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Middle School Educators' Perceptions of At-Risk Students Following a School's Initiative Focused on Helping At-Risk Students Succeed

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Doctorate of Education Program

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Middle School Educators' Perceptions of At-Risk Students Following a School's Initiative

Focused on Helping At-Risk Students Succeed

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College of Education

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Abstract

 With a focus on teachers' efficacy and its effect on their perceptions of at-risk students, this qualitative case study examined the perceptions of teachers toward at-risk students, following a school's 3-year implementation of an initiative that was geared toward helping educators improve teaching efficacy. The effects of professional development on improving the relationships with at-risk students and the influence on middle school educators' perceptions and efficacy were explored. Data was gathered by conducting 20 interviews with the participants; including classroom teachers, an administrator, and a guidance counselor, regarding teachers' perceptions of the at-risk students, following a schoolwide initiative. Six themes were found when the codes were analyzed and grouped within and across interviews. The themes included Awareness, Relationships, Impact, Teacher Efficacy, Teacher Perception, and Take 5. The majority of the teacher participants mentioned that the school's initiative increased their awareness of their perceptions. The findings of this study suggested that districts seeking change should consider providing educators with concrete strategies and consistent reminders of the importance of forming healthy relationships of mutual respect with all students. Professional development should be provided for the interaction with at-risk students and effective strategies should be designed to improve teachers' perspectives that will impact the success of all students.

Keywords: at-risk students, teachers' perceptions, teachers' efficacy, awareness, teacher-student relationships, relationships of mutual respect

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, my husband—Corey, our children—Zamion and Zyan, and my parents—Rev. and Mrs. Johnnie (Johnnita) Bryant.

To my immediate family: my husband—Corey, my children—Zamion and Zyan, I thank you for your support and patience. Zyan, your hugs and kisses kept me lifted up. Zamion, you coming down and tellling me, "Don't stay behind that computer too long now" did more for me than you would ever imagine. This has been a long journey and I have been blessed, as you have supported me through the entire process. I am thankful to have you in my life. To my mom, Johnnita Bryant, and my dad, Rev. Johnnie Bryant, thank you for instilling within me the importance of education. From encouraging me to "keep on working", to allowing me to simply rest, you all are my heroes.

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To my dissertation committee, Dr. Calabro and Dr. Powell, I say thank you. Dr. Calabro, your suggestions were very insightful. Dr. Powell, my dissertation would not be grammatically poised without your advice. I thank you both for your contributions to this research study. You have both contributed to me becoming a better writer.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Problem

Amid educational inequity, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (McAndrews, 2013; Thompson, 2015). Education in the United States of America has since been under reform. President Reagan's administration examined the quality of education in America and the National Commission on Excellence in Education reported that America was a nation at risk; thus, the creation of the term at-risk.

The term at-risk is frequently used to describe scholars who are considered to have a greater likelihood of deteriorating educationally or dropping out of school (Buechler, 2011; Cooper, 2015; Koball, Dion, Gothro, & Bardos, 2011). At-risk students are characterized as those who are at risk of school failure, where the risk factors include academic, personal, and environmental influences (Cummings, Whitlock, Draper, Renschler, Bastian, Cox, & Visker, 2014; Warshof & Rappaport, 2013; McNulty, 2014).

Policies and reports from governmental agencies still shape education today (Holmes, 2012). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) were educational laws aimed to ensure continued educational equity and the success of all students. Even with the efforts put forth by governmental agencies, these policies will not close achievement gaps that result in all students succeeding (Contreras, 2011). 'Closing the achievement gap' and 'reaching every student everyday' are phrases very common to those in the educational field. Educational institutions are constantly on the lookout for strategies and suggestions on how to meet the needs of every student. Teachers are being held accountable for ensuring all students succeed. The issue of at-risk students is faced by public schools across America. Schools are responsible for the social and educational development of all students. Teachers are faced with the responsibility of teaching those who seem to be unreachable

(Holmes, 2012). The problem addressed in this study was the teachers' perceptions and efficacy regarding the behaviors of at-risk students. Despite the need for effective strategies that empower all students in the classroom, there is no research on teachers' perceptions of at-risk students after a school's initiative focused on improving the outcomes of at-risk students.

Background, Context, History, and Conceptual Framework for the Problem

The achievement gap continues in public education (Darensbourg, 2013; Pollock, 2012). An achievement gap occurs when one group of students outperforms another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups is significant (National Center on Educational Statistics, 2015). Strategies and ideas should be explored and implemented. As a nation, schools can no longer afford to leave children behind. There should be consistent, innovative, and purpose-filled efforts to close this gap while addressing at-risk students.

Teachers and schools should ensure student success (Dennis, 2017). This includes at-risk students who, oftentimes, come from diverse backgrounds and cultural beliefs than their peers and teachers (Thompson, 2015). Teachers are responsible for the success of every student (Hattie, 2009; Pollock et al., 2012). At-risk students may present behavior and discipline problems uncustomary of academically engaged students (Money, 2015). Thus, the at-risk student may challenge the classroom management skills of the teacher (Thompson, 2015). Teachers who are not equipped and/or prepared to handle difficult students may resort to disciplinary actions that are not academically beneficial for the at-risk student (Contreras, 2011). Those disciplinary actions lead to a continued cycle of digress for the at-risk student (Dearborn, 2015). For student success, the cycle of digression should be broken.

Teachers may be lacking the skills to manage classroom disruptions related to behavior and discipline issues among at-risk students (Thompson, 2011). For students to be successful,

educators should understand students' unspoken rules and teach the rules supporting success at school as well as at work. Educators should offer support, assistance, and maintain high expectations (Bartley, 2007; Bongo, 2011; Contreras, 2011; Gehlbach, Brinkworth, King, Hsu, McIntrye, and Rogers, 2016; Thompson, 2010). The classroom environment has a significant effect on the teaching and learning process (Warshof & Rappaport, 2013). Additionally, working relationships among educators and students are vital for a learning-rich environment (Hannah, 2013; Laird, 2015; Nash, 2016; Phillips, 2014; University of Virginia, 2012).

Teachers' perceptions inadvertently affect students' educational achievements and outcomes, while their perceptions affect their ability to form relationships with the students (Ross, 2015). Comer (as cited in Pierson, 2013) stated that learning cannot occur without a meaningful relationship. For teachers to understand a student's behavior, a teacher-student relationship should be established. Teachers' perceptions not only affect the academic outcome of at-risk students (Contreras, 2011), but they also play a vital role in the relationship established between the teacher and the at-risk student (Contreras, 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Guillory, 2012; Pariser, 2011; Ready & Wright, 2011; Ross, 2015; Sorhagen, 2013; Thompson, 2015). These relationships affect students' motivation to learn (Contreras, 2011; Ross, 2015) as students will put forth more effort when they know teachers care and believe in them (Beavers, 2014; Buechler, 2011).

Teacher efficacy is influenced by teachers' perceptions (Adeyemo, 2011; Guo, Connor, Yang, Roehrig & Morrison, 2012; Hoy, 2000). Teachers do not make a conscious attempt to understand and know the at-risk student (Contreras, 2011). Provided staff development on relationships with at-risks students can affect teachers' perceptions (Ross, 2015). In order for staff development to be effective, faculty should commit to learning and change. When a school

commits to organizational change, perceptions and behaviors can be altered (Buechler, 2011). Little research is available on the effect of a school' s initiative focused on reaching at-risk students.

Learning institutions are social organizations. Improving education and student achievement requires less change in policy and more change in the habits and interactions of people (Schmuck, Bell & Bell, 2012). The teacher is the single most crucial factor affecting the trajectory of students (Hattie, 2009; Marzano, 2003). Transformative learning emphasizes intentional efforts toward resolving issues with perspectives. Transformative learning occurs by using developmentally advanced conceptual structures and transforming both meaning schemas and perspectives through critical reflection (Taylor & Taylor, 2012). Organizational development is a planned, organization-wide, action-oriented effort focused on changing the organization (Keep, 2012). Therefore, the Conceptual Framework will provide the theoretical frames of reference focused on Change and Teacher Efficacy through Transformational Learning and Organizational Development.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study was the teachers' perceptions and efficacy regarding the behaviors of at-risk students. Research studies have focused on the correlation between teacher-student relationships and student achievement (Daly, Moolenaar, Der-Martirosian, & Liou, 2014; Gallagher, 2016; Gehlbach et al., 2014; Osher, Spier, Kendziora & Cai, 2009) as well as teacher efficacy and effectiveness to reach at-risk students (Guillory, 2012). White (2009) determined that high levels of teacher efficacy may serve as an essential element for teaching students who are difficult to reach. Thompson (2015) found that teachers need better assistance options while dealing with disruptions in the classroom; noting that the results from

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this study could enlighten educational leaders as they layout staff development programs and teacher training plans, which may change teacher perception, improve their effectiveness, and balance educational quality for at-risk students (Thompson, 2015). Despite the need for effective strategies that empower all students in the classroom, there was no research on teachers' perceptions toward at-risk students after a school's initiative focused on such students.

Purpose of the Study

With a focus on teacher efficacy and its effect on the teachers' perceptions of at-risk students, this qualitative case study examined the perceptions of teachers toward at-risk students following a school's 3-year implementation of an initiative geared toward helping educators improve teaching efficacy: a necessary component for teaching at-risk students. The teacher is the single most key factor in affecting the trajectory of students (Hattie, 2009; Marzano, 2003). With a focus on change, this qualitative case study explored the roles of teacher's efficacy and perceptions of at-risk students, following an initiative which was focused on building relationships of mutual respect and mentoring.

Research Question

In this study, the effects of professional development on improving relationships with at-risk students and middle school teachers', administrators', and a guidance counselor's perceptions and efficacy toward at-risk students were explored. Therefore, the following question was researched.

1. How has a 3-year schoolwide initiative on reaching at-risk students affected middle school educators' perceptions of at-risk students?

Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study

In order to bring about change in the education world, teachers should address their perceptions about students, as these perceptions affect student achievement (Contreras, 2011). Continuous staff development (Thompson, 2015) and a continued dialogue (Contreras, 2011) are crucial to reaching the needs of every student, especially those at-risk of failing (Ross, 2015). The goal of this research was to expand upon the research brought forth by Thompson (2015) and share the importance of staff development on at-risk students, teacher perceptions, and efficacy throughout the school year and school districts. The results of the study may provide educational institutions, with a focus for closing achievement gaps and reaching the needs of at-risk students by improving teacher perceptions and efficacy.

Definition of Terms

This section contains terms and phrases that are exclusive to the study. Defined below are the critical terms used in the study.

At-risk students: students receiving four or more referrals within a school year (School Improvement Team, 2016).

Late Take-In: professional development days designated by the school board of the school involved in this study.

Schoolwide initiative: the school improvement action step that included in-services/staff development that was specifically identified and designed to educate the faculty and staff on their designated curriculum and pedagogy (School Improvement Team, 2016).

Take 5: 5-minute professional development segments delivered during Late Take-In at the school involved in this study.

Teacher efficacy: the belief a teacher has in the ability to affect change in the life of a student (Guillory, 2012; Guo, Connor, Yang, Roehrig & Morrison, 2012; Kleinsasser, 2014; Parker, 2012; Yilmaz, 2011).

Teachers' perceptions: the mental thoughts or images the teachers possess (Ross, 2015).

W.A.T.C.H.: the acronym used during Take 5; "W-Welcome them every day. A-Advocate for them. T-Treat them with respect. C-Care about them. H-Have a little mercy on them." (Robinson, 2014).

Delimitations and Limitations

Limitations are conditions and circumstances that are beyond the researcher's control (Simon, 2011). A limitation of the study was the researcher's incapability to control the responses of the participants. Participants may or may not have responded candidly during the interview process. While measures have been taken to ensure transferability, due to the small sample size, the findings of the study may not be generalized for a larger population.

Delimitations are characteristics that limit the scope of a research study (Simon, 2011). Three years ago, a schoolwide initiative was implemented. Due to this timeframe, a delimitation in this study was the restriction of participants to those who have been employed at the study site for the past three years.

Summary

This chapter presented the problem background for the study. A background, including the conceptual framework, was also shared. The purpose of the study along with the research question was also shared. Chapter 2, The Literature Review, presents a thorough review of the published literature relevant to the research on at-risk students, teacher perceptions, and student achievement. Chapter 2 will further provide proof that this study was built on the findings of the

previous studies. A literature review will provide sufficient support for an investigation

examining the effect of professional development on the teachers' perceptions of at-risk students.

Change is possible. However, successful change happens not only when there is a cultural

change, but also when the masses are involved. Professionals must work together to create

leaders and teachers who possess the characteristics of impressive empathy. "What is

'impressive' is the ability to put oneself in other people's shoes, particularly those who hold

values and experiences very different than yours" (Fullan, 2011, p. 30). The methodology

chapter, Chapter 3, outlines how the study was conducted. Explanations of the data collection

and analysis process, expected findings, and ethical considerations are components within the

chapter. Chapter 4 will present the data collected while Chapter 5 will provide an analysis and

discussion of the research findings.

Chapter 2: Introduction to the Literature Review

In a phenomenological study of the experiences and perceptions regarding teachers' beliefs about students, Thompson (2011) suggested that teachers may be lacking the skills to manage classroom disruptions that are related to behavior and discipline issues among at-risk students. Students may develop behavior and discipline issues in the classroom due to a lack of mutual respect. This lack of respect could affect teachers' perceptions of students with behavior and discipline issues. Teacher efficacy plays a role in their perceptions. A teacher's perception of difficult students could affect the students' motivation to learn. While teachers are not the only influence on a student's ability to achieve, Marzano et al. (2003) noted that because it pertains to student achievement, the teacher is probably the most important factor.

This literature review presents an overview of the current and historical literature searches related to at-risk students, teachers' perceptions, the effect teachers' perceptions have on teacher-student relationships, and the effect student behavior has on student achievement. The first section, the Conceptual Framework, provides theoretical frames of references that are focused on Change and Teacher Efficacy through Transformational Learning and Organizational Development. The second section, the Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature, is organized into the following sections:

1. At-Risk Students

2. Student Behavior and Achievement

3. Teacher-Student Relationships

4. Teacher Perception and its Effect on Student Teacher Relationships, Students' Motivation to Learn, and Student Achievement

5. Teacher Efficacy and Staff Development

6. The Relationship between Teacher Efficacy, Student Behavior, At-Risk Students, and Achievement

This section also includes a discussion on teacher efficacy and the role it plays in the classroom. The researched documents include books, research documents, and peer-reviewed publications.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guides the frame of reference for the research being presented. The research of this study, paired with its purpose, was orchestrated from the perspectives of Transformational Learning and Organizational Development (OD) with a focus on Change and Teacher Efficacy. Closs and Antonello (2011) asserted that transformational change focuses on change within an organization while transformative learning concentrates on change within each individual. The two are complementary; thus, the twinning of transformative learning theory with organizational development within the conceptual framework of this study. Transformational learning and organizational development are the selected theories that guided the research on teachers' perceptions and their professional practices.

Teacher Efficacy

The perceptions a teacher acquires of at-risk students can be linked with the concept of teacher efficacy. Efficacy is the power that one possesses to produce a desired result. Based upon the theoretical work of Bandura (1977), teacher efficacy is derived from self-efficacy. Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, and Hoy (1998) defined teacher efficacy as the belief that a teacher cultivates pertaining to the capacity to somehow matter in the life of a student. Teacher efficacy has been show to impact student achievement.

Researchers suggested that the association between teacher efficacy and student achievement is indirect, with teacher efficacy impacting classroom practices that, in turn, promote student achievement (Guo et al., 2012). Teachers who believe in their students can oftentimes increase their students' academic performance (McCollum, 2014; O'Connor, Dearing & Collins, 2011; Pappa, 2014; Protheroe, 2008). Teachers with a heightened sense of self-efficacy believe they can impact the achievement and motivation levels of students (Guillory, 2012; Kleinsasser, 2014; Parker, 2012; Yilmaz, 2011). Mojavezi and Tamiz (2012) conducted a study and revealed that the association between teacher efficacy and students' levels of motivation and achievement indicated a positive trend line. Teachers with a high level of efficacy believed that unmotivated students could be instructed if the teachers were willing to experiment with different instructional strategies in the classroom. In contrast, their study also showed that those with a low sense of efficacy believed they could not help the unmotivated students.

The stronger a student feels connected to their teacher, the more they are likely to perceive their level of success to be influenced by those relationships (Beuchler, 2011). Guillory (2012) found that the teachers' perceptions of their effectiveness showed a statistical significance in helping the students re-engage behaviorally. Their perceptions in assisting students with behavior issues were compelling, and had a positive association with teacher efficacy. Thompson (2015) also concluded that "teacher perceptions can be improved to shape identity development and improve the educational quality of at-risk students" (p. 3). Teacher efficacy can best be described by Gandhi: "If I have the belief that I can do it, I shall surely acquire the capacity to do it even if I may not have it at the beginning" (as cited in Redmond, 2016).

Transformative Learning Theory

Adult learning theories can help clarify the way adults acquire new knowledge, and can help others teaching adults to be more responsive to their learning needs (TEAL Center staff, 2011). Transformative learning (TL) is an experience which occurs as time moves us through life on a continuous cycle. TL is effective for capturing the meaning making process of adult learners (Taylor, 2007), who guide the teaching and learning process for all students. It involves dialogue-inquiry or rational discourse; thus, enabling individuals to make self-discoveries. TL facilitates deliberate and intentional efforts by the learners to employ meta-cognitive skills. In order to change the teachers' perception of at-risk students and have a positive effect on their efficacy levels, the teachers must become learners once more and reflect critically on the assumptions that influence their own perceptions (Kreber, 2012).

Transformative learning emphasizes the intentional efforts toward resolving issues with perspectives (Closs & Antonello, 2011). Transformative learning occurs by using developmentally advanced conceptual structures and transforming both meaning schemas and perspectives through critical reflection (Taylor & Taylor, 2012). The Transformational Learning Theory is a theory applied to adult learners because life experience, cognitive ability, and critical reflection are essential elements for transformative experiences (Singleton, 2015).

"It is clear that the transformation of the students cannot be achieved without the transformation of the teachers" (Barchuk & Harkins, 2010, p. 13). Critical reflection dates back to John Dewey, who once noted that we learn more from reflecting upon old actions than by the action itself (Mellanby, 2014). Higher education and adult learning does not only refer to *schooling for adults*, but rather, it indicates towards a qualitative shift. There is a shift in gears from the accumulation of information to a focus on critical thinking, reflective practice, problem-

solving, and the relationships of prior knowledge to new knowledge (Mellanby, 2014). Critical reflection provides a way of viewing a situation from a constructive and outside point of view (Fook, 2007).

Organizational Development

Organizational development (OD) includes learning the skills of communication, problem-solving, and decision-making. OD seeks to increase the conditions of life for the organization and its members. OD, while involving sustained effort over time, understands that true change requires a shift in the mindset of the organization (Schmuck et al., 2012). Further characteristics include an organization which is geared toward change through effective measures that include open communication and feedback with an "integration and commitment to the goals of the organization from which comes the willingness to change" (Gallos, 2006, p. 6). Notably, the goal of organizational development is to reform the performance of the organization while being guided by its mission.

An organization must be aligned with its mission. The efforts of such are long-term, and the types of interventions implemented are action-oriented, with the intent of changing the practices of the organization. Adjusting the practices of the organization can be addressed through staff development sessions. Adults working in the educational field are continuous learners. As adult learners, the act of learning best occurs when the educators know why they are learning and are able to learn by doing (TEAL Center staff, 2011). Continuous improvement on the behalf of the teacher and the student are essential elements to transformative change within an organization. According to Crutchfield and Grant (2012), great organizations adapt well to change. They are able to comprehend the external cues and make necessary adjustments (Crutchfield, 2012).

Staff development provides a procedure to attain educational change and improve the organization. Johnson (2014) and Gulamhussein (2013) acknowledged the importance of staff development in the educational change process.   Through an organizational development method, change and awareness can be developed and fostered. When an organization is not aligned with its mission, they must adapt and implore tactics, such as staff development, to realign with its focus.

Change

According to Gallos (2006), organizational development is a well-organized plan which is managed by leaders in an effort to increase the organization's effectiveness. Organizational Development (OD) is about changing people, their patterns, and actions, in an effort to bring about change. The effort involves several techniques which can be utilized to implement change. Giesecke and McNeil (2004) noted that learning organizations are able to accept and adapt to change while adjusting their performance.

Change and awareness, through an organizational development approach, is best influenced when guided by the culture and character of the school, rather than by individual teachers (Schmuck et al., 2012). Change within any organization or institution occurs only once awareness has been heightened. Awareness is garnered as result of meta-cognition. Metacognition, or thinking about thinking, involves self-awareness and critical reflection. Staff development provides a process to attain educational change and improve the organization through awareness.

Staff development training is provided for the purpose of learning. As noted by Noe (2013), "training design is effective only if it helps employees reach instructional or training goals and objectives" (p. 11). Johnson (2014) and Gulamhussein (2013) acknowledged the

importance of staff development in the educational change process. Professional development involves a change in the attitude, practice, and belief. Affecting real change takes a sound professional development plan that includes many well-documented elements—from training design to sustained support (Fogart & Pete, 2007). In this ever-changing society, educators must be change agents.

Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature

History of Laws for Educational Equity

History of education. To fully understand the issue of at-risk students, this study delved into the history of public education. Public education began in 1647 as a means to provide literacy skills to children, so that they were able to read God's holy words and get some basic information about their faith (Applied Research Center, 2013). During this time, public education was for White boys only, as slavery prevented the education of African Americans. In the late 1700s, Pennsylvania called for free public education with restrictions. These restrictions included free education for the poor Whites, while the wealthy paid for their children's education (Watson et al., 2013).

Notably, the first school for women, Ursuline Academy New Orleans, was opened in 1727. Ursaline Academy was also the first school to offer education to non-White, minority females (Ursuline Academy New Orleans, n.d.), as in the mid-1800s, the Mexican-American War granted citizenship to the Mexican and Native people living in the newly-acquired territories. The mid-1800s meant the end of the Civil War. It marked the beginning of legal education for Blacks. It also marked the creation of the Department of Education, designed for collecting statistics and facts to show the condition and progress of education (Vinovskis, 1998). The late 1800s saw the wrath of Plessy v. Ferguson's (1896): separate but equal, the decision of

the Supreme Court legalized segregation. By 1924, students were attending high school. It was in 1954, with Brown v. Board of Education (1954), that segregation became illegal. Since the 1950s, issues in education, such as educational inequality and education for handicapped children, began to evolve (Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975).

War on Poverty. President John F. Kennedy sought to expand the role that the federal government played in education. However, his attempts were halted due to the lack of support from Congress. Following President Kennedy's assassination, President Lyndon B. Johnson stepped into office and signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 amid issues of educational equity. This initiative was signed shortly after he delivered his State of the Union address where a War on Poverty was declared.   The act promoted equal access to education, higher education standards, and new accountability measures (McAndrews, 2013; Thompson, 2015). Taking a more active role in education, the federal government implemented a national student assessment system, also known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

A Nation at Risk. Released in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk* examined the quality of education in America. With President Reagan at the helm, the first sentence of the report read, "Our nation is at risk" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The report to the Secretary of Education noted:

> Part of what is at risk is the promise first made on this continent: All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own

lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself.

(para. 10)

This landmark report, despite being written over 30 years ago, still shapes education (Holmes, 2012; Kapalka, 2012; Mehta, 2015).

New education laws. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), signed into law in 2002, was an update to the ESEA. With the introduction of Title I, NCLB sought to improve the academic achievement of the disadvantaged. NCLB also placed special focus on ensuring that the states and schools increased the academic achievement of low-income minorities, special education students, and English-language learners. Directed toward the expansion of the accountability of at-risk students, and to begin to close the achievement gap, NCLB requested that schools, school districts, and states separate the test results for several subgroups of students (GreatSchools, 2015).

The Obama administration acknowledged the increasingly unworkable requirements of NCLB. Thus, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law. Signed on December 10, 2015, the ESSA continues with the focus on educational equity. The goal of the act was to create a better law geared toward equipping students with the tools and skills needed for life after high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).   A relevant and unique feature of ESSA is that it called for education agencies to provide assessment data for specific categories of students, including foster children and homeless students (Klein, 2016). Although Brown v. Board of Education (1954), the ESEA, NCLB, and the ESSA were laws representing the United States' efforts toward maintaining a commitment and ensuring educational equity for all student, national policy will not close the

achievement gap and meet the needs of every student. "It will take more than policy or federal and state mandated programs to bring an end to the achievement gap" (Contreras, 2011, p. 4).

At-risk students. At-risk students may experience more difficulties at school than their peers (Beavers, 2014). At any given point in any given student's academic career, there is a chance of the individual meeting the criteria of being labeled at-risk, recent literature has defined the at-risk as students who are not perceived to succeed in school due to variables beyond their control, such as socioeconomic status and family dynamics (Gray, 2013).

At-risk students are characterized as the students who are at risk of school failure, where the risk factors include academic, personal, and environmental influences (Cummings et al., 2014; McNulty, 2014; Warshof & Rappaport, 2013). Buechler (2011), Cooper (2015), and Koball, Dion, Gothro and Bardos (2011) defined at-risk students as those with higher probability of dropping out of school with risk factors including, along with the aforementioned, drug abuse, lawful misconduct, poor social skills, and chronic absenteeism.

Although earlier research indicated that at-risk students were minorities, studies from 2010–2015 show socioeconomic status (SES) measured by parents' occupation, educational attainment, and income index influenced at-risk identification. There is a negative relationship between SES and student's academic success rate. That is, the lower the SES status of the student's family, the higher the likelihood of school failure for that student. Borg's (2015) analysis found a significant relationship among SES, ethnicity, and their performance in school.

Educators in American schools are predominately White and Middle class (Bennett, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). A diverse workforce contributes to better outcomes in schools. It is beneficial for the students to see this diversity within the school setting. As indicated by the report on racial diversity issued by the U.S. Department of Education (2016),

there is a lack of racial diversity in classrooms across the nation. There are programs and policies for effective teachers in the classrooms, especially in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. However, there is no focus on the extent to which teachers possess cultural capital, racial, and linguistic backgrounds to teach the growing diverse student populations (Dilworth & Coleman, 2014). "This creates a cultural barrier between the majority of teachers and at-risk students" (Myers, 2012, p. 10). Such a diverse dynamic reiterates the importance of purposely forming relationships with at-risk students.

Student Behavior and Achievement

Classroom behavior of students is related to their academic achievement (Borg, 2015; Cortez, Moussa & Weinstein, 2012; Marzano, Marzano & Pickering, 2003). Borg (2015) conducted latent profile analyses involving 2,400 13– and 14–year old students, which showed a correlation between classroom behavior and students' academic marks. According to the Borg (2015), the self-perceived behavior of the students not only affected their freshman year of high school, but it also affected their academic careers as late as three years later. Marzano et al. (2003) reasoned that unless the classroom teacher is capable of competently managing a classroom, the art of teaching and learning will not occur. Thus, if a student is misbehaving, then chaos will likely become the norm. Furthermore, Buechler (2011) confirmed that there is a strong correlation between teacher-student rapport and school behavior. Teachers may be lacking the skills to manage classroom disruptions related to behavior and discipline issues among at-risk students (Thompson, 2011).

Teacher-Student Relationships

Building positive individual relationships with all students is paramount. Hattie (2009) identified that teacher-student relationships affect student achievement, noting that strong

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teacher-student relationships imply teacher-efficacy and respect by the teacher for what the students contribute to the classroom. Additionally, Marzano et al. (2003) noted that if the teachers have favorable relationships with students, then the students are more willing to accept the rules, procedures, and the disciplinary consequences that follow their wrongdoings. In a study where data were derived from student interviews, Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam (2013) discussed the positive effects of teacher-student relationships and their function on student experiences. Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam (2013) shared the importance of these relationships, including the students' ability to feel connected at school.

Buechler (2011) determined that the less students feel connected to their teachers, the less they feel those relationships affect their academic success. "At-risk students often have a difficult time acquiring positive relationships. Many have deficits in forming relationships due to the chaotic, random relationships they have outside of school" (Buechler, 2011, p. 17). The first steps to develop these types of relationships include being an empathic listener and being attuned to the students. These are skills that can be developed over time (Cummings et al., 2014).

In a study conducted by Beavers (2014), students reported being more engaged in school academics and activities if they had a significant relationship with their teachers or other adults in the building. The research also revealed a positive correlation between students' academic performance and their respective teacher-student relationships (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Lindsey, Nuri Robins & Terrell, 2009; Lee, 2012). Students who feel valued and respected are more willing to learn from their teachers than those who do not feel the same. The writers further noted that appreciation must be extended to all students, regardless of race, creed, or beliefs (Lindsey et al., 2009). Hence, the importance of teachers knowing who the at-risk students are in

their classes is high, as they need positive relationships with teachers in order to be successful in the school setting (Buechler, 2011). Many times, behavior and discipline issues in the classroom are due to a lack of mutual respect.

Teacher Perception

Students, like adults, need interaction. This desire for relationships creates a need to be valued by others (Pelling & White, 2009). The way teachers characterize students affects how the teachers interpret and respond to events involving those students. Researchers have documented the importance of teacher perception (Contreras, 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Guillory, 2012; Pariser, 2011; Ready & Wright, 2011; Ross, 2015; Sorhagen, 2013; Thompson, 2015). Ross (2015) noted that the teachers' perceptions influence the children they teach. "Almost all researchers agree that teachers will consistently underestimate the performance of low-income, African-American, Latino, and male students relative to upper-income, White, Asian, and female students" (Ross, 2015, p. 21). Perceptions exist and play a role in education (Contreras, 2011; Ross, 2015).

Teacher perceptions and student-teacher relationships. Students achieve and behave better when they sense they are cared for and understood. It is rewarding to treat them with respect and sensitivity (Gehlbach et al., 2016; Pierson, 2013). In a study of at-risk students, Pariser (2011) noted that students welcomed teachers who were able to teach and reach, that is, teachers who were able to deliver the academic content while establishing a good rapport with them. Gehlbach et al. (2016) conducted a landmark study consisting of five-weeks of intervention. During this time, teachers and students received feedback on similarities. Consequently, teachers perceived better relationships with those students who shared their similarities. Interestingly, they also received higher course grades.

Teacher perception and students' motivation to learn. A teacher's perception of difficult students could affect their motivation to learn. Teachers consider motivation to be an important part of the teaching and learning experience (Adeyemo, 2011; D'Elisa, 2015; Hughes, 2011). Just as teachers' and students' learning experiences vary, so do their perceptions. Students who perceive a teacher as caring, open, and trustworthy, whether the characteristics are factual or not, might be motivated to please the teacher (Hughes, 2011).

Teacher perceptions and student achievement. Contreras (2011) analyzed the transcripts of teachers to discover beliefs and perceptions about minority students and confirmed that teachers have particular perceptions and expectations. Contreras (2011) implied that to affect change in the educational arena, educators should confront perceptions and student expectations. Adeyemo (2011) also determined that the teachers' perceptions affect students' academic achievement. It was further recommended that teachers encourage and motivate students.

Teacher expectations of students produce long-lasting and powerful effects on the students' achievement (Contreras, 2011; Ross, 2015; Sorhagen, 2013).

> When teachers unintentionally express tougher guidelines to students whom they believe possess more academic ability, they are impacting not only those students but the other students who are getting the reverse treatment and cues. If a teacher expects that a student doesn't need help or will do well, the student is likely to do well. If the teacher expects a student to fail, they will probably fail. It is awareness of such behavior and expectations that will beget change . . . . The topic of teacher perception must become the focus of professional learning communities to help heighten teacher awareness in order for schoolwide change to begin and be sustainable. (Contreras, 2011, pp. 13–14)

Positive teacher perspectives about at-risk students are critical for the students to develop self-esteem in their academic and personal lives (Bartley, 2007; Bongo, 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Thompson, 2010). In a 5-year study, Algozzine, Wang and Violette (2011) examined the relationship between student achievement and behavior. With regards to the teachers' perception, the study found that teachers tended to believe that well-behaved students were succeeding, even if they were not. Additionally, they found that teachers believed students who were misbehaving were not succeeding academically, even though they were succeeding. This study concluded that teachers should focus on both behavior and academics when teaching at-risk students. At-risk students who face many obstacles throughout their development respond firmly to the teachers who appear to care about them (Pariser, 2011). Sorhagen (2013) showed the long-term effects of teacher expectations. By tracking 1,000 students for nine years, Sorhagen (2013) revealed that teachers' misperceptions have more influence on students from families with lower SES than their peers. That is to say, students who were from more prosperous families were not affected as much by their teachers' perceptions as their peers.

Teacher Efficacy and Staff Development

Teacher efficacy is defined as the teachers' belief in the ability to foster students' academic achievement (Guo et al., 2012; Hoy, 2000). Teachers who believe in themselves and believe in the success of their students can often increase their confidence level and performance (McCollum, 2014; O'Connor, Dearing & Collins, 2011; Pappa, 2014; Protheroe, 2008). Guo et al. (2012) examined the potential outcomes of teacher efficacy on student learning. The researchers suggested that the association between teacher efficacy and student achievement is indirect, with teacher efficacy impacting classroom practices that, in turn, promote student achievement (Guo et al., 2012). The researchers found a significant relationship between the

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efficacy levels of teachers and classroom environment and teacher sensitivity. Classroom environment and teacher sensitivity are significant attributors for effective teaching and learning practices (Hannah, 2013; Laird, 2015; Phillips, 2014; University of Virginia, 2012;).

The best teachers believe that children can learn, and that it is the teachers' job to get children interested in learning (Ross, 2015). Ross (2015) believed that teachers' education should be improved to instill these qualities in new teachers. It is the school's responsibility to promote change through effective staff development. In completing a study including 40 teacher-student relationships and behavior problems, O'Connor et al. (2011) recognized the importance of supporting elementary school teachers' awareness about the role of their relationship with students and providing them with information as to how to support first-class relationships with their students. As noted by Pariser (2011), students appreciated teachers who were able to teach them academic standards while creating meaningful relationships. According to Pariser (2011), helpful teachers develop a capacity to discipline students while showing they care. Furthermore, teachers were able to create relevant learning experiences for the students. The outcomes of the research conducted by Pariser (2011), Buechler (2011), and Thompson (2015) indicated to be successful in helping at-risk students, teachers should be provided with staff development training, with outcomes including fostering positive teacher-student relationships and meeting the academic needs of students.

Empathy is the ability to understand someone else's circumstance regardless of one's own situation. It is with empathy that teachers can move toward compassion and action (Laird, 2015) when working with at-risk students. Pariser (2011) built a case for empathy in the classroom while also noting the importance of congruence and acceptance. With reference to empathy in the classroom, Buechler (2011) mentioned that teachers were trained specifically

about how to develop a caring environment in which the students felt they were supported and welcomed. Students were encouraged and mentored throughout their middle school years in a family-like atmosphere. Notably, "had the students not had well-trained teachers, they may have perceived their relationship affected their success at a different level than reported in the current study" (Buechler, 2011, p. 91).

According to Thompson (2015), "Various types of cultures and families have migrated to schools, which create diverse student populations. The need to prepare teachers for diversity in the classroom is integral to student achievement" (pp. 31–32). The ability to counter behavior issues with relevant knowledge and skills is a missing ingredient for the teachers of at-risk students (Thompson, 2015). "Professional development can help change teacher perception to support providing educational quality to at-risk students" (p. 52).

Relationship between Teacher Efficacy, Teacher-Student Relationships, At-Risk Students and Achievement

Startz (2016) and Wright (2015) agreed that students performed and behaved better when matched with teachers of similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds; however, schools cannot use this as an excuse to not meet with the needs of every child. Schools can create learning environments that accommodate at-risk students in a manner that will usher opportunities for their success (Pariser, 2011). The academic achievement of at-risk students is dependent upon the educators who are willing to serve as advocates (Baker, 2006; Camak, 2007; Doster & Fears, 2015; Ogbu, 2003; Ridnouer, 2011; Tosolt, 2009). Caring beliefs and practices of effective public-school teachers play an important role in the process of helping at-risk students become productive citizens within their local societies (McCollum, 2014).

Baker (2006) conducted a study which included 169 at-risk students. These were designated as being susceptible to poor developmental or school outcomes. Baker reported that at-risk students oftentimes felt estranged at school. They reported that they were satisfied with school if they sensed being cared for and respected by their teachers (Baker, 2006). Teachers and students should be respectful of one another. In Camak's (2007) study, students felt respected when their teachers did not shout at them for their lack of understanding. Camak's (2007) study was echoed by Pollock, Ford, and Black (2012), who noted "being respected and valued can increase a student's confidence, investment in the classroom, and motivation to succeed" (p. 58).

In a multi-case study, McCollum (2014) found that the teachers felt a sense of responsibility to support and educate the child completely. This was the case for underachieving students as well. The teachers believed developing such relationships benefitted the students both personally and academically. Further study revealed that teachers possessed high levels of efficacy for every student. They valued the differences among students and supported individual instruction and student growth. It was also conveyed that the personal backgrounds of teachers affected their beliefs and practices about how to be an effective teacher. The diversity of the students impacted how teachers taught their students but did not affect how they treated their students. McCollum (2014) solidified the importance of having a caring teacher to help low-achieving students.

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Review of Methodological Issues

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Quantitative Studies

    Teacher self-efficacy. Teacher self-efficacy was approached through the use of quantitative methods. Mojavezi and Tamiz (2012) studied teacher efficacy and students'

motivation to consider the impact of teacher efficacy on students' motivation and achievement. The researchers also examined whether there were differences in the students' achievement levels based on the teachers' level of efficacy. Two instruments, teacher self-efficacy and students' motivation questionnaires, were used to determine the Pearson product-moment correlation and ANOVA. Teachers' efficacy showed a positive influence on the students' motivation and achievement (Mojavezi & Tamiz, 2012).

In an effort to gauge whether teachers were ready to respond in the ways that would help students persevere in the face of challenge, Guillory (2012) implored a correlation design methodology to study the relationship between teacher efficacy and teacher-perceived effectiveness in helping students re-engage in the classroom settings. Guillory (2012) discovered that teacher perceptions were critical for helping students with behavior issues. An association was also found between teacher perceptions and student engagement. Mathematics and English Language Arts teachers portrayed efficacy levels that assisted students with academic deficiencies in a manner beneficial to those being served.

Perception. Other quantitative studies, such as those by Buechler (2011), Beavers (2014), Ross (2015), Gehlbach et al., (2016), and Adeyemo (2011) studied different perceptions from students' and teachers' perspectives. Buechler (2011) investigated the perceptions of students attending an at-risk middle school program. Using a statistical analysis of student surveys, Buechler (2011) conducted t-tests to compare group data and Pearson product-moment coefficients to determine the relationships between student perceptions and school records. Showcasing the role perception plays, this study indicated that students felt positive connections with their teachers. The stronger the students felt a connection, the more they perceived their level of success to be influenced by those relationships (Beuchler, 2011).

In a correlational study designed to link the disconnect between empirical research and at-risk students at a rural middle school, Beavers (2014) uncovered consistent quantifiable correlations that supported the hypothesis that a student's academic self-perception is related with academic achievements in core academic subject areas. Ross (2015), Gehlbach et al. (2016) and Adeyemo (2011) examined real-world relationships between teachers' and students' perceptions by using quantitative methods. All instances measured the effect such relationships had on student achievement.

According to Ross (2015), teachers on average, were quite accurate in their opinions of their students' cognitive abilities. The socioeconomic status of the mothers and fathers of the offspring, aided by the school and the setting of the institute's locality, were weighty forecasters of a student's cognitive ability. As noted by Ross (2015), this suggested that it is in the culture and character of the school, rather than an individual teacher's characteristics that influenced teacher perception of student cognitive ability. Gehlbach et al. (2016) noticed that when teachers learned of the likenesses with specific students, better relationships with them were established. Remarkably, those students also produced advanced scores in the course. Adeyemo (2011) determined that students' perceptions and teachers' perceptions of the educational setting played a significant part in students' success. These quantitative studies conveyed the impact perception has on both the student and their achievement. From affecting student achievement to developing relationships in the classroom, perceptions mattered.

Qualitative Studies

Pariser (2011) and Contreras (2011) conducted qualitative studies. Pariser (2011), who believed that previous literature had failed to adequately document relational factors that could change the academic destiny of at-risk students, investigated the impact of relationships with both supportive and insignificant educators on the academic achievement of students. The

results of this research indicated that to be prosperous in helping at-risk students graduate,

teachers should be provided staff development on improving student relationships while meeting

the academic needs of all students. As also noted from the findings, teachers should also

increase their ability to elicit and learn from the students' perceptions.

 Through interviews and classroom observations, the researcher used surveys to match

students with teachers who were asked to provide information that supported the students'

growth and commitment to their academic futures. Contreras (2011), seeking to examine

teachers' perceptions and expectations of Hispanic students, analyzed a group's dialogue and

choice of words in a grounded theory research designed study. Contreras (2011) noted the

following of the teachers:

> They saw their [Hispanic students] attendance at the school as being contrary to the
>
> purpose and focus of the school and as a result caused problems in behavior and focus.
>
> The researcher believed that this was all coded language for considering Hispanics as
>
> 'other' and also indicated a particular attitude toward the Hispanic students on the
>
> campus. (p. 98)

In order to bring about change in the education world, teachers must be able and willing

to admit and address their perceptions of students, as these perceptions have been found to affect

student achievement (Contreras, 2011). In a qualitative study, Thompson (2015) recorded the

encounters of educational leaders in relation to behavior and discipline-related problems. With

an aim to highlight the need for further exploration of the topic, Thompson's (2015)

phenomenological student research included in-depth interviews with open-ended questions. By

transcribing interviews and discovering the important themes, the researcher could determine the

teacher's perception and beliefs influence students' identity and behavior (Thompson, 2015).

Pariser (2011), Contreras (2011), and Thompson (2015), while delivered from three different scenarios, reached similar conclusions. Thompson (2015) and Pariser (2011) shared that teachers' perceptions and their beliefs influenced students' behavior and pointed out that an effort to assist at-risk students must include educator training and professional development to improve relationship-building skills of educators. Contreras (2011) contended that while conversations concerning teacher's perceptions are difficult, in order to bring about systemic change, educators should acknowledge and address issues like teacher expectations and perceptions impact student success. These qualitative studies indicated staff trainings and professional development sessions which build a knowledge base of the instructional strategies for at-risk students in the classroom. With focus on organizational change and teacher efficacy, a qualitative research approach permitted a further examination of teachers' perceptions and how those were affected by a schoolwide initiative, geared toward helping at-risk students become successful citizens of the community.

Synthesis of Research Findings

Research claimed teacher efficacy influences the students' academic outcome (Guillory, 2012; Mojavezi and Tamiz, 2012). Positive correlations were discovered among teacher efficacy and student achievement. Given the importance of building relationships in the classrooms, it is important to note: perceptions matter (Beavers, 2014; Buechler, 2011; Contreras, 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Pariser, 2011; Ready & Wright, 2011; Ross, 2015). At-risk students' perceptions relate to their academic achievement (Beavers, 2014; Buechler, 2011). Students' outlooks guide their outputs. Buechler (2011) learned that the stronger the students felt a connection to their teachers, the more they perceived their level of success was influenced by those relationships. Beavers (2014), paralleled by Adeyemo (2011) and Ross (2015) uncovered

consistent quantifiable correlations that supported the hypothesis that a student's academic self-perception highly related to academic achievement in core academic subject areas.   Gehlbach et al. (2016) noticed when teachers learned about their similitude with learners, who recognized stronger associations with those scholars, and the scholars received advanced scores in their course of study. Their study was the original investigational study to incorporate concrete likenesses as a resource to improve the associations between students and teachers.

Thompson (2015), in his qualitative phenomenological study, explored the experiences of educators as they managed at-risk students. The phenomenon studied was the disciplining of behavior problems which caused disruptions during instructional time. Unlike the previous studies, the socioeconomic background of students was not a determining factor during the research study phase. With a research question based on perception, the research findings of Thompson (2015) and Pariser (2011) expressed a need for staff training and professional development on building relationships to meet with the needs of at-risk students.

Perception impacts expectations and student achievement (Beavers, 2014; Buechler, 2011; Contreras, 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Pariser, 2011; Ready & Wright, 2011; Ross, 2015). Teachers' perception also affects the relationship built between student and teacher. The effect professional development has on changing a teacher's perception of at-risk students is unknown (Thompson, 2015).

Critique of Previous Research

With a focus on closing the achievement gap, Contreras (2011) focused solely on the teachers' perceptions and expectations on the achievement of Hispanic students. Contreras' study uncovered the importance and difficulty of conversations involving race, perceptions, and expectations. The study implied that teachers should be willing to address perceptions in order to make an impact on students' achievement.

Ross (2015) studied teacher perceptions of children's cognitive abilities. Gelbach (2016) studied perceptions by purposely matching teachers and students by commonalities. Ready and Wright (2011), using only a sampling of kindergarten students, examined the teachers' perceptions of students' literacy skills. These quantitative studies determined that teachers' perception influenced the interactions and expectations of their students. Further in-depth analysis of teachers' perceptions of at-risk students was needed. Explanations would provide guidance to those working with educators to alter their perceptions of at-risk students.

Summary

To study the teachers' perceptions of at-risk students, this literature review presented an overview of historical literature searches related to at-risk students, teachers' perceptions, its effects on the teacher-student relationships, and the effect student behavior has on achievement. The conceptual framework provided theoretical frames of references focused on change and teacher efficacy through transformational learning and organizational development. The Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature was organized into the following sections: At-Risk Students, Student Behavior and Achievement, Teacher-Student Relationships, Teacher Perception and its Effect on Student Teacher Relationships, Students' Motivation to Learn and Student Achievement, Teacher Efficacy, Staff Development, and the Relationship between Teacher Efficacy, Student Behavior, At-Risk Students, and Achievement. Also included was a discussion on teacher efficacy and the role it plays in the classroom.

Transformational learning and organizational development are the theories which guided the research on teachers' perceptions and their professional practices. In order to change the teachers' perceptions of at-risk students and create a positive effect on efficacy levels, teachers should become learners once more and reflect critically on the assumptions influencing their own

perceptions (Kreber, 2012). Guillory (2012) found teachers' perceptions of their effectiveness to have a statistical significance in assisting students to re-engage behaviorally (Guillory, 2012) and this can be improved to shape the development and the educational quality of at-risk students (Thompson, 2015).

At-risk students experience greater difficulties with academics (Beavers, 2014). In any student's academic career, there is a chance of a student meeting the criteria of being at-risk, as researchers define them as individuals not perceived to succeed academically because of the factors associated with socioeconomic status (SES), family variables, and academic deficiencies (Gray, 2013, p. 1247).   Therefore, the issue of helping at-risk students is an issue confronted with compassion and diligence.

There is a lack of racial diversity in the classrooms across the nation, creating cultural barriers between the majority of teachers and at-risk students (Myers, 2012). Such a diverse dynamic reiterates the importance of purposely forming relationships with these students. There is a firm connection between teacher-student relationships and school behavior. Perceptions exist and play a role in education (Contreras, 2011; Ross, 2015). Students learn better in environments where there are reciprocal levels of respect shown between teachers and students. There is a strong relationship between teacher efficacy, classroom environment, and teacher sensitivity. Classroom environment and teacher sensitivity are significant attributors to effective teaching and learning practices (Hannah, 2013; Laird, 2015; Phillips, 2014; University of Virginia, 2012;). Empathy is to understand someone else's circumstance or situation regardless of one's own current situation, and it is with empathy that teachers can move toward compassion and action (Laird, 2015) when working with at-risk students.

As mentioned by Ross (2015), teacher's education in this country should be improved to instill the importance of perceptions and student-teacher relationships. School districts affect change through utilizing staff development that is focused on improving the teachers' perceptions on at-risk students. Perception impacts expectations and student achievement (Beavers, 2014; Buechler, 2011; Contreras, 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Pariser, 2011; Ready & Wright, 2011; Ross, 2015). Teacher's perception affects relationships built between students and teachers. The effect that professional development has on changing a teacher's perception of at-risk students is unknown (Thompson, 2015).

Contreras' (2011) study implied that teachers should be willing to address perceptions, in order to make an impact on student achievement. Teacher perceptions influence the interactions and expectations of students. However, the influence of staff training on teacher perceptions toward at-risk students has not been examined. Transformation of the students cannot be achieved without the transformation of teachers (Barchuk & Harkins, 2010). Staff development provides a process to attain educational change and improve the organization. In this ever-changing society, educators must be change agents as well (Fullan, 2011).

The conceptual framework included teacher efficacy, transformational learning, organizational development, and change. The level of efficacy teachers possess impact their perception of students, as well as the students' motivation and academic achievement (Guillory, 2012; Mojavezi and Tamiz, 2012). Transformational learning, the second component of the conceptual framework, causes critical reflection by the learner; thereby, taking a deeper look into one's own perspective (Kreber, 2012; Mallanby 2014). Organizational development, the third component of the conceptual framework, seeks to improve the overall effectiveness of an organization. Furthermore, organizational development seeks positive changes for the

organization (Schmuck et al., 2012). Researchers suggested that teacher's efficacy may be related to the behavior, discipline, and academic issues facing at-risk students (Thompson, 2011). Based on the review of literature, there was a need for this investigation which examined the impact of a schoolwide initiative that included staff training, but was focused on changing teachers' perceptions of at-risk students.

Chapter 3: Introduction

Stake (2010) asserted that qualitative case studies are useful while seeking a more in-depth understanding, as case studies help organize and report data. The qualitative case study approach is valuable for program evaluation because of its flexibility and rigor (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The focus of this study was based on the perceptions of teachers regarding at-risk students before and after participating in three years of a schoolwide initiative that was focused on addressing issues related to at-risk students. With a focus on change and teacher efficacy, this qualitative case study explored the role of teacher efficacy, played on teachers' awareness of at-risk students, following three years of professional development aimed toward building relationships of mutual respect and mentoring.

Research Question

The literature review provided support for pursuing a research project designed to answer the following research question:

1. How has a 3-year schoolwide initiative on reaching at-risk students affected middle school educators' perceptions of at-risk students?

When conducting qualitative research, one of the major procedural steps Creswell (2013) recommended was asking open-ended questions that included accounts of experiences the participants had as it related to the phenomenon, as well as detailed descriptions or events that impacted their experiences. The researcher sought to explore how professional development and an emphasis on reaching at-risk students at a middle school have impacted the way teachers, administrators, and a guidance counselor interacted with the students who were at-risk.

Purpose and Design of the Study

Teachers' perceptions impact expectations and student achievement (Beavers, 2014; Buechler, 2011; Contreras, 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Pariser, 2011; Ready & Wright, 2011; Ross, 2015). Teacher perception also affects the relationship built between a student and a teacher. The research question was based on the teachers' perceptions, as supported in the literature review. Research supported that teacher perception impacts student achievement. Staff training, from an organizational development approach, can create awareness about the importance of forming relationships of mutual respect with students. Thompson (2015) and Pariser (2011) expressed a need for staff training and professional development on building relationships to meet with the needs of at-risk students. A critique of the previous research provided justification for a further in-depth analysis of the teachers' perceptions of at-risk students. With a focus on change and teacher efficacy, this qualitative case study explored the role that teacher efficacy played in their perceptions of at-risk students, following an initiative focused on building relationships of mutual respect and mentoring.

Qualitative research will be used in this study. Qualitative research possesses distinct characteristics that separate it from quantitative research, as qualitative research seeks to understand individual perceptions as inquiry which looks into understanding one thing well (Stake, 2010). When people are categorized and placed in a column that is equated to a number, their unique qualities are lost and become non-existent (Creswell, 2013). A qualitative single-case study design (Yin, 2009) from an insider's perspective (Coghlan, 2007) was used in this study. A case study design consists of open-ended questions, which allows in-depth inquiry, to provide informative data and information for generalization (Creswell, 2013; Green, 2011). A

case study design is well-defined by the attention given to separate and special circumstances (Hyett, Kenny & Dickson-Swift, 2014).

According to Yin (as cited in Baxter & Jack, 2008), a case study design should be considered when:

1. the focus of the study is to answer "how" and "why" questions;

2. you cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study;

3. you want to cover contextual conditions, because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study; or

4. the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context. (p. 545)

The purpose of this case study was to examine the changes in perception and the level of efficacy teachers possessed about at-risk students, both before and after three years of a schoolwide initiative at a middle school in southeast Louisiana. The experiences of teachers, as they interacted with difficult students, before and after engaging in staff development, was the central phenomenon of this case study. The focused selection of research participants comprised of finding and choosing persons or clusters of people that were particularly well-informed or knowledgeable with the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2013). This study focused on the perceptions of middle school teachers about at-risk students, therefore, the population included approximately 55 teachers and staff members who participated in the schoolwide initiative focused on staff development and mentoring. Placing boundaries on a case study is a good practice as it prevents a study from being too broad (Baxter, 2008). The boundaries in this case include one school setting over a 3-year period. This study was bound by time and place (Creswell, 2003) as participants must have been members of the school for at least three years.

Provided staff development can impact upon the teachers' perceptions (Ross, 2015).

There was little research available on the impact of a schoolwide initiative which was focused on reaching at-risk students. This study is important, because its results may provide educational institutions with a focus for closing achievement gaps and reaching the needs of at-risk students by improving teacher perceptions and efficacy. The researcher used a case-study methodology to examine the impact of a schoolwide initiative focused on the achievement, discipline, and relationship-building of at-risk students through staff development and mentoring. Yin (2011) and Stake (2010) suggested binding a case study to ensure it remained reasonable in scope (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In a qualitative research study, Thompson (2015) examined discipline practices of the administrators about at-risk students who displayed behavior that negatively impacted classroom instruction. Thompson's research study supported including both counselors and administrators in this case study, as they provide a different perspective.

In this study, the researcher used open-ended interviews with teachers, a guidance counselor, and administrators, who participated in the middle school initiative since its inception. This study occurred during the third year of implementation. The first step in the procedures of the research was to acquire authorization from the school district to conduct research. The research protocol was drafted for approval by the university and the Institutional Review Board. The researcher was involved with the implementation of the program that was focused on enabling at-risk students to become successful citizens.

Research Population and Sampling Method

Honesty, unity, respect, self-motivation, and tolerance are the core values of the research study site. Between the months of August and May, diverse groups of learners, ranging from 11–15 years of age, attend the southeast Louisiana middle school. There are approximately 645

students enrolled, and about 55 teachers assigned to the school. Out of them, 18% teachers have a Master's Degree or higher and 90% of the core classes are taught by Highly Qualified Teachers (School Improvement Team, 2013). The mission of the workplace includes providing high quality education for the students, in an effort to produce citizens who are productive and responsible life-long learners. The belief system stresses education as the first priority. They believe all students can learn.

Perhaps, the most important belief of the school's district is the belief that excellence is worth the cost. One of the goals of the workplace states that the students will obtain the information and talents needed to become effective citizens. The school's leaders consist of the principal, the administrative team, and the school improvement team. The department chairs, team facilitators, and committee chairs are all members of the school improvement team. The administrative team is the governing body of the school.

Qualitative case study research is best suited when it is important to recognize a group of individuals sharing an experience or rare occurrence. Case study research is an investigation that explores a circumstance while incorporating complete and detailed information collected from various sources of data (Creswell, 2013). This study was focused on the perceptions of teachers, a guidance counselor, and administrators on at-risk students. The sampling population included approximately 55 teachers and staff members who participated in the schoolwide initiative. Criterion sampling (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2001) was used in this case study to identify and select the participants who experienced the phenomenon of being considered for the study. The researcher distributed written and verbal invites to teachers, a guidance counselor, and administrators who were members of the school faculty for at least the last three years.

Approximately 75% of the teachers on staff, along with two administrators, and one counselor fit the criterion. Once the participants consented, interviews were conducted.

Instrumentation

Yin (2009) suggested that the case study research is more reliable and valid when derived from several sources. One procedure for case study research included data collection from individuals who have lived experiences related to the case being studied. Data gathering involved detailed dialogue with contributors. Interviews were conducted with participants, including classroom teachers, one administrator, and a guidance counselor, regarding teachers' perceptions of at-risk students following a schoolwide initiative. One of the purposes of the interview was to understand another person's perspective (Patton, 2001). Interviewing allowed the researcher to collect data including in-depth account of teachers' perceptions of at-risk students. It also provided a glimpse into their lived experiences. According to Merriam (2009), interviewing is essential to examining emotions, perceptions, behaviors, or how people construe their environment or workspace. The interviews were recorded and transcribed on a password-protected laptop.

The interviews consisted of five questions. Flick (2014) believed that the provision of pictures and artifacts could assist the interviewees in the recollection of events related to the focus of the research study. During the interview process, the participants were provided with an outline of past professional development gatherings (Appendix A) in which they participated during the 2014–2016 school years, as these were the first two years when the schoolwide initiative took place. In an effort to gain rich, detailed descriptions, participants were asked open-ended questions.

Data Collection

Mojavezi and Tamiz (2012) studied teacher efficacy, as it related to students' motivation through quantitative research measures. Researchers have also used quantitative methodologies to study teacher efficacy, teacher-student relationships, and perceptions of both the teachers and students (Adeyemo, 2011; Beavers, 2014; Buechler, 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Guillory, 2012; Ross, 2015). The qualitative studies of Pariser (2011), Contreras (2011), and Thompson (2015) indicated that the success of at-risk students lies in the hands of the teachers.

According to Creswell (2013), a qualitative approach to research is implemented once an exploration of an issue or problem is required. Contreras (2011) explained that while conversations concerning teachers' perceptions are difficult, in order to bring about systemic change, educators should be willing to confront those perceptions in order to affect a significant impression upon the attainment level of all scholars. Qualitative research is performed when an intricate and thorough interpretation of the issue is desired (Creswell, 2013) and when researchers seek to empower those individuals. The mainstay of qualitative research is the vast assemblage of information, classically from an array of sources (Creswell, 2013). Data was composed by way of face-to-face interviews, with follow-up interviews as necessary. Open-ended interviews allowed for a breakdown of the evidence gathered. The interviews occurred in the study room of the local library after school hours. The researcher used an iPad and an iPod to record the interviews, and a password protected laptop for note-taking. Each interview was transcribed immediately after the interview by the researcher. The interview questions and supporting documents can be found in Appendix C.

Identification of Attributes

The data collection process was designed to reveal the teachers' perceptions of at-risk students following a 3-year schoolwide initiative. The interviews focused on the following:

- The perceptions of suburban teachers who had engaged in three years of a schoolwide initiative that included professional development and mentoring while working with at-risk students

- The effect the Take 5 staff training (5-minute professional development segments delivered during Late Take-In at the school involved in this study) had on teachers' perspectives and their approach to building relationships of mutual respect with at-risk students to reduce the number of pupils with four or more referrals in a school year

- The effect of the Take 5 staff training from an organizational development approach to create awareness of the importance of building relationships of mutual respect with students

- The effect of the Take 5 professional development trainings on the teachers' perceptions of at-risk students

Data Analysis Procedures

The rationale for analyzing the collected information during research proceedings is to allow the analysts to establish a consensus or form sensible conclusions from the data collected (Merriam, 2009). There are several ways to analyze qualitative data. Information examination in qualitative research entailed setting up and structuring the data for breakdown, coding the findings, and finally, representing the data (Creswell, 2013). Data investigation was an intricate procedure that included maneuvering back and forth between real bits of data and intangible

ideas, amid inductive and deductive reasoning, between explanation and examination (Merriam, 2009). The results of such processing constitute the findings of the study.

Merriam (2009) noted that a favored technique to evaluate information in a qualitative study is to organize it concurrently with data gathering. Previous research studies on teacher perception have transcribed, verified, and analyzed, where the research results are obtained through interviews (Contreras, 2011; Pariser, 2011; Valentine, 2010). Interviews were transcribed by the researcher from digital audio to written words. The interview transcription process assisted in identifying different segments within the data that are responsive to the research question. The task was then to relate a unique piece of evidence with the following piece of evidence in search of hidden, but repeated consistencies within the collected records (Merriam, 2009). Data collected through interviews were analyzed and coded by using Merriam's (2009) step-by-step process of analysis.

The data analysis process began with category construction, which consisted of reading and note-taking, by using a method called open coding (Merriam, 2009). The researcher then grouped the open codes and repeated this method with the next set of data. The lists of groupings were coupled into a master list of concepts. The challenge was then to assemble the groups or topics that encapsulated several repeating themes which expanded across the information gathered (Merriam, 2009). With the assistance of computer software, Atlas.ti, the process of naming categories continued as the researcher tested tentative category schemes against the data. Merriam (2009) describes saturation using a forest and trees analogy. The forest represents the big picture while the trees represent bits of data. Once a point of saturation, the inability to develop new categories, was met, the researcher moved from an inductive to a deductive analysis strategy.

As previously mentioned, the data analysis began with the first interview. The interview was transcribed by the researcher. After the transcription was complete, the data was entered into Atlas.ti, a software program used to organize data. Using an inductive approach, the researcher noted meaningful words and phrases such as aware and stop-and-think. These key words were coded and compared to the transcribed interview. The researcher continued the process noting common patterns interwoven throughout the interviews. This process continued as interviews were conducted. The common or related key words and phrases were given codes. Forty codes were reduced to 14 code groups. Moving from an inductive to a deductive process, the code groups formed themes.

For example, Participant 1 (P1) said, "It has made me stop and think more about how I am reacting to student problems. I am more likely to stop and talk to the student." The phrase "stop and think" was noted by the researcher and marked in Atlas.ti. A few days later Participant 3 (P3) commented, "This initiative has made me more cognizant of having to make the extra effort to build relationships with students I don't automatically develop a relationship with." From this statement, "made me more cognizant" was marked as it related to P1's phrase "stop and think." These statements, along with a few others that will discuss later in chapter 4, were grouped together to deductively form the theme Awareness with sub-themes including Self-Reflection and Reminder.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Research Design

Limitations are the conditions and circumstances that are beyond the researcher's control (Simon, 2011). A limitation of the study was the incapability to control the responses of the research participants; as the participants may or may not have responded candidly during the interview process. Delimitations are the elements that restrict the extent of a research

investigation (Simon, 2011). While measures have been taken to ensure transferability, due to the small sample size, the findings of the study may not be generalized to a larger population. A delimitation in this study would be that it was limited only to employees who had been employed at the facility who were involved in the study for the previous three years.

Validation

Creswell (2013) recommended that the researchers engage in validation strategies to help ensure a valid and accurate research study. Member checking is a familiar approach for guaranteeing inside legitimacy or integrity (Merriam, 2009). By reviewing the transcriptions, the researcher sought feedback about the findings from the individuals interviewed. According to Maxwell (as cited in Merriam, 2009), this is the single most significant method to eliminate the chance of misconstruing the gist of what partakers share and the view they have about what is going on, as well as being a vital way to recognize one's personal prejudices and misinterpretations of what was observed.

"To enhance the possibility of the results of a qualitative study 'transferring' to another setting several strategies can be employed" (Merriam, 2009, p. 227). Thick, rich descriptions enable transferability, by providing a detailed description about the setting and participants of the study. Rich accounts are offered through an arrangement of quotes from face-to-face conferences. This study included detailed descriptions of the settings, the participants, and the findings. Another strategy to ensure transferability was the use of typical sampling (Merriam, 2009). The participants of the study are representative of typical school employees within a suburban school district.

Expected Findings

Teacher-efficacy has a constructive effect on the scholars' enthusiasm and accomplishments (Mojavezi & Tamiz, 2012; Mojavezi & Tamiz, 2012). Perceptions impact expectations and student achievement (Beavers, 2014; Buechler, 2011; Contreras, 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Pariser, 2011; Ready & Wright, 2011; Ross, 2015). There was a need for staff training and professional development on building relationships to meet the needs of at-risk students (Thompson, 2015; Pariser, 2011). Teacher perception also affected the relationship between the student and the teacher. This study sought to determine the effect professional development had on changing a teacher's perception about at-risk students (Thompson, 2015). It was expected that the results of this study would show that confronting the topic of at-risk students should ideally be approached with empathy. It was expected that a schoolwide focus on at-risk students would create an encouraging influence on the educators' perceptions and their perceptions would impact the learning outcomes of those students.

Ethical Issues

"Ethics is one of many considerations when conducting a research study" (Adams & Lawrence, 2015, p. 11). To ensure validity and credibility, it is recommended that any biases be explained that could impact the study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). The researcher has been employed by the school that serves as the setting of the research since 2011. The researcher is a teacher leader and serves on the school improvement team. The researcher was one of the team associates responsible for the implementation and monitoring the schoolwide initiative that was geared toward helping at-risk students become responsible citizens of the community.

To reduce bias, the researcher provided the participants with a list of staff development training sessions (Appendices A and D) to prevent the likelihood of participants' forgetfulness.

While the participant criterion did not allow for random sampling, a method used to reduce bias (Yin, 2011), the participants were chosen based on their own willingness to be interviewed. The participants gave full consent (Appendix B) prior to the interviews. Furthermore, member-checking ensured that what participants meant to say was interpreted correctly. The agreement procedure provided a safeguard which confirmed that that contributors were willingly sharing in the study, with complete facts about the related advantages and disadvantages (American Psychological Association, 2016).

Upon receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board and the school district, participants were written, then questioned, about their willingness to participate in the study. A letter of consent was shared with a required signature. To protect the privacy of the participants, aliases were assigned. In addition to being password-protected, quotes used from the participants were not identifiable.

Summary

Organizational development within an educational setting has the potential to increase the efficacy of teachers. Transformational learning is a multi-dimensional theory, which, when employed by an organization, can help change perspectives. "It will take more than policy or federal and state mandated programs to bring an end to the achievement gap" (Contreras, 2011, p. 4). The issue facing many classrooms is the silent call for educational organizations to reach the need of every child, including at-risk students. Perception impacts how we, as a society, interact with others on a day-to-day basis. Teacher perception impacts student achievement. The school setting used in this study sought to change teachers' perceptions, with an intent to affect the success of at-risk students. Through conducting interviews and developing themes, the

effects of a schoolwide initiative on teachers' perceptions of at-risk students were examined in this case study.

Chapter 4: Introduction

A 3-year schoolwide initiative, focused on helping at-risk students succeed, may affect middle school teachers' perceptions of at-risk students. According to previous researchers (Ross, 2015; Thompson, 2015), teachers need professional training, to address the needs of at-risk students. To ensure help all students succeed, schools should meet the needs of every student. The school in this study addressed the needs of at-risk students by developing and implementing a schoolwide initiative. Teachers' perceptions of at-risk students were selected because these perceptions have been found to impact student achievement. This research study has the potential to impact the available research on the schools, confronting issues surrounding at-risk students. Chapter 4 will include a description of the sample, research methodology and analysis, a summary of the findings, and a presentation of the data and results.

The purpose of chapter 4 is to analyze the data and report about the results of the conducted research. The literature review provided support for pursuing a research project designed to answer the following research question:

1. How has a 3-year schoolwide initiative on reaching at-risk students affected middle school educators' perceptions of at-risk students?

In the previous years, the issue of addressing strategies to enable the "at-risk" students to be more successful, lifelong learners, and respectful citizens of the school and community in the School Improvement Plan was addressed with certain action steps, such as a mentoring program. Prior to the start of the school's initiative, the 2013-2014 School Improvement Plan contained an action step that included mentoring of African American students. More specifically, teachers would mentor African American students in their individual classes. Additionally, African

Americans from the community would be invited to discuss educational opportunities, careers, and their personal successes (School Improvement Team, 2013).

The summer following the 2013–2014 school year, the school improvement team met to plan for the upcoming school year. During the summer meeting, the team analyzed the previous school year's discipline data. There was a realization among the team members that the issue was not one that could be defined by ethnicity. As a result, for the 2014–2015 school year, the School Improvement Plan (School Improvement Team, 2014) action step was revised to include the following:

- Ensure that teachers and staff participated in professional development that taught them how to foster relationships through mutual respect.

- Ensure that teachers and staff be provided with a list of at-risk students (students with four or more referrals) with whom they will develop relationships, mentor, review academic issues, and address behavioral concerns.

With these action steps, the school created professional development that was focused on sharing effective strategies to use with at-risk students who were defined as students with four or more referrals.

According to Creswell (2013), a qualitative approach to research is implemented once an exploration of an issue or problem is required. Contreras (2011) explained that while conversations concerning the teachers' perceptions are difficult, in order to bring about systemic change, educators should be willing to confront those perceptions to affect a significant impression upon the attainment level of all scholars. Qualitative research is performed when an intricate and thorough interpretation of the issue is desired (Creswell, 2013), and when the researchers seek to empower individuals. This research is a qualitative single-case study design

(Yin, 2009) from an insider's perspective (Coghlan, 2007). Using a qualitative approach, 20 interviews were conducted, transcribed, and coded by using the software Atlas,ti. The interviews focused on the impact of the school's initiative on teachers' perceptions. Data analysis revealed six themes: Awareness, Relationships, Impact, Teacher Efficacy, Teacher Perception, and Take 5.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher approached this study with an investigative mindset with an effort to analyze teachers' perceptions from the standpoint of a teacher leader. Prior to the interviews, the researcher reminded the participants that there were no risks in participating in the study. The researcher encouraged participants to respond honestly and openly to structured interview questions. Following each interview, the researcher transcribed and coded the participant's responses to reveal themes associated with teacher perception. During the analysis of data, the researcher incorporated a secret code without any identifying information.

The research site incorporated an approach that addressed how to enable at-risk students to be more successful, lifelong learners and respectful citizens of the school and community. Yearly revisits by the school's leadership team created a platform that facilitated a unique approach to addressing the issue. Teachers' perceptions play a pivotal role in student academic progress.

Description of the Sample

There were approximately 55 teachers assigned to the school in this study. Eighteen percent of the teachers have a Master's Degree or higher and 90% of the core classes are taught by Highly Qualified Teachers (School Improvement Team , 2013). The school has a student

population that consists of 37% minority students and 46% economically disadvantaged students (Advance Education, Inc., 2014). Tables 1 provides detailed demographics.

As indicated in Table 1 a description of Educator Demographics is provided. Table 1 represents the demographics of the school as of March 2017. The school site employs 94 full-time staff members; including 54 teachers, two counselors, and four administrators. Thirty-three teachers were employed at the school for at least three years. One of the counselors and two of the administrators have worked at the school for more than three years. Eighteen teachers, one counselor, and one administrator were interviewed for this case study.

Table 1

Educator Demographics September 2014

Category	White	Non-White	Eligible	Interviewed
Educators with three or more years with the local school	63%	12%	33	20
Educators with less than three years with the school	21%	4%	0	0
Teachers	46	9	33	18
Counselors	2	0	1	1
Administrators	4	1	2	1

Sixteen percent of the educators at the school are non-White while 84% identify as White. Of those interviewed, 10% were non-White while 90% were White. As mentioned in Chapter 1, educators in American schools are predominately White and middle class (Bennett, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). As indicated by the report on racial diversity issued

by the U.S. Department of Education (2016), there is a lack of racial diversity in classrooms across the nation. Such discrepancies can create "a cultural barrier between most teachers and at-risk students" (Myers, 2012, p. 10). Such a diverse dynamic within the school reiterates the importance of purposely forming relationships with at-risk students.

Research Methodology and Analysis

For this study, the researcher used a case study approach. The rationale for analyzing the collected information during research proceedings was to allow the researcher to establish a consensus and form conclusions from the data collected (Merriam, 2009). There are several ways to analyze the qualitative data. Information examination in qualitative research entails setting up and structuring the data for breakdown, coding the findings, and representing the data (Creswell, 2013). Data investigation is an intricate procedure that includes maneuvering back and forth between real bits of data and intangible ideas, amid inductive and deductive reasoning, between explanation and examination (Merriam, 2009). The results of such processing constitute the findings of the study.

The researcher conducted interviews with 20 participants. The interview questions, as found in Appendix C, supported the research question on middle school educators' perceptions of at-risk students. Each interview was evaluated and analyzed during the interview phase. Merriam (2009) noted that a favored technique to evaluate information in a qualitative study was to organize it concurrently with the data gathered. Previous research studies on teacher perception was transcribed, verified, and analyzed, and the results were obtained through interviews (Valentine, 2010; Pariser, 2011; Contreras, 2011). Interview transcription assisted in identifying the segments within the data that were responsive to the research question.

Data collected through interviews was analyzed and coded using Merriam's (2009) step-by-step process of analysis. Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis computer software, was used during the coding process. The process of coding began with category construction which consisted of reading and note-taking, using the open coding method (Merriam, 2009) followed by the grouping of the open codes. This was repeated with the next set of data. The lists of groupings were coupled into a master list of concepts. By moving from an inductive to a deductive analysis, six themes emerged. These six themes: Awareness, Relationships, Impact, Teacher Efficacy, Teacher Perception, and Take 5, will be discussed in the next section.

Summary of the Findings

The research question addressed in this study is: How has a 3-year schoolwide initiative on reaching at-risk students affected middle school educators' perceptions of at-risk students? Twenty structured interviews were conducted with the educators, including teachers, a counselor, and an administrator. The interviews focused on the impact of the school's initiative on teachers' perceptions. The interviews were coded using Atlas.ti, and, as a result, themes emerged. As indicated in Table 4, six themes were formulated, when the codes were analyzed and grouped within and across the interviews. The themes include Awareness, Relationships, Impact, Teacher Efficacy, Teacher Perception, and Take 5. Themes represented thoughts and responses of the participants as they replied to the interview questions as themes were developed by grouping and re-grouping coded phrases. Data in Table 4 provides an organized description of the following themes.

The most prominent theme discovered through data analysis was Awareness. All participants acknowledged that the schoolwide initiative increased awareness of the issues at-risk students face. Many of the respondents shared that Take 5 segments of the initiative increased

awareness of interactions with difficult students. Teachers appreciated participating in structured moments to self-reflect while being reminded of the significance teachers have on students' lives. By creating an awareness of the issue, the school improvement team periodically reminded teachers of the importance of fostering and nurturing relationships with students.

The concept of Relationships was the focal point of the second theme. From respect to empathy, educators communicated that developing relationships of mutual respect was an essential part of the schoolwide initiative. Examining the perceptions of middle school educators following a school's initiative focused on helping at-risk students succeed, uncovering a humanitarian effort that resulted in teachers sharing outlooks of respect and care for at-risk students. Mentoring, an aspect of the schoolwide initiative, gave way to a platform that allowed middle school students to talk about their lives. Additionally, an increase in advocacy for at-risk students resulted from the initiative.

Theme 3, Impact, was the result of the organization adjusting practices through staff development sessions. All participants experienced the impact of the school's initiative that focused on reaching at-risk students. The professional development sessions created a sense of hope in the teacher participants' ability to make a difference in the lives of at-risk students. In addition to creating a culture of mutual respect within the school, empathy was a trait further developed through the school's initiative. As expressed during interviews, becoming more empathetic toward students was a result of the schoolwide initiative.

Teacher Efficacy, the fourth theme of the study, examines the impact of the initiative on teachers' abilities to affect change in students. The Take 5 segments, which occurred for 5 minutes twice a month, increased teacher efficacy. During the Take 5 segments teachers glimpsed into the lives of students through specific strategies used to reach at-risk students.

Teachers mentioned maintaining high expectations for all students and the ability to separate the student from the behavior.

Teacher Perception, the fifth theme in this study, was examined during data collection. Six of the 18 teachers mentioned there was no change in perception of at-risk students. The six teachers, who shared verbal indicators of high levels of efficacy, each had more than 10 years of teaching experience and previous experience working with at-risk students. The remaining teacher participants noted a change in perception. Participants shared becoming more compassionate and less judgmental. In attempting to change perceptions, awareness was developed.

Theme six Take 5, the short periodical professional development offered through the schoolwide initiative, was formed during the analysis process. According to the interview participants, Take 5 segments were beneficial and effective. The consistency of the professional development segments allowed teachers the ability to focus and reflect without feeling overwhelmed. Some of the teacher participants' perceptions were not affected by the schoolwide initiative. However, the initiative made all teacher participants aware of the issues at-risk students face and assisted the participants in providing useful strategies and structured opportunities to self-reflect.

Table 2

Description of Themes

Theme	Description of the Theme
Awareness	Cognizance of the Issue
Relationships	Focus on Relationships and Humanity
Impact	Descriptors and Evidence that Supports the Program's Effectiveness
Teacher Efficacy	Development of Teachers' Levels of Efficacy
Teacher Perception	Teachers' Perceptions of At-Risk Students
Take 5	Details of the Professional Development Sessions

Presentation of the Data and Results

The goal of this research was to expand upon the research brought forth by Thompson (2015) and share the importance of staff development on at-risk students, teacher perceptions, and efficacy throughout the school year and school districts. Analysis of the collected data focused on teachers' perceptions of at-risk students following a school's 3-year implementation of an initiative that was geared toward helping educators improve teaching efficacy. Data was gathered by conducting 20 interviews with the participants; including classroom teachers, administrators, and a guidance counselor.

The conducted interviews resulted in the development of themes. Six themes were discovered when codes were analyzed and grouped within and across interviews. The themes, as found in Table 2, included Awareness, Relationships, Impact, Teacher Efficacy, Teacher Perception, and Take 5. Theme 1, Awareness, described participants' perceptions of the issues related to at-risk students, including teacher efficacy and building relationships of mutual respect. Theme 2, Relationships, addressed teacher-student relationships with a focus on

humanity and advocacy. Theme 3, Impact, provided evidence that supports the program's effectiveness. Theme 4, Teacher Efficacy, offered insight into the impact of the program on teachers' beliefs in their ability to make a difference in the academic path of students. Theme 5, Teacher Perception, explored participant perceptions of at-risk students. Theme 6, Take 5, encompassed descriptions of the professional development sessions provided under the schoolwide initiative.

Theme 1: Awareness

Professional development involves a change in attitude, practice, and belief.   Affecting real change takes a sound professional development plan that includes many well-documented elements—from training design to sustained support (Fogart & Pete, 2007). The interview questions were constructed to gain an understanding of the impact upon teachers who had participated for the entire three years of the school's initiative; as they became more knowledgeable of who their students were and understood what those students needed. The participants were able to explain the impact of the school's initiative on their effort to help at-risk students succeed. During the coding process, 18 quotes were tagged and grouped with the theme Awareness. Participants referenced words such as awareness, mindfulness, self-reflecting, and responsiveness.

Awareness. Educators responded with statements that included the words "aware" and "reminded" when asked about the impact of the school's initiative on teachers' efforts to build relationships with students. Participant P7 responded:

> It has reminded me how important it is to foster and nurture the relationships with
> students. I am now more cognizant of having to make the extra effort to build
> relationships with students I don't automatically develop a relationship with.

Participant P18 added:

> The initiative has allowed me to become more aware of how I talk to certain students. I take a minute or two before I respond to inappropriate behavior. For example, when I see students behaving inappropriately in the hallway I know that I must correct the behavior. Now I am more mindful about my approach to correct the behavior.

Participant P8 believed:

> Mainly it has made me more aware of the need to build relationships with students. It has also made me more aware of the fact that students bring so much baggage to school that can and will distract them from learning. Some have more to deal with than others.

Participant P5 added, "When I first started teaching I was curriculum driven and envious of the teachers who taught kids and not content. This initiative helped me see 5 simple things I can do every day to be a better teacher and person."

Educators also spoke about being appreciative of the consistent, friendly reminder that was provided by the implementation of the program. Several pieces were mentioned outside of the interview questions as the researcher and participants further discussed the program. Regarding the schoolwide initiative and professional development segments, Participant 12 (P12) believed that the initiative made people think about the students they teach. This was evident as one participant mentioned an increased awareness while writing discipline referrals becoming more concerned about the true cause of the issue. Educators also mentioned that the program created an awareness of the students who are socially and academically in need. Participant 11 (P11) shared, "The fact that we focused on them brought it to my awareness . . . . Had we not been focusing on it, I would not have thought about it."

Self-reflection. Several of the respondents noted that the Take 5 segments (five-minute professional development segments delivered during Late Take-In at the school involved in this study) of the program allowed them time to stop-and-think. Teachers responded about the opportunity to self-reflect in several ways. The teacher participants provided evidence that supported self-reflection as a characteristic of awareness, from how teachers react to student issues to focusing on one topic without being overwhelmed. Participant P14 shared, "I was allowed the time to take a step back and look at my own approach to teaching. This made me question my interactions and their efficacy." While Participant P9 commented:

> It [the schoolwide initiative] has served as a reminder to step back, assess the situation, breath, and then determine the best route. Students from different backgrounds and cultures respond differently to being corrected or reprimanded in a certain way. The program brought that knowledge to the forefront of my mind especially when I am dealing with misbehavior.

Participant P13 shared "The program slowed me down and made me think about how I could help them."

Self-reflection is a strategy often used in the classroom with students. According to the responses, teachers benefit from having structured time to self-reflect. A benefit of the Take 5 segments is that it allowed educators a moment to reflect on their beliefs and practices without interruption or judgment. The most important part of self-reflection is being afforded opportunity to recognize weaknesses or areas of improvement and then being able to make improvements. Participant 20 noted:

> It [Take 5] made me realize that some of my students come from a different background than me and have different situations to deal with. Being allowed the time to reflect

made me see that they may be just looking for a kind word from someone. I am also less

quick to 'write up' a student. I find myself, more often now, trying to figure out what is

really going on with the situation.

The school utilizes grade level teams. A team consists of a teacher from each core

subject and an elective/enrichment teacher. Students are assigned to a team and therefore a

cluster of students will receive instruction from the same teachers. One of the benefits of

teaming is the ability to conduct teachers-student conferences during team time with the student.

These conferences allow students the time to reflect on behavior and/or academics. Participant

13 (P13) shared that the school's initiative put her in the place of students during those

conferences; saying,

> By being allowed the five minutes, it was like I was being counseled like the students
>
> often are in team raps. I mean I was able to change my view of one student in particular.
>
> It made me try to be more compassionate and understanding.

Reminder. During the interview, teacher participants were asked if the professional

development segments of the school initiative were (i.e., take five moments) beneficial.

Participants discussed the benefits and as a result, an on-going theme developed during the

interview process. The researcher collected and organized the responses under the code:

reminder. Teacher participants were asked to gauge the benefits of professional development

sessions (i.e., Take 5). The majority of the participants conveyed that the Take 5 segments of the

school's initiative served as a reminder about why they became a teacher and the positive impact

they can have on a child. One of the most powerful responses shared by a teacher was that it

served as a reminder about why they became a teacher. Other educators noted that the program

reminded them of the importance of fostering and nurturing relationships with students.

Participant P2 shared, "I think all teachers and staff need to have friendly reminders on how to handle students. The world is changing and what worked years ago will not necessarily work today." Participant P4 added, "They [The professional development sessions] were good reminders. I have 10 years of experience teaching high-risk kids and I have been removed from that environment for several years. The sessions reminded me of best practices." While Participant P6 commented,

> The professional development jogged my memory a bit. I have been confronted with actual truths of what some of my students go home to deal with on a daily basis and this work we have done keeps it fresh on my mind.

During an interview session, Participant P7 mentioned,

> It just reminds to make sure I know their story. We have a story and they do too. I have my students complete an inventory at the beginning of the year. The sessions solidified why I have them complete those inventories.

Participant P8 explained, "The initiative we implemented as a school motivated me. It helped remind me of why I became a teacher and the positive impact I can make on a child." Furthermore, Participant P9 commented,

> I take as much as I can from the Take 5 moments. It's always nice to have reminders of why we do what we do. It's not just academics. It has helped me to remember to focus more on the student rather than the behavior. They are children, and for many of them we are their best hope.

Theme 2: Relationships

Building positive individual relationships with students is paramount. Marzano et al., (2003) noted that if teachers have favorable relationships with students, then students are more

willing to accept rules, procedures, and disciplinary consequences for misbehaviors. Students

who feel valued and respected are more willing to learn from teachers. Hence, the importance of

teachers knowing who the at-risk students are in their classes, as they need positive relationships

in order to be successful in the school setting (Buechler, 2011**).** There were over 50 quotes

coded with terms including humanity, relationships, mentoring, advocacy, respect, empathy, and

hope. The following section summarizes the organized and collected responses surrounding the

theme Relationships.

     Relationships. Hattie (2009) identified that teacher-student relationships affect student

achievement, noting that strong teacher-student relationships imply teacher-efficacy and respect

by the teacher for what the students contribute to the class.   During the interview process, the

researcher noted relationships of mutual respect played an integral part of the schoolwide

initiative. P19 commented, "Our teachers already work hard to form relationships with their

students, but this [the schoolwide initiative] gave 'a little extra' to the students who needed it!

. . . Teaching and learning is positively impacted when positive relationships are formed."

     Educators mentioned regarding students as individuals and spending extra time,

exploring the causes of the problem instead of becoming frustrated when a student was not

compliant or misbehaving. Participant P3 commented, "The initiative made me more cognizant

of having to make the extra effort to build relationships with students I don't automatically

develop a relationship with." While Participant P8 shared, "Every child has a story and the

initiative forced teachers to look beyond the utterance of, 'this kid is a horrible child.'"

Similarly, Participant P10 mentioned, "Students that I would normally write up, I now find ways

to build relationships and trust. Writing them up puts them more at risk and non-compliant."

While Participant P14 noted, "It has made me speak purposefully. I make sure I have a

conversation with my students when they misbehave is encouraging and not demeaning. They as people are not wrong but the actions were wrong."

According to the school's improvement plan document (School Improvement Team, 2016), to foster relationships through voice, mutual respect, and student engagement . . . teachers and staff will develop relationships with students with academic and behavioral needs. Regarding teacher-student relationships, all participants acknowledged the importance of building and/or maintaining positive relationships with students. Participants P7 shared the following, "It has reminded me how important it is to foster and nurture the relationships with students. I also know that it's important for a kid to connect with someone on the team or in the building." Participant P8 agreed, "Mainly it has made me more aware of the need to build relationships with students." Notably Participant P9 mentioned, "It has helped me try to build relationships with students that I had previously just 'taught.'" While Participant P20 asserted,

> The school initiative has encouraged and supported me in building relationships with students. I have participated in professional development to better understand how to build stronger teacher-student relationships and to be responsive in my approach to discipline and classroom structure.

Humanity. Several of the participants mentioned the importance of remembering that students are humans too. Participant 6 (P6) used the old adage, "don't judge a book by its cover" when asked how their perception of at-risk students has changed over the past three years. Two other educators shared that students are human too, and, as such, remembering that they are human is more important than reacting haphazardly to the misbehavior. During an interview, Participant 14 (P14) discussed the initiative and the school's focus on at-risk students:

The PD segments were eye-opening. Yes, these are human beings and their actions don't

matter as much as them as people matter. They still deserve respect. And sometimes they

need to feel respected before they can give respect. The sessions were like a renewal

period. These are my babies. They want to be loved ultimately. And I need to make sure

that that is in the forefront of my mind when I speak with them.

Adults working in the educational field are continuous learners. According to

Crutchfield and Grant (2012), great organizations adapt well to change. They are able to

comprehend the external cues and make necessary adjustments (Crutchfield, 2012). When

speaking of the professional development sessions offered under the school's initiative through

the delivering of Take 5 moments, P4 shared the following:

These sessions were a good touch point to remind me that not everyone comes from the

same type of environment I have in my home. It makes kids seem more human and

individual. We can forget that each child is unique sometimes.

Mentoring/Advocacy. The academic achievement of at-risk students is dependent upon

the educators who are willing to serve as advocates (Baker, 2006; Camak, 2007; Doster & Fears,

2015; Ogbu, 2003; Ridnouer, 2011; Tosolt, 2009). The school's 2014–2015 School

Improvement Plan (School Improvement Team, 2014) included a focus on mentoring at-risk

students.   As a result of this focus within the school's setting, a sub-theme described as

mentoring and advocacy evolved. Teacher participants shared that the mentoring of at-risk

students gave way to a platform that allowed middle school students to talk about their lives.

P14 noted the following about a student who had been mentored, "Because of the school

initiative and mentoring, I have noticed my mentoring students have started participating during

class time." Advocacy was also mentioned during the interview period by P14, "I have to make

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sure to be their advocate because if I am not no one else will be. I want them to know that there is one person who will always be in their corner."

During one of the interviews, P19 shared the following as it related to the mentoring program incorporated under the schoolwide initiative.

The time we spent during the summer identifying these [at-risk] students was extremely beneficial . . . . I am always trying to find ways to give teachers background information on students without breaking confidentiality. However, I think it is extremely important for teachers to 'know' their students and what goes on with their students inside and outside of their classroom walls . . . . When this program began, it opened up even more dialogue that I had with teachers about our students. Most middle school students want to talk about their lives, but sometimes it is hard for them to begin the conversation. As the adults in their lives, we should facilitate these conversations, and that is exactly what happened.

Theme 3: Impact

Organizational development (OD) includes learning communication, problem-solving, and decision-making skills (Schmuck et al., 2012). OD seeks to increase the conditions of life for the organization and its members. OD, while involving sustained effort over time, understands that true change requires a shift in the mindset of the organization (Schmuck et al., 2012). The goal of organizational development is to reform the performance of the organization while being guided by its mission. An organization should be aligned with its mission. The efforts of such are long-term, and the types of interventions implemented are action-oriented, with the intent of changing the practices of the organization (Schmuck et al., 2012).

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, prior to the onset of the school's initiative, the 2013–2014 School Improvement Plan contained an action step that included mentoring of African American students. More specifically, teachers would mentor African American students in their individual classes. During the summer meeting prior to the onset, the team analyzed the previous school year's discipline data. There was a realization within the organization that the issue was not one that could be defined by ethnicity. Participant 15 (P15) shared the following clarification, "One thing I really like is that our mind shifted from Black students to under-privileged students. They are truly under-privileged. I like the term under-privileged because it was a realization of really looking at the kids themselves."

Adjusting the practices of the organization were addressed through staff development sessions. Teachers participating in the study were able to verbalize the effect of the initiative on their perceptions of at-risk students. The interview questions provided the opportunity for participants to share their thoughts. A prominent theme gauged from data analysis was the impact of the professional development segments (Take 5) on the school's initiative on the educators who participated for the entire three years of the program. All teacher participants experienced the impact of the school's initiative that was focused on reaching at-risk students. Hope, empathy, and appreciation for consistency were indicators of the impact of the schoolwide initiative on teachers' perceptions. While not all participants' perceptions were affected, all responses indicated support for the schoolwide effort.

Hope and empathy. The best teachers believe that children can learn, and that it is the teachers' job to get children interested in learning (Ross, 2015). Ross (2015) believed that teachers' education should be improved to instill these qualities in new teachers. Empathy is the ability to understand someone else's circumstance regardless of one's own situation. Five out of

the 20 teacher participants felt that professional development sessions, along with the schoolwide focus, created a sense of hope in their ability to make a difference. P12 referenced a Take 5 session titled Listen*!* Backpack video (see Appendix A). The video featured students in a classroom with their backpacks. The students went into a classroom and had a seat as if they were getting ready to start class with a teacher directing them. As the students opened their book bags they pulled out a single sheet of paper that had words such as sad, helpless, depressed, and angry displayed on them. The video showed what the students wanted their teachers to hear when they (the students) were not feeling their best. In reference to the video, P12 responded by adding the following statement:

> I really enjoyed the backpack video showed last year. It made me see that those kids do come here with that [issues beyond our control] stuff. We have jobs to do and yet we still have to take their outside issues into consideration. The work we do is valuable. I think it isn't something a lot of people would not consider if it wasn't for the work we are doing.

P2 noted that they showed students they really care about them. P2 further stated, "It gives me hope that together (administration, staff, teachers, and all those that come in contact with our students) we can make a difference in these children's lives." Empathy was a character trait component included in the School Improvement Plan (2016) of the school involved in this study. Empathy was discussed during the professional development sessions (see Appendix A). During the afternoon announcements, the counselor ends the day by saying, "Students please remember our C.A.R.E.S. component of H.U.R.S.T. C.A.R.E.S: Cooperation, Assertiveness, Responsibility, Empathy, and Self-Control." (personal communication, May 28, 2017) Teachers offered sentiments in becoming more empathetic toward students as it made them see that

students may need a kind word from someone. Participant 15 conveyed the following about the program:

> You really have to understand where these kids come from to understand why they
> operate the way they operate. We have to show empathy and understand that these kids
> may have issues and yes, we have to address them in a different way. We have done a
> good job at looking at the data and identifying the kids and being proactive. We need to
> continue to look beyond the behaviors.

Theme 4: Teacher Efficacy

Teacher Efficacy was the fourth central theme found during data analysis of this study. Recalling from the definition mentioned in Chapter 1, teacher efficacy is the belief a teacher has in the ability to affect change in the life of a student (Guillory, 2012; Guo, Connor, Yang, Roehrig & Morrison, 2012; Kleinsasser, 2014; Parker, 2012; Yilmaz, 2011). Teacher efficacy is influenced by teachers' perceptions (Adeyemo, 2011; Guo, Connor, Yang, Roehrig & Morrison, 2012; Hoy, 2000). Teachers with a high level of efficacy believed that unmotivated students could be instructed if the teachers were willing to experiment with different instructional strategies in the classroom.

While only one teacher used the word efficacy specifically, other participants shared comments that were coded under teacher efficacy. Many teacher participants stated specific benefits of the W.A.T.C.H. (W-Welcome them every day. A-Advocate for them. T-Treat them with respect. C-Care about them. H-Have a little mercy on them.) during the interview process. W.A.T.C.H. is the acronym used during Take 5 and the graphic organizer for W.A.T.C.H. can be found in appendix D. Educators stated that W.A.T.C.H. provided specific suggestions that were short and sweet. P11 stated,

I realized that I could hold them to the same expectations but maybe have different

considerations because I understand that they have a different type of home life and

maybe they need more support to be successful academically and socially. (personal

communication, May 25, 2017)

Take 5 was consistently referred to as a moment to step back from the norm and self-

reflect. The 5-minute moment was described as a moment to recharge, because it allowed them

to shift their mindset. P10 shared, "I realize some of their actions are beyond their control and

the behavior/grades are often due to environmental factors. We can't control what happens at

home, but we can control what happens in our classrooms." Further evidence in a shift in

efficacy was provided by the educators throughout the interview process as Participant 10 (P10)

said, "Writing them up puts them more at-risk and non-compliant. We can't control what

happens at home, but we can control what happens in our classrooms." Further evidence

supported teacher efficacy, including this statement shared by P6 during the data collection

process:

WATCH has given me specifics on what students deal with and strategies in order to help

them. When students are difficult to deal with I now have a better understanding of the

issues they may be dealing with at home that may be affecting their life here at school. It

has caused me to become more compassionate toward my students and really think about

what they are going through versus them just being defiant or just disrespectful.

It is evident that the teachers expressed a separation between the student and their

behavior. For example, P14 shared, "I feel I have good rapport because of Take 5. It has made

me speak purposefully." The teacher participant stressed that she ensures the student is aware

they as a person are not wrong but that their actions were wrong. P8 stated, "I feel I have worked

harder to look at each student as an individual . . . . I'm not perfect at this and at times it is still hard to do, but when you know where a student is coming from, you can better help them."

Theme 5: Teacher Perception

According to Gallos (2006), organizational development is a well-organized plan which is managed by leaders in an effort to increase the organization's effectiveness. Organizational Development (OD) is about changing people, their patterns, and actions, in an effort to bring about change. Staff development provides a process to attain educational change and improve the organization. Johnson (2014) and Gulamhussein (2013) acknowledged the importance of staff development in the educational change process. Teachers' perceptions not only affect the academic outcome of at-risk students (Contreras, 2011), but they also play a vital role in the relationship established between the teacher and the at-risk student (Contreras, 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Guillory, 2012; Pariser, 2011; Ready & Wright, 2011; Ross, 2015; Sorhagen, 2013; Thompson, 2015). Teacher perception, a theme in this study, examined the perceptions of teachers toward at-risk students following the school's 3-year implementation of an initiative that was geared toward helping educators improve teaching efficacy.

No change in perception. Of the 18 teachers interviewed, six noted no change in their perception. Of those six, two noted that the initiative encouraged them to continue to build relationships with students; saying that Take 5 served as a reinforcement. The remaining participants agreed they tried to develop relationships with students. Participant P2 commented,

> I don't think I am doing anything differently. I have always built good relationships with my students. I try to learn something about them. Once we connect, I can get so much more out of them. It has encouraged me to continue to build those relationships.

Participant P3 shared, "My perception has not really changed. I try my hardest to develop relationships with my kids." Similarly, Participant P7 mentioned,

> Don't think it's changed much. I have always looked at kids and find what it takes to connect with them. I always self-evaluate at the end of the day; have I hugged this kid, have I said something positive to them. If I was frustrated with a kid I check to see why and then try to fix it the next time I see them.

Participant P14 stated, "My perception didn't change but it reinforced being respectful at all times." While Participant P16 noted, "The initiative did not change my perception of difficult students because I love the difficult students." Participant P18 shared, "I have been teaching a very long time. I have experience dealing with students from many backgrounds. My perception did not change."

Ross (2015) believed that teachers' education should be improved to instill these qualities in new teachers. Guo et al. (2012) examined the potential outcomes of teacher efficacy on student learning and suggested that teacher efficacy impacted classroom practices. The participants who noted no change in perception gave verbal indicators of high levels of teacher-efficacy. Additionally, these participants had more than 10 years of teaching experience and included four teachers with more than 20 years of experience; resulting in more experience helping students with behavior and academic issues.

Change in perception. When asked about the impact of the school initiative on the way they view students, several teacher respondents noted a change in their perception. The most frequent response was that the initiative was a good reminder and raised awareness; while others revealed looking beyond the moment and the behavior. P6 shared,

It has helped me to definitely not judge a book by its cover and to really think before I

pull out a referral. It has helped me to see that at-risk students need the extra love and

encouragement in order to do better themselves. It has also further solidified that I may

be the only person in a child's life that cares about them or that they feel loved. So, it's

important for me to WATCH out for every student, especially my at-risk students.

Educators mentioned becoming more compassionate toward their students and practicing

empathy by putting themselves in the students' shoes. Participant P1 shared, "I think about them

as a person and not their behavior. I am more likely to get to know them for who they are now

and not for what was said about them from previous years." Participant P4 commented, "Not

everyone comes from the same type of environment I have in my home. It makes kids seem more

human and individual. We can forget that each child is unique sometimes."

Participant P5 agreed, "Now I try to spend a little extra time figuring out what is causing

the problem so we can work together to fix it instead of just getting frustrated." Participant P6

shared,

When the study started I had some ideas about how children might have a rough home

life so to fix their life at school. Watch gave me specifics on what students deal with and

strategies in order to help them. When students are difficult to deal with I now have a

better understanding of the issues they may be dealing with at home that may be affecting

their life here at school. It has caused me to become more compassionate towards my

students and really think about what they are going through versus them just being

defiant or just disrespectful.

Participant P8 said, "I feel it has made me aware that every child "has a story" and it is

important for me to get to know that story. I do try now to create some sort of relationship with

each student." While Participant P9 noted, "they really are dealing with stuff that is REAL to them even though it might seem trivial to an adult." Also, Participant P10 mentioned, "It has allowed me to come up more constructive ways to get students to be more compliant by building relationships."

Participants repeatedly shared comments which conveyed changes in their perception. Participant P11 said,

I realized that I could hold them to the same expectations but maybe have different considerations because I understand that they have a different type of home life and maybe they need more support to be successful academically and socially.

Participant P12 commented, "I can relate better with the kids that are impoverished because we shared some of the same struggles." While Participant P13 agreed, "Yes, my perception has changed because it made me put myself in their shoes." Finally, Participant P17 noted, "I am now more aware of what baggage each student brings to school each day which has in turn caused me to try to be more empathetic."

Approximately 70% of the participants acknowledged a change in perception of at-risk students. This supports the potential for the positive effects of professional development on teachers' perceptions. Thompson (2015) and Pariser (2011) expressed a need for staff training and professional development on building relationships to meet with the needs of at-risk students. In attempting to alter perceptions, awareness can be developed. Change and awareness, through an organizational development approach, is best influenced when guided by the culture and character of the school, rather than by individual teachers (Schmuck et al., 2012).

Theme 6: Take 5

Take 5 was the sixth theme identified during the collection and organization of the responses. In addition to a mentoring program, the schoolwide initiative included professional development for teachers and staff. The professional development segment, known as Take 5 around the school, was mentioned numerous times during the data collection phase. Take 5 is a 5-minute segment presented during the Late Take-In Sessions which occur approximately once a month. On these days, students would arrive at school three hours later than usual, while the faculty and staff would gather during their normal arrival time for professional development. One of the key features of organizational development (Schmuck et al., 2012) involves sustained effort over time.

Consistency and importance of Take 5. The teacher participants were asked if the Take 5 moments of the schoolwide initiative were beneficial. The teachers shared supportive remarks and also noted the reasons why Take 5 was beneficial. The benefits included short professional development segments that were consistent with repeated exposure. Participant 17 (P17) shared, "I have been more mindful about how I interact with students based on our sessions." Other teacher participants spoke of the importance of building relationships with students and allowing a moment of self-reflection. P1 noted that the segments were quick and therefore were not overwhelming. P2 said, "I think all teachers and staff need to have friendly reminders on how to handle students." P8 mentioned that the segments were motivational saying, "I feel it has made me aware that every child has a story and it is important for me to get to know that story. I do try now to create some sort of relationship with each student."

Participant 16 displayed an emotional connection to the schoolwide initiative. During the member-checking process, P16 shared artifacts based on the professional development sessions

delivered over the past three years and shared that the initiative affected her interaction with all of her students. P16 mentioned,

> The program made me pause and reflect on my interactions with all my students. It helped me change the way I interact with students that day and weeks to come. If I forgot there was another reminder; another Take 5 session. The consistency helped me by reminding me of all the strategies we can use in case we forget. (personal communication, May 19, 2017)

Participants were forthright about sharing the importance of Take 5. During the interviews, Participant P13 commented, "I don't think we should stop Take 5. It gave teachers tools to deal with difficult students." While Participant P16, said,

> We need to keep Take 5 going in our school. I think there are teachers who need it. I don't say it just for me. The consistency is needed because just like students with repetition it becomes engrained in our core.

Artifacts. During the interviews, participants shared pieces from the Take 5 sessions. Participant 1 (P1) brought to the interview a card titled *Invite Students to Learn* (Figure D2). According to P1 the card was given to the faculty and staff during one of their Take 5 sessions. P17 mentioned the same card during the interview session saying, "The information we get from the sessions are tidbits we can refer to throughout the weeks because we get little cards like this that we are able to simply hang on the wall or place in our desk drawer." Enthusiastic about Take 5, P16 sang a song titled *Relationships and Discipline* (Figure D3). It was a song they learned during one of their professional development sessions. Inquiring about why the song was so meaningful P16 offered the following:

I love music! And so, for us to sit together as a school and sing about how important it is

for us to be sure to discipline while creating relationships was so powerful. I would have

never thought of the two going to hand-in-hand. But it is true: you can't have one

without the other.

Reading through the school improvement plan and the action step designated for the

initiative, more insight was sought in regard to fostering relationships through voice (School

Improvement Team, 2016). After inquiring about voice, P13 shared a little pink card featuring

an umbrella with an excerpt from Ginott (2003) while saying,

A lot of what we do here has to do with the way we talk to kids. I am huge proponent of

DD [development design] and Take 5 flows right along with DD. The voice we use to

address students is just as important, if not more important, as what we say. It is about

how we say it. One thing I really treasure is the umbrella story.

Summary

This chapter explored different elements from the themes derived from the analysis of

research collected via interviews on the educators' perception of at-risk students, following a

schoolwide focus on helping at-risk students succeed. In an effort to gain impartial insight, the

researcher solicited participation from 18 teachers, a counselor, and an administrator from the

site. Interviews were conducted to reveal the essence of teacher participants' perspectives,

following a 3-year school initiative. Through data collection, coding, and analysis, the

researcher identified the themes connected to teacher perception. The six themes identified

through the research coding process included Awareness, Relationships, Impact, Teacher

Efficacy, Teacher Perception, and Take 5. The themed findings (see Figure 1) revealed

connections to the conceptual framework: Transformational Learning and Organizational

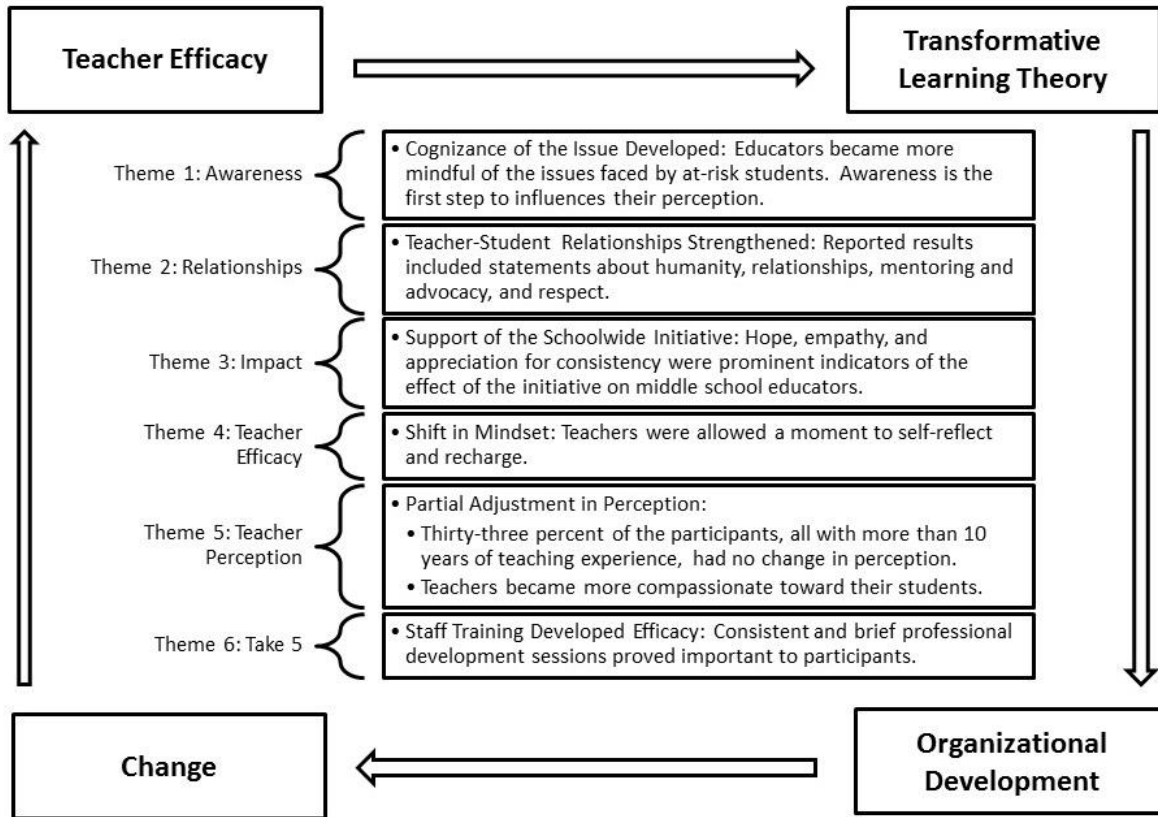Development with a focus on Change and Teacher Efficacy.

Figure 1. Link between the research question, conceptual framework, and themes.

Analysis of the connection between critical reflection, transformative learning, and adult

learning showed that transformative learning facilitates deliberate and intentional efforts by

learners to critically reflect on, validate, and effectively act on their interpretations and ways of

thinking (Concordia University, 2014). Critical reflection dates back to John Dewey, who once

noted that we learn more from reflecting upon old actions than by the action itself (Mellanby,

2014). Critical reflection provides a way of viewing a situation from a constructive and outside

point of view (Fook, 2007). Chapter 5 will explore the relationships between these themes and

the conceptual framework while investigating their significance towards teachers' perceptions.

Chapter 5: Introduction

This qualitative case study examined the perceptions of middle school teachers on reaching at-risk students following a schoolwide initiative focused on helping at-risk students succeed. The following research question guided the qualitative process of data collection, analysis, and reporting of the findings: How has a 3-year schoolwide initiative on reaching at-risk students affected middle school educators' perceptions of at-risk students?

Chapter 5 provides a summary, discusses the results, as well as the implications of those results for practice, policy, and theory. In addition to naming the limitations of the study, Chapter 5 also offered recommendations for further study. A case study methodological approach was implemented to examine the effects of a schoolwide initiative that was focused on helping at-risk students succeed. The teacher participants provided insights into the effect of focusing on perception. This chapter provided discussion and conclusions based on those findings.

Summary of the Results

According to researchers, perception impacts expectations and student achievement (Beavers, 2014; Buechler, 2011; Contreras, 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Pariser, 2011; Ready & Wright, 2011; Ross, 2015). Teacher perception also affects relationships between the student and the teacher. With a focus on closing the achievement gap, Contreras (2011) focused solely on teachers' perceptions and expectations on the achievement of Hispanic students. Contreras' study uncovered the importance and difficulty of conversations involving race, perceptions, and expectations. This research implied that teachers should be willing to address perceptions in order to impact student achievement.

Ross (2015) studied teacher perceptions of children's cognitive abilities. Gelbach (2016) studied perceptions by purposely matching teachers and students through commonalities. Ready and Wright (2011), using only a sample of kindergarten students, examined teachers' perceptions of students' literacy skills. These quantitative studies determined that teacher perception influenced the interactions and expectations of their students. Further in-depth analysis of teachers' perceptions of at-risk students was needed. Explanations would provide guidance to those working with educators to alter their perceptions of at-risk students. This study introduced the effects professional development has on improving teacher perceptions of at-risk students; a recommendation based on the research findings of Thompson (2015).

The conceptual framework guided the frame of reference for the research presented. The findings and purpose of this study was orchestrated from the perspectives of Transformational Learning and Organizational Development (OD) with a focus on Change and Teacher Efficacy. Closs and Antonello (2011) asserted that transformational change focuses on change within an organization while transformative learning concentrates on change within each individual. Transformational learning and organizational development were the selected theories that guided the research on teachers' perceptions and their professional practices.

Twenty structured interviews were conducted with educators, including teachers, a counselor, and an assistant principal. The interviews focused on the impact of the school's initiative on teachers' perceptions. Six themes were found, when codes were analyzed and grouped within and across interviews. The themes included Awareness, Relationships, Impact, Teacher Efficacy, Teacher Perception, and Take 5. Theme 1, Awareness, described the participants' awareness of the issues related to at-risk students, which included teacher efficacy and building relationships of mutual respect. Theme 2, Relationships, addressed teacher/student

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relationships with a focus on humanity and advocacy. Theme 3, Impact, discussed descriptors

and evidence that supports the program's effectiveness. Theme 4, Teacher Efficacy, provided

insight into the impact the program had on the development of teachers' levels of efficacy.

Theme 5, Teacher Perception, depicted teachers' perceptions of at-risk students. Theme 6, Take

5, encompassed detailed descriptions of the professional development sessions provided under

the schoolwide initiative. The themes represented the thoughts and responses of the teacher

participants as they responded to the interview questions.

Discussion of the Results

A discussion of the results centered on the researcher's interpretation and was supported

with the findings gathered during the research process. The purpose of the research study was to

explore the educators' perceptions of at-risk students. The themes generated from research were

Awareness, Relationships, Impact, Teacher Efficacy, Teacher Perception, and Take 5.

Awareness impacted perception, as Contreras (2011) noted, "the topic of teacher

perception must become the focus of professional learning communities to help heighten teacher

awareness in order for schoolwide change to begin and be sustainable" (pp. 13–14). A majority

of the teacher participants mentioned that the school's initiative has made them aware or more

aware of their perceptions. In order to understand the depth of one's perception, the individual

should be cognizant of the issue. According to Dretske (2012), Perception without awareness is

impossible, because awareness of x, a conscious experience of x, is required to make the receipt

of information about x a perception of x. Participant 1 (P1) shared,

> [The initiative] has made me stop and think more about how I am reacting to student's
>
> problems. I am more likely to stop and talk to the student about what is going on instead
>
> of going straight to handing out consequences.

Perception is significant, as it is a personal view found in one's mind (Dretske, 2012). Teachers' perception affects student achievement of developing relationships. By receiving specific strategies and daily reminders of the importance of forming healthy relationships of mutual respect with all students, teacher participants felt that the professional development sessions of the school's initiative were beneficial. Participants shared that one of the benefits of the school's initiative was regarding W.A.T.C.H. P6 said, "WA.T.C.H. gave me specifics on what students deal with and strategies to help them." In addition to the concrete strategies, this consistency was also mentioned as an added benefit of the school's program. According to Participant 16 (P16), "If I forgot there was another reminder, Take 5. The consistency helped me by reminding me of all the strategies we can use in case we forget."

Forming healthy relationships of mutual respect with students is a win-win for all parties involved in the educational process. During the member-checking session with P15, data about the students, with four or more referrals, was shared. The data showed a decrease in the number of students with four or more referrals, and this can be found in appendix E (Figures E5 and E6). Most of the teachers believed that building relationships with students was always a focus. However, a few teachers expressed building relationships with students who they would not automatically develop relationships with as one of the impacts of the school's initiative. When negative perceptions precede the opportunity to build a relationship with an at-risk student, the student loses out. P5 shared, "[the school initiative] was a constant reminder of the importance of building relationships with our students. You can't teach if you can't reach them." Teachers must know the power of their impact; thus, the importance of teacher-efficacy.

Teacher-efficacy is a teacher's belief in the ability to affect change. Three teachers shared that their level of efficacy increased as their perception of students with behavior issues

changed since the beginning of the school's initiative. In a very open face-to-face interview, P11shared,

> So, when they come down the hallway and they are loud and obnoxious, my thought is 'that is a behavior that we need to fix.' I have come to understand that that may be appropriate for them when they are not at school. And so, I think, 'that's a behavior that needs to be addressed instead of jumping straight to you are not meeting expectations and so you get a consequence.' The initiative made it more important for me to be ok with saying to students, "hey we need to have a conversation about this because my goal is to help you be successful in all areas of your life and this will carry over into your profession. We don't walk down the hall shouting."

The teacher participants in this study engaged in three years of 5-minute professional developments, approximately 1–2 times per month during the school year. Their focus was to help the at-risk students succeed by developing relationships and opportunities for the mentors. As a result of exploring the impact on teachers' perceptions, their initiative brought awareness of the issue to the forefront. Teacher participants began forming relationships with students they would not have actively sought out prior to the initiative. For educators who formed relationships with their students, the initiative provided a reminder of the importance of maintaining relationships of mutual respect with students. When presented with brief and purposeful segments of professional development on at-risk students, the educators' levels of efficacy increased and their perceptions of those students were affected as well.

The findings of this study suggested that districts seeking change should consider providing educators with concrete strategies and consistent reminders of the importance of forming healthy relationships of mutual respect with all students. Through this approach,

districts will cultivate a work environment where awareness and the teachers' levels of efficacy flourish. If teachers are trained on how to interact with at-risk students and are given effective strategies, then their perspectives and approach may change in a manner that will positively impact the success of all students.

Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature

Transformative learning emphasizes the intentional efforts toward resolving issues with perspectives (Closs & Antonello, 2011). Transformative learning occurs by using developmentally advanced conceptual structures and transforming both meaning schemas and perspectives through critical reflection (Taylor & Taylor, 2012). It is awareness that will beget change (Contreras, 2011). Teacher participants shared self-reflection as a benefit of the school's professional development portion of the program. P16 mentioned, "The program made me pause and reflect on my interaction with all my students." Take 5 provided teachers the opportunity to critically reflect.

In completing a study that included 40 teacher-student relationships and behavior problems, O'Connor et al. (2011) recognized the importance of supporting elementary school teachers' awareness about the role of their relationship with students and provided teachers with information as to how to support relationships with their students. Research supported that teacher perception impacts student achievement. According to P3, "the initiative made teachers more cognizant of having to make the extra effort to build relationships with students we don't automatically develop a relationship with." Staff training, from an organizational development approach, created awareness of the importance of forming relationships of mutual respect with students. The school's decision to focus on building relationships with at-risk students was an

action that increased the possibility of success, as awareness is the first step to changing perception.

The Transformational Learning Theory is a theory applied to adult learners because life experience, cognitive ability, and critical reflection are essential elements for transformative experiences (Singleton, 2015). Metacognition, or thinking about thinking, involves self-awareness and critical reflection. The theme, Awareness, was the result of a school employing organizational development to address an issue. Transformative learning requires independent, active learners. A transformative dimension of adult learning is reflection. Reflection is the process of critically assessing the content, process, or premise of efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience (Mezirow, 1991). The act of reflecting helps learners extract meaning through intellectual organization. Reflection often occurs through interactions with others. The schoolwide initiative, focused on helping at-risk students succeed, allowing teachers and staff the platform to self-reflect with people who shared similar experiences and thoughts.

Organization development, a sustained effort over time, is about changing people and their patterns and actions in an effort to bring about a desired change (Schmuck et al., 2012). The goal of organizational development is to improve the effectiveness of organizations while being guided by its mission. The school improvement plan designed and implemented by the school in this study is an example of organizational development. Many states only require this plan for schools not reaching their academic goals. However, that is not the case with the district involved in this research study. A school improvement plan requires significant planning with a goal to improve the quality of teaching and learning within a school. This form of organizational development is focused on changing the culture of the school with a clear mission.

The school's plan indicated a commitment to learning and change. Buechler (2011) suggested perceptions can be altered when a school commits to organizational change. Research conducted by Buechler (2011), Pariser (2011), and Thompson (2015) indicated to be successful in helping at-risk students, teachers should be provided with staff development training, with outcomes including fostering positive teacher-student relationships and meeting the academic needs of students. Gulamhussein (2013) and Johnson (2014) acknowledged the importance of staff development in the educational change process. Professional development involves a change in the attitude, practice, and belief. Affecting real change takes a sound professional development plan that includes many well-documented elements from training design to sustained support (Fogart & Pete, 2007). Teacher efficacy is influenced by teachers' perceptions (Adeyemo, 2011; Guo, Connor, Yang, Roehrig & Morrison, 2012; Hoy, 2000). P14 shared, "I feel I have good rapport because of Take 5. It has made me speak purposefully." Through organizational development, teacher efficacy was improved.

Teacher-Student Relationships was a theme that evolved during the data analysis process. Participants also shared the impact of empathy in the classroom. Pariser (2011) and Buechler (2011) built cases for empathy in the classroom. Buechler (2011) focused on teachers being trained specifically about how to develop a caring environment in which the students feel they are supported and welcomed. P2 noted that they showed students they really care about them. Teachers offered sentiments in becoming more empathetic toward students as it made them see that students may need a kind word from someone. P15 commented, "We have to show empathy." It is with empathy that teachers can move toward compassion and action (Laird, 2015) when working with at-risk students. With the incorporation of continued dialogue and

staff development with opportunities to reflect, perhaps teachers will continue to grow in their confidence to help at-risk students succeed.

Community of Practice

To affect change, districts must commit to transformative learning. Transformative learning, coupled with opportunities to self-reflect, provide the foundation needed to alter educators' perceptions. Such learning must occur with training that is purposeful. Educators should see and feel the importance of their work and the relevance of the training provided. Schools should continue to lay the groundwork for continuous improvement. Learning should be embedded within the school's culture for greatness to grow and reside.

Learning institutions are social organizations. Improving education and student achievement requires less change in policy and more change in the habits and interactions of people (Schmuck et al., 2012). With regards to the community of practice, this research encourages organizations to address the issues that exist with at-risk students, by first acknowledging the issues. After acknowledging the issues, the findings suggested that schools should provide educators with brief and consistent staff development, where they are given opportunities to self-reflect. Providing staff training may raise awareness and change teachers' perceptions of at-risk students.

The results of this study pertaining to teachers' perceptions, following a 3-year initiative, included participants sharing about opportunities to self-reflect:

Participant 14 commented, "It is a very gentle way for people to look and reflect without feeling like fingers were pointed at them." Participant 16 stated, "The impact made me pause and reflect on my interaction with all my students." Participant 1 agreed, "It has made me stop and think more about how I am reacting to student problems."

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Relation to the Literature

The teacher is the most important factor in impacting student achievement (Hattie, 2009; Marzano, 2003). Teacher-student relationship impacts student achievement. Students do not choose their racial or linguistic background. They do not get to choose their socioeconomic status. This lack of choices creates barriers between themselves and the teachers (Myers, 2012). In order to help at-risk students succeed, teachers should develop relationships of mutual respect with all students.

According to Pierson (2013), no meaningful learning can occur until there is a meaningful relationship. Relationships were the second theme of the research. Participants shared the importance of building relationships with at-risk students as one of the benefits of the schoolwide initiative. As mentioned in the literature review, working relationships amongst educators and students are vital factors for an improved climate (Hannah, 2013; Laird, 2015; Nash, 2016; Phillips, 2014; University of Virginia, 2012). To that end, P8 provided, "it has made me more aware of the need to build relationships with students."

Guillory (2012) found that teachers' perceptions of their effectiveness has a statistical significance in assisting the students to re-engage behaviorally (Guillory, 2012) and can be improved to shape the development and the educational quality of at-risk students (Thompson, 2015). Continuous staff development (Thompson, 2015) and a continued dialogue (Contreras, 2011) are crucial to reach the needs of every student, especially those who are at the risk of failing (Ross, 2015). P19 commented, "When this program began, it opened up even more dialogue than I had with teachers about our students." Schools seeking to reach the needs of at-risk students should be geared toward change through effective measures that include open communication and feedback with a commitment to helping at-risk students succeed.

Community of Scholars

Positive teacher perspectives about at-risk students are critical for the students to develop self-esteem in their academic and personal lives (Bartley, 2007; Bongo, 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Thompson, 2010). Ross (2015) believed that the teachers' education should be improved to instill teacher-efficacy in teachers entering the profession. As noted by Contreras (2011) in the literature review, "the topic of teacher perception must become the focus of professional learning communities to help heighten teacher awareness in order for schoolwide change to begin and be sustainable" (pp. 13–14). There has been an increase in professional education for reflective practice (Petko, Egger & Cantieni, 2017). In order to change the teachers' perceptions of at-risk students and increase their efficacy, teachers should become learners and reflect on the assumptions that influence their individual perceptions (Kreber, 2012). Participant 1 (P1) shared,

> [The initiative] has made me stop and think more about how I am reacting to student's problems. I am more likely to stop and talk to the student about what is going on instead of going straight to handing out consequences.

Limitations

Limitations are the conditions and circumstances beyond the researcher's control (Simon, 2011). A limitation of the study was the researcher's incapability to control the responses of the participants. Participants may or may not have responded candidly during the interview process. Measures were taken to ensure transferability, but, due to the small sample size, the findings of the study may not be generalized to a larger population. The gathering of data took place during the close of the school year. Researchers seeking to explore the teachers' perceptions should consider choosing a time of the year that is not as busy a time for educators.

Implications of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory

In order to change the teachers' perceptions of at-risk students and improve efficacy levels, teachers should become learners once more and reflect critically on the assumptions influencing their own perceptions of at-risk students (Kreber, 2012). Transformational learning and organizational development are the theories which guided the research on teachers' perceptions and their professional practices. Guillory (2012) found that teachers' perceptions of their effectiveness has a statistical significance in assisting students to re-engage behaviorally (Guillory, 2012), and this can be improved to shape the development and the educational quality of at-risk students (Thompson, 2015).

The goal of this research was to expand upon the research brought forth by Thompson (2015), and share the importance of staff development on at-risk students, teacher perception, and efficacy throughout the school year within school districts. Thompson (2015) found that teachers need better options to assist with disruptions in the classroom. In order for staff development to be effective, districts should commit to learning and change. When a school commits to organizational change, perceptions and behaviors can be altered (Buechler, 2011).

This study confirmed that staff development on improving relationships with at-risks students can impact teachers' perceptions. According to Participant P4,

> These sessions were a good touch point to remind me that not everyone comes from the same type of environment I have in my home. It makes kids seem more human and individual. We can forget that each child is unique sometimes.

Participant P5 said,

> When I first started teaching I was curriculum drive and was envious of the teachers who taught kids not content. This initiative helped me see 5 simple things I can do every day

to be a better teacher/person. It is a constant reminder of the importance of building

relationships with our students. You can't teach if you can't reach them.

Professionals should work together to create leaders and teachers who empathize and

develop the ability to counter behavioral issues with relevant knowledge and skills.   Staff

development can increase awareness and change teachers' perceptions to provide quality

education for at-risk students. School districts should be willing to confront and address the

issues that exist in middle-class teachers and students who are at-risk (Contreras, 2011).

Training teachers, through an organizational development approach, will affect their perspectives

on working with at-risk students and allow them to realize the key roles they play in closing the

achievement gap.

Teacher efficacy impacts individual perception of students, as well as students'

motivation and academic achievement (Guillory, 2012; Mojavezi & Tamiz, 2012).

Transformational learning causes critical reflection by the learner, thereby, taking a deeper look

into one's own perspective (Kreber, 2012; Mallanby 2014). Organizational development seeks to

improve the overall effectiveness of an organization. Organizational development also seeks

positive change for the organization (Schmuck et al., 2012). This study supports Thompson's

(2011) suggestion that teacher efficacy is related to the behavior, discipline, and academic issues

that at-risk students face. According to Thompson (2015), the ability to counter behavior issues

with relevant knowledge and skills is a missing ingredient for the teachers of at-risk students.

This investigation showed that professional development can change teachers' perceptions

providing quality education to at-risk students.

An educator's perceptions of classroom situations impact both their action and reaction.

Relationships, teacher efficacy, student performance, and their motivation to learn are affected

by teachers' perceptions (Contreras, 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Guillory, 2012; Pariser, 2011; Ready & Wright, 2011; Ross, 2015; Sorhagen, 2013; Thompson, 2015). In order to bring about change in the education world, teachers should address personal perceptions of students, as these perceptions affect student achievement (Contreras, 2011). Continuous staff development (Thompson, 2015) and a continued dialogue (Contreras, 2011) are both crucial to reaching the needs of every student.

Recommendations for Further Research

The researcher sought to explore how professional development and an emphasis on reaching at-risk students at a middle school impacted the way teachers, administrators, and a guidance counselor interacted with these students. A recommendation for this study is to continue the research, examining the effects a school's initiative has on the outcomes of students who are at-risk in different academic environments. The school in this study implemented a program, and its impact was studied after three years of implementation.

Prior to this study, there was no research available on teachers' perceptions of at-risk students after a school's initiative focused on improving their outcomes. Another recommendation would be for a school to implement a similar program for a shorter period of time and gauge the impact on teachers' perceptions. Teachers' perceptions affect student achievement. Therefore, more dialogue about teachers' perceptions of at-risk students should occur in schools across the nation.

Positive teacher perspectives about at-risk students are critical for the students to develop self-esteem in their academic and personal lives (Bartley, 2007; Bongo, 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Thompson, 2010). Individual differences among teachers (e.g. gender, age, and teaching experience) and contextual differences (e.g., grade level, subject taught, and affective episodes)

can influence teacher practice (D'Elisa, 2015). The discovery of individual teacher differences and the effect of those differences on perception and efficacy is a topic that warrants further investigation as teachers whose perception did not change all had over ten years of teaching experience.

According to Thompson (2015), "Various types of cultures and families have migrated to schools, which create diverse student populations. The need to prepare teachers for diversity in the classroom is integral to student achievement" (pp. 31–32).   Therefore, a last suggestion is for more research to focus on the extent to which teachers possess cultural capital, racial, and linguistic backgrounds, to teach the growing diverse student populations (Dilworth & Coleman, 2014). In an effort to support the education of at-risk students, schools should confront and address the issues that exists between teachers' perceptions and the effect it has on the ability to form relationships of mutual respect.

Conclusion

As a nation, the United States can no longer afford to leave children behind. As a nation, there should be consistent, innovative, and purpose-filled efforts to close the achievement gap. At-risk students have a different social and family background when compared to their peers. These students live by a different set of rules, often gathered from their surroundings (Payne, 2013). In many cases, they live below the poverty level and come from single parent homes. These students bring with them some unspoken rules of the class in which they were raised, which means, they operate under different set of rules (Payne, 2013).

Teachers should understand and know at-risk students (Contreras, 2011). For students to be successful, educators should understand their unspoken rules and teach them the ones needed for success at school and work. Students should not be excused or scolded for not knowing;

educators should teach them and provide support, assistance, and high expectations. Researchers suggested that the role of the educator is not to save the student, but rather, to offer a support system, become a role model, and provide opportunities to learn, which will increase the likelihood of the student's success (Bartley, 2007; Bongo, 2011; Contreras, 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Payne, 2013; Thompson, 2010).

Educators, support leaders, and staff members should make an effort to understand the world from which the students come, in order to help them achieve success. Schools with a rigorous and relevant curriculum will reach greater success, especially if relationships with rapport, respect, and role models are established with all students. Continuous improvement calls for continuous learning. Continuous staff development (Thompson, 2015) and a continued dialogue (Contreras, 2011) are crucial to reaching the needs of every student, especially those who are at the risk of failing (Ross, 2015). The goal of this research was to expand upon the research brought forth by Thompson (2015) and share the importance of staff development on at-risk students, teacher perception, and efficacy throughout the school year within the school districts. Taking five minutes periodically throughout the year created awareness of an issue. Taking five minutes consistently throughout the school year provided educators with a moment to self-reflect. Taking five minutes consistently throughout the school year provided teachers with strategies that helped them to both interact more effectively with at-risk students and increased teacher efficacy. Taking five minutes consistently allowed them time to examine, and, in some cases, change their perception of the at-risk students. The results of the study will provide educational institutions with a focus for closing achievement gaps and reaching the needs of at-risk students by improving teachers' perceptions and efficacy.

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d%3D_12871_1%26course_id%3D_872_1%26framesetWrapped%3Dtrue

Appendix A: A Review of At-risk Students Staff Development Trainings

Late take in 2014–2015

1. W.A.T.C.H. Youtube Video

2. Rsa short on empathy

3. Rita Pierson DVD series

4. Rita Pierson YouTube video

5. Student engagement (Ron Clark on the activexpressions)

6. Motivating the teacher (I'm a teacher video)

Late take in 2015–2016

1. YouTube video on at-risk students PBS special

2. Shared WATCH cards

3. Listen! Backpack video

4. Umbrella story

5. Rita Pierson Ted Talk

6. Ron Anderson

7. The math property: The product rule (KG's Story)

Appendix B: Consent Form

Research Study Title: Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of At-Risk Students Following a School's Initiative Focused on Helping At-Risk Students Succeed
Principal Investigator: Johnel Bryant Robinson
Research Institution: Concordia University
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Brandy Kamm

Purpose and what you will be doing:
The purpose of this interview is to gain your perspective so that we can examine the impact of a schoolwide initiative on various teachers' perception of at-risk students. We expect approximately 20 volunteers. No one will be paid to be in the study. We will begin enrollment on March 1, 2017 and end enrollment on March 10, 2017. To be in the study, you will notify the researcher via email or through verbal contact about your desire to participate in the study. Interviews can be conducted at your convenience after school in the study room of the local library. A list of questions will be emailed to you prior to the schedule of the interview. Doing these things should take less than one hour of your time.

Risks:
There are no risks involved in participating in this study other than providing your information. However, we will protect your information. Any personal information you provide will be coded, so that it cannot be linked to you. Any name or identifying information you give will be kept securely via electronic encryption or locked inside the researchers' password protected laptop. When we or any of our investigators look at the data, none of it will have your name or identifying information. We will only use a secret code to analyze the data. We will not identify you in any publication or report.   Your information will be kept private at all times, and then, all study documents will be destroyed 3 years after the conclusions drawn from this study.
Benefits:
Information you provide will help us assess the benefits of confronting sensitive issues related to the teachers' level of efficacy and the perceptions of at-risk students. You could benefit from this by knowing that your stories and experiences have contributed to the whole body of knowledge regarding teachers' perceptions.

Confidentiality:
This information will not be distributed to any other agency and will be kept private and confidential. The only exception to this is if you tell us about abuse or neglect that makes us feel seriously concerned for your immediate health and safety.
Right to Withdraw:
Your participation is greatly appreciated, but we acknowledge that the questions we are asking are personal in nature. You are free, at any point, to choose not to engage with or stop the study. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. This study is not required for you to do and there is no penalty for not participating. If, at any time, you experience a negative emotion from answering the questions, you can let us know and we can stop asking you questions.

Contact Information:

You will receive a copy of this consent form. If you have questions, you can talk to or write to the principal investigator, Johnel Robinson, at his email jorobinson@mail2.cu-portland.edu. If you want to talk to a participant advocate other than the investigator, you can write to or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch (email obranch@cu-portland.edu or call 503-493-6390).

Your Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information. I asked questions if I had them, and my questions were answered. I volunteer my consent for this study.

_____   _____
Participant Name   Date

_____   _____
Participant Signature   Date

_____   _____
Investigator Name   Date

_____   _____
Investigator Signature   Date

Investigator: Johnel Bryant Robinson email: jrobinson1@stcharles.k12.la.us
c/o: Professor Brandy Kamm
Concordia University – Portland
2811 NE Holman Street
Portland, Oregon 97221

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Lead-up Interview questions:

1. What impact has the school initiative had on your effort to build relationships with students?

2. Has the school initiative had an impact on the way you view your students?

3. Were the professional development segments of the school initiative (i.e., take five moments) beneficial to you as a teacher? Why or why not?

4. How has your perception of the students who can be difficult to deal with changed since the beginning of the school's initiative?

Main Question

How has the three year schoolwide initiative on reaching at-risk students affected your perception of at-risk students?

The WATCH Program

Operation: Close the achievement Gap

W. — Welcome them every day.

A. — Advocate for them.

T. — Treat them with respect.

C. — Care about them.

H. — Have a little mercy on them please.

Figure D2. W.A.T.C.H. Card used and referenced during the professional development sessions.

Adapted from School Improvement Team. (2016). *School improvement plan.* XXXXXXXX

Parish Public Schools.

Figure D3. Invite Students into Learning Card used and referenced during the professional

development sessions. Adapted from School Improvement Team. (2016). *School improvement*

plan. XXXXXXXX Parish Public Schools.

Figure D4. Relationships and Discipline Music Sheet used and referenced during the

professional development sessions. Adapted from School Improvement Team. (2016). *School*

improvement plan. XXXXXXXX Parish Public Schools.

Appendix E: Discipline Data

Students with 4 or More Referrals

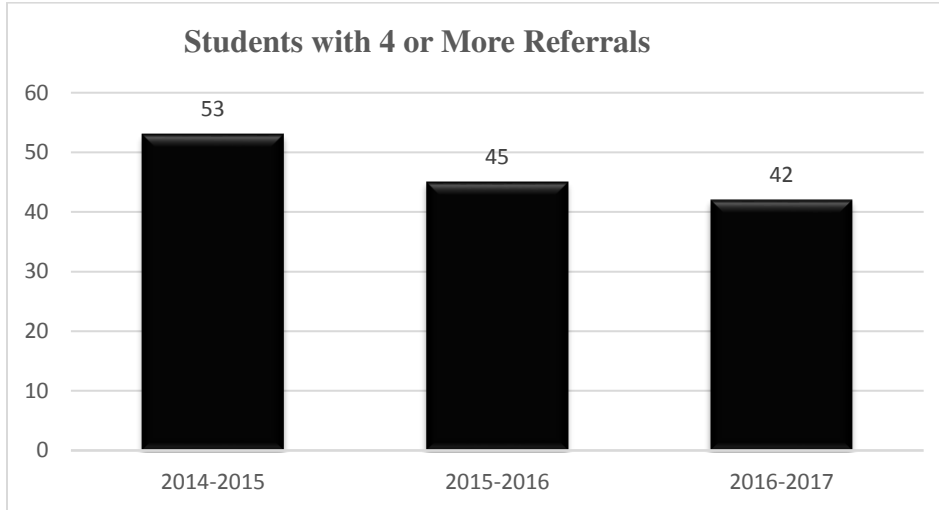| Year	Value
2014-2015	53
2015-2016	45
2016-2017	42

Figure E5. Students with 4 or more discipline referrals between the 2014–2017 school years. Adapted from School Improvement Team. (2016). *School improvement plan.* XXXXXXXX Parish Public Schools.

Number of Referrals by Students with 4 or More Referrals

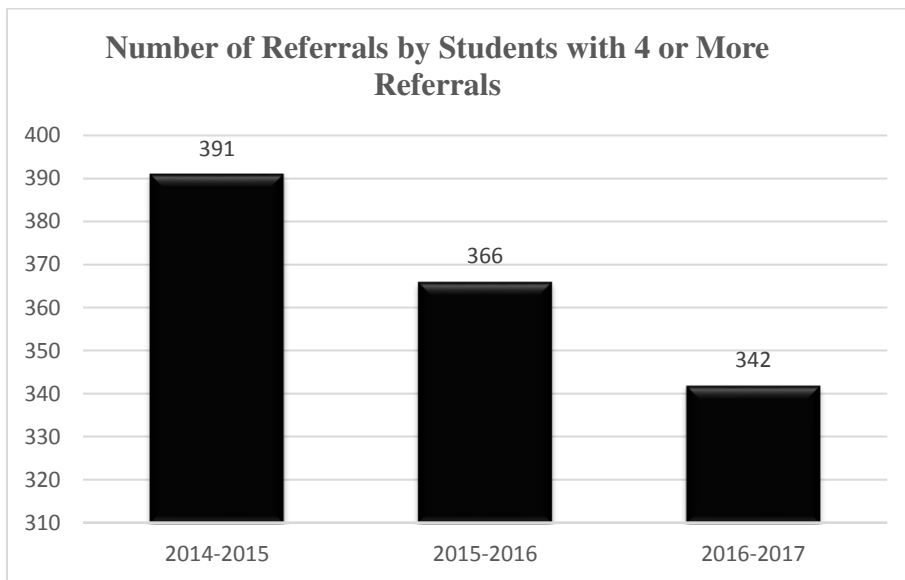| Year	Value
2014-2015	391
2015-2016	366
2016-2017	342

Figure E6. Number of referrals accumulated by students with 4 or more referrals. Adapted from School Improvement Team. (2016). *School improvement plan.* XXXXXXXX Parish Public Schools.

Appendix F: Statement of Original Work

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously-researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

Statement of academic integrity.

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

Explanations:

What does "fraudulent" mean?

"Fraudulent" work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one's own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate's final work without full and complete documentation.

What is "unauthorized" assistance?

"Unauthorized assistance" refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another's work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

Statement of Original Work

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University-Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.

2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*

_____Johnel Bryant Robinson_____
Digital Signature

_____Johnel Bryant Robinson_____
Name (Typed)

_____9/28/2017_____
Date