At-risk students' perceptions of their school experiences

Glen A. Johnson

The University of Montana
INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

ProQuest Information and Learning
300 North Zeib Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
800-521-0600

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

**Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature**

Yes, I grant permission  

No, I do not grant permission

Author's Signature: [Signature]

Date: 5/24/02

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.
At-Risk Students' Perceptions of Their School Experiences

by

Glen A. Johnson

B.S., Western Montana College, 1978
M.Ed., The University of Montana, 1991
Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education The University of Montana 2002

Approved by:

[Signatures]

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

Date 29 May 2002

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
ABSTRACT

Johnson, Glen A., Ed.D., May 2002 Educational Leadership

At-Risk Students' Perceptions of Their School Experiences

Advisor: Dr. Roberta D. Evans

This qualitative study examined the school experience as perceived by at-risk students. These perceptions were then subjected to qualitative data analysis techniques in an effort to determine if the data gathered would lead to new insights regarding the place called school.

A purposefully selected sample of 12 at-risk students was questioned about their school experiences and data collected in an effort to establish a grounded theory. Each subject responded to open-ended questions asked via a pre-determined protocol during face-to-face interview sessions. The data obtained from the interview process was then transcribed and subjected to qualitative data analysis as prescribed by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Bogdan and Biklen (1992).

The processes of open, axial, and selective coding resulted in three distinct categories of data. Data analysis yielded the following: at-risk students' perceptions of school, at-risk students' perceptions of punishment and consequences, and at-risk students' advice to school personnel. Further qualitative analysis of the data also resulted in the following conclusions:

1. The perceptions of at-risk students with regard to school and school personnel are directly related to their perceived treatments and subsequent difficulties.

2. Emerging school related issues help to explain at-risk student behaviors and stated needs.

3. Adolescent perceptions are beneficial to schools in developing a better understanding of meeting the needs of potentially troubled youth and all students in general.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The completion of this dissertation was a labor of love and the culmination of years of hard work and dedication, not only by the author but by several others. I am forever indebted to each for their continued encouragement and understanding.

To my wife Ann, thank you first of all for your love, your understanding, and your devotion to my work. I thank you too, for encouraging me to enter the doctoral program. I would have not taken the chance if you hadn't taken the initiative and gotten the ball rolling. Especially, thank you for being my constant source of strength and my continual inspiration. No educator works harder than you do to see that students succeed. You are the type of teacher that the subjects of this study describe as the kind of teacher necessary for them to have a chance at success. You do care for all students and give every child a chance to succeed. Ann, you are a professional to be emulated.

To my sons, Josh and Zach, thank you for your love and understanding, too. You have both grown up during the completion of this program and have sacrificed a great deal in seeing it through. Many times when I should have been playing ball or fishing with you, I was in class or writing. I appreciate all that you each gave up for me. I am so proud of you both and what you have accomplished. I promise to do all that I can to make up the time together we have lost.

To my parents Loryl and Helen Johnson, my departed grandfather George Johnson, and my mother and father in-law Joe and Gerre Shannon, thank you for instilling in me and emulating for me, the worth of a solid work ethic and the satisfaction found in a job well done. Had I not been taught to work hard and to finish every task to the best of my ability, this project would have long since gone by the wayside. Thanks too, for your love and support throughout this labor and for understanding why I couldn’t always visit or spend as much time with you as I would have liked.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank the members of my dissertation committee for their assistance in this study: Dr. Darrell Stolle, whose professional insight was very helpful and welcomed; Dr. Dean Sorenson whose professional experience and candor were and continue to be of great value to me; Dr. William McCaw, whose own study served as a roadmap for this study and whose comments and ideas added to its quality, I will forever be indebted to you; Dr. John Lundt, who has been a colleague and friend for over ten years, the man whose quick wit and ability to always provide the perfect advice has been of great comfort to me, special thanks John; and finally Dr. Roberta D. Evans, who has been a source of professional inspiration and a great friend for over ten years. Always willing to listen and help, she has assisted me through tough times both personally and professionally and encouraged me to reach heights I had once only dreamed about. Thank you, Bobbie. Please know that you will always hold a special place in my heart and in the hearts of my family.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ..................................................................................................iii

LIST OF TABLES ..............................................................................................................vii

CHAPTER ONE ..................................................................................................................1
  Introduction .............................................................................................................1
  Context of the Problem ..........................................................................................1
  Purpose of the Study ...........................................................................................4
  The Research Question ...........................................................................................5
  Definition of Terms ...........................................................................................6
  Delimitations and Limitations of the Study ..........................................................11
  Significance of the Study .......................................................................................12

CHAPTER TWO ................................................................................................................14
  Review of the Related Literature ...........................................................................14
    Review of the Literature Introduction .......................................................14
    The Description of Students ......................................................................16
    The School Climate ....................................................................................20
    Teacher Attitudes and Expectations ..........................................................27
    The Victimization of Students ...................................................................36
    Adolescent Depression ..............................................................................41
    Students’ With Dual Exceptionalities .......................................................43
    Summary of the Review of the Literature ................................................46

CHAPTER THREE ............................................................................................................49
  Methodology ...........................................................................................................49
    Research Design .........................................................................................49
    Developing a Theory .................................................................................49
      Grounded Theory ..........................................................................50
    Data .............................................................................................................50
      Sample ............................................................................................50
      Data Collection ..............................................................................51
      Procedures ......................................................................................52
        Interviews ..............................................................................53
        Interview Protocol .............................................................53
      Ethical Considerations ...................................................................55
      Development of Questions ..............................................................56
        Grand Tour Question ........................................................56
        Subquestions ........................................................................56
    Research Question Rationale ....................................................................57
Data Analysis Procedures .............................................................. 62
  Analytic Induction ............................................................. 63
  Coding ............................................................................. 64
Verification .................................................................................... 64
  Accuracy ............................................................................ 64
  Generalizability .................................................................. 65
  Sampling ............................................................................. 67
Data Reporting ............................................................................. 67
  The Role of the Researcher ............................................... 68
  Narrative ............................................................................. 69
Summary of Methodology .................................................................... 70

CHAPTER FOUR ............................................................................................................... 71
Findings From the Qualitative Inquiry ................................................................. 71
  Open Coding ............................................................................... 73
    Students’ Perceptions of School........................................ 73
    First Feelings of School.................................................... 74
    When School Related Problems Began............................ 75
    Perceived Causes of School Related Problems................. 75
    Feelings of School at the Onset of Problems................. 76
    Perceived Changes in Treatment by School Personnel.... 77
  Perceptions of Punishments and Consequences .................. 78
    Explanation of Perceived Treatment ......................... 79
    Perceived Effects of Punishment and Consequences....... 80
    Subjects’ Insight into Educators’ Behaviors ................. 81
  Students’ Advice to School Personnel .................................. 83
    Consistent Treatment of Everyone.............................. 84
    Listening to Everyone ..................................................... 84
    Respecting Everyone ..................................................... 85
    Caring for Everyone ...................................................... 85
Axial Coding ....................................................................................... 85
  Causal Condition and Phenomenon .................................... 86
    The Phenomenon: Students’ Perception of School ......... 89
    The Phenomenon: Perceptions of Punishment & Consequences 92
    The Phenomenon: Students’ Advice to School Personnel . 96
Selective Coding .................................................................................. 100
  At-Risk Students’ Perceptions of Their School Experience.... 100
  Core-Category ..................................................................... 107
  Subcategories ..................................................................... 108
    Students’ Perception of School .................................. 108
    Perceptions of Punishment and Consequences .............. 108
    Students’ Advice to School Personnel ....................... 109
Summary ....................................................................................... 109
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Definition of At-Risk vs. At Greater Risk</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a.</td>
<td>Subject Information</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Properties and Dimensional Range of the Category:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students' Perception of School</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Properties and Dimensional Range of the Category:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Punishment and Consequences</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Properties and Dimensional Range of the Category:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students' Advice to School Personnel</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Axial Coding Process</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Causal Condition and Phenomenon</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>The Phenomenon: Students' Perception of School in Context</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>The Phenomenon: Punishment and Consequences in Context</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>The Phenomenon: Students' Advice to School Personnel in Context</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Kids Who Are Different

Here's to the kids who are different,
The kids who don't always get A's,
The kids who have ears twice the size of their peers,
And noses that go on for days...

Here's to the kids who are different,
The kids they call crazy or dumb,
The kids who don't fit, with the guts and the grit,
Who dance to a different drum.

Here's to the kids who are different,
The kids with the mischievous streak
For when they have grown, as history's shown,
It's their difference that makes them unique.
- Digby Wolfe

The Context of the Problem

Much has been written and said about the causes and reasons for the recent outbreaks of violence in our schools. School officials and mental health workers cite such things as broken homes, problems with peers, as well as the violence portrayed on television, movies, and in video games as the basis for these attacks (Cannon, 1999). Others state that music lyrics (Jipping, 1999), failing grades (Kolman, 1999), bullying (Dedman, 2000) and mental health issues (Cannon) as being the underpinnings of these attacks. In some of the cases, it has also been theorized that the culture of the school may
have had something to do with the offending students’ problems (O’Toole, 2000). The shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, as well as similar incidents in other schools, is a reminder of how complex and interwoven the causes of such acts may actually be.

It has been very well documented that both of the youths that participated in the horrific act at Columbine, as well as many of those who have participated in other shootings, did not always get along with others. Students and school officials admit that perpetrators of this act were teased, tormented, and subjected to a climate that they both perceived hostile (Alter, 1999). Similar stories emerged regarding this outcast syndrome including the young man from DeKalb, Missouri, who in 1987 shot a classmate and then himself was teased about his chubbiness; the offender at Moses Lake, Washington, who opened fire in 1996, killing a teacher and two students ostensibly because he was tired of being teased; the adolescent at Stamps, Arkansas, who shot two students that humiliated him in front of his peers in 1997; At Goddard, Kansas, where the perpetrator claimed he had been bullied and beaten for years leading to his 1985 shooting of his junior high principal and three others; the young man at Napa, California, who wounded two students in 1992 because they bullied him; In 1978, the youth who resided at Lanett, Alabama, that shot and wounded his principal after the principal had paddled him once and was threatening to paddle him again; and the young man at Blacksville, South Carolina, who in 1995, after having been continuously teased and then suspended for giving an obscene gesture to one of his tormentors, returned to school with a gun and killed one teacher, wounded another, and then killed himself (Dedman, 2000).
Other reasons have also been given for school related shootings. Some say that music lyrics and their propensity toward anti-social behavior can be blamed; others claim that the violence displayed on television and graphic video games are at fault, some blame the internet, while still others claim that various types of mental illness might be the cause. It has been well documented that the perpetrators of the Columbine incident spent a great deal of time listening to music containing violent lyrics and chatting on the Internet about macabre subjects (Jipping, 1999). Both, too, had experienced diagnosed bouts of depression and had been treated mental health professionals (Cannon & Pooley, 1999) however, we will never know the real reason for their actions.

The lack of significant, caring adults has been also often mentioned as a cause for these youthful acts of violence as has the stress and competition of academics. For example the young man, who in the small town of Pearl, Mississippi, shot and killed his mother and two of his peers while wounding seven others, claimed that he acted out because he felt that none of the adults in his life cared. "I just wanted to kill them," he said later (Dedman, 2000, p. 1). Another example took place in Lewistown, Montana, where an high school student who was failing French, shot and killed a substitute teacher and wounded three others while another, when he had been denied graduation, returned to his school in Olivehurst, California, and killed three students and the social studies teacher who failed him in 1992.

The challenge is to identify potential offenders and prevent such acts of violence. According to the Secret Service (Dedman, 2000) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (O'Toole, 2001) there is no profile that we can use to identify such students. Some of the
shooters were considered to be "different" by nearly everyone with whom they had had contact (Rossenblatt, 1999) while others came from ideal, All-American families (Dedman, 2000). "What caused these shootings, I don't pretend to know, and I don't know if it is knowable" observed Robert A. Fein, a forensic psychologist for the Secret Service. "We're looking for different pieces of the puzzle, not whether kids wore black clothes" (as cited in Dedman, 2000, p. 1).

It would seem that no one has the answer. The FBI and the Secret Service seemed stymied at clarifying ways of determining who these students are. School safety experts chide various solutions none of which are foolproof and mental health professionals seek to find intrinsic solutions. While the debate continues, schools and school personnel struggle daily to prevent random acts of violence, to prevent vicious attacks within their confines, and more importantly to save the lives of the children to whom they are entrusted.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to seek a better understanding of how students perceive the actions and behaviors of educators, the perceived climate created by these actions and behaviors, and how said actions and behaviors were associated with the students' subsequent depressive incidents. Of special interest were the perceptions of those students who were identified by school personnel, through the discipline process, as having problems and whose parents as a result of their student's problems at school, sought professional help. The subjects of this study were students who experienced some form of major school disciplinary action such as suspension or expulsion, and who, as a
result of said action, underwent a program of treatment from a mental health professional. A more detailed definition of the subjects in this study is provided in Chapter Three.

Implementing the qualitative research method known as Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), a purposeful sample of identified students was interviewed in the presence of a mental health professional who volunteered to assist with this study. The student’s answers were processed using the coding methods described by Schwandt (1997) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). The results were then compiled, leading to the development of a grounded theory, describing the perceived effects that the practices and approaches of school personnel and the implementation of their rules and policies have had upon the subjects of this study.

The Research Question

Creswell (1994) related that qualitative studies may use research questions in the form a grand tour question followed by sub-questions. Creswell’s (1994) recommendations suggested “that a researcher ask one or two grand tour questions followed by no more that five to seven sub-questions” (p. 3). This qualitative study was guided by the following grand tour question:

1. What kinds of perceptions do selected “at risk” adolescents have regarding their interactions with school personnel?

Sub-questions that were used in support of the grand tour question included:

1. How are students’ perceptions of school and school personnel related to their perceived treatment and subsequent difficulties?
2. What emerging school related issues help to explain students’ behavior and stated needs?

3. Could adolescent perceptions be beneficial to schools in developing a better understanding of meeting the needs of potentially troubled youth?

These questions assisted in the development of a grounded theory clarifying how the perceptions of these students toward school assisted in explaining their behavior, thus enabling schools to anticipate students’ reactive behaviors. The rationale for these questions is provided in Chapter Three, (Methodology).

Definitions of Terms

For the purposes of this study and the analysis of literature on which it will be based, the following definitions of terms applied:

Action/Interaction

Action/Interaction is: "strategies devised to manage, handle, carry out, respond to phenomenon under a specific set of perceived conditions" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 97).

Adolescents/ Emerging Adolescents

The terms adolescents and/or emerging adolescents will refer to those middle and high school aged students between the ages of 10 and 17.

At risk youth, students, adolescents

The terms "at risk, highly at-risk, and at greater-risk" can and will be used interchangeably. As defined by the Recovery Foundation (1998) "at-risk youth" are
defined as individuals between the ages of childhood and adulthood that bear the distinct possibility of suffering harm, loss and/or damage: in danger.

**At-greater-risk students**

The California Office of Criminal Justice Planning, Delinquency Prevention Programs (2000) defined students exhibiting many of the risk factors demonstrated by some students as “at-greater-risk.” In addition to the more common risk factors, “at-greater-risk” students faced many challenges with high levels of adversity in their young lives.

Youth with one or more of the following factors are considered to be:

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>At-Risk</th>
<th>At-Greater-Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poverty or Economic Disadvantage</td>
<td>Alcohol, Tobacco, or Other Drug Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical or Learning Disability</td>
<td>Drinking and Driving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited Language Proficiency</td>
<td>Low Educational Achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim of Crime</td>
<td>Antisocial, Violence or Gangs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol or Substance Abusing Parent</td>
<td>School Truancy or Dropping Out of School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic Disadvantage</td>
<td>Running Away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim of Racial, Ethnic, or Sexual</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation Prejudice</td>
<td>Teen Pregnancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim of Abuse or Neglect</td>
<td>Depression and Attempted Suicide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Axial Coding

Axial Coding as described by Strauss and Corbin, (1990) is, “A set of procedures where by data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories” (p. 96).

Causal Condition

Implementing Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) definition, causal conditions are “events, incidents, happenings that lead to the occurrence or development of a phenomenon” (p. 97).

Category

Category refers to a classification of concepts with reference to qualitative analysis. Building on Strauss and Corbin (1990) noted: “This classification is discovered when concepts are compared one against another and appear to pertain to a similar phenomenon. Thus the concepts are grouped together under a higher order, more abstract concept called a category” (as cited in McCaw, 1998, p. 5).

Coding

Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe coding as “the process of analyzing data” (p. 61).

Core Category

Core category, is defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as: “the central phenomenon around which all the other categories are integrated” (p. 116).
Context

McCaw (1999) noted that context is, “the specific set of properties that pertain to a phenomenon” (p. 5).

Disciplinary Removal

Disciplinary removal: some form of repeated suspension or expulsion from regular school attendance (Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, 1997).

Gatekeeper

The term gatekeeper(s) refers to those individuals such as parents and mental health professionals, whose permission is required to gain access to the subjects of the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 1994).

Grounded Theory

The definition of grounded theory by Strauss and Corbin (1990) was used. Strauss and Corbin wrote: “The grounded theory approach is a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon” (p. 24).

Intervening Conditions

Strauss and Corbin (1990) defined intervening conditions as “the structural conditions bearing on action/interaction strategies that pertain to a phenomenon” (p. 96).
Open Coding

Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) definition was used, that is: “Open coding is the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (p. 61).

Phenomenon

This study employed Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) definition of phenomenon: “the central idea, event, happening, incident about which a set of actions or interactions are directed at managing, handling, or to which the set of actions is related” (p. 96).

Property

For the purposes of qualitative analysis, the term “property” refers to the attributes or characteristics pertaining to a category (McCaw, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

School Climate/Culture

While the terms school climate and school culture vary in meaning in some educational circles, they will be used interchangeably in this study. School climate and thus school culture is defined as the environmental conditions to which students are subjected (Green, 1997).

Selective Coding

Selective coding is “the process of selecting a core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 116).
Semi-structured Interviews

This study employed Merton, Fiske, and Kendall's (1956) belief that interviews be open-ended yet directed by some general questions centered about a specific topic.

School Personnel

School personnel are school employees who are essential for the delivery of quality educational services (Rebore, 1998).

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

The subjects, who constituted the sample for this research, were purposefully selected from a specific pool. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) praised the use of purposeful sampling “because they [subjects] are believed to facilitate the expansion of developing theory,” (pp. 71-72). The limitation of such purposeful sampling may be in the generalizability of the study (Creswell, 1994). Creswell (1994) reminded the qualitative researcher that generalizability and replication of such a study is difficult, due to the specificity of samples and conditions.

Eisner (1991), (as cited in McCaw, 1999) stated that, “users of research, who have chosen their samples by means other than by random selection, must assume the responsibility of determining whether these findings are appropriate to their situation” (p. 10). Eisner (1991) also reminded the qualitative researcher that generalizations made from such a study are to be regarded as tools that are to be worked with in the context in which they were made.

All of the definitions of terms were expressed in context and therefore may be seen as potential limitations. One such vulnerable component was the use of the semi-
structured interview. This study restricted itself to semi-structured interviews with students who have already experienced problems at school. However, as McCaw (1999), observed “Research scholars have recognized limitations inherent when using interviews” (p. 10).

All interviewees offered data that had been filtered through the interviewer (Creswell, 1994). Bogdan and Biklen (1992) wrote that semi-structured interviews are vulnerable and limited given that the researcher frames the topic from the interviewer's perspective. In order to mitigate these limitations, the semi-structured interviews in this investigation resulted in transcriptions that were analyzed from multiple perspectives, as described in Chapter 3.

Significance of the Study

Very little scholarly research has been done studying what perceived impact, if any, teachers, school personnel and their various written and unwritten rules and policies have on the success of students, especially those who struggle in meeting the everyday demands of the classroom and the school itself. Although much has been written about how the creation of a positive climate can lead to success, very little research has been directed at determining with any degree of specificity, the perceived effects such things as negative teacher behaviors and attitudes have on students. While the field of psychology is rich with assessment constructs, the voices of emotionally fragile students are seldom heard.

It was the intent of this study to help school personnel better understand all students but especially those students who, because they are considered different, are apt
to be disenfranchised in schools. This study should be especially interesting to teachers, administrators, counselors, and coaches who work daily with emerging adolescents. The study may be of secondary interest to those in the mental health field and to others who assist in helping adolescents cope with everyday life.
CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Related Literature

Children Learn What They Live

If a child lives with criticism,  
He learns to condemn.  
If a child lives with hostility,  
He learns to fight.  
If a child lives with ridicule,  
He learns to be shy.  
If a child lives with jealousy,  
He learns to feel guilty.  
If a child lives with tolerance,  
He learns to be patient.  
If a child lives with encouragement,  
He learns confidence.  
If a child lives with praise,  
He learns to appreciate.  
If a child lives with fairness,  
He learns justice.  
If a child lives with security,  
He learns to have faith.  
If a child lives with approval,  
He learns to like himself.  
If a child lives with acceptance and friendship,  
He learns to find love in the world.  
- Dorothy Law Nolte

Introduction

Discussion as to why students react to school and school problems in the way that they do has been ongoing for years. With school shootings in Arkansas, Oregon, and Colorado, student safety issues command prominence in American headlines! Internet websites and software programs have been created offering assistance to teachers and parents, yet the Secret Service and the FBI were unsuccessful at establishing profiles of adolescents prone to violence (Dedman, 2000).
Many schools have the installed security systems, added security personnel, and adopted school crisis plans (Marcus, 1999). “Security and added law enforcement play a role,” observed Bill Modzeleski, director of the Department of Education’s Safe and Drug Free Schools Program, “but if it’s all you do, you’ll fail abysmally” (Marcus, 1999, p. 26). Aronson (2000), chronicling events after the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School noted in the preface of his book:

[he]...was appalled at the naïve and feeble solutions proposed by our policy makers in the aftermath of that horrifying event: more security guards and metal detectors in our schools, forcing students to show respect for their teachers by calling them sir and ma’am, and posting the Ten Commandments on school bulletin boards. Surely our lawmakers can do better than that. (p. ix)

Incidents like Columbine grab the headlines, yet America’s schools remain relatively safe havens for children. In 1998 alone, 1100 children died from family abuse, another 3300 died from auto accidents, while only 42 died in school related violence (Marcus, 1999). In other words, for every student killed in school, 105 are killed out of school. Fifty million students attend 108,000 public schools, yet less than one percent of adolescent homicides occur at or near school (Aronson, 2000). Neither of these statistics is acceptable, and efforts are continuing to lower them both. The point is, when one examines the whole picture, schools remain to be relatively safe places.

Scholars and experts at all levels continue to suggest ways to continually improve American schools. In researching these “experts” and digesting the literature on which
this study was based, a strategy of macro to micro-analysis of what has been written was used (Sternberg, 1981). In synthesizing the literature regarding causes for violent incidences at school, assisting schools in preventing these behaviors, and predicting which students are most likely to commit such acts, several themes emerged. This review is organized and presented around these themes. Initially each thematic area delineates the recommendations of experts. That information is followed by a corresponding discussion of how today’s schools and school staff, are perceived by students and others.

The Description of Students

The literature is rife with speculation and analysis of the students who react by displaying behavior problems and/or violence at school. Whether the problem is an act of violence, a suicide, or a classroom behavior problem, it is commonly known that perpetrators exhibit few common traits. Dedman (2000) backs this up in his research of the Secret Service’s attempt to profile these perpetrators. Dedman reported:

[the Secret Service found]...some lived with both parents in ideal, All-American families. Some were children of divorce, or lived in foster homes. A few were loners, but most had close friends. Few had discipline records. Some had honor roll grades and were in Advanced Placement courses; some were failing. Few showed a change in friendships or interest in school. (p. 1)

Aronson (2000), in writing about the perpetrators of the Littleton, Colorado shootings stated:
...there was very little about their day-to-day public behavior that would have led us to conclude that they were dangerous individuals. They were functioning well in school, doing their homework, preparing for exams, getting reasonably good grades, and so on. (p. 37)

Generally, the children involved in acts of violence and extreme behaviors at school are adolescents, ages of 10 through high school (Dedman 2000; O'Toole, 2000; The Surgeon General of the United States, 1998). Most are boys but offending incidences by girls in on the increase (Aronson, 2000; Dedman, 2000; O'Toole, 2000). Taylor (2001), in his article for Teacher Magazine on violence in American schools also reports that a growing number of girls are turning to violence:

Girl arrests for aggravated assaults increased 57% between 1990 and 1999, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. And between 1981 and 1997, the violent-crime arrest rate for girls rose three times faster than the rate for boys. School suspensions, though not always violence related, indicate a similar trend, with girl's suspensions growing 56% from 1990-1998, while boys’ rose 40%.

Rush Sebiston, who directs safety programs for high schools in San Mateo, California, has witnessed these changes first hand. The number of fights between young women has increased, she says, and they have gotten worse; it’s harder than it used to be to pull brawling girls off each other, and more knives, guns, and other weapons are in evidence. Gang involvement is up, too, Sabiston says. There’s not as much difference between boys and girls as there was in past
years...the type of stuff the guys are doing, the girls are doing, as well...Boys, however, are still perpetrating more violence. (p. 15)

Why? Dr. William Pollack, a clinical psychologist at Harvard University reported:
...across the country boys have never been in more trouble: They earn 70% of the D’s and F’s. They make up two thirds of those labeled ‘learning disabled’...are perpetrators of 4 out of 5 juvenile crimes...and account for 80% of high school dropouts and ADD diagnosis (cited in Mulrine, 2001, p. 42).

Aronson (2000) also writes that:
...adolescence is a time of...rapid physiological and hormonal changes. Adolescent boys are flooded with testosterone...a hormone that is not only associated with sex; it is also associated with aggression. One indication of this association is that convicts serving time for violent crimes have considerably higher levels of testosterone than do those serving time for nonviolent crimes. (pp. 64-65)

As our culture demands that boys grow up with a sense of “honor” and live by what Dr. Pollock calls “the boys code”. That is, when boys are given the choice of losing face in front of their peers or resorting to aggressive actions, they usually choose what our culture tends to expect and sometimes even rewards, aggression (Aronson, 2000, p. 97). “The actions of violent boys show us what comes of our society’s poisonous belief that ‘revenge is sweet’,” stated Garbarino (1999, p. 48). The perpetrators of Columbine, as many of the others involved in recent acts of school violence followed the boy code to the end (Aronson, 2000).
In her study of the American high school, Patricia Hersch (1998) found that children, of both genders and from all socio-economic statuses are caught up in what she calls a “separate teen community” (p. 1). All have problems of varying degrees, and all need support. Maran (2000), in her in-depth study of the culture of the American high school, echoes Hersch’s thoughts. “...it [high school] is a mix of one from Column A and one from Column B ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, academic levels, life circumstances, and personalities” (p. xv). She further stated that although teenagers profess to want freedom from adults and their rules, they yearn for contact with those who care (Maran, 2000). With little in the way of predicting who the violent student’s might be or what events might trigger their behavior, society continues to pressure schools to prevent violence. In a recently-published doctoral dissertation examining the effects of academic competition on school violence in Japan and the United States, Motoko Akiba (2000), stated:

School violence is not a simple phenomenon that can be explained by a single theory. It is related with a complex web of human interaction among students, teachers, and parents. Students’ personal traits, how to react to frustrations produced at and outside of school...risk factors specific to the developmental stages of early adolescence...environmental changes such as school transition and school systems practices...all have a great impact on students’ mental health and their problem behaviors. (p. 25)

This statement leads to the next theme regarding environmental factors and school system practices and how these factors affect students and school.
The School Climate

Much has been written in educational and sociological literature regarding how the creation of a proper, positive learning environment is critical for the success of students. John Wiles (1986), an early leader in middle school reform wrote that “climate determines motivation, teachers determine climate; teachers can then determine motivation” (p. 217). William Glasser (1990) believed that letting students learn together did a better job of satisfying needs for power and belonging than does their working alone. He also argued that when teachers give up some of their “power,” students begin to feel more in control of their own learning. When schools and teachers embrace such ideas, they become learning communities (Jalongo, 1991). K.G. Short in his work on creating learning communities described the learning community as having the following characteristics:

1) Students come to know each other
2) Students learn to value what each other have to offer
3) The focus is on problem-solving and inquiry
4) Students and teachers share responsibility and control,
5) Teachers learn through action, reflection, and demonstration and,
6) Teachers establish a learning atmosphere that is predictable, yet full of real choices. (cited in Jalongo, 1991, p. 42)

Linda Lantieri, National Director for the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program posited in her 1996 article that, “Clearly, schools today must be committed more deeply than ever to intentionally creating community and to paying attention to young people’s
social and emotional lives" (p. 29). These community-building approaches could be implemented into a school’s overall improvement efforts (Schaps, et al. 2001). Schaps and Solomon (1990) in their article regarding schools as caring communities report that, “All too often, meeting children’s needs for belonging and contributing is the missing variable in the school improvement equation” (p. 42). R.L. Green (1997) of the College of Education at Wright State University, in his study regarding the creation of effective learning conditions concluded:

Maintaining structure and holding fast to strict academic standards must give way to seeking continuous renewal and finding ways to address the needs of all the students...Schools must become communities within themselves—accepting people as individuals and respecting the value of their contributions. (p. 25)

If schools are to become as suggested, “learning communities” in order to improve and allow children to truly succeed, great changes in the current “climate and culture” of many of our schools must change (Green, 1997). Still the question remains: How should it change?

For decades, the terms “climate” and “ethos” have been used to describe in describing the culture of schools (Peterson, 1998). Culture is the environment to which students are exposed to daily in our schools and classrooms. J. Merrill Hansen of Brigham Young University and John Child’s, Principal of Orem, Utah High School (1998) wrote, “Improved school climate is an ideal, a goal to pursue” (p. 14). They further agreed that improved climate is something that professional educators should

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
always be working toward. William Glasser’s (1990) writings on quality schools, Peter Benson’s (1994) asset building, J. David Hawkins (1985) research on risk and protective factors, and Bonnie Benard’s (1991) ideas on resiliency training all seem to affirm what Gail Tanaka and Kelley Reid (1997) of the Comprehensive Health Education Foundation state “when students feel that schools care about them, the more likely they are to care about school” (p. 31). William Ayers (1997) of the University of Illinois posited the need for creation of a positive culture best:

...as a teacher, I find a familiar rhythm and a powerful focus. I learned long ago that in my own classroom that if I treat kids like hoodlums and thugs they will rarely disappoint, but if I treat them as scholars and ethicists, valued and valuable, they can just as easily stretch and grow into people of values. (p. 51)

While the need to improve school climate is obvious, many observers characterize present school conditions in discouraging terms. David Hill (2001) in his report in Teacher Magazine about The Gates Foundation’s attempt to make schools more conducive to learning, quoted Tim Vander Ark, the Foundation’s education guru who says schools at present “deal with the symptoms, not the problem” (p. 35). Today’s large high schools are “lousy places for adults and kids” (p. 35). “The task of dealing with school rage is difficult where students tend to feel marginalized and less a part of a school community” (Hill, 2001, p. 35). Elliot Aronson (2000) noted in his book:

From my classroom research, I have found that the social atmosphere in most schools is competitive, cliquish, and exclusionary. The majority
of teenagers I have interviewed agonize over the fact that there is a
general atmosphere of taunting and rejection among their peers that
makes the high school experience an unpleasant one. For many it is worse
than unpleasant – they describe it as a living hell. (p. 15)

Hansen and Childs (1998) affirmed that schools really are alike no matter where
they are: “Mandates and regulations that govern many school systems make them
impersonal, indifferent, and generally insensitive to the individuals within them” (p. 14).
Some argue that in their zeal to get back to basics, school policy makers may be losing
sight of how crucial the social climate of the school can be in the lives of young people
(Aronson, 2000). John Goodlad (1984) noted in the early 1980’s that schools and
classrooms are to often dull and uninteresting places for students who are unable to cope
with the current structure of the school environment. R. Soder (1996) in his book about
democracy and education, reiterated this by claiming that schools are becoming
preoccupied with a narrow standardization of the curriculum, excluding or failing to
recognize the differences in students’ experiences. Scott Poland, president of the
National Association of School Psychologists and Crosby Rogers, professor of human
development at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University had this to say about
today’s schools:

Academics are important, but legislatures and our current president have
not given our educators the message that how we treat each other is [just
as] important. Nobody is mandating time and resources to work on anger
management and learning how to get along … We must attend to the whole
child. We must help our legislators understand that education must be for the whole child – the body, the mind and the spirit. (as cited in Eckman, 2001, p. 3)

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) also stated the need for changing how we approach teaching and learning in order to reach all students:

Often, teachers let the acquisition of facts and basic skills become the end product of instruction, depriving youngsters of an education rich in nuances and deeper meanings. We do not want to disparage the learning of facts; a knowledge base serves a foundation for growth. We prefer, though, to emphasize the acquisition and application of facts through thinking and problem solving. (1996, p. 24)

The Oregon Department of Education (2000) reported that educators do not often connect the knowledge that students already have to what the teacher is trying to teach them. This methodology causes frustration in many students. Activities that allow students to use their knowledge in situations that mimic real life are important to adolescents and allowed them to feel a sense of competence. This type of learning cannot be presented or assessed in an authentic context but it can help student’s connect to the schooling process.

In order to promote a positive climate in any school, not only do teaching and testing methods need to be changed but so do the methods of assigning students to classes. Programs targeted at gifted students or at the at-risk, no matter how well intentioned, tend to compound the inequities that may have existed in the first place.
(Oregon Department of Education, 2000). In their book Gilbert and Robins (1998) quoted a student, J.T., with regard to this point:

What I would like to know is why do you leave us in lower-level classes and learning disability classes and leave us out of a lot of your activities? It's kind of like saying that we are not human, so we can't work with other students. Yes, it sounds as cold as ice, but that's the way you make us feel.

(cited in Oregon Department of Education, 2000, p. 43)

Another student, R.D., echoed this point, "Maybe, if accelerated students were in my building construction class, I could show them a thing or two. Maybe they wouldn't look down on us." (Oregon Department of Education, 2000, p. 54)

The more students are involved in a cooperative atmosphere, the more responsible they become. The more responsible they become the more they feel a sense of connection. This feeling gives them (the students) the courage to contribute and participate (Meredith & Evans, 1990).

While so much has been written about the need to change the climate and culture of schools, schools still seem to resist any changes (Green, 1997). Combs (1988) claimed that the reasons schools resist needed change are not only the lack of revenue and resources, but the philosophical and psychological differences of teachers and their personal feelings, attitudes, and beliefs of what school should be.

Robert Sylwester (1999) in his article on the roots of adolescent aggression stated that at the school and classroom level, "educators must reduce the stereotyping and ridicule that alienates children...and focus on programs that develop social skills" (p. 66).
We must end competition and stress cooperation. While we can’t put an end to stereotyping, ridicule, aggression, and competition in our society, we can create an accepting climate in our schools and classrooms. Such would be an important first step (Sylwester, 1999). R.L. Green (1997) in his article in the Journal of the National Association of Secondary School Principals stated, “Schools must educate all students, regardless of variations of their interests, capabilities, or learning styles” (p. 18). For this to occur, teaching methods, content, and function must be combined with the human qualities and potential of students (Goodlad, 1984). Green (1997) again posited that, “Our current school and classroom structure does not allow the type of nurturing environment that allows all students to reach their full potential” (p. 19). In the review of the literature for his study Green, related that there are 13 characteristics of schools with nurturing environments:

1. Students feel a sense of self-worth and acceptance.

2. Students feel safe and involved in their education.

3. There is a mutual trust and positive interaction between teachers and students.

4. A sense of community, family, and collaboration exists in the school.

5. Everyone values individual differences; the self one brings into the environment is respected and nurtured.

6. There is a sense of caring among individuals and a collective sense of responsibility for student success.

7. The need for self-actualization is respected.
8. There is recognition of a wide range of talents and the need for empowering all individuals.

9. Teachers have an in depth knowledge of students.

10. The school models the values of community and involves the community in the education of students.

11. Teachers model caring attitudes for students.

12. Teachers demonstrate a love for their subject matter and continuously search for competence.

13. Students value themselves and others (p. 18).

Finally, Schaps, Schaeffer, and McDonnell (2001) in their article on character education conclude, “In other words, students will care more about a school’s goals and values when that school effectively cares for them; moreover, when they feel connected to a school and the people in it, they learn better” (p. 2).

**Teacher Attitudes and Expectations**

Teachers play a large role in determining how students adjust and adapt to the daily stresses of school. A well publicized quote by a former teacher, Hiam Ginott stated this position best:

I’ve come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It’s my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child’s life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In
all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or dehumanized.

John Bucci (1992), writing for the Kappa Delta Pi, discussed the need for teachers to be aware of the influence they possess, “Often lost in this extensive and confusing array of plans, programs, and projects is the individual teacher who encounters at-risk students every day in the classrooms, hallways, and on school grounds” (p. 64). This loss is not helpful to our attempts at change as Bucci again pointed out, “education works at the point of contact with the individual teacher, …the teacher is the heart of the educational enterprise” (p. 64). Given that the teacher is at the heart of education, this theme described how their attitudes and expectations can affect the morale and success of students, especially those who are struggling in an attempt to succeed or who are prone to having problems at school.

Noblit, Rogers, and McCadden (1995) reported that teaching should be organized around relationships. They continue writing that without the development of caring relationships, teachers must rely instead on discipline and classroom management techniques. Reginald Green (1997) of Wright State University stated that, “When there is a positive relationship between teachers and students, students have a reason to commit to the instructional activities and attach meaning to what happens in the classroom (p. 19) …the teacher has control of the room without being in control” (p. 20).

Research by Wubbels, Levy, and Brekelmans, studying the effects student-teacher relationships, has been ongoing for over 15 years and has yielded some interesting
results. A synopsis of their research was reported by the Oregon Department of
Education in 2000. This synopsis stated:

They (Wubbels, Levy, & Brekelmans) have questioned over 50,000
students and teachers and have developed a model of interpersonal teacher
behavior to measure connection between student-teacher relationships and
student achievement and attitudes. According to students, the best
teachers are strong classroom leaders who are friendlier and more
understanding and less uncertain, dissatisfied, and critical that most
teachers. Their best teachers allow them more freedom than the norm.
These ideals closely match teachers’ description of exceptional teachers,
and also check out quite well against measures of student achievement and
attitudes. (p. 26)

Teachers who exhibit caring demeanors have long been found to reverse negative trends
and choices in certain students. Those who listen, strive to cater to the strengths of
individuals, and create ways for students to express themselves as well as demonstrate
their understanding find that their students become more engaged and more willing take
risks during classroom activities (Black, 1999). Caring teachers make encouraging
statements and point out student strengths; they avoid discouraging actions like setting
unreasonable standards or making pessimistic interpretations (Oregon Department of
Education, 2000).

Amy Eckman (2000), in her article on bullying, stated that there are four things
that all people, especially children need: “attention, power, love, and competence. Give
children a positive reason for getting attention and displaying their competence” (p. 3). Eckman continues by offering this advice for those working with children:

We always give the ‘good’ kids the little jobs to do, like taking a note to the office or watering plants. Those other guys who need attention, they need jobs too. If they are physically aggressive, they need jobs that only physically aggressive and strong persons can do, such as moving a desk or carrying a large stack of books. (p. 3)

Understanding the culture of adolescent students is also important in laying the groundwork for mutual respect. Teachers who lack social insight may have trouble communicating with students and classroom management can suffer. Gordon (1997) recommended the following strategies for positively interacting with students:

1. Expose yourself to adolescent culture. Know what your students are listening to, watching and doing.

2. Affirm students’ “weather”. Show you’re in touch with the school events and interests that are distracting your students on any given day.

3. Teach with images that interest them. Metaphors that relate to current trends, relationships, or feelings will be heard better and remembered longer.

4. Know your students. Attend sporting events and performances, read the school paper, and chat with students as they come into the classroom. Drop references to students’ interests into lectures and discussions.
5. Share your humanity. Successful teachers are not afraid to show students their strengths and weaknesses in the proper context (p. 57).

As the aforementioned literature emphasized, students want and need the understanding and compassion of their teachers and other caring adults. However, the literature described what most students actually receive, painted a very different picture.

In a recent Harris Poll released on October 2, 2001 it was reported that fifty-six percent (56%) of secondary school principals believe strongly that their teachers have high expectations for their students, but only twenty-five percent (25%) of their students agree (Schouten, 2001). The same Harris Poll also reported that while sixty-nine percent (69%) of minority students had high hopes for their future only forty percent (40%) of their teacher’s agreed. Are teacher attitudes shortchanging kids?

Farrel (1990) in his book regarding the dropout rates of at-risk students found that most of the students he studied regarded their teachers as disinterested, disrespectful, and unfair. Bucci (1992) reported that at-risk students reported that they were treated differently from high achievers. They claimed to be subjected to things such as being seated further away from the teacher, called on less often, criticized more frequently, given less praise, and given less feedback. In the University of Missouri Professor Tamara Murdock’s (1999) study of alienated middle school students, she found that students’ discipline problems were correlated with their reports of teacher disinterest, criticism, and as functions of low teacher expectations. Murdock surveyed 431 semi-urban seventh graders using a school-related opinion questionnaire. Students were asked to rate, on a Likert Scale of 1 (agree) to 5 (disagree), statements about their experiences
with teachers and peers. Data were then analyzed using primary factor analysis from which conclusions were drawn. Murdock also found in her study, that teachers were so proximally related to student academic lives that the students’ perceptions of teacher appraisals and support were the biggest predictors of the students’ behavior. She further reported that students chose to reciprocate “teacher disrespect” in their decisions to work or not work, to obey or disobey.

Adults who work with children, especially adolescents, need to understand the Pygmalion effect, or the idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy. This axiom stated that one’s expectations about a person can eventually lead to that person behaving and achieving in ways that confirm those expectations (Tauber, 1997). In the following five-step model, Robert Tauber explained how the self-fulfilling prophecy works:

1. The teacher forms expectations.
2. Based upon these expectations, the teacher acts in a differential manner.
3. The teacher’s treatment tells each student (load and clear) what behavior and what achievement the teacher expects.
4. If this treatment is consistent, it will tend to shape the student’s behavior and achievement.
5. With time, the student’s behavior and achievement will conform more and more closely to that expected of him or her (p. 3).

Teacher expectations are a result of several key factors. Good’s research (1987) demonstrated that teachers form expectations and assign labels to students based upon, “...body build, gender, race, ethnicity, given name or surname, attractiveness, dialect,
and socioeconomic level” (Tauber, p. 3). Tauber suggested that, “Once we label a person, it affects how we act and react toward that person” (p. 3). “With labels we don’t have to get to know the person. We can just assume what the person is like” (p. 11). These expectations and labels are then conveyed to students via what Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) called the Four-Factor theory. The four factors, as prescribed by Rosenthal and Jacobson, by which teachers communicated their expectations to students, are:

1. Climate: the socio-emotional mood or spirit created by the person holding the expectation, often communicated non-verbally (e.g., smiling and nodding more often to certain students, greater eye contact, leaning closer to some students).

2. Feedback: providing both affective information (e.g., more praise and less criticism of high-expectation students) and cognitive information (e.g., more detailed, as well as higher quality feedback as to the correctness of higher-expectation student’s responses.)

3. Input: teachers tend to teach more to students of whom they expect more.

4. Output: teachers encourage greater responsiveness from those students of whom they expect more through their verbal and non-verbal behaviors (i.e., providing students with greater opportunities to seek clarification) (cited in Tauber, p. 4).

While most teachers claimed that they treat all children equally and fairly and would never expect more of one student than another, Klinger & Vaughn’s (1996) research
showed that "students are particularly sensitive to the differential treatment of other students even when teachers are certain they treat all students the same" (p. 26).

If as Wagar (1963) claimed, "The ultimate function of prophecy is not to tell the future but to make it," (p. 66), then every time a teacher prejudges a student he/she influences the student’s future and achievement. In short once a student is labeled a "troublemaker" his chances of becoming one are greatly increased (Brophy, 1988).

With the continuing movement toward total inclusion of special needs students into regular education classrooms, teachers are required to cope with increasingly diverse groups. As the diversity and severity of student characteristics increases, it can be expected that the frequency and intensity of student-teacher incompatibility will also increase (Greene, 1997), especially if we allow students to be prejudged and labeled by those entrusted with their care.

Leland (1999) in his Newsweek article about the secret lives of teens found, "Modern schools are divided into different groups of kids: the break-dancers, the people who listen to heavy metal, the pretty girls, and the hip-hop people" (p. 46). Students who choose to belong to these and other diverse groups are very sensitive to the stereotypes and labels that adults use to describe them. Aronson (2000) reported that directly after Columbine, the principal asked the “normal” kids to “point out the strange students,” which in turn caused a group of already disenfranchised youth to feel more rejected and excluded. L.B. (as cited in Leland, 1999), a senior from Glenview, Illinois, observed:

I went to a National Honor Society induction. The parents were just
staring at me. I think they couldn’t believe someone with pink hair could be smart. I want to be a high-school teacher, but I’m afraid that based on my appearance, they won’t hire me. Don’t be afraid of us. Don’t stereotype us.

(p. 47)

A mother, K.H. (as cited in Halls, 1999) wrote of her daughter’s high school experience in Halls (1999):

I soon realized that my daughter’s high school was more concerned with image than helping real kids survive real problems. A sterling record of academic excellence, athletic prowess, and production of squeaky clean, cookie-cutter graduates seemed foremost in the administrative agenda. Kids who didn’t fit that mold were simply edged out...my daughter experienced emotional problems...was struggling with teenage depression and I was struggling to help her find her way through it. When I met with her school administrators, they could offer no real plans or solutions. She is a good girl, I told the vice-principal. What, on Tuesdays and Thursdays? he replied caustically...We decided to move...and headed for the Pacific Northwest. Within days, she was one of 15 sophomores under the compassionate care of a hand picked, specially trained teacher. She was suddenly happy, eager to go to class, eager to make new friends, eager to succeed in an atmosphere that celebrated her distinctive light, rather than trying to extinguish it...While people wonder how such violence could have happened in Littleton, it doesn’t surprise me much. Perhaps
Littleton educators, therapists, and parents who were in a position to notice and help two severely troubled teenagers weren't willing to take action...It was easier to stamp the two as 'losers' and move on to more 'promising youth'.” (pp. 2-3)

Adults with whom students are in direct contact on a daily basis at school are very powerful influences. How these adults feel about themselves and their jobs also has a lot to do with the climate they foster. Jordan (1993) reported that teachers who had higher self-efficacy scores also dealt with at-risk and gifted students more successfully. Related literature emphasized that in order for schools to become safe and effective, teachers and school personnel need to be held accountable for both self and student deprecating behaviors. Teacher self image is important; hence they must see that every action on their part (overt and subtle) impact students. As Webb (2000) stated, “Through our personal, ignorant judgment of children, we educators can unconsciously, but permanently, clip the innocent wings of angels” (p. 75).

The Victimization of Students

The victimization of children at school has been a problem for as long as public schools have been in existence. Probably the most prevalent and studied form of victimization in schools is bullying and harassment by fellow students. The Montana Behavioral Initiative, a program developed to assist educators in creating safer schools, utilizes a continuum of behavior ranging from “insults”, “trash talk”, “threats”, and “bullying” to more violent school-related incidents such as “rape”, “murder”, and “suicide”. The continuum projects incidents of the former as precursors to the later.
Harassment, taunting, and bullying were listed as reasons for several of the recent school shootings (Dedman, 2000) and as a result, many school districts have invested much time and money into bully-proofing their schools and by instituting zero-tolerance policies against such harassing behavior. However, the victimization of students still continues. While the intent of this study is to examine student perceptions, bullying and harassment individually will not be explored. However, how school personnel react to such acts will be discussed.

Reporting on their three-year study of students’ classroom experiences and stories, Carole Shakeshaft (1997), Chairperson of Administration, Policy Studies, and Literacy at Hofstra University, and her colleagues wrote:

Typical adult responses to allegation of harassment in schools almost always discouraged students from further reports, seldom curbed harassment, and left kids feeling that they had no place to turn for help...In many cases, staff and other students penalized them for going public by reporting a crime. In these cases, students were violated twice – first by the harassmen: and then by the treatment of adults and other students...They were often told, you're overreacting, that's the way life is or, what do you expect when you wear clothes like that. (p. 24)

One student interviewed replied, “No way I’d report harassment to the principal or anyone else, I’d be the laughingstock of the school” (p. 24).

Noted Sociologist Alfie Kohn (2001) recently discussed the legacy of today’s high schools, using a quote from a Boston area high school student:
I am a geek, and very proud of it. I have been beaten, spit on, pushed, and jeered at. Food is sometimes thrown at and on me while teachers pretend not to see people trip me. Jocks knock me down in the hallway. They steal my notes, call me a geek and a fag and a freak, tear up my books, have pissed in my locker twice. They cut my shirt and rip it. They wait for me in the boy’s room and beat me up. I have to wait an hour to leave school to make sure they’re gone. Mostly, I honestly think it is because I’m smarter than they are and they hate that. The really amazing thing is that they are the most popular people in school, while everybody thinks I’m a freak. The teachers slobber all over them...the whole school cheers when they play sports. Sometimes I want very much to kill them...but unlike those guys in Littleton, I never will. I value my own life too much.

(pp. 6-7)

While incidents such as these may seem somewhat sensationalized and isolated, the fact remains that they have been reported for years. Author Frank Peretti (2000), in his book, discussed how he was treated in the late fifties as a student in an all boys Physical Education class. Peretti wrote that he was tortured in the locker room by other students and student teacher assistants, while the teacher stood outside the door and listened. Peretti was told not to make waves, “[I] had to be there, [I] had no choice” (p. 10). By ignoring these incidents, school personnel condoned the acts, validated the actions of the perpetrators, and in essence acted to further victimize their students.
Much has been written about student aggression toward their peers, school personnel and schools in general, yet little has been written about the other side of school violence. Victimization of students in the name of discipline has received very little attention in the media and is seldom recognized (Hyman & Perone, 1998). Case studies of the worst experiences of students in school reveal respondents' feelings of frustration, anger, and thoughts about revenge against the offending school personnel (Hyman, 1990). Practices such as corporal punishment, abusive motivational techniques (Hart, 1987) and the overzealous use of other punishment procedures such as time-out, have the potential to cause serious, long-term emotional harm (Hyman, 1990). When asked why they misbehaved, students' most common response was that they wanted to get back at teachers who put them down, who did not care about them, or who showed disrespect to them, their families, or their culture (Hart, Brassard, & Germaine, 1987).

Ironically much been published about how parents traumatize children yet little has been written about how schools traumatize children. Irwin Hyman and Donna Perone (1998) of Temple University stated that this is because “schools do not encourage research regarding the possible maltreatment of students by staff or...how this behavior might affect student behavior” (p. 20). In other words, schools tend to ignore the problem, stating that such treatment only occurs in one to two percent of the students (American Psychological Association, 1993). While this does not seem like a very large number of students, in a school system like New York City, this would mean that about 10,000 children would be so traumatized by educators that they may suffer serious, and sometimes lifelong emotional problems (Hyman, 1990). While efforts to reduce school
violence and school misbehavior continue to make the headlines across the country, law enforcement and school officials continue to ignore and even implicitly sanction these forms of maltreatment that may be at the root of the problem. James Garbarino (1999), Professor of Human Development at Cornell University, in his work regarding young murderers, wrote:

Nothing seems to threaten the human spirit more than rejection, brutalization, and lack of love. Nothing, not physical deformity, not debilitating injury, not financial ruin, not academic failure, can equal insults to the soul. Nothing compares with the trauma of this profound assault on the psyche. (p. 8)

Garbarino also reported that due to this trauma:

...they (students) often commit acts of violence one the basis of a 'moral' issue in their heads, usually something to do with revenge or injustice or wounded pride or glory. Pressures build as they ruminate on the injustice done to them, usually some specific insult or disappointment set within a bigger picture of resentment. (p. 9)

Hyman and Perone (1998) argued that student victimization must be exposed, noting:

While school psychologists should be concerned with the verbal and physical maltreatment by teachers, this topic receives very little mention and almost no research attention in the school psychology literature. Furthermore there is paucity in the research on the relationship between
victimization of students by educators and the causation, prevention and remediation of school violence. (p. 8)

While victimization of students might be an important factor in any discussion of school violence there is yet another issue that one must consider when reviewing the literature and that is the mental health issues of students, especially depression.

Adolescent Depression

Another area of great importance to this investigation is the issue of adolescent depression. Depression has a distinct bearing on how students perceive school and the school experience. Many of the adolescents reported in Dedman's (2000) review of school shooters had been or were at the time of the shootings receiving some time of psychotherapy to assist them in coping with bouts of depression. While no one has placed the entire blame for their actions on their depression, most believe it to have been an important factor in many incidents of school violence (Flannery, 2000).

Recent studies concluded that the prevalence of depression in the general population of children is between 0.4 - 2.5 percent, while the prevalence of depression among adolescents may be as high as 8.0 percent (Cicchetti & Toth, 1998; Flannery, 2000; Schlozman, 2001). Flannery, in his study, stated:

Seventy to eighty percent of adolescent depression is not adequately treated, and in many cases the depression is made worse by attempts to self-medicate the depression with alcohol. This compounds the problem because depression is a major side effect of alcohol abuse. (p. 75-76)
As their depression deepens, its effect upon their lives greatens.

Because adolescents spend so much time at school, school personnel may be the first to recognize signs of depression (Schlozman, 2001). The symptoms include sadness, reserved, withdrawn and irritable behavior. Depressed students may walk more slowly, with rounded shoulders, while some seem persistently anxious and overwhelmed. Older students may become irresponsible. Jokes or even loud, disruptive moments in the classroom may elicit no response (Flannery, 2000; Schlozman, 2001).

Depression may lead to violence against others. Many times the young person is displeased with the adult world and its perceived injustice. Flannery (2000) again posits, “If the loss of self-esteem seems too great, taking control of the situation through violence may be seen as the only way to gain the respect of others” (p. 77). Such may have been the case with the young men in Littleton, Colorado and many of the other school shooting incidents since most of the shooters talked of injustice and their need to regain respect (Dedman, 2000; Flannery, 2000). All teachers need to be aware of the traits of depression, what acts depression may lead to, and take heed to the words of Steven Schlozman (2001), clinical instructor in psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital/Harvard Medical School, “School personnel need to work toward making depressed students feel needed, bolster their self worth by building their confidence in themselves, and providing opportunities for them to be successful” (p. 81).

Finally another factor, which may determine how students perceive school and one that has recently come to light in more and more educational literature, is the study of students with dual exceptionalities. As described in the next section, students with these
characteristics view school in a different way and by gaining a better understanding of these students, educators may be better equipped to address their wants and needs.

**Students With Dual Exceptionalities**

Students with dual exceptionalities or “twice exceptional” children, (Fine, 2001, p. 1) are a topic that has been discussed in some educational circles for the past thirty years. While these children, who are both gifted and learning disabled, have been discussed in the past, it has only been in the last decade that these students have begun receiving the attention in the literature that they need (Beckley, 1998). As the terms “gifted” and “learning disabled” are often considered to be at opposite ends of the learning continuum and seem to contradict each other there is uneasiness in accepting this condition, which often leads to faulty, incomplete understandings of this students and results in them falling through the educational cracks (Baum, 1990). Cline and Swartz in their book regarding this group of students concluded, “Gifted students with disabling conditions remain a major group of underserved and under stimulated youth (cited in Willard-Holt, 1999, p. 1).

There generally tends to be three subgroups of twice exceptional students. The first subgroup is those students who have been identified as gifted but are considered by school personnel to be underachievers. They work at grade level or above through elementary school but start to regress as they reach middle school. This underachievement is attributed to, as Beckley (1998) posited, “their poor self-concept, lack of motivation, or laziness” (p. 1). Susan Baum (1990) stated that, “These students may impress teachers with their verbal abilities while their spelling and/or handwriting
contradicts the image” (p. 1). It is not until schoolwork becomes more rigorous that they begin to fall behind and only then does someone consider the chance that they might have a disability.

The second subgroup is those students who are twice exceptional but not identified at all. They might have a learning disability such as dyslexia but it is masked by their superior intellectual ability (Baum, 1990). Students of this group struggle to stay at grade level as their gift masks their disability and their disability masks their gift. They struggle through their entire education undiagnosed and it is usually not until they reach adulthood or attend college that they discover their exceptionalities (Baum, 1990; Beckley, 1998).

The final subgroup of twice exceptional students is those students who are identified as disabled but are also gifted. Baum (1990) wrote that this group is “often failing miserably at school… and are first noticed because of what they cannot do rather than because of the talent they are demonstrating” (p. 2). They go through school with the implicit message that accompanies their learning disabled label, something is wrong with this child and needs to be fixed before anything else can happen (Baum, 1990). Everyone in the students’ lives, teachers and parents become totally focused on the problem and pay little attention to their strengths or interests. The students begin to generalize their failure as overall inadequacy and become pessimistic and disruptive in class. They are frequently off task, act out, daydream, are easily frustrated and use their creative abilities to avoid common tasks (Baum and Owen, 1988; Whitmore, 1980).
It is estimated that between 2 and 5 percent of all students are likely to be gifted students with learning disabilities (Fine, 2001). Over 45,000 students are estimated to be included in this group nationwide in 1998 (Fine) and yet the problem continues to receive little attention in educational literature or in educational circles (Baum, 1990). As twice exceptional students are as Beckley (1998) posited “atypical learners who are often characterized as smart students with school problems” (p. 1), they need to be given attention in any study regarding school related behavior. As stated earlier, twice exceptional students are easily frustrated. This frustration leads to tension and tension to fear that eventually becomes defensiveness (Beckley, 1998). These frustrated, defensive students often become careless and aggressive (Beckley, 1998). Depression and high stress levels also become prevalent due to failure and low self-esteem, which can lead to unacceptable classroom behaviors (Baum 1990: Fine, 2001). Baum (1990) in her Eric Digest on Dual Exceptionality wrote, “As schools fail to offer these bright youngsters much opportunity to polish and use their gifts [the results they obtain] are not surprising”, (p. 2).

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1962) stated that individuals, must feel like they belong and are valued in order to reach their full potential. How can a student feel valued if the curriculum is constantly modified or assignments watered down in order for him or her to achieve success (Baum, 1990)? Schools must identify these twice-exceptional students and create an environment that shows concern for developing the full potential of all students while valuing and respecting their individual differences, (Baum, 1990;
Fine, 2001). As Baum (1990) stated, “In such an environment no child will feel like a second-class citizen, and the gifted students with learning disabilities can excel” (p. 2).

**Summary of the Review of Literature**

The literature presented in this review has been quite varied and as stated before, several themes and patterns emerged. As the literature pointed out, agencies have tried in vain to predict or build a profile of who the perpetrators of acts of aggression at school may be. Many of these students displayed some of the same traits while others were completely different in every way. Most of the perpetrators were boys but violent acts involving girls were on the rise. While there were several differences in each incident of school violence, there still seems to be a common thread. Research points to the fact that most of those students involved in school related violent acts felt that their schools were hostile places and that few people there cared about their well-being.

This review explored the need for schools to be community like places where students felt wanted and cared for. The need to belong is strong in adolescents and the literature presented several reasons why changes in school climate must be instituted in order for at-risk adolescents to succeed. While much regarding the creation of a welcoming school climate has been written over the years, many schools remain unchanged and are still cold, uncaring institutions. Students are still stereotyped and predestined to fail by the methods and practices instituted by many schools and school personnel. What can be done to change this? Schools must become places that educate the whole child, as Eckman (2000) stated, “education must be for the whole child – the body, the mind, and the spirit” (p. 3).
Also discussed in this review was the affect of teacher attitudes and expectations upon student attitudes and behavior. Students ask not to be labeled but to be given chances and praise those teachers who offer such opportunity. Students seek teachers who care and who can relate to their culture and with their problems and disdain those who are unfair and disrespectful. The literature stated that many times student behavior is directly linked to teacher attitudes and expectations (Murdock, 1999). The Pygmalion Effect is accentuated among adolescents. Students who are labeled early in life tend to live up to the expectations of their label. Once a student is labeled a “troublemaker” his chances of becoming one are greatly increased (Brophy, 1999).

Victimization of students was also discussed. Bullying and harassment were mentioned, as often times these behaviors are precursors to other behaviors, but these areas were not explored in depth. Victimization of students in the context of this study dealt more with the victimization of students by teachers. While victimization of this kind seems to occur in today’s schools, the scholarly literature regarding such is relatively scarce. Most of the information presented in this study is anecdotal rather than researched based. As stated within the review, the reason for this paucity in the research is because schools tend to disallow such research to take place within their confines.

The final areas discussed in the review of the literature were the areas of adolescent depression and students with dual exceptionalities. These are important areas of discussion, as the mental state and frustration level of adolescents who become involved in acts of aggression seem to have a great deal of influence upon how they choose to react. The adolescents’ perception of others and of judicial matters such as
school discipline, are greatly influenced by their mental state, especially those who are experiencing adolescent depression. Twice exceptional students also feel many of the same frustrations as depressed adolescents and react accordingly. School personnel should be attuned to the signs and symptoms of mental illness, be trained in identifying twice exceptional students and do all they can to assist affected students in coping with the problems that seemingly surround them.

In summary, the literature presented in this study seems to point to schools being very powerful institutions, places that greatly affect how adolescents approach their everyday lives. By law everyone is entitled to a free and appropriate public education (Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, 1997). It was the intent of this study to provide information that might assist in making the experience of education appropriate for all.
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Research Design

The qualitative method allows researchers to describe a phenomenon with text, in a way that could not be done with statistics (Eisner, 1991). As this study was, “an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem...reporting detailed views of informants” as asserted by Creswell (1994, pp. 1-2), and is full of “rich descriptions of people, places, and conversations, not easily handled by standardized procedures” described by Bogdan and Biklen (1992, p. 2), the qualitative paradigm was most appropriate for its design. As little has been written about student perceptions of schools rules and personnel behaviors and how such perceptions might effect the overall functioning of schools, the need for more study seemed to be apparent. The intent, then, of this qualitative study was to develop a theory based on the rich data collected through the process of semi-structured interviews. As this study did not use statistics and hoped to better understand a social problem, the qualitative research design was used as it best answered the proposed question.

Developing a Theory

This study focused on the development of a theory regarding the perception of at-risk students toward their teachers, other school personnel, and school rules and policies. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) remind us that the qualitative researcher does not try to prove or disprove a hypothesis held a priori but should build a theory through the use of inductive reasoning (Creswell, 1994). McCaw (1999), building on Eisner’s (1991) work,
stated, “Building a theory through inductive reasoning is critical to the qualitative paradigm as the researcher cannot predetermine what themes will become evident or the one best course of action to pursue during the study” (p. 48). This theory should emerge from the data as it is collected and analyzed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Grounded Theory

Glaser and Strouse (1967) first proposed the idea of grounded theory while Corbin and Strauss (1990) expanded its use. Strauss and Corbin (1990) wrote: “The grounded theory approach is a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon” (p. 24). Creswell (1994) wrote that grounded theory was a research design used in human and social research. Creswell (1994) went on to say that researchers employing this method “hope to discover a theory grounded in information from informants” (p. 93). Bogdan and Biklen (1992) proposed that, areas of inquiry about which little is known or where there is a lack of research, are good candidates for the grounded theory design. As the purpose of this study was to enter an area of inquiry where little has been written and attempted to construct a picture (Eisner, 1991) of the problem, the grounded theory research design was utilized.

Data

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of participants purposefully selected from various school sites. Subjects were purposefully selected in an effort to facilitate expansion of the developing theory (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The sample was
composed of 12 adolescent public school students, ages 11-17, who exhibited one or more of the factors contributing to the classification of "at-risk" as defined by the California Office of Criminal Justice Planning, Delinquency Prevention Programs (2000). To facilitate a safe interviewing environment, only students who were referred to a professional counselor and who met the requirements for classification as at-risk were included in the study. Gender was proportionate to the referred caseload of the licensed mental health professional who agreed to assist with the study. The Grade Point Average (G.P.A.) range for the subjects was reported so that any relationship between perceived intelligence and behavior would be evident.

**Data Collection**

Because this study dealt with a very sensitive, vulnerable sample, every precaution was taken to insure the well being of the subjects. Initially this study obtained the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at The University of Montana prior to any fieldwork being undertaken. Once the project was approved by the IRB, letters seeking parental permission for participation in the project, were distributed by the mental health professional (see Appendix A). This letter stressed that all information gathered was to be held in strictest confidence and that every means possible to guarantee anonymity was taken. As permission to participate was granted, and appointments with the subjects were scheduled, data collection began.

Data was collected through one-on-one, face-to-face interviews with the subjects in the presence of the licensed mental health professional (functioning as the gatekeeper) at his/her office. Creswell (1994) and Bogdan and Biklen (1992) refer to gatekeepers as
those whose approval must be obtained in order to conduct the research in a given location. The gatekeeper had previously reviewed the general focus of the research, how the data were to be collected, and what could be expected in return for subjects’ participation. Permission from the gatekeeper as well as the subjects was obtained in advance of any data collection. Initial permission to participate in the study from the subjects was solicited and collected by the gatekeeper.

Procedures

After the study received permission from the IRB to proceed, an introductory letter was sent to the licensed, certified professional counselor explaining the purpose and significance of this study; an explanation of the interview process; assurances of confidentiality; and an invitation for a summary of the results of the study at its completion. Accompanying this letter was a copy of the parent/guardian permission to participate letter (Appendix A). The counselor had earlier verbally agreed to participate and assured the researcher that the sample pool was readily available.

Once the licensed counselor had officially agreed to participate, she in turn contacted each subject. From their parents she secured written permission, an “intent to participate” form, and a “permission to quote” from each parent. Use of direct quotes was important to this study; however, maintaining strictest confidentiality when using quotations was assured each participant. As soon as all permission forms were returned, an interview schedule was prepared, the subjects were notified, and their interview times were confirmed. Data collection then began.
Both data collection and data analysis were simultaneous in the qualitative process (Merriam, 1988). Typically throughout the data collection and analysis process, the researcher indexed and coded the data using as many categories as possible (Jacob, 1987). During the process of collecting and coding data, such data were organized categorically, reviewed often, and continually subjected to re-coding. A list of major ideas that surfaced were chronicled (Merriam, 1988), and the researcher’s notes and field journal were reviewed regularly.

**Interviews:** The interviews for this study were semi-structured as to allow further inquiry by the interviewer. Dedman (1987) posited that interviewing is a basic mode of inquiry which “is not to get answers to questions, nor test a hypotheses...At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make out of that experience” (p. 3). Creswell (1998), as well as Bogdan and Biklen (1992), wrote that semi-structured interviews have an advantage over structured interviews as they allow the interviewer and the interviewee to adapt if necessary, while Merriam (1988) stated that “this format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand...and to add new ideas to the topic” (p. 74). Bogdan and Bilken (1992) also suggested that the creation of an open climate of discussion with the interviewee will free them to discuss their perceptions of events and points of view, providing the interviewer with needed quality data. This quality-perceptive data were exactly what was needed for this study.

the protocol will assist the interviewer to stay on track, log information, take notes about
the responses, and to organize general thoughts and conclusions including thanking the
respondents. Following Creswell's (1994) recommendations, the interview protocol for
this study included: (a) a demographic information sheet concerning the time, place, and
setting of the interview, (b) the heading, and (c) opening statements. After the opening
statements, the protocol contained: (d) interview questions, (d) an interview form with
space for descriptive and reflective notes as prescribed by Eisner (1991) and Creswell
(1994). Finally, as a supplement to the protocol, a follow-up field-note form for notes
added by the researcher post-interview was used "to reflect on issues raised in the
setting" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 159). These forms are located in Appendix B.

Interviews were conducted, answers written down, and then transcribed by the
researcher using the aforementioned protocol. Pursuant to the recommendations in the
literature, the interviews were not tape recorded (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, McCaw,
1999). Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) posited that the main disadvantage of using tape
recordings was that "the presence of the tape recorded changes the interview situation to
some degree" and that "respondents might be reluctant to express their feelings freely if
then know that their responses are being recorded" (p. 320). This study relied strongly on
the expression of these very feelings and perceptions; hence, field notes served as the
primary means of data collection. The original protocols, field notes, and transcripts
were retained by the researcher with copies of them supplied to the gatekeeper for
member checking or verification of the information contained therein (Creswell, 1994).
To assist in this final analysis, a field journal was kept to provide details of how time was utilized in coding information as well as how the researcher used the data collected. Perceptions of the researcher during the field experience were also noted. The field journal, as noted by Creswell (1994), was an invaluable resource during the data analysis phase of the research.

**Ethical Considerations**

Because of the potential for qualitative research to be highly obtrusive, and in order to safeguard the rights of the informants, the following ethical considerations as outlined by Creswell (1994) were employed in this study:

1. Permission to conduct the study from The University of Montana Institutional Review Board was gained prior to the beginning of the research.

2. Research objectives were articulated in writing benchmarked at the fourth grade reading level, so that they were clearly understood by the subjects. This included a description of how the data were to be used.

3. Written permission in the form of participant assent to proceed with the study as articulated was collected from the subjects.

4. The subjects were informed of all data collection devices and activities.

5. Transcriptions, written interpretations, and reports were made available to the subjects for their review.

6. Subjects knew they had the right to stop the interview at any time (p. 166).
Development of Questions

Most qualitative researchers suggest keeping interview questions relatively open-ended yet focused on a specific topic, guided by some general questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 1994, 1998; Seidman, 1991). Werner and Schoepfle (1987) suggested the interview structure be composed of grand tour questions while Creswell (1994) recommended “that a researcher ask one or two grand tour questions followed by no more than five to seven sub-questions” (p. 70). While others such as Merriam (1988) and Siedman (1991) placed no limits on the number of questions, this study employed Creswell’s (1994) recommendations as noted previously.

Grand Tour Question: A grand tour question was defined by Creswell (1994) as “a statement of the question being examined in the study in its most general form. This question, consistent with the emerging methodology or qualitative design, is posed as a general issue so as not to limit the inquiry” (p. 70). This study was guided by the following grand tour question:

1. What kinds of perceptions do selected at-risk adolescents have regarding their interactions with school personnel?

Sub-questions: The three sub-questions subordinate to the grand tour question were:

1. How are students’ perceptions of school related to their perceived treatment and subsequent difficulties?

2. What emerging school related issues help to explain students’ behavior and stated needs?
3. Could adolescent perceptions be valuable to schools in developing a better understanding of meeting the needs of potentially troubled youth?

To answer the grand tour and sub-questions of this study, respondents were asked eight interview questions. The development of these questions was influenced by the extant literature as synthesized in this study’s Chapter 2: Review of the Literature.

Research Question Rationale

The research questions for this proposal were developed from a review of the literature and consist of a grand tour question and three sub-questions. The grand tour question was written in a general form as to allow it to be constantly under review and subject to change during the course of the study. This freedom, allowing the researcher to alter questions as the study evolves, is consistent with the qualitative assumptions of an emerging design (Creswell, 1994).

The grand tour question, as well as the sub-questions, was developed from a review of the current literature synthesized in this study. This synthesis pointed to five areas to be studied: a) the creation of school climate, b) the attitudes and expectations of school personnel, c) the victimization of students by school personnel, d) the needs of adolescents as reported by the experts and, e) what adolescents feel they get from schools. The researcher in developing the sub-questions, took the above themes into account, developed the sub-questions and interview questions that he thought might allow the informants to address the areas revealed in the literature. Data pertaining to each of these five areas were then collected from each subject.
General demographic data as well as G.P.A. data were also gathered prior to the actual face-to-face interview. After this general data were gathered and recorded, interview response forms were prepared for each respondent. As each interview began, each subject was read the same opening statements followed by the researcher's asking of questions and data collection so as to answer the grand tour question.

**Grand Tour Question:** What kinds of perceptions do selected "at-risk" adolescents have regarding their interactions with school personnel? Darling-Hammond reported: "The mandates and regulations that govern many school systems make them impersonal, indifferent, and generally insensitive to the individuals within them" (as cited in Hansen & Childs, 1998, p. 14). As the subjects of this study have already experienced difficulty in adjusting to school as it currently exists, it is the intent of the study to find out how these adolescents perceive their school experience, how they feel they were treated by school personnel, how such treatment made them feel, and what they think might be done to make school a more welcome environment. By answering the grand tour question it is intended that this information will be brought to the forefront.

**Sub-question #1: How are the students' perceptions of school and school personnel related to their perceived treatment and subsequent difficulties?** Ayers (1997), in his article about teaching delinquent students, stated:

...as a teacher, I learned long ago that in my own classroom if I treat kids like hoodlums and thugs, they will rarely disappoint, but if I treat them as scholars and ethicists, valued and valuable, they can just as easily stretch and grow into people of values". (p. 51)
Murdock (1999) found that teachers are so proximally related to student academic lives that the students' perceptions of teacher appraisals and support were the biggest predictors of the students' behavior. Sub-question #1 sought to find out how the subjects' perception of school and those associated with the operation of the school itself relates to the subjects' subsequent difficulties at school. Interview questions #1–#4 were intended to answer this question.

**Interview Question #1: How did you feel about school when you first started?**

This question attempted to establish a relationship with the literature as to the age when behavior began to become a problem for these students and how they felt about the results of their behavior. In examining the literature, the onset of such problems has been rarely reported at the primary level and as reported earlier in this work, generally occurs in adolescents. The issue has become to define adolescence and ascertain when it begins? While this research did not intend to determine a relationship between age and the onset of school based emotional problems, the information regarding such garnered from this study may be of benefit to school personnel.

**Interview Question #2: When you first began to experience problems at school, describe what was happening?** Interview question #2 was asked in an effort to find out what the students interviewed felt “went wrong” and what the causes may have been.

**Interview Question #3: At the time your problems began, how did you feel about your school and your teachers?** Interview question #3 was asked to find out how had the subjects achieved and what were their perceptions of school and their teachers up until they began to experience problems?
Interview Question #4: After you began experiencing problems at school, how did your teachers and principals treat you? Question #4 was designed to explore how subjects found school to have "changed" once they interviewees began to experience behavior problems. Of particular interest, were their perceptions that the school and its climate changed, and that they were potentially stereotyped and then subjected to the Pygmalion effect (Brophy, 1983; Tauber, 1997; Wager, 1963). Of concern to the researcher was the possibility that the subjects began to feel different (Brophy, 1983; Hyman and Perone, 1998).

Sub-question #2: What emerging school related issues help to explain students' behavior and stated needs?

Much has written and researched regarding the causes of school violence, yet few of these studies seek to find out from students why they act out in the ways that they do. Hyman and Perone (1998) wrote:

While school psychologists should be concerned with the verbal and physical maltreatment (of students) by teachers, this topic receives very little mention and almost no research attention in the school psychology literature. Furthermore there is paucity in the research on the relationship between victimization of students by educators and the causation, prevention and remediation of school violence (p. 8).

Some have speculated why there is so little research in this area. Hyman and Perone (1998) again stated that, "schools do not encourage research regarding the possible
maltreatment of students by staff or...how this behavior might affect student behavior” (p. 8).

Interview Question #5: Did you feel that you were treated the same as others in your school? This question was designed attempting to get at the root of subjects' perceptions, including the degree to which they felt singled out and identified by their dress or peer group. Was it their dress or peer group, or do they feel it was because of their behavior and the school’s expectations for them?

Interview Question #6: Do you feel the consequences (punishment) given to you because of your behavior made a difference in (changed) the way you acted at school? The intent of this question was an attempt to find out why students continued to rebel and disrupt even though they knew that their actions would ultimately lead to severe consequences. What did these students expect to gain from their actions? What was their reward and did their actions achieve what they intended them to?

Interview Question #7: Thinking back on your behavior at school, why do you think your teachers and others reacted the way they did? Question #7 hoped to encourage the subjects to give insight into why school personnel reacted to the subjects’ behavior the manner that they did. Were these students perceptive enough to use school policies and emergency procedures in order to meet their needs? Did they use things such as “zero-tolerance” or mandatory suspensions to gain the self-esteem they desired? Hopefully the answering of this question will help to shed light upon how these students approach such “procedures.”

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Sub-question #3: Could adolescent perceptions be valuable to schools in developing a better understanding of meeting the needs of potentially troubled youth?

Schouten (2001) quoted Tom Watkins, Michigan State Superintendent of Schools, who observed, “...we have...some students who struggle...but if you (schools) provide the tools, the children can soar” (p. 1). This research will attempt to identify some of these “tools.” Some of the literature says that smaller schools are the key (Hill, 2001; NASSP, 1996; Taylor, 2001), others say it is caring school personnel (Aronson, 2000; Hyman and Perone, 1998; Murdock, 1999) while others claim it is setting high expectations for all (Aronson, 2000; Ayers, 1997; Schouten, 2001).

Interview Question #7: Given your experience what do you think administrators and teachers could do to create schools that are better, more welcoming places for all students? The literature has provided many recommendations about essential elements for schools. However, very little research has asked the students themselves –especially those who have experienced problems –what they feel school should be like. Given the perspective of students who have experienced the negative aspects of today’s schools, it may be possible to draw some conclusions and develop some techniques to make school a place of success for all students.

Data Analysis

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) described the process of data analysis in the following way:
Analysis involves working with data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, synthesizing them, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others (p. 153).

Data obtained from the interview questions were analyzed in an attempt to discover emerging relationships. McCaw (1999) described data analysis in qualitative studies as "an ongoing inductive process" (p. 69), and because collection and analysis occur at the same time (Creswell, 1994), the direction of this study was under constant adjustment. As relationships and trends evolved, the researcher proceeded in directions that were not originally intended or anticipated (Eisner, 1991). Eisner likened qualitative research to an artist's creation of a collage. As the artist creates the collage, decisions are made constantly that affect the final outcome. Such is the role of the researcher in a qualitative study; as data are collected and analyzed, decisions are made which may or may not change the anticipated outcome. Data in this study were analyzed in a similar manner.

Analytic Induction. The data that were obtained from the semi-structured interviews of the identified youth were processed using analytic induction. This is the method prescribed by Bogdan and Biklen (1992) when the researcher is collecting and analyzing data and using it in the development of a theory. As the development of such a theory was the focus of this study, the process of analytic induction was appropriate. Formal analysis began soon after the first interview was completed, and allowed for modification of the theory and research questions at any time during the research process.
(Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). As interviews were concluded and data analysis began, coding was employed to assist in process of data analysis.

Coding. Creswell (1994) noted that every researcher needs to have a systematic process of analyzing the data. Coding is the procedure used in most methods of analyzing qualitative data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). While Creswell (1994) stated that there was no firm set of procedures for categorizing the interview data, Strauss and Corbin (1990) advocated a set of processes for grounded theory which include open coding, axial coding, selective coding, and the generation of a conditional matrix.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) posited that “Coding categories are developed as the researcher searches through the collected data to discover emerging topics and patterns” (p. 70). Bogdan and Biklen (1992) wrote that these categories can then be regrouped into coding families as similar details emerge. The coding procedures, suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (1992) as well Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998), were employed in this study to ensure verification of its findings.

Verification

Evidence of true, quality research exists in the accuracy of the study, its generalizability, and the possibility of it being replicated (Creswell, 1994). While both research paradigms (quantitative and qualitative) vary in their methods of addressing validity, generalizability, and reliability (Creswell, 1994; Eisner, 1991), both are equal in their concern for accuracy (McCaw, 1999).

Accuracy. Accuracy in this study was controlled by employing the procedures as suggested by Miller (1988) and Jick (1979):
1) Triangulation of data – data were collected from multiple sources including multiple interviews, observations and document analysis. Triangulation also helped to ensure validity of the study.

2) Member checking – the licensed, professional counselor served as a check throughout the analysis process. He/she provided feedback to the researcher regarding the accuracy of quotes, assumptions, and conclusions.

3) Peer examination – this same trained psychotherapist served as a peer examiner.

4) Participatory modes of research – The licensed counselor was involved in most phases of the study, from the checking of interpretations to the writing of the conclusion (p. 158).

“Rich, thick descriptions” of detailed information, as recommended by Merriam (1988), also aided in the transferability and generalizability of the findings of this study.

**Generalizability.** Generalizability, the ability of the study to be generalized to other like situations, is a very important aspect for the researcher to consider. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) noted that “When researchers use the term generalizability they are referring to whether the findings of a study will hold up beyond the specific research subjects and setting involved” (p. 44). The generalizability of a study’s findings is “associated with the transference of knowledge,” McCaw observed (1999, p. 72). Eisner (1991) recognized this association also and believed that generalizing is not only
exploring the information given but is in the transfer of the information and "what has been learned from one situation to another" (p. 198).

As this study is qualitative in design, it will be most concerned with what Eisner (1991) calls retrospective generalizability. He stated that retrospective generalizability was:

...developed not by random sampling and using findings to anticipate the future, but by encountering or formulating an idea that allows us to see our past experience in a new light. Retrospective generalizations find their subject matter by examining history rather than by anticipating the future. (p. 205)

Rorty (1979) stated that the generalizable qualities of this type of study "are not so much located in truth, as in their ability to refine perception and to deepen conversation" (p. 73). As the research paradigm used determines and limits the generalizability of the study's findings (Eisner, 1991), and because this study was qualitative in nature, Eisner put the responsibility of generalizing the findings on the consumer of the research not the researcher:

Since no generalization can fit an individual context perfectly, modification is always necessary. The modification requires judgment on the part of intelligent practitioners. Hence, they are the ones who must act upon the situation after the researchers have finished their work. In the end, it is practitioners, the users of ideas, who must determine whether the ideas that are available are appropriate for their situation. (p. 212)
With the above cautions in mind, any people making generalizations of this study's findings must determine if its findings can and will be appropriately applied to their situation.

**Sampling.** Consumers of research, when determining the generalizability of a study's finding, often consider the research sample. This study employed a purposeful sample. Creswell (1994) stated the need for purposeful sampling in qualitative research because "the idea of qualitative research is to purposefully select informants (or documents or visual material) that will best answer the research question" (p. 148). Bogdan and Biklen (1992) also advocated the use of the purposeful sample when employing analytic induction, as they believed that the use of chosen subjects best expands the development of the emerging theory. Given this, the subjects for this study were derived from a purposeful sample. Subjects were chosen because they had been involved with behavior problems at school, so much so that they were undergoing professional counseling in order to help overcome them their problems. Subjects were from different schools and towns so as to meet Bogdan and Biklen's (1992) recommendation of using multiple sites and subjects in the development of a theory.

**Data Reporting**

At the completion of the data collection phase of this study, the data obtained was checked for accuracy, analyzed, and reported in the form of a narrative. McCaw (1999) wrote "Data Reporting, consists of two parts, 'The Role of the Researcher' and the 'Narrative'. The first part, 'The Role of the Researcher' is of particular interest as it addresses any inherent bias by the researcher" (p. 75).
The Role of the Researcher. It has been well documented that qualitative researchers bring their own biases, values, and judgments into their studies (Creswell, 1994). Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (as cited in McCaw, 1999) believed that an awareness and acknowledgement of their biases, values, and judgments was not only important but useful to the qualitative researcher. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) felt that the biases of the researcher can be problematic, “particularly when the data must ‘go through’ the researcher’s mind before they put it on paper” (p. 46). They go on to note that in an attempt to be objective in the interpretation of data researchers must “constantly confront how his or her own opinions and prejudices with the data” (p. 46). The researcher was aware of such bias and did everything possible to refrain from letting such bias taint the results of the study.

To guard against bias, the researcher incorporated Bogdan and Bilken’s (1992) suggestion to keep detailed field notes of each interview. These notes were kept using the interview form in the Appendix. Reflective notes in the form of a field journal were also kept regarding each interview in an effort to control for any bias.

The researcher’s background and experiences can also influence how the data was interpreted (Eisner, 1991). Eisner also suggested that the ability of the consumer to know the researcher is not “altogether irrelevant” (p. 193) in interpreting the results of a study. The researcher’s perception of the problems that exist in schools was based upon twelve years of experience as a classroom teacher and coach at all levels, K-12, seven years as a public school principal at both the middle and high school levels, three years as a district superintendent, ten years of graduate level study in the area of educational leadership and
eighteen years of parenting. For nearly three years the researcher reviewed the literature regarding all aspects of school climate and culture, teacher and student perceptions of school, school violence from every angle, and childhood mental illness. In his experience he witnessed successful interventions made toward making school a better place for every student as well as blatant attempts by school personnel to completely destroy the psyche of students. The researcher entered this study with bias that some students perceive school as a place that is less than welcoming. He acknowledges this bias and also acknowledges that his actions may also bias the data.

Because of theses biases, the researcher did all he could to keep from influencing the responses of the subjects during the interview process (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The interviews were conducted as a good conversation (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, Eisner, 1991) with the researcher, as Eisner (1991) states, “listening intently and asking questions that focus on concrete examples and feelings rather than an abstract speculations, which are less likely to provide genuinely meaningful information” (p. 183). The researcher did everything possible to uphold ethical standards, adhere to the promises made in the permission forms, maintain strictest confidentiality, and be respectful of each subject before, during, and after the study (McCaw, 1999).

Narrative

Once the data was collected and analyzed it was reported in the study’s narrative. The results of qualitative studies are best reported in narrative form (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Creswell, 1994, Eisner, 1991). Creswell (1994) suggested that these narratives be presented in text or image forms while Bogdan and Biklen (1992) suggested that the
narrative format may either be traditional or presented in a non-traditional manner such as via a storytelling like method.

The researcher used rich, thick descriptions to present the findings of this study in a narrative format. This narrative was designed to bring forth the true results of the research. Real experiences of students as well as quotations were used to, as suggested by McCaw (1999), "amplify the categories that emerge as suggested by several research scholars" (p. 78).

Summary of Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design with the hopes of establishing a grounded theory upon analysis of the data. This grounded theory was based on the perceptions of the students interviewed and an analysis of the data gathered. Data were collected through semi-structured one-on-one interviews with students who have been identified as subjects for this study by trained psychotherapists. Each interview was conducted using a structured interview protocol, with data collected during the interview being recorded by the interviewer via note taking. A field journal was also kept to provide supplemental data and member checks and peer examination were used to verify the data collected.

The methodology described throughout this chapter provided the framework for the data collection during this study. The findings of the study resulting from a thorough analysis of the data, as reported in the following chapter, Chapter Four, which describes the analysis of the data and explains the emergence of the grounded theory.
CHAPTER FOUR

Findings From the Qualitative Inquiry

This study was guided by the general research question: What kinds of perceptions do selected at-risk adolescents have regarding their interactions with school personnel? Data collected pertaining to this question and the analyses of said data are reported in this section. Twelve subjects, six male and six female, were purposefully selected for this study and interviewed over a period of one month. All attend public school in one of two of Montana’s larger cities, four junior high schools and three high schools are represented. Five of the subjects attended middle school and were of the ages 11-14. The other seven were ages 15-17 and attended high school. The subjects were interviewed individually in a confidential setting at the office of the Licensed Certified Professional Counselor who had agreed to assist in this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a standard protocol consisting of eight questions that sought data pertaining to the general research question above.

For the purposes of this study, descriptive data were reported in narrative form and accentuated through the use of direct quotations taken from the interview notes. These quotes were presented verbatim and connected to the source from which they came, even though fictitious identities were consistently used for each of the 12 subjects. The identities of the subjects and the schools they attend have been purposefully concealed, yet the confidentiality of this information did not detract from any data collection or analysis.
The analysis of the data from each subject in this study was completed hoping to identify common relationships and phenomena. In the analysis of data, one core category emerged. This was the "At-Risk Students' Perception of Their School Experience," along with three subcategories and several properties. The three subcategories that emerged from the data were: (a) students' perceptions of school, (b) perceptions of punishment and consequences, and (c) students' advice to school personnel. The relationships that occurred between the categories and their properties served as the foundation for the narrative of this study. This narrative would not have been possible without the detailed data provided by each participant.

Subjects for this study provided data via detailed descriptions of their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and perceptions. General information about the participants in this study can be found in Table 1. This table provides demographic information for each subject; their age, gender, their ethnicity; grade in school; and current reported G.P.A.

Table 1a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Code</th>
<th>Subject Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>G.P.A.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Native Am</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Native Am</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S6</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The analysis of data for this study employed the format prescribed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) with the processes of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding being utilized. These processes, which take apart data, analyze relationships, and then re-contextualize the data, were the basis from which the narrative was written. The initial step used to examine the data collected from each subject was open coding.

**Open Coding**

Strauss and Corbin (1990) posited that open coding involves making comparisons and asking questions. Using this methodology, data collected from the subjects were broken down into simple parts and examined for relationships. The open coding process yielded the following three general categories: (a) students' perceptions of school, (b) perceptions of punishment and consequences, (c) students' advice to school personnel. These three general categories were then scrutinized regarding their properties and dimensional range (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Properties uncovered within the open coding process were defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as “attributes or characteristics pertaining to a category” (p. 61). The properties that emerge were then analyzed to determine their dimensional range. The first of these categories examined was students’ perceptions of school.

**Students’ Perceptions of School**

Table 2 presents the category of students’ perceptions of schools, as well as the dimensional range of the properties related to this category.
Table 2

Properties and Dimensional Range: Students' Perception of School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Properties</th>
<th>Dimensional Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>students' perception of school</td>
<td>first feelings of school when school related problems began</td>
<td>scared &gt; neutral &gt; excited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>perceived causes of school related problems</td>
<td>myself &gt; my family &gt; my teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>feelings of school at the onset of problems</td>
<td>negative &gt; neutral &gt; positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>perceived changes in treatment by school personnel</td>
<td>negative &gt; neutral &gt; positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>one person &gt; some people &gt; everyone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each property in Table 2 and each dimensional range of the category Students’ Perception of School is supported with descriptive narratives derived from the data collected from the subjects of this study and listed in the table. This stage of the open coding process begins with the property “First Feelings of School” and refers to Table 2.

First Feelings of School: Subjects related their remembrances of how they felt when they first began school in a variety of ways. Whatever their remembrance however, each had no problem recollecting their initial feelings of going off to school. The dimensional range for these recollections varied from the subjects being scared to their being somewhat neutral to others being very excited. Four subjects expressed that they were scared or didn’t want to go to school. One subject, S2, reported: “I was scared to go to school. I have never liked to go to school.” Three subjects, S2, S5 and S11, related
that they didn’t want to go to school because in the words of S2, “I am the youngest and wanted to stay home with my mom.” Only one student answered this question as having no real strong feeling one way or the other. S6 recalled, “I was kind of neutral I guess. I guess I knew that it was something that I had to do.” Six subjects reported that they were happy and excited about going to school. S1 recalled, “I was excited because I wanted to learn to read”, while S4 reported, “I was excited. Both of my parents are teachers and I wanted to go to school to learn how to read better.” Another, S7, spoke of being “incredibly excited. It was finally my time to be in the spotlight.”

When School-Related Problems Began. The majority of the subjects recollected their problems beginning in grade school; however, one subject’s problems didn’t emerge until he entered high school. Another subject described his problem as, “starting in the third grade but it really got going in the fourth.” Four others, including S7, also reported their first problems beginning in the fourth grade. S7 vividly remembered, “My first fight was when I was 10. I was in the fourth grade Gifted and Talented Program when I lashed out.” Five others in the study related that their problems began in the fifth or sixth grade, while S9 reported the 7th grade and S1 responded by recalling that, “I started having problems my freshman year...I had an overall feeling of hopelessness.”

Perceived Causes of School-Related Problems: Subjects’ answers varied with the dimensional range of answers extending from blaming self to blaming the school rules. Four subjects reported family reasons for their problems. S5 recalled, “My parents got divorced and I was angry.” S12 also blamed divorce. “My parents got divorced and my temper got short,” he said. S7 related, “I was abused by my step-father and when another
student pushed me like he did, I punched her.” Two subjects blamed themselves for their problems. S11 said that he was constantly in trouble; “I couldn’t concentrate on my homework and couldn’t get my work done.” Finally, six students blamed their teachers and/or school discipline rules. S2 was adamant, stating, “I didn’t like my teacher because she let groups in the class pick on others.” S4 claimed, “The teacher cheated me out of the lead in the class play. I won it but made me share it with another…she favored him because they went to church together,” while S10 claimed that her problems began when, “My teacher lost some of my assignments… (I) got zeros. My mom tried to explain to her that I had done them but she wouldn’t believe her.” S6 reflected his disgust with school rules by relating, “I got caught with a can of fake snuff, you know; the mint kind. Anyway, they didn’t have a rule against it so they just made one up along with detention.” S3 also felt strongly about the application of school rules.

“I got bullied and fought back,” he said. “The bully smashed my head into a brick wall, and I got a concussion. Nothing happened to him so my mom moved me to another school in town. When I moved to the middle school, I was left alone at first but then some kids from my old school started picking on me again, so I turned them in. Nothing happened to them, but when I began fighting back I got in trouble. It seems like nothing ever happens to them.”

Feelings of School at the Onset of Problems: Subjects perceptions of school when they first began to experience problems at school were on a continuum from negative to positive with most reporting that they still liked school. S2 recalled, “I didn’t like my teacher because she was phony to all of us. She pretended to like what she was doing but...
I don’t think that she really wanted to be teaching us.” S1 related a statement that was more neutral in feelings than did most others by saying that, “Most teachers still tried to help but some didn’t. Some teachers are people, some are not.” As stated previously, most subjects remained positive about school in general even though some real problems had began to surface. S4 stated that he still “liked school and... liked teachers. [I] grew up around teachers and school.” S5 reported that, “I have always liked school. When my problems began I liked school but hated my teacher. She treated me like I wasn’t smart because I couldn’t write cursive.” “I have always liked school and I still liked it then (when my problems started). My friends were at school and I liked to be with my friends. It was the teacher and the classroom that I disliked,” recollected S8.

Perceived Changes in Treatment by School Personnel: Most subjects felt that once they began to experience school related problems their treatment by school personnel changed dramatically. Eleven of the twelve subjects reported that their interactions with school personnel worsened and that a downward spiral in their treatment resulted. No subjects reported anything positive in their experience. From their perspective, they felt blamed and picked on for everything. S3 was very adamant in his response, stating, “The old-vice principal quit talking to me, wouldn’t even say ‘hi’ but when there was trouble, he blamed me for everything.” S4 reported being labeled as “different” and that “the science and English teachers blamed me for everything. My 7th grade principal gave me a chance, but in the 8th grade we got a new guy, ex-military. He told me that I should be an example. He was harder on me and never listened.”
“They all changed,” said S7, while S9 stated, “They started watching everything that I did.” Her perceptions were supported by S11, who recalled, “…after I got in trouble it seemed like they watched me, waiting for me to goof up again. It was weird.” The frustration in the voices of the subjects at this point is best typified by S5, whose response was,

“It seemed like they just kept picking on me. I got blamed for everything. One day we were all playing tackle football at noon. We got caught—well, tackle football was against playground rules—and I was the only one that got detention, three noon hours. The counselor also tried to blame me for everything. It seemed like I was in trouble all the time.”

Perceptions of Punishments and Consequences

Table 3 represents the category “Perceptions of Punishments and Consequences” and the dimensional range of the properties related to the category Perceptions of Punishments and Consequences.
Table 3  
Properties and Dimensional Range: Perceptions of Punishment and Consequences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Properties</th>
<th>Dimensional Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>perceptions of punishment</td>
<td>explanations of perceived</td>
<td>reputation &gt; singled out &gt; equal treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and consequences</td>
<td>treatment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>perceived effects of punishments</td>
<td>behavior worsened &gt; ineffective or non-existent &gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and consequences</td>
<td>punishment beats going to class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>subjects’ insights into</td>
<td>unsure &gt; it’s all about me &gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>educators’ behaviors</td>
<td>fear &gt; morality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the purpose of this study, the category “Perceptions of Punishment and Consequences” consists of three properties. The properties are: (a) explanations of perceived treatment, (b) perceived effects of punishments and consequences, and (c) explanations of personnel behavior. A description of each property, with inclusion of its dimensional range, is presented in the following three narratives.

**Explanations of Perceived Treatment:** The data reported by the subjects regarding this property was given in great detail. The data ranged from subjects S6 and S12, who believed that their treatment was due to their reputation preceding them, to all the other subjects who felt singled out. No subject reported perceiving treatment as fair and equal with that of others in the school. S6 reported, “You get a ‘rep,’ and it’s hard to lose.” Middle school was the hardest place to lose your rep.” S12 responded similarly, “I thought I was finally doing OK, but my rep has followed me. The other day we had a sugar cube fight in the lunchroom. We all were doing it and the duty
teacher caught us. I got suspended for 3 days, the others got 15 minutes of detention.”

The other ten subjects felt that because of their problems they were constantly singled out and punished. S2 was “tired of the ‘favorites’ game’. Teachers have favorites, pick them early, and defend them in everything.” S4 claimed, “It seemed like the more trouble I got into, the more things I got blamed for. It was always my fault.” “Other kids would blurt out in the class and the teacher would blame me. I got into trouble for everything. The counselor walks down the hall and says hello to everyone but me,” said S5. S7 remembered that “I was the only one who had to take a behavior note home everyday,” while S8 was very direct: “I was singled out” she said.

**Perceived Effects of Punishments and Consequences:** When allowed to discuss the punishment and consequences they had received as a result of their behaviors and the effectiveness of such the responses, data varied from their behavior worsening to the consequences being better than the alternative. Six subjects reported that their punishment and related consequences only escalated their behaviors. “They (the consequences) didn’t make me quit fighting, they made me madder,” said S3, an answer reiterated by S4, S5, S10, S11, and S7 who claimed, “They changed my behavior but not the way they intended. I was challenged to see how far I could push.” Some subjects felt that punishment was ineffective and useless. S12’s opinion was, “Detentions don’t work. I get detention for everything that I do...Detention is an easy way for them to look like they are doing something”. S6 echoed S12, claiming,
"The consequences that schools come up with are not real. They think that their penalties work and if they make them progressively stiffer it will stop behavior but they (the penalties) don't change most kids' behavior. If the consequences meant something and were designed to help change behavior they might work. Right now they are pretty lame."

Finally, some subjects reported that the punishment was better than the alternative, being subjected to their teacher(s). S7 noted, "Sitting in the hall was better than being humiliated in class. Whenever I wanted to get out of a situation...I'd act out and I was out of there in a heartbeat." S8 recalled her problems in sixth grade saying that she and her friends were always in trouble for talking. "She (the teacher) would keep us in at recess, leave the room, and we could talk. Other times she took assemblies away from us and left us in the room next door, where we got to do just what we wanted to do, talk." In explaining the consequences of her current problems, S8 reported, "ISS (in school suspension) is really not punishment for me. I get my work done...and it is definitely better than having to see my math teacher again."

**Subjects' Insight into Educators' Behaviors:** The data analysis resulting in this emerging category ranged from subjects' straightforward perceptions to those that had obviously reflected on for several years. Some of the subjects had no thoughts regarding why school personnel reacted the way that they had toward the subjects. S3 claimed that he wasn't sure why his teachers and the administration reacted the way they had, observing,
“I know fighting is wrong, but the only thing they have ever done to help me was to put me on a behavior plan that took my lunch free time away from me so that I would be safe. It’s not fair. I don’t know why I get punished for fighting while others fight and keep their lunch.” Similarly, S8 stated, “I really don’t know why... It was kind of weird... It made no sense.”

Other subjects felt that the reactions of school personnel were an outgrowth of the subjects’ behavior. In discussing her problem with attendance, S2 stated, “Most of the eighth grade teachers knew that I didn’t come to school very often in the seventh grade, most expected me not to change so I didn’t.” S9 guessed that her treatment was “because they don’t want me to carve on myself again. I only did it once and now they won’t let me forget it.” S11 claimed that he “disappoints them,” while S12 states, “I am different and they know it.”

Another group of subjects seemed to feel that school personnel reacted the way they did because they are afraid. “I don’t think they liked me or any other kids that caused problems. Maybe it was because there had been a shooting in the school a couple of years before. I think they wanted to get rid of any kid who caused trouble,” stated S5. S7 felt this way also, responding, “When teachers get challenged by a child, and become afraid, they punish us rather than understand us. It is easier to punish a child than to listen to them.”

The last group of responses that led to this property seemed to lend itself to students’ believing that personnel responses to their actions were due to some feeling of moral purpose.
"I think they thought that since I was a teacher’s kid, I should be held to a higher standard. By punishing me...they could keep others in line. If they punished their own they would not be accused of favoritism by other students," recalled S4. S6 responded, “They tell us that when we disrupt we are taking away from the other’s education but when they discipline us with suspensions and such, they are taking away from our education too,” while S10 stated that, “They think they have to be tough and have an attitude. It’s funny, they get to have an attitude but we can’t. They want us to respect them but they don’t have to respect us.”

Students’ Advice to School Personnel

Table 4 presents the category of students’ perceptions of what school should be as well as the dimensional range contained within.

Table 4

Properties and Dimensional Range: Students’ Advice to School Personnel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Properties</th>
<th>Dimensional Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>students’ advice to school personnel</td>
<td>consistent treatment of everyone</td>
<td>inconsistency &gt; consistency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>listening to everyone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>respecting everyone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>caring for everyone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the purposes of this study, the category “Students’ Advice to School Personnel” consists of four properties. The properties are: (a) consistent treatment of everyone, (b)
listening to everyone, (c) respecting everyone, and (d) caring for everyone. Each property is described in the following narratives, which also include the dimensional range of each property as reported by the subjects.

**Consistent Treatment of Everyone:** Several subjects were quick to discuss the inconsistencies in the treatment of students from different groups in schools and the need for school personnel to be fair and consistent in all that they do. S1 felt that teachers needed to “be fair with all students...some teachers favor the jocks, some favor the drama geeks. If all students were given the same opportunities and treated the same no matter who they are, school would be a much better place.” S2 asked that schools “stop the inconsistency with the rules and enforcement of rules. What is good for one should be good for all,” while S11 proclaimed, “Bad teachers are the ones that have rules that are different for some than for others.” S6 was very profound in his reflection, stating, “Schools need to think through their rules and administer them in a consistent way. They need to treat all kids fairly and not let certain groups get away with things that they don’t let others.”

**Listening to Everyone.** Many of the subjects of this study perceived that school personnel could change school by simply listening to their students. S3 believed, “Teachers and principals need to listen to both sides of the story. Good teachers listen to us and let us talk to them. This helps us deal with our problems. When you tell a teacher something, they need to listen.” “Listen to students,” concurred S4 whose sentiments were also echoed by S7; “Be open-minded and listen to what kids are saying and doing.” S9 and S10, respectively added, “listen to me” and “I like teachers who talk and listen to
me. Teachers need to take time to talk to us all of the time, not just when we are in trouble.”

**Respecting Everyone.** Mutual respect was another key property that emerged from the open coding process as one that school personnel needed to pay attention to. S12 felt that schools and teachers should “lighten up. Investigate things before judging us. Good teachers have personality…talk to you…and are friendly. They treat you with respect.” S10 said, “Teachers need to respect kids more, be a little more laid back and not so uptight” and S11 suggested that teachers, “let kids laugh at your mistakes and treat everyone in your class with respect.” One subject S3, summed it up by reporting, “Good teachers respect us, include us, and let us be involved (by us he meant students who were different and felt as he did). They are open to our ideas too.”

**Caring for Everyone.** Several subjects felt that there was a need for teachers and others connected to schools to care for and about everyone entrusted to them. S2 concluded in her interview by asking teachers to “Be fair. Show us you care about us all. I work hard for those who care.” The use of the word “care” was rampant throughout the data and was very apparent in this analysis. S5 felt, “They (school personnel) need to care for everyone the same.” “Care for us and when problems occur try to find out why,” said S7, while S8 added, “They need to care about all kids.” Finally, S10 reported, “If they care about what I’m doing, I care about what they are doing. The feeling is mutual.”

**Axial Coding**

The previous section employed the use of the open coding process, resulting in the identification of three categories of data. Employing the process of axial coding, the
data were de-contextualized into small parts, and then those parts were subsequently analyzed. When this analysis was completed, these parts were then re-contextualized in a different manner. This re-contextualization of the data identified properties for each of the three categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The properties were then reported with their dimensional range.

An analysis of the re-contextualized data led to a revelation of phenomena that directly related to the causal condition and the properties of that phenomenon. The relationships and properties which then emerged from the axial coding process are then referred to as "Causal Condition," "Phenomenon," "Context," "Intervening Condition," "Action/Interaction," and "Consequence." A brief explanation of these terms is explained below. However, for a more detailed study of these terms and their features, refer to Strauss and Corbin (1990).

**Causal Condition.** Causal conditions are incidents that result in the occurrence or development of a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The causal condition for each category in this study is the attendance at school of each subject. It is their attendance at school that led to the development of each phenomenon.

**Phenomenon.** A phenomenon is an event or central issue (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The phenomenon that emerged during this study, are the three categories of data that resulted from the open coding process. Therefore, three specific phenomena came forth: (a) students' perceptions of school, (b) students' perceptions of punishment and consequences, (c) students' perceptions of how school should be.
Context. Context is “the specific set of properties that pertain to a phenomenon along a dimensional range,” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 96). As the data in this study was separated into parts or de-contextualized and then put back together or re-contextualized, the context of each phenomenon was directly linked to the phenomenon that had emerged. For the purposes of this study, each context has an intervening condition.

Intervening Condition. Intervening conditions are structural conditions that pertain to a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). They are influenced by action and/or interactions.

Action/Interaction: Strauss and Corbin (1990) refer to action/interaction strategies as “purposeful or deliberate acts that are taken to resolve a problem and in doing so shape the phenomenon” (p. 133).

Consequence. Consequences are the results of action and interaction (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For the purposes of this study, consequences are listed directly below the action/interaction statements.

Table 5 relates the components that make up the axial coding process and the flow between each component in the analysis process.

Table 5

Axial Coding Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>causal condition &gt; phenomenon &gt; context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>intervening condition &gt; action/interaction &gt; consequence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data analysis in the axial coding process is an analytical flow beginning with the relationship of a causal condition to phenomenon as McCaw (1998) explained:

These phenomena are then related to context, which identify specific features of each phenomenon. Strategies employed to respond to specific phenomenon are listed under action/interaction. These strategies are affected by the intervening conditions. The process concludes with consequence which is the result of action and interaction. (p. 105)

In the process of axial coding, the first procedure employed is the identification of a causal condition and the phenomena of that causal condition. Table 6 displays the causal condition and phenomena identified during this study’s process of axial coding.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causal Condition</th>
<th>Phenomena</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>students’ attendance at school</td>
<td>-students’ perceptions of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-perceptions of punishment and consequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-students’ advice to school personnel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The phenomena listed in Table 6 each emerged from the melding of various contexts as well as the features of each context. For the purposes of this study, these features have been labeled: intervening condition, action/interaction, and consequence.

To assist in understanding the axial coding process and the analysis that has taken place thus far, each phenomenon and its context were presented in a table format.
Following the table for each phenomenon, the context of that phenomenon, and the features of each context ("Intervening Condition," "Action/Interaction," and "Consequence.") are presented. At this stage of axial coding, the first phenomenon to be explored is "Students' Perceptions of School."

The Phenomenon: Students' Perceptions of School

The phenomenon, student's perception of school emerged from the synthesis of four contexts. Table 7 lists the aforementioned phenomenon as well as the four contexts from which the students' perception of school phenomenon emerged.

Table 7

The Phenomenon: Students’ Perception of School in Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phenomenon</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>students' perceptions of school</td>
<td>subjects recalled that their first perceptions of school were mostly positive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>subjects blame themselves, their families, their teachers and school rules for causing their problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>after the onset of problems, subjects still had positive feelings toward school in general.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>treatment of subjects by school personnel deteriorated after their problems began.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussed below are the four contexts for the phenomenon of students' perceptions of school and the features of each context. This phenomenon and its related features are a direct result of the axial coding process.
Students Perceptions of School Context #1:

Subjects in this study recalled that their first perceptions of school were mostly positive.

Intervening Condition

• Subjects viewed school attendance as important.

Action/Interaction

• Subjects were excited about going to school.
• Subjects wanted to learn to read, as they saw reading as the reason for school at that age.

Consequence

• Subjects liked and enjoyed their initial school experience.
• Subjects liked and respected their first teachers.

Students’ Perceptions of School Context #2:

Subjects blame themselves, their families, their teachers, and school rules for causing their problems.

Intervening Condition

• School attendance led to school related problems.

Action/Interaction

• All subjects could trace the onset of their school related problems to a specific event.
• Each subject related their experience believing that they had had a unique experience.
Consequence

- Subjects had strong personal beliefs as to the cause of their school related problems.
- Perception of most significant adults in the lives of these subjects changed.

Students' Perception of School Context #3:

After the onset of problems, subjects still had positive feelings toward school in general.

Intervening Condition

- Despite their negative experiences, school was still regarded as a place where the subjects felt they needed to be.

Action/Interaction

- All students continued to attend school believing that their problems would pass.

Consequence

- Subjects believed that they could put their problems behind themselves.
- Subjects felt that they would be given an opportunity to succeed despite their previous difficulties.

Students' Perception of School Context #4:
Treatment of subjects by school personnel deteriorated after their problems began.

Intervening Condition

- Perceived unjust treatment of the subjects.

Action/Interaction

- Subjects could articulate incidents of perceived unjust treatment without hesitation.
- Subjects were very specific in relating incidents.

Consequence

- Subjects felt that unjust treatment led to an escalation of their problems and a decline in relationships with school personnel.

The Phenomenon: Perceptions of Punishment and Consequences

The phenomenon, student’s perception of punishment and consequences emerged from the synthesis of three contexts. Table 8 lists the aforementioned phenomenon as well as the three contexts from which the students’ perception of punishment and consequences phenomenon emerged.
Table 8

The Phenomenon: Perceptions of Punishment and Consequences in Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phenomenon</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>perceptions of punishment and consequences</td>
<td>subjects' explanations of perceived treatment by school personnel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>subjects' reflections on the effects of punishments and consequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>subjects' insight into why school personnel behaved in the manner they did</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Listed below are the three contexts for the phenomenon of perceptions of punishment and consequences. The phenomenon and its features are a direct result of the axial coding process.

**Perceptions of Punishment and Consequences Context #1:**

Subjects' explanations of perceived treatment by school personnel.

Intervening Condition

- The ability of subjects to recall past treatment by school personnel and to reason why the personnel reacted the way that they did.

Action/Interaction

- Subjects reported various reasons for their treatment yet two of the reasons stood out.

Consequence
• Subjects perceived that they were singled out and received differentiated treatment that others.

• Subjects reported that they felt that their reputations preceded them.

Perceptions of Punishment and Consequences Context #2:

Subjects’ reflections on the effects of punishments and consequences.

Intervening Condition

• The maturity level of the subject.

• The subjects’ ability to reason and reflect deeply.

Action/Interaction

• Punishment was non-existent or ineffective.

• Neutrality with regard to effect of punishment

• Punishment led to escalation of behavior.

• Punishment and/or consequences better than the alternative.

Consequence

• Subjects’ behavior did not change.

• Subjects unsure as to the effectiveness of punishment and consequences.

• Subjects’ behavior escalated as a result of punishment and perceived in justice.

• Subjects continued their behavior as the consequences were better than the treatment that they were subjected to in class.
Perceptions of Punishment and Consequences Context #3:

Subjects insight into why they believe school personnel behaved in the manner that they did.

Intervening Condition

- Subjects’ maturity level and ability to reason beyond the obvious as well as the depth of their interaction with school personnel.

Action/Interaction

- Subjects were unable to discern why personnel reacted the way that they did.
- Subjects felt that the reactions of school personnel were a function of themselves (the subjects).
- The teacher’s need to be in control was discussed by subjects.
- Subjects reported that they felt that such reactions were related to the teachers’ perception of their moral purpose.

Consequence

- Subjects were naïve as to why school personnel reacted as they did and had a difficult time responding.
- Subjects felt that they had bought all of their problems and the reactions to those problems upon themselves.
- Subjects reported that the need for schools to control everything and everyone in an effort to create safe schools was the reason for the over reaction of some.
• Some subjects believed that school personnel try to justify their actions because of their sense of duty, holding students to a higher moral standard.

The Phenomenon of Students’ Advice to School Personnel

The phenomenon, students’ perceptions of what school should be, emerged from the synthesis of four contexts. Table 9 lists the aforementioned phenomenon as well as the four contexts from which the students’ perception of how school should be phenomenon emerged.

Table 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phenomenon</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>students’ advice to school personnel</td>
<td>subjects’ desire for school personnel to understand the need for consistent treatment of everyone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>subjects’ suggestion that school personnel need to listen equally to all students and to both sides.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>subjects’ belief that staff respecting everyone equally is important in creating better schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>subjects’ feelings that schools need to care for and about everyone.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Listed below are the four contexts for the phenomenon of student's advice to school personnel. The phenomenon and its features are a direct result of the axial coding process.

**Students' Advice to School Personnel Context #1:**

**Subjects' desire for school personnel to understand the need for consistent treatment of everyone.**

**Intervening Condition**
- The subject's past school experiences.

**Action/Interaction**
- Subjects felt that they had been unfairly treated, even labeled.
- Subjects desired equal and consistent treatment of all students.

**Consequence**
- Unfair treatment led to further poor choices regarding behavior.
- No cliques or special groups would lead to an atmosphere conducive to all students.

**Students' Advice to School Personnel Context #2:**

**Subjects' suggestions that school personnel need to listen equally to all students and to both sides.**

**Intervening Condition**
- Subjects' daily interactive experiences with school personnel.

**Action/Interaction**
- Subjects report that no one ever listens to their side of the story.
Subjects report that some students “do the same things they do,” and when the subjects question why, the others “get away with it”, they are disciplined.

Consequences

- Frustration levels of subjects escalate, as does their behavior.
- Subjects again feel singled out and treated differently.

Students’ Advice to School Personnel Context #3:

Subjects’ belief that staff respecting everyone equally is important in creating better schools.

Intervening Condition

- Past experiences with school personnel

Action/Interaction

- Subjects reported lack of respect by teachers for students. “How can they expect us to respect them if they don’t have to respect us?”
- Good teachers respect their students.

Consequence

- Lack of respect leads to more student disrespect.
- Students respect and work for teachers who show them the same courtesy.

Students’ Advice to School Personnel Context #4:

Subjects’ feelings that schools should care for and about everyone.

Intervening Condition
• Students view of their school environment

Action/Interaction

• Subjects report that they will work for those who in turn show that they care for their students.

• Subjects want to teachers to care about them and their problems.

  "Good teachers have personality."

Consequence

• Subjects will cooperate with and work for teachers who care.

• Subjects equate a good teacher with a caring teacher.

This concludes the section explaining the axial coding process employed in this study. The axial coding process revealed the causal condition “attendance at school of each subject.” The development of each subsequent phenomenon was directly related to the causal condition. During this process, three phenomena resulted from the original three categories, as each category is the central idea to which a set of actions is related. In the later stages of the axial coding process, the de-contextualized data was re-contextualized in an analysis of each phenomenon. The three original phenomena were analyzed by identifying the “context” of each, the “intervening condition” of each context, the “action/interaction relating to the phenomenon, and the “consequence” of the action/interaction. At the conclusion of the axial coding process the resulting data were re-examined in an attempt to discover information not originally apparent. Such microanalysis led to the discovery of several interrelationships between the phenomena.
Selective Coding

Strauss and Corbin (1998) define selective coding as “the process of integrating and refining the theory” (p. 143). In the process of selective coding, the researcher integrates the major categories that have emerged from data analysis and integrates them to form a larger theoretical theme or theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The integration and macro analysis of the data in this study has resulted in the development of such a theory.

The theory that developed via the analysis of the data in this study and the interrelationships that exist between the data comprise this section of this study. The findings from analysis of the data and their interrelationships are presented through a story line. The resulting story line emerged from analyses that took place in the axial coding process and focuses on the three phenomena. In describing the storyline in this manner, formulation of a grounded theory is allowed.

Contained in the following storyline is the context of each phenomenon. Concepts related to the context of the phenomena are identified in **bold** to assist the reader in the analysis of said story line. The story line and the interrelationships of the phenomena are presented in narrative form in the following section: “At-Risk Students’ Perceptions of Their School Experience.”

At-Risk Students’ Perceptions of Their School Experience

Students view school and those associated with school based on several different types of perceptions, some of which are formed relatively early in their school lives. These perceptions influence several facets of their school experience, but most seem to
influence their behavior and their responses to the consequences resulting from the behavior.

The subjects of this study report that generally their first perceptions of school were mostly positive. At-risk students' recollections range from their reports of being scared and afraid to leave home, to those who had neutral feelings and didn't really care about going to school one way or the other. Most however, recall being very excited about attending school and viewed school attendance as important. Most want to learn how to read or learn to read better and understand that going to school is the first step in the process of growing up. In the minds of most children, they liked and enjoyed their initial school experience as well as liking and respecting their first teachers. Generally students' initial school experiences are perceived to be positive.

At-risk students have various perceptions of when their school related problems first began and who or what caused their school related problems. All students can trace the onset of their school related problems to a specific event. Some students recall that their problems began as early as third grade while others said that their problems didn’t develop until as late as the ninth grade. Many students however describe their problems as beginning between the fifth and seventh grades, the time all face the time of adolescence and all of its changes.

When at-risk students report the causes of their school related problems, these perceived causes also vary to a great degree but all subjects traced the onset of their problems to a specific event. When asked their thoughts and perceptions about these causes, some students report, myself. They feel that they are directly responsible for the
onset of their problems. It is their actions and attitudes that they feel cause their problems. Others blame their families as responsible parties. They feel that such things as divorce and separation and their reactions to such, cause them to act out at school. They lose the stability that they have grown accustomed to at home and as they feel they can’t control their parents, they choose to act out at school. Many at-risk students feel that their teachers and school rules are the cause of their problems and that their behaviors are a direct result of the way they are treated at school. When they perceive they are being treated unjustly, they react to this alleged unjust treatment with overt actions and behaviors of their own. Students relate their experiences believing that each experience is unique and also relate that their perception of the significant adults in their lives changed as a result of their school related problems.

When at-risk students are asked about their feelings of school at the onset of their problems, their answers vary. Students express feelings that are negative toward school and school personnel while others remain neutral and report that they continued to view the school as being fine but still nothing special. A majority of students however recall that even after the onset of their problems and their original perceptions of injustice that they still had positive feeling toward school in general and even though they had had a poor experience they felt that school was still a place they needed to be. They report believing that their problems would be left behind them and that they would be given an opportunity to succeed despite their previous difficulties.

Once their school related problems began, student recollections of how they were treated are nearly unanimous. At-risk students perceive being labeled as different
and report that they are picked on, blamed by their teachers and other school personnel for everything, and unjustly treated. These students feel that they are constantly watched and singled out amongst their peers. The frustration of always being wrong generally escalates their problems and leads to a decline in the relationships with school personnel. The general perception of at-risk students is that their treatment by school personnel deteriorated after their problems began and no matter what they did they couldn’t rid themselves of their reputation.

As a result of the behaviors that students choose and display, they face the punishment and consequences of their actions. As a result of these punishments and consequences, at-risk students develop perceptions of punishments and consequences. These perceptions are all related and range from students explanations of their treatment, to their thoughts about the effects of punishments and consequences, and their explanations of personnel behaviors or why they felt teachers and others reacted to their problems they way they did.

In recalling past treatment by school personnel, at-risk students again are nearly unified when discussing their explanations of their treatment by school personnel. Most had little trouble recalling past treatment and why they believe personnel reacted the way that they did. While more that one perception becomes evident in their responses, two reasons for their treatment stand out. These youngsters feel that they are singled out and because they are singled out they are considered different. As a result of being singled out, they earn a reputation. Due to this reputation, students perceive that they receive differentiated treatment and get more
severe, repeated consequences than do other students. Their reputation then precedes them to the next level as does their perception of differentiated treatment.

The reflections on the effects of punishments and consequences by at-risk students seem to depend upon the maturity level of the student and their ability to reason and reflect deeply. Some report that in their case punishment was non-existent or ineffective and as a result student behavior did not change. Other students report a kind of neutrality with regard to the effect of punishment. These students are unsure as to the effectiveness of school related punishment and consequences. Another group of at-risk students recall that punishment led to an escalation of their behavior. These students feel that as a result of school related punishment, an even greater feeling of injustice resulted and due to this perceived injustice, students escalated their behavior. A final group of at-risk students report that in their case, the punishment and/or consequences are better than the alternative. These students perceive such injustice in the classroom that they continued to act out as they perceived that the consequences were better than the treatment that they were subjected to in class.

Students' insight into why they believe school personnel behaved in the manner that they did also provides some interesting information. The ability of at-risk students to reflect upon this idea is depended upon their maturity level and ability to reason beyond the obvious as well as the depth of their interaction with school personnel. When discussing these ideas, student answers vary as a result of the above. Some students are unable to discern why personnel reacted the way that they did. Their inability to come up with any thoughts regarding this is seemingly due to naivety.
and as a result they experienced difficulty responding to any great degree. Some at-risk students feel that the reactions of school personnel are a function of themselves (the students). Teachers and other school personnel deal with them the way that they do because of who they are. These students perceive that they had brought all of their problems and the reactions to those problems, by school personnel, upon themselves. As a result, they can only reason that they are to blame. Other at-risk students discuss that they feel that it is teachers' need to feel in control that predicates their reactions to student behavior. These students perceive that the need for schools to control everything and everyone in an effort to create safe schools is the reason for the over-reaction of some school personnel to their behaviors. A final group of students in this study report that they feel that the actions of school personnel are related to teachers' perceptions of their moral purpose. This group discusses how teachers and others justify their actions by claiming it is their duty. These same students feel that they are held to a higher moral standard than are other students because of their past difficulties and the teachers' duty to change them.

When discussing their perceptions of what school should be, at-risk students' insight emerges in four specific areas. These students' reflections are once again predicated on their varied school experiences and the depth of their understanding. However, every student had some strong feeling regarding this area.

One of the most reoccurring concepts brought forward by at-risk students is their desire for school personnel to understand the need for consistent treatment of everyone. These students feel that they have been treated unfairly often throughout
their school careers and have been labeled, resulting in further unfair treatment which in turn leads to further poor choices regarding behavior. At-risk students desire and need to experience consistent treatment of all students for like offenses. Schools and classrooms with no cliques or special groups would lead to an atmosphere conducive to all students and a place they would enjoy attending without fear.

Another suggestion of at-risk students is that school personnel listen equally to all students and to both sides of every story or incident. These students report that no one ever listens to their side of the story. As a result, their frustration levels escalate as does their behaviors. They feel that other students involved do the same things they do, with no consequences. When these at-risk students question school personnel why the others are allowed to get away with it, they report that they are disciplined for asking. Once again they feel singled out and treated differently. If schools are to be safe places where all students are given the opportunity to learn and succeed, these perceived injustices must end, they report.

Respect for everyone is another need that at-risk students feel very strongly about. These students report a general lack of respect by teachers toward students. “How can they expect us to respect them if they don’t have to respect us,” is a common outcry of troubled students in this study. Teachers’ lack of respect leads to more student disrespect, they say. These same students are unified in reporting that good teachers respect their students and as a result students respect and work for teachers who show them the same courtesy.
A final concept that at-risk students perceive that schools need to adhere to is that of schools being environments that care about everyone. Students feel that they want teachers to care about them and their problems. These same students report that they will work for and cooperate with those who in turn show that they care for their students. Subjects equate a good teacher with a caring teacher. “Good teachers have personality,” resounded in their reports.

The story told during the selective coding process exposed interrelationships between the phenomena. Final analysis of data during the selective coding process resulted in the emergence in a core category. This core category is labeled “At-Risk Students’ Perceptions of Their School Experience.” This core category is related to the three phenomena that were examined in the process of axial coding. Once the core category has emerged from the analysis of the phenomena, the phenomena are now referred to as subcategories. The relationship between the core category and its subcategories (phenomena) requires this change in terminology. The core category and its interrelationships with the aforementioned subcategories then form the structure of the narrative report.

Core Category

The core category is base upon the interrelationships between the subcategories that emerged from the selective coding process. The core category is related to the following three subcategories: (a) students’ perceptions of school, (b) perceptions of punishment and consequences, (c) students’ advice to school personnel. These three categories are also related to each other.
Subcategories

The interrelationships between the subcategories are briefly discussed under the heading of each subcategory. The first subcategory to be discussed is “Students’ Perceptions of School.”

Students’ Perceptions of School. Subjects in the study for the most part reported that they first perceived school in a positive manner and that they knew that attending school was a necessary step in the process of growing up. Even after they begin to experience school related problems they still perceived school in general in a positive light. Their perceptions of school changed as they experienced more problems and the treatment they received as a result of their behavior. Their perceptions of teachers and other school personnel also changed therefore, it appears that as their perceptions of school and school personnel changed so did their perceptions of the consequences related to their behavior. Thus there is a direct connection between “Students’ Perceptions of School” and “Students’ Perceptions of Punishment and Consequences.” It is also reasonable to surmise that as a result of the change in students’ perceptions of school, these students would have some new perceptions about how they feel school could be more inviting. Therefore another direct link exists between the subcategory “Students’ Perceptions of School” and “Students’ Advice to School Personnel.” How students view having been treated in the past, has a profound effect on how they wish they could be treated.

Students’ Perceptions of Punishment and Consequences. Subjects’ perceptions of the effectiveness of punishment and behavioral consequences brought about the
subcategory "Students' Perceptions of Punishment and Consequences" which directly linked to the subcategory "Students' Perception of School" for the reasons mentioned in the preceding discussion. There is also a direct link between the subcategory "Students' Perceptions of Punishment and Consequences" and the subcategory "Students' Advice to School Personnel" as the manner and the tone in which they were treated directly effected their perceptions of the utopian school. Subjects felt they had been singled out, disrespected, etc. and as a result felt that schools should make sure that this doesn’t happen to others.

**Students' Advice to School Personnel.** The subcategory "Students Advice to School Personnel" is related to the other subcategories for the reasons mentioned in the preceding discussions.

**Summary**

The data collected in this study, obtained through the semi-structure interview process, were subjected to the qualitative procedures of open, axial, and selective coding. The findings of this chapter were a direct result of these analyses. Several themes emerged from the open coding process, which were then de-contextualized into data segments at the onset of the axial coding process. The micro analysis which occurred during later stages of the axial coding process resulted in a re-contextualizing of the relationships that emerged. As the axial process concluded, the procedures identified three phenomena from the data as well as contextual components of each phenomenon.

The use of selective coding on the re-contextualized data made up the final stage of data analysis. This process employs a macro analysis of the data. This macro analysis
in narrative form allowed the emergence of a "core category" from the phenomena that were identified in the axial coding process. During this stage of the analysis the phenomena are referred to as "subcategories" of the "core category" as they are directly related to the "core category". The interrelationship of these "subcategories", then form the basis for the grounded theory. The grounded theory was then brought forth in the form of a narrative report. This narrative report occurred at the conclusion of the selective coding process and is titled, "At-Risk Students' Perceptions of Their School Experience".

In the following chapter, the findings of this study are summarized. The findings of the open, axial, and selective coding processes were included in the summary. Beginning with "Broad Spectrum Analysis," the findings were examined to answer the grand tour question of this study: "What kinds of perceptions do selected "at-risk" adolescents have regarding their interactions with school personnel?" Chapter Five concludes with postulations, implications for practitioners, recommendations regarding further research.
CHAPTER FIVE

Interpretive Summary, Postulations, and Implications

Introduction

The process of qualitative research is inductive and not as structured as other research methodologies. The ability of the researcher to interact with the data and come to a new understanding of a phenomenon is the strength of the qualitative research paradigm. Chapter Five summarizes the findings from Chapter Four of this qualitative study. This summation includes a broad spectrum analysis of the core category “At-Risk Students’ Perceptions of Their School Experience” as well as the three subcategories of (a) Students’ Perceptions of School, (b) Perceptions of Punishment and Consequences, and (c) Students’ Advice to School Personnel.” Throughout this summary, the phenomena will continue to be referred to as subcategories since each is directly related to the core category. This too, allows the consumer to move away from the micro-analysis which led to the discovery of the phenomena and toward a more macro view; a view that utilizes their original labeling as categories. The difference is that this macro view acknowledges the interrelationships between all categories that emerged from the analysis procedures that the data were subjected to.

The first subdivision of this chapter, Broad-Spectrum Analysis, describes the utilization of a micro-to-macro perspective of the analyzed data in the formulation of a grounded theory. This section ends with a discussion of the interrelations of the categories that emerged and their connection to the literature. This discussion will then be followed by a re-examination of the grand tour question and sub-questions that frame
the study. The broad spectrum analysis of the qualitative data revealed one postulation from the findings reported in Chapter Four. The section, Postulation, contain this postulation and its explanation. The general implications that this study might have on practitioners are contained in the section, General Implications of the Findings, while recommendations for practitioners as well as recommendations for further research are discussed in the section, Recommendations, near the conclusion of this chapter. A description of the qualitative procedures employed during this study begins the following summary.

Summary

Broad-Spectrum Analysis

The production of the grounded theory concerning "At-Risk Students’ Perceptions of Their School Experience," resulted from a synthesis of the analyses of the original qualitative data. This grounded theory is the final product of several analysis procedures including the qualitative processes of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding following the format suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The three categories that emerged from the axial coding process are the basis of the grounded theory for this study. A fourth category resulted from the selective coding process and encompassed the other three. This encompassing category is called the "core category" and for the purposes of this study is referred to as "At-Risk Students’ Perceptions of Their School Experience." The core category was important to this study as it was integrated with the following three subcategories: (a) Students’ Perceptions of School, (b) Perceptions of Punishment and Consequences, and (c) Students’ Advice to School
Personnel. Together these categories form the framework of the grounded theory that was presented in Chapter Four.

As data gathered from this study was analyzed, first in the micro perspective of axial coding stage, and then in the macro perspective of the selective coding phase, a grounded theory began to emerge. The grounded theory was further enhanced by reporting it via a narrative using thick, rich descriptions that afford the viewer an opportunity to examine the phenomenon in a manner not previously imagined. The perceptions of at-risk students with regard to school and how those perceptions affect their behavior and ultimately their success at school became apparent during this process of analysis. A broad spectrum view of the data, which was generated from the various analyses conducted during this study, revealed that how students perceive their school experiences and their related interactions with school personnel directly affect how they approach each day at school.

**Exploration of the Grand Tour and Sub-questions**

An analysis of the data collected from the interview process led to categorical relationships between the core category “At-Risk Students’ Perceptions of Their School Experience” and the three subcategories of (a) Students’ Perceptions of Schools, (b) Perceptions of Punishment and Consequences, and (c) Students’ Advice to School Personnel. In depth analysis of these categorical relationships and their components revealed a new perspective on the grand tour research question that framed this qualitative research design. This research question was:
• What kinds of perceptions do selected at-risk adolescents have regarding their interactions with school personnel?

For the purpose of this study, each subcategory was linked to a sub-question. The following refers to the sub-questions in a holistic manner that came directly from the qualitative processes of open, axial, and selective coding. This approach begins to develop a picture of how students' various perceptions of school affect their behavior at school and their interactions with school personnel. The first sub-question addresses students' perceptions of their school environment.

Are the students' perceptions of school related to their perceived treatment and subsequent difficulties? Subjects for this study were purposefully selected because they had experienced problems at school that eventually led to their subsequent treatment by a mental health professional. Their perceptions of school and school personnel change as they progressed through the system. Kids begin school with excitement and high hopes, hoping to make new friends and explore new things. As they progress through school various changes in situations occur in themselves, in their families, and at their schools. These changes adversely affect at-risk students causing them to alter their feelings about school and the adults associated with school. While many remain positive about school at the onset of their problems, their feelings change as they are constantly singled out and treated differently than are others. As their problems grow, so do their negative perceptions of how they are treated. At-risk students feel that once school related problems begin their ability to positively interact with school personnel deteriorates, as do their chances for any success in the school setting.
What emerging school related issues help to explain students’ behavior and stated needs? Data relating to this question centered around students’ perceptions of the punishment and consequences they receive for their behaviors. Many understand the need for school personnel to make school a safe place but are confused as to why others get away with the same behaviors they are punished for. At-risk students know why weapons aren’t allowed in schools and also understand why most schools have “zero-tolerance” toward fighting and other physically aggressive behaviors. What they don’t understand is why a chosen few get away with fighting and other negative behaviors, while they get punished for them. The subjects also reported that they understand why school personnel react the way that they do but they again feel that, because of their reputations, they are singled out and punished for nearly everything they do while other doing the same things are ignored. The subjects reported that this makes them even madder and tends to result in an escalation of their negative behaviors. As for the punishment or consequences they receive as a result of their actions, subjects report a variety of views. Most agree, however, that consequences are an ineffective deterrent. Often the consequences result in an escalation of behaviors while in some cases subjects reported that the consequences were better than being subjected to the treatments they received in the classroom.

Could adolescent perceptions be valuable to schools in developing a better understanding of meeting the needs of potentially troubled youth? More than any other category, the data analyzed in regards to “Students’ Advice to School Personnel” holds the key to schools becoming places where all students can learn. Subjects report the need
for school personnel to understand at-risk students’ need to experience the consistent treatment of everyone by school personnel. Don’t single people out, and if you are going to punish people for breaking a rule, make sure you punish everyone who breaks the rule. At-risk students suggest that school personnel take the time to listen to all sides of the story before passing judgment and ask that “they” not be the only ones judged. These students are also unified in their request for respect. They equate good teachers with teachers who show students the same respect that they expect. Want respect, give respect is their cry. The final suggestion that the subjects of this study gave is that schools need to become places that care about all kids. Cliques and special groups need to become memories and all students need to feel that they are cared for and cared about by all members of the school community.

In examining the previous sub-questions, one recognizes the interrelations of the components of each category. The Grand Tour Question, “What kinds of perceptions do selected at-risk adolescents have regarding their interactions with school personnel?” cannot be answered acceptably unless the core category and its three subcategories are examined as a whole. This approach then allows for discovery of the interrelations that in combination lead to the construct of the significance of the perceptions of at-risk students.

Broad-Spectrum Analysis Related to the Literature. Data obtained from the semi-structured interview process has been re-contextualized and examined to answer the three sub-questions and the grand tour question that frame this study. The data has support in the existing literature regarding the creation of school climate and safe schools. Subjects’
perceptions of school align with the writings of Good (1987), Klinger and Vaughn (1996), Rosenthal and Jacobson (1967), Tauber (1997), Wager (1963) and others. As students continue to be subjected to negatives and made to feel less than their peers, personal expectations and values are lessened to and to make up for the lack of positive strokes, poor behavior tends to escalate.

The at-risk students' perceptions of punishment and consequences can also be substantiated in the literature. Garbarino, (1997) and Hart, Brassard, and Germaine (1987) as well as Hart (1987), Hyman (1990), and Hyman and Perrone (1998) all write of the ineffectiveness of most school related consequences and that most punishment meted out by schools and school personnel usually leads to an escalation in behavior, with some students even becoming vindictive as a result.

A great deal of the current literature supports the data collected regarding how at-risk students feel school should be. Students' need for a caring environment, a place where they are respected and listened to is borne out by Aronson, (2000), Ayers (1997), Benard (1991), Gilbert and Robins (1998), Glasser (1990), Green, (1997), Hanson and Childs (1998), Hawkins (1995), Jalongo (1991), Lantieri (1996), Meredith and Evans (1990), Oregon Department of Education (2000), Peterson (1998), Tanaka and Reid (1997). Perhaps Schaps, Schaeffer, and McDonnell (2001) best confirm the findings of this study, when in their article the concluded that “...students will care more about a school’s goals and values when that school effectively cares for them; Moreover, when they feel connected to the school and the people in it, they learn better” (p. 2).
Postulation

Analysis of the data relating to this study has resulted in the production of one major postulation. This postulation has been labeled "The Relationship That Exists Between, Students' Perceptions of School and Their School-Related Behaviors." This theme is a result of a holistic analysis of the data collected during the processes of open, axial, and selective coding.

Relationship between Students' Perceptions of School and Their School-Related Behaviors

It is apparent in the literature and borne out by this study that most students begin their school experience with a positive perception about school and teachers. Somewhere along the line, however, this perception changes for many. This perceptive change may result from changes in the students' family structure, changes in friendships, or perceived changes in their ability to interact at school. When student behavior changes at school, it should be a warning sign to school personnel that greater problems could result if these initial behavior changes are not addressed in a positive way. Students who may not initially be at-risk can become so very quickly if not given the attention they need during certain personal crisis situations. These students need to be made to feel that they are cared for and that they are not different than others. They need to experience the same treatment as others and need to be made to feel that they are not being singled out.

Students who feel that they are stereotyped, picked on, or given reputations report that they feel that their ability to interact at school with school personnel deteriorates because of their labels. This leads to an escalation of behavior and feeling of
hopelessness. Their perceptions of school and everything about school quickly turns negative, and as the Pygmalion Effect suggests, the at-risk students begin to live up to the expectations of those who have labeled them.

Schools and school personnel must be aware of the power they possess in the lives of young people. One single negative interaction can affect a child for life as it can make or break their perception of education. From the data collected in this study, students’ perceptions of school and school personnel directly affect their subsequent behaviors.

General Implications of the Findings

Analyses of the data obtained in this study resulted in two general implications for practitioners and other school decision makers. These implications need to be studied and implemented if schools are to successfully meet the needs of at-risk students. These implications have been labeled: (a) Rethinking School-Related Punishments and Consequences and (b) Reevaluation of School Priorities.

Rethinking School-Related Punishments and Consequences

The subjects of this study had some interesting insight into the application and use of punishment by school personnel. They understand the need for a safe and orderly school environment, discussing school violence issues and shootings. What they report confuses and angers them is why some people get away with the same behaviors for which they are punished. Again, many feel that such is due to their reputations and having been singled out because of past incidents. This leads to more frustration and an escalation in behavior.
The students reported that school punishment as it now exists is ineffective and rarely has caused them to alter their behavior. If current consequences employed by schools do anything, they again cause an escalation in negative behavior. Some subjects even reported that the consequences given them were better than the treatment they were subjected to in the classroom therefore they chose punishment over class time. This result is hardly an effective use of punishment and consequences and surely not what schools intend when applying such.

The data resulting from this study suggests that students perceive the need for discipline to be applied in a consistent manner and that consequences be developed that have meaning to all students. Punishment cannot be applied to the same group all the time and neither can rewards. All students need to feel wanted and important, not constantly picked on and ignored. Injustice among students by school personnel must end if at-risk students are to have a chance at success.

Reevaluation of School Priorities

At the present time there is a big push by the federal government as well as many state and local agencies to increase test scores. “No Student Left Behind,” is President Bush’s current battle cry regarding education but will throwing more money at schools in an attempt to raise their “test scores” really make a difference? The data collected from this study says “No.” At-risk students make up a large group of students nationwide and according to Maslow’s (1962) hierarchy of needs they aren’t going to care very little about raising their test scores. Maslow posited that a person cannot achieve the upper
levels of the hierarchy, such as the need to achieve, until the needs of the lower level, feeling loved and wanted, are met.

Eckman (2001) reported that our current president and legislature have also failed to grasp this basic premise, observing “We must help our legislators understand that education must be for the whole child – the body, the mind, and the spirit” (p. 3). Not only do our political leaders need to understand this axiom, so do school leaders and other school personnel. School priorities need to be re-evaluated and teachers trained so that truly no student is left behind. Students need to feel respected and cared for. Teachers need to be given the skills to deal with student issues as they may be the only stable adult in the life of a child. In order for our schools to truly succeed at “leaving no student behind”, we must change our priorities and how we approach all students. The results of this study point directly toward this issue and were summed up best by one of the subjects who reported, “When a teacher cares about me, I care about them. I will work for teachers who care.”

The following is summative postulation regarding the synthesis of the data resulting from this qualitative study: At-risk student perceptions of their school experience directly affect subsequent school related behaviors, attitudes, and perceived chances for their success.

**Recommendations**

Several recommendations have also resulted from the findings of this study. These recommendations are divided into two sections: (a) Recommendations for Practitioners, and (b) Recommendations for Future Studies. The first section describes
recommendations for those wishing to utilize the findings of this study in their current occupations.

**Recommendations for Practitioners.**

The results of this study and these students’ stories provide invaluable insight into at-risk students’ perceptions. Educators should pause to re-examine their ideas as to what the place called school should be and how those for whom schools are intended—the students—are to be treated. Clearly, subjects in this study understood the importance of an education; they merely had trouble getting one in the environment to which they felt they were subjected. Specific recommendations include:

- Provision of mandatory professional development regarding the understanding of the value systems of at-risk students to all school personnel,
- redefining district and building goals, taking into consideration the environmental needs of at-risk students,
- readjusting and rewriting district and school policies as well as procedures, addressing the differentiated treatment of at-risk students,
- ridding school of the biases and stereotypes held by teachers and administrators toward at-risk students and all students in general,
- the termination of teachers and other school personnel who will not or cannot buy into the creation of a caring community, where all people feel valued.

By doing away with old ideas and prejudices of what a student should be and how schools should operate, all students may be given an opportunity to learn and to succeed in an environment where everyone cares and a true learning community exists.
Recommendations for Further Research.

Researchers interested in generating successful school programs should direct their studies to focused investigations on the crucial relationships among students, parents, and school personnel. Specific areas in need of further research are:

- Study the perceptions of the parents of at-risk students of their children’s school experience,
- research the perceptions of “normal” students regarding their school experience,
- examine the indicators of problematic school culture from the mental health professionals’ perspectives,
- analyses of the achievement results and student satisfaction comparing traditional schools to those with early intervention programs targeting at-risk students,
- obtain student perceptions about how they think schools should operate to better meet their needs,
- research teacher quality from the students’ perspective,
- study the role of resiliency in the success of at-risk students,
- examine the impact of professional counseling and the success rate of the at-risk student, and
- longitudinal study of these subjects examining their school and lifelong successes given their school experiences.
If we are to truly understand what it takes for all children to become successful, we must also take into account what and how they feel. To ignore our children and continue to try to fix our schools with canned programs and government mandates is a recipe for continued failure. If, however, we learn to understand students better and examine what we do from their perspective, the higher likelihood there is that our schools will be able to meet their needs, allow them to achieve, and prepare them to become contributing members of our society.

Endnote

For far too long the voices of at-risk students have been neglected. As stated earlier in this study there is paucity in the research regarding the perceptions of at-risk students' and all students for that matter, and the place called school. Whether this is because schools refuse to allow such research or because researchers feel that it is not an area of viable research, this study does not propose to answer. This study does however conclude the need for further research in this area so that these voices no longer remain unheard and ignored.

As borne out by the results of this study, the perspectives of students can be an invaluable source of information. The information that might be garnered from the perspectives of students may be the key to our finding a way to stem the “all too common incidence” of school violence in our world. As stated by Sorenson (2000) “Reality is negotiable but perception is rock solid.” We must take how our students feel into account when deciding on what is best for them. Glasser (2001) bears this out when he writes,
“If we do not improve our relationships, we will have little success in reducing school related problems.” (p. 1)

It is time for schools to redefine their role in our society. As more and more families struggle to make ends meet, schools may be the only stable environment to which children are subjected. School personnel must then care for and about all of our children. They must believe and practice as St. Francis Xavier professed, “They won’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care.”

In order for our future generations to become contributing members of society each student must feel valued, needed, and that he or she is as equally important as the next student. So that we may accomplish this task, a great shift in priorities must occur. We can no longer operate schools that mimic the factories of the 1890’s. One size no longer fits all; the days of the cookie cutter education are over. Those entrusted with the education of our children not willing to put aside archaic beliefs and change their ways, need to go the way of the dinosaur. If they don’t become extinct soon, our educational system may.
REFERENCES


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.


Dedman, Bill. (2000, October 15). Bullying, tormenting often led to revenge in cases studied. *Chicago Sun Times, [On-line]: www.suntimes.com/shoot/case15.html*


Oregon Department of Education. (2000). *Keeping kids connected: How schools and teachers can help all students feel good about school... and why that matters*. Salem, OR: Oregon Department of Education.


APPENDICES
Appendix A: Letters
12/6/01

Dear Parent:

I am asking your assistance and the assistance of your child in regard to a study that I am conducting in order to complete my Doctoral Dissertation in Educational Leadership at the University of Montana. This study will add important information to the existing literature regarding the needs of adolescent students and the problems they face at school. I hope to use the information gained from your student and others to formulate recommendations about how to make school a more accepting, safe place for all children.

I am proposing to conduct interviews of selected adolescent students, who have been identified by Lynn Pillman, L.P.C., from her case files, as children who may have experienced social and/or behavioral difficulties at school. Each interview will take 30 to 45 minutes and will take place in Lynn’s office or the location of your choice. Your child will be interviewed, with Lynn present, and either your child or Lynn will be allowed to stop the interview at any time either feels that it needs to be stopped.

As with any study of this type confidentiality of the subjects is of the essence. All personal information gleaned from these interviews will be held in strictest confidence at all times. There are two governing bodies in place to ensure this confidentiality; my Doctoral Dissertation Committee and The Institutional Review Board at The University of Montana. As you can see by the attached consent forms, the Institutional Review Board has given my permission to complete this study.

At the conclusion of this study, I will be most happy to provide you with a brief summary of the findings should you choose to participate.

I hope you will seriously consider allowing your child to participate in this study. If you wish to have your child or if you would like more information about the study, please call me at any of the phone numbers listed on the attached card. Once we have talked and you have agreed to participate, I will need you to read and complete the Subject Information and Consent Form attached and your student needs to read and complete the attached Assent Form. The completed forms can then be returned to Lynn, to myself, or brought to the interview. Lynn and I will work together to schedule interviews as soon as possible after your agreeing to take part.

Thank you in advance for your consideration with regard to this very important project.

Sincerely,

Glen A. Johnson
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Educational Leadership
The University of Montana
Appendix B: Interview Protocol
Student Interviewee Demographic Information Sheet

Interview Date: ___________  Interview #: ___________

Time: ________________

Subject Gender: __________

Age: ________________

Ethnicity: ______________

Current Grade Level: ______

Length of Interview: ______

Subject Code: ____________
Standard Interview Introductory Statements

The following opening statements will guide each interview.

- Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. Before we begin I would like to explain the survey process and how our session will unfold.
- I will be asking a series of general questions and taking notes of your answers as we proceed. You will be referred to only as “S” for subject in my notes.
- All the information from this interview will be confidential, including your statements, my responses, and all of the notes that I take. At no time will you be referred to by name or by any other description that would allow a reader of this research to identify you in this study. Such confidentiality is protected by myself, my doctoral dissertation chair, and as a requirement of the Institutional Review Board at the University of Montana.
- Your name will not be known to anyone except Lynn and me.
- Direct quotes used will not be name specific and all names used or referred to will be changed to protect each person’s privacy and anonymity.
- There are no expectations as to how you will answer these questions and there are no incorrect answers. The goal of each question is to assist us in understanding the perceptions you have with regard to your school related problems.
- Lastly, please remember that you can stop this interview at anytime or take a break whenever you feel the need to do so.

Do you understand what I have just read and do you have any questions before we begin?
**Student Interview Protocol**

1) How did you feel about school when you first started?

2) Describe what was happening when you first began to experience problems at school.

3) At the time that your problems began, how did you feel about your school and your teachers?

4) After you began experiencing problems at school, how did your teachers and principals treat you?

5) Did you feel that you were treated the same as the others in your school?

6) Do you feel that the consequences (punishment) given to you because of your behavior made a difference in (changed) how you acted at school?

7) Thinking back on your behavior at school, why do you think your teachers and others reacted the way that they did?

8) Given your experience, what do you think administrators and teachers could do to create schools that are better, more welcoming places for all students?

I would like to thank you again for your participation in this interview. Remember that everything that was said will be kept in the strictest confidence and that your name will not be revealed in any of the reports of this research. Your patience and assistance is appreciated very much.
Interview Data Recording Form

Interview # ____________________  Date: ____________________

Page ___ of ___

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Interviewer’s Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Field Journal Page
Field Memo

DATE:

INTERVIEW CROSS REFERENCE

Interview Date: ____________

Subject Code: ______________

Interview #: _______________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Emerging Trend</th>
<th>Reflective Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D: Consent Forms
RELEASE FORM

Permission to use Quotations

The intent of this form is to obtain permission to use direct quotations from the semi-structured interview(s) conducted as part of a research study regarding student perceptions of school and school personnel conducted by Glen A. Johnson.

Subject’s Name:___________________________________________________________

The undersigned (subject of the study and originator of the quotation) or his/her parent or guardian hereby grants permission for Glen A. Johnson to utilize quotations by the undersigned to be reported in his research study regarding student perceptions of school and school personnel and in any subsequent publications resulting from said study.

The anonymity of the subject, his/her parents or guardian, the school attended, and city of residence is insured and all personal information will remain confidential at all times.

____________________________________  ___________________________________
(Signature of Subject)                (Date)

____________________________________  ___________________________________
(Signature of Parent or Guardian)     (Date)
ASSENT FORM FOR MINORS

Project Title: “At-Risk Students’ Perceptions of Their School Experience”.

How do you feel about your time at school?

Project Director:
Glen A. Johnson
1739 Florence Avenue
Butte, MT 59701
Phone: (406) 782-2513 (h); (406) 685-3471 (o); (406) 491-7616 (cell)

This form may contain words that are new to you. If you read any words that you don’t understand, please ask me for help.

I have asked your parents to allow you to be in a study about schools. This form will help to answer your questions about the study. The form also gives me your permission to ask you questions for the study.

Why you? : By talking to students like you, I hope to learn more about ways to help all students become “happy” students.

What will you have to do? : You will be asked seven questions. There are no right or wrong answers. Answer them the best way you can.

Is there any danger in this project? : There is no risk of injury. If you get scared or too sad answering my questions, you can stop any time.

What will this project do for you? : You may not get anything out of this project. By sharing your thoughts with us though, other students may have a better life at school.

Who will know about your answers? : Your name will not be used at all. Your answers will only be identified by letter (S1) and all notes will be for my use only. Only the therapist and I will know what you say.

Can you quit if you want to? : You can quit anytime you wish. Just tell me that you do not want to be part of the study any longer.

What if you have other questions: If you ever have questions call me at the number above or call your therapist.

Permission: I have read and understand this form. I wish to take part in this study and know that I can quit at any time. I will be given a copy of this form after I sign it.

___________________________
Printed Name of Student

___________________________
Student’s Signature          _______________________
                                Date

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
SUBJECT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Project Title: “At-Risk Students’ Perceptions of Their School Experience”.

Study Director:
Glen A. Johnson
1739 Florence Avenue
Butte, MT 59701
Phone: (406) 782-2513 (h); (406) 685-3471 (o); (406) 491-7616 (cell)

Study Team:
Dr. Roberta Evans, Interim Dean
Department of Education
The University of Montana
Missoula, MT 59812
Phone: (406) 243-5877

This consent form may contain words that are new to you. If you read any words that are not clear to you, please ask the person who gave you this form to explain them to you.

Purpose of the Project: Your child is being asked to take part in this research study due to their unique experiences in the school setting. This study will attempt to use the perceptions of students such as yours, who have had social and behavioral problems at school, to better understand why students think and react the way that they do. It is hoped that through this research knowledge might be gained that will assist parents, teachers, and counselors in making schools better places for all students.

Procedures: If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, he/she will be asked a series of open-ended questions about their school experiences (see attached interview protocol for the content of the questions to be asked). The interview session will be held at the office of your child’s counselor, in her presence, and should take about 45 minutes to complete. Your child will remain anonymous and all personal information will remain in strictest confidence.

Risk: The only risk involved in participating in this study might possibly be that of your child’s revisiting their past. Recalling memories of experiences that may have been less than pleasurable may bring about some emotional discomfort. For this reason, as stated earlier, your child’s counselor will be in attendance at the interview session. Either the counselor or your child may stop the interview at any time, as it is not the intent of this project to cause undue stress or emotional pain for any subject.

Although there is little or no risk involved in this project, the following liability statement is required in all University of Montana Consent Forms:
In the event that your child is injured as a result of this research, you should individually seek appropriate medical treatment. If the injury is caused by the negligence of the University or any of its employees, you may be entitled to reimbursement or compensation pursuant to the Comprehensive State Insurance Plan established by the Department of Administration under the authority of M.C.A., Title 2, Chapter 9. In the event of a claim for such injury, further information may be obtained from the University's Claims representative or University Legal Counsel.

**Benefits:** Although neither your child nor yourself may benefit from taking part in this study, future children may. It is again the intent of this study to better understand why some children react the way that they do to certain school situation. Upon completion of the study recommendations may result that could prevent other children such as yours from experiencing similar difficulties.

**Confidentiality:** Your identity and the identity of your child will be kept in strictest confidence. All data obtained will be stored in a secure environment, as will all signed consent forms. If the results of this study are written in any journals or presented at any meetings, your name and the name of your child will not be used.

**Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal:** Your decision to allow your child's participation in this study is strictly voluntary. You may withdraw your child at any time. Please notify the project director immediately should you choose to do so.

**Questions:** Should any questions regarding this study arise before, during, or after the initiation of this study, please call the research director at any time at any of the numbers listed previously in this document. If you have any questions with regard to your rights or the rights of your child as a research subject, please contact Dr. Tony Rudbach at the University of Montana Research Office, (406) 243-6670.

**Statement of Consent:** I have read the above description of this research study. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I have been assured that, a member of the research team will also answer future questions that may arise. I voluntarily agree to have my child take part in this study. I understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form.

(Printed name of subject)

(Printed name of Parent or Guardian)

(Signature of Parent or Guardian) Date