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LEARNED HELPLESSNESS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF AT-RISK BEHAVIOR

by

Michael L. McIntosh

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

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Approved by:



Dr. Dale Brubaker, Dissertation Advisor

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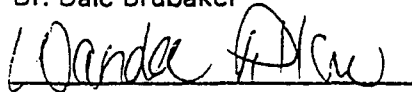
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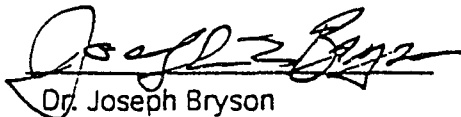
This dissertation has been approved by the following committee
of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North
Carolina at Greensboro.

Dissertation Advisor(s) 


Dr. Dale Brubaker



Dr. Wanda Pillow

Committee Members 

Dr. Joseph Bryson



Dr. Svi Shapiro

March 21, 1996

Date of Acceptance by Committee

March 21, 1996

Date of Final Oral Examination

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The research problem that guided this study was to describe how a number of the strategies to address at-risk student behavior are also leading to the development of learned helplessness in the same target population.

This study includes interviews, surveys, historical data, and observations of students, faculty, and staff at public alternative education schools. This data was used to formulate cases studies. The interpretation of these components will be based upon the point of view or cultural lens that the researcher and the participants both possess.

The study shows a relationship between the learned helplessness and at-risk behavior by first defining the two terms, discussing the strategies to deal with each one, and the implications of each of them. It also attempts to explore the relationship between the proliferation of LH within the support systems we have created.

The study concludes that the findings correspond with the hypothesis that there is some type of relationship between the two, although the extent and importance of the relationship is arguable. This correlation should show us that the programs created, often serve as hinderance as well as cures when programs fail to base thier assistance strategies upon the attributes associated with resiliency and self sufficiency.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND DEDICATION

Throughout my life, I have been privileged to be loved and guided by a number of strong and compassionate African-American women. My wife; Sofia, has been my best cheerleader, my biggest supporter and my inspiration. My daughter; Jennell, is a constant reminder that God has blessed me to be part of a wonderful family. Special thanks to my parents, Levi and Donna; who took in a orphaned child when the world had given up on him and showed him love and support. To my other parents, Nat and Jennette; this paper is an expression of love for the encouragement and support you have always given me.

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I reserve heartfelt praise and gratitude to my mother; Mabel McIntosh, whose life was dedicated to helping her children succeed. In heaven, she is smiling that her son has defied the odds and made a difference. Foremost; To God, I offer my gratitude, my allegiance and my life as his servant.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Martin Seligman defines the phenomena of learned helplessness as “when experience with uncontrollable events leads to the expectation that future events will elude control, therefore disruptions in motivation, emotion, and learning may occur.” Seligman was describing the notion that an individual realizes after numerous attempts that he is totally unable to control his own destiny. This conclusion is accepted after several situations in which the the outcome is determined totally outside of the individual’s locus of control.

It is a motivational theory based on the assertion that “when an individual expects that nothing she does matters, she will become helpless and thus fail to initiate any action” (Seligman, 1975). The individual recognizes that due to the uncontrollable forces at work in his life that he is helpless to alter his destiny.

This helpless attitude leads to a level of inactivity which cripples the person to the point that only negative outcomes are expected and very little effort is made to alter his course. There have been a number of scholars who have supported this idea that a person may become so conditioned to his or her own helplessness that he or she turns fully away from living (Coyne, Metalsky & Levelle, 1980).

One of several examples used to illustrate this motivational condition is the scientific laboratory experiment which looks at the passivity of a lab rat that is placed in a steel chamber which is set up to deliver a series of shocks. A mildly painful

shock is conveyed through the floor. In an attempt to escape the shock, the rat scampers to every corner of the chamber but to no avail. The shock is repeated over eighty times and gradually the rat realizes that there is no escape from the shock. Before the end of the experiment, the rat realizes that he cannot escape the shock, so he just sits motionless in the corner; accepting the painful shock. The rat is then transferred to another wooden and metal shuttlebox, in which all he has to do to escape the shock is run to the other side of the box where the wood floor will not conduct electricity. Rather than scurry to the other side of the box, the rat remains on the metal side and accepts the shock (Levis, 1976). He has become defenseless and helpless.

A number of distinguished scientists and scholars have supported this theory about the effect of helplessness and the corresponding effect it has on the ability to adjust, learn, and survive. Numerous studies such as the "helpless dog study" performed by Leaf & Overmier in 1965, by Maier, Seligman, & Solomon in 1967, the Two-process theory by Rescorla & Solomon, 1967, and others have started the debate as to how this phenomena relates to humans.

Before I move to a deeper level of discussion on this subject, it must be made clear that agreement or disagreement with the validity of this theory is not my intention. The introduction of this phenomena and its scientific basis serves only to show how this theory and term; learned helplessness, although widely accepted, means something somewhat different to me in my own behavioral theory. The term, learned helplessness, as this author proposes to use it has a different meaning.

Based upon the definition used by Seligman, I am utilizing the term learned helplessness to describe the condition which comes after a person feels their helpless state is inescapable, therefore the person makes no effort to escape. In humans, the phenomenon is associated directly with economic and psychological hopelessness and helplessness. It is a theory that has been discussed as the explanation for the lack of effort exhibited by the economic underclass of America. When a person fails to see any results from their labors to change the condition, one takes on a defeated outlook until they basically give up and accept his fate. When every effort is met with the sting of rejection based upon racial or sexual discrimination; minorities, women and the poor begin to feel that any struggle or effort is useless and futile. The lack of effort to secure employment, register to vote, or take any substantial level of personal initiative has often been attributed to this phenomenon.

For the purpose of this research, I am suggesting the theory that learned helplessness in humans leads to the development of dependency behavior patterns due to the positive outcomes associated with the continuation of that dependent behavior. It is the loss of goal-directed behaviors which include self-motivation and self efficacy. My own view, while similar to that of Seligman, also poses the idea that this cycle of dependency, brought on by a lack of control, is perpetuated by the support system which was created to end that same behavior. Those students who have been identified as at-risk are especially prone to those psychological forces that may lead to a student feeling helpless and hopeless. Identification as an at-risk student leads to some form of intervention, which may proliferate the learned helpless behavior. It is my belief that much of the helpless behavior that our children exhibit is a learned behavior that is

taught by those same persons who have as their mission to teach self-esteem and self-responsibility.

Persons who realize that racism, sexism, and other social forces will hinder their efforts to succeed are further damaged by support programs which fail to teach the ability to be resilient. An accompanying and equally serious and debilitating effect is a person's belief that there will always be a support system or safety net to catch him when he falters. When a student learns that committing a crime, dropping out of school, becoming pregnant or some other deviance will always result in a positive result like financial support or counseling, it sends the wrong message to all of our students.

Learned helplessness is at the root of many of our social problems because not only is the student hindered from any form of self-motivation, but those who offer the debilitating support also enter a downward spiral of co-dependence and symbiotic destruction. Recognizing that racism and sexism usually leads to acts of discrimination and prejudice is not justification to accept further victimization by abrogating your personal right to exist and persevere. Blaming the victim is not the direction, but neither is continuing to victimize the victim by taking away all personal initiative and motivation.

The larger question is what role has this form of learned helplessness played in the onset and proliferation of at-risk behavior which often leads to an increased drop out rate, juvenile crime, teenage pregnancy, and other forms of social deviance? To discount the effects of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of prejudice and discrimination in the social condition of the poor and minorities would be both naive and

incorrect. The social and economic condition of Blacks, Latinos, women, and the poor has been the sad result of centuries of economic and social repression, but these factors alone have not totally led to the perpetuation of second class citizenship for these groups, although there is clear proof that all people suffer from these problems.

This study will explore the effect of learned helplessness and what role it plays in the equation of failure that is experienced by so many of our children. If racism, sexism and class division were the sole problems that have handicapped the development of the lower class, then there would be no success stories as the great number of minorities and poor people have to suffer under the burden of these social maladies each day. If we continue to blame the maladies of our children upon the same causes, we are telling only half the story. The question we must answer is why do so many of our children still fail, even after the implementation of the numerous strategies to help them succeed? When these programs did not exist and there was little or no help for the poor, blacks, or women; a much more convincing argument could be made that racism and the like were the only obstacles which created these situations.

To find the solution to these problems, we must discover the underlying causes, which lead to our children failing. Identification and research of less recognized causes of failure like learned helplessness must be given as much attention as causes like racism, sexism, discrimination, and prejudice. The purpose of this study is to a)define learned helplessness B)describe its effect upon student performance and C) explore the relationship between learned helplessness and at-risk behavior. The researcher will interview students who have been identified as at-risk, and those persons who work directly with them. Responses of both groups will be analyzed.

Problem Statement

The research problem that guided this study was to describe how a number of the strategies to address at-risk student behavior are also leading to the development of learned helplessness in the same target population

Framing Questions

The following questions were used to guide the investigation:

1. How and when are students classified as at-risk?
2. How does learned helplessness contribute to the onset or proliferation of at-risk behavior?
3. What strategies can be used to reduce the onset of learned helplessness and at-risk behavior?
4. What is the relationship between learned helplessness and the at-risk student behavior?

Interview Questions: (Student & Educator)

The interview questions are based upon the resiliency model developed by McMillan and Reed (1992), who as members of the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC) completed an investigation which led to the conclusion that some at-risk students develop traits that enable them to be successful in school. The study also offered a conceptual model demonstrating how schools and other agencies can reinforce personal traits leading to resiliency. Those traits are: Goal Oriented, Personal Responsibility, Optimism, Internal Expectations, Coping Ability, and Self Efficacy. The interview questions for this study were designed to measure the degree to which each student has attained these attributes. Students who possess these traits are less likely to become helpless.

Student Interview Questions:

1. What would cause you to drop out of school before graduation? (motivation)
2. How can the (school, parents, community) help you finish your education?
(Personal Responsibility, motivation)
3. How much control do you feel you have over your life, why? (Self-efficacy, Internal Expectations)
4. When you are successful, who or what do you attribute it to? (Personal Responsibility, Self-Efficacy)
5. When you are unsuccessful, who or what do you attribute it to? (Personal Responsibility, Self-efficacy)
6. How do you deal with problems on a daily basis? (Coping ability, Internal expectations)
7. What are your goals and how will you accomplish them? (Goals oriented, Optimism)
8. When do you ask for help? (Coping ability, personal responsibility)

MERC developed a process for schools interested in replicating and implementing the resiliency model. MERC projected five phases that a school must go through to provide a school climate that supports the development of resiliency in at-risk students. They are: Awareness, Analysis, Strategies, Action, and Evaluation. This model will be used as a guide to assess whether each school is operating under this model. It will also be used to assess the effectiveness of support programs.

Faculty/Staff Interview Questions:

1. What causes a student to be labeled at-risk, describe to me what a “typical” at-risk student is? (Awareness)

2. Who is responsible for insuring that our students get a good education?(Awareness, Analysis)
3. What support systems are or should be made available for our students? which of these is the most effective? (Strategies, Analysis, Evaluation)
4. Why do some students achieve and others don't, even though they both are at-risk? (Awareness, Evaluation)
5. What role should the (teacher, principal, student, parent) play in helping our at-risk children succeed? (Analysis, Strategies)
6. How and when do you know that you are successful with at-risk students? (Evaluation)
7. When do support programs hurt our students? (Analysis)

Definitions

At-risk: (AR) Students who are labelled at-risk are those who, because of a combination and interaction of multiple variables, possess characteristics that are likely to result in the student's failure to graduate from high school, to attain work skills, and to become a productive member of society (McMillan, Reed, & Bishop 1993).

Learned Helplessness (a): (LH) When experience with uncontrollable events lead to the expectation that future events will elude control, therefore disruptions in motivation, emotion, and learning may occur (Seligman, 1975).

Learned Helplessness (b): (LH) a condition in which a person develops dependency behavior patterns due to the positive outcomes associated with the continuation of that dependent behavior (McIntosh, 1995).

Resilience: Students who succeed despite hardships and the presence of several at-risk factors. They have developed characteristics and coping skills that enable them to succeed. They are termed resilient because they are able to recover from or adapt to life's stressors and problems (Peng, Wang & Walkberg, 1992)

Limitations

The following limitations are recognized in this research:

1. There are restrictions on the sample as the participants will be from my own state and regions that I work and live in. In an attempt to have sample that is representative of both rural and urban areas, surveys and interviews were conducted in both these areas in Virginia.
2. Those characteristics that define students as at-risk vary to such a degree that it may be unclear what effect these characteristics played both in their decision to either leave school, become pregnant, break the law, or any other actions.
3. The interpretations and conclusions in this study are a result of my experience with the two alternative education programs that I have worked with. My role in each of the settings will be discussed further in Chapter #3. Another researcher may arrive at different conclusions.

Organization

The dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter I discusses the development of the research idea, identifies the problem statement, limitations and definitions, and lists the framing and interview questions. Chapter II reviews the literature that is pertinent to the research problem. Chapter III describes the

methodology used in the selection of site, pools of participants, and cases. It also examines the task of data collection and analysis. Chapter IV describes the results of the interviews from the framing questions and Chapter V includes a summary of responses, major themes, conclusions from the research, recommendations for further study and personal reflections about the research project.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

In the review of literature I will initially examine how to define the concept of at-risk and those strategies used through the schools to address the onset of at-risk student behavior. The success and failure of these strategies are also a part of the equation of learned helplessness. Rather than begin the discussion of at-risk behavior by discussing the familial or environmental causes of that behavior, I believe that the presence and proliferation of racism, sexism, classism, and other handicaps is well documented and therefore indisputable. What I will attempt to prove is that learned helplessness is one of the obstacles that minorities, women, and poor need to conquer. While racism and sexism might create many of the social and economic problems; learned helplessness perpetuates it.

Identification of At-risk Student Behaviors

At-risk students currently account for approximately one-third of all elementary and secondary students in our nation and the number is rising (Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1990) The initial step in understanding at-risk youth is to first attempt to understand what it means to be listed or labeled as at-risk. The literature on this topic has grown considerably as the number of students failing and drop out of school has increased dramatically. The term at-risk has evolved from a rather specific term, which usually included attributes such as misbehavior and low self esteem, into

an ambiguous conglomeration of descriptors so extensive that one might argue that the great majority of our children are at risk. At-risk behavior has been defined as: certain behaviors, attitudes, and attributes which increase the likelihood that a student will fail to complete high school. Some examples include: lower economic class, low standardized/non-standardized test scores, poor attendance, poor behavior, teenage pregnancy, dysfunctional family, one parent home, lack of parental involvement, etc., (McMillan & Reed, 1992). (MERC) developed the following information surrounding at-risk students. The study authored by McMillan, Reed, and Bishop (1993) identified an at-risk student as those who, because of a combination and interaction of multiple variables, possess characteristics that are likely to result in the student's failure to graduate from high school, to attain work skills, and to become a productive member of society. Three central groups of factors that are characteristic of students at-risk:

1. Social/Family Background

- *Sibling or parent dropout.
- *Low socioeconomic status-inadequate nutrition, damage to dignity, inadequate home facilities.
- *English is a second language.
- *Dysfunctional Family-lack of structure and stability, substance abuse, physical or sexual abuse, single parent families, lack of family commitment to school.
- *Poor communication between home and school.

2. Personal Problems

- *External locus of control.
- *learned helplessness, accepting failure.
- *Suicide attempt(s)
- *Substance abuse; health problems.
- *Low self-esteem
- *Teenage pregnancy; raising children.
- *Trouble with the law.
- *Learning Disabilities
- *Lack of life goals, inability to see options.
- *Lack of hope for the future.

- *Significant lack of coping skills
- *Works many hours per week

3. School Factors

- *Behavior problems-"in trouble" in school or community, acting out behavior, disruptive in learning environment.
- *Absenteeism
- *Lack of Respect for authority, feelings of alienation from school authorities.
- *Grade retention-especially in the early grades.
- *Suspension/expulsion
- *Course failure, poor academic record.
- *Tracking/ability grouping.
- *Dissatisfaction and frustration with school
- *Lack of available and adequate counseling possibilities
- *Inadequate school services-mental health, social services and health services
- *School Climate hostile to students who do not "fit the norm."

This list is by no means inclusive of all the factors that determine a student's possibility or propensity to drop out of school nor has any study been able to isolate those factors which most often lead to a student dropping out. Some students leave school for one of these reasons, while others leave due to the total effect of a number of these variables. It is also important to note that even though some of the students may have one or more of these variables present in their lives, they do not always leave school.

Despite incredible hardships and the presence of several at-risk factors, there are some students who have developed characteristics and coping skills that enable them to succeed. They become individuals with stable, healthy personas, sound values, high self-esteem, good interpersonal relationships, success in school, positive goals and plans for the future. These students can be termed *resilient* because they are able to recover from or adapt to life's stressors and problems. It is estimated that 19% of at-risk students are resilient (Peng, Wang & Walberg, 1992) The resiliency model will be examined in depth when we look at learned helplessness and the strategies to address

it.

In education, we often determine the level of the handicap by the degree to which the person is unable to function in the normal educational/social setting. If a person has a number of these characteristics, but is not having any difficulty functioning in the setting, we often do not label the student as at-risk. They do not take advantage, nor are they privy to the programs and strategies which deal with teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, or low self esteem. To this end, resilient students who do not exhibit negative behavior do not enjoy the same level of support that lower achieving students do; even though they are in the same economic class, and may have greater challenges in the home. When some educators have determined that a student is at risk of dropping out or is exhibiting behavior that will lead to failure, there is a need to address that behavior with some form of intervention. It is not clear what effect these strategies have in motivating students to change their behavior, but it is clear that there certainly is a need for some form of intervention.

Strategies to address At-risk Behavior

In recent years, school systems and localities have attempted to change the increasing number of unsuccessful students by creating programs which have as their focus; serving students who are unable to make it in the more traditional setting. The programs are based upon the belief that a separate program is needed for these students. These programs have had a varying level of success in reducing the dropout rate and other social maladies and the structure and organization of these programs usually vary according to mission and available resources. My own experience as a director/administrator of one of these programs has allowed me to experience a large

degree of success, but it has also led to the more realistic view of intervention that I have today.

The August 1995 issue of Educational Leadership lists the following

characteristics of effective alternative schools:

- 1.They are small
- 2.Both the program and the organization were designed by those who were going to operate them.
- 3.They took their character, theme, or emphasis from the strengths and interests of the teachers who conceived them.
- 4.Their teachers all chose the program, with subsequent teachers selected with the input of the present staff.
- 5.Their students and families chose the program.
- 6.A teacher-director administered the program.
- 7.Their small size denied them much auxiliary or specialized staff, such as librarians, counselors and deans.
- 8.All the early programs were housed as mini-schools in buildings that were dominated by larger programs.
- 9.The superintendent sustained their autonomy and protected the integrity of the mini-schools.
- 10.All of the programs were relatively free from district interference, and the central administration buffered them from demands of central office officials.
- 11.The continuity in leadership has been considerable. For example. Ohn Falco, who oversees the Spanish Harlem program today, has been the director for ten years.

(Domanicao 1989, Elmore 1988, Harington & Cookson 1992)

The Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium also looked at the attributes of a successful program for at-risk students and their research seemed to focus more on the affective rather than structural and procedural characteristics highlighted in the

study mentioned earlier. The most effective approach to developing programs and strategies that can improve the success rate of students at-risk is to focus on the characteristics and problems of at-risk students.

The review of literature on effective programs for at-risk students yielded ten categories of these successful programs. They are:

1. Early Intervention: If educators monitor progress and problems early and provide help, at-risk students may be able to avoid years of school failure that drastically affect self-esteem.

2. School Climate: A positive school climate encourages students to stay in school. Attributes of an inviting and positive climate include ensuring high time on task, facilitating a high degree of student interaction, providing positive reinforcement for desired classroom behavior, maintains high expectations and order, encouraging decision making by the students, providing school organizations, school teams, and alternative schools.

3. School Personnel: Teachers play immensely important roles. Faculty must be cooperative, mutually supportive, reinforce the goals and philosophy of the school, and are involved. Instructional programs must be developed that will promote a sense of internal locus of control. The classroom environment should facilitate time-on-task, student interaction, which lead to a sense of belonging, bonding, and encouragement.

4. Small class size: Lower student-teacher ratios allow for greater monitoring, troubleshooting, and early intervention when signs of problems appear.

5. Parental Involvement: When parents are involved in the planning of all areas of school happenings, the parents develop a vested interest in their child's education, which in turn improves the child's performance.

6. Self-Esteem Building & Support: Providing a system of recognition for valued behavior is helpful to the at-risk child who is seldom the high achiever.

7. Guidance and Mental Health Counseling: Counseling should be an integral part of the school yet maintain a feeling of privacy for each individual student. Counselors should also have contact with parents and have a flexibility in dealing with different types of problems.

8. Social and Life Skills/Vocational Education: A positive correlation has been found to exist between vocational education and school completion. Vocational education and social and life skills training appear to bring many of the at-risk students back into engagement with the school.

9. Peer Involvement/Extracurricular: Extracurricular activity seems to increase peer involvement and membership in school organizations, provide an arena where new activities are experienced and where unhealthy choices (drug, crime) are avoided, and decreases the likelihood of dropping out of school.

10. Easing Grade Level Transitions: The greatest number of students drop out between grades and during times of transition between elementary, junior/middle, and high school. Early attempts at easing the transitions and improving attitudes toward school for these at-risk students has great potential to increase completion of school. (Pisipia & Pearlman, 1992)

With these attributes or characteristics used as a guideline, numerous public school and private social agencies have developed different strategies and programs which address the huge number of problems our children are encountering. Each of the preceding studies produced data which showed that intervention needs to affect four key areas. Those areas are: the child, the teacher (instruction), the parent, and the facility or structure that houses the student. The premise is that if we create an environment where we reduce the negative outcomes by altering the the child's exposure to the risk, reduce the negative reactions that follow exposure to a risk, establish and maintain self-efficacy and self esteem, and provide opportunities for at-risk children to receive the skills necessary for school and career service, then we are increasing a student's chance or experiencing success. To increase the likelihood that at-risk students achieve, public schools have developed different strategies which have had both positive and negative effects.

With the passage of state and federal guidelines which mandate special services for the handicapped and the mentally challenged, the results of these programs have had mixed reviews. By looking at three school based strategies/programs, one can see that their intent, although noble and well intentioned, has led to further problems with the

achievement of our minority and poor children. LH has been a social construct that has added to the problem of low achievement by further hindering the progress and destroying the potential gains by enacting school and local policies that lead to non-achievement. The most used and abused of those practices within our public schools are tracking, retention, special education placement, and system wide low expectations for children of color and low socio-economic classes.

Tracking is used to accommodate instruction and curriculum to the diverse needs, interests and abilities of students. The underlying rationale for tracking theory is that students will learn when instructional content and practice are well-matched to individual knowledge and abilities. With students so divided into homogeneous learning groups, teachers can offer instruction and curriculum at a level that the student can handle, thereby maximizing motivation and learning (McPartland & Slavin, 1990). Although this rationale has been the impetus for the almost universal usage of tracking or ability grouping, there is an equally destructive effect produced by this practice when those who administer it have less than honorable intentions.

One of the greatest stigmas resulting from lower track classes is the informal classroom climate. A general feeling that students are not capable learners and are unable to master the same kinds of skills demanded of other classes results in negative instructional consequences including: a less challenging curriculum, fewer curriculum units, slower instructional pace, fewer demands for higher order thinking skills, and a less serious attitude toward tests and homework requirements (Oakes, 1989; Mitchell, 1989; McParland & Slavin, 1990). Tracking has led to the formation of such programs as gifted and talented, academically gifted, and college preparatory, while it has also led

to the equally deplorable formation of such tracks as general, low/basic, ungraded, and the ever increasing number of special education placements, which will be discussed later in this paper.

The literature indicates that tracking produces unequal educational opportunities distributing educational resources unevenly among students. Therefore separately tracked classes receive unequal shares of key formal/informal aspects of a good learning environment (McPartland & Slavin, 1990). It is deplorable that we send those who need the most into situations where we know they will receive the least. Minority and low socioeconomic class children are disproportionately assigned to lower track courses/curriculum and they usually find that early placement in these lower level are seldom reversed. The Virginia Department of Education published a study entitled, "A Study of Tracking and Ability Grouping in Virginia Secondary Schools" which indicated that tracking affected both what students learned and in what programs they were eligible/or qualified to participate. The report also notes that once placed in low-ability track, students have difficulty switching to high-ability tracks because low level courses do not teach the prerequisite concepts and skills essential for successful achievement in advanced academic programs.

The report concluded that while it was shown that separate instruction for high achievers result in enhanced learning for those students, there is strong evidence that low and middle ability grouped students suffered a retardation of academic progress and lowered self esteem because it: 1) places children in a caste system, frequently as early as kindergarten; 2) can create low expectations for those in the lower tracks; and 3) can result in unintentional segregation and stereotyping of students.

The practice of tracking and ability groups also has a negative impact on the pool of minorities prepared to enter college. According to the same Virginia Department of Education study "...Black students and low socioeconomic status students were unable to achieve the level of preparation necessary to attempt the challenging academic courses were limited under the tracking system." What tracking has done and continues to do is create an academic and social caste system in which minority and low income children are relegated to second class citizenship through a systematic process. This process has created an underclass of students who find little to connect them with the rest of the world. My view of tracking is that it is a societal construct that is an attempt to continue segregation even after it has been officially outlawed. What is even more disturbing is that all of this is done under the umbrella of academic progress. When students are tracked, they learn they are helpless and unable to cope with the challenges of life. Within this learned helplessness, they become pawns in an intricate game which allows them to continue this lower class citizenship with support from social agencies, while those who run the agencies remain financially and psychologically in control of this underclass.

It is not a coincidence that many of those students who are placed in these lower tracks are usually brown or poor, while those who are placed in higher tracks are most often non-blacks and affluent. This practice of placing minority and poor children in lower tracks lead to a disproportionate number of these students being retained each year. When a student is retained, he/she is less likely to ever catch up with his peers and is often more prone to be retained again or later dropping out.

Another example of this control developed by the system is the horrible practice of special education placement. It has served as a way to stifle individual student growth, while enlarging the coffers of local budgets. Special education programs, in contrast to retention and tracking, usually provide resources for the students they serve. These programs offer a broad range of services which range from special schools to special classes within schools, as well as a number of part time arrangements. However, in the past fifteen years, schools have frequently used special education labels to secure additional funds for low achieving students with no other major handicapping conditions. As a result, the number of children classified as learning disabled or placed in special services programs has doubled, even though the numbers of students classified as physically disabled or mentally retarded have not substantially changed (McPartland & Slavin, 1990).

In fact, the literature on learning disabled students indicates that these students... are usually the lowest of low achievers, with no other distinctive characteristics (Deschler, 1982). What has happened in the clamor to secure additional funds for schools has been the corresponding shipping of poor and minority children into these programs. It has served a double purpose as students classified as special education or special needs are removed from the mainstream, expectations for success are then lessened or given up, and additional funds are allocated. Much of these additional funds do not reach these children that they have been allocated for. This subjugation of special needs students to boiler rooms, enlarged closets, and musky garages, has been somewhat scaled back, but we are still seeing these students being placed in these black hole programs. Once they enter these programs, the chances are

next to zero that will be later mainstreamed into other classes, because they have not received adequate instruction to keep up with their peers.

Another related issue of critical importance is the fact that African Americans are disproportionately placed in special education classes. African American males are more likely to be diagnosed as mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed and are more likely to be placed in classes for such individuals than whites with identical diagnoses; therefore, despite being in the minority, African Americans and Hispanic males constitute the largest percentage of those in special education classes (Gary, 1981). The fact is that African American students, especially males, even when they attend school with Whites, are three times as likely to be assigned to a class for educable mentally retarded as their White counterparts. Further, African American students are only half as likely to be in a class for the gifted and talented (Carnegie Quarterly, 1989). The placement of minority students in classes for the mentally retarded is sometimes based more on an inability or unwillingness to work with these students. The subsequent removal of these students serves to create a "out of sight, out of mind" situation when they are in self-contained classes that are outside the mainstream.

It is also interesting to note that many of these students, although deemed mentally deficient are readily used and lauded as athletic superstars. While they are graceful entertainers on the gridiron and the court, they are equally clumsy and hidden in the classroom. This message adds to the problem of learned helplessness as students become accustomed to the second class status and begin to accept the support in ever-increasing amounts until they become dependent upon it. That dependency translates into a feelings that they will always have the crutch and therefore do not need to exert

any substantial amount of energy to succeed. The teachers and support personnel also become dependent upon these students needs. Positions and programs are created and funded to alleviate/solve the problem, but they seldom do. What happens is that this co-dependence blossoms and grow to a point where we are are not sure who is really sick, who is the patient, and who is the healer.

The basic problem with how we work with students, when reduced to its lowest common denominator, is our expectations for the students of color and low income. A number of studies have been completed that indicate students usually meet the level of expectations that teachers and administrators have for them. Usually these expectations has been made even before the student arrives. Prejudice, racism, sexism, and class bias have led to preconceived notions and assumptions about minority and poor children. The self-fulfilling prophesies have led to children being labeled as losers before they even enter the game.

One area that is especially guilty of killing dreams and hopes is the area of school support that has as its main function: support and guidance. That area is the guidance and counseling component. Guidance counselors frequently operate under the assumption that Blacks and other minorities do not belong in college. LeMelle (1992) notes that many guidance counselors often assume that children who received good grades did not really earn them or that the courses they took did not prepare them for the academic challenge of college (p.63). To further complicate the issue, many high school counselors do not spend enough time and effort with less able minority students to guide them into accredited vocational, trade and career schools or to corporations with

training programs and entry level jobs.

Kozol (1992), in his book, Savage Inequalities, graphically portrays negative counselor attitudes toward minorities with the following example: A Cambodian girl attending a predominantly minority high school in Camden, New Jersey said to her guidance counselor, "I want to be a lawyer." He replied "No, you cannot be a lawyer." The girl asked, "Why?" He replied "No, you cannot be a lawyer. Look for something else. Look for an easier job" (p.156). LeMelle (1992) states that the greatest tragedy of faulty counseling in high school is the dropouts whose potential may be forever lost to society. These young people may sooner or later cost society many times what good counseling would have cost had they been motivated to continue their education (p.64).

The limited expectations some educators have for students leads them into learned helplessness as they accept those expectations as the gospel and decide that their actions bring reward only if they meet the limits of their supporters. It is a saddening tale that allows those students to rise only as high as the educators see them rising. They are sometimes doomed to failure as opportunities are denied for no other reason except that the limited vision of their teachers, parents, and counselors must not be transgressed. Whatever the effect of limited expectations, one is crystal clear: the children often do not become productive members of society and their helplessness is profitable only for those who run the support system.

Understanding Learned Helplessness

The phrase "learned helplessness (LH)" first was used by Overmier and Seligman (1967) and Seligman and Maier (1967) to describe the debilitated escape-

avoidance responses shown by dogs exposed to uncontrollable shocks in the laboratory. Since then research in the area has proliferated. The debilitating consequences of experience with uncontrollable events have been observed in cats (Masserman 1971; Seward & Humphrey, 1967; Thomas & Dewald, 1977), in fish (Frumkin & Brookshire, 1969; Padilla, 1973; Padilla, Padilla, Ketterer & Giacalone, 1970), and rats (Braud, Wepman, & Russo, 1969; Maier, Albin, & Testa, 1973; Maier & Testa, 1975; Seligman & Beagley, 1975; Seligman, Rosellini, & Kozak, 1975).

Since 1967, investigators have documented the existence of LH in humans (Fosco & Geer, 1971; Gatchel & Proctor, 1976; Glass & Singer, 1972; Hiroto, 1974; Hiroto & Seligman, 1975; Klein, Fencil-Morse & Seligman, 1976; Klein & Seligman, 1976; Karantz, Glass & Snyder, 1974; Miller & Seligman, 1975; Racinkas, 1971; Rodin, 1976; Roth, 1973; Roth & Bootzin, 1974; Roth & Kubal, 1975; Thornton & Jacobs, 1971; among others). Seligman has argued that LH plays a part in a wide variety of human conditions, including child development, stomach ulcers, depression, and death.

Other investigators have argued that the LH model is useful in examining intellectual achievement (Dweck & Licht, 1980) (Rodin, 1976), victimization (Wortman & Silver, 1980), coronary prone personality (Glass & Singer, 1972) and aging (Schulz, 1980). The LH hypothesis provides a unified account of the debilitating consequences of experience with uncontrollable events in humans and animals.

According to the hypothesis, learning that outcomes are uncontrollable results in three deficits: motivational, cognitive, and emotional. The motivational deficit consists of retarded initiation of voluntary responses and is seen as a consequence of the expectation that responding is futile. The cognitive deficit consists of difficulty in

learning that responses produce outcomes. Finally, the LH model in relationship to the emotional aspect, argues that the depressed affect is a consequence of learning that outcomes are independent of responding (Garber & Seligman, 1980).

Introduction of the LH model and the corresponding research which deals with animals and humans gives us a scientific explanation of the phenomena. As I stated earlier, the existence of the phenomena is not in question, but rather the effects of this response theory. Martin Seligman, who has been recognized as one of the major authorities on this subject, initiated the debate over whether the same debilitating effect evidenced in animals is present in humans. The division of the deficits into the three areas; motivational, cognitive, and emotional begins to explain the personal and universal affect of LH. As indicated earlier, it is my intention to look at the effects of this phenomena as it not only causes the person who accepts the condition to be helpless, but to consider how the condition is perpetuated by a system of dependency and lack of control. The early research on LH focused on animals and their reaction to uncontrollable stimuli and this research will be used as our starting point.

This phenomena appears in helpless dogs, rats, and humans. Occasionally, a naive dog sits and takes a shock on the first three or four trials in the shuttle box.; then on the next trial jumps the barrier and escapes shock successfully for the first time. Once a naive dog makes one response that produces relief, he catches on. On all further trials he responds vigorously and learns to avoid shock altogether, but dogs who first received inescapable shock are different in this respect also. Man and animals are born generalizers. It is believed that only in the rarest circumstances is a specific,

punctuate response or association learned. The learning of helplessness is no exception. When an organism learns that it is helpless in one situation, much of its adaptive behavioral repertoire may be undermined. After receiving uncontrollable shock, dogs, rats, cats, fish and people make fewer responses to escape shock (Seligman, 1975).

In comparison to animal research has been the deluge of research on human response to uncontrollable stimuli. What are the laboratory effects of inescapable trauma in Homo Sapiens? Like the dog, cat, rat, fish, and non-human primates, when a human is faced with noxious events that he can control, his motivation to respond is drastically affected. Donald Hiroto (1974) replicated the findings on dogs, quite exactly, in college students. His escape group received loud noise, which they learned to turn off by pushing a button; the yoked group received the same noise. Each subject was then taken to a finger shuttle box. In order to escape noise the individual had only to move his hand from one side to the other. Both the no-noise group and the escape group learned readily to shuttle with their hands. As with other species however, the human yoked group which failed to escape and avoid, sat passively and accepted the aversive noise. Finally, the personality dimension of "external vs. internal locus of control of reinforcement" was another determining factor explored by researchers in whether the subject was prone to capitulation to the phenomena. (Seligman, 1975)

D.C. Glass and J.E. Singer (1972), in studies attempting to stimulate urban stress, found that uncontrollable loud noise resulted in subjects who did poorly in proofreading, found the noise highly irritating, and gave up at problem solving. The mere belief that they could turn the noise off if they so desired, as well as actually having control over the melange of urban sound, abolished their deficits. It seems to be

generally true that uncontrollability produces deterioration of the readiness of dogs, cats, rats, fish, monkeys, and humans to respond adaptively to trauma. Helplessness is a general characteristic of several species, including man, but if we are to take helplessness seriously as an explanatory principle for real life depressions, anxiety, and sudden death, it must not be peculiar to shock, shuttle boxes, or even just to trauma. Does uncontrollability produce a habit limited to circumstances like the ones under which helplessness is learned, or does it produce a more general trait?(Garber & Seligman, 1980).

Human reaction to stress and trauma often lead to responses based upon a learned behavior. Many theorists have hypothesized that whether a student displays resilient behavior is based upon that student's level of motivation as well as their ability to control their destiny. Motivational theories look at what strategies lead to a student continuing his efforts to achieve, even when there are seemingly enormous odds before them. Whether students react to an external or internal stimulus in attempting to succeed is a huge factor in the determination of whether a person learns to be helpless. If this phenomena of LH is valid and discernible, and I believe it is, then we need to look at what effects this phenomena has on academic achievement and the ability to learn.

Failure has dramatic effects on performance. For some children, these effects are positive ones: effort is escalated, concentration is intensified, persistence is increased, strategy use becomes more sophisticated, and performance is enhanced. For other children, the effects are quite the reverse: efforts are curtailed, strategies deteriorate, and performance is often severely disrupted (Seligman, 1991). Failure

does not always breed lack of effort in humans or animals, but how we react to the obstacles that are placed in front of us is sometimes quite different. As stated by Seligman, failure inspires some while it deflates and defeats others to the point that they stop trying. Determining what attributes make a student continue to try helps us in explaining and understanding when and why students suffer from learned helplessness. Dweck, (1975) and Dweck & Reppucci,(1973) concluded that when failure is attributed to stable factors, such as lack of ability, humans believe that failure is likely to continue to recur, whereas failure attributions to less stable factors, such as insufficient effort, suggest that future success remains possible. Moreover, Dweck (1975) demonstrated that a treatment that taught the extremely helpless persons to attribute their failures to a lack of effort (instead of to lack of ability) led to a great improvement in their reactions to failure. In fact, a number of the children receiving this treatment began to show performance after failure that was superior to their prior performance (Garber & Seligman,1980). It is the same story with the connection between expectations, motivation and results. Students who attribute their failure to their own level of effort rather than their ability seem to feel that if they try harder they have a better chance of succeeding. When I look at children who have been identified as at-risk, I also see that there are certain attributes that lead to an increased chance of success rather than failure. The term used earlier to describe their state is resilience. If you are not teaching our children to focus on their efforts to succeed and instead teaching them to focus on their shortcomings, you are adding to the proliferation of LH. How humans react to stressors and harmful situations directly

affect how they cope with various situations in our life.

Lazarus (1991) is one of the few theorists to discuss how individuals respond to potentially harmful information before it has been defined as a crisis. He maintains that individuals appraise the significance of the situation for their well-being, as well as the coping responses at their disposal for dealing with the harm. He also suggested that an individual may appraise a potentially harmful situation as a threat and thus focus on the possible harm; or regard it as a challenge and focus on the potential for mastery or gain (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

LH has been defined as the perception of independence between one's responses and the onset or termination of aversive events. In short, one's locus of control is severely limited, therefore a subject will react to this helplessness by refusing to attempt intervention in a crisis. The researchers who completed the bulk of these studies have focused on the cognitive effect of learned helplessness and its affects on how we cope with both academic performance or societal obstacles.

LH can be both a personal and universal problem for society when certain attributes recur frequently in one target group such as minority and poor children. Humans learn the responses to behavior through personal experience as well as through modeling the behavior of their peers and parents. When the poor, women, and minorities are summarily exposed to the same stressors, predictions that their response to these stressors will be the same is an acceptable theory. When investigators began testing the model on human subjects, however, the findings were inconsistent. Exposure to the insoluble problems or uncontrollable noise bursts or shocks did not always result in passivity, performance decrements, or depressed mood

as the model would predict (Miller & Norman, 1979, Roth 1980). Investigators began to speculate that helplessness effects may stem not from an uncontrollability of an adverse stimulus, but from the way in which the stimulus is interpreted by the subject (Dweck & Repucci, 1973). In an attempt to address these and other criticism of the original theory, Abramson (1978) argued that the nature of helpless effects can be categorized according to three orthogonal dimensions: internality, stability, and globality (p.286). The role of LH in the development of at-risk behavior has been a debated issue as it relates to academic achievement and reaction to societal stressors.

Understanding the scientific and sociological basis for the theory is the first step in determining the role it plays in our students' lives. LH is just as much about motivation as it is about coping, self-control as it is about dependence, and self-efficacy as it is about independence. The next area will focus on those strategies used in addressing the problem of LH.

Strategies to Address Learned Helplessness in Humans

When describing LH as a social construct, much like how I describe the concept of being at-risk, this learned behavior can also be "unlearned" or corrected. Much like any animal, human actions and reactions to societal stressors is indicative of both the internal and external controls that have shaped their experiences and culture. A person who uses a defensive attitude or aggressive behavior to fend off academic deficiencies has adapted this strategy as the most opportune and efficient method for coping with this stressor. Education must play the role of facilitator and enlightening force for our children who are most at risk to fall prey to the attributes of learned

helplessness and some forms of social deviance.

In order to accomplish this mission, I need to see what traits or characteristics can be identified that have allowed some students to survive and flourish while others have failed miserably. MERC has identified a number of traits that lead to the phenomena of “resilience” or the ability to persevere and achieve a moderate level of success, even though there are a number of at-risk characteristics present in the child’s life.

The research on resilient children comes from a number of sources. Some of the major findings from studies that followed the same children from infancy through adolescence (Block, 1981; Block & Block, 1980; Murphy & Moriarty, 1976). Clark (1983) and Gamezy (1983) studied the lives of minority children who had succeeded in school. Others, such as Anthony (1974), looked at the traits and factors surrounding resilient children from highly dysfunctional families, and still others examined the resilient survivors of wars and concentration camps (Moskovitz, 1983). Werner (1984) summarized all of these studies to find that resilient children share four central characteristics:

- 1) Resilient children take a proactive rather than a reactive or passive approach to problem solving.
- 2) Resilient children are able to construe their experiences in positive and constructive ways, even when those experiences are painful and negative.
- 3) Resilient children are good natured and easy to deal with and as a result, they can gain other people’s positive attention.
- 4) Finally, resilient children develop early in life a sense of what Antonovsky (1979) calls “coherence”, defined as a basic belief that life makes sense and that one has some control over what happens.

This sense of coherence keeps children strong through the most difficult times.

These aforementioned attributes or characteristics of a resilient child tends to decrease the chances of succumbing to learned helplessness and the onset of at-risk behavior.

The connection is rather clear, that resilient students are less likely to be helpless and engage in at-risk behavior. How they deal with failure and life's other challenges directly affects their ability to achieve (Joseph, 1994).

As mentioned earlier, failure can be therapeutic or it can be totally deflating. If it is proven that LH will increase the chances of a person becoming involved in deviant or at-risk student behavior, then education must take the lead in decreasing the proliferation or continuance of the behavior. A person who is able to survive by developing coping skills which will decrease the effect of stressors is more likely to flourish rather than succumb to those same stressors. Those characteristics which resilient student possess have been identified as:

Self-efficacy: The student feels that he or she is successful because they have chosen to be so, and they give themselves credit for accomplishments.

Goals oriented: The student is able to articulate clear, realistic, long term goals and wishes.

Personal Responsibility: The student possesses an internal locus of control for their success and failures. Poor performance is attributed to internal factors such as a lack of effort, not caring, not trying, not studying as much as they need to, goofing off, and playing around. The students did not believe school, neighborhood, or family was critical in either their success or failure.

Optimism: The student demonstrates that they are motivated to do well and are optimistic about the future. He or she has hope, despite all the negative circumstances in their life. The student also has confidence that they can achieve their long term goals. **Internal expectations**: The student is able to relate success to effort and ability and demonstrates a willingness to take responsibility for their actions.

Coping ability: The student is more able to cope with stress, resolve personal problems, and keep their focus on doing well in school. When there are problems or difficulties, these students are willing to reach out for help.
(McMillan & Reed, 1992)

In the same vein, education and educational programs must use strategies which will train our students to become more resilient and therefore develop coping skills which will allow them to persevere and survive, even though they have a number of the stressors which make them at risk of dropping out of school and falling prey to other social maladies.

Schools can expect that once such a resiliency model's support system is implemented and reinforced over time it will lead to the development of resilience in all students and in particular at-risk students. Schools can also anticipate that more at risk students will become resilient and successfully complete their education.

Specifically, a school which uses a resiliency model has the following attributes:

A) Significant Adult relationships: Judith Jones (1989) says "There is growing evidence that the involvement and caring of even one adult in the life of an at-risk child can prevent lifelong disadvantage".

B) Positive Use of Time: Schools that provide opportunities for at-risk students to make use of their time by involving themselves in positive endeavors such as clubs, hobbies, sports, and church activities increase the chance that their students will become resilient.

C) Motivation: Schools that motivate students through encouragement and by setting high expectations increase the chance that the students will become resilient.

D) Acknowledgement: Schools that recognize and acknowledge when a student has problems, as well as when the student accomplishes something positive increase the chance that the students will develop resiliency.
(Pisipia & Pearlman, 1992)

There is a clear relationship between at-risk behavior, its effects and the phenomena of learned helplessness. LH is the mechanism by which an individual learns that his/her own actions have no effect upon those stressors which directly affect his life. When a person continuous attempts to achieve are unsuccessful due to forces beyond his control; then his actions are determined by that conclusion. A person who feels this way then decides that because racism or sexism will continuously hinder his

efforts, then he often chooses illegal or immoral actions to gain that which he needs or desires. The basis for the resiliency model is the belief that a student can develop coping skills that will enable him/her to survive. Seligman and other researchers have identified a number of coping strategies which will increase the chances of student success and decrease the effects of LH.

Coping skills are essential for a person to be psychologically resilient. Good Coping skills are defined as the effective management of stressors. Effective means dealing with a stressor in a way that minimizes its negative impact and maximizes its positive impact on the individual or group. More specifically, coping is the mental effort and physical actions applied to managing events, people, and situations that we perceive as negative or potentially negative. Lazarus & Folkman, (1984) recognized two types of coping: emotion-focused and problem focused. Emotion-focused coping has to do with managing the feeling that arise in response to a problem and is especially important in situations where the outcomes are not controllable. There are any number of emotion-focused forms of coping: wresting the good out of a bad situation (e.g., recognizing that losing your job frees you yo do something you like better); finding a diversion (e.g., going to a movie as a break from a stressful task); reappraising the negative situation so that it does not appear as bad, making positive comparisons to another situation. Problem-focused coping attacks the problem directly. Such a strategy might involve decisions that directly affect the outcome. it may mean that we bring together the appropriate resources to solve the problem or it may involve changing aspects of ourselves. How effective our coping skills are will depend on the magnitude of the problem and our own ability to think flexibly. (Joseph,1994)

Scholars have found a very large variety of possible coping responses Coping strategies can be oriented toward the person-environment mismatch and can be classified into four

areas:

problem focused: These areas are designed to reduce a person-environment mismatch by molding the problematic events and maintaining intact existing mental structures. Problem focused coping consists of vast array of cognitive and behavioral procedures. In a factor analytic study, Carver (1989) found four different problem-focused strategies: (a) active coping-procedures to remove obstacles from the goal; (b) planning-thinking about action strategies and about how to solve the problem; (c) suppression of competing activities-disengagement from other goals and activities; and (d)restraint-holding back actions and avoiding premature decisions.

reorganization: These strategies may be used when people cannot adjust to their wishes and instead try to minimize the person-environment mismatch. It is the pursuit of more realistic goals and the adoption of a more realistic view of oneself.

reappraisal: this consists of attempts to alter the cognitive construction of the unresolved mismatch and to make it less threatening (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978)

avoidance: this strategy leaves the mismatch unresolved and instead attempts to reduce its threatening implications.

It stands to reason that if we can identify the phenomena of LH then perhaps our schools can teach self efficacy or as Seligman defines it: Learned Optimism. Life inflicts the same setbacks and tragedies on the optimist as on the pessimist, but the optimist weathers the storm. As we have seen, the optimist bounces back from defeat, and with his life somewhat poorer, he picks up and begins again. Becoming an optimist consists not of learning to be more selfish and self-assertive, and not to present yourself to others in an overbearing way, but simply of learning a set of skills about how to talk to yourself when you suffer a personal defeat and develop strategies to

overcome those defeats (Seligman, 1991) His strategy of learning to be optimistic is part of a strategy to deal with the debilitating effect of LH. The even larger issue is that if helplessness can be learned, it can also be unlearned. Learning to be optimistic is part of that strategy to unlearn helplessness.

Summary

It is erroneous to analyze human LH from the exclusive standpoint of what the exposure to uncontrollable outcomes does to people--that is, without knowing the beliefs, goals, concerns, and history of the particular person exposed to these outcomes. A similar error would be made if one ignores the way a person subjectively construes what is happening between him or her and the world. (Joseph, 1994)

Human LH is not particular to one group or class, but how it develops differs from person to person and group to group. At-risk student behavior and learned helplessness are connected in that they both deal with issues of motivation to achieve and the locus of control for the individual. Peterson (1985) and Seligman (1991) suggested that LH also may be involved in the phenomenon of battered women and also has been applied to explain other human problems that seem to follow the exposure to uncontrollable events. Before identifying any human actions as being associated with LH, there is that need to quantify those actions to see if the condition is actually present. Joseph (1994) identifies six basic criteria that should be used to recognize LH deficits in other human problems:

1. LH deficits are present when a person displays problems in functioning and task performance, failing to meet the demands of a task situation.
2. LH deficits follow exposure to uncontrollable bad events that disrupt the equilibrium between the person and the environment.
3. LH deficits occur mainly when the uncontrollable bad events is appraised to be an imminent threat to one's basic commitments.

4.LH deficits occur mainly when exposure to uncontrollable bad events lead to the heightening of self-focused attention.

5.LH deficits are distally mediated by the acquisition of unfavorable expectancies of control during exposure to uncontrollable events and the generalization of these experiences to new situations.

6.LH deficits are proximally mediated by the adoption of off-task coping.

Any application of human LH should take into account the above six criteria. You should also verify whether people showing the targeted problem have a history of uncontrollable bad events that they appraise to be important and relevant to their commitments. One should also check whether people react to these uncontrollable events with enhanced self focus and strong emotions or if they are unable to mold their environment and react to these challenges and difficulties with off task ways of coping (Joseph, 1994)

The usual reaction, according to Seligman (1991), to uncontrollable bad events is the use of off task or negative strategies to accommodate for the condition. Students who are prone to uncontrollable events such as poverty, crime, and shame react negatively when they see that the positive strategies are useless or ineffective. At risk behavior can be described as those actions which will lead to some form of failure. A student who believes that his studying does not lead to passing grades may resort to cheating. An elderly man who is mugged or accosted repeatedly, even after several calls to the police, may resort to violence to defend himself. All of these actions are reactions to a helpless state.

The review of the literature was designed to show a relationship between the learned helplessness and at-risk behavior by first defining the two terms, discussing the strategies to deal with each one, and the implications of each of them. In my experiences with at-risk youth there always seems to be an underlying current of hopelessness and helplessness shared by the poor, women, and minorities when it

comes to such issues as racism. By developing the argument that learned helplessness can not only be labeled a cause of at-risk behavior, but also a condition of it, I am going beyond the superficial and looking at society through a different cultural lens. The studies conducted look into what role we can give to LH when we look at the on-set of at-risk behavior. It also attempts to explore the relationship between the proliferation of LH within the support systems we have created. Such symptoms as a high level of frustration, anxiety, uncertainty, aggression, stress, distress, and fear along with low motivation, expectations, self-esteem, cognitive development, and effort are shared by LH researchers (Seligman;1975, Garber & Seligman;1984, & Mikulenci, 1993) and educational researchers who define at-risk (McMillan, Bishop, & Reed, 1993).

The review of literature shows the findings from numerous studies correspond with the hypothesis that there is some type of relationship between the two, although the extent and importance of the relationship is arguable. This correlation should show us that the programs are created; often serve as hinderance as well as cures when programs fail to address these same attributes. The best analogy I could use in this situation is that it is much like a cold remedy I would take for a fever, runny nose, and itchy eyes. To work I need to control the symptoms, but by using the remedy and not getting enough rest or fluids, I am prolonging the effects of the cold and risking the onset of a more serious condition. The proliferation of learned helplessness may lead to more serious conditions and also lessen the possibility of a cure.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Junker (1960) has estimated that, as a rule, one-sixth of the field workers time is spent observing, one-third recording, one-third analyzing, and one-sixth reporting all the data you have recorded (p.12). This study begins a long process of examining how LH has added to the problem of at-risk behavior by becoming the centerpiece of a dependency curve. I plan to look at how the social and educational systems we have developed have hindered the development of self-efficacy in our students and therefore perpetuated the cycle of dependence and hopelessness. Simply formulating surveys and analyzing their responses doesn't always give a clear and complete answer to the questions we ask. Rather it is sometimes better to talk directly with those persons responding to the survey and see if the answers given truly reflect the background, condition, and expectations of the respondent. It should be obvious that the inference from case studies is based on analytical induction (Ellen, 1984) .

The theoretical approach to this study will be based upon Phenomenology. Researchers in the phenomenological mode attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). This study will attempt to describe how at-risk children feel, believe, and act based upon how they view the world around them. It is not a value judgement, but hopefully afterwards, the reader can better understand how this population views the world. That

information can then be used to develop more effective plans of assistance. Bogdan and Biklen (1982) are correct when they state that the “point of view” of our participants and ourselves must be understood before there can be any real discourse about what the study actually accomplished (p.32).

This study includes interviews, surveys, historical data, and observations to formulate cases studies. The interpretation of these components will be based upon the point of view or cultural lens that the researcher and the participants both possess. This chapter includes a description of the setting, the focus of the data collection, and the design of this study which includes the process used to select the site, establish a pool, and select sample cases. Data collection in the next section includes the methods used to tabulate responses from the participants. The final section will describe the process to analyze the findings from the interview questions. An ERIC Search was performed to locate the most current and relevant sources for this study.

Qualitative researchers attempt to expand rather than constrict understanding. They do not attempt to resolve such ambiguity by seeing the differences as a “mistake,” and so attempt to establish a standard definition. Rather they seek to study the concept as it is understood in the context of all those who use it. The subject of this study focuses on how various participants see and experience goals. It is multiple realities rather than a single reality which concern the qualitative researcher (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

Description of the setting

Each of the two sites in Virginia. Both are alternative education centers for students who have been long term suspended, expelled, recently returning from

incarceration or unable to adjust to the regular school setting. Each school serves students in grades 6 - 12. Each public school has been recognized by the state and the district for its work in (a) reducing the district dropout rate (b) offering effective alternative instructional strategies for at-risk students and (c) offering an alternative placement for students who cannot function in the traditional educational setting. Those persons selected to participate will include students, faculty, and staff from each site.

Focus of Data Collection

The focus of the data collection is to examine the strategies used by the schools to solve the problems associated with at-risk behavior and to see if these strategies were in line with the resiliency model and recognized coping skills used to deter at-risk behavior and learned helplessness. The schools were not briefed on the definition or terminology associated with LH. This was done to elicit more genuine responses. Interviewing and observing were the dominant forms of data collection as they seemed to reveal the most about the school, its culture and its strategies.

Design of the study

Site Selection

Two alternative education programs in Virginia were selected as sites for case studies by meeting the criteria for successfully dealing with at-risk student behavior. Domanico (1989) developed eleven attributes of effective alternative programs and one site (Danville) possessed ten of those characteristics, while the other (Roanoke) possessed all eleven. The Danville site was not developed by the staff, but was a design outlined by a state grant. These schools were developed by the local school divisions to

work with students who have been expelled, long term suspended, recently released from incarceration, or are unable to fit in the traditional educational program that has been established at the majority of the schools within the district and the state. The two schools chosen: The Opportunity/Phoenix School in Danville, VA and the Noel C. Taylor Learning Academy in Roanoke, VA are two such institutions which meet those standards. These programs were chosen because I am very familiar with the overall academic and social structure of each as I was employed as the Lead Teacher at the Phoenix School (1993-94) and I am currently the principal of the Taylor Learning Academy (1994-96). Identification of the sites to participate in this study was determined by the researcher.

Establishing a Pool of participants

The student population at both schools is predominately African-American, with a large majority of the students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds. There were no students selected who were being served by special education or other special services included in the sample. All faculty and staff work on site and they have a varied level of experience working with at-risk students. It is important to note that all of the students who are at each site, as well as all those interviewed, have been identified as at-risk by the school district as they possess several of the attributes listed earlier for determining at-risk behavior.

Participation in the group and individual interviews was voluntary and no compensation was offered or given. At the Phoenix/Opportunity school, 72 of the 90 students (80%) participated in some form, while 11 of the 13 faculty and staff (84%) participated. At the Taylor Academy, 106 of the 144 students participated (74%) in

some form and 21 of 23 faculty/staff participated (91%). To insure confidentiality and to meet the guidelines for use of minors in research, parental consent forms were sent home for permission to include individual students in the study. This did not significantly limit the number of responses, but factors like absenteeism, incarceration, suspension, reassignment, or withdrawal from the program prevented a higher percentage of student participation. Overall, students and faculty/staff were very receptive to participation.

Case Selection

The method selected to choose a data source that is compatible with my topic and my resources will be the case study format. Bogdan & Biklen (1982) defines a case study as: "a detailed examination of one setting, or one subject, or one single depository of documents, or one particular event" (p.58). Of the various types of case studies, the Observational Case Study will be used as the dominant model. In these studies the major data-gathering technique is participant observation and the focus of the study is on a particular organization (school, rehabilitation center) or some aspect of the organization (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

Those cases included in the report have been selected as representative of the overall sample. Several student and faculty cases from each site will be selected representing the range of responses and respondents. The selection of which cases to analyze in detail must be governed by their typicality , their representativeness. Consistency is an important issue as it can also refer to the way different kinds of data relate to each other. The ideal text brings together different kinds of data to bear on the

argument, integrates statistics, description and deep analysis (Ellen, 1984). Every effort has been made to insure the validity of the responses by completing the data collection through a number of strategies. Different responses which are not part of a common theme or concept will be included rather than dismissed. This is in direct contradiction to empirical research which usually dismisses these "outliers." The richness of the interpretation is within the variety and range of the participant responses. The section on data collection will cover those strategies used to collect the data.

Data Collection

The following strategies will be used to collect data:

Collection of School, Student and District Records

Demographic information on the student populations of the alternative school and the overall district was collected. Data, such as curriculum design, incentives and rewards, and instructional strategies, used to assist at-risk students was collected from each school.

Surveying

A survey was given to faculty and staff at each school. The survey reflected the framing questions and gave the researcher a sense of how the teachers felt about the school and its educational mission. Appendix A contains a copy of that survey instrument; At-risk Student Behavior Questionnaire. The survey was part of a study on the effectiveness of school and community-based strategies to help at-risk students. The students were also given a survey which was part of an effort to discover effective strategies to reduce student dropouts. The Drop-out Prevention Questionnaire is in

Appendix B. The framing questions are:

1. How and when are students classified as at-risk?
2. How does learned helplessness contribute to the onset or proliferation of at-risk behavior?
3. What strategies can be used to reduce the onset of learned helplessness and at-risk behavior?
4. What is the relationship between learned helplessness and at-risk behavior?

The researcher recognizes that such a survey can be considered a quantitative measure, but it was used as a method that would compliment the interviews and allow for a better comparison of responses. Siebert (1982) states that “survey results can cast new light on field observations, or more precisely, the serendipitous nature of some survey findings can illuminate a field observation that was once inexplicable or misinterpreted” (p.87).

Interviewing

Both individual and group interviews were held with the faculty and staff of each school. Extensive notes were recorded either by hand or recorder during and after the conversations. I found that taking notes during an individual interview seemed to distract the juvenile and adult participants, but this form of recording did not have the same negative effect during a group discussion. A variation of methods allowed for interpersonal communication of thought, as well as the ability to see the overall culture of the school by focusing on school leaders and group dynamics. Student interviews were performed in the same manner, with the bulk of the information coming from the

individual responses.

Previous situations in school told me that some students became extremely agitated and were distrustful of the use of any type of recording or videotaping devices; therefore I had to write down the responses after these sessions. Responses sometimes came from a range of settings; from a fifteen minute private talk to an impromptu session with several members of the same sex and race. African American males were especially resistant to any form of formal interview, and their previous negative experiences with authority prohibited me from using an office or a closed conference room. Because I have developed a personal relationship with many of my students, we were often able to engage in a conversation, without my having to give them an interview question as a formal prompt. A casual handshake sometimes turned into an in-depth conversation and a counseling session would evoke different responses. This strategy was also used to examine the culture of the school and see what responses were more prevalent when there was a group discussion and when the responses were made individually. Whyte (1960) stated "The whole point of not fixing an interview structure with pre-determined questions is that it permits freedom to introduce materials and questions previously unanticipated" (p.352). Each of the interviews and discussions were held in a manner that encouraged an open-ended conversation, rather than a question and answer session. This was both more comfortable and more revealing in the end. The importance of establishing a rapport led me to more meaningful discourse. With the informal interview, "everything is negotiable". The informants can criticize a question, correct it, point out that it is sensitive, or answer it in any

way they want to. (Agar, 1980)

Observations

Fieldwork may, to a large degree, consist of watching, hanging-around and listening, but its essence lies in interaction. We solicit information directly from particular individuals, prompt them to speak generally about special subjects, pose specific questions, and benefit from them through more diffuse and subtle exchanges. In all cases, these are our informants, respondents and subjects of our research (Ellen, 1984). I observed both formal and informal settings within each site. Classrooms during instruction, cafeteria, student and faculty interaction, parental involvement, central office role, etc. Data was collected from each of the two sites and below is a brief description of those schools and the methods of data collection.

Phoenix/Opportunity School/Site #1

Data was compiled from observation made in 1993 and 1994 when I was employed as the Lead Teacher at the facility. This information was coupled with the observations made in 1995 and 1996, when I was no longer there. While employed, my observations were based upon my everyday contact with students and staff and I was a member of the faculty. The relationships established were more in-depth, based upon the personal and professional contacts made with faculty, staff, and students. This needs to be noted as the interviews and discussions held in 1995 and 1996 might yield different results, since I am seen as an outsider, even though most of the people there still recognize and know me. Because of this familiarity, I was allowed to move freely throughout the entire building and spoke without conditions to all respondents.

Noel C. Taylor Learning Academy: Site #2

Data compiled from observations at this site comes from my experience as the administrator of the alternative program on site. It is important to note that I took this position at a time when the program was in a state of disarray and conflict. My mission was to come in and reorganize and reform the program. Because, I was able to make nearly every level of decision from personnel, curriculum, to discipline, and length of school day, the information gathered is much more complete and in-depth. I began employment here in July 1994 and as of (Feb, 1996), I am still employed as the principal/director. Observations of my students, teachers, staff, and the establishment of the culture are all first-person.

Qualitative researchers try to interact with their subjects in a natural, unobtrusive, and non-threatening manner. The more controlled and obtrusive one's research, the greater the likelihood that one will end up studying the effects of one's methods (Douglas, 1976). An additional concern is that my role as administrator/principal in this program would directly or indirectly affect the responses given by some of the participants. To offset that "observer effect", I attempted not to ask any questions that infringed on our professional relationship. I am also confident that the responses are genuine due to the culture that we have established at this site. The small faculty and staff has formed a close knit family atmosphere that has directly affected the level of performance by both our students and faculty. It is impossible to gauge the negative effect of my role as principal on participant response, but is equally difficult to measure the positive effects as well.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of sorting out the data collected from all the various sources and, in an inclusive process, develop some reasonable conclusions and generalizations. (Brogdan & Biklen, 1982). The process used involved collection, sorting, and interpreting. To insure a consistent organization of the material, the data was immediately divided according to the two dominant groups that gave the information: (a) Teacher/staff and (b) student.

Guba (1985) suggests dividing the data into “units of information”. A unit of information meets two criteria. First it is relevant to the study and has implications beyond its basic content. Second, it is the smallest amount of information that can stand by itself for interpretation. This action brings the analysis from the concrete level to an abstract level that involves interpretation and judgement. The researcher allowed the natural evolution of categories to arise from the data. Colavito (1995) contends that tight control of the categories would deny the free collection of the data as it becomes available. The above process is a form of content analysis, in that the data is analyzed and placed into categories on the basis of the content (p.62). In short, the data collected will be categorized afterwards. Keeping in mind that the questions asked will be in line with the framing questions, I am seeking to discover information by hearing what is said as well as what is not.

The process of sorting and interpreting the information is a pivotal stage as it leads directly to the appearance of common themes and concepts. The discovery of those themes directly affects the conclusions I reach about the data collected.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter gives a representative description of the data collected and the general themes and concepts developed from that collection. The mere task of compiling data and then allowing the data to offer commonality and typicality are the initial steps towards a more valid interpretation. To validate the process of discovering themes and concepts, there was a need for a technique which would decrease the possibility of misrepresentation. The researcher chose *triangulation* due to the numerous strategies used to ferret out the truth. Stake (1995) defines it as: working to substantiate an interpretation or to clarify its different meanings (p.173). This technique will also be utilized in the final chapter which draws conclusions from the data researched and theme identified.

Initially, the chapter offers a profile of the two alternative schools which were selected as sites for this study. When I examine the community, the school, and the staff, I will be able to understand how the culture and environment has evolved. These portraits were developed and organized through the research problem and the framing questions. This segment describes the communities of both schools, the schools themselves, and the staff which employ the strategies to assist at-risk students. After offering a profile of each segment of the participants, I will report the responses. To insure validity and consistency within this process, the compilation of the data is based

upon the framing questions. Question #1 deals specifically with the classification of students as at-risk by faculty and staff as well as by students themselves. Question #2 deals with the characteristics of learned helplessness and its relationship to at-risk behavior. Question #3 talks about strategies or interventions, and #4: the relationships between LH and at-risk. Faculty and student behaviors and responses were sorted into the following areas:

1. Observed and reported student behaviors which are classified at-risk/LH by research and faculty/staff.
2. Observed and reported Student behaviors which are classified at-risk/LH by the student.
3. Observed and reported Faculty/staff interventions (at-risk) (LH) - (effectiveness)
4. Similarities/Differences between LH and at-risk.

Although, not one of the framing questions, I will describe those behaviors, responses and data which are not consistent with the common themes and concepts to insure an inclusive picture of the sites.

Profile of Phoenix/Opportunity School (Site #1)

The community

The Phoenix/Opportunity school is located in Danville, VA. The school serves as the alternative education center for the Danville Public School system. Initially, there was only one site for students who had been expelled from school, but the need for an additional site to serve middle school students led to the establishment of the grant funded Opportunity School in 1993. In 1994, the Phoenix school and the Opportunity School were joined in one building. This occurred because the school district was facing the loss of those funds and a more fiscally conservative city council suggested the

merger into its present format. Danville is a small city located in south central Virginia less than a mile from the North Carolina northern border. It is a town that is dominated by clothing and material manufacturing mills. The city population is nearly fifty percent African American, but leadership of the school board and city council does not reflect that balance as both are predominately Caucasian and upper middle class. The school itself serves the entire city school district and it draws a majority of its students from three housing projects in the city.

The students

The Phoenix/Opportunity School has become an educational placement for students who have been long-term suspended, expelled, or have been assigned because of an inability to adjust to the regular educational setting. Grades 6-12 are the primary grades served, but students in grades 4 & 5 have been assigned here on occasion. The majority of the students are African American (90%) and male (65%). The other 10% of the population is Caucasian. Because the student body has been merged from two different sites, statistics differ based upon grade level. The middle school students are closer to their grade level, while nearly 3/4 of the high school students are below grade level. Currently 85% of the students are receiving free or reduced lunch, which also indicates that they qualify for some form of public assistance due to low income and number of persons in the home. The actual number of students, whose families receive aid, is not available. Nearly 65% of the students are in single parent homes, with a significant number of them being raised by someone other than their birth parents.

Very few of the middle school students reported involvement with the court

system, but nearly 60% of our high school students reported they had had some contact in the past 6 - 12 months. Because of the high rate of turnover from students returning to their base schools, drop-outs, withdrawals, and reassignments; it is very difficult to compile any types of long term information on the students who are in the program. The high school reported a 75% turnover in students from the previous year, while the middle school reported a 40% turnover.

The school

The school is located in an old elementary school in the southern part of town. The high school offers the basic educational courses (English, math, social studies, physical education) with no electives. The students attend the four classes each day and are graded based upon the district policy. There are currently four teachers, one counselor, one instructional aide, and a secretary assigned to the program. In the middle school, there are six teachers, one instructional aide, and a secretary assigned to the site. The school is led by a certified principal. There have been efforts to merge the two schools and the alternative education program is currently undergoing extensive changes. The school district is nearly 50% African American, while the faculty and staff of the district is 25% of the same. The student population is 90% African American and 10% Caucasian. The faculty/staff of the school is 60% minority and 40% majority. All faculty and staff are certified in the area that they teach. The school recognizes the difficult task of preparing a child to become a productive member of society and its mission statement reflects their drive to insure this is accomplished. This is evidenced in their mission statement and goals and objectives listed in Appendix C.

Profile of Noel C. Taylor Learning Academy (Site #2)

The community

The Noel C. Taylor learning Academy is located in Roanoke, Virginia. The school serves as the alternative education center for the Roanoke City Public School System. As discussed earlier, this school evolved from a need to place students who have had some type of trouble adjusting and succeeding in the more traditional educational setting. Roanoke is a medium sized city located in the western part of Virginia in an area called the Roanoke/New River Valley. It is primarily an urban area which has service industries as the main employers in the region. The school itself serves the most urban areas as it draws from four federally funded housing projects, as well as some of the lower middle class areas.

The students

The Taylor Learning Academy serves students who have been expelled, long term suspended, recently released from incarceration, or have been assigned because of an inability to adjust to the regular educational setting. Grades 7 - 12 are served and the school gets its students from both area high schools and all six middle schools. The majority of the students are African-American (93%) and male (65%). The other 7% of the student body are Caucasian. 80% of our students are at least one grade level behind, and 30% of the students are returning to school after being officially dropped from the rolls for non-attendance. 75% of the students have either fathered a child or given birth to a child out of wedlock. Currently 73% of the students are receiving free or reduced lunch, which indicates that same percentage qualifies them for some form of public assistance due to low income and number of persons in the home. Over 65% of the

students are in one parent homes with the majority of them being households headed by a female. I also found that a significant number of our students were being raised by someone other than their birth parents. Nearly a quarter (24%) of the students listed either a grandparent, uncle, or aunt as the head of the household. Other responses included some students who were supervised by older siblings, cousins, and even friends of the family.

I found that nearly 70% of the students (who replied to survey) stated that they had had some level of involvement with the legal system in the past 6 - 12 months. Of the 144 secondary students enrolled, 54 are or were on some form of supervised or unsupervised probation, outreach, or house arrest. Of the 15 participants in a rehabilitation program for drug (related crimes) offenders, 9 are enrolled at the center in one of our educational programs.

The school

The faculty and staff of the Taylor academy was selected to offer quality instruction, and also serve as excellent role models. The curriculum includes the basic subjects as well as a number of electives. By utilizing a traditional block schedule, the students have the opportunity to earn as many as ten units toward graduation each year. The program consists of five programs: A Day Middle and High school, an evening middle and high school, a regional grant-funded program located at another site, an off-site education program, and a new program for students recently from incarceration to transition them back into the regular program. The staff of 28 at Taylor is culturally diverse and represents the make-up of the student body. In direct contrast, the overall

school district is 40% African American, while the faculty and staff of the district is less than 19% of the same. The student population at Taylor is 90% African American and 10% Caucasian. Currently there are over 200 students being served by the program. The faculty/staff of Taylor is 60% minority, and 40% majority, with the largest percentage of the staff being African-American male, which matches the largest segment of the student population we serve. All faculty and staff are certified in the area that they teach and over half of them have a Masters degree.

Each member has been trained in strategies to assist at-risk and low achieving students become more successful inside and outside the classroom. Staff development has included: Dealing with Violent and Aggressive children, Curriculum Integration, Accelerated Learning Modules, Individualized Instruction, etc., The Holistic of “whole child” approach to education has enabled the school to develop a number of strategies to assist students in four areas: 1)Academic achievement 2)self-esteem/self worth 3)Setting Goals and Expectations and 4)Coping Skills. The school reported that they had a 55% turnover rate of students from the previous year. This high turnover has prevented them from accumulating any long term statistics on student performance after they leave or a longitudinal study of improved achievement while enrolled.

There is a recognition that each student must be approached and worked with in an individual manner for that child to experience success. The school also recognizes that part of its is to prepare each child to gain legal and useful skills that will enable them to become a productive member of society. This is evidenced in the mission statement and goals and objectives listed in Appendix D.

Research Findings

Henry Wolcott (1990) wrote in his manual:

The critical task in qualitative research is not to accumulate all the data you can, but to “can” (i.e., get rid of) most of the data you accumulate. This requires constant winnowing. The trick is to discover essences and then to reveal those essences with sufficient context, yet not become mired trying to include everything that might possibly be described. Audio-tapes, videotapes and computer capabilities entreat us to do just the opposite; they have gargantuan appetites and stomachs. Because we can accommodate ever-increasing quantities of data-mountains of it-we have to be careful not to get buried by an avalanche of our own making. (p.35)

Stake (1995) like Wolcott also summarizes quite effectively that it is important to spend the best analytic time on the best data. He states: “Full coverage is impossible, equal attention to all data is not a civil right. The case and the key issues need to be kept in focus. The search for meaning, the analysis, should roam out and return to those foci over and over “(p.84).

When one locates what he terms to be the best data, it is then interpreted based upon the world that you live in. Of all the roles performed by the researcher; the role of interpreter, and gatherer of interpretations, is central. Most contemporary qualitative researchers nourish the belief that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered. The world we know is particularly human construction (Stake, 1995). The following information gathered from the participants is reported in a format which will lead to interpretation based upon the cultural lens of the reader.

Faculty/Staff Survey Results

Teacher Survey (site #1)

The survey: At-risk Student Behavior (1995) was administered to this faculty

and staff to examine how this group of participants viewed the at-risk student population, as well as their feelings on those programs created to assist these student. (See Appendix A.)

The majority of the respondents identified themselves as classroom teachers and the remainder were support staff such as instructional aides, counselors, and administration. The staff identified high self esteem, self motivation, and high parental involvement as the top three reasons that students are successful in school.

It is interesting to note that they also listed good teachers at the same frequency as high parental involvement. Low motivation, poor decisions, and low self esteem were listed as the primary reason that children fail. When asked about why students drop out, they responded: Disliked school, misbehavior, and pregnancy as the top three reasons. They reported that students, parents, and the community were the ones most responsible for insuring that our students get a good education. Faculty and staff stated that all of the support systems and services are available to their students and those students should be expelled when they bring weapons, drug possession and when they assault a teacher.

They believed that race and gender have somewhat of an effect on the students who were placed in special education, and nearly all of them reported that race and gender had a great deal to do with which students were suspended and expelled. The five most frequently observed traits of an at-risk child were listed as: truant, aggressive/violent, low self-esteem, low economic class, and limited parental involvement.

In the section in which they were asked to rate certain programs and support

systems, they reported that alternative schools, counselors, remedial classes, and visiting teachers were effective when working with at-risk students. Special education classes, incentive-rewards, free daycare, and probation officers were somewhat effective, and social service agencies, subsidized housing, and free medical care were seen as ineffective. When asked to rate these agencies according to how they teach self-responsibility/sufficiency to at-risk youth, the ratings stayed much the same.

Teacher Survey (site #2)

The survey: At-risk Student Behavior Questionnaire (1995) was used as a quantitative measure to examine faculty and staff responses in relationship to student behaviors of the students.

Self-motivation, high parental involvement, and high self-esteem were listed as the top three reasons the faculty believed students were successful in school, while they reported that low self-motivation and lack of student effort were the main deterrents to student success in school. Teachers listed a general dislike for school, misbehavior, and boredom as reason that students drop out of school, and said that parents, students and the community are the persons they felt were most responsible for each student getting an education. The faculty recognized that of our students were privy to 10 school or district related support systems. When the topic of discipline was discussed, they listed possession of a weapon, drug possession, assault on a teacher, and assault on a student as the most serious offenses which should lead to expulsion.

On the subject of school supported programs like special education and special services; they reported that issues like race, gender, economic class, and academic

achievement played varying roles in the placement of youth in these programs. The teachers related that race and gender were used in negative and discriminatory fashion which has led to more minority and poor children being assigned to special education classes with little regard for psychological and academic level.

When they were asked to list the most frequently observed traits of at-risk youth; they listed: truancy, aggressive/violent behavior, poor grades, limited parental involvement, and low self-esteem. Because my study involves the effectiveness of support programs; they were asked to rate the effectiveness of local, state and federal programs on dealing with at-risk student behavior. The programs were rated from ineffective, somewhat effective, effective and very effective. Teachers rated the community's view of local schools, at-risk programs, and social service agencies as somewhat ineffective, while the juvenile court system was rated ineffective as was the level of parental involvement. The disciplinary system for at-risk youth and district performance were listed as somewhat effective, while alternative school efforts were listed as effective. When they were asked about the specific support programs created to assist at-risk youth, only as few were given a rating of effective. Incentives and rewards for students were rated ineffective, as was the probation officer and social service agencies (i.e. AFDC, free medical care, welfare, and subsidized housing. The most effective support systems listed are free daycare, alternative schools, visiting teachers, and remedial classes. When they were asked to rate the same programs in respect to how they teach self-responsibility and self sufficiency they listed basically the same programs and their level of effectiveness. To access the validity of the responses from this survey, the results of this survey was discussed with the faculty

and staff. This comparison was essential to validate both the oral and written responses.

Participant Case Studies: Student & Faculty

The case studies described below give a basic overview of the wide range of responses and types of participants that were found at each site. It is important to note that each descriptive case study includes biographical information as well as responses from the interview questions. Due to the number of responses and the amount of information gathered, it was the task of the researcher to include those responses that he felt had some level of significance. It is not a complete portrait of the person nor the site. The findings are just a piece of the puzzle, but a large enough segment to produce some common themes and concepts. Bogdan (1982) summarizes the dilemma of representation and consistency, and typicality in the following passage:

The researcher will often choose an organization, such as a school, and then focus on some aspect of it. Picking a focus, be it a place in school, a particular group, or some other aspect, is always an artificial act, for you break off a piece of the world that is normally integrated. The qualitative researcher tries to take into account the relationship of this piece to the whole, but out of necessity, narrows the subject matter to make the research manageable. Detaching a piece to study distorts, but the researcher attempts to choose a piece that is a naturally existing unit. (The part that is chosen is the one that the participants themselves see as distinct and the observer recognizes as having a distinct identity of its own (p.60)

The following student case studies were classified based upon observed and reported student behaviors and responses to the interview questions, and historical data. Based upon the definition and classifications outlined in the Literature Review, these students could be classified as: Learned Helpless (LH), At-risk (AR), or Resilient (R), based upon the interpretation of their actions and responses. The order or the severity of the designation would deviate from least to most distinguishing characteristic. That is an interpretation that must be made to discern which strategies

need to be utilized for intervention.

Student Case Studies (site #1)

Jamie

Jamie is a twelve year-old African-American male, whose main problem seems to be his temper and his inability to make rational decisions when he becomes angry. He is a small boy whose size often leads to him being called an elementary student while his anger is much larger than his diminutive stature. His early problems started when he began to fight his classmates daily. When a teacher attempted to break the fight up, Jamie kicked and scratched the teacher so severely that medical aid was required. When I met him, he had just been assigned to our school via an expulsion hearing and he sat there with a blank expression on his face. We often talked about cars and because I had a sports car, he immediately became interested in pleasing me so that I could take him home on occasion in my car. Jamie told me that he hated it when people picked on him, but he also admitted that he often poked fun at other students. I asked him why did he seem to get so angry and he told me it was because people left him alone when they saw he was angry. He told me that the best way to help him would be to leave him alone when he gets upset. I asked him did he feel like he was controlling his anger and he felt like it was not a problem, even though it had caused him to be removed from school.

When we started to talk about goals, he told me that he wanted to get back to regular school and wanted to be a mechanic like his father. He also told me that his parents were separated and he lived with his mother and hardly saw his father. Jamie told me that when people leave him alone, he's usually successful in school, but when people bother him he messes up. From my relationship with him, his main coping strategy seemed to be avoidance and it ranged from running away to fighting/lashing out at those who he saw as a threat.

Robert

Robert is a thirteen year old male of mixed race parentage. His mother is Caucasian and his father is African-American. He lives with his mother, but his older brother lives with his father. An unusually bright young man, he was expelled from school for random acts of violence and vandalism at his middle school. Robert told me that he wants to graduate from school, but he keeps on making bad mistakes. Some of those mistakes was stealing, trespassing, assault, and shoplifting. Robert told me that he is smarter than the rest of these bad kids and he doesn't understand why he was sent over here with the rest of these guys. He did not see the similarity between his behavior and that of the other children. He told me that he solved most of his problems by getting back at the people who messed with him. He always struck me as someone with an identity crisis. When we were filling out the demographic section of the Literacy Passport Test, he raised his hand to ask a question. I motioned him to come to my desk and he pointed to the section marked race. He asked me which section box should he check. When I told him that it was his decision, he left the box blank. This

same confusion could be seen when the students grouped together during lunch or breaks, as he often sat alone rather than sit with one race or the other. He told me that he wanted to go to college, so that he could leave Danville, and that he wasn't sure what he wanted to be. Help was something he did not want. He often would leave a section blank, rather than ask for assistance in front of the other students. He was a loner and even though other students would approach him to join in on activities, he would not participate. In January, he was arrested and charged with several counts of shoplifting and burglary and much like his demeanor at school, he did it all alone.

Melissa

Melissa is a sixteen year old Caucasian female, whose only topic of discussion was her boyfriend and when they were getting married. She was assigned to the school because she had gotten so far behind in her studies that it was feared that she would soon drop out. She seldom caused any form of disturbance other than being caught smoking or skipping school to be with her boyfriend who was much older than she was. Her mother and father visited regularly to express their concern that she was missing so much school, and that the boyfriend also was black. Melissa was an average student who was capable of finishing high school if she wanted to. Her main goals seemed to surround her involvement with her man. She wanted to finish school, get married, and get an apartment. When I told her that she could attend college, she told me that it would take too long and she didn't want to leave her boyfriend.

She often commented that she wished her parents would sign the papers so that she could get married now. This decision by her parents caused a great deal of tension. She told me that school was okay, but she hated being in the same place for so long each day. She said she didn't have that many problems and she wasn't as bad as the rest of the students at this school. She wanted more control. She wanted to leave school, get married, and get a place and her parents were keeping her from doing that. Melissa told me that she didn't need school for what she wanted to do in life, since she already had a job at Lowe's and that was where she wanted to be.

Brandy

Brandy is a sixteen year old African American female who stands about six feet two and is one of the best basketball players in the district with the potential to be one of the best in the state. The problem was that her failure to do any schoolwork and her lack of effort had caused her to miss the opportunity to play a full season. She was a young lady who had the support of her family, coach, and community, but she could not get it together to match effort with talent. A student of average ability, she seldom gave any effort above par.

Her mother and father were very supportive and they tried to push her to do her very best in school and on the court, but many of these efforts failed. When she approached me in the fall, she told me that she wanted to regain her eligibility for the upcoming season and we discussed in detail what she had to do. She signed an academic/behavior contract and then proceeded to cause a ton of trouble. She told me

that the only reason she came to school was to play ball and because her mother would kill her if she quit. I asked her how she could be so good on the court and so lackadaisical in the classroom. Her responses told me that she saw no relationship between history and hoops. She told me she was a good basketball player because she had "skills" or an enormous amount of talent. She never had to work hard as the game came very easy to her, but in the classroom, it was a different story. She told me that whenever she was failing a course, her coach, her mother, or the principal would always help her pass it. As a freshmen, she was selected to the varsity girls squad, but she lasted only two months as she was again long term suspended from school for pushing a teacher.

Student Case Studies (site #2)

Angie

Angie is a seventeen year old African-American female whose life has been dominated by violence and turmoil. Since grade school, she has been in some type of trouble due to her behavior and propensity to fight at the drop of a hat. She lives in a female headed, one parent home in a low income neighborhood. She has had numerous brushes with the law. When I first met her she was being charged with aggravated assault and was on active supervised probation. Because of her behavior, she has been arrested several times and has been placed in Juvenile detention. Her problems have led directly to her lack of success in school. When she gets into a fight, she often escalates the conflict to the point that she has cut a few enemies and has brought weapons to school to do the same to others. She is one of four children in the home. Her older sister was the first to graduate from high school in nearly four generations. She has been formally expelled from school two times and has left school due to her problems getting along several times. Her ability level is average and she has the potential to graduate and go on to post-secondary training, but her behavior tends to hinder every effort to assist her.

Angie has been in every form of support program that she qualified for. The family receives public assistance, due to income limitations. She has received remedial classes, school-level counseling, court appointed counseling, private counseling, been in juvenile detention, on juvenile outreach, assigned an outreach counselor, placed in an alternative education program, and still has current charges pending against her for assault. In my own program, she has been through four different components and there has been little success. Her reactions to assistance seem to be further resistance to the help. She shows little remorse for her actions and has told me that she "deserves an education and the services she receives." When I asked her about the numerous chances she had gotten over the past years, she shrugged and said, "I could do my work, if they just leave me alone." She mentioned to me that when she fails, its not her fault and its usually because "someone is messing with me." She told me that she doesn't need other people telling her what to do and she doesn't need people talking to her all the time about her problems. She feels that she does not have a problem.

Jermaine

Jermaine is a seventeen year-old African-American male, whose life direction seems to change with each passing day and idea he has. He came to me last year, nearly two grade levels behind and even though he is less than six feet tall, and weighs about 185 pounds; he told me that he needed to get eligible to play football. This was based upon his current theme of earning a division one scholarship and going onto the pros. I spoke with him about what it would take to accomplish all of his goals and he seemed very interested.; so interested that I allowed him to return to his base school campus to lift weights in the evening. He lifted weights but not any books that semester. He missed nearly half the semester due to skipping, suspensions, and goofing off; but he continued to lift weights. By the end of the semester, he had quit school altogether. By missing fifteen consecutive days, he was automatically dropped from the rolls; but he reported for summer tryouts. When the football coach called to check his grades and attendance, I told him he had neither. Jermaine quietly left the field and proceeded to get into several types of petty crimes which ranged from assault to drug possession to driving violations. These violations brought supervised probation, court funded personal counseling, and community service. When I called him in to talk about returning to school, he told me that he couldn't understand why "ya'll took football away from me." I explained to him that he was aware of eligibility rules and he told me that he would return, because he now wanted to attend college and the judge court ordered him to. His attendance at school was constant for one month, and then he began to miss school and get suspended again. He dropped out again and his last return marked a final request to get in the GED program. He shared with me that the weekend prior he had been robbed at gun point and this was the last time he would "be out there" like that. We talked again and he said he had to leave Roanoke. He told me that he had lost three family members; his mother, cousin, and grandfather, in the past two years. He refused to come back to school and the last time I heard of him he was being sought by the police for trespassing on school property and threatening to kill a student.

Jasmine:

Jasmine is a sixteen year old Caucasian female who has every advantage to succeed, but cannot seem to get over the hump. Even though her parents have separated and she lives with her mom; they both still remain involved in her life. Her family is financially sound and she was given a new car on her sixteenth birthday. She has been in accelerated classes since grade school and was on schedule to graduate early or be able to take college level classes before leaving school. Her aptitude and achievement are both above average; but her most frequent visits have been to the court and the juvenile detention center, not to college campuses. Jasmine says school has been boring to her, but she does not plan to drop out.

She is a likable young lady who is aware of her ability and potential, but she is also even more aware of her ability to deceive and lie. She started staying out all night and skipping school when she got her car. Her job at McDonalds served only as a cover to get out of the house as she often left home to go to work and either did not make it or left early without clocking out. When she came to us she was on juvenile outreach and

before the semester was over, she had run away, stayed out all night on several occasions, and forged notes to leave school early to be with her friends. When asked to explain her behavior she often told me that “she does what she wants, because she wants to.” She told me that punishing her won’t make her do any better and her mother is to blame for letting her have her way before. She also remarked that she has “always been able to do what I wanted, so why is she trying to put rules on me now.” After a few stays in the detention center, Jasmine has pledged to me that she will stop her bad behavior. Her plans include completing college, but she does not know when or where she’s going.

Seth

Seth is a sixteen year old African-American male who has not attended a complete school year or passed a grade in the past three years. As truants go, he is the most truant. Seth complains daily that if he does not want to go to school, then we shouldn’t make him. Although seldom violent, he often becomes profane and abusive when he is confronted with a task he does not feel like completing. He says he wants to work and support himself, but he has no idea in what trade or profession. Once, when we were talking about goals and success, he told me that he did not have any goals and he only liked hanging out in the street. The only stable constant in his life seems to be an elderly grandmother who is too disabled to even venture out the house and a elderly white couple who has taken an interest in him and his sister.

His outlook on life could best be termed: pessimistic. He is reluctant to attempt any form of educational work except drawing on his books and papers. Seth’s homelife and self worth are equally dismal. He does not see himself leaving Roanoke and he awaits the day when he can drop out of school.

Andrew

Andrew is a seventeen year old African American male who, more than most of the other students, has few if any of the socio-economic traits usually associated with at-risk youth. He comes from a two-parent, middle class home, and lives in one of the nicer subdivisions. He is always dressed nicely and is well groomed. Andrew has been in every support program for non-achieving students over the past three years as his achievement levels have steadily declined. He told me that his mother and father give him everything he needs and wants, but he sees no connection between his efforts and his failure. His favorite phrase seems to be “if they would just leave me alone.” The “they “ he spoke of was teachers, principals, counselors, and other students who were always bothering him. I asked him why he had been so successful in middle school and so unsuccessful in high school and he replied that school was fun then and not now. He said that when school was fun, he did a better job and the high school teachers didn’t like him that much. He also told me that his parents were the only reason that he gave any effort in school. Andrew recently got a job and when I asked him how much he was saving, he told me that his parents told him to just use the money as his allowance. The most interesting thing we saw about his parents is that one of them is an educator.

Rochelle

Rochelle is a seventeen year old African American female who has made the best of a bad situation. Rochelle's performance could best be described as an example of resilience. A bright and energetic child, she has had one previous pregnancy end in a miscarriage, has seen her parents split, eventually was raised by her grandmother, has had problems adjusting to high school, and has been expelled for fighting another girl and using a weapon. Even with all of these setbacks, she never let her studies suffer. Even when she gave birth to a little girl three months ago, she was bound and determined to complete her high school diploma and go onto college. She refused to enter the Teenage Mothers' program because it would hinder her efforts to graduate with her class and she told me that no matter what, she would never drop out. When I asked her why she seemed to have problems getting along with some people, she told me that it was because of her bad temper, which she knew she needed to work on. She also told me that much of her success came because she was given a second chance and she made the best of the situation.

Rochelle recently completed all of the requirements for graduation and she plans to attend the local community college part time to become an Licensed Practical Nurse. I told her that she could come to me for help when she needed, and she told me she would remember that, but she hoped she wouldn't need it. She invited me to her graduation in June and she told me she would keep in contact so that I could attend her college graduation too.

Jim

Jim is seventeen year old Caucasian male whose level of motivation is only matched by his level of inactivity. Jim is a student who had the opportunity to complete the majority of his graduation credits last year, but he has managed to circumvent every effort to succeed. Last year, James started the year off on the honor roll and finished the year with straight F's. His parents are divorced and he has used them as pawns in a fierce battle to win his way. He often uses the animosity between the two to get an advantage. His girlfriend, who recently delivered him a second baby son, has dropped out of school and she is constantly trying to persuade Jim to do the same. Jim has often repeatedly committed blatant offenses to be suspended. His reply to his girl friend's recent court request for child support has been to ask his parents for the money and surprisingly his mother gives it to him. His motivation to stay in school now is the use of a vehicle that his mother has purchased for him. He often tells me that he wouldn't stay in school without these carrots. Jim's strategy to cope with problems tends to be avoidance and his actions reflect his lack of motivation and effort. When I asked him about his goals, he replied "I don't know, just get out of school and go to work." His answer was spoken in the same disinterested and nonchalant manner that he uses when he sleeps in class and tosses his classwork in the wastebasket.

Rickey

Rickey is a sixteen year old Caucasian male whose main problem seems to be his total lack of respect for any type of authority. Rickey has a history of truancy, petty crimes, and propensity to burn the bridges of support people. His father is partially disabled and his mother is not in the home. He uses his father's feeble physical condition to take advantage of the lack of supervision. He commented to me that his father just yells at him and on several occasions has called the police when he has stayed out all night or takes the car. He seems interested in the social aspect of school, but school work is not his forte. He told me that the only reason he attends is because he is court ordered to attend. When we talked about his efforts and his level of motivation, he told me that he didn't like school and the reason he fails so much is because school is boring and has too many rules. I asked him if he felt like he was doing his part to be successful and he told me that he was, even though he was failing all of his subjects.

Rickey told me that when he has a problem, he looks for someone who can help him and if he can't get any help; he just accepts whatever happens. Currently he is awaiting sentencing for a number of charges and his past performance in school will not help him at all. Recently, our court liaison reported that Richard told the judge that he needed one more chance to do better. The judge reminded him that he had given him four or five second chances and that he had not shown any progress. Even after that comment by the judge, he granted him another continuance to get his act together.

Brent

Brent is a seventeen year old Caucasian male whose ability to get into trouble is matched only by his father's ability to get him out of it. Since I have known him over the past year, Brent has been to four Disciplinary Review Committees for drug related offenses such as possession on school property (2 counts), distribution/intent to sell on school property, and possession with intent to sell fake drugs. Each of these offenses carry with them supposedly a mandatory one year expulsion from school, but each time his father and him have managed to circumvent the rules with lawyers, a weak superintendent, and dumb luck. When I spoke with Brent about his problems in school, he told me that he had also been arrested in the city for driving without an operators license, driving while license revoked, and possession of a controlled substance. Each of these offenses have resulted in Brent spending not one day or night incarcerated.

His actions are often without any regard for consequence. He has failed nearly every subject since he has been enrolled, even though he has one of the highest achievement/aptitude scores in the city. His actions caused him to lose all privileges and he still tells me that all of the things that happened to him were not his fault. He told me his lack of success is because he does things that other people want to do, but can't. He often speaks about his father in contemptuous tones, and tells me that he (father) is supposed to get him out of trouble when he gets into it.

Arthur

Arthur is a eighteen year old African American male who has fulfilled many of the prophecies that majority America contends that all like him will fulfill. Currently he is serving a 33 year sentence in the state penitentiary for robbery by violence, weapon possession, and second degree murder. When I met him last year, he struck me as a polite and polished young man, who needed opportunities to succeed. In excellent athletic condition, he stands 6'2 with a muscular 220+ pound frame. I was told that he had fallen behind in his studies, and he needed to catch up so that he could be eligible for his last year of high school football. He was a starter and both area high schools contacted me to see what attendance zone he was in to see if he would be added to their roster. In class, he was bright and always respectful and made above average grades. He came from a lower middle class home with two working parents who kept him comfortable. He was not rich, but he had all the tools to make it. When he approached me about continuing his education in college and hopefully playing college football, I contacted a friend who coaches on the collegiate level. We all saw him as a school leader and role model at a school that was badly in need of one.

When I spoke with him, he related some past brushes with the law, but my court liaison told me he had been on unsupervised probation and completed all requirements. But over the next four months, he was to leave the school and become one of the richest drug dealers in the city. He became a collector for the head dealer and then was allowed to sell while he collected. We began to suspect some level of involvement when he started missing school and came often time very tired and depressed. After one long absence, I sat down with him and he explained to me that he was doing what he had to do. He told me that anything you get you have to take and he was not going to spend his life the way his parents were; barely able to make ends meet. He was right, because he was sentenced under the new state law which eliminates parole. Arthur will be at least 45 years old when he is released.

Faculty and Staff Case Studies

The following Faculty/Staff case studies defy classification much like the students, as they are all classified as teachers of at-risk youth. It would be incorrect to assume that because they all work at the same location, they are all part of a homogeneous group with similar thoughts and motives. When we talk about a *group* in an organization as the foci of a study, we are using the word sociologically to refer to a collection of people who interact, who identify with each other, and who share

expectations about each other's behavior. People who share characteristics such as age, race, sex, or organizational position may not however, share "group" membership.

What they share will emerge more clearly when you individually solicit their perspectives rather as well as observe their activities (Bogdan & Bilken, 1982).

Site #1

Jackie

Although small in stature, this lady is one of the biggest reasons for the success of the program. Jackie is an African American female who has the distinction of having the longest tenure with the program. She knows the children, the parents, and the community to the point that students feel they are with a relative. She is soft spoken and compassionate, but she insures that all of her students toe the line in her classroom. While we were together, she taught all of us how to manage a classroom and insure student success.

She told me that the children are not really bad, but they have been placed in bad situations in which they then made bad choices. She told me that there was no such thing as a typical at-risk child, but the ones she sees the most at the school are poor, minority, and most often male. She told me that black males were the ones sent here because of fear and incompetence of the teachers and principals. She said that the lack of strong, black male role models in the public schools has led to the current problem. As a single parent, she was thankful that her father was around for her son when her husband and she divorced. Parents should be the mainstay and they are the ones most responsible for the education of their young, but she also added that at some point, the child must begin to care as well. It was unrealistic to expect teachers, principals and others to raise your child and what ultimately led to some children being labeled at-risk was lack of parental involvement.

When we talked about the support systems, she told me that they tended to treat the people like children and take away their rights in order to serve them. By doing this, they caused the people to stop thinking for themselves and lose their drive to succeed. One theme that she continued to visit was that students are capable of succeeding if we let them know that we have high expectations for them. Teachers and principals who don't expect poor and minority children to succeed usually do everything in their power to insure this belief is fulfilled.

Janet

She is a Caucasian female, whose experience prior to coming here was with rural white kids. Talking with her about working in an urban, minority alternative school showed me just how much culture shock she had to endure. The first statement she made was, "I had no idea it was like this." She told me that she had worked with students in the foothills of Virginia and had never been exposed to black students in this

number and not in this atmosphere. She told me that the students' general distrust of whites seemed to come out each day in class. The term at-risk had meant just truant in her county, and she said that all of the children were definitely at-risk. She told me that the contact she had with parents had been negative for the most part and she thought they should be more supportive of the teachers. She remarked that students often used their parents to get what they wanted and the school and teacher were seen as an adversary. All the efforts to be positive and supportive had met with distrust and rejection.

She did tell me that some students did achieve, while others didn't and the main thing was who gave the most effort. She told me that students who wanted to be successful worked while those who did not usually slept or disturbed class. She lamented that too much was expected of the teacher as she had to daily suffer with excessive profanity and abusive behavior. She could not understand why these students seemed to be so hostile and she recalled an incident when an enraged student turned over several desks in the room because she had written him up for skipping class.

She said that too much was expected of this program and the staff because we could not change behaviors and attitudes that had taken years to develop. She told me that this year was the most challenging of her professional career. At the end of that year she left the program and the school system to take a job in the more rural part of the state.

Wesley

Wesley is one of three ministers who are employed at the site. An African American male, whose role in the community includes pastor of a local church, athletic official, and father of two. He is a twenty-five year veteran of the school system and he knows the students and their parents well because he taught many of them. Much of our conversations centered around the double role he had to perform as both an educator and a pastor of many of the children that he served. He told me that the school system and the community could be held directly responsible for the present plight of our children. Each year, he sees more parents at athletic events than P.T.A. meetings and they make very little fuss when their children are constantly put out of school and warehoused in sub-par facilities. As the leader of the Black Ministers Association, he serves as an advocate for the rights of African Americans.

Much of his disdain and dissatisfaction with the school system has centered around their reluctance to hire more black teachers and administrators. Although he and a number of black teachers were certified in administration, very few had been elevated to administrative positions and only one black had been assigned a central office position. Parents, students, and the community should be enraged over the treatment of black kids, he told me and it was a shame that they were not. He told me that many of the programs were unsuccessful because there were insufficient funds and incompetent personnel appointed to run them. He also told me that because this program had been so successful, the reaction from the school board was not to increase the allocation of funds and personnel, but rather to decrease it even more to see if they could perform any more miracles.

He said that we needed to teach not only the children, but also the parents that they are being cheated when they accept less than the best effort from themselves. His message seemed to be that the program was set up to fail, and because it had succeeded for the most part, the new challenge was to make do with even less.

Jake

The first administrator of the program is an African American male, who has since left the program. When he arrived, there was a great deal of expectation and trepidation surrounding his appointment. Community leaders and the current faculty were incensed about the fact that he had been given the position over some other established administrators in the district. Some of the concern was over the fact that he had not completed his masters, was not certified to teach or be an administrator, and he had no experience leading a school. This coupled with the fact that other experienced African American candidates had been passed over for a younger, less experienced person who many thought was chosen because he could be easily manipulated.

When I talked with him about the students, he told me that the concept of at-risk was constructed by the schools which wanted to get rid of them. He also added that these students lack the motivation and the support to achieve as much as they should. He said that students needed more parental support and less school intervention. We often talked about the expectations of the parents not matching the effort they put forth in raising their children. Teachers and principals were often used as scapegoats when students fail. He told me that students often attribute success to their effort, but when they fail, they blame everyone else but themselves.

He shared with me that much of the trouble he had the year he was there was that people second guessed each decision he made and later gave him no support with the students. He saw the entire school as an experiment that was destined to fail because there was not sufficient resources allocated to accomplish what we were trying to do.

site #2

Janet

Janet, an African American female, is a ten-year veteran of the city school system and she is most admired for her even tempered and compassionate manner with the students. The mother of three children who also attend in the system, she is a veteran of the alternative school program. She has been with the program for the past five years and she has expressed to me several times that she prefers to work with difficult children. She is one of the teachers who survived the transition as she was on staff during the long and complicated conflict between my predecessor and the school administration over tenure, pay, and job security. She is a master teacher, whose compassion is matched only by her skill as an instructor. Because she is an experienced teacher of at-risk students, a mother of three in our system, and she has seen the evolution of the program, she will serve as an excellent case study.

Janet shared with me the transformation of the at-risk student. She told me how

initially only poor, minority children with serious behavioral problems were labeled as at-risk. She has seen the determination change to include students who are middle class, average or high ability, and more and more white students. She feels that this move away from just poor black kids to white kids has led to an increase in funds for the program, but still not enough to make a substantial difference. She told me that students and parents should take more responsibility for their own condition. She shared with me that school boards seldom are cognizant of the real problems of the community. The support systems are so numerous that she found herself naming ten or twelve just in our program. She said any program could be effective if it was administered correctly. She explained how additional funds are okay, but we need more experienced and effective teachers who are both compassionate and competent. The term at-risk gives her some problems as she told me that based upon the definition she knew, most of the children in the city could be called at-risk at some time or another. Students achieve based upon their own drive to succeed and she reiterated that low parental involvement and lack of student responsibility as the main reason that some students make it and sometimes they don't.

Ed:

Ed is a neophyte math teacher whose first experience has been in this educational setting. As a Caucasian male, whose early life was in the suburbs of Boston, his assignment as a teacher in alternative education program has caused a great deal of a culture shock. He told me that his largest hurdle has been realizing that some of the students lack the motivation to even attempt some of the strategies we have developed to help them. He commented that students seem to assume that we will always be there to help them. The lack of motivation and effort by the students often caused him to lose the motivation to make continuous changes in instruction. He told me that students are at-risk when they feel they are at-risk and not when someone else labels them that. The conscious choice not to try and not to give any effort is what makes them at-risk.

He believes that the responsibility of getting a good education is usually shifted to everyone except the student. There needs to be a change in this assumption as parents and students should be held more accountable for their own efforts. He did mention that being in the minority in this environment has sensitized him to what black kids go through, but he still feels that those who want to succeed can and those who do not want to; will not. He said that support programs, like the Academy, were good for some kids, but for others it was just a dumping ground used by the base schools. He commented that the students often brag about the many time that they had "gotten over" on the courts, police, school, and other support agencies. In this respect, Ed told me that these programs are actually hurting the child as they begin to believe that there are no consequences for their actions. He mentioned a case of one of our students who had been arrested multiple times for drug possession on a school campus and still was allowed to come to school. That was sending the wrong message to other students and setting this student up to take a big fall later in life.

Jennifer

Jennifer is also a new teacher and her first year teaching was spent here at the Taylor Academy in 94-95. She is a Caucasian female straight out of college and she readily admits that nothing she learned in her education classes prepared her for what she has had to endure over the past two years. She shared the belief of most of the staff that those students who make some level of effort are usually successful, while those who do not make any effort are failures. She said that students seem to expect us to let them slide and not hold them accountable for their actions. She made the comment that the girls seem to make the most effort, but they also tend to be the most difficult to work with and approach.

When I asked her about the concept of at-risk and our students, she told me that plenty of the students in the district could be labeled at-risk, but these students here are given that name because they are the most difficult to work with. Teachers in the base schools tend to lose patience or become intimidated by the aggressive nature of our kids, and just want to get rid of them. She said that success with at-risk students can be seen when you help them realize that they need to change their behavior and show them the positive outcomes associated with that change. The amount of profanity and aggressiveness of our students come from their own environments, that have taught them that their behavior is okay. She saw her role as more like a guide who tries to show them where each path leads and hope they choose the right one. The biggest problem is that the other negative path is so easily chosen and the kids don't see the pitfalls until they have already fallen in.

AL

In his position as instructional aide, Al has seen his role transform from a security guard to a teacher, counselor, and mentor to the students. An African-American male, whose career as a professional athlete prepared him for many things, but not the current condition of our youth. Al has seen schools become little more than holding pens and warehouses for problem students and children that parents are either incapable or unwilling to raise. He told me that the entire concept of at-risk is a label that describes most of the children who are unable to cope with their present condition. He lamented over the fact that blacks had given away all of their heritage to be called retarded, at-risk, and learning disabled. Much of the problem is that parents and students don't understand that it is their responsibility to get a good education.

He told me that even though the students are given every possible advantage and opportunity to achieve, they often rebel against the very success they say that they crave. "The school system and the city is in a state of denial", he said, because the school board, parents, and community leaders fail to see the urgency of the current situation. Students are becoming more aggressive, more violent, and more daring in their attempts to rebel against the system. He told me that parents need to wake up and realize that by failing to raise their own kids, they are sealing our doom by destroying our future. Even though we give them love, acceptance, guidance, and direction here in school, we are usually unable to reach them because the majority of their world is

outside of this school and our grasp. He concluded that unless the community steps up and demands better for their children and takes an active role in that task, the number of children being labeled at-risk will rise, the number who go to jail will increase, and the number who die will multiply.

Deborah

She is the mother of two children in the school system and the wife of a minister. This traditional role might have her being seen as a quiet and unassuming, person but she is not. She is an African-American female whose mothering instincts and street smarts makes her an excellent middle school teacher. When we began to talk about the children, she immediately began to call them "our children". She told me that much the problem is because, we have decided that these children are not ours as has everyone else who has abandoned them. Their parents do not care enough to claim them, the base schools have discarded them, and here is their last hope. She accepts that challenge by acting like a mother to those who do not have one. She told me that society and the community is at-risk and not the child. Those students who fail will also help the community to fail and those who succeed will uplift the community. She told me that the schools need to recognize those problems that affect our students and stop living in the past. Even though, a majority of our students have children, the district will not provide daycare and early education programs to break the cycle of poverty. When I asked he about what role we should play, she told me that parents and the community should take the lead and we should aid them in any way we can. She said that the break down of the family unit, especially in the black community, has led to the problems of crime, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy.

Ray

Ray has been with the alternative education programs almost from its beginning and he has the ability to tell us the most about the transformation of the programs from a back room in the YMCA to the current site in the renovated shopping center. An African-American male, who serves as assistant principal, he is a mainstay in the community and because he knows all of the students, their parents, and the neighborhoods, he is invaluable. He told me that students who end up at our school are usually no more at risk that others, but they have been placed her because the schools either are afraid of them or tired of messing with them. He has often remarked that our enrollment would be tripled if we allowed the schools to send everyone they wanted. The main problem seemed to be the parents who either didn't care enough, were unable to keep up with their kids, or spoiled their kids to the point that they were unmanageable. He told me that parents had given up their rights as parents and had passed the duty over to the schools as long as it was convenient.

He shared with me that the worst culprit was the juvenile justice system, which was geared only to arrest and set our kids up for failure. The support systems led to a second type of slavery he told me because poor people and blacks became so dependent that these handouts became the new masters. When I asked him about achievement, he told me that students make it when they have been taught and use a work ethic,

regardless of being labeled at-risk. Students who learn that programs which give without conditions are meaningless and they expect the handouts without working for them. He always commented about the community and the school board which seemed to be oblivious to the many problems that the school system was suffering under. The fact that each year, fewer and fewer black teachers were hired to replace the ones retiring proved this point. You cannot teach those you do not know nor care for was the message.

While he has been in education, he has seen the role of the teacher become that of a babysitter and a scapegoat. When parents want us to keep their students out of their hair, we're their friends; but when a student needs to be disciplined, we're the villains. He told me that the best role we could take would be to help our students learn to be responsible and take charge of their life. The most successful students he mentioned were those who had taken themselves out of the projects and became productive members of the community. These students had learned the most important lesson: you have to work and earn everything you get.

Comparison of Key Elements

All researchers recognize the need not only for being accurate in assessing things but logical in interpreting the meaning of those measurements. It is true that researchers deal with many complex phenomena and issues for which no consensus can be found as to what really exists--yet they have ethical obligations to minimize misrepresentation and misunderstanding. I need certain triangulation protocols or procedures that go beyond simple repetition of data gathering to deliberate effort to find the validity of data observed (Stake, 1995) In an effort to insure that the data collected is valid and consistent, I incorporated triangulation so that the information gathered from the faculty/staff and students was gathered in a number of ways and to decrease the likelihood of ambiguity and situational responses.

Faculty/Staff Responses

The sorting of this information is based upon the responses to the interview questions, reports and observations. All faculty/staff were asked the same basic questions and responded to identical surveys.

The survey responses showed a similarity of faculty/staff beliefs and actions.

Both sites identified student success link to three central factors: high self motivation, significant parental involvement, and high self-esteem. The only difference in the response was:

*Site#1's inclusion of good teachers as a factor toward student success.

*Student failure was attributed to low motivation, poor effort and low self esteem. The response to why students drop out was nearly identical except site #1 listed teenage pregnancy while #2 listed boredom as a factor.

*Each site had the same support systems, with the exception being site #2 did not serve special education students.

To maintain consistency of sample, students with active special education placements were not included in either of the samples. Both sites stated that parents and students were the persons most responsible for student academic success. There was very little difference in the opinions about special education placement, expulsions, and reasons for expulsion. Both sites recognized a negative use of race and gender in the suspension and expulsion of students and the rate at which minority and male students were placed in special education classes.

When they were asked to describe the basic characteristics of an at-risk student, the only attributes they agreed upon were that they were usually truant, sometimes violent/aggressive, with low self-esteem. Surprisingly, they did not mention low grades as a factor, even though a great deal of their students were at least one grade level behind.

Faculty and staff gave ratings of ineffective to somewhat effective to the eleven support systems listed on the survey and none of the support systems, including alternative schools at which they worked, was given a rating of extremely effective.

When they were asked to make the same type of rating according to whether the programs taught students self responsibility or self-sufficiency, each program received even lower ratings.

Faculty/Staff responses matched those given in both group discussions and individual interviews. The faculty and staff at the Phoenix/Opportunity School seemed to be less certain of the direction of the school. This may be due to the recent removal of the manager and the upheaval caused by the assignment of another administrator to head the program. The faculty and staff were interviewed and hired by the former administrator and they were still in the process of getting accustomed to the new administrator. The faculty and staff of the Taylor Academy were selected by the present administrator with the exception of two persons. This might have led to a better understanding of the direction of the program, since they were all involved in the formulation of strategies to improve instruction.

Student Responses

The sorting of this information will be based upon the interview questions and how student responses, behavior, observations, and interviews lead to my own interpretation. It is also significant to note that all students were asked the same basic interview questions and responded to the same survey.

The students at the Taylor Academy and Opportunity school had answered the questions previously on a survey developed by my faculty committee for the purpose of selecting solutions more in line with student needs and expectations. I found that the students listed the following as the top four reasons that they might drop out of school.

- 1.Student gets pregnant or fathers a child.
- 2.School is boring.

3.Lack of success in school

4.Trouble with the law/ Need a job.

These answers were consistent with what I found out in the interviews and discussions. Overwhelmingly, the females indicated that lack of daycare caused them to miss school, while that was not the case with the males. Females tended to list external reasons, such as daycare, for not regularly attending school at a higher rate than males. This may be associated with the fact that females or their families are the principal caregivers of the child and not the father or his family.

The large majority of the students mentioned that it is the “job” of the school to make sure they graduate. Their status as juveniles made them the responsibility of the school, parents, and the community. My follow-up question was always what is your role or responsibility in your finishing your schooling?, and the common theme was that they knew it was also their responsibility, but because it was our job and we got paid for it; adults were ultimately responsible. In an attempt to equate their grades with pay, nearly all students said there was no comparison. The students spoke often of the responsibility of adults for looking out for them. This is ironic in that most of the students I spoke with told me that they were grown and not kids; something we (adults) needed to realize. Many saw no contradiction in their floating status as adults and they often went from demanding adult/grown-up rights to asking for privileges only afforded to children/juveniles. Few students told me they earned grades for fun or enjoyment. Many said they came because you had to have a diploma to get a decent job, get off probation, get a lighter sentence, and keep their parents off their backs. A few students did say they enjoyed school, while the majority said that most of the subjects taught

were not relevant to their lives.

On issues of success, the overwhelming majority of the students told me that when they are successful, it is due to their own effort and ability. But when asked, why they had failed, a clear majority responded that it was because of “them”. I attempted to find out who “they” and “them” were. It ranged from stupid teachers who were constantly picking on them to power hungry principals, sorry cops, bad parents, associates (friends), and several other responses. A small number of the students admitted that much of the problems they had were due to their bad decisions and lack of effort, but this was a small minority. I also found that in group settings, this response of personal responsibility was less likely to be heard, while in private conversations, some students would more readily admit personal responsibility for failure. It seemed that students were less likely to respond like this in a group setting, because they knew it might not be an acceptable answer.

In private conversations and small group sessions (three or less students), I found that students were enthusiastic about and willing to discuss their goals in life. Some students were uncertain of their goals, and a large number of them had goals that did not match current academic achievement and social behavior. For example, the majority of our students responded on the survey that they desire a four year degree, while their current pace of academic progress and behavior may preclude them from even attaining a GED. In an effort not to discourage their goals and dreams, I never spoke negatively about the lack of correlation between effort and achievement, but asked questions which I hoped would allow them to realize that there were some inconsistencies between what they said and what they were doing. Few students saw the inconsistency and held to the lofty goals. It seemed as if they were answering according

to a script. When educators attempt to motivate children, they don't motivate them by saying, complete your education and get a job as a janitor, maid, or flipping burgers. Teachers often use high paying occupations like doctor, lawyer, computer analyst, or nurse and my students were still repeating those same themes they had heard since grade school.

Now that I have heard what the teachers and students have said, it is my task to attempt to understand it based upon the concept of at-risk and learned helplessness. The next chapter examines how the participant responses correlate with the definition and social construction of the two concepts.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS & REFLECTIONS

Conclusions

As discussed earlier, the framing questions will be used as a guide to direct the interpretation of research findings. This format will insure that the conclusions discussed will be enhanced through the use of two strategies: Categorical Aggregation and Direct Interpretation. Two strategic ways that the researcher reaches new meaning about cases are through direct interpretation of the individual instance and through aggregation of instances until something can be said about them as a class or group (Stake, 1995). At the sites, each participant's action, or lack of was interpreted based upon the identity of the person and how that action/inaction related to the responses of the overall group. To that end, I will make generalizations based upon the establishment of patterns.

Question #1: How and when are students classified as at-risk?

The determination of which students are classified as at-risk is a subjective process with respect to the school, the faculty and staff, the parent, community, and the student. Basically, there are two points of view: that of the student and of people other than the individual student. The faculty/staff participants responded that the classification of students as at-risk is based upon the three areas: Achievement, Behavior, and Expectations. This belief was substantiated by the written responses on the At-risk Student Behavior Questionnaire, as well as the verbal responses collected in

the individual and group interviews.

Students were either unclear or uninformed about the definition or attributes associated with being at-risk. When questioned about the definition and the fact that they had been classified as such, the common answer was that they were the same as the rest of the kids in school. This lack of clarity when it came to self definition seems to be quite common among youngsters and adults alike. Seldom do poor people see themselves as such until they come in contact with rich people, nor do children see themselves as dumb or slow until they are compared to other students who have been labeled bright. The Social Learning theory of Rotter (1972) that integrates learning and personality theories also stresses the fact that the major or basic modes of behaving are learned in social situations and are inextricably fused with needs requiring their satisfaction or the mediation of other persons. The theory comprises four basic variables: behavior potential, expectancy, reinforcement value, and the psychological situation (Rotter, Chance, & Phares, 1972).

This environmental theory of behavior is directly linked to the premise upon which students are labeled at-risk. It explains how AR students react in their environment based on the four variables. Because the adults identified at-risk characteristics based upon behavior, expectations, and achievement, the correlation with Rotter's theory is significant. It states that Behavior potential is the probability that an individual will act in a certain fashion relative to alternatives. Behavior includes observable and covert acts (e.g., thinking, planning) that can manifest themselves in behavior. The attribute of behavior, as related by the faculty/staff is in line with the assertion that at-risk students behave in accordance with their reactions

to alternatives. Students who do not fear or respect authority rank alternatives differently and therefore the actions they display are not in line with societal or institutional expectations.

Expectations, as defined by faculty/staff, also differ from those of students. Teacher expectations of student behavior, achievement, and social morals may differ to a point that each group is reacting based upon different scales. The theory defines expectancy as an individual's belief concerning the likelihood that a particular reinforcement will occur following a specific behavior (Schunk & Pintrich, 1996). Students who come from a different environment, might not feel the need to perform academically if they only expect failure due to previous experience with it.

The reinforcement value refers to how much individuals value a particular outcome relative to other particular outcomes (Schunk & Pintrich, 1996). When this attribute coincides with achievement and behavior, students may value being removed from class more than attempting an assignment, because they assume that failure and humiliation may occur in that setting due to an inability to comprehend the subject matter. The idea of grades being a substitute for actual pay was readily dismissed by the students, while faculty/staff readily saw and accepted the correlation. This mismatch of motivation and effort result from a difference in value systems. How each group arrived at these values is a subject of intense debate.

The psychological situation, which highlights the importance of the context of behavior, seems to encompass all three areas addressed by the adult participants. The value of an education is a part of the teacher's world, while the student might place little value in it. This obvious contradiction in social construction of the world with

respect to age, ethnicity, income, religion, and other cultural factors may lead to a student being classified as at-risk. Any number of personal, family, school, or community experiences can change how a young person views the world. The following theory examines the role of environment in the development of behavior and motivation.

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory is based on several key assumptions that concern a)the reciprocal nature of influence among personal, behavioral, and environmental factors; b)the relation of learning to motivation; and c)the enactive and vicarious sources of behavioral change. The behavioral-personal interaction can be exemplified with perceived self-efficacy, or beliefs concerning a person's capabilities to perform actions in designated levels. Bandura describes the framework of the triadic reciprocity as follows:

In the social cognitive view people are neither driven by inner forces nor automatically shaped and controlled by external stimuli. Rather human functioning is explained in terms of a model of triadic reciprocity in which behavior, cognitive and other personal factors, and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants of each other. (p.18)

How and when a student is classified as at-risk is as dependent upon the attributes of the classifier as by the attributes of the student. Personality, sexual and racial bias, cultural expectations, morals, religious beliefs, and institutional guidelines lead toward a determination of one child being classified in one school, while another with similar or more serious attributes is not.

Based upon the information gathered from the contact with participants, I have identified the following general themes about student at-risk behavior. These themes are not reported as the characteristics of all the participants, but from a majority of

those who participated. Some students did respond in a different manner, but these are based upon a representative sample, which shows a presence of at-risk behavior and learned helplessness.

- 1) The majority of the student participants do express positive goals and expectations about their lives and the lives of their children, but many of these goals are inconsistent with current academic and personal performance. For example, a student who has missed 55 days out of a 90 day semester, asserting that he can pass all his courses. A student who has failed every course since entering high school expects to graduate with honors. A student who does not complete any courses, but maintains that he will be eligible for sports. A student who is terrible at math and science and states he will be a doctor.
2. The majority of the students attribute personal success to their own ability and effort (internal), while failure is normally attributed to outside external forces such as teachers, school, friends, police and others.
3. The method for dealing with problems is usually to take the path of least resistance. To earn money and get a car; students sometimes sell drugs or take money from another person. Earning a high school diploma takes too long and requires too much effort. Coping strategies are based upon what can eliminate the problem in the quickest manner with least amount of effort and no retribution from the student.
4. The majority of the students do not understand the concept of delayed gratification. Efforts to acquire wealth and prestige immediately has led to illegal activity for some.
5. Help and assistance are expected and students recognize the many avenues from which it will come. Students seldom express any level of personal responsibility for actions

as they expect a second chance, no matter how many times they mess up. Generally, students express little remorse over the bad decision, but more for the fact that an adverse consequence may result from it.

Question #2: How does LH contribute to the proliferation of at-risk behavior?

At the heart of the continuation of LH and the debilitating effects associated with negative behavior is the absence of effective coping strategies (Mikulincer, 1995). Teachers responded that student achievement is directly related to effort and motivation. The level of motivation is contingent upon the three areas identified by Bandura in his social cognitive theory. My theory is that students who lack the coping skills necessary to address the long term effects of LH are more prone to engage in AR behavior. This may be due to their inability to cope with negative environmental factors which lead to equally destructive behaviors.

LH contributes to the proliferation of AR behavior by shaping the cultural lens that each person uses to construct their world and the coping skills students develop are associated with that view. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) coping responses serve to manage a mismatch between an actual course of events and what a person wants in that situation. Some responses are designed to restore the disrupted equilibrium between the person and the environment by attempting to change either the environment or oneself (p.34).

The conclusion I arrived at is that if a student has AR characteristics, the introduction of strategies which teach LH will intensify that condition. Faculty/Staff responses coincide with this conclusion as they reported that students who take

advantage of programs and strategies which fail to teach self efficacy and relevant coping skills based upon a personal locus of control, are often prone to continue their participation in at-risk behavior. The faculty/staff also agreed with the conclusion reached by other researchers, who found that students who have both AR characteristics and resiliency attributes are more successful than those who do not (McMillan, Bishop & Reed, 1993).

Question #3: What strategies can be used to reduce the onset of LH and AR behavior?

The review of literature outlined the attributes of successful alternative programs as well as those of effective strategies to produce resiliency in students. Faculty/Staff identified those attributes which they felt lead to student success. They listed: high self motivation, significant parental involvement, and high self-esteem. The only difference was that good teachers were listed nearly as much as high self esteem. Self-motivation and self-esteem could be described as internal (intrinsic) factors leading to success, while parental involvement and good teachers would be classified as external (extrinsic) factors. The marriage of the internal and the external is the subject of constant debate over which has the most effect on student success.

When developing any program or strategy to reduce LH and AR, it is my view that the most effective and long lasting effects come from those based upon intrinsic motivation. That assertion is supported by educational research. Harter (1982) states that intrinsic motivation relates positively to perceived competence and internal control. Students who believe they are competent enjoy tasks more and display greater intrinsic motivation than do students who judge their competence lower. The efficacy model outlined earlier describes such a strategy with students developing coping skills

based upon a student's perception that his/her own effort and ability will determine the level of success. Attributional Motivational theory proposes that personal and environmental conditions lead to the attribution of ability leading to the casual dimensions of stability, locus, and control. The psychological consequences of these dimensions are expectancy of success, self-sufficiency, and affect. The result are behavioral consequences such as choice, persistence, level of effort, and achievement (Weiner, 1982, 1992). In short, it is the perception of yourself and the environment that leads to the expectancy of success or failure. Students who attribute their past success to personal, controllable characteristics like effort and ability rather than uncontrollable characteristics such as luck and competence of teachers are better able to meet differing levels of difficulty in tasks (Jospheh, 1993).

The teachers mentioned programs which utilize controllable attributes to help our students overcome the failure associated with LH or AR behavior. None of the support systems were rated as extremely effective in teaching self-responsibility and sufficiency; including the alternative programs they taught in. Students regularly rated all of the support programs which gave monetary assistance as the most effective, while long term programs which did not pay money but rather taught skills necessary to obtain employment were rated as ineffective to somewhat effective. Students attributed success to effort and ability, while they attributed failure to external factors.

The mismatch between ability and achievement evidenced in our school is consistent with the results of several studies on expectancy of success which showed that minority children had equal or higher expectations for success, yet had lower levels of performance. Some studies find that self-perception of ability or efficacy are

linked to academic achievement in the same fashion (Taylor, Casten, Flickinger, & Roberts, 1994). However, Graham (1994) notes that in the many studies she reviewed, the actual performance measures, such as grades or standardized tests, showed that African Americans had lower levels of performance, yet they had higher self-perceptions of ability.

This reflects the notion that simply having high expectations does not lead to high achievement. The majority of our students listed four year degrees and professional positions as their goals, but these expected goals did not match the effort. Due to the large number of minority students who are classified as at-risk due to such factors as poverty and its adverse effects; these findings are not surprising. Self-definition and a mismatch of perceptions and reality exist in worlds warped by racism, sexism, and classism.

The faculty/staff reported that any program which teaches students a work ethic and allows them to gain social and occupational skills, such as an alternative school or vocational programs, was most effective in decreasing the effect of LH and AR. Students identified support programs, such as free daycare and subsidized housing, which offered monetary assistance and reduced restrictions on movement and actions as the most beneficial. The obvious disparity between the principles and structure behind each of these belief systems explain the proliferation of at-risk and learned helplessness in society due to different point of views held by each segment. How each group arrives at these different points is based, in part on maturity level and co-existing perceptions. It is also attributed to different environmental factors within the context of generational

changes

Question #4: What is the relationship between LH and AR behavior?

The findings raised additional questions as to whether one condition leads to the other, whether one condition intensifies the other, and whether the two co-exist and in what proportion. The answer to that question will require additional research, but the co-existence of the two can be easily proven as evidenced by the similarity of attributes associated with each condition.

The initial step was comparing the attributes of LH and AR is to determine if there are similarities. If so, then it is plausible that some of the same strategies might produce similar positive results. In the research findings, I outlined the shared characteristics of the two. To further validate this comparison, during a group discussion I asked teachers to describe those attributes they associate with being at-risk and the descriptors given matched, with small variation, the descriptors used to describe learned helplessness. These descriptors include: High level of frustration, anxiety, uncertainty, aggression, stress, distress, fearful, low motivation, expectations, self-esteem, cognitive development, and effort are reported by LH and AR researchers, as did my adult participants. This leads to the assertion that if I identify the presence of them both, then I may be able to attack their causes and treat the symptoms with measurable success. I found it equally important to note that in some instances, the classification of students as LH may be just as biased and jaded as the classification of AR.

Implications

Drawing implications is akin to stating recommendations but allows the researcher to remain more distant and contemplative (Wolcott, 1990). A number of implications regarding elements needed to effectively assist at-risk and learned helpless students came from the data. These elements led to the development of effective coping strategies which reduce the probability of the development of and/or proliferation of at-risk and learned helpless behavior.

Program Development

Both sites recognized that one of the essential components of developing effective programs for at-risk students is to insure that the program is a) developed and staffed by a competent personnel b) that the components of the program taught self-responsibility and self-efficacy, and c) that ample funding is made available for the successful completion of the mission. The faculty and staff of each school recognized that without these three basic attributes, the school is more likely to fail. In their responses, many teachers lamented about the lack of funds made available for the task they are asked to perform. Teachers told me that they are asked to work with the most difficult students usually with the least amount of resources and assistance.

Effectiveness of the programs hinged on the selection of a competent school leader and supporting cast. Because working with at-risk students tends to be exhausting mentally and physically, faculty/staff said that only persons with the right demeanor should be selected for these programs. I found that at each site, all teachers were certified in the area they taught, and each staff was continuously involved in staff development and in-service programs which offered training to sharpen their

instructional, counseling, and facilitating skills. The faculty and staff at each site all volunteered for the assignment at the school, with only a few exceptions.

In my experience as a teacher and administrator, I have school districts staff alternative schools that with the cast aways and deserters from the general personnel pool. Assignment to such a site often was the result of poor instructional skills, a person nearing retirement, or a person being punished for some transgression against a principal or district administrator. Seldom are the most competent, experienced, and motivated teachers assigned to these programs as some districts see it as a waste of talent on the talentless. Both school districts do not follow this recipe and only one of the faculty and staff assigned to both school was there without administrative or site approval.

Every faculty member complained about the apathetic behavior of the students, their parents, and the general community when it came to taking responsibility for the education of the youth. Students commented that it was the "job" of the teachers to insure they (students) received a good education. Comments like "school is boring, school is not fun, teachers are the main reason that we fail, and if they would just leave me alone, I could pass my classes"; are examples of how students have shifted the responsibility from themselves to the faculty and staff of the schools. None of the support programs utilized by the students, including the alternative schools that teachers taught in, were rated as extremely effective by the faculty and staff.

The main reason they saw these programs failing was their inability to teach student self-responsibility for their actions, which often lead to continued deviant

behavior. The support programs have a noble purpose, but it is lost when students believe they “deserve” the assistance without restrictions. The fact that students rated programs like free day care and subsidized housing as most effective, while teachers rated work intensive programs like alternative schools and remedial instruction as most effective underscores this difference in focus and direction.

Faculty and staff recognized the negative effect of poverty, racism, and other forms of discrimination on the students, but they generally agreed that students needed to understand that these obstacles should inspire them to achieve rather than be used as excuses for bad behavior. These responses were consistent with my belief that holding people responsible for their actions is not blaming the victim, but rather empowering them to be part of the solution.

Much like other schools, both alternative and traditional, faculty and staff lamented about the lack of funds to complete the very important mission of educating these at-risk students. Neither school had access to a gymnasium on site, transportation to and from school only recently improved, neither school had its lunch meals prepared on site (no functioning kitchen), only one site offered elective courses to its secondary students and those were limited, central office administration tended to dictate certain decisions which were site based at other schools, and there were not additional stipends paid to teachers of the at-risk students even though the district recognized the difficulty of the task. Neither site had a school resource officer, even though a good number of the students are violent/aggressive, and both sites are over capacity in student enrollment.

The faculty and staff of both sites stated that this lack of support directly affected

their effectiveness with their students. Classrooms designed for ten to twelve students often held 16 - 19. Central office administration would often place students at the center without informing or conferring with the site administrator and base schools would dump problem students at each site to bolster graduation rates and reduce their number of student withdrawals. Even with these impediments, each school has steadily improved student attendance, number of courses passed, improved standardized and non-standardized test scores, and improved their graduation rates. It seems that their ability to do so much with so little has led to them being asked to do more with even less.

Both the faculty and the administration of both sites stated that they could be more successful if they were given the needed funds. They said that as the number of at-risk students grew, so would the need for additional staff and programs. The best use of the present resources would be to attempt to teach students coping skills at an early age which would reduce the likelihood of becoming at-risk or learned helpless. Faculty and staff needed to be trained effectively to deal with at-risk youth in the early years and teach self-efficacy skills which will reduce the likelihood of AR of LH behavior. Early prevention strategies would be more cost effective than later more expensive measures.

Leadership

Each school had undergone a recent change in leadership at the schools and the faculty saw a number of difference and similarities in the leadership style of both past principals and the current ones. As stated earlier, I currently serve as the site administrator for the Taylor Learning Academy and I also was employed at the Phoenix/Opportunity school under its former administrator. This is noted because,

responses made about my own leadership style may be subject to some level of scrutiny as these persons are presently under my supervision. I do have the greatest confidence that their opinions are both candid and truthful, but I am cognizant of the culture of a supervisor/subordinate relationship; which in some employees minds is seen as naturally adversarial. I do not share that view point.

It is also significant to note that the administrator at the Danville alternative school was assigned there and did not volunteer for the position. This is not a value judgement nor is it a negative comment about his commitment or level of professionalism, but it bears some level of importance when the reader interprets the data.

At each site, the principal is the recognized instructional leader, although the faculty is given a great deal of input on instructional and non-instructional matters. Each school has a site-based council which regularly makes recommendations to the administrator concerning a number of matters. Each site utilizes a lead teacher to act as liaison between administration and the faculty. The faculty of the Roanoke site is divided into instructional teams with team leaders. These teams make several decisions and recommendations concerning students and the overall school culture. Truancy referrals, recommendations for counseling, referrals for placement testing, student schedule changes, and proactive academic and behavior contracts are developed by these teams with significant autonomy. Although the Danville site is not as involved in these areas, they are future plans to incorporate more of a faculty leadership role with their new principal.

Both schools have been affected by the continuous change in leadership at the schools. The Danville school's first administrator left the school in the middle of his second year, while the first administrator of the Roanoke school was dismissed by district officials. The faculty and staff of both school have experienced enormous turnover with the changing of administrators. When the first Danville administrator left, eight faculty and staff members either resigned or requested transfers out of the school and when the first Roanoke administrator left, only five of the twenty faculty and staff were rehired. Each district administration states that these were necessary and positive changes but they were seen as disruptive by the community and especially the students. Continuity in staff and leadership is seen as an important aspect of program development and leadership.

Recommendations for Future Study

This study has raised a number of questions that are of significant value and warrant additional research. Our research data has revealed a great deal of rich and important findings, but every study is limited by a number of variables beyond our control. The framing questions are the best guides for seeing what we have learned and what we still need to know. Students are labeled at-risk based upon the attributes of the child as well as the person classifying them. Future research might look at student self-perception in relationship to participation in intervention programs. How many and what types of students see themselves as at-risk, socially disadvantaged, or learned helpless?

The programs in existence which were created to alleviate the problem of being at-risk and learned helplessness are also adding to the proliferation of the conditions.

An additional research area might be the development of a set of a evaluation tool which measures the effectiveness of these programs in relationship to teaching self-responsibility. Additional research is warranted for the area of student motivation in relationship to the programs developed.

The relationship of the two conditions is still an area which warrants additional research. The shared attributes of the two is clear, but what degree does one affect the other, intensify the other, or lead to the other are areas which we need to examine.

Reflections

Qualitative case study is highly personal research. Persons studied are studied in depth. Researchers are encouraged to include their own personal perspectives in the interpretation. The way the case and the researcher interact is presumed unique and not necessarily reproducible for other cases and researchers. The quality and utility of the research is not based on reproducibility but on whether or not the meanings generated, by the researcher or the reader, are valued. Thus a personal valuing of the work is expected (Stake, 1995).

This section is included in the paper so that the researcher could accomplish two tasks: a) offer a summary of the findings in relationship to the research problem and framing questions and b) reflect on the personal nature of the research and its effect upon the researcher. The research problem which guided this study was to investigate whether the present strategies used to decrease at-risk and learned helpless behavior were actually increasing the presence of the two conditions. The process for doing this included first defining and identifying the two terms through historical documents and studies, then I described the strategies currently in use to decrease the two conditions.

This was followed by examining what a target population of at-risk students and persons assigned to work with them had to say about the conditions and the strategies.

Conclusions were drawn from responses from both groups which were evidenced in common themes and generalizations.

All of this was done to see if the two conditions existed and if through participant responses I could ascertain whether the strategies used were effective or not. My own role as both observer and participant gave a unique quality to the interpretations. To that end, I found that the participants offered responses that were consistent with my research problem. The programs and strategies did seem to reduce locus of control and lead to a continuation of some form of deviance in most students. It is significant to note that, these same programs, which failed miserably with the majority, worked extremely well with other students who had the same at-risk attributes as those who failed to benefit from them. It is my conclusion that personal internal characteristics of the students were more of a determining factor than the external effects of either the support programs or their environment at large.

This is a powerful theory of motivation based upon internal expectations which can cancel or eliminate environmental factors such as poverty, racism, and sexism. The research described a situation where students and adults have developed different value systems which are so divergent that they have caused a near rift in our society. This phenomena has been called a generation gap in the past, but its effect has increased to a magnitude that many social anthropologists have likened it to the spark which will ultimately lead to the downfall of our civilization.

The other issue I will address is the personal nature of the research and the findings, and the interpretations made. Much has been said about including the environmental factors such as poverty, lack of opportunity, racism, sexism, and other social maladies into the picture. While I would never dismiss these problems as inconsequential, I must take an equally bold step by expressing my own belief that they are not the sole nor major reasons that my children fail. A limitation expressed about the study was that I was more than an observer, but also a participant in more ways than one. My lifelong experience with racism, sexism, and poverty shaped my perspective when I interviewed participants. Some researchers are guilty of what could be termed "the pity principle". It is the belief that students/adults who have been constant victims of racism should have their deeds dismissed because of the enormous injustice they have had to endure. Those who do not share this belief are immediately labeled as victim blamers. Somewhere in the middle between blaming the victim and completely excusing them because of discriminatory societal obstacles is my view that we can empower people by teaching them to increase effort and perseverance when either real or imagined problems arise.

The enormous number of support programs and assistance offered to the many who deserve them should not be eliminated in wholesale fashion as many have asserted, rather these "gift programs" should be re-evaluated to insure that they are helping and not hindering. The old adage that "one should never look a gift horse in the mouth" must be revisited in this instance. Anyone who buys and sells horses know that the first place you look is in the mouth area to see if there are any signs of tooth decay and other symptoms that might indicate an illness that would cause that person to decline the gift

horse. In the same vein, public and private assistance must be continuously evaluated to insure that the help offered does not further enslave the people it is given to. One's freedom and self worth are terrible prices to pay for a handout. The biblical lesson of teaching a man to fish needs to co-exist with the ability to offer him bread.

I needed to answer the research problem because my program must not be part of the problem, but rather part of the solution. Self-responsibility and accountability must replace passivity and excuses. Our children need solutions which will transcend dependence and second class status. To begin this process, education must become the vanguard for teaching our children from the inside out. The inner transformation which I liken to a spiritual rebirth must invade the mind and the heart of both man and child. To really break the cycle of poverty, we must gird our children with the armor of self worth and self sufficiency, while not abandoning them as useless when they stumble and fall. The study I completed is a personal work with personal value, but it is also a work in progress. Finishing a case study is the consummation of a work of art. Because it is an exercise in such depth, the study is an opportunity to see what others have not seen, to reflect the uniqueness of our own lives, to engage the best of our interpretive powers, and to make, even by its integrity alone, an advocacy for those things we cherish (Stake, 1995). This study was more than a culmination of a terminal degree program, but the continuation of a life's work to help others help themselves. Because it is personal, the first person it will serve is its author.

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Appendix A.

At-Risk Student Behavior Questionnaire

Please complete the following questionnaire. Insure that each question is answered according to the directions. All answers will be kept in a strictly confidential manner. Please complete the demographic information as it will also be used for statistical purposes. All answers should be on the answer sheet. Thank-you for your participation.

1.Age: (A)21-30 (B)31-40 (C)41-50 (D)51-60
(E)60+

2.Race: (A)African/American (B)Caucasian (C)Hispanic (D)Asian

3.Position/Title:

A.Teacher	F.Instruc. Aide	K.Counselor/Psychologist
B.Principal	G.Asst.Principal	L.Central Office Admin.
C.Asst. Supt.	H.Supt.	M.Nurse/Health care Asst.
D.Secretary	I.Support Staff	N.Police Officer
E.Soc. Service	J.Parent	O.Court Official

1.Check the top five reasons that cause students to be successful in school.

A.High self-esteem	D.High parent involvement	G.economic class
B.Good Teachers	E.Good Schools	H.race
C.self-motivation	F.gender	I.support systems

2.Check the top five reasons that cause students not to be successful in school.

A.Low self esteem	D.low parent involvement	G.economic class
B.Poor teachers	E.Poor schools	H.racism or sexism
C.low motivation	F.lack of support	I.Poor decisions

3.Check the top five reasons you feel students give for dropping out.

A.Pregnancy	D.Boredom	G.Lack of money
B.Misbehavior	E.Unfair/Poor Teachers	H.Too Old
C.Dislike School	F.Fear for safety	I.Lack of Interest

4.Rank the following: Who is responsible for insuring our children get a good educ.

A.Teachers	C.Principal	E.School Board
B.Parents	D.Students	F.Community

5.Check those support systems that are available to your students.

A.Daycare	D.Counselor/Soc. Worker	G.Spec. Ed. Class
B.Visiting Teacher	E.Incentives	H.Soc. Services
C.Probation Officer	F.Resource Officer	I.Remedial Instr.

Appendix A

6. Check the top five reasons a student should be expelled from school.

- | | | |
|----------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| A. Weapon possession | D. drug possession | G. Assault/student |
| B. Assault/staff | E. Truancy | H. Vandalism |
| C. Overage | F. Felony conviction | I. Academic Failure |

Answer the following questions with:

- (1) none (2) very little (3) somewhat (4) a great deal

7. What role do you feel the following play in spec. educ placement.

- A. Race B. Econ. Class C. Gender D. Acad. Ach. E. Psych/Emot. needs

8. What role do you feel the following play in suspensions & expulsions?

- A. Race B. Econ Class C. Gender D. Acad. Ach.

9. Check the five most frequently observed behavioral traits of at-risk youth.

- | | | | |
|------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| A. Truant | D. Aggressive/Violent | G. Poor Grades | J. Teenage Parent |
| B. 1 parent home | E. Low econ. class | H. Limited Parent involvement | |
| C. drug abuse | F. criminal record | I. low self-esteem | |

Answer the following questions with:

- (1) ineffective (2) somewhat effective (3) effective (4) very effective

10. How would you characterize the community's view of local schools?

11. Rate the local level of programs for at-risk youth.

12. Rate the local social service agencies who serve at-risk youth.

13. Rate the performance of the local juvenile court system for at-risk youth

14. Rate the disciplinary system used in your school.

15. Rate the effectiveness of all local schools for dealing with at-risk students.

16. Rate the overall effectiveness of alternative schools for at-risk students.

17. Rate community efforts to deal with at-risk youth.

18. Rate the guidance/counseling services in your school for at-risk youth.

19. Rate the special education services in your school for at-risk youth.

20. Rate the level of parental involvement in your school.

Appendix A

21. Rate the following support systems based upon effectiveness w/ at-risk youth.

- | | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| A. Special Education Classes | E. Probation Officer | I. Soc. Service Agencies |
| B. Incentives/Rewards | F. Visiting Teacher | J. Subsidized housing |
| C. Counselors/Social Workers | G. Alternative Schools | K. Free Medical Care |
| D. Remedial Classes | H. Daycare (Free) | L. |

22. List the top three programs which teach self-responsibility/sufficiency.

Appendix B.
Drop out Prevention Survey

Demographics Information

Ethnicity: African American Caucasian Hispanic
 American/Alaskan Indian

Date of Birth: _____ Age: _____

Grade: 7 8 9 10 11 12

Gender: Male Female

Educational Goal: GED 4 Yr. College Degree
 High School Diploma Voc/Technical Certificate
 2 Yr. College degree Other _____

Career Goal: (i.e., doctor, teacher, lawyer) _____

Number of Family members in home: _____

Number of Parents in Home: _____ Gender of Parent(s) M F

Do you have any children?: _____ If so, how many children? _____

1. What do you the reasons are for a student dropping out of school? Rate the following statements from 1 to 9 with 1 being the most important reason and 9 being the least important reason.

A student gets pregnant/fathers a child.

A student has an older boyfriend or girlfriend.

School is boring.

A Student gets a job because he/she has to help support their family.

A student feels like teachers aren't fair.

Appendix B

___ A student feels that he/she cannot be successful at school.

___ A Student is in trouble with the law.

___ Other reasons (list):_____

2. In what ways could we make school better for a student whose thinking of dropping out. Rate the following statements from 1 to 10 with 1 being the best way to help and 10 being the least helpful.

___ The student comes to school for half a day and spends half a day at work.

___ Decrease the number of credits needed for a high school diploma.

___ Open a daycare center for students with children.

___ Increase the amount of time spent learning to use a computer.

___ Decrease the number of hours a student must attend school daily.

___ Increase the number of community service projects. (i.e. High and middle school students reading to elementary students.)

___ Decrease the amount of textbook work.

___ Increase the number of field trips taken during school hours.

___ Increase the number of hands-on classes offered to students.

___ Other reasons (list):_____

Appendix C

Mission statement & Goals and Objectives (Site #1)

The Mission of the Phoenix School is to offer quality instruction for all of our students. This will allow them to achieve academic success, modify their behavior, and become productive members of the community.

Goals and Objectives

- *Each student will select an academic and behavioral goal to achieve before leaving the center.
- *The center will aid in the development of basic skills which will lead to academic success.
- *The student will strive to a) recognize his/her behavioral problem and B) develop coping skills which will aid them in their personal development.
- *The center will provide opportunities for success for all students.
- *The center will encourage community involvement through participation in our service learning component.
- *The center will provide a safe environment that is conducive to learning and personal growth.
- *Everyone will work towards developing self-discipline, respect for authority, and respecting the rights of others.
- *The center will assist students in developing knowledge and skills to successfully enter the work force and become productive citizens.

Appendix D.

Mission statement & Goals and Objectives (Site #2)

The mission of the Noel C. Taylor Learning Academy is to provide an orderly learning environment that will help our students develop into useful and productive citizens for our society and Workforce 2000.

Goals and Objectives

The educational provisions are more specifically defined as follows:

- *To stress competence in the basic learning skills.
- *To encourage self-discipline, respect for authority, and the rights of others.
- *To encourage academic success.
- *To assist the student in acquiring the knowledge and skills to cope in the ever changing global society.
- *To provide opportunities where students experience success.
- *To offer varied curriculum and programs that will motivate and interest the students.
- *To aid the student in recognizing his/her personal worth and dignity.
- *To help students respect cultural diversity.
- *To encourage student involvement in the community.
- *To provide well planned, safe, and attractive facilities which are conducive to learning.
- *To encourage a positive respect for the work ethic.
- *To assist students in acquiring the knowledge and skills to successfully enter the work force.
- *To aid students in the development of computer skills and other forms of technology in all areas of their lives.