4	Personal Behavior	180.31	13	11.353
	Lack of Support	175.23	13	7.407
	Other People	184.75	4	15.840
	Total	178.70	30	10.658

Participants from the highest self-efficacy quartile were more than four times as likely to use internal change as a strategy to overcome obstacles as the participants from the lowest self-efficacy quartile were. Conversely, the students with lower reported self-efficacy were four times as likely to have overcome obstacles by receiving help as the students with the highest reported self-efficacy. The interplay of main obstacle and main strategy can be seen in Table 9 and Table 10.

Table 10

*The Dependent Variable Efficacy Score by Variable Main Strategy across Quartiles*

Quartile	Main Strategy	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Q1	Internal Change	96.20	5	13.791
	Situational Change	101.20	5	12.153
	Received Help	101.88	16	18.892
	Total	100.65	26	16.529
Q2	Internal Change	134.40	10	7.806
	Situational Change	135.50	4	9.950
	Received Help	131.23	13	5.876
	Total	133.04	27	7.192
Q3	Internal Change	153.00	28	6.092
	Situational Change	156.50	2	2.121
	Received Help	145.00	2	.000
	Total	152.72	32	6.108
Q4	Internal Change	178.09	22	10.840
	Situational Change	183.20	5	11.735
	Received Help	175.67	3	8.327
	Total	178.70	30	10.658

*Analysis of Open-ended Responses by Self-efficacy Score Quartile*

During the next stage of analysis, findings were organized and reported by quartile, with students in the first quartile having the lowest self-efficacy scores and students in the fourth quartile having the highest self-efficacy scores. As shown in Table 11, student self-efficacy quartiles contained the following ranges of scores on the SELF-A, (1) 57-123, (2)124-144, (3)145-164, and (4) 165-201 with the standard error of mean being 2.805. Individual students' self-efficacy scores ranged from 57 to 201 as assessed with the SELF-A.

Table 11

*Self-Efficacy Score Quartiles*

N	Valid	115
	Missing	0
Std. Error of Mean		2.805
Minimum		57
Maximum		201
Percentiles	25	124.00
	50	145.00
	75	165.00

*Quartile one.* The obstacle most mentioned by this group of students with lower self-efficacy was *other people*, which included family and friends. Following close behind was *lack of support*, especially for academic difficulty. One student on the verge of giving up shared her frustrations,

Not understanding some concepts being taught in different classes and feeling frustrated when you try to get help but you still don't get the subject you start feeling hopeless and just give up slowly each day because you think there is no point to keep on struggling to catch up and do good if you know at the end you are going to fail.

However, there are some opportunities for students to get extra help after school, but for many at-risk students, after school tutoring clashes with employment, sibling care, and transportation. Others simply do not know who or how to ask for help. Some have such large deficits in basic skills that content area high school teachers do not feel equipped to provide assistance.

For many low self-efficacy students, behind *other people* as an obstacle to graduation, a surreal undercurrent flowed. Some sounded near the end of their patience, while others had mastered “working the system;” neither option is promoting the types of graduate outcomes educators so proudly write about in mission statements. The burden of the bell causes stress in many ways, “getting tardy lunch detentions for being a few minutes late,” and “the long eight hours at school. Going home and doing more school work just to be ready for the next day.” Others simply escape.

The thing that made it hard for me to be successful in school was I had went to a public school (High School No. 4), and it was SO easy for me to gip [skip] class. We had an open lunch, and even without it being lunchtime, there were so many exits out of the building that led straight into the parking lot where your car was, it was laughable.

When students are hanging on by a thread in the first place, unexpected complications can be the final straw. “I felt overwhelmed as if though I couldn't do anything anymore. Coming back from a personal long absence just destroyed me mentally.” Often students are not equipped with effective strategies required to juggle so many important things. “One thing I struggled with was balancing school with my life outside of school. I also struggle when teachers constantly throw work at you that overloads you.” Too many were unsure of exactly what was getting in the way of their success at school, as one simply said, “I don't have an answer.” The least often mentioned obstacle was time management; it simply was not something they were keenly aware of as an obstacle or strategy.

Students in the first quartile tended to focus on obstacles beyond their locus of control, blaming the elusive “others.” This is highlighted by comments such as, “The school, the attitude of the teachers, and my administrator. And when I started failing I had teachers and my administrator telling me that I'm nothing and I'm never gonna pass or graduate.” Staff members wish students to take responsibility, but quite often responsible role models are absent from their lives. “I have no one to look up to or go to for school work help. My family has no goals - we never have.” When these students did write about personal behavior being an obstacle to school success, they wrote about not understanding, not being motivated, and not paying enough attention. “When I am not successful in my class work or test it's not because I do not put effort into them but because I might have not understood the information given to me or I did not pay good attention.” What other explanations can salvage self-esteem when so little exists? For at

least one student, the entire experience was new; she was truly pioneering for her family, creating a support system for her siblings, though none exist for her yet.

I had to learn a lot on my own. I'm my family's first generation to begin life in the United States. Neither of my parents graduated from a college or university and only one graduated high school (outside of the U.S). With me being the oldest, I had go through different experiences and make mistakes for my younger sisters to tell them what routes to avoid through life because I didn't have someone older to do that for me. I know if my parents could have guided me through school they would, but they had distinct lives and education in Mexico of what I have here in the U.S. For example, I didn't know what the Major and minors of college meant, what was the difference between a community college and university. Basically all I knew was the word "college" and that it meant good.

For this group of students, even internal change was passive. One student summed it up this way, "I had trouble being dedicated and persistent when everything didn't turn out right," which is after all, the heart of self-efficacy. These students lacked both the belief and will to overcome.

*Quartile two.* Quartile two participants often entertained unrealistic ideas about what obstacles were in their way. "Teachers being unfair; that's the only thing ever stopping me." Some simply denied the existence of problems; "I don't have that problem," and "I just ignore the problems" were common sentiments. Occasionally anger flared at the seeming unjust system requiring them to jump through educational hoops, "some required credits are asinine" and deny their own desire to succeed, possibly because success seemed beyond their reach. "I didn't feel the need to be successful in school, because I always figured I could just make it up my Junior/Senior year of school." The lack of school connectedness came out in the words shared, like this student who was not just giving up on school, but on learning in general. "Not wanting to learn anything and feeling like I could never do it."

Some students did recognize the need to overcome obstacles and graduate, "I overcame this by paying more attention and by asking for help if needed. I no longer stay quiet." They put forth more effort, "by paying attention in class harder" and by trying to set goals. "I didn't really

have any specific plan for what I wanted to do after high school.” Once set, follow through was often an issue. “I think the most difficult thing is myself; I often make new goals but find it hard to follow through.” Other times strategies to change were passive, “I trudged through everyday doing the bare-minimum and let time go by and waited for life to get back to normal” and full of waiting and “doing what they said.” When respondents in this group discussed personal behavior, they most often wrote about lacking focus and getting distracted, usually by adult issues of work and family. One student wrote, “Sometimes I find it exceptionally difficult to get motivated enough to motivate myself to do all my homework.”

Participants also internalized situational change, putting a lot of faith in its ability to transform their lives. “[I] moved out of my house,” “I changed schools” and “[I overcame it] by taking the Learning Center and not trusting the school's structure.” School and home mobility was very apparent. “I moved back in with my mother, and learned not to let the actions of others influence how I act.” Unfortunately, the students themselves did not always control this situation. “I moved to a new school and it was going great, but now it’s happening all over again because they switched to block scheduling.”

For this group of students, other people are both a source of problems and blame and at other times, a resource for help, depending on the current state of affairs. One student stated,

One of the contributing factors of my laziness during my junior year was the laxness of my father. So with him never on my case about anything, it was fairly easy to slack-off and not do what I needed to do.

He later stated, “My father was a big help in overcoming the problems that I had in my life.”

Though most comments were directed towards family, some struggled relationships at school as well. “When teachers don’t take the time to explain the main things [I’m not successful],” and “there are a lot of things that made it hard for me to succeed in school; like drama in school with

other peers, or just not getting along with the teacher.” When there are issues that need to be resolved, students have trouble “finding out who was available at school to talk to.” Usually once found, caring adults are willing to assist. “I explained to the teacher what was going on and she gave me more time on my work.”

This group’s passive strategies were also connected to *reading RIT* scores, though none mentioned reading at all, and only one student mentioned struggling in English. This is most likely due to the number of Hispanic students in the study who may be second language learners. Time spent doing homework was a common issue, possibly related to lack of focus and distractions, or limited reading ability. Students complained, "sometimes I find it exceptionally difficult to get motivated enough to motivate myself to do all my homework." "It's truly difficult to get everything done every single day. And I've had some days were I just want to give up high school." Overall, this profile was very similar to that of the first quartile, with respondents in the first quartile feeling other people were more of an obstacle, and quartile two simply deigning the existence of obstacles more frequently than quartile one students do.

*Quartile three.* This group of students was better at recognizing when something was beyond their control than students in the lower self-efficacy groups. Because of this, they were able to allocate resources more wisely, rather than waste time on lost causes or lose sleep over something that was not their fault. Still, the main strategy used by these students was internal change (see Table 12).



Table 12

*Main Strategy and Gender Crosstabulation*

		Gender		Total
		Female	Male	
Main Strategy	Internal Change	16	11	27
	Situational Change	1	1	2
	Received Help	1	1	2
	Passive	1	0	1
Total		19	13	32

Quartile = Q3

Overall, this group was good at triage-type problem solving; fixing the problem at hand, but sometimes to the detriment of underlying systemic problems. One student believed that to graduate, he must focus efforts in areas other than math. “Math has always been one of my weakest subjects, from 5th grade on, I still struggle deeply in math but what has worked for me is just getting by with a D or a C, it’s not anything to be proud of but it gets me by.” We can debate the merits of his choice; however, he is going to graduate, albeit without honors. Though this young woman needed some time to assess the situation, “I had a stalker my junior year, he went to school with me and was an ex-boyfriend. I missed school due to his threats and intimidation for up to a week.” She was able to solve the problem quickly, “I got a restraining order and finished my junior year with all passing grades, except math,” and move on.

Though there was a relationship between main strategy and denial, it sounded different from these students. “Nothing makes it hard for me to be successful in school.” Rather than simply denying there was an obstacle, they were denying the obstacle was going to keep them from graduation. This group of students took academic success seriously. “When you are first entering high school you feel like there’s so much you need to do just to graduate so you stress about passing classes that you need the second you walk in not just second semester senior year.”

Though there were those students who felt overwhelmed, for most a sense of calm prevailed, “I took everything as it came and for the most part stayed on track” and, “my personal life doesn't really affect my schoolwork,” even for those who had to face the mirror and acknowledge, “I was just plain lazy.” Another student admitted, “There wasn't any personal problems or anything getting in the way. I don't have a legitimate reason for my poor performance in school. I just didn't want to do it.” The big difference between quartile two and three is that the quartile three group of students felt they were capable of success, as soon as they were willing to go after it. To them, this meant there was not a real problem to be solved. This is probably the biggest difference between the third and fourth quartiles as well, students at the fourth quartile recognized there was a problem needing solved, and it was themselves.

Often, this group of students tried to tackle problems with brute force, “I just made myself do it” and refusal to lose focus on the goal. “Forget about fitting in and do the work and study more.” “I realized I can't go back in time and fix thing[s] so ether you do them now or...” “I stop dating and started to put all my focus in school.” Willpower was winning, but at what cost? Hiding problems can be a useful, but temporary strategy. Of course, there were bumps in the road.

This group also felt an increasing lack of support, as they grew older, not so much academically as emotionally. “Things I need to do, talk to someone I look up to for help to keep me on track.” “I started taking notes and focusing more in school because friends don't really help you.” For some, panic was setting in. “[I] start asking for help from everyone.” They suddenly realized that their life as high school students was near an end, and they were unprepared, not just for graduation, but for life. Parents who had always provided were getting more forceful at pushing responsibly upon them. One student lamented, “Mom [has] taken

everything.” These feelings of abandonment and desperation were most likely based on increased personal responsibility rather than not receiving appropriate assistance.

This group of students with higher self-efficacy was also making plans. For example, this student was struggling academically, but he had an active, detailed plan. “English, it’s a really hard subject for me at school and it’s hard for me to pass. I’m trying to pay more attention and take better notes.” Rather than simply trying harder, he is looking at specific strategies, in this case, taking better notes. Another student sees her emotions taking over and realizes she needs to check them at the door and make a huge effort to make graduation by May. “By really focusing hard and buckling down and working through my tears of frustration.” She is also able to think through long-term goals and make changes in her life now that will not be rewarded for possibly years to come. “I have realized that all the people at this school and the people I hang out with now will not be there for me 10 years down the road, some may, but my diploma will be there for me the rest of my life, so this is my motivation to finishing on time.”

A full 84% of the participants in quartile three listed an internal change as their main strategy for overcoming obstacles, though the precise internal change differed for males and females. Males were more likely to “try harder,” while females were likelier to “focus and prioritize” in an effort to overcome obstacles (See Table 13).

The amount of effort expended implies a student’s self-efficacy to perform a given task, in this case, to graduate high school. Also, when individuals focus on end results that requires prolonged effort or exertion, they perceive higher capacities than individuals focusing on the amount of work that needs doing (Bandura, 1997).

Table 13

*Internal Change and Gender Crosstabulation*

		Gender		Total
		Female	Male	
Internal Change	None Listed	3	1	4
	Increased Effort	0	3	3
	Time Management	0	1	1
	Focus and Prioritize	7	3	10
	Seek Help	3	2	5
	Motivation and Attitude	3	1	4
	Set Goals / Make Plans	3	0	3
	New Learning Strategy	0	2	2
Total		19	13	32

Quartile = Q3

Types of internal change were not the only gender difference in this group of students. Another obstacle was unexpected events. These life complications ranged from, “missing class because of an illness then trying to catch up for the rest of the semester” and “family death and other stuff,” to trauma—“This summer my father committed suicide.” Unplanned pregnancy was also an unexpected complication for many. “What made me hard to be successful at school was getting pregnant at age 15.” These students struggled with “...homework, cleaning, changing diapers” This young woman feels it was worth the effort and shared, “How did I overcome this...my baby boy.”

Interestingly, no males in this group of students reported an unexpected event as an obstacle to graduating, however, 32% of females did. These unexpected events included pregnancy, serious illnesses, and deaths of loved ones. Another gender difference in quartile three was the use of passive strategies. Males were more likely to deny or not address obstacles in their lives to successfully graduating high school (see Table 14).

Table 14

*Passive and Gender Crosstabulation*

		Gender		Total
		Female	Male	
Passive	None Listed	17	8	25
	Waited it Out	2	2	4
	No Answer	0	2	2
	No Problem	0	1	1
Total		19	13	32

Quartile = Q3

*Quartile four.* One of the things that really stood out about the students with the highest self-efficacy is not one of them claimed there were no obstacles. This quartile of students, for the most part, was also very adept at maneuvering around the obstacles in their lives. They recognized themselves as a barrier when appropriate, but they also knew when it was not him or herself that needed changing, but rather the system or someone else. In other words, they could more accurately place blame where it belonged and tended to use appropriate problem solving strategies to find success despite obstacles.

The phrase “tremendous will” comes to mind often when reading student comments from this group. This limited English proficient student wrote, “I must focus on my school and get better grades. Study hard, pay attention to the teachers. I did tried to work very hard. I got the better grades and focus on them. I’m really happy. I haven’t gradate[d] but will work very hard.” Indeed, he has and is carrying an adjusted GPA of 3.06 to prove it. It has not been easy for many of these students. The average reading RIT level for the group is 219.50, slightly lower than the average of all 115 students in the study, 220.75, which equates to the beginning of the eighth grade according to the NWEA’s latest normative data (Northwest Evaluation Association, 2009) (see Table 15).

Table 15

*Averaged Academics by Self-Efficacy Quartiles*

	Graduation Credits	GPA	Adjusted GPA	Reading RIT	Math RIT	KSAR	KSAM
All	18.27	2.01	2.17	220.75	231.71	67.27	47.96
Q1	17.37	1.96	2.22	224.42	234.58	68.26	45.21
Q2	15.86	1.79	2.02	221.41	234.32	65.08	45.31
Q3	18.05	1.86	2.19	220.83	233.50	61.13	48.35
Q4	17.72	2.05	2.20	219.50	231.64	67.23	47.46

In fact, for most outward appearances, these students are just like the rest. The average GPA for the quartile 1 students is 2.05, and the adjusted GPA is 2.20, both scores are slightly higher than the average for all study participants. So, what is different about his group of students with high self-efficacy?

“I did anything that I could to get back on track.”

“It was like ‘man, its hard!’ but I asked them to explain them to me to make me understand.”

“Once I got back I had to get involved in anything that could help me in school.”

“Well there is nothing that is going to stop me from getting the things that I need to done.”

“Well, being in foster care sucks, but I tell you what, it might slow me down but it will not stop me, I promise you that.”

“There is not anything that could keep me from finishing school.”

Simply put, *that* is the difference. The sentiments go on and on, across gender, across race, across everything. High self-efficacy students are persistent.

### *Summary of Survey Findings*

Three central themes emerged from the survey data analyzed. High self-efficacy students (a) are able to see their own personal behavior as an obstacle to graduation, (b) can identify and implement effective strategies to overcome obstacles to graduation, and (c) are persistently focused on the goal of graduation.

Students with higher academic self-efficacy were more likely to see their own behaviors and attitudes as an impediment to their progress than their peers. They recognized apathy, procrastination, and lack of focus as major obstacles that could only be overcome by changing themselves, rather than others. Many understood that others around them were contributing to their unproductive behavior.

Rather than wasting a lot of time with ineffectual strategies, high self-efficacy students tended to be good problem solvers. They were able to look beyond themselves to see what was really going to work. They were also particularly adept at enlisting others, as needed, to get the job done.

High self-efficacy students were not afraid to make sacrifices, or end relationships if needed, to meet their goals. At times, they could even be ruthlessly selfish. Blame was seldom mentioned, except in passing, as a matter-of-fact reason for the use of a particular strategy. This group of students was adamant they were going to make it; no doubts—get the job done.

Students with lower self-efficacy looked externally for both support, and blame. Bandura (1986) explains that students with high self-self efficacy attribute their failures to lack of effort, while students with lower self-efficacy to lack of ability. This phenomenon was demonstrated with this student sample, however, “lack of ability” included the ability to harness recourses, rather than being limited to innate abilities of students.

These themes and their manifestation over high school careers are substantiated by the voices of participants and detailed school records documenting their journey. In an effort to frame the high-self efficacy students more clearly, a trail a students with lower academic self-efficacy to students with higher academic self-efficacy will be followed.



## CHAPTER 4

### Qualitative Data Analysis and Findings

Six individuals participated in the interview portion of the study. Two African Americans, one male and one female, one Hispanic male, one multi-racial female, and two Caucasian males were interviewed over a two-month period. All interviews were conducted with students who had scores in the top quartile of the self-efficacy inventory. All student interviews took place at students' schools, with the exception of one student who had graduated at mid-term. Her interview was conducted at the researcher's office. The interviews were semi-formal, revolving around a set of questions designed to explore three sources of self-efficacy, (1) physiological state, (2) verbal persuasion, and (3) vicarious experience. A complete list of interview questions can be found in APPENDIX K: Interview Questions. Each interview was digitally recorded and then transcribed prior to analysis. All student names were changed to aliases to maintain student privacy.

#### *Emergent Themes*

In contrast to the survey data, the interview analysis was a manual process. After transcription, the interviews were printed and a line was drawn down the back of each page with a colored marker. Each participant was assigned his or her own color. The interview transcripts were then cut up into strips with interview questions and answers together for easy reference. Then, each strip was read and a main idea was determined. Post-It notes were used to label main ideas as they emerged and all strips of paper were sorted into them. At the beginning of analysis, there were 14 themes, which were later narrowed. When this stage of analysis was completed, each main idea stack was re-read to make sure it was sorted into its best-fit category. Some categories were merged, and others removed if a different category label proved more useful to

understanding. The ten themes that remained were, (a) role models, (b) competition with peers, (c) stressors, (d) academic support and learning, (e) time management, (f) relevance, motivation, and goals, (g) encouragement, and (h) distractions. This analysis was completed prior to attempting to place the themes under the four sources of self-efficacy as overarching categories. At this point, the category role models and competition with peers was split and role models were placed under vicarious experience and competition with peers was placed under enactive attainment. A diagram was created to illustrate the push and pull of these emergent themes that were affecting students' academic self-efficacy and the effects self-efficacy was having on the self-regulating factors of motivation, time management, and goal setting (see APPENDIX L: Themes from Interviews).

The higher self-efficacy students talked about role models in their lives, usually peers at school. Positive role models affect the vicarious learning experiences of students, which can lead to increased self-efficacy. Students talked about friends who were similar to themselves and sometimes and were successful in school. Competition with peers was discussed as well, usually with mischievous grins. One young man shared of his best friend, "He's Mr. Straight A Student. I wanna try to beat him." Students enjoyed competing with others when the completion was not too tough, nor too easy. Worthy opponents needed to have enough skill to be challenging, but not enough that the student felt they were out classed.

There are stressors in everyone's lives, and these students were no different. They had divorced parents, economically hard times, relationship problems, and, what is often referred to simply the "drama" of high school. This student summed it up when she shared, "...with all the stress and stuff, it's been – I've been going through a lot." This group of students had the unique ability to "tune out" problems for periods, allowing them to focus on solving other problems

related to finishing high school. Janisa explained, “I kind of learned how to tune those out, to stay focused.”

Academic support and learning was an issue for all in at least one subject area. All of the students had failed at least one course needed for graduation. They were aware of their need for extra support and sought it from parents, peers, siblings, and teachers, whoever would help, as time allowed “...after class and also sometimes after school, just to get a little extra help.” They understood academic gains as incremental and taking time. “I just tell myself to keep moving forward, and that I can improve.”

Related to academic support and learning, time management was a skill these students either had, or were working to improve. Time management was often thought of in terms of responsibility. “You have to learn about yourself and take responsibility for every action that you make in the whole process of high school.”

Like most students, relevance, motivation, and goals worked together to produce results. When relevance was not made clear by teachers, students sought their own or sometimes, Tim shared, “You mostly just have to muscle through it...” When relevance could not be found, they tried other strategies to stay motivated, including setting long-term goals. “[ My goal is ] college and going to law school afterwards.”

Encouragement also played an important role for virtually all of the students interviewed. Some had been receiving it all of their lives, “My mom and my dad, they have always been encouraging since I was a little girl, since I started school” and others had to seek it out in the same way they sought academic support.

### *Documented Student Profiles for Lower Self-Efficacy Students*

To better frame the student interviews and provide contrast to high self-efficacy students, profiles of lower self-efficacy students were formed. These profiles are anchored on past and present information collected from district data warehouses and data gleaned from the student self-efficacy survey in which they participated. Together, this data was used to draw up three student profiles that complete the narrative of self-efficacy's role in school success or failure.

*Beverly—Self-efficacy score: 57.* Beverly is a 16-year-old Caucasian female in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. She was originally marked as exited in the study database, however, she has since re-enrolled. She began attending high school in the district in October, 2009 where she earned a semester worth of credits before exiting again January 8, 2010. A month later, she returned and is now living at a Salvation Army placement facility for female juvenile criminal offenders 12 to 18 years old. Her photograph looks more like a frightened girl, unsure of herself even as she gets her school picture taken. She is 16 and has just 2.75 credits and no school records explaining whereabouts before then. She attended her current high school long enough to be tested and her reading level was found to be seventh grade and her math fourth grade level. In the online survey, she wrote, “Sometimes I don’t understand the math or whatever it is that I’m studying.” The strategy she shared to overcome this obstacle was, “I have not yet figured it out yet.”

*Alvarado—Self-efficacy score: 99.* Alvarado is an 18 year-old American Indian male of Hispanic culture. He attended two different elementary schools in the district, both of which are predominantly Hispanic. In the third grade, Alvarado was tested for the gifted program. His first IEP (Individual Education Plan) read, (a) general information, superior—119 on the Peabody Individual Achievement, (b) total reading, very superior—132 on the Peabody Individual Achievement, (c) mathematics, very superior—124 on the Peabody Individual Achievement , (d)

spelling, very superior—136 Peabody Individual Achievement, and e) total test, very superior—135 on the Peabody individual Achievement. The testing psychologist wrote, “Alvarado is bilingual in Spanish and English. His overall ability is superior to very superior when tested in English only. Scores may be slightly depressed due to his bilingual ability. Alvarado is performing above grade level. His critical and logical thinking is superior to very superior.”

Alvarado lives in a tiny house in the middle of Central City. The house sits on a dirt street behind a row of businesses, hidden by trees and weeds. Alvarado is a very bright boy, but that has not been enough for him to find success at school. He scored near perfect on the last state assessment in reading and during his pre-ACT testing, called Explore, he earned scores in the scholarship range, however, his overall GPA is only 1.81. A look at his mid-term grades for spring semester 2010 reveals that Alvarado has an F in five of his classes and an A in two, field ecology and Chinese. Teacher comments from his most recent IEP include,

Alvarado did not complete the requirements for placement in College Algebra. At the beginning of the school year we wrote a contract in order to keep him in College Algebra. Alvarado missed two days for job training. These are unexcused absences. Therefore, he has not met the contract. Ms. Smith is recommending removal from College Algebra and placement in study hall with an F for first semester. He has become increasingly irritable when I question him about what he needs to be working on. I have tried to provide structure for him to get things completed, but he has not acted with much maturity in taking care of the things he needs to do to attend college in the fall.

On the open-ended survey questions he listed “attendance and homework” and “lack of initiative” as obstacles to graduation and simply, “I don't have an answer” and “I don't know” as strategies. As a senior with only 16 credits towards the 22 needed for graduation and failing most of the courses he is currently enrolled in, it is doubtful if Alvarado will graduate this year.

*Brad—Self-efficacy score: 126.* Brad’s clear blue eyes stare out of his picture in the district’s student information system. He is not smiling and his intense stare, with uplifted brow scream, “What!?” Brad attended Kindergarten at an Edison School and the only records

transferred were attendance. Records show Brad missed 19 days that year, and only attended 75, which means it was half day Kindergarten and he actually missed 38 class sessions. Brad's first grades posted to his transcript are from first grade; it consists of Cs and Ds. Perhaps he was behind from missing so many days of school the year before. His grades took a dramatic leap and turned to all As and Bs during second and third grades. When the first day of school started in what should have been Brad's fourth grade, he had not enrolled and the school exited him to "other school in Midwest." Brad turned up on December 7, 2000 at a third elementary in Central City where he remained enrolled until March 11, 2002. Records show he was again exited to "other school in Midwest," but there were no grades posted for fourth or fifth grade for Brad, who was off the grid once again. Brad resurfaced in sixth grade and spent all three of his middle school years in one school where his grades were high and his attendance was acceptable. Brad's high school career began on time and Brad enrolled in honors courses, no doubt due to his standardized test scores, which showed his reading and math abilities were already at the grade 12+ level.

Brad received his first D, since first grade, that year as a freshman in high school. It was not his last. Though Brad's standardized test scores remained high, his grades did not. The last full semester Brad attended a comprehensive high school, he failed three of his courses. On January 6, 2010, just months before Brad should be graduating high school; his mother signed the papers for Brad to drop out of school. This official document is part of Brad's school records. When reviewing the scanned document, it can be seen where the administrator had placed an X for the parent's signature, and her name is printed in a childish scrawl. It is possible that Brad's mother could not read.

When filling out the online survey just months earlier, Brad shared, “I ran in to a lot of family problems that distracted me from my work.” The strategy he shared to overcome this obstacle was, “I moved out.” Brad applied to one of the district’s dropout recovery centers the same month he dropped out of school and attended his first day on January 20, 2010. After interviewing him for the program, the counselor wrote, “[Brad] wants to graduate by the end of March. He's in a rough situation right now—his mom has had lots of medical issues and he's living on his own.” Brad attended just three hours at the center before falling off the grid again; just one and one-half credits shy of a high school diploma.

#### *Profile of a Medium Self-Efficacy Student*

Though interviews were attempted for numerous students with the highest self-efficacy scores, actually making contact with many was difficult. One of the students interviewed had a self-efficacy score near the mean of the entire survey sample and could be considered “average” in terms of academic self-efficacy.

*Timothy—Self-efficacy score: 144.* You cannot miss Tim and his shock of red hair. Now that this Caucasian male has turned 18, his parents’ custody battle is over. Currently he lives with his mother, stepfather, and brother in a nice home located in a cul-de-sac, complete with pool. Tim was plunged into this higher socioeconomic class when his mother remarried just a few years ago, leaving the South side of Central City behind like a bad dream.

Tim attended two different elementary schools, two different middle schools, and two different high schools. The most rigorous course he has ever taken was intermediate algebra, in which he received a D. The problem is not one of capacity; Tim's standardized test scores put him at the 12+ level in both reading and math. Tim even has a goal, "I've already figured out what I'm gonna do, be a welder. Yeah. I'm in Metals Three. I think that's my medium right there.

Challenging and fun." Tim, like many others, struggles to find relevance in high school. When asked about his early school years, Tim said, "Like in first grade when they were teaching us how to color in the lines. Do I really need to learn that?" Now that he is in high school, "Over half the stuff they teach us, chances are we don't even need." When asked about why he failed the class he was taking, Tim stated, "Just doing the bell work is what killed me. All I had to do is something simple, just copy down a quote." Tim just did not see the point. About school in general, Tim explains, "It's not that the school work was hard. It's just that - a little motivation problem. If I find something too easy, I just don't wanna do it and sometimes when things are just far too challenging, I just give up." When asked about how he gets through a class he feels is boring and irrelevant, Tim explained, "Well, that's really hard. You mostly just have to muscle through it and keep yourself awake." I inquired if he had any tricks to keep himself awake and he answered, "Usually I make sure I have a class with at least one friend."

Tim also talked about his learning. He feels like he "Just can't retain the information like other people can." He was able to turn around his grades however because he "got tired of paying for learning center." Tim's standardized test scores indicate he is capable, even in math. Perhaps motivation is the deciding factor for him, and he is motivated to weld, as his only course A shows. He can be motivated by others as well, Even though Tim does not like math, he shared, "My girl was struggling in math so I stopped doing my work and started helping her with her work." Because Tim does not often see the relevance of school, distractions are a continual obstacle for him in school. Tim says, "Distractions, I can be distracted by the simplest thing and get absolutely no work done, or I will just zone out because what the teacher is teaching does not strike me as interesting."



Tim does not recognize himself or others as an obstacle; he focuses blame on the organization of school.

When I went to No. 5 High School freshman year they had the block schedule and it was not good. I failed all of my classes because the teachers had way too much time so they would stack up the class work and the homework. I had core classes on one day and electives on another, so I was stressed every other day... I had four classes that gave me massive loads of homework. I would be up late trying to finish them and I would be too tired to work in my interesting classes.

Tim, however, is a problem solver and skilled at manipulating his environment to ensure his success. Tim says he got behind in school because of block scheduling, but he was able to ask for help when needed. "I explained to the teacher what was going on and she gave me more time on my work." Tim has thought about the problem and suggests a long-term solution.

Block schedules should not be used in school. Classes should only be 45 minutes long just because the class will cover only one thing a day so the student can better understand material and because the days will be consecutive, they will have retained more information for the following day. Also if the school day was 30 minutes longer, the school year would be shorter and the school would save money from school bus services.

Tim will graduate this school year because he is persistent and able to manage his time and resources well—when he feels the need to do so.

### *Profiles of High Self-Efficacy Students*

*Demetrius—Self-efficacy score: 173.* Demetrius is a tall, 17 year old African American male. He is also his school's basketball star. Demetrius has a very outgoing personality and gave me a side hug in place of a handshake when we met for the first time. As the high school's basketball star, it should not be surprising that his earliest memories of school were field day. What keeps Demetrius in school? "I would say just my math classes because I like math; just math and sports." Demetrius probably likes math because he is better at it than reading. During his last standardized testing, Demetrius tested at the 7th grade level in mathematics, but at the 2nd grade for reading. This reading score is below the skill level generally cited as being needed

to learn by reading, rather than still learning to read. Demetrius' GPA is 1.37, however, he considers himself successful at school. "Real successful. I came up from middle school because in middle school I had bad grades, but when I got to high school, I knew it was time to buckle down, so I just started studying and working hard." Undeterred by low skills and poor grades, Demetrius narrows his focus and plows ahead. "I think about the positive stuff, not negative stuff. I just set everything aside and try my hardest in that subject. I'll put all my plans that I have for the week, I'll put them aside and just start studying for the test instead."

Some might not think Demetrius as successful, but he is—in the ways that are considered successful to those around him. When placed in cultural context, Demetrius, who is a basketball star, is popular with 'the ladies', and will not only graduate high school, but will go to college, is successful in the ways his culture define success. This personal self-efficacy that Demetrius holds seeps over into academic self-efficacy despite his actual abilities in particular subject areas.

Demetrius also has a twin brother that attends the same school with whom he competes. His brother, who is enrolled in a college algebra preparation class does better in school than Demetrius and has a GPA of 2.56. This is just high enough to support Demetrius' vicariously gained self-efficacy. He also has a best friend who is doing well in academics and reports that "Most of my teachers that I've had, they usually help me to try to get my grade up, and help me in other classes too." The boys are being raised by their mother and grandmother. Demetrius says, "Well, I have a mom and she encourages me a lot too; she helps me a lot." This family support, along with his academically successful peers creates a circle of support and resources for Demetrius but make no mistake, outside assistance is not what will get Demetrius on the stage at graduation.

Demetrius engages in self-talk and can manage his time. "I think about the positive stuff, not negative stuff. I just set everything aside and try my hardest in that subject. I'll put all my plans that I have for the week, I'll put them aside and just start studying for the test instead." Sometimes Demetrius has doubts, "Most of the time at night, I just, like, well, I'm gonna have to go to school and just try my hardest and not talk to nobody, whatever. Just turn my cell phone off and just start trying to work." He is also able to tune out the noise by listening to music. "I tend to turn the music on when 'it's' not working."

Demetrius will graduate, because as he says, "Well, sometimes, I just think to myself, like man, if I don't graduate, what am I gonna do? How am I gonna show my face to everybody? They look to me as a basketball star, so a basketball star not graduating and just staying at home, I don't know."

*Janisa—Self-efficacy score: 174.* Janisa is the only student who I interviewed who had already graduated. This multi racial 18 year old graduated at mid-term from the district's largest high school. She lives in a small bungalow directly behind a large supermarket with her mother. Janisa has had many stresses in her life, including the death of a beloved aunt during her senior year. When asked how she overcame these obstacles, she stated, "I overcame this with the motivation from my fellow classmates and teachers." Janisa was very cheery during the interview and says she has always felt comfortable going to teachers, asking questions, and getting help from the counselors. Her test scores indicate she is an average reader, but has strong math skills. She is a relentless advocate for herself and finds resources everywhere.

I usually talk to the teacher, and if I can't get help, if I'm really not gonna be able to further my grade, I usually go to the counselor, talk to them about it, or ask my grandma or my mom. My mom was in college for a while, so she knows that kind of stuff, and if not, then I just get - not tutors, but study-buddies, yeah. I usually have a lot of friends in each class.

For Janisa, there is also a competitive factor,

I've been going through a lot, and to have my mom and my grandma there to motivate me, you gotta get through school, you gotta do this, you gotta graduate. I know a lot of people in my family haven't graduated, so that kind of motivated me. I like to be better than the next person sitting there.

As a matter of fact, after the recorder was turned off, we had a short conversation about never being satisfied, and always trying to do better, no matter how much was already achieved. Other students succeeding in school are also a motivating factor and act as a source of vicarious self-efficacy. Janisa said,

Some of my friends that I used to hang around freshman and sophomore year, they're in the extracurricular classes, like the AP classes and all that. I look at them and it makes me want to be like that, but I know if it gets too hard, then I'll have to try to do it again. I look at them as an example, basically. Sarah for example, she is in a lot of AP classes and honors.

I asked Janisa if there was any competition going on there and she said “Always. I think it’s always. I try not to be competitive, but...” Janisa took many rigorous courses throughout high school and found that she could be successful in them just like her peers, which builds the strongest type of self-efficacy, enactive attainment. She feels she succeeded because she took responsibility for herself. Janisa explained,

It means a lot. You have to learn about yourself and take responsibility for every action that you make in the whole process of high school. You can't just let it slide and let somebody else try to take responsibility for your actions because that's not gonna happen. You have to learn to take responsibly and that's it.

Janisa does have a support system in place. She has her mother and grandmother who act as cheerleaders and a boyfriend of three years as well as a large circle of friends telling her “you can do it.”

Janisa’s greatest resource – people, are also her greatest obstacle. She said that her high school “is the kind of school where you kind of just get in. There's a lot of drama, a lot of fights

and stuff, a lot of stuff that you have to deal with.” Janisa finds the teachers and counselors helpful however, “students, like, friends and stuff like that, sometimes that can get in the way of the learning process. With me, it really didn't. I kind of learned how to tune those out, to stay focused.”

Janisa also engages in self-talk. She is not a morning person and when asked if it is hard to get up in the morning and get to school she said, “maybe a little bit, but it's gotta get done.” The only course she failed as an AP history course. Though usually adept at time management, this particular course “was kind of hard, like, it's a college course basically, and at first it was okay, but then the tests were – I don't know, when I would get the test, my mind is kind of blank at times, but when I got to the learning center, it was step-by-step. It makes it a lot easier, honestly.” Janisa’s physiological state was elevating her stress in this class and making her feel less self-effaces. When asked how she usually handles stress, Janisa shared, “I like to read. That keeps me motivated a little bit, and then music – I'll have music there, like, in the classroom, I can shut everything out and just get my work done...” And Janisa did get it done – early, and graduated high school in just three and a half years. She says, “I know a lot of people in my family haven't graduated, so that kind of motivated me. I like to be better than the next person sitting there.” That “little bit” of a completion streak was showing itself again.

*Sheronda—Self-efficacy score: 179.* Sheronda, a 17 year old African American, attends the smallest of the school district's comprehensive high schools; the one with the highest poverty rate and the lowest graduation rate. Sheronda started 10th grade in Central City, after having begun her school career in a small town in Midwest. Sheronda has taken some rigorous courses and is a good reader and fair at mathematics. Sheronda gushed,

I love to read. I have like so many reading awards and stuff.... I like to read a lot and I like to write a lot. In my, when I do research papers or something like that, I always get As, yeah, pretty much.

Sheronda also found herself in competition with her sister,

Like in my middle school days, there was a teacher that [said] my sister would always be better than me and that I wasn't going to graduate; so I wake up even though I don't want to and I get out of bed just to come to school so I can graduate and prove people wrong.

Her sister is not the only one Sheronda competition against. “Not this year but last year there was a girl in my history class. We always debated and she was my main rival. They would always put me against her! So yeah, I feel like I’m pretty competitive with my school work. I feel like I am.”

When asked if she had others looking up to her, Sheronda shared,

I think I do because there's a lot of girls especially my age you know they're getting pregnant and stuff like that and they wish they could be in my shoes. ...I know I'm gonna graduate. They told me ahead of time that I was gonna graduate.

Sheronda notices that students learn a lot from each other and not all of it is positive. She explained how skipping school is contagious. “I make sure I’m in class but yeah it depends on what type of class it is for them to be passing; or what kind of environment it is because people, if one person doesn’t go to class, another person won’t go to class.” Apparently, vicarious learned efficacy works both ways. Sheronda says it happens a lot, “so like if you were having a hard time coming and saw some other people weren’t coming, people would be like ‘oh, well they’re not coming, I’m not gonna come too’,” but not to her, she is in a different situation.

Sheronda has a very supportive family. Her mother and her mother's friends encourage her and help her in school and other family members including cousins are doing well in school. Indeed, encouragement ended up being a theme throughout the high self-efficacy students I interviewed. Sheronda summed it up with,

I think people need more encouragement because like these days I see, especially around here all these girls getting pregnant. I don't think they're getting enough encouragement to

graduate. Everybody needs encouragement. Don't get me wrong but some situations at home; or their parents are not getting on them enough; or something like that. Everybody needs encouragement; if it's just a teacher or a mentor or a parent, even a friend to encourage someone to come to school. I believe that there would be more people graduating if they had more encouragement.

Sheronda certainly gets plenty of encouragement which has increased her self-efficacy through verbal persuasion (Bandura, 1986). When encouragement is not enough and she needs more assistance, she actively pursues it.

[I] just find someone to talk to. It might be my counselor or one of my teachers or one of my family members or the teacher of that class; I'll go to them and see if I can get in some kind of tutoring or something like that; something that will get me where I need to go but won't cause me so much stress.

At Sheronda's school, there is a lot of stress surrounding the end of the senior year. Not all of the students have time management skills and Sheronda has an idea that might help. "There needs to be like special tutoring just for seniors; so that they don't have to compete with other kids for the attention to get the tutoring." Sheronda is not only lining up resources for herself; she would like to contribute to a long-term solution to the dropout problem at her school.

Sheronda thinks a big part of the dropout problem at her school is time management and getting academic help when needed.

So I've seen a lot of kids that they get behind because they haven't turned in homework and stuff; and I think that a lot of teachers, because you'll hear them say "well kids just don't care. They just don't care and they're not trying to do their homework and stuff."

The real problem, Sheronda says, it is that students don't know how to ask for help and they don't have enough time to get everything finished.

They just don't have time. You know, it's senior year, we have a lot of stuff to pay for so we have to get jobs and we won't have that much time after school. It's not that we don't care, it's just that either we need help or we just don't have the time; either that or we need more class time to do it.

Not only does the high school Sheronda attends have the highest dropout rate, it also has the highest poverty level of all the high schools in Central City.

*Nick —Self-efficacy score: 181.* Nick has decided he is going to attend a four-year university and is working to get a scholarship. He is a 17-year-old white male on a mission. "I can't get a scholarship without power lifting. Mostly I want; I want to go to Midwest University. It'll be kind of hard, but I'm gonna do it." Even though Nick reads at the fifth grade level and his palms get sweaty during math tests, he is stoic in his decision about college. When asked about receiving encouragement at school, Nick responded, "I don't know about teachers encouraging me but I have teachers that are there to help me. They're always there." Nick has others around him for support as well who provide both vicarious and persuasory efficacy information.

I have friends. Justice and Jay, they all have straight A's and B's. They have their career of wanting to go to the Navy.... Yeah, that's pretty much my bunch of friends. They are good at school and they want to succeed.

Nick feels sports have helped him set and meet goals. "The only thing is, I think sports really, really does keep kids in school, or keeps them straightened up. It's made a big impact on my cousins, all my family members, and friends." Nick explains how having goals have affected his school success, "Now that I'm really starting to want things and want to do better, I'm actually doing really good."

Nick's earliest memories of school were "mostly drawings and singing stuff—had to be the part about singing. I remember that more than anything, singing." He is happiest when active, and takes his love of sports very serious; this was evident from his head of hair, half of it dyed bright blue, the other half red. Nick had a rough time at the end of elementary school with his grades, but in middle school got back on track by "meeting new people, new friends. The way they are have an impact on your life." Nick loosely understands the connection between this



vicarious learning and his motivation to perform in school and shared, “Friends and people outside of school can sometimes have a effect on my mood which also effects my motivation to learn.” Nick also has family resources. When talking about his mother he confessed, “She’s my biggest help. She’s helped me through everything actually.” She is not the only one. Nick shared, “I have some teachers that are kinda on my back about getting good grades because my parents like to email and talk to the teachers. They make sure I’m all on track and doing my right thing.” Even his grandparents “make sure I’m also doing good in school. They always tell me school is my main thing in life, to get me started, to get me going.” For Nick, persuasory efficacy information is everywhere.

Though weight lifting will be his vehicle to pay for college it is not Nick’s end game. [I] look forward to later on goals in life.” As part of his college plan, Nick sometimes worries about “not knowing what I want to do when I get older such as a career and finding subject[s] to benefit that career.” He is really thinking ahead, Nick is only an 11<sup>th</sup> grader and still has a year to go until graduation. His focus is laser like. When asked how he keeps himself focused on school when other things are going on, he said, “My thoughts are on a scholarship or how bad I want a scholarship or mostly when I succeed.” While having dreams and making plans, he strategically positions himself to have future options. “I opened up to a majority of careers and didn’t just focus on one subject but had other things in mind.” Confident and optimistic, Nick confided, “Every problem—I have I have a solution to help it.” This kind of confidence in ones abilities come from enactive attainment of self-efficacy, gained though repeated successes (Bandura, 1986).

*Jose —Self-efficacy score: 187.* Jose likes to draw and listen to music, but right now, he is focused on finishing high school. Jose, an 18-year-old Hispanic male had many obstacles to overcome. He shared,

I would have to say that the 'outside life' made it hard for me to be successful in school. It's hard to stay focused when certain things are going on such as deaths or family issues that are going on at home or other issues such as transportation and etcetera.

When you listen to his story, the term brutal determination comes to mind. Jose was dealt a bad hand, but played it anyway. Jose describes how he overcame this,

By just holding in what was going on and continued coming to school when I could. I would deal with the whole "family issue" thing before and after school and would try my hardest not to think about it when I was in school. For transportation, I would take the city bus when I had the money or ask neighbors or other family members for rides. If I could not get any, then the days I could make it to school I would work my hardest and even more to catch up for the time that I haven't been there.

Typical of high self-efficacy individuals (Bandura, 1986), Jose speaks most critically of himself.

Something that made it difficult for me to set goals such as graduating from high school was my lack of dedication and determination. I kept blowing it off thinking that it would just be easy and would come to me and that I personally didn't need to set goals. I was *so* wrong!

Jose did get off to a rough start at the beginning of high school. When he first transferred to High School No. 3, he got in with the wrong crowd. His native language is Spanish and the school groups were hard to resist. "The things that made me not be 100% successful in school were the friends that I chose to hang around with. They made me not want to make progress in work and also made me want to give up school." Jose went on,

Then I opened my eyes and seen how I was just was falling behind, and I wasn't liking that. After feeling uncomfortable about being behind I decided to tell my friends that I had to stop spending time with them and start getting my work done.

Jose has high expectations for himself; they were not set by others. Bandura (1986) explains that when high self-efficacy individuals are faced with failure, they credit their

inadequate performance to defective strategies rather than to inability to succeed. Failures that are overcome by resolute effort can inspire strong feelings of self-efficacy, supporting the idea that one can eventually tackle even the largest obstacles. Though he had few resources, Jose leveraged the ones available, and dug himself out of the hole he was in.

I realized how far behind I was and noticed that I had not gotten anywhere because I was not doing anything or making any progress. I seen that if I was doing nothing then nothing was being done and that it was up to me to make it happen so I sat down and made myself goals. I talked to teachers and a councilor to see if reaching my goals were possible and that brings me to today—still working on reaching my goals. When I was a junior, I set a goal that I wanted to accomplish. I was to turn in everything on time and really do my work. ...I am going to do my best the rest of this year and I'm really interested in going to college.

Perpetually hard on himself, Jose has his regrets. “I wish I could go back into time and just pay more attention...I know I can graduate this year, but I wish my GPA could have been better.”

During his standardized tests last year, Jose scored at the fourth grade level in both reading and math, but Jose has high expectations of himself, despite these academic and social obstacles. Once again, Jose looks internally for the solution.

I believe that you shouldn't let anything or anyone stop you from reaching your goals especially when it comes to school. I think that learning is the best thing in life and you only become higher in power by getting smarter. Your intelligence is something that you will always have and nobody can ever take it from you and what you decide to do with it in your life is on you.

Like the other high efficacy youth, Jose was able to tune the world out when he had to. While sharing his strategies, he said, “I overcame it by setting it all aside and forgetting about it while I was in school.” Jose ended our conversation with, “just hopefully I graduate this year. I'm excited, I mean, it would be something for my mom to be proud of.”

*Patrido —Self-efficacy score: 196.* I was unable to interview Patrido; this vignette has been created from student records and comments Patrido typed into the student self-efficacy survey himself. Patrido is a 17-year-old Hispanic male who attends High School No. 3 in Central

City, Midwest. The son of a migrant worker, Patrido began attending ISD 100 in the fourth grade at a dual language Kindergarten through eighth-grade magnet school. There he participated in special classes for native Spanish speaking students and joined the band. Patrido also participated in a program called AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) which allowed him to start high school in Honors English. Patrido was still reading at the fifth grade level then and failed the first semester. By second semester, he brought his grade up and ended the year with a B. Patrido passed all of his classes in tenth grade despite an incident at school. He and another student were passing a folded dollar bill that contained cocaine. A teacher confiscated the dollar bill and it tested positive for the illegal substance. As a junior, Patrido failed his honors history class, which landed him in the learning center as a senior. Though not on the honor roll, Patrido did receive High School No. 3 Honorable Mention in his senior year and has a 3.05 overall GPA. Patrido says “Having to find a job and having little time for homework” gets in the way of his school success, though most would agree he has made extraordinary strides. He has done this using the same strategies as the other high self-efficacy students interviewed which included, (a) managing resources, both time and people, “*By trying to always take advantage of the free time I had and the help around me,*” (b) putting forth tremendous effort, “*By giving it all my best,*” and (c) remaining focused despite distractions, “*Ignoring most of the things going on, and simply concentrating [on] success.*”

Patrido scored a 15 on his ACT test; English is still a challenge for him, however, Patrido will graduate on time, ending his high school career with AP English, college algebra preparation, and Chinese II. This was all accomplished through hard work and determination.

### *Summary of Qualitative Findings*

Boosts in self-efficacy require environmental information be “cognitively processed” by individuals and this is a two step process, first the individual must attend to the information provided, then they must process it using distinct “rules or heuristics” to form their personal self-efficacy judgments (Bandura, 1986, p. 404). Listening to the high self-efficacy students in this study describe their school experiences, one “sees” the complicated interplay of distractions, relevancy, and stressors working with peer competition, role models, academic support, encouragement, and learning. These factors all create individual formulas for student self-efficacy as they provide varying degrees of enactive efficacy information, vicarious efficacy information, persuasory efficacy information, and physiological efficacy information.

## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion of Findings

This study has attempted to understand the problem of dropout from the perspective of successful at-risk students by exploring the knowledge they carry about themselves as learners and how that knowledge has affected their school persistence, particularly their perception of their ability to reach the goal of high school completion. The role of self-efficacy has been explored deeply, beginning with the valid assessment of 115 student's academic self-efficacy.

Social cognitive theory relies heavily on the concept of learning indirectly through modeling (Bandura, 2000; Gladden, 2002). Bandura's social cognitive theory, which has emphasized the role of observational learning and social experience on development, was used as the theoretical framework of this study. Self-efficacy has been shown to play a major role in how students approach goals (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992), as well as tasks and challenges (Zeldin & Pajares, 2000).

The social constructivist view of learning is that each individual forms his or her own representation of knowledge and as a result, there is no single, correct representation of knowledge (Harris & Graham, 1994; von Glasersfeld, 1996). It was within these two theories that at-risk high school students' interactions with self and others was explored, attempting to shed light on how at-risk students construct themselves as learners, what role does self-efficacy play in this construction, and how that construct affects their persistence to graduate high school.

A long history of self-efficacy research has shown that people are both products and producers of their environment and the bi-directional interaction that occurs between the environment and personal characteristics are complex (Bandura, 1986, 1989). In the current study, differences have been found in how students perceive obstacles to their academic success,

strategies they employ to overcome those obstacles and their persistence to problem-solve their way to success, despite previous failed attempts. When students are grouped by these factors, differences in students' academic self-efficacy can be seen.

*Perceived obstacles.* All of the perceived obstacles mentioned by students were found across groups of perceived academic self-efficacy scores, however, students with lower levels of self-efficacy tended to externalize the source of these obstacles. This finding was triangulated between the survey data and personal interviews, quantitative and qualitative data analysis, and the literature. High self-efficacy students were able to accurately identify sources of obstacles, employ effective strategies, and harness appropriate resources to overcome them. More often than low self-efficacy students, high self-efficacy students recognized when the obstacle to their success was themselves, stemming from an internal locus of control. Lower self-efficacy students more often identified other people, be that friends, family or the schools, as a barrier to their success. This tendency influenced their ability to select an effective strategy. When lower self-efficacy students did identify themselves as a barrier, they often did so in such vague ways it was difficult for them to align strategies to obstacles effectively. Lower self-efficacy students gravitated towards an external locus of control.

Students with the highest levels of self-efficacy were adept not only at identifying sources of obstacles to their school success, but to mapping effective strategies to overcome them. It is important to note that this group of students did not have more resources available to them; the entire student sample in the study struggled academically, and usually socioeconomically. However, they were very good at seeking out resources, be they internal, external, or systemic. This is illustrated not only in the obstacles they identified, but also in the strategies they employed. This is similar to a finding in Prawat's 1993 study of students' problem

solving where “idea-based social constructivism” where individual students’ “focus is less on problems and more on the possibilities” allowing the replacement of the negatively framed problem-solution construct (p. 5).

*Employed strategies.* One important finding about high self-efficacy students is that they employ the use of appropriate, effective, and sometimes diverse, strategies, to overcome barriers and obstacles to their success. This problem solving behavior was persistent across obstacles and strategies, both internal and external. Both verbal persuasions in the form of encouragement and vicarious experiences though comparison to peers were critical sources of self-efficacy which supported their persistent efforts. These same phenomena have been reported in other studies as well (Bandura, 1986; Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Zeldin & Pajares, 2000).

*Persistence.* A substantial amount of research has been amassed that support the idea that individuals who have a low amount of self-efficacy towards particular tasks avoid them and people with high amounts of self-efficacy approach the same obstacles as challenges to be mastered, rather than avoided (Bandura, 1995). This was shown to be true in the current study as well. Self-efficacy is not the only factor do affecting school persistence, a willingness to play the game and meaningful connections made with adults and peers have been shown to be critical factors in other studies (Knesting & Waldron, 2006). However, in this study of 115 similar students in race, gender, socioeconomic class, and academic abilities, self-efficacy’s influence has been shown to be influential to student’s persistence, despite obstacles, to graduate high school. Students in this study also sought out courses that were more difficult if they were not being challenged and selected friends whose academic levels were near or slightly above their own.



### *Sources of Student Self-efficacy*

Student self-efficacy is gained through a wide range of experiences throughout their lives. These self-efficacy experiences can be classified as physiological, verbally persuasive, and experienced vicariously or enactively. Physiological state was the least mentioned source of self-efficacy for this group of students. This is most likely because physiological information affecting self-efficacy is usually negative. Students did occasionally mention getting nervous before tests or mild math anxiety; however, none reported debilitating physical symptoms associated with school.

*Verbal persuasion.* Verbal persuasion most often took the form of encouragement offered to students from parents, teachers, and peers. Though widely believed, simple encouragement or verbal reassurance that one can complete a task, cannot affect the outcome unless the individual felt they were capable of performing the task in the first place (Bandura, 1995). All of the students in the current study engaged in “self-talk” as a form of personal verbal persuasion. This may be even more effective than external verbal persuasion as it is targeted at specific tasks the student must perform, using strategies the student feels capable of employing to overcome an obstacle the student wishes to tackle. This self-talk was related to students’ internal locus of control so common to the high self-efficacy students as shown in the quantitative as well as qualitative data.

*Vicarious experience.* Vicarious learning is important in that it enables humans to form patterns of behavior quickly (Bandura, 1995). Though early vicarious experiences can be gained through parents and siblings, most vicarious learning of teenagers happens at school through peer relations. The vicarious experiences reinforced at school include contact with competent peer models, social learning experiences, and comparing and validating themselves against peers.

Bandura (1993) also noticed the effects of individual interests in student selection of peers, and that peer influences are bidirectional, explaining the “friendly competition” relationships seen between the students in this study and their peers. Students were also purposefully changed friends to better align themselves with role models who shared similar goals and to avoid those who did not and who would provide negative vicarious experiences.

*Enactive attainment.* The strongest source of self-efficacy is actually experiences, lived and learned by the individual and is affected by “choice behavior.” In their daily lives, students make many choices, and they learn from all of them. When students have positive, successful experiences, their self-efficacy for tasks in that area increase and when they have negative, unsuccessful experiences, their self-efficacy in that area is reduced (Bandura, 1986).

#### *Self-regulatory Capability*

Self-regulation occurs through the interaction between internal and external sources of influence including motivational and social standards. The use of motivational standards as a guide to personal behavior is a process of goal setting and working to attain that goal (Bandura, 1986, 1989). People continually go through the process of setting goals, then comparing that goal to their accomplishments. This in turn can motivate a person to work harder or modify their behavior in order to meet a particular goal.

Bandura argues that there are three factors, which seem to determine the degree of self-motivation that occurs in individuals (Bandura, 1986, 1989). First, a person's self-efficacy in an area significantly affects their self-motivation for performing tasks associated with that area. In other words, if a person feels confident of achieving a goal, then she is likely to work harder and give up less easily, compared to a person who has low self-efficacy, when working towards that goal. This behavior was seen in the high self-efficacy students with very low skills who were

still managing to finish high school such as Jose and Demetrius. In contrast, another student shares, "I had trouble being dedicated and persistent when everything didn't turn out right." This student has more academic skills than either of the other boys, but a self-efficacy score of 106.

A second critical factor for self-motivation is feedback. Through feedback, a student is able to control or adjust their efforts and goals to make them more realistic. Encouragement, from multiple sources, was found to be an important factor in the school lives of all the high efficacy students interviewed. However, there were no specific questions regarding feedback, encouragement, or support; participants often mentioned it, when answering the questions about obstacles and strategies. Students struggle without this kind of support as the immigrant student explained being the first in her family to transverse the public school system. That student has a self-efficacy score of just 99, even though her reading and math scores were on grade level, her self-efficacy for being academically successful and finishing school was low because she had little personal experience and few role models. Another female student with a self-efficacy score of 81 shared, "I have no one to look up to or go to for school work help. My family has no goals we never have." She has dropped out of the comprehensive school setting and is now attending a dropout recovery center while raising her first child. She has just 14 of the 22 credits required for graduation. Receiving positive feedback on performance has been shown to improve a person's self-efficacy for the behavior, creating a positive (Jussim, 1989; Weinstein, 2002). A student with a self-efficacy score of 199 states, "I just kept on trying I never gave up" when asked how he overcame obstacles to school success.

The third factor that influences self-motivation is the anticipated time to goal attainment. Proximal goals are more effective than distal goals in enlisting self-motivation. In the survey data, time management was related to self-efficacy scores of students. Time management issues

included, "being to school on time" (self-efficacy Score-82), "Not studying and messing around in school." (self-efficacy score-107), "the lack of time to work on things," (self-efficacy score-124), "All the advance classes, and work. There is hardly any time for one that is working at night and having essays to do." (self-efficacy score-137), "Well I'm planning on graduating high school now, but before like I said [it] was procrastination. I thought I can do this later, and later never came. When I set goals I would think I still have time and I could put it off until later." (self-efficacy score-180). As the student's self-efficacy scores rose, so did the detail in which they spoke of time management and its connection to successful goal attainment. Data such as this is very difficult to demonstrate in a strictly quantitative way.

#### *The Role of Distractions*

"The employment of motivational standards as a guide for behavior is a process of discrepancy production (goal setting) and discrepancy reduction (work to attain a goal) (Bandura, 1986, 1989). Distractions, while being directly related to self-efficacy, it is an aspect of self regulation which is affected by an individual's self-efficacy. The high self-efficacy students in the study had a strong ability to manage distractions in their lives. Sheronda explained, "I try not to bring it to school because if I bring it to school, then it's going to be on my mind all day and that's gonna hold me back from what I need to progress in the future. I don't really bring it to school. I mean there's always stuff that goes on at home or something like that for everyone but I don't really bring it to school. I kind of come to school to get my mind off things basically and I keep myself in my work."

#### *Relevancy*

Students put forth effort to reach goals they see as relevant to themselves. Some students see little relevance to high school and therefore put little effort into becoming proficient at school

related tasks. "School had no purpose for me. The things they have tried to teach me were things I already knew and I grew more and more upset with the school system as time went on." Higher self-efficacy students used two strategies to overcome irrelevance related to school. One was to make an effort to find a personal connection or something of interest about the subject. This often required a bit of extra work and imagination. A second strategy was to simply make a grand effort for a limited amount of time until the task required was completed. Students must determine the longevity of the task before choosing the appropriate strategy to use. These strategies were used as personal self-regulation strategies and were affected by student self-efficacy and affected motivation, time management, and goals.

#### *Implications for Practice*

Because academic self-efficacy has such a powerful effect on student persistence and strategies used to overcome obstacles, its cultivation should be of particular interest to educators. Educators need to be aware of practices, both classroom and system wide, that can affect student self-efficacy positively or negatively. Self-efficacy should not be confused with self-esteem (Bandura, 1986; Nelson, Knight, Kagan, & Gumbiner, 1980). Promoting higher levels of self-efficacy cannot be accomplished with simple feel good exercises and pats on the back. Self-efficacy is constructed personally by each individual over time and built by enactive, vicarious, physiological, and persuasory experiences at home as well as at school (Bandura, 1993, 1995; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996).

Students' self-efficacy in high school is affected greatly by the vicarious experiences learned through peer relations, particularly from peers most like the student himself (Bandura, 2006a, 1995). That is why it is vital that students are exposed to positive "like peers" during schooling. This can have ramifications in special education placements, desegregation efforts,

and course placements as well as in disciplinary policies such as expulsion (Bandura, 2006a; Bandura, Blanchard, & Ritter, 1969).

Though not as effective at increasing self-efficacy as decreasing it, physiological states can have a very powerful effect on learning. Schools should go to some efforts to decrease stressors in the school environment and counselors should be trained to support students who suffer from academic anxieties such as math and test anxiety. Alternative ways of knowing and expressing knowledge in the classroom such as alternative assessments, performance based assessments, and project-based learning (Bandura, 1986, 1995).

Verbal persuasion can be an effective enhancer of student self-efficacy when students are already near performing to the targeted level, but can turn into a stressor if the student's competence level is far from the requirements of the task. Verbal persuasion is most effectively used to destroy self-efficacy and has been shown to have detriment results after single instances of its use (Bandura, 1986). School districts and administrators should work relentlessly to remove teachers who practice destructive verbal persuasion from the classroom as soon as possible, regardless of the extensive work such a removal requires. Teachers should also be aware of how powerful their words can be and should be extensively trained to understand their potential ramifications across cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Enactive attainment, the strongest sources of self-efficacy is not easy to orchestrate in a school setting (Bandura, 2006a). Because of its personal nature, requiring students to work just above their current mastery level, it is often dismissed as too difficult to accomplish in schools, despite the research expounding on the rewards. Resent legislation requiring adequate progress for all children, however has reignited an interest in personalized education. Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) have begun to spring up in schools across the country. The premise

of the model, providing differentiated instructional levels of support to all students, both academically and behaviorally, is a step in the right direction. Not often topic of current discussion, helping students find their own instructional level and engaging them in self-directed learning, may prove even more effective at increasing students' academic self-efficacy and school success.

### *Conclusions*

It is April, in Center City, just a month before Pomp and Circumstances begin to play. Who will walk, and who will stay? Will the high self-efficacy of the students in this study be enough to ensure not only their high school success, but also their overall success and happiness in life? Will the lower self-efficacy students drop out of school, setting themselves and their future families up for a lifetime of poverty? Though self-efficacy is indeed a powerful factor affecting the human psyche, it is not the only factor affecting the lives of the 115 students in this study, however, it gives many hope and a fighting chance to succeed.

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## APPENDICES



APPENDIX A

SELF-A

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
1. When you miss a class, can you find another student who can explain the lecture notes as clearly as your teacher did?	7.765	2.7794	-.785	.226
2. When your teacher's lecture is very complex, can you write an effective summary of your original notes before the next class?	5.83	3.033	.096	.226
3. When a lecture is especially boring, can you motivate yourself to keep good notes?	7.03	2.856	-.415	.226
4. When you had trouble understanding your instructor's lecture, can you clarify the confusion before the next class meeting by comparing notes with a classmate?	6.83	2.738	-.250	.226
5. When you have trouble studying your class notes because they are incomplete or confusing, can you revise and rewrite them clearly after every lecture?	7.59	3.032	-.731	.226
6. When you are taking a course covering a huge amount of material, can you condense your notes down to just the essential facts?	8.07	2.787	-.981	.226
7. When you are trying to understand a new topic, can you associate new concepts with old ones sufficiently well to remember them?	8.06	2.563	-1.027	.226
8. When another student asks you to study together for a course in which you are experiencing difficulty, can you be an effective study partner?	8.25	2.533	-1.327	.226

APPENDIX A (continued)

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Std. Error
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Error
9. When problems with friends and peers conflict with schoolwork, can you keep up with your assignments?	7.88	2.725	-.844	.226
10. When you feel moody or restless during studying, can you focus your attention well enough to finish your assigned work?	5.10	2.978	.451	.226
11. When you find yourself getting increasingly behind in a new course, can you increase your study time sufficiently to catch up?	7.64	2.841	-.742	.226
12. When you discover that your homework assignments for the semester are much longer than expected, can you change your other priorities to have enough time for studying?	7.34	3.072	-.419	.226
13. When you have trouble recalling an abstract concept, can you think of a good example that will help you remember it on the test?	7.68	2.634	-.619	.226
14. When you have to take a test in a school subject you dislike, can you find a way to motivate yourself to earn a good grade?	8.10	2.358	-.901	.226
15. When you are feeling depressed about a forthcoming test, can you find a way to motivate yourself to do well?	7.91	2.412	-.606	.226
16. When your last test results were poor, can you figure out potential questions before the next test that will improve your score greatly?	7.91	2.491	-.811	.226

APPENDIX A (continued)

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error
18. When you are struggling to remember technical details of a concept for a test, can you find a way to associate them together that will ensure recall?	7.50	2.245	-.765	.226
19. When you think you did poorly on a test you just finished, can you go back to your notes and locate all the information you had forgotten?	8.43	2.407	-.979	.226
20. When you find that you had to “cram” at the last minute for a test, can you begin your test preparation much earlier so you won’t need to cram the next time?	8.17	2.450	-.999	.226

# APPENDIX B

## Web-Based Self-Efficacy Survey

### Student Survey on School Performance

#### Performance Questions

This survey should take you about 10 minutes to complete. Don't forget, you need to answer all the questions in order to be entered into the drawing for an iPod.

Please rate the following questions using the scale below. The higher the percentage (further to the right), the closer you are to answering "I can definitely do that". The lower the percentage (further to the left), the closer you are to answering "I can definitely not do that".

- 0% = Definitely Cannot Do It
- 20% = Probably Cannot Do It
- 50% = Maybe
- 80% = Probably Can Do It
- 100% = Definitely Can Do It

	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%	80%	90%	100%
1. When you miss a class, can you find another student who can explain the lecture notes as clearly as your teacher did?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. When your teacher's lecture is very complex, can you get frustrated and give up trying to take notes or summarize what was being discussed?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. When a lecture is especially boring, can you motivate yourself to keep good notes?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. When you have trouble understanding your instructor's lecture, can you stay confused because there is no way to clarify the information before the next class period?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. When you have trouble studying your class notes because they are incomplete or confusing, can you revise and rewrite them clearly after every lecture?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. When you are taking a course covering a huge amount of material, can you condense your notes down to just the essential facts?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. When you are trying to understand a new topic, can you associate new concepts with old ones sufficiently well to remember them?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. When another student asks you to study together for a course in which you are experiencing difficulty, can you be an effective study partner?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. When problems with friends and peers conflict with schoolwork, can you keep up with your assignments?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. When you feel moody or restless during studying, can you lose focus and your attention to the point of not finishing your assigned work?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. When you find yourself getting increasingly behind in a new course, can you increase your study time sufficiently to catch up?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. When you discover that your homework assignments for the semester are much longer than expected, can you quit trying because it feels hopeless to catch up?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
13. When you have trouble recalling an abstract concept, can you think of a good example that will help you remember it on the test?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
14. When you have to take a test in a school subject you dislike, can you find a way to motivate yourself to earn a good grade?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
15. When you are feeling depressed about a forthcoming test, can you find a way to motivate yourself to do well?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
16. When your last test results were poor, can you figure out potential questions before the next test that will improve your score greatly?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
17. Please leave this item blank and don't mark any bubbles.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
18. When you are struggling to remember technical details of a concept for a test, can you find a way to associate them together that will ensure recall?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
19. When you think you did poorly on a test you just finished, can you go back to your notes and locate all the information you had forgotten?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
20. When you find that you had to "cram" at the last minute for a test, can you begin your test preparation much earlier so you won't need to cram the next time?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

[Prev](#) [Next](#)

## APPENDIX C

### ANOVA for Self-Efficacy Scores

#### *School*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for		Minimum	Maximum
				Mean			
				Upper Bound	Lower Bound		
HS No. 1	130.14	24.802	9.374	107.20	153.08	99	174
HS No. 2	139.80	34.288	7.667	123.75	155.85	57	201
HS No. 3	142.03	30.142	3.958	134.11	149.96	72	199
LC	149.07	34.722	9.280	129.02	169.12	81	187
Alt. HS No. 2	145.00	.	.	.	.	145	145
Alt. HS No. 3	161.00	12.728	9.000	46.64	275.36	152	170
HS No. 5	145.80	32.229	14.413	105.78	185.82	110	181
HS No. 6	156.00	14.142	10.000	28.94	283.06	146	166
HS No. 7	152.83	18.104	7.391	133.83	171.83	126	179
Total	143.10	30.085	2.805	137.55	148.66	57	201

#### *Race*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for		Minimum	Maximum
				Mean			
				Upper Bound	Lower Bound		
American Indian	141.50	9.192	6.500	58.91	224.09	135	148
Asian	140.00	.	.	.	.	140	140
African American	148.41	27.929	6.774	134.05	162.77	100	179
Hispanic	140.74	31.316	4.429	131.84	149.64	72	199
Multi	148.25	20.918	10.459	114.96	181.54	124	174
White	143.44	31.769	4.961	133.41	153.47	57	201
Total	143.10	30.085	2.805	137.55	148.66	57	201

#### *Gender*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for		Minimum	Maximum
				Mean			
				Upper Bound	Lower Bound		
Female	145.95	30.423	3.995	137.95	153.95	57	201
Male	140.21	29.725	3.937	132.32	148.10	78	199
Total	143.10	30.085	2.805	137.55	148.66	57	201

## APPENDIX D

### Open Ended Survey Questions

- 1a. Describe something that made it hard for you to be successful in school.
- 1b. How did you overcome this?
- 2a. Describe something that made it difficult for you to set and meet goals.
- 2b. How did you overcome this?
- 3a. Describe something that got in the way of you solving a personal problem.
- 3b. How did you overcome this?
4. Is there anything else you would like to share concerning your personal beliefs about yourself and your ability to complete school?
5. Would you be interested in participating in a follow-up interview?
6. Would you be interested in participating in an audio journaling activity?

## APPENDIX E

### Call for Participants

#### Win a Video iPod!

Robin Surland, Program Director, is going to school. As part of my "homework" to finish my degree, I must do a research project. As part of my research project, I am asking students about their school experience. The results of my research will be used to help make schools better places for students.

The survey is online so it can be taken at anytime. Everyone who takes the survey will be entered into a drawing for a Video iPod and there will also be five winners of \$20 cash.

To be eligible to win, Robin needs the following:

- (1) Signed Consent Letter (under 18 or 18+)
- (2) Student ID (please enter on consent and survey)
- (3) Completed Survey

Click [here](#) to take the survey now. It will take about 15 minutes. Give your teacher the signed consent form to put in Robin's envelope.

## APPENDIX F

### Consent Form

Wichita State University Department of Educational Leadership Consent Letter

**PURPOSE:** You are invited to participate in a study of successful students and how they have overcome obstacles to their success. I hope to learn not just what characteristics these students have in common, but also how school programs might be structured differently to assure more students are successful through high school completion.

**PARTICIPANT SELECTION:** You have been selected as a possible participant in this study because you failed one or more classes required for graduation, however, are taking steps to recover the credit.

**EXPLANATION OF PROCEDURES:** If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete an electronic survey and/or participate in an interview or journaling activity. School records including demographics, GPA, and MAP scores will be added to your dataset via your school ID, however, your name will not be, and therefore you will remain anonymous. Results of this study will help administrators and teachers plan and facilitate successful programs for high school students. Findings from the research may be presented at regional, national, or international conferences and may result in publication in scholarly journals.

**DISCOMFORT/RISKS:** There are no discomforts or risks expected during this research.

**BENEFITS:** It is expected that the results of this study will provide administrators and teachers with information that can be used to improve school programs.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** All information collected in this study in which you may be identified will remain confidential and will only be disclosed with your permission. Any data gathered will remain in the possession of the principal investigator. Participants in the study will remain anonymous. Your decision not to participate will not affect your future relations with Central City Public Schools or Central City State University.

**CONTACT:** If you have any questions about this research, please contact Dr. Jean Patterson 316-978-6974. If you have any questions pertaining to your rights as a research participant, you can contact the Office of Research Administration at Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas, 67260-0007, and telephone (316) 978-3285.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your signing of this consent letter will be taken as evidence of your willingness to participate and your consent to have the information used for the purposes of the study. You may keep a copy of this cover letter and explanation about the nature of your participation in this study and the handling of the information you supply.

**REFUSAL/WITHDRAWAL:** Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you are under no obligation to participate.

Sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name and signature of principal investigator      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of subject/participant      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of subject/participant Guardian      Date



## APPENDIX G

### Protocol for Individual Interviews

Wichita State University  
Surland Dissertation

#### PROTOCOL FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Date of Interview:

Location of Interview:

Participant's Name and Title/Role:

Interviewer's Name: Robin Surland

#### Introduction and Ground Rules

Hi, my name is Robin Surland. Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about graduating high school. I am a doctoral student from Central City State University researching students' "stick-to-it-ness" for graduating high school. This interview should last approximately 45 minutes. Although I will ask some questions to guide the discussion, this is meant to be a semi-structured interview with possible follow-up questions. Please remember I am interested in your thought processes as well as feelings as you meet/met challenges along the way.

Before we begin I would like to share a few procedures for this conversation. Although we will be on a first name basis today no names will be used when we report the results of this session. You can be assured of complete confidentiality. With your permission, I would like to tape-record our session today so that I will be able to more carefully listen to your responses. The tape will only be used for the purpose of note taking and transcription and will be destroyed following the completion of the study.

You can refuse to answer any question or to stop the interview at any time. Withdrawing from the project will not result in any negative consequences for you.

You have been provided a copy of the consent form that you or your guardian signed. I have some extra copies if necessary.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

(Turn on the tape recorder, identify the interview, location, and date.)

## APPENDIX H

### SPSS Data Codes

#### Demographic Codes

Race  
American Indian = 1  
Asian = 2  
African American = 3  
Hispanic Culture = 4  
Multi Racial = 5  
Caucasian = 6

School Code  
No. 1 = 1  
No. 3 = 2  
No. 2 = 3  
Learning Centers = 4  
Alternative No. 1 = 5  
Alternative No. 2 = 6  
No. 5 = 7  
No. 6 = 8  
No. 7 = 9

School Type  
Comprehensive = 1  
Alternative HS = 2  
Learning Center = 3  
No Longer Enrolled = 4

Gender  
Female = 1  
Male = 2

Programs  
None = 0  
ESOL = 1  
Migrant = 2  
Learning Disabled = 3  
Hearing Impaired = 4  
Gifted = 5

Status  
Graduated = 1  
Enrolled = 2  
Exited = 3

#### Obstacle Codes

Main Obstacle  
1=Self  
2=Others  
3=Random  
4=Denial

O\_PB (Personal Behavior)  
0 = Personal Behavior NA  
1 = Boredom  
2 = Effort  
3 = Focus and Distractions  
4 = Loss of Credit  
5 = Motivation  
6 = Stress  
7 = Truancy

O\_LOS (Lack of Support)  
0 = Lack of Support NA  
1 = Academic Difficulty  
2 = Family  
3 = Language  
4 = Mentoring  
5 = School

O\_TM (Time Management)  
0 = Time Management NA  
1 = Employment  
2 = Family Responsibilities  
3 = Homework  
4 = Social Life

O\_OP (Other People)  
0 = Other People NA  
1 = Family  
2 = Students  
3 = Teachers and School  
4 = Friends

O\_P (Poverty)  
0 = Poverty NA  
1 = Other Responsibilities  
2 = Transportation

#### Obstacle Codes Continued

O\_UE (Unexpected Events)  
0 = Unexpected Events NA  
1 = Pregnancy  
2 = Illness  
3 = Death

O\_D (Denial)  
0 = Denial NA

1 = No Response  
2 = No Obstacles

#### Strategy Codes

Main Strategy  
1=Change Self  
2=Change Situation  
3=Passive

S\_IC (Internal Change)  
1 = Increased Effort  
2 = Time Management  
3 = Focus and Prioritize  
4 = Seek Help

5 = Motivation and Attitude  
6 = Set Goals / Make Plans

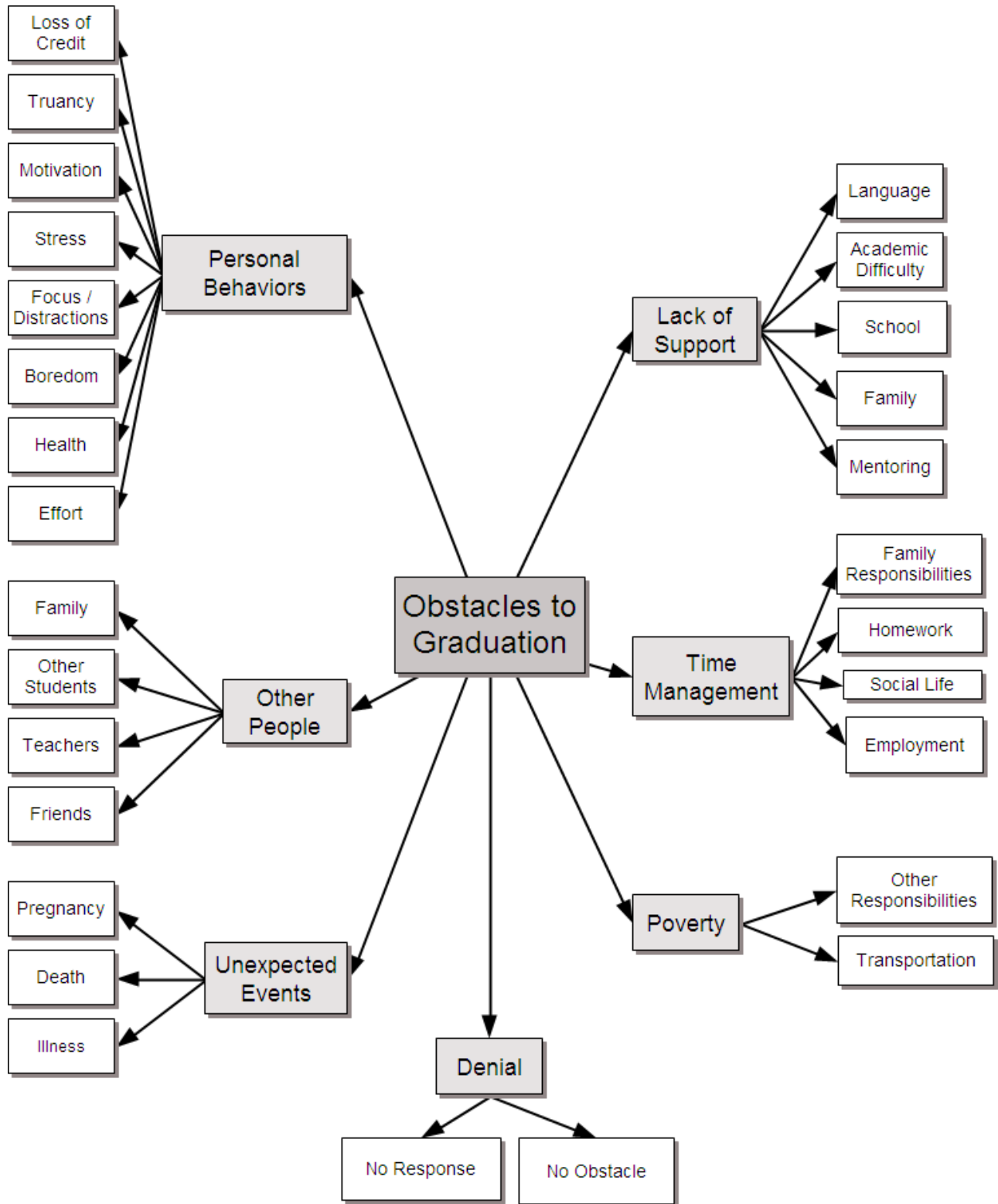
S\_SC (Situational Change)  
1 = Change School  
2 - Change Class  
3 = Change Learning Strategy  
4 = Change Friends  
5 = Change Living Situation

S\_RH (Received Help)  
1 = Family Helped  
2 = School Helped  
3 = Friends Helped

S\_P (Passive)  
1 = Waited It Out  
2 = No Answer  
3 = No Problem  
4 = Lowered Expectations

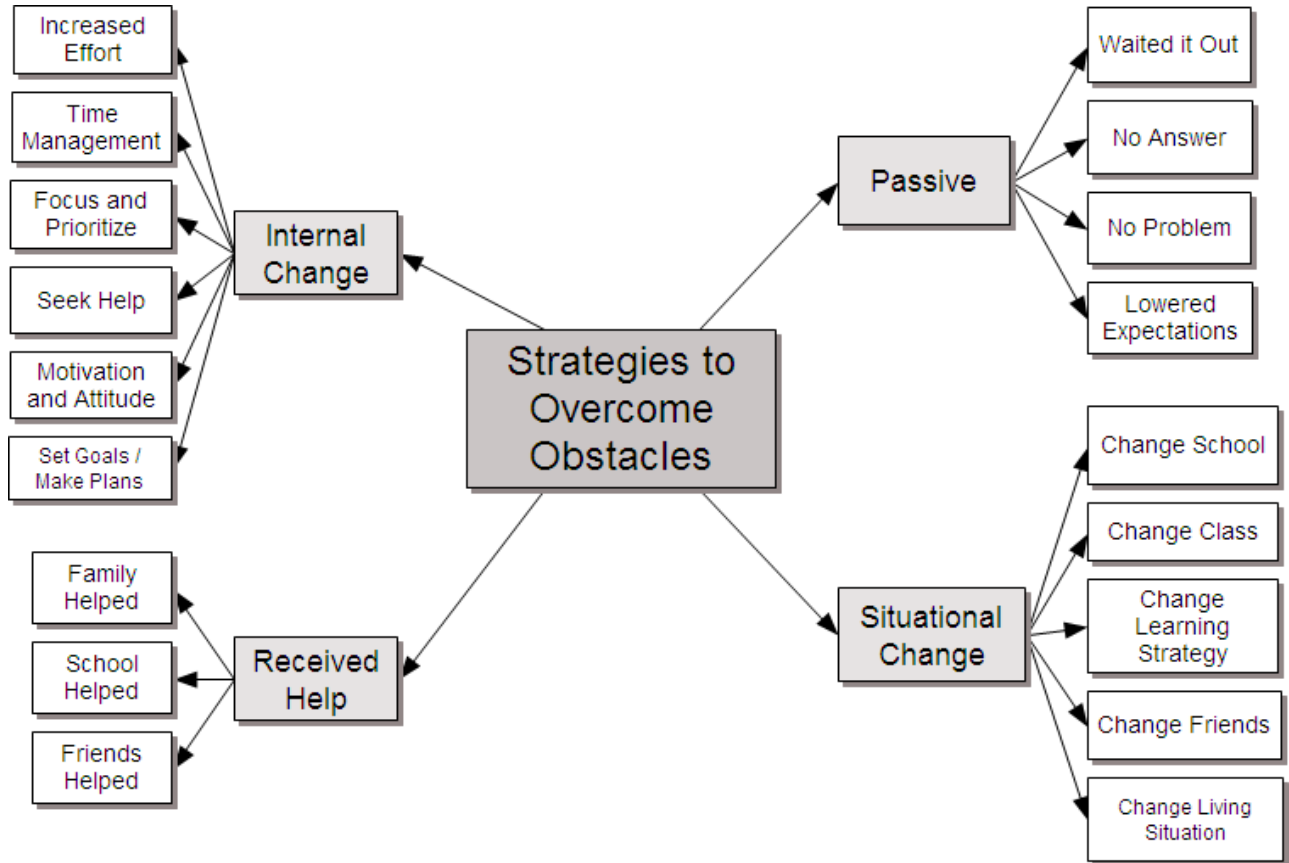
APPENDIX I

Obstacles to Graduation



APPENDIX J

Strategies to Overcome Obstacles



## APPENDIX K

### Interview Questions

1. What are some of the things that stand out in your memory during your school years?
2. What things have affected your progress along the way either positively or negatively?
3. How have you deal with getting to school when it was difficult?
4. How did you get through [difficult subject area for student] and earn your credits?
5. How did you catch up after failing [name of course(s) failed]?
6. How have you kept yourself engaged in school when it was boring or when other things were going on in your life?
7. How successful do you consider yourself when it comes to school?

# APPENDIX L

## Themes from Interviews

