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## The Perspectives of Male Inmates Regarding Their K-12 Educational Experiences

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# The Perspectives of Male Inmates Regarding Their K-12 Educational Experiences

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
In  
Educational Administration

By

Shannon P. LaFargue

B.S. McNeese State University, 1991  
M.Ed. McNeese State University, 1993

August, 2007

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## Abstract

All school systems throughout the country serve students referred to as at risk. Research documents that these students are at a greater risk of dropping out of school due to characteristics that contribute to school disengagement. By exploring the perspectives of male inmates aged 18-30 regarding their educational experiences, this study's data illuminated how school personnel and the schooling process may theoretically contribute to negative outcomes such as incarceration.

The focus of the study was to identify commonalities and phenomena in relation to educational experiences, school engagement levels, deviant behavior, and school staff-student interactions as related to the at-risk student population. Interviews of a sample group of prisoners were utilized to gather rich data from their experiences. A qualitative/phenomenological research method was employed.

This study introduced a revised and expanded term to replace the *at-risk* term when describing students who are at risk of school failure. This new term is COPE (Children Of Promise in Education). The acronym COPEr will be used when referring to the individual student who is *at promise* for academic success. COPERs will be used when referring to multiple students of promise for academic success. Six themes emerged from the data analysis. The six themes were as follows: characteristics of the respondents as k-12 students, student-staff interaction, engagement, disengagement, negative outcomes, and reflection and advice.

An analysis of the themes is represented by quotes from the study's participants. This analysis allowed for the emergence of data that substantively contributes to the gap in the literature pertaining to a continued need for qualitative research examining the schooling experiences of at-risk youth, juvenile delinquents, high school dropouts, and, as in this study,

inmates. Few studies have examined the perspectives of inmates regarding their schooling experiences. Most research regarding inmates has examined correctional education within the prison system. After the findings of the study are revealed, the implications of the study are presented. Implications for school staff and student development through communication and positive interaction are addressed. Suggestions for future research related to positive academic and social development of COPers in the educational system are suggested.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

As someone who subscribes to the philosophy that all students can learn, I have increasingly become disenchanted with the static portrayals of students who drop out of high school. I have become critical of the way large high schools have become impersonal. I have become disheartened by the “business” of education and the result-driven methods of performance. If anything is that I found that the men in my study had a basic need to belong—to feel that their existence had meaning. The men had a tremendous desire to be surrounded by adults whom they could trust, even though at times they did not outwardly display that desire in a positive way. Their efforts to gain that trust did not always mesh with the way schools work. The men believed they were marginalized, but after getting to know them in depth “top to bottom,” I found that their reactions and interactions were in direct response to attempting to find a place of belonging, a place where their voice had meaning. The men knew the world from a particular vantage point; after experiencing the world from that point of view, one no longer “sees” from the margins or from within the marginalized culture but from the center of one’s own being. (Roussel, 2000. pp. 183-184)

Scholars are in general agreement that regardless of the causes, dropping out of high school is a national problem that has significant consequences for both the individual and society at large (Cassel, 2003; Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990). The multiplicity and complexity of the causes are difficult to define and analyze. However, we do know of the

possible negative outcomes that manifest from one' dropping out of school and being less educated. One of the negative outcomes associated with dropping out of high school is crime that may lead to incarceration. Not all dropouts become prisoners, but according to Harlow's (2003) national statistics, nearly 75% of state prison inmates, almost 59% of federal inmates, and 69% of jail inmates did not complete high school. Included in these percentages were inmates who did not complete high school and those who received a General Equivalency Diploma (GED). Further analysis of Harlow's statistics revealed that 40% of state prison inmates, 27% of federal inmates, and 47% of local jail inmates had not completed high school or its equivalent (GED) while only 18% of the general population, aged 18 or older, failed to attain high school graduation. Why does a high percentage of the prison population not complete high school? The present study focused on the perspectives of a sample of prison inmates in the Southwest Correctional Center regarding their educational experiences and set out to provide insight to this complex question.

Education can be an important variable in controlling or preventing crime. Can the educational process and its stakeholders provide early detection and necessary intervention to decrease the frequency of behavior detrimental to the student at risk of disengagement from the schooling process, thus reducing dropouts? Research suggests that this is indeed plausible. An analysis of The National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 concluded that the characteristics used to identify students at risk of school failure predict later outcomes strongly related to school failure (National Center of Education Statistics, 1995). Knowing the characteristics of these students is an important marker for identification, but understanding the student and their perceptions of the schooling experience as it relates to their needs or desires can provide indispensable data for effective intervention for all stakeholders in the educational



process. Understanding these particular students' needs, wants, or desires can help teachers in providing interaction and motivation conducive to school and society-defined success.

The present study reflectively examines the perspectives of inmates who dropped out of school. Why should society care about an individual who seemingly lacks the initiative to succeed in school and in society? Cassel (2003) suggested that society's absorption of the disengaged student who drops out of high school is detrimental to the economy. In describing the consequence to society where the high school drop-out rate becomes crucial and important in relation to competitiveness and our economy, Cassel noted that one million of the two million inmates in this country are high school drop-outs. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (1998) noted that "in 1997, among those 16 to 24 years of age, only 67% of dropouts, as compared with 83% of high school graduates, were participating in the labor force" (p. 169). Cassel also recommended that high school principals take immediate action to prevent such high school dropouts which may curtail the loss of workers in the workforce. Cassel's notation exhibits the framework for this study: the schooling process, through the conceptualization of parts affecting the whole, may contribute to students' disengagement, thus creating the impetus for school violence and school crime, juvenile delinquency, school dropouts, and, ultimately, criminal activity and incarceration.

The national dropout rate is approximately 35% (Diplomas Count, 2006). Dropout rates in the United States, particularly in Louisiana, can no longer be brushed aside with marginal concern, but must be strategically and systematically addressed by school districts and schools the same way test scores are now addressed. In addition to the enormous burden dropouts place on society, drop out rates greatly impact Louisiana School Performance Scores (SPS). For the 2007-2008 school year, a graduation index will be introduced into the SPS high school

accountability calculations for Louisiana. The 2007 SPS for high schools will be calculated using 70% standardized test results and 30% Graduation Index. The Graduation Index awards points to the school's score for several factors. If a student receives a regular high school diploma with both an academic endorsement and career/technical endorsement, the school is awarded 240 points, and if a student drops out, the school receives zero points. Obviously, a dropout negatively affects the overall school performance score. The Graduation Index will contribute to determining whether a school meets its growth target from year to year. Schools that meet or exceed the growth target receive financial rewards and flags that identify them as Schools of Recognized Academic Growth or Exemplary Academic Growth (Louisiana Department of Education, 2006). Schools that fail to grow are labeled Academically Unacceptable and enter either Academic Assistance or School Improvement. These low performing labels require levels of intervention. Louisiana state law now provides for the state to takeover schools that have been labeled Academically Unacceptable for at least four years in a row (Louisiana Department of Education, 2006).

According to 2002-2003 data from the Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center (Diplomas Count, 2006), 30% of all students dropout before completing high school. Males are less likely than females to graduate from high school with a diploma. Large disparities exist across racial and ethnic groups, with about half of American Indian and African-American students graduating, compared to more than three-quarters of European-Americans and Asians. In Louisiana, the graduation rate for all students is approximately 60 % (with males and females graduating at a rate of 54 % and 67% respectively and with blacks and whites graduating with rate of 53 % and 66% respectively). A study conducted by the Council for a Better Louisiana (CABL) (2006) showed a dropout rate increase from 17,801 in 2002-2003, to 18,186 in 2003-

2004. In fact, in the most recent four years of record, a total of 72,414 students dropped out in grades 7-12. The CABL suggested that this alarming statistic is “reflected in Louisiana’s workforce problems, crime statistics, and continued poverty. Research shows the whole school experience has to change and attitudes at home must change as well” (CABL Education Report, 2006). Harrison and Beck (2006) revealed further evidence for concern in Louisiana in a midyear report on prison inmates in 2005. The report showed that Louisiana led the nation with 1,138 prison and jail inmates per 100,000 state residents, followed by Georgia (1,021) and Louisiana’s neighbor, Texas (976). The state with the fewest inmates relative to its population was Maine (273).

Most chronic juvenile offenders start their delinquent careers before the age of 12 (Onwudiwe, 2004). The U.S. juvenile population, which is comprised of citizens under the age of 18, is expected to increase to an estimated 80.3 million citizens by the year 2020 (Statistical Briefing Book, 2004). According to Snyder and Sickmund (2006) the juvenile population (ages 0-17) in Louisiana was 1,185,700 in 2002. The largest juvenile population was in California with over 9 million juveniles. With these large numbers and projected increase, it is paramount that not only criminologists and the criminal justice system take note, but also that educational leaders prepare for growing school systems and potentially growing problems. At what level does education contribute to the drop out rates and increase in juvenile delinquency? Most at-risk students share common disadvantaged circumstances that increase the probability that they will not be successful in school. Waxman and Padron (1995) asserted that what may be considered their greatest risk factor is that their teachers and schools are likely to contribute to their failure and academic underachievement.

Many researchers and educators argue that features of schools and classrooms are viewed as detrimental or alienating, and consequently, drive students out of school rather than to schools. (Kagan, 1990; Waxman, 1992). Some students are driven out of school while being physically present in school. West (1991) defined an in-school drop out as a student who is physically present in school but who has disengaged from the schooling environment. All too often, some teachers allow students to disengage as long as they do not disrupt the class or cause disturbances. These teachers may be simply unaware of the scope of their own perspective.

Prison populations are rarely studied in terms of educational experiences and perceived levels of engagement. Based on research that most prisoners displayed characteristics of risk in childhood and more than half are high school dropouts (Harlow, 2003), it seems logical to investigate their educational backgrounds and engagement levels (Hall, 2006). The CABL report summarized that the school experience has to change. If this change is to occur, the stakeholders must examine the perspectives of the participants that exemplify where it all went wrong.

### **Statement of the Problem**

All school systems throughout the country serve students at risk of leaving school before receiving a high school diploma. Who are these students? Kagan (1990) empirically answers this question:

We now have available several decades of demographic and correlational studies that document a clear profile for students at risk – students who are likely to leave school before receiving a high school diploma. According to this profile, at-risk students have low educational aspirations, low self- esteem, an external locus of control, and negative attitudes toward school along with a history of academic failure, truancy, and misconduct, with no indication that they lack requisite aptitudes. These characteristics are

further accompanied by exogenous variables such as: a fractured family structure, low socioeconomic status, membership in ethnic or racial minorities, and the incidence of teen pregnancy or drug abuse ( Durken, 1981; Peng & Takai, 1983; Rumberger, 1981, 1987; Schreiber, 1979).

The remarkable consistency of this profile over several decades and across varied urban sites suggests that there may be a generic aspect to the school experience for at-risk pupils. It also suggests that the affective characteristics just listed may, in part, be produced or exacerbated by the school experience itself. In this regard, it may be significant that the single most frequent and consistent perception found among all varieties of at-risk students is that their teachers do not care about them (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Although dropouts often provide plausible reasons for leaving school (e.g., choosing to accept entry level employment, pregnancy, etc.), it is possible to infer that they prefer such alternatives largely because they are simply more attractive than school.

Thus, Wehlage and Rutter (1986) suggested that dropping out of school might be regarded more accurately as a process of disengagement from school; in other words, schools and classrooms systematically alienate these pupils. Similarly, Catterall (1987) and Richardson, Casanova, Placier, and Guilfoyle (1989) suggested that we might regard dropping out of school as a symptom of institutional rather than individual pathology. (pp. 105-106)

It is well documented that at-risk students are at a greater risk of dropping out of school and, subsequently, may engage in criminal behavior that leads to incarceration. By exploring

the perspectives of inmates regarding their educational experiences, the data may illuminate the role that school personnel and the schooling process play in the negative outcome of incarceration.

Some teachers may lack the pedagogical understanding of teaching and interacting with the student at risk of school failure. Several studies have found that teachers provide differential treatment for some types of students, and teachers' beliefs and perceptions have a direct impact upon their pedagogical practices in the classroom. Clark and Yinger (1977) suggested that teachers' prior experiences are at the center of decision-making and that teachers' thinking directly predicts their practice. Tournaki (2003) found teachers' perceptions of students influenced predictions of their social success and that teachers predicted less social success for boys than girls, for uncooperative students than for cooperative students, and for inattentive students than for attentive students. Franklin (2000) suggested from research that African-American students' weaker social relationships with their teachers compared to other students may affect their motivational levels and academic performance. Anderson and Keith (1997) analyzed a sample of 8,100 at-risk students from the High School and Beyond Longitudinal Study and suggested that effectively intervening in student motivation has a strong total effect among low-socioeconomic and non-Asian minority students.

If teachers are not instructed or familiarized with structured motivational strategies used when working with students who have low levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, such students may ultimately succumb to patterns of behavior detrimental to themselves, the school system, and society. There is a qualitative gap in the literature for understanding students at critical junctures in the schooling process. Interventions and the teachers' understanding of their students must be grounded in research to fully engage the student in schooling success. Maquin

and Loeber (1996) stated that interventions that improve academic performance are associated with a reduction in the frequency of delinquency. These findings suggest a reciprocal relationship between academic and social behavior. Do teachers have an understanding of the students to provide necessary perspective? Do teachers have an understanding of their own perspectives and value systems that may accommodate the diversified needs of the at-risk student? In the paper *Rough Road to Justice*, George Theoharis (2004) conducted a meta-analysis of eight empirical studies and suggested teachers and administrators must develop consciousness and skills necessary to deal with issues of equity and social justice. There seems to be an apparent need for providing educators with instruction to understand their own diversified values, the diversified values of the students and how to mesh these chasms into a dynamic learning environment for all, especially the at-risk student.

One population of the schooling experience that has been overlooked with regard to qualitative analysis is male inmates in the prison systems. Identifying the relationship between perceptions of teachers, student engagement levels and manifested deviant behavior could provide the insight needed to redirect teachers' perspectives and reinvigorate intervention programs. Most qualitative inquiries on the topic are concerned primarily with analysis of educational experiences regarding the rehabilitation process (Mageehon, 2003). There is a paucity of qualitatively driven analyses relative to identifying precursors to deviant behavior, perspectives of inmates regarding the educational process, intervention programs, and teaching pedagogy. This data can define or give valuable insight for students, teachers, administrators, and parents with regard to preventative constructs.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to provide educational stakeholders (students, teachers, administrators, counselors, parents, teacher programs, and correctional education) with informative research so that they may consider what might be done differently with regard to students and adults who had a negative set of school related experiences and with regard to preventing future possibilities for negative school related experiences.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study was that a phenomenological examination of inmates' educational experiences might provide educators, criminologists, judicial systems, rehabilitation faculties, sociologists, and psychologists with a perspective that might help to create an improved awareness regarding students in need. An improved understanding of students at risk of school failure might provide a preventative net for catching these students before they fall through the cracks of school failure.

Hall's (2006) study on correctional education suggested a further need to investigate the experiences of prisoners. She stated, "By interviewing prisoner students about these experiences, the researcher could possibly determine characteristics of school-aged children that predict possible incarceration. Just as teachers of K-12 are able to identify the need to nurture and encourage from the information in this [Hall's study], a study focusing solely on past experiences would provide teachers with a starting point for identifying at-risk behaviors from a unique source – a former at-risk student/child" (pg.133). Hall also suggested that teachers have a grand opportunity to influence students at an early age; and although teachers have no control over the students' home environment, a caring and encouraging classroom may increase engagement and decrease disruption.



Identification of significant junctures in the schooling process for students at risk of school failure might help educators create transition programs to help these students make the leap across these educational barriers. All agencies and faculties, from disciplines of education, sociology, criminology, and psychology that deal with at-risk students' dilemmas may gain an unheard perspective regarding the inmates' experiences.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were proposed: What are the perspectives of prison inmates regarding their K-12 educational experiences? Aspects of this general research question were explored through related sub-questions: (a) What were the characteristics associated with respondents during their schooling years? (b) How did the respondents' educational experiences influence their education? (c) What were the respondents' school engagement levels (positive or negative) like during their educational years? and (d) Did the respondents think their education experiences influenced life-choices, possibly leading to their incarceration?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was centered on research that demonstrates the interaction of educational, social, psychological, and scientific disciplines as being dynamic, multifaceted, and non-linear. "Education has separate subjects, separate skills, separate objectives, separate evaluations, linear methods, and isolated classrooms" (Crowell, 1989, p. 61). The components of education such as curriculum, instruction, and student performance have been assessed separately. Likewise, linear systems have been dominant in criminological thought (Milovanovic, 1996). For instance, Milovanovic (1997) gives an example of a linear and non-linear system – criminal justice and social justice, respectively. He stated that criminal justice linearly focuses upon the single, acting person, whereas, social justice non-linearly focuses upon

the conditions of life in the whole society. Milovanovic also noted that criminal justice “is based upon certainty, sameness, routine, or rational application of either pain or pleasure” and “social justice is based upon non-linear processes such as mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and transformation” (Milovanovic, 1997, p. 46).

What is necessary is the dynamic understanding of the interrelationship of the functioning of all systems (Crowell, 1989; Cziko, 1989). One way to understand the whole is to understand the child’s ecosystems and their links to each other. A change in one ecosystem can affect the others. For example, an incident in one class a student attends may destabilize the ecosystem of another class (Sadovnik, Cookson, & Semel, 2001). Specific theories and perspectives that shape the conceptual framework for this study are as follows: chaos theory, labeling theory, and strain theory. The theoretical framework for this study is detailed in chapter two along with the theories and various studies pertaining to the broad overview of students at risk of school failure, their interactive moments within systems that may affect other systems, and the interrelationships among ecosystems that may culminate in incarceration.

### *Chaos Theory*

Education and Criminology have been described as linear or closed systems of functioning (Doll, 1987; Forker, 1997; Milovanovic, 1997). Marion (2002) described closed systems theory organizations as self-contained and largely untainted by external forces or issues. Educationally, this linear view excludes students as active participants of meaning with diverse views, needs, and goals (Doll, 1987). In terms of delinquent behavior, linear systems overlook one major problem with human behavior – forces outside the system have an effect on the systems functioning (Forker, 1997). Chaos theory, on the other hand, is defined as a science of large interactive systems and nonlinear cause and affect (Marion, 2002). Chaos theory provides a

framework for conceptualizing the embodiment of all disciplines and theories regarding the role that education plays in student outcomes.

### *Labeling Theory*

The basic assumption of labeling theory is that perceived negative labeling may lead to one's development of negative self-efficacy and possibly greater delinquent involvement (Lemert, 1951; Becker, 1963). Lemert (1951) defined formal labels as those obtained through contact with social control agencies, and informal labels as those generated by parents, teachers, and peers. The present study emphasized informal labeling of students by their teachers.

### *Strain Theory*

General Strain Theory focuses on the individual's negative relationships with others. These negative relationships increase the likelihood that individuals will experience negative outcomes. Agnew (1992) noted that as adolescents enter a larger and more demanding social world, their desire for autonomy from adults and acceptance by peers may contribute to the adolescents being treated negatively by others. The negative affects create pressure for corrective action by the adolescents, and one possible response is negative behavior (Agnew, 1992).

The theoretical framework of this study suggests that the dynamic interactions between the school and the student may contribute to dynamic tracts of possible negative outcomes. Chaos theory's global perspective of systems in action provides a foundation for the framework, but labeling theory and strain theory refine this framework with regard to negative school interactions and negative outcomes.

### **Scope of the Study**

Twelve inmates at the Southwest Correctional Center in Louisiana were interviewed to gain an in-depth understanding of their educational experiences as k-12 students. The inmates

were males ranging in age from 18 to 30. The study was conducted from January 2007 to May 2007. Interviews were conducted, transcribed, coded, and cross-referenced for reoccurring themes and phenomena during this time.

### **Definitions**

*At-risk student* – Kagan (1990) provided an empirically-based profile of at-risk students in the Statement of the Problem section of this chapter. In addition, O’Shaughnessy, Lane, Gresham, and Beebe-Frankenberger (2003) suggested:

It is important to consider risk in terms of dynamic relationships among children, families, and schools, rather than in terms of unchanging characteristics of a child, family, or a school. From this perspective, positive changes are expected to occur, given appropriate support, and the responsibility for the healthy development of any child is shared among the major persons in the child’s life. (p. 27)

This perspective must become pervasive in the educational community in order to foster positivism when dealing with students of need. In chapter two, a historical view of the *at-risk* label is provided and a new term is suggested to signify a positive viewpoint. Causey and Freeman (2003) suggested a different perspective in viewing at-risk adolescents. They stated that “We, as a society must come to acknowledge that the ‘at-risk’ adolescents who serve as the meat of our statistical reports of educational and social decline are ‘at promise’ for transforming the social order of our world” (p. 418). Patton (2006) suggested a synonymous term for *students at-risk*. Rather than *at-risk children*, Patton uses the term *children of promise* to exemplify a positive approach and overcome an underlying pattern of labeling students negatively as *at-risk*. The present study suggests an expansion of Causey and Freeman’s (2003) *at-promise* and Patton’s (2006) *children of promise*. The expanded viewpoint of *at-risk* will be in the form of an

acronym, COPE (Children/Child Of Promise in Education). This new form is introduced for two reasons: (a) to accommodate the mission of the paradigm shift in viewing at-risk students, and (b) to establish an acronym that in its word form (cope) gives meaning that allows the acronym to stand on its own.

The *Encarta Dictionary* defines *cope* as, “to deal successfully with a difficult problem or situation.” This definition gives substance to the student facing difficult circumstances and then successfully *coping* with these problems. The acronym COPER will be used when referring to the individual student who is *at promise* for academic success. COPERs will be used when referring to multiple students of promise for academic success.

*Dropout*- refers to a student who does not receive a high school diploma.

*Ecosystem*- Consists of an organism and its environment(s), including the behavior of other organisms. Children’s ecosystems include physical, social, cognitive, and time aspects that provide opportunities and limits on behaviors and development (Howard, Barton, Walsh, and Lerner, 1999).

*Engagement and attachment* – refers to “students feeling embedded in their school and are more likely to exert effort. Participation in school and classroom activities more likely develops positive feelings about school, thus, leading to academic success” (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001, p. 320). A broad definition is the extent in which students identify with and value their school environment.

*Disengagement* – refers to students disinterested in school and unlikely to exert effort, thus causing a disconnect from the schooling environment. Disengaged students feel as though they do not belong and withdraw from the schooling environment.

*Juvenile delinquent* – is a juvenile characteristic of antisocial or criminal behavior.

*Motivation* – is the biological, emotional, cognitive, or social forces that activate and direct behavior.

*Paradigm* – is a model of how ideas relate to one another, forming a conceptual framework or forming a new perspective.

*Pedagogy* – refers to curriculum, instruction, and teacher attitude toward student and subject matter taught.

*Phenomenon* – is something perceived or experienced.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter one provided an overview of the study and its elements. This included an introduction of the content and the study's statement of the problem, purpose, research questions, theoretical framework, scope, definitions, limitations, organization, and significance.

Chapter two provides the literary examination of the inquiry. This chapter provides the literary foundation for the theoretical framework and elements of the inquiry: at-risk student semantics and characteristics, school disengagement and dropping out, school crime and violence, teaching pedagogy, teacher perceptions and expectations, and student perceptions, motivation, and engagement. Chapter three provides a detailed account of the methodology used to conduct the study. This chapter's components will guide the reader through the methodology used in the study.

Chapter four presents the findings of the study in detail by using the respondents' perspectives to support the themes. Chapter five provides a summary of the study, as well as implications and suggestions for future research.

## Chapter Two

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

Sitting in his cell, the inmate signifies the culmination of a variety of systems relevant to his perspective world. The parameters contributing to his incarceration such as his socioeconomic status, family situation, race, health issues, learning disabilities, and his schooling environment are numerous and diverse. The individual's journey to incarceration can be an informative process pertaining to the questions of how, why, and when. Most research of inmates looks to examine how to rehabilitate the inmate and reintroduce him to society in a productive form. Few studies look to examine the life and school related events as possible preventive junctures that may cause the chaotic sequencing of events that translate to school dropouts and possible incarceration. Along this journey, the inmate was a student motivated through needs, wants, and desires. This study examined the school's role in this dynamic journey to incarceration from the eyes of former at-risk, disengaged students – male prisoners. In addition, this study examines the future possibilities for the role of schools in engaging students in the schooling process.

This study does not suggest that the schooling process is solely responsible for the negative outcome of incarceration. It does suggest, however, that schools might contribute to the students' success or failure through the conceptualization of parts affecting the whole. Sadovnik, Dookson, and Semel (2001) suggested that schools help to shape children's perceptions of the world by processes of socialization. They noted that the schooling process helps shape students' values, beliefs, and standards of society and that schools play a major role by contributing in

determining who will get ahead in society and who will not (Sadovnik, Cookson, & Semel, 2001).

This study emphasized the micro-role that teachers play in the school's major role as suggested by Sadovnik and others (2001). How important are teachers to the overall development of the student? Irvine (1990) suggested that teachers play a central role in the school performance of students because the teacher-student relationship "rivals the relationship between a parent and a child" (p. 47). When Csikszentmihalyi and McCormack (1986) asked high school students who had influenced them to become the kind of people they were, 58 % named one of their teachers. These close, seemingly inconsequential, dynamic bonds developed between the teacher and student may manifest into wholesome learning experiences that perpetuate continued learning success or possibly, failure.

One way to conceptualize this dynamism in school-level interaction between the ecosystem of the school and the ecosystem of the student is to use a theoretical framework that explicitly addresses the operation of dynamic systems. This study proposes chaos theory, in which dynamic elements interact in unpredictable but describable ways, and provides an appropriate framework for examining student-school interactions. This framework is also applied to theoretically examine the dynamism involved in the role of educational systems in the evolution of a criminal (Dowson, Cunneen, & Irwin, 1999). Chaos theory (Marion, 2002) provides a global perspective as a theoretical framework for the systems in action, but labeling theory (Rist, 1977) and strain theory (Agnew, 1992) refine this framework further by explicating how the schooling process contributes to the negative interaction of these systems and creates unfortunate outcomes.



If teachers have the capacity to influence school performance positively, then they must also be able to influence school performance negatively. Baker (1991) stated, “School performance is by far the single most predictor of delinquency and future criminality – more accurate than race or economic level or social class, more accurate than any of the sociological variables commonly considered to have an effect on the rate of delinquency. Today, a boy with poor grades in high school is more than six times as likely to be in trouble with the law as is the youth earning above average grades” (pp. 61-62).

The ideology of the importance of education to reduction in crime is not a novel idea. In fact, further investigation of this premise of the relationship between schooling and criminality is found in Lubbock’s 1895 work titled *The Use of Life*. Lubbock suggested a correlation between the passage of England’s National Education Act and the reduction in national crime in subsequent years. In his book, *The Use of Life*, Lubbock stated:

While the number of criminals has been falling, the population, on the other hand, has been rising rapidly. We are beginning to feel the advantage of education in the diminution of the poor-rate and the emptying of our prisons, showing the diminution of paupers and criminals, and especially, I may add, of juvenile crime. (pp. 96-97)

It is quite enlightening to negotiate the passage of time between Baker’s and Lubbock’s findings, nearly 100 years. More recent statistics showed that between 1990 and 1999, the U.S. prison population had increased 48 % and that between 1999 and 2004 it had risen another 19 % (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). By connecting the dots, it is easy to ascertain the possibilities for our educational systems’ vital contribution to society.

The literature examined in this chapter provides a framework for generalizing to all students, however, the emphasis for this study was males. Males were the focus of this study for

two reasons: (a) males are more likely to engage in school misbehavior, engage in delinquency, drop out of school, and become incarcerated, and (b) the all male population at the prison was convenient and purposeful when examining the data regarding males.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2006), 42 % of boys have been suspended from school at least once by age 17, compared to 24 % of girls. Greene and Winters (2006) found that only about 65 % of boys who start high school graduate four years later, compared with 72 % of girls. Examining gender and crime, DeComo (1998) found that males have a 1 in 50 chance of being arrested by the age of 18, whereas females have a 1 in 400 chance of being arrested.

There is a qualitative gap in the literature for understanding students who are at critical junctures in the schooling process. Getting the teacher and student to understand whom they are is necessary in their respective learning interactions and development. Maslow (1976) stated that when “parents convey their own distorted patterns of behavior to the child...if the teacher’s are healthier and stronger, the children will imitate these instead” (p. 181). Interventions grounded in research, and teachers grounded in understanding the student foster schooling success. Maslow’s thoughts convey the importance for teachers not to underestimate the influence they have on children who are in need.

As mentioned in chapter one, *at-risk* may have become an abrasive term unintentionally labeling students in a negative form. The following section provides a literary framework for the *at-risk* terminology and the need for a new term.

### **The Semantics of the At-Risk Label**

In a study examining the semantics of the phrase “at-risk”, Placier (1993) articulated *at-risk* as “an educational policy ‘buzzword’ used metaphorically in *A Nation at Risk* (a national

report on education) to describe an economically and culturally endangered society” (p. 380). It was used to describe students endangered by a high probability of school failure. Placier studied the semantics of the legislative definition of *at-risk* in the State of Arizona and found that vague terms associated with social reforms give latitude to reformers’ problems they are advocating. Arizona, like the rest of the nation, was beginning to target young populations for early interventions associated with crime, delinquency, children of poverty, and children with low literacy levels. As noted in chapter one, Kagan (1990) profiled the at-risk student as a student having low educational aspirations, low self-esteem, apathy toward schooling, and a history of academic failure, truancy, and bad behavior.

According to Lilienfeld and Lilienfeld (1980) *at-risk* is a term borrowed from the field of epidemiology. *At-risk* in the field of epidemiology is associated with identification of populations with a higher probability of medical conditions and their prevention through intervention. This definition fit the student failure ideology at the time. The background characteristics of certain students (risk factors) make them susceptible to school failure and possible criminality. Therefore, for policymakers, *at-risk* was a new generic label for students once called *special needs students*. In her study, Placier (1993) noted interview responses desiring the use of *at-risk* because of its neutrality in regards to race and class.

The term *at-risk* has resonated throughout education since the early 1980’s. It has pierced the pages of policies and intervention strategies from one corner of the country to the other. The term has served its purpose well, as it replaced stigmatized language descriptive of ethnicity and the poor. After 25 years of use, however, the term has breached a language barrier built with foundational neutrality mentioned previously. *At-risk* may now be creating the very underlying

problem it seemed to erase in its early use, stereotyping children in a negative way. Bartsch (1987) and Bolinger (1980) suggested that a term will be replaced if it symbolizes negativism.

As stated in chapter one, a new term is pulsating scholarly work and interventions. *Children of Promise* (Patton, 2006) is a term that doesn't share the scientific value that *at-risk* does; however, it also does not share the negative tone of *risk* and the negative labeling of this population of students. Franklin (2000) argued that the research community must focus attention on how families, schools, and communities can promote the development of all youth, who should be considered more *at promise* for school success than *at risk* for school failure. As noted, the researcher has expanded upon this premise to form COPE (Children Of Promise in Education), COPER, and COPERs.

### **Characteristics of COPERs (Children Of Promise in Education)**

The ability to identify students in danger of academic failure and the ability to provide strategies to improve their capacity to succeed in school are important topics that interest all stakeholders in the field of education. Sizemore (1981) noted that students who have had a history of bad schooling experiences or who come from families with low socioeconomic conditions are at a higher risk of school failure. Even though these students are at risk of school failure and share certain characteristics that exacerbate negative outcomes, they should always be considered COPERs. All children, regardless of their circumstances and current academic performance are capable of promising futures.

The National Center for Education Statistics examined the outcomes of The National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (National Center of Education Statistics, 1995). The purpose of the examination of data in the study was to determine if high school outcomes were related to risk factors that could be identified at the beginning of high school. Eighth grade

COPers were identified as those who: a) lived in single family homes, b) had family incomes of less than 15,000, c) had an older sibling who had dropped out, d) had parents who did not finish high school, e) had limited proficiency in English, or f) lived at home without adult supervision more than three hours per day were identified as at risk of school failure. Headley (2003) revealed that adolescents living in a lower class rather than middle or upper class environment were more susceptible to delinquent activities. According to the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2000), about 20 % of all Americans under the age of 18, around 14 million, live in poverty. Poverty is much higher among children of mothers without husbands (46 % in poverty in 1998) than married-couple families (9 %).

The examination of the NELS data concluded that the characteristics used to identify students at risk of school failure predicted later outcomes. These factors were strongly related to academic outcomes. Poor school achievement of socially-disadvantaged students is often evident in first grade and likely to worsen thereafter (Hernnstein & Murray, 1994). McDill, Natriello and Pallas (1986) found that it is possible to identify potential dropouts as early as elementary school. McDill and colleagues noted that perhaps the most interesting question for further research is to identify the home and school experiences that distinguish between the COPers who succeed and those who do not. Studying inmates' perspectives regarding their schooling experiences sheds valuable light on the reasons why this population did not succeed in school or society. Intervening at the appropriate time in the schooling journey of COPers may provide the impetus for a promising future.

### **Disengagement from the Schooling Process and Dropping Out**

The enormity of the dropout rate can be found in a study conducted by Matherne and Thomas (2001). They noted that in the United States, 2,255 teenagers drop out of school each

day. Schools can play a role in counteracting maladaptive behavior and in promoting engagement and academic success among adolescents, thus preventing dropouts. McPartland, Legters, Jordan, and McDill (1996) suggested that schools can influence students by developing supportive relationships between students and teachers. Nettels (1991) noted that these supportive social relationships with adults other than parents may influence the adolescents' success or failure in school. Why do students drop out of high school? The student disengagement phenomenon is difficult to measure; it is temperamental and fluid; thus, a corollary for chaos theory. Student disengagement in the schooling process transcends surface factors and delves deeply into the sanctity of experiences, events, and emotions. Qualitative research on school dropouts suggests that an important element of poor school performance translating into school withdrawal is disengagement from the schooling process (Roderick, 1993).

Recent data on the dropout problem suggests that students dropout for a variety of reasons, but the primary reasons are associated with the school. The California Dropout Research Project (CDRP) (2007) analyzed data from a nationally representative sample of sophomores who were surveyed in the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002. The data revealed that the primary reasons for dropping out of school were: (a) missing too many days, (b) thinking that getting a GED would be easier, (c) failing or poor school performance, (d) disliking school, and (e) not being able to keep up with schoolwork. Other reasons not related to school were: (a) getting a job, (b) females getting pregnant, and (c) working at the same time as school. Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) revealed reasons for dropping out in a study of dropouts aged 16-25. The dropouts' primary reasons were: (a) uninteresting classes, (b) missing too many days, (c) spending too much time with people disinterested in school, and (d) failing school

grades. The data continues to be similar over time. The primary reasons students dropout of school are school related.

Fine (1986) showed that some schools passively allow students to drop out without any effort to retain them or by not finding out what the problem is. Wehlage and Rutter (1986) analyzed data from *High School and Beyond*, a national longitudinal study of American high school students. They noted that predictors of dropping out are truancy, low expectations discipline problems, low grades, and being late to school. They added that while the school cannot change the socioeconomic factors experienced by the child, the school has a responsibility to take action for those students who are at risk of school failure. Wehlage (1983) analyzed programs that successfully involved marginal students. His analysis found that alienation from school, daily reinforced by teachers and administrators, was one of the most important threats to the retention of at-risk youth.

Cassel (2003) noted the primary reason for students dropping out of school is a general lack of personal development. This general lack of personal development evolves over time and is related in many ways to the schooling environment, not just the students' disadvantaged social constraints. Mageehon (2003) examined the impact of early school learning experiences regarding women's perceptions of jail or prison learning environments. She revealed that the respondents' general positive attention received from elementary and middle school teachers disappeared by high school. Teachers in high school were perceived as uncaring and unconcerned. Respondents expressed that neither the administration nor teachers seemed to be aware of the traumatic events in their life that prevented them from continuing the schooling process (Mageehon, 2003). Disengagement from a school perspective is caused by a disconnection from peers and teachers or because of school personnel perceptions of students as

troublemakers (Mageehon). Case studies indicated that a common thread in dropouts' school careers is a cumulative record of poor school experiences (Fine, 1987; Reich & Young, 1975). It is evident that poor school experiences may lead to detachment and disengagement from the schooling process for these students of need.

The following sections discuss the possible outcomes and causes of school disengagement. The ensuing section, school crime and school violence, examines the literature with regard to delinquent and criminal behavior outcomes as a result of school disengagement and current data on the state of the problem. Subsequent sections examine the student-teacher relationship and its contributions to disengagement and engagement, the theoretical framework for this study, the gap in the literature, and need for further research.

### **School Crime and School Violence**

A report conducted by the Justice Department (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006), *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 2006 National Report*, draws on data and research to provide a comprehensive and insightful view of juvenile crime across the nation. It is suggested that this report offers Congress, state legislators, professors and teachers, policymakers, justice officials and citizens empirically based answers to questions about juvenile crime. For the purposes of this study, the emphasis of the data is primarily related to juvenile offenders and school-related data.

The 2006 *National Report* (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006) noted that in 2003, one in three high school students reported in a national survey that they had property stolen or damaged at school, and one in eight reported that they engaged in fighting at school. Also, 5 in 100 high school students stayed at home at least once during the prior month for fear of school-related crime. In addition, the report found that 6% of high school students had carried a weapon (e.g.,



gun, knife, or club) on school property within thirty days of the survey. Other findings of the report revealed that half of high school seniors surveyed in 2003 stated they had tried illicit drugs at least once with marijuana reported as the most common drug used. More than three-quarters of seniors said they had tried alcohol and two-thirds of eighth-graders had tried alcohol, and almost one in three high school students said they were offered, sold, or given drugs at school in the past year. Clearly, the ability of schools to curtail drug-use on school property is critical to students' engagement in the learning process and the prevention of misbehavior.

Interestingly, the survey (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006) noted that a change in student's use of marijuana and alcohol was tied to their perception of possible harm. As the perception of risk of harm from the use of alcohol or marijuana increased, use declined, and when the perception of risk decreased, use increased. This finding is of significant importance regarding students' perceptions of their environment. The students' perceptions may affect the interaction of the systems involved and subsequently, change the life-course of the student. The association between the school environment and student behavior outcomes can be detected from the report's finding that juvenile arrests for weapon law violations peaked during school hours on school days and in the late evening hours on non-school days.

Kaufman, Chen, Chow, Ruddy, Miller, Chandler, Chapman, Rand, and Klaus (1999) noted that about 13 % of violent crimes (sexual assault, aggravated assault, robbery, and simple assault – predominantly the latter) in the United States take place at school, and adolescent students are victims of about 1.3 million violent crimes at school per year, while teachers are victims of about 125,000 such incidents per year (Kaufman et al., 1999; Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). The crime rate of juveniles, including drug trafficking, robbery, and gang violence,

remains very high (Howell, 1997; Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). The data display the obvious – crime in our schools and among the juvenile population continues to be a concern.

Over the past decade, school violence has gained increased scrutiny as to its relationship to the school environment. It is paramount not to overlook the possibility of the school environment playing a crucial role in these instances of school violence. This perspective does not absolve the individuals from committing these acts, but it does provide a look at the system of education and individual student needs and deficiencies as they advance through it. In a survey on crime and safety, the National Center for Education Statistics (2003a) found that academic engagement and school discipline are significantly related to the occurrence of school violence. The survey noted that schools with high levels of serious violence generally have large enrollments, high student-teacher ratios, and a higher percentage of students with poor academic performance. Morrison, Furlong, and Morrison (1994) noted that students who engage in their schoolwork and have opportunities to participate and succeed in academic tasks are less likely to commit acts of violence toward each other, toward school staff, or upon the school itself in the form of vandalism.

The school's structure and procedures might also contribute to student disengagement over time. In a study of adolescents who were incarcerated (Todis, Bullis, Waintrup, Scholtz, & D'ambrosio, 2001), the offenders stated that by middle school, they began associating with peers who experimented with drugs and alcohol and started skipping school. Schools reacted by suspending them, reducing their extracurricular activities and labeling them as behavioral problems. The adolescents reported that school staff acted as though they did not want them there. Respondents also reported that they either did not get caught doing early activities or that threatened consequences did not materialize. Todis and his colleagues suggested that schools can

play an important role by providing COPERs youth structure, positive adult influence, skills, and problem-solving experiences. Furlong's (2000) study also suggested that further evidence is needed to define the schools' specific role in the deterrence of school violence, leading to effective and relevant programs that can be implemented.

The following sections narrow the scope of the school's role to the interactions of the teacher and student in the classroom with regard to teaching pedagogy, teacher perceptions, teacher expectations, student perceptions, student motivation, and student engagement.

### **Teaching Pedagogy**

An aspect of the school's specific role is to delve into the pedagogical interactions between the teacher and student. Shulman (1987) defines pedagogy as the teaching strategies that teachers use for transforming the content of subject matter knowledge in forms that help students' comprehension. Chang (2005) states that the school culture, content knowledge, personal values, teaching strategies, and the understanding of students' characteristics become incorporated in the pedagogic reasoning process of the teacher.

Teachers have a huge impact on student learning and behavior. Jackson (1968) found that teachers have as many as 1,000 interpersonal contacts each day with students in their classrooms. Based on this number of contacts, there are many opportunities for teachers to engage in positive interaction with students. Shores, Gunter, and Jack (1993) found, however, that although teacher praise has been proven to effectively increase student engagement in the classroom, it is rarely used. These teacher-student interactions have long-term effects on the students. Students' experiences are related to their level of psychological investment (motivation) and academic success (Clark, 1995). A study conducted by Tidwell (1988) showed that dropouts believe that an improvement in the attitude and behavior of the teachers, specifically in their sensitivity and

tolerance, is needed. Students are cognizant of the teachers' positive attitude and positive teacher-student interactions in the classroom.

Adjustments made to teachers' interactions socially and pedagogically in the classroom can have a significant effect on the COPers' schooling process. Sociologists of education suggested that pedagogic practices are differentially offered to different groups of students, often based on class, racial, ethnic, and gender differences (Bernstein, 1990). An example of an adjustment made to teaching practice and teacher behavior was demonstrated by social psychologists Aronson, Fried, and Good (2001). Their study revealed a possible antidote to stereotype threat. Stereotype threat was introduced by Steele, Spencer, and Aronson (2002). The phenomenon of evoking stereotypes about the intellectual inferiority of groups based on race or gender may harm the academic performance of these group members. In Aronson and his colleagues' study, African-American college students were taught to think of intelligence as changeable, rather than fixed. The results were that the group of students who heard this message improved their grades more than the control group who did not hear the message. This research revealed a relatively easy way to narrow the Black-White academic achievement gap. Interestingly, this study was successfully replicated with seventh-grade students in New York City by Blackwell, Dweck, and Trzesniewski (in press). The studies revealed that compared to the control group, students who learned about intelligence's malleability had higher academic motivation, better academic behavior, and better grades.

Teachers' attitudes and perceptions play a significant role in pedagogical output and in student outcomes. Reflecting on how teachers may need to reconsider their own decisions on student-conflict, Donna Marriott (2001) stated, "If a child starts to act up, I have learned to ask myself: 'How have I failed this child? What is it about this lesson that is leaving her outside the

learning? How can I adapt my plan to engage this child?’ I stopped blaming children” (p.27). If teachers take a responsible role, provide encouragement, and a positive learning environment, COPErs may respond with academic engagement and success in the classroom.

The following sections closely examine the areas of teacher perceptions, teacher expectations, student perceptions, student motivation, and student engagement and how they influence pedagogy.

### **Student Perceptions**

COPErs’ perceptions of their learning environments are important to their academic success. Sizemore (1981) analyzed a study in Virginia that surveyed a sample of approximately 11,000 high school students about what they considered to be among the most important differences between being a “good” teacher and a “bad” teacher. The results showed that adolescents want teachers who are supportive and view them as good students. Students’ positive perceptions of teachers can have a significant influence on their success in the classroom. Sanders (1998) found that African-American students’ perceptions of teacher support had a positive influence on their classroom behavior and academic achievement. Sanders’s study demonstrates the need for the African-American population, which has a high representation among the dropout and criminal populations, to have positive perceptions of their teachers, administrators, and support staff.

### **Teacher Perceptions**

Teachers’ experiences produce perceptions that are at the center of their classroom decision-making (Clark & Yinger, 1977). If teachers’ experiences, moral judgements, and paradigms influence their teaching practice, students who do not have a linear relationship to the teachers’ perspectives will be at a disadvantage in the classroom. Tournaki (2003) found that

teachers' perceptions of students influence the teachers' predictions of the students' social success. Tournaki found that teachers predicted less social success for boys than for girls, for uncooperative students than for cooperative students, and for inattentive students than for attentive students. In addition, Adams, Robertson, Gray-Ray, and Ray (2003) found that teachers and peers are important sources of negative labels that can lead to the adoption of deviant behavior.

### **Teacher Expectations**

Teachers, as instructional leaders and models for students, set standards for students and influence self-esteem and a sense of efficacy. A study conducted by Rosenthal and Jacobsen (1968) showed that teachers' expectations of students directly influence student achievement. In the study, teachers were told that children in their classrooms were likely to have a mental growth spurt that year. In reality, however, an intelligence test administered to the children revealed nothing about their potential level of achievement. The students were placed in the classes randomly and researchers returned at the conclusion of the school year to test the students for improvement. The children labeled as *spurters* made significantly greater achievement gains than other children. This evidence revealed that expectations play a major role in encouraging or discouraging students' classroom motivation. Low expectations, negative interactions, and poor academic achievement may lead students to adopt helpless behaviors and have a passive attitude toward schooling (Coley & Hoffman, 1990; Fine & Zane, 1989; Irvine, 1990; Kelly, 1991).

As far back as 1968, educational research has sought to determine the significance of teacher expectations for student academic success (Brophy & Good, 1974). Over the years the literature has demonstrated that in schools where expectations are high, student achievement tends to be higher than in schools where expectations are low (Bamburg, 1994; Paredes, 1993).

Previous research revealed the importance of building nurturing school communities with high expectations to encourage student engagement and academic success. Teachers sometimes inadvertently encourage emotional and behavioral problems when they have low expectations for achievement and performance (Kauffman 1997; Sanders, 2000). In addition to teacher expectations and student perceptions, student motivation is also important in academic engagement and academic performance of the COPer.

### **Student Motivation**

Adolescence is a time of major adjustment for juveniles. A lack of motivation and little academic effort in this stage of their life can have a major impact on the future adult life experiences of adolescents. As noted, teacher perceptions and expectations and student perceptions have an undeniable affect on student motivation. Research regarding motivation showed that there is a gradual decline in various indicators of motivation, behavior, and self-perception that can lead to lower academic achievement and increased rates of dropout (Feldlaufer, Eccles, & Midgley, 1988). Ryan, Stiller and Lynch's study (1994) of middle school students showed that students who experience their teachers as supportive and warm are more likely to be intrinsically motivated, to feel more competent, and to have higher self-esteem than students with a more negative view of their teachers.

Unfortunately, minority students are experiencing lower levels of social relationships between the student and teacher. Franklin (2000) suggested from research that African-American students' weaker social relationships with their teachers compared to other students affect their motivational levels and academic performance. A longitudinal study (Anderson, 1997) suggested that student motivation has a strong total effect among low-socioeconomic and non-Asian

minority students, and educators may be able to enroll more COPers in academic classes by intervening in student motivation.

A student's perceived support is important in the student's feelings of relatedness to the adult school staff (Ryan, 1993). Connell and Wellborn (1990) theorized that one will be more engaged or motivated in contexts where positive relationships are experienced. Goodenow (1992) found that perceived teacher support is significantly associated with both perceived competence and intrinsic motivation in middle-school age students. A study conducted by Feldlaufer, Eccles, and Midgley (1988) reported evidence that students who perceived high teacher support in one classroom and moved to a classroom in which perceived teacher support was low displayed a decrease in interest and positive engagement in the learning environment.

The literature signifies the importance of positive student-teacher relationships on student motivation; and if students are motivated, they will have a higher propensity to do better in school, thus decreasing the number of school discipline problems, violence, dropouts, juvenile offenders and ultimately young men and women in the adult prison population.

### **Student Engagement**

Linear components of education, such as academic achievement and degree attainment, have been the primary foci of sociological research. Less understood and needing more research are the aspects of the educational experience, such as students' participation in school, paying attention in class, making an effort to learn, feelings about school, and a sense of belonging (Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001). Researchers are now paying more attention to these aspects of the educational experience.

Engagement has been discussed developmentally as a growth-producing activity through which the student's attentiveness is in active response to his learning environment



(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This construct of engagement was investigated by Marks (2000) in a study of student engagement in instructional activity. Marks investigated whether patterns exist in students' engagement, whether the patterns were consistent across grade levels, and whether class subject matter differentially affected engagement. A sample of 3,669 students representing a nationally selected sample of 24 restructuring elementary, middle, and high schools was used for the study. Marks discovered that across all three grade levels – elementary, middle, and high – girls were significantly more engaged than boys, and social class contributed to the engagement of students at the middle school level. Marks also discovered that the student's orientation toward school, defined as success (grade point average) or alienation (misbehavior and consequences) significantly influenced engagement across all three grade levels. In other words, positive orientation predicts engagement and negative orientation solidly predicts disengagement (Marks).

Marks (2000) showed that a positive school environment is favorable to learning. She noted that a learning environment with respect, fairness, safety, and positive communication enhances the engagement of students across all grade levels. She also concluded that supportive classroom environments, in which students experience high expectations and receive help from teachers and peers, promote the engagement of all students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### *Theory*

Theory is “an integration of all known principles, laws, and information pertaining to a specific area of study. This structure allows investigators to offer explanations for relative phenomenon and to create solutions to unique problems” (Woolfolk, 1998, p. 585).

### *Chaos theory – “butterfly effect”*

Chaos theory has been described as one of the most prominent theories of the twentieth century, along with quantum theory and relativity theory (Gleick, 1988). The mathematical framework as a foundation for this theory’s development is beyond the scope of this study and literature review. Viewing chaos theory through the lens of the postmodern leadership paradigm, the present study will apply this theory to the disciplines of education, sociology, and criminology. Marion (2002) describes the perspective of viewing organizations with postmodern constructs. He notes that organizations are unique and are best understood by examining the organizations ideas, ideologies, and perceptions, and not the organization’s patterns and history. Chaos theory, which is associated with the postmodern paradigm for understanding systems, has been gaining attention from scientists and psychologists from a wide variety of specialty areas (Barton, 1994; Marion, 2002).

Chaos theory is the study of complex nonlinear systems and describes the complex and unpredictable motion or dynamics of systems that are sensitive to their initial conditions (Barton, 1994; Gleick, 1988; Marion, 2002). Gribbin (2004) described the difference between linear and nonlinear systems by giving an example relating to the everyday world. Gribbin describes walking as a linear and nonlinear process. In the example, the linear process of walking would be to take two steps down a road and be twice as far from the starting point than if you had taken one step. Walking in a nonlinear process, however, is described as, after taking the first step, each step thereafter, carried you twice as far as the one before. In linear walking, eleven steps down the road would take you eleven meters if each step were one meter. In the example, the eleventh step in nonlinear walking alone would take you a distance of 1,024 meters. Nonlinear things move very swiftly away from their starting point (Gribbin).

Important to comprehending chaos theory is to understand *initial conditions*. *Sensitivity to Initial Conditions* refers to a concept of chaos theory that states that minor changes can cause huge fluctuations in nonlinear systems over time, drastically affecting the outcome of events (Gleick, 1988; Gribbin, 2004; Walthrop, 1994). In 1961, meteorologist Edward Lorenz introduced the *butterfly effect* to explain weather forecasting. This model exhibits the phenomenon of *sensitive dependence on initial conditions*. For example, a butterfly flapping its wings in South America causes weather effects in North America (Marion, 2002). Trygestad (1997) noted that researchers suggested that applying chaos theory to the classroom non-linearly enhances learning by reinforcing systemic approaches, encouraging diversity, and reaffirming theoretical notions of intelligence as multi-dimensional. Of interesting notation is the concept of chaos and its importance to educational research. This concept provides a model for “understanding how [extremely] tiny initial differences in a multitude of factors (e.g., teacher attention, teaching materials, motivation, home background, student background knowledge) could, in the course of time, lead to significantly and totally unpredictable differences in outcomes” (Cziko, 1989, p.19). Thus, slight changes in initial states may greatly affect learning and behavioral outcomes.

These slight changes lead to moments of bifurcation. Bifurcation is a doubling in the pattern of behavior of a system (Milavonovik, 1997). With each doubling, there is a distinct change from one behavioral system to new patterns for all systems involved, ultimately, a chaotic state. In natural or social systems, there are moments when a very small change in a parameter can explode to open up a new track for a system. It is these bifurcation points which one can use for a theory of exploring crime rates or examining why a good student cheats on an exam (Milavonovik, 1997).

Bifurcation moments can also produce positive explosions in the learning environment. The learning environment is an open system that is nonlinear, complex, and has unpredictable bifurcation points for each learner. Education is a dynamic, multidimensional system. Trygestad (1997) suggested that although educational components have been assessed separately (such as curriculum, instruction, and student performance), understanding the dynamic interrelationship of the whole is necessary (Crowell, 1989; Cziko, 1989). A recent example of dynamic teaching in the theoretical sense is the teaching method used by Ron Clark. His book, *The Essential 55* (Clark, 2003), and movie, *The Ron Clark Story* (<http://www.tnt.tv/title/?oid=633246>), demonstrate a learning environment that is non-linear, dynamic, and successful.

If teachers understand the COPEr holistically, their interactions may produce bifurcation moments in an open learning experience characterized by an approach using multiple structures and strategies for learning. The perspectives gained from populations with backgrounds as COPErs can be extremely beneficial to the stakeholders involved in the learning process. If chaos theory is to be applied in the classroom, teachers must foster a learning environment that is varied and flexible enough to address the complexities of COPErs (Children Of Promise in Education).

If teachers are not instructed or familiarized with structured motivational strategies they might use, COPErs with low levels of intrinsic, as well as, extrinsic motivation may ultimately choose a path detrimental to themselves, the school system, and society. Applying chaos theory or the *butterfly effect* to the educational system, society, and COPErs' interplay with the school setting, introduces a paradoxically simple, yet complex concept of COPErs' possible evolution to criminal behavior. On one hand, a positive interaction between a teacher and COPEr may theoretically create vibrant interactions of systems that produce a productive, law abiding citizen;

and, on the other hand, a negative interaction may theoretically create ballistic collisions of systems that produce an individual destined to have a negative future.

The embodiment of chaos theory may provide the most revealing and coveted solutions for stakeholders to the perpetual disengagement of youth from the schooling experience and society. The interplay between the school environment, individual domestic circumstances, student levels of motivation, and schooling experiences contribute to dynamic outcomes of COPers. A lack of qualitative, pedagogical understanding of a theory such as the chaos theory may inhibit teachers, administrators, support personnel, and, for that matter, education as a whole, from providing access to the oceans of success that education has to offer COPers.

A population of the schooling experience that has been overlooked with regard to qualitative analysis and chaos theory is the prison population. Identifying commonalities and phenomena in relation to motivational levels and manifested deviant behavior may provide the insight needed to redirect teacher's perspectives and reinvigorate intervention programs.

Chaos theory has provided a conceptualization of the *sensitivity to initial condition* interactions between the students and their environment. What needs to be addressed is the type of interaction provoking the nonlinear system to grow exponentially toward varied negative social outcomes. The theoretical framework for this type of interaction as an influence to the system can be understood through *labeling theory* and *strain theory*.

#### *Labeling theory*

Labeling theory suggests that because of the manner in which schools label students, schools may contribute to the COPers' involvement in delinquency (Sadovnik, Cookson, & Semel, 2001). The basic assumption of the theory is that perceived negative labels lead to the development of negative self-conceptions and greater delinquent involvement (Becker, 1963;

Lemert, 1951). The present study emphasized the informal labeling of students by teachers. Lemert suggested that informal labels are generated by parents, teachers, and peers and formal labels are generated by social agencies.

Labeling theory is not a new phenomenon for an explanatory framework for education. Its origin was for providing a framework for the study of social deviance. Over the years, however, labeling theory has crossed disciplines from sociology to the field of education (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951; and Sadovnik et al., 2001). Rist (1977) suggested that the labeling theory counters both the biological and cultural determinists' theories of educational outcomes. Both perspectives place causality of success or failure outside the school. The labeling approach allows for an examination of what is happening within schools and the theory has contributed to our understanding of the forces that affect the judgment of deviance. Rist noted:

that labeling theory calls our attention to various evaluative mechanisms, formal and informal, operant in schools, the ways schools nurture and support these mechanisms, how students react, what outcomes are for interpersonal interaction based on how these mechanisms have evaluated individual students, and how, over time, the consequences of having a certain evaluative tag influence the options available to a student within a school (pp. 147-148).

Rist (1977) suggested extending the research on the educational experiences of those students who are differentially labeled by teachers. The expansion of research and further theoretical development may extend into areas of investigation related to the types of students perceived by teachers as prone to success or failure and the effects of specific teacher reactions on specific outcomes. Rist suggested two lines of inquiry at a more general level that are applicable to investigating the perspectives of inmates: the outcomes in the post-school world of

having received a negative vs. positive label within a school and the phenomenological meanings that are attached to labels.

A study of dropouts by Roussel (2000) showed that as the students became alienated from school, the teachers placed demands on the students to try and bring them back to the mainstream. Ironically, however, the students felt like they were being pushed away from school by these demands. Roussel stated “this created distance between the students and school personnel which resulted in high stress levels and labeling of the students” (p. 167).

The crux of the present study’s theoretical framework, argument, and methodology may be summarized in what Rist (1977) concluded:

Labeling theory provides a conceptual framework by which to understand the processes of transforming attitudes into behavior and the outcomes of having done so. To be able to detail the dynamics and influences within the schools by which some children come to see themselves as successful and act as though they were, and to detail how others come to see themselves as failures and act accordingly, provides in the final analysis an opportunity to intervene so as to expand the numbers of winners and diminish the numbers of losers. For that reason above all others, labeling theory merits our attention (p. 157).

In addition to labeling theory is the theoretical perspective of strain. Along with labeling theory, strain theory provides an influential *sensitivity to initial condition* element to the chaos theory.

#### *Strain theory*

Robert Merton (1938) offered scholars strain theory to explain the differential crime rate between the lower and higher social classes. According to Merton, crime is a result of

overemphasizing material success and the lack of opportunity to achieve it. Cohen (1955) felt that Merton's theory did not explain purposeless crime. Cohen postulated that delinquency among youths had no real purpose except to establish peer status and strengthen group loyalty. They often act impulsively and without consideration for the future. Greenberg (1977) revised classical strain theory and developed a design with educational components to explain the peak in crime during adolescence. Greenberg suggested that adolescents are subject to strain because they become very concerned with achieving popularity with peers. In addition, the authoritative school structure limits their strong desire for individualism and inhibits male role expectations

Agnew (1992) provided an expansion for the theory focusing on negative relationships with others. These negative relationships such as individuals not being treated the way they desire increase the likelihood that the individual will experience negative affects. According to general strain theory (GST), negative relationships are defined from the perspective of the individual, but GST notes that certain types of relationships are most likely to be experienced as aversive by most individuals.

Agnew (1992) provided an explanation as to why students act out when applying GST. He suggested that the adolescent enters a larger and more demanding social world with a desire to be autonomous from adults and to be more popular with peers. These two elements increase the likelihood that adolescents will be treated negatively by others. For example, students leave elementary school during early adolescence and enter larger, more impersonal, and more diverse secondary schools (Petersen & Hamburg, 1986; Simmons & Blyth, 1987; Simmons & Rosenberg, 1971). Adolescents find that middle and secondary schools are more demanding than elementary schools (Agnew, 1992). In middle and secondary schools the students encounter



more rules, more work, and tougher grading policies (Petersen & Hamburg, 1986; Simmons & Blyth, 1987).

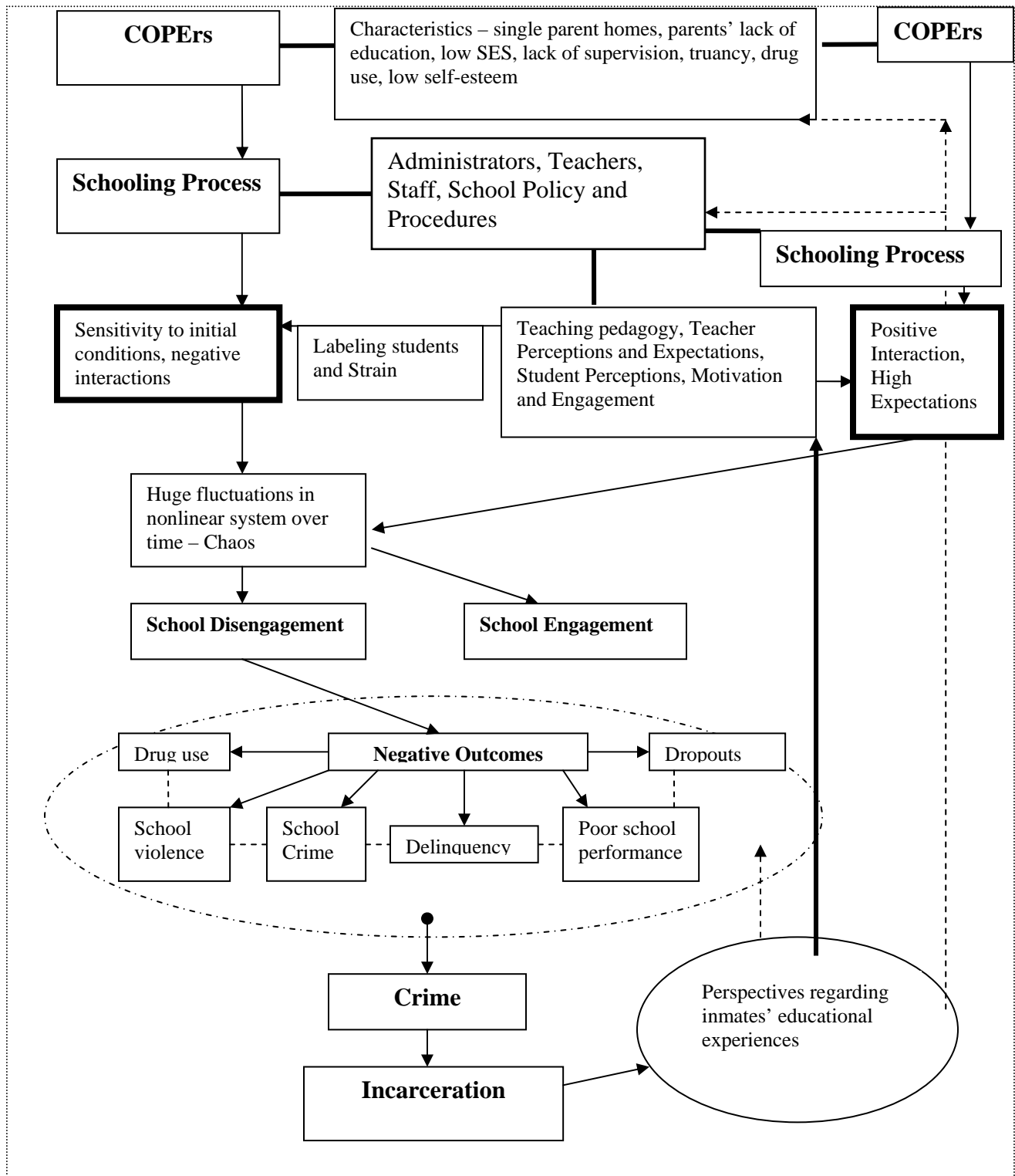
Adolescents experience higher levels of emotional distress than children. A study by Larson and Lampman-Petratis (1989) equipped preadolescents and early adolescents with electronic pagers, which were signaled at random times during the day. The respondents were asked to describe their feelings at these times. The early adolescents indicated more occurrences of anger, hurt, and worry than did preadolescents. This study suggested that the transition students make from preadolescence to adolescence (elementary school to middle school) is a critical juncture (strain) in the schooling process where more intervention may be needed.

### **Conceptual Diagram**

The conceptual diagram (Figure 1) visually demonstrated the configuration and pulse of this study. The diagram flowed from top to bottom illustrating the COPERs' possible journey to incarceration; then bottom to top illustrating the reflective examination of the inmate's journey. The characteristics box consisted of the at-risk (COPER) student traits. The flow of the chart moved the COPER through the schooling process as he interacted with his educational environment. His educational environment consisted of his teachers, administrators, school staff, and the policy and procedures of the school. The COPER interacted with teaching pedagogy, teacher expectations, his perceptions of the environment, and his engagement with the environment. The theoretical framework of the study was exhibited in the central portion of the flow chart. Here, the student interacted with the *strain* of his circumstances, the *labeling* of him by his teachers, and the *chaos* of all these elements interacting. This interaction created new tracts of behavior, likely in the form of disengagement. The disengagement from the schooling environment then created the possibility of negative outcomes, such as school violence, poor

school performance, drug use, school crime, delinquency, and dropping out. These outcomes may result in criminal activity in adulthood, thus leading to incarceration.

### Figure 1 Non-linear and Dynamic, At-risk Student Education – A System in Chaos



### **Importance of the Study**

The gap in the literature spotlights the continued need for qualitative research to examine the schooling experiences of at-risk youth, juvenile delinquents, high school dropouts, and, as in this study, inmates. Few studies have examined the perspectives of inmates regarding their schooling experiences. Most research regarding inmates has examined correctional education within the prison (Hall, 2006; Mageehon, 2003). Succinct evidence for the need of for this study is suggested by Hall. She suggested that by interviewing prisoners about their prior educational experiences may help determine characteristics of school-aged children that predict possible incarceration. Furthermore, she added that “a study focusing solely on past experiences would provide teachers with a starting point for identifying at-risk behaviors from a unique source – a former at-risk student” (p. 133). Stephens (1990) examined the educational backgrounds of inmates in a New York prison, however his study was quantitative in nature. Stephens used questionnaires to collect data regarding the respondents’ educational backgrounds rather than one-on-one interviews. Furthermore, Lochner and Moretti (2004) suggested that “Little is known about the relationship between schooling and criminal behavior” (p. 155). The present study contributes to the gap in the literature concerning a qualitative study examining the perspectives of male inmates regarding their k-12 educational experiences.

In addition to the specific contributions of the present study, over the past two decades other researchers have noted the need for further research pertaining to teacher-student interaction, dropouts, teacher expectations, labeling of students by teachers, and the continued need to examine chaos theory’s implications for education. Ryan, Stiller, and Lynch (1994) argued for continued study of the feelings of connection and security with the schooling environment, thus enabling academic socialization and adjustment. Ryan and colleagues also

suggested that the interpersonal experience between teachers and students is important in facilitating adjustment within the educational environment.

Roderick (1993) argued that educators need to develop a new conception of the nature of school dropouts that is strongly influenced by a student's experiences in school. Roderick goes on to suggest that if dropouts' difficulties following school transitions can be attributed to the impact of pedagogical practices, then more changes in class instruction and class organization would be needed. Sanders (2000) suggested the need for further research examining ways to maximize teacher expectations and support. He concluded that from such studies, reform efforts for American high schools may be facilitated. Matsueda (1992) found that fewer studies have examined the effects of informal labeling on delinquency. Matsueda noted that when informal labeling is the focus of the research, the emphasis has been placed on negative parental reactions. Further research is needed to focus on the teachers in the labeling process.

In a recent study of interactions between student and school characteristics and student dropout status, Zvoch (2006) suggested that school personnel may need to consider how characteristics of the school environment interact with the background characteristics of students when devising interventions and policy. Roderick (1993) noted that resolving the debates over policy prescription will require an understanding of how poor school performance and disengagement develop over the youth's school career.

The theoretical framework of the present study also contributes to the literature. Trygestad (1997) suggested that as educators become more familiar with chaos theory, further research studies will be conducted. A review of the literature revealed a need to examine the dynamic processes of systems, whether biologic or social that influences student behavior in a negative way and further expands chaos theory's association with the educational process.

## Summary

The role of the relationships established in interactions involving the educational milieu and COPers is critical to bifurcation moments and subsequent success or failure of students. Positive, supporting, trusting, and respectful relationships create bridges from COPers to the learning environment. Piaget (1932) thought about the development of a sense of duty in a child. Piaget stated that “it is not the obligatory character of the rules laid down by an individual that makes us respect the individual, it is the respect we feel for the individual that makes us regard as obligatory the rule he lays down” (Piaget, 1932, p.101).

Failure to make the connection to the schooling environment may lead to academic failure for COPers. Academic failure is a major predictor of students who do not complete school (Baker, 1991; Katz, 1997; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990). Cassel (2003) noted that students who fail to complete school sustain huge costs on themselves and society. Approximately one third of students who dropout earn less than \$12,195 annually. This relates to approximately \$3.2 billion in earnings lost and \$400 million in social services, as well as, increased health problems and criminal activities (Gut, 2000; Rumberger, 1995).

Hirschi (2002) and Baker (1991) found that a students’ poor academic performance is linked to delinquency. Hirschi argued that poor school performance leads to a dislike of school, which leads to rejection of school staff, which leads to acts of delinquency. Using Lorenzo’s *Butterfly Effect* as a framework for Hirschi’s suggestion, further links in this chain could be: acts of delinquency, which may lead to school drop outs, which may lead to crime, which may lead to incarceration.

As suggested by Hall (2006), student disengagement in the educational process must be analyzed from the perspective of former COPers. Hall suggested, as in the case of this study,

that the analysis should be from a former COPER's perspective. This perspective, in a sense, provides a longitudinal component to the data. If teachers are not aware or do not understand the personal histories and experiences of students, they are less likely to engage the student in classroom instruction (Conroy & Fox; Weigle, 1997). Segall (2002) noted that the question to be asked is how teachers can engage students in a process that influences the education they are receiving. Providing teachers with qualitative data regarding the educational experiences of prison inmates may answer this question by establishing a paradigmatic bridge between the student and teacher, and, thus, provide the engagement to sustain and increase the engagement levels of the COPER (Kroeger, 2003). This point is substantiated by Hick's (2004) study regarding seventh grade COPERs that suggested that "developmentally appropriate school structures with caring and concerned teachers who are proficient working with young adolescents would eliminate school failure and promote successful learning experiences" (p.104).

The evidence provided documents the unmistakable need for teachers to provide positive engagement with their students. Kroeger (2003) suggested that this positive engagement changes teacher perceptions and expectations in a manner that creates an environment that positively engages the COPER. These proactive relationships may create a positive attachment to the learning environment that gives meaning to the educational process. This type of dynamic interaction could reduce the likelihood that students will become disengaged in the schooling process, misbehave, commit school crimes or violence, engage in delinquent behavior, dropout of school, commit adult crimes, and thus, become incarcerated. This study seeks to investigate these relationships.

## Chapter Three

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

This study's purpose was to investigate the perceptions of inmates regarding their k-12 educational experiences. A sample of inmates incarcerated at the Southwest Correctional Center was used as the subjects for this research. These participants' perceptions of their educational experiences pertaining to school engagement levels, interactions with teachers and administrators, teaching instruction, deviant behavior, school discipline problems, and life-changing events were the focus of the investigation. This exploratory study investigated a scarce perspective from the male inmate regarding their k-12 educational experiences for the purpose of improving the k-12 educational experiences of COPERs. Furthermore, this research drew upon the theoretical representation of chaos theory, labeling theory, and strain theory and their applicability to the interaction of education and criminology. This chapter describes the research design, sampling method, data analysis techniques, and the procedures utilized to ensure trustworthiness of findings for this study.

#### **Research Question**

The following research question was proposed: What are the perspectives of male inmates regarding their K-12 educational experiences? The primary concerns of this study are:

- (a) What were the characteristics associated with the respondents during their schooling years?
- (b) How did the respondents' educational experiences influence their education?
- (c) What were the respondents' engagement levels like during their educational years?
- and (d) Did the respondents' think that their educational experiences influenced life-choices, leading to their incarceration.



## **Qualitative Research Design**

Using this study as a vehicle, I wanted to “contribute knowledge that will help people understand the nature of a problem in order to intervene, thereby allowing human beings to more effectively control their environment” (Patton, 2002, p. 217). Patton’s quote exemplifies the qualitative nature of this study.

Researchers have identified elements that help define and give reasoning for the use of qualitative research. Qualitative research has been useful in such fields as anthropology, social science, history, and political science (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman suggested that qualitative research is conducted to validate research, develop the scope of existing research, gain new perspectives, and provide more detail about something that is already known. Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested that qualitative research is best used when the methods are: (a) related to the views and personal experiences of the researcher, (b) in agreement with the nature of the research problem, and (c) employed to investigate areas about which little is known. Furthermore, Marshall and Rossman (1999) described qualitative research as humanistic, interactive, naturalistic, emergent, and interpretive. My reason to use qualitative research for this study was based upon these reasons.

Glesne (1999) noted that qualitative research is used when the researcher aims to gain an understanding of research participants’ life experiences and gain meaning from those experiences. Because the goal of the present study was to gain an understanding of the research participants’ educational experiences and gain meaning from them, phenomenology was the prescribed qualitative methodology. According to Rudestam and Newton (2001), phenomenological inquiry attempts to describe and elucidate the meanings of human experience. A phenomenological application to this study focused on what the respondents experienced

during the schooling process and expressed their perspectives in a language that was as faithful to the lived experience as possible (Polkinghorne, 1989).

### **Role of the Researcher**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that in conducting a qualitative study, a researcher must do three things: (a) commit to the naturalist paradigm, (b) develop the level of skill appropriate for a human instrument, and (c) prepare a research design that utilizes accepted strategies for naturalistic inquiry. As a qualitative researcher, I accepted the task of developing my abilities in all three areas suggested by Lincoln and Guba. The task of contributing to a greater body of knowledge was immense, and with this view came vast responsibilities. As the researcher, I assumed these responsibilities eagerly.

Stauss and Corbin (1990) refer to theoretical sensitivity as a personal quality of the researcher. This sensitivity refers to the “attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, and the capacity to understand” (Stauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 42). Another important element of theoretical sensitivity suggested by Stauss and Corbin is the researcher’s ability to separate the relevant from the irrelevant. Strauss and Corbin believe that theoretical sensitivity comes from a number of sources, including professional literature, professional experiences, and personal experiences. The qualitative research report’s credibility relies on the confidence readers have in the researcher’s ability to be sensitive to the data and to make appropriate decisions in the field (Eisner, 1991; Patton, 1990).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified the characteristics that make humans the prescribed instrument for naturalistic inquiry. Humans are responsive to environmental cues and able to interact with the situation, collect information at multiple levels simultaneously, perceive

situations holistically, process data as soon as they become available, provide immediate feedback, request verification of data, and explore uncharacteristic or unexpected responses.

I feel I had prepared for this research my entire life. My background and interests give me a holistic paradigm necessary to interact with the environment and resulting data. Growing up the son of a Louisiana State Trooper and former Warden of the Southwest Correctional Center, and being the brother of a Louisiana State Trooper, I was exposed to the aspects of this study dealing with crime and incarceration. My background of teaching COPers in special education classes, coupled with my experience of coaching and teaching adolescent males for over fifteen years gave me a holistic paradigm for understanding the interaction of the proposed systems in this study: COPers, education, and crime. As a researcher, I was professional and treated the study with tremendous respect. I made all attempts to represent the ideology and practice of qualitative research. It was important to continue the never-ending pursuit of knowledge in a systematic, logical manner.

### **Researcher Bias**

Creswell (2003) described the qualitative researcher as one who “systematically reflects on who he or she is in the inquiry and is sensitive to his or her personal biography and how it shapes the study” (p. 182). As an educator of teenaged, male students in a secondary public school setting, I witnessed the interplay between the ecosystem of the school and the ecosystem of the student on a daily basis. I saw students on the path to success and students on the path to failure. I was intrigued by the idea of the educational system boastfully acknowledging its contribution to students’ success but distancing itself from blame regarding students’ failure. How can we as educators change our perspectives to allow us the opportunity to engage COPers unconditionally?

Careful consideration was made to ensure that my position as the researcher regarding this perspective and my family background in criminal justice did not interfere with data collection and analysis. Researcher bias was monitored throughout the data collection and analysis process. The findings were revisited several times to ensure that the words of the prisoners were evident in the findings and not the researcher's personal thoughts and questions.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board in early 2007 (Appendix A). Participant exploitation and University Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines were two major areas considered during the study. Glesne (1999) describes the basic principles of the IRB as follows: (a) the participant should always be able to make informed decisions, (b) withdrawal from the study without penalty should always be an option, (c) participant risks must be eliminated or significantly reduced, (d) the benefits of participation should outweigh any risks, and (e) the researcher must be qualified to conduct the study.

A thorough consent form (Appendix B) was developed for this study to address each of these principles. Guidelines required an oral consent form that was written at the fifth grade level to accommodate the average literacy level of prisoners in Louisiana. The consent form stated that the study would have no effect on administrative treatment within the prison or on parole board decisions (Appendix C). This was important so that the inmates did not feel participation would afford them preferential treatment.

I felt the qualification principle had been met in three significant ways: (a) conducting the Pilot Study in 2005, (b) completion of doctoral coursework regarding methodological application, and (c) the completion of the National Institute of Health sponsored online course. I gained research certification by completing the Human Participants Protection Education for

Research Teams online course (Appendix D) on September 1, 2006 (<http://www.nih.gov>). This course included the following certification principles.

- Key historical events and current issues that impact guidelines and legislation on human participant protection in research.
- Ethical principles and guidelines that should assist in resolving the ethical issues inherent in the conduct of research with human participants.
- The use of key ethical principles and federal regulations to protect human participants at various stages in the research process.
- A description of guidelines for the protection of special populations in research.
- A definition of informed consent and components necessary for a valid consent.
- A description of the role of the IRB in the research process.
- The roles , responsibilities, and interactions of federal agencies, institutions, and researchers in conducting research with human participants.

Ethical considerations were a priority throughout the investigation, data analysis, presentation of the findings, and discussion of the inmates' educational experiences. The priority of anonymity was addressed by using pseudonyms. This study used pseudonyms in place of the respondents' names, the education director's name, the name of the parish the study was conducted, and the name of the prison the respondents were incarcerated.

### **Assumptions**

My primary assumption was that the respondents' perspectives would reveal that there was a disconnect between the COPERs and the educational process. A second assumption was that the education director would provide me with information rich participants for data retrieval. A general assumption posited from my interpretation was that the embodiment of the theory,

literature, and perspectives of the respondents would provide the most revealing and coveted solutions for all stakeholders regarding the perpetual disengagement of youth from the schooling experience and society. This disengagement might have ultimately led to socially and educationally inappropriate behaviors. The interplay between the school environment, individual domestic circumstances, school engagement levels, and schooling experiences might be contributing components of COPers' negative outcomes. A lack of qualitative, pedagogical understanding of the COPER population might inhibit teachers, administrators, support personnel, and, for that matter, education systems as a whole, from providing tributaries to the oceans of success that education has to offer.

### **Site**

According to the Southwest Parish Sheriff's Department website (2006), the Corrections Division of the Southwest Parish Sheriff's Office is composed of two facilities: The Southwest Correctional Center and Southwest Sheriff's Prison. The detention facilities were constructed to provide incarceration as an appropriate deterrent to the commission of crime, to be used as a method of guidance and treatment for incarcerated offenders, and assist the judicial system with evaluation tools and information for use when sentencing offenders. The Corrections Division offers a variety of services to the community, the criminal justice system, and offenders. The services provided directly to the community focus on education/information and reparative support. The most obvious services provided to offenders are risk-management programs that are targeted at criminogenic needs and designed to reduce the likelihood of re-offending. In 2005, the Corrections Division admitted over 8,000 prisoners, and its current prison population is 1100 male inmates.

## Pilot Study

### *Introduction*

In the summer of 2005, a pilot study was conducted to test the interview questionnaire and research methodology. The pilot study included in-depth, focus-group interviews, which consisted of four inmates incarcerated in the Southwest Correctional Center. The sample available was in the GED program at the prison. Inmates in the program had to meet certain criteria: (a) they had to ask to be in the program, (b) they could not be inmates from B Block. Inmates from B Block were automatically disqualified because they were considered violent, and (c) they could not have bonds higher than \$100,000. The pilot study afforded me an opportunity to do some preliminary work directly related to the current proposed study, thus providing a foundation for the deeper inquiry of dissertation work.

### *Findings*

There were five themes I detected from the focus group transcripts: (a) characteristics of inmates during the educational years, (b) relationships with teachers, (c) guardian involvement in the educational process, (d) educational engagement-positive, and (e) disinterest in the educational process. I categorized the many characteristics of the inmates into one theme. Theme one *characteristics* included: (a) having absent parents, (b) using drugs/alcohol, (c) skipping school, (d) fighting, (e) escalating deviant behavior in middle school, (f) quiet/introverted, and (h) getting picked on.

The second theme I detected was *relationships with teachers*. In general, the inmates could not recall the names of their teachers, except for the teachers they liked and why they liked them. A sub theme detected was the characteristics of the teachers they liked. One inmate stated, “She was sweet. She reminded me of my grandmother.” Another remembered Mrs. Jones who

brought treats to class. Also remembered by another inmate was Mrs. Smith, “We got along real well. She did things to keep the class interested.” One inmate articulately described his favorite teacher, Mr. Jones, as being honest and “if you did not understand something, he would show you another way.”

The third theme detected was *parental or guardian involvement*. Because of at least one parent absent, most of the participants noted poor parental or guardian involvement in the educational process. One inmate stated that he grew up with his grandmother rearing him. He stated that she could not read or write, and he basically had to learn everything on his own.

The fourth and fifth theme detected was the *engagement levels* of the students during the educational process, both *positive and negative*. Overall, the participants enjoyed or were interested in school during the elementary years. This interest gradually deteriorated as the educational process continued. The middle school years became a “melting point” of factors that exposed a critical juncture in the deterioration of this process. As one inmate described, “the middle school years is when it all broke loose.” It was noted that extracurricular activities provided a positive influence on their schooling experience. One inmate stated that he enjoyed his elementary years because he was in plays. Another inmate stated that the primary reason he graduated was because he was in the band in high school.

#### *Pilot Study – Reflection and Revisions*

The present study’s investigative inquiry was easier to navigate because of the pilot study. Having a plan for the pilot study was important for preparation, but having to execute the plan by interviewing, transcribing data, analyzing data, and developing themes from data analysis brought trial and error to the forefront. The identified themes facilitated the asking of more pertinent questions. I focused more on periods or events in which the individuals were



experiencing emotions detrimental to the educational process, engaging in activities at school and outside of school that were harmful to their engagement levels toward schooling, and interacting with their teachers and staff.

Based on the Pilot Study, numerous additional issues were discovered. These issues were used to expand and refine the data analysis techniques for this study. Revisions made for the present study were: (a) expanding the interview guide to include more emphasis on the teacher-student relationship, teacher instruction experiences, themes of school disengagement, and the middle school years, (b) consulting with administrators at the elementary, middle, and high school level, and asking what would they want to know if they could question the inmates regarding their educational experiences. (c) carefully revising the questions regarding the deletion of any questions that could be interpreted as relating to family or criminal history experiences, (d) separating the interview guide into three different guides to reflect the three stages of the schooling process: elementary, middle, and high school, and (e) targeting an age group of 18-30 for the present study to gain a perspective from the recent past. The older prisoners in the pilot study seemed too far removed from their educational experiences.

The Pilot Study proved beneficial in establishing a comfort zone for working in a prison environment. The interviews conducted were rewarding, educational, and purposeful. I also felt comfortable with the research design. I became comfortable with the interview format and with the use of the tape recorder to gain quality data. After the pilot study, I developed a deeper curiosity to examine other inmates and the perceptions of their educational experiences.

### **Research Plan**

Qualitative research uses a dominant strategy called purposeful or purposive sampling. This sampling technique seeks information-rich data (Patton, 1990). Lincoln and Guba (1985)

suggest that purposive sampling is used in naturalistic inquiry to concentrate on the range of realities that make up an individual's perspective rather than being concerned with generalizing to a larger population. Based on this philosophical approach to qualitative sampling, I targeted a sample of twelve inmates at the Southwest Correctional Center to gain an in-depth understanding about their k-12 educational experiences.

Participant selection proceeded according to what is termed "snowballing" or chain sampling. This type of sampling strategy requires the assistance of designated contacts and their staff at the prison to direct me to potential participants who are considered information rich and informative (Kuzel, 2001). I obtained permission to conduct the study from the Southwest Parish Sheriff's Office (Appendix E) and the University's Institutional Review Board before seeking out potential participants.

I consulted with the Education Director at the prison to contribute to identifying potential participants for the study. The sample group involved in this study was incarcerated at the Southwest Correctional Center (SCC). The anticipated goal for the number of participants was twelve males. Sample size is less important for qualitative inquiry than the rich information collected from the participants (Patton, 1990). A letter explaining the participant selection process (Appendix F) and selection table (Appendix G) was sent to Mr. Goodly requesting a sample of 15 potential participants fitting the criteria. The criteria for selection were: (a) incarcerated males, (b) aged 18-30, (c) school dropouts, (d) presently or formerly enrolled in the prison GED program, and (e) attended school in Louisiana. The reason for the young age group in the prison population was to keep the experiences relevant to the issues of our educational system in recent past. The sample was diversely representative and an approximation of the dropout population in Louisiana, 47% for blacks and 34% for whites (Diplomas Count, 2006).

Thus, as a goal, I sought to include seven African-Americans and five Caucasians for the sample. Participants were chosen for their potential to contribute valuable data to the research. The participants were either current or former GED students at SCC. Upon receipt of the 15 potential participants from Mr. Goodly, I then selected 12 of the possible 15 participants to be used in the study. Mr. Goodly did not provide names of the inmates, only numbers, 1-15, and the race of the inmate next to the corresponding number. Only Mr. Goodly knew the identities of the inmates selected. The remaining three participants not selected were used as back-ups if needed. After discovering qualified and willing participants for the study, I consulted with Mr. Goodly to ascertain times and dates for interviews. I also acquired properly functioning equipment – tape recorders.

At the beginning of each interview session, participants were presented an oral consent form that described the research project. This form was used to allow permission from the subjects to participate in the study and provide the authorization needed to audiotape the session. I read the consent form, making sure as I read that they had a clear understanding of the study, its procedures, and their rights. After discussing the oral consent form and my commitment to confidentiality, participants were asked if they understood the information. Each one agreed, thus indicating that they understood their rights regarding participation.

Safeguards to ensure the confidentiality of the participants were applied in several ways. First, pseudonyms were used to identify the participants to protect anonymity. Next, I ensured that all audiotapes of all interviews and transcripts were kept separate from one another and in a private, secured location. Aside from myself and my doctoral committee, no one had access to this information.

## **Data Collection**

The interview guide's purpose was to: 1) ensure that the same sets of questions were asked of each participant, 2) elucidate the research questions, and 3) establish flow for the probing of the inmates' reflections. I developed three separate interview guides (Appendix H, I, & J) that reflected each stage of the schooling journey (elementary, middle, and high school). After each stage was discussed, I moved to the next stage's guide to assist the flow of the interview and field note organization. It was my intention to probe participants for more information regarding their experiences relating to the education years. The respondents' points of view was sought through detailed interviewing (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The nature of qualitative research allowed for revision of the researcher's interview guide to focus attention on specific areas or delete questions that are unproductive (Lofland & Lofland, 1984).

"The purpose of interviewing, then," according to Patton (2002, p. 341), "is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective." Patton continued, "We interview to find out what is in and on someone else's mind, to gather their stories" (p. 341). The purpose of my interviews was to get to the stories these participants had to share of their experiences in the American educational system.

I conducted individual interviews with each of the twelve participants. The interviews lasted approximately one to one and a half hours. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. I was able to systematically return to the written text for extraction of data pertinent to the evolving themes and phenomena.

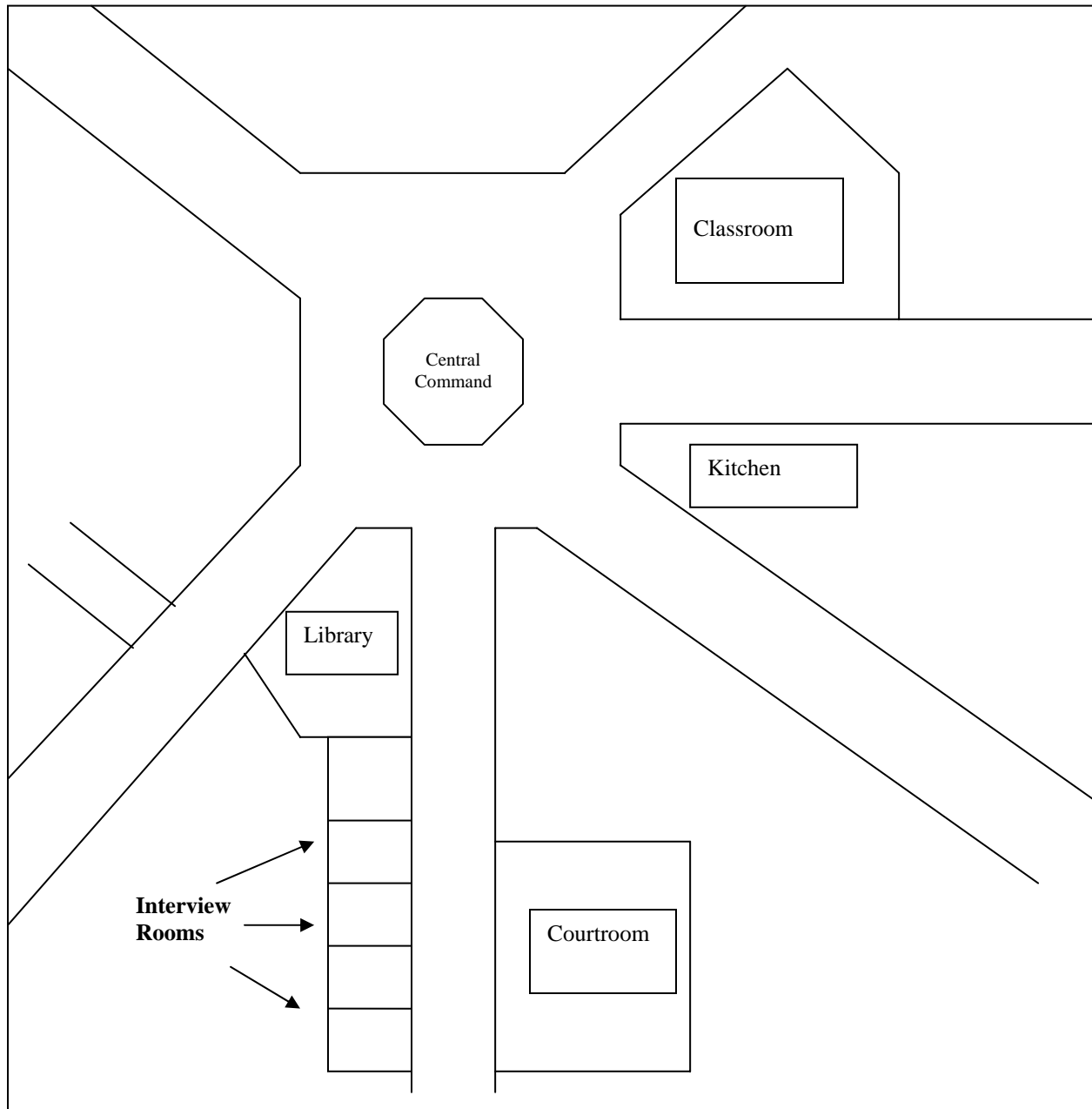
## **Interview Site**

The individual interview sessions took place in the interview/attorney rooms located along the Central hallway in the prison. These rooms provided a location of minimal distraction

and safety. Correction officers and prison staff were constantly visible in the hallway. The doors to the rooms provided visibility into the room with four foot by one foot vertical windows and provided a comfortable atmosphere with dimensions of ten feet by eight feet. The rooms were available to me from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. The participants were available at these times conditioned upon scheduled appointments.

The following diagram (Figure 2) displays the configuration of the interview area and the area's location within the prison.

**Figure 2 Diagram of Area for Individual Interview**



## **Data Analysis**

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) defined qualitative data analysis as “working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (p. 145). Patton (1990) suggested that qualitative researchers tend to use inductive analysis of data, meaning that the critical themes emerge out of the data. Using a phenomenological research method, I conducted interview sessions that lasted approximately one to one and a half hours. At the completion of the interviews, the transcripts were transcribed, coded and cross-referenced for commonalities and phenomena related to the topic discussed and the researcher’s questions for the study. The researcher carefully examined each transcript and labeled the text with abbreviated themes, codes, thoughts, or symbols.

Once the major themes were identified, copies of the unlabeled, original transcripts were highlighted to elucidate the data with the corresponding themes. With the themes and sub-themes highlighted, I reviewed the data not highlighted to further examine any missed or unassigned data. Upon completion of this process, I revisited the labeled transcripts and transferred notes, specific field notes, and research applicable to the themes elucidated to the highlighted version of the transcripts. Because the interview guide was structured with each stage of the schooling process examined separately, the transcripts analysis process flowed easily.

While the literature described stages of analysis in a linear fashion, in practice they occurred simultaneously and repeatedly (see Figure 3). For example, during coding the researcher determined that the initial categories identified must be revised, which led to re-examination of the raw data. This process allowed the researcher to continuously examine the codes, concepts, and themes until all the transcripts were analyzed. Figure 3 exhibits the holistic,

non-linear approach to data analysis. From this perspective, all elements of data analysis are theoretically occurring at the same time. Figure 3 depicts the conceptual model as the underlying framework for the research. The conceptual model guided the researcher through the design of the study. The conceptual model was revisited and revised as the research progressed and contributed to developing the story-line and discussion of the study. The researcher translated the resulting themes of the data analysis process into a revised conceptual model that contributed to developing the story line that will be read by others. The research report is a tightly woven account that “closely approximates the reality it represents” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 57).

### **Trustworthiness**

Figure 3 also displays the non-linear approach to establishing trustworthiness in the study. The figure displays four constructs of the study that occurred throughout the research design. The concept of trustworthiness of findings refers to the usefulness of your results. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify four constructs for enhancing the effectiveness of your findings: 1) credibility, 2) transferability, 3) dependability, and 4) conformability.

Credibility depends less on sample size than on the richness of the information gathered and on the analytical abilities of the researcher (Patton, 1990). Glesne (1999) describes rapport established with participants equivalent to establishing trust. To arrive at the richness noted, the researcher sought to establish trust with each inmate from the moment of courteous introductions. I purposely stood partially in the hallway awaiting the arrival of Mr. Goodly and the inmate to the interview session. A smile, firm handshake, and, “Nice to meet you!” awaited each inmate. I continued to establish trust or rapport by engaging in small talk with the inmates before the formalities began. It was important to be efficient in establishing trust due to the briefness of the encounter. In addition, while reading the oral consent form as they followed



along with their copy, I made an effort to be relaxed, looking up occasionally and re-explaining lengthy sections. I made a concentrated effort to demonstrate attentiveness and respect to each response. I was able to establish great rapport with each inmate and considered their responses to be genuine, sincere, and truthful. I made certain that their words were represented in the transcript versions.

The researcher cannot specify the transferability of findings. The reader must determine whether the findings are transferable to their situation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By providing adequate detail and background information, I provided readers and researchers with enough information to ascertain whether the results may be transferable to other contexts.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose that the use of an “inquiry audit” enhances the dependability of qualitative research (p. 317). The inquiry audit allows the reviewers the opportunity to examine the consistency of the research process and product. I provided a detailed account of the methods used in each aspect of the research plan.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to the degree to which the researcher can demonstrate the neutrality of the research interpretations, through a “confirmability audit.” This means providing an audit trail consisting of 1) raw data; 2) analysis notes; 3) reconstruction and synthesis products; 4) process notes; 5) personal notes; and 6) preliminary developmental information (pp. 320-321). I systematically revisited these areas to ensure confirmability by making a constant reference to the transcripts throughout the process of reporting and discussing the findings, using tables for theme analysis, and revisiting and revising the conceptual framework.

An additional effort to address confirmability entailed discussing the findings with two debriefers – a former elementary principal and now high school principal and an assistant middle school principal. These debriefers were selected for their knowledge of working with students at

### Figure 3 Research Design Model



## **Summary**

This chapter presented an outline of a qualitative study designed to explore the perceptions of inmates regarding their educational experiences. A rationale for using a qualitative method was offered, and phenomenology was described as the qualitative approach most suited to the research question. The methods for data collection and analysis were described as part of the research plan.

Chapter four and chapter five conclude the study. Chapter four presents the findings and describes them based on themes developed through data analysis and describes the setting, individual inmates, and their quotes. Chapter five discusses the connection between the findings, the literature, and the revised conceptual framework of the study. Chapter five also includes implications of the study and suggestions for future research.

## Chapter Four

### Findings

#### Introduction

The primary purpose for conducting this study was to determine the perceptions of prisoners regarding their kindergarten through twelfth grade (k-12) education. The researcher was able to learn about the respondents' k-12 educational experiences by conducting one-on-one individual interviews. The voices of male inmates may address the gap within the literature regarding their unique perspectives of their educational journey. This study's central focus is to uncover the perspective of former COPEs (Children Of Promise in Education – a revised at-risk term) in the schooling process.

The selection process was developed after extensive coordination with the University of New Orleans Institutional Review Board. The research participants were selected according to the following criteria: (a) incarcerated male, (b) aged 18-30, (c) school drop-out, (d) present or former prison-GED participant, and (e) former student of a Louisiana school. Mr. Goodly, the education director of the prison, coded the inmates by number and designated their race next to the number. He kept the list with the names and numbers and sent the researcher the list with no names, only numbers and race. The researcher randomly selected 15 participants and provided the list to Mr. Goodly. The ethnic breakdown of the 12 participants chosen from the 15 potential participants was seven African –Americans and five Caucasians. The remaining three participants were used as back-ups if needed. This ratio of black to white is a close approximation of the dropout rate ratio in the state of Louisiana, 47% for African-Americans and 34% for Caucasians (CABL, 2006). The researcher and Mr. Goodly coordinated the interview

schedules for the participants selected. The researcher conducted three interviews per day over a four day period. The warden was not involved in the participant selection process.

A primary goal for the researcher while conducting the interviews was to protect the anonymity of the inmates. In devising a protocol for the interview process, anonymity was the central concern. Several safeguards were instituted to guarantee anonymity. They were as follows: (a) neither the date nor time was recorded for the interviews, (b) identifying information was not used for the interviews except for race, and (c) nothing linked the content of the discussion with the participant (i.e. inmate's amputated leg). These procedures were closely followed.

Chapter four is comprised of two primary sections. First, the informants are introduced with a descriptive portrait of the interview setting and the individual inmate participants. Section two offers a summary of the data analysis, procedures, and emerging themes. This section of chapter four introduces the emergent themes from the interviews. The data answer the general research question, "What are the experiences of male inmates regarding their K-12 educational experiences?"

### **Southwest Corrections Center**

According to the Southwest Parish Sheriff's Department website (2006), the Corrections Division of the Southwest Parish Sheriff's Office is composed of two facilities: The Southwest Correctional Center and Southwest Sheriff's Prison. The detention facilities were constructed to provide incarceration as an appropriate deterrent to crime, to be used as a method of guidance and treatment for incarcerated offenders, and to provide the judicial system with evaluative information to use when sentencing offenders. The Corrections Division offers a variety of

services to the community, the criminal justice system, and offenders. The services provided directly to the community focus on education/information and reparative support.

In 2005, the Corrections Division admitted over 8,000 prisoners with its current prison population being 1,100 male inmates. For the most part, the 1,100 inmates are confined to their cells each day. The inmates do have opportunities for recreation, vocational education, academic education, and work. According to the Southwest Sheriff's Office Corrections Division policy manual, the inmates have access to recreational opportunities and equipment, including one hour daily of physical exercise outside the cell and outdoors, when weather permits. The purpose for the vocational and academic education programs is to provide the inmates with the tools that may improve their educational and vocational skills. These tools may decrease inmate recidivism by preparing inmates to lead a more productive life. The inmates also have the opportunity to enroll in the prison work program. Inmates are notified of work program positions that are available through the classification office or the inmate television information channel. A normal workday for the inmates working outside of the facility is from 6:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. and for inmates working inside the facility is from 6:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. or from 6:00 p.m. until 4:00 a.m.

### **Researcher's Perspective on Interview day**

The facility is located off of a formerly, well-traveled roadway. Now, however, the roadway is mainly used by employees of the prison system or families visiting the prison. The city's industrial airport is within a mile of the prison. As I approached the facility in my vehicle, I could not help but notice a field of vegetation adjacent to the prison. Later, I discovered that this was the property of the prison and that the prisoners actually cultivated and worked in the fields. On the left of the roadway, directly across from the prison was a Vegas-style smorgasbord

of bail bondsmen establishments. The establishments' neon lights were barely visible in the afternoon sun. I turned into the prison area about a quarter mile later. I pulled into an open parking spot facing the prison. I double-checked my bag for the recorder, interview guides, batteries, tapes, and pens.

I had dressed moderately, wearing a polo pull-over shirt, slacks, and dress shoes. I put thought into my dress for the interview sessions. I did not want to be too formal with a suit or tie. I felt that would cause the inmates to experience withdrawal – having been conditioned to be wary of formality such as police, lawyers, judges, and the judicial system itself. I felt that too casual an appearance would cause the prison personnel to be suspicious or concerned.

As I stepped out of the vehicle, a twenty-foot fence was prominent with spiraling barbed-wire fixed at the top. As I walked on the side-walk along the fence line, I heard the sound of voices coming from the direction of one of the prison pods. As I looked in that direction, a voice screamed out, “What are you looking at?” At that moment, it became clear the inmates' cells had windows with iron bars that accessed the outside. I didn't want to draw any more attention, so I looked away and without the hint of intimidation, continued to walk to the entrance.

I checked in at the front desk, signed a form, and awaited Mr. Goodly, the education director. There were several families awaiting visitation with their incarcerated relative. Walking with Mr. Goodly down the hall and pausing was eerie. We waited for the steel doors to be opened by monitors at the main desk. We went through three such doors to gain access to the pod hallways. We walked to the central location of the facility, the control center. There, Mr. Goodly accessed the key to the interview room. The atmosphere was extremely cold, clean, and odorless, yet the reality of captivity was present.

We went into the library to talk and await the time to retrieve the first inmate. Mr. Goodly immediately began filling me in on the GED (General Equivalency Diploma) program and its participants as we walked into the library where class was being held. GED classes were held in the library and in the education classroom located across the hall. Being in the GED setting gave me an opportunity to observe the inmates and the program from which I selected my sample. Besides maybe just a glance, the inmates seemed to pay no attention to me as I walked in. Mr. Goodly explained that the tutors, who were inmates, did most of the teaching with the help of computers. The computers had GED software specific to the needs of the inmates. The inmates in the class have to ask to be in the program. In addition, they have to meet certain criteria to be accepted. Inmates who are in B Block are automatically disqualified from being in the program because they are considered violent. Also, inmates with bonds higher than \$100,000 cannot be admitted to the program.

There were nine black and three white inmates in the library. The room was painted with three different colors. The top half of the wall was a light blue, the middle, a teal blue, and the bottom portion was beige. There were two large windows in the room. The window behind where I was seated looked out to the central command post. The other window looked out to the basketball court. On one of the desks was a Bible, and I noticed a map of the Middle East on the wall above the desk. I then noticed a sheet taped to the computer terminal directly in front of my seat. It was a list of the library rules. The rules listed were: (a) inmates will remain seated, (b) no loud talking or unnecessary movement, (c) full participation is required, (d) no disrespect will be tolerated, (e) no non-trustee is to leave the library w/o being escorted for any reason, (f) if not a student, do not enter the library during class, and (g) educational tutor is there for assistance.



The inmates wore orange jumpsuits, blue jumpsuits, khakis jumpsuits or yellow t-shirts. *Inmate* was in bold letters across the back of all of them. Mr. Goodly informed me upon questioning that the uniform colors other than orange meant the inmates were a trustee to some degree. All of the inmates were diligently working at their terminals and waiting patiently and courteously for the tutors to help them.

The interview rooms were located along the Central/Intake hallway in the prison. These rooms provided a location of minimal distraction. These rooms were generally used by lawyers and investigators for meetings with the inmates. Correction officers and prison staff were constantly visible in the hallway. The doors to the rooms provided visibility into the room with four foot by one foot vertical windows, and the room itself provided a comfortable atmosphere with dimensions of ten feet by eight feet. There was a relatively small desk in the middle of the room with a chair on each side. Located along the wall was a bench with ironclad, square bars sticking out the top to secure the wrists of the inmates if needed. However, none of the inmates were chained in the interview sessions. In fact, they were all with the researcher in a one-on-one setting with the door closed to the interview room.

Mr. Goodly brought me to the room to await the first participant. Mr. Goodly set the interview times, but still had to have the inmates brought to the area. I waited, not inside the room, but in the doorway. As Mr. Goodly approached with the first inmate, I stuck out my hand and said, "Glad to meet you. Thanks for coming." I hoped this would be an ice-breaker welcome. It seemed to work.

*Ron*

I began this interview, and all subsequent interviews, with the same introduction. I read over the oral consent forms, explaining the interview and its purpose and made sure both tape recorders were rolling, in case one did not function properly.

I began the interview guide with an explanation of how we were going to organizationally conduct the interview. I told Ron that if we were to divide up his education into three separate periods, we would take his education from kindergarten to fifth grade as one period, middle school grades – sixth, seventh, and eighth as another period, and high school years as the last period. I explained to Ron that I would ask questions focusing on each of those periods of his education. I said, “Let’s talk about your elementary educational experiences. Let’s go back to that time period when you were a little boy going to school.” (I felt it was important to try to mentally take the respondents back to these particular time periods by organizing them into three areas: elementary, middle, and high school.) The description of each participant, therefore, is a general portrait of his educational journey.

Ron was Caucasian and dropped out of school in the tenth grade. He lived with his mom who worked most of the time. In the early years, Ron went to a Christian school and remembered that he was not fond of reading. He moved to the public school system in the third grade and discovered this transition to be a rough one. Ron described himself as a loner with low self-esteem. He indicated that he was picked on quite a bit and felt like an “oddball.” He described himself as a hyper kid, but stated that his mom could not afford the medications to calm him down.

Ron expressed that the middle school years were the most difficult time for him. He became very apathetic toward school and felt his mom just couldn't help. Ron moved three times in middle school and tried to fit in at his new schools by being the class clown.

About half way through Ron's interview, there was a knock on the door. I went to the door and opened it. The guard wanted to know if I needed to talk to these two guys, one named Vasquez. They were of Mexican descent. I said I didn't think so. I knew this because they were in orange jump suits, and I was interviewing trustees that day, wearing blue or beige jump suits. The guard said, "OK," and left. Ron, looking disgusted with the guard's interruption, said the guard's name and said, "He never knows what the fuck's going on." Ron had a lot of anger in his educational journey, and it surfaced at times in the interview. According to Ron, this anger, his apathetic attitude, and discovery of drugs in high school led to his drop-out point in the tenth grade.

### *Reggie*

Reggie was African-American and dropped out of school in the eleventh grade. Reggie had good grades through elementary and remembered his teachers' names. Reggie attended school in a rural setting and stated that both of his parents were involved early in his education.

Reggie felt like his involvement in basketball as an extracurricular activity in middle school and high school was positive. Reggie started to get into fights in middle school, however, and that caused him to be suspended. He continued playing basketball but became ineligible due to poor grades in the eleventh grade and had to quit. Reggie discovered girls and alcohol at that time and missed too much school. His mom and dad had given up by then and left him alone to drop-out.

### *Nate*

Nate was an African-American who lived with his grandmother while growing up. She was there to make sure Nate did everything right, and, for the most part, Nate did fairly well in the early schooling years. It was obvious that his grandmother was very influential in his life. She was there for him and guided him with advice. During this time, Nate liked school. He grinned with softness as he recalled a field trip to the New Orleans Zoo and a school festival in elementary school.

These good times came to an abrupt end in the eighth grade at 8 a.m. on Nate's first day of school. The administration called him to the office where his aunt waited. She informed Nate his grandmother, his "lady," had passed away. At this point in the interview, Nate described himself in his eighth grade year as being in a deep depression. This was obviously a time in Nate's life when he lost his way. He was living with his dad now, and things went down hill from that point on. Nate never recovered. He dropped out of school in his ninth grade year.

### *Dexter*

Dexter was a muscular, African-American who seemed out of place in the prison. Dexter articulated his thoughts well and had a good sense of his educational background. Dexter went to school in an urban setting and lived with just his mother in the early years. Even though he stayed with his mother, she was rarely there, but his grandmother was there for him. When Dexter got home, he would go to his grandmother's house.

Dexter also enjoyed his elementary years. In middle school he went to a magnet school located out of his school zone, so he had to ride the bus. This is the period in Dexter's educational journey when "the turmoil set it." Dexter moved to a different town and experienced

the move to another school. He participated in athletics, and that kept him in check at school, but after school, the streets began to consume his time.

His transition to ninth grade was “smooth” because of sports, but then he broke his leg, and his mom moved back to the city. Dexter did not want to go and stayed behind. He lived by himself for about a year. Dexter literally took care of himself during this time. He seemed strong and proud of his ability to be independent, but he was also cognizant of the fact that this was not, in the long run, good for him. Dexter was arrested for theft during this time and had to spend time “locked up.”

Dexter’s temper and apathy eventually got the best of him, and he was expelled from the school system for threatening a teacher. He came back and eventually dropped out. Dexter made it to April of his senior year. Being that close to graduation and not being able to push through to the end seemed to haunt him.

### *Eddie*

Eddie began the second day of interviews. After the first day, I was looking forward to the second day. Eddie was an African-American who had a sense of humor and seemed to be at ease with the interview session. I really got a chuckle from one of Eddie’s responses to the question regarding his favorite subjects in elementary. Eddie responded:

I liked math and history, really. English, I had trouble in. I liked the exactness of math; history was interesting. I took an interest in certain things, you know, like what Christopher Columbus did, and George Washington did this. I like that. Science, I just liked, you know, you could make bombs and shit.

His transition from the seriousness of the subjects and their content matter that seemed very normal to the unusual quip of his interest in science caught me by surprise. I could not help but

laugh, while verifying, “You didn’t make any bombs, did you?” To which Eddie responded in loud laughter, “No, man!”

Eddie had a mother and father, but as Eddie stated, his father had “eleven kids total.” Eddie stayed with his father and step-mom and two brothers and two sisters. Eddie changed schools in middle school – going from an all-black school to a predominately white school. He described this change as a frightening experience, but said he thought it was better for him educationally. What he could not overcome, however, was the call of “the streets.” During middle school, Eddie’s dad lived elsewhere but came to his mom’s house a couple of nights a week. He was pretty much left on his own to make unsupervised decisions, which turned out to be destructive ones. During Eddie’s first year in high school, he was arrested for stealing in August. As he explained his plight, Eddie dropped his shoulders, looked down, and said, “Ninth grade started, and I didn’t go to school ‘til Christmas.” By his eleventh grade year, Eddie wasn’t attending school regularly and quit rather than face the obstacles of repeating courses due to absences.

### *Dennis*

Dennis was Caucasian and came to the interview from his duties in the kitchen. He was covered from head to toe in flour and still had his hair-net on. He wore it throughout the interview, and it did not seem to bother him.

Dennis failed every grade from the first through the eighth. Dennis stated somewhat proudly, “I did every year twice.” Dennis seemed to be a student who figured out the system at an early age: the system would socially promote him if he would just be patient. Dennis thought his parents should have been harder on him and that the school just tried to tolerate him the best

it could. Dennis was always older than his peers. He smoked his first joint in the third grade when he was about eleven and his peers were just around eight years of age.

According to Dennis, his only accomplishment was the fact that he never missed school. Dennis was in school physically but was not there cognitively. Once Dennis got to the eighth grade, he discovered alcohol. According to Dennis, the combination of “the weed” and “alcohol” took its toll, and he quit school in the eighth grade.

#### *Arnold*

Arnold was African-American and informed me at the beginning of the interview that he had been involved in an accident in 2000 and might have a hard time remembering. Arnold had two life events that impacted his journey. One, being the accident, in which he was struck by a truck in the street, broke both pelvic bones, and was out of school for a while because of his stay at a hospital in New Orleans; and two, he became a father at the tender age of thirteen. Also on his resume` of problems was the fact that he had a probation officer assigned to monitor his activities during his schooling journey. Arnold spent time in juvenile detention centers throughout the state, which interrupted the educational process. His early educational years were punctuated with his placement in FINS (Families In Need of Services).

Arnold was street smart and felt that the school system could not give him what he wanted. He was ready to drop out by the start of his freshman year in high school. Arnold was somehow able to survive until the eleventh grade year before dropping out.

#### *Irvin*

Irvin was African-American and dropped out of high school in the eleventh grade. Irvin described himself as being quiet, and this characteristic was evident throughout the interview. As such, it was hard to elicit responses with the much depth.

Irvin's mom worked "all the time," and his brother who graduated from high school helped him with his homework in her absence. Irvin made good grades during his elementary years and could not think of anything "bad" about any of his elementary school teachers. Irvin described his teachers accordingly: "They were good people." Irvin's problems started to develop when he got to middle school.

Irvin felt that his participation in sports was helpful in keeping him in school, but once he got injured in football his freshman year, he just did not care anymore about school. His drug use, which began in middle school, got worse; he skipped more school and became more apathetic. Irvin dropped out in the middle of his eleventh grade year.

### *Tony*

Tony was Caucasian and lived with his mother and step-dad. Tony described his elementary years as good, but in the sixth grade, he had to move to another town and go to another school. This was a difficult adjustment for Tony, but he gradually made friends and began to "fit in." Tony began his experimentation with drugs during his eighth grade year on the morning of the LEAP (Louisiana Educational Assessment Program) exam. Reportedly, he failed the exam but passed it in summer school.

Tony relocated back to the city when high school started. Tony went from a rural school setting to a large school with close to 2000 students. Tony described it as, "way too much." In the middle of Tony's ninth grade year, he was expelled for having a few ounces of marijuana at school. Tony finished the year at an alternative school but returned to the high school at the start of the next school year. The drug use continued; he started missing more and more days, and finally, he dropped out.



### *Robby*

Robby was Caucasian and dropped out of school in the eighth grade. Robby lived with his mother, and as he describes it, “her different boyfriends.” Her promiscuousness led to Robby’s moving at least ten times during his elementary years. She was not around to help Robby and his sister with their schooling. In fact, according to Robby, she would not get home until around eight p.m. each night. Robby and his sister were left alone at the house until then. Robby did not have an affectionate tone in his voice when talking about the “boyfriends” who came and went in his mother’s life. “They would beat me and stuff,” Robby exclaimed.

Robby enjoyed his early schooling experience, but failed the third grade because he missed too many days. Robby remembered making good overall grades in elementary. In middle school Robby described himself as a bad student influenced by his “environment, home and friends.” Robby got expelled in the seventh grade, went to school in another state, and got expelled over there. In the other state, Robby and his mom were living with a new boyfriend. Robby was expelled from that school system for getting in a fight and hitting the teacher who tried to break it up. His mom’s boyfriend “beat the hell out of [him]” for this, so they moved back to Louisiana. Robby did drugs, skipped school, and was “put in jail” when he returned to Louisiana. Robby dropped out of school during his eighth grade year.

### *Willie*

Willie was African-American and described himself as a loner. Most of Willie’s responses were no more than five to ten words. The themes were emerging as Willie responded to the questions: dysfunctional family, good elementary experiences, middle school problems, moved and changed schools, poor school performance, lack of or poor communication with the schooling environment, apathy, cutting or skipping school, and blaming himself. The only two

themes not revealed in the interview were drug use and fighting. Willie did not disclose either trait. Willie failed the eleventh grade and did not go back to school.

### *Brian*

Brian was Caucasian and dropped out of school in the seventh grade. Brian discussed in good detail his teachers and the transition to middle school. Brian fought all the time. He did not handle the emotional trauma of his grandfather's death. Instead, he lashed out at school with violent behavior due to his frustration. Brian was expelled from the school system for fighting and from that point, was home-schooled by his mother. His home-schooling lasted until the eleventh grade.

### **The Ride Home**

At the conclusion of the last interview, I thanked Brian for his time and thoughts on the subject matter. Brian dismissed himself, and I collected my things. I made final notations and paused before leaving the room. The room was lonely, yet it provided a facility for transformation of thoughts, ideas, and hopefulness. I found Mr. Goodly near the library and thanked him again for his help in coordinating the interviews. He walked me to the security doors, buzzed for entrance, and we moved through to the lobby area. I told Mr. Goodly that I would let him read the final product. I jokingly stated that I hoped it would be done before he retired.

This day was cold and overcast. There were no *cat-calls* coming from the windows of the pod on this day. The windows were closed, I'm sure, because of the cold. It was a poignant moment; leaving the prison with my choices intact, leaving behind former COPERs in search of something they had an opportunity to have. Their choices were limited now to their thoughts and regrets. At one time, they all had a chance to choose education. Or did they? Was their choice to

choose education then as limited as their ability to move freely and do as they wished in their confined environment now? I hoped that my data would provide some answers to my wonderment. The following section is a description of the emergent themes of this study.

### **Data Collection, Analysis Procedures and Emerging Themes**

The interviews were conducted over a four-day period. Three interviews were conducted each day between one and four p.m. All audiotapes were transcribed by the researcher. Upon completion of interviews, the transcripts were analyzed for reoccurring themes. These themes were then organized by grouping them according to similarities amongst the participants' responses and assigning codes to represent the contents of each group.

An analysis of the themes is best represented by quotes from the study's participants. A detailed examination of the results is given in the form of a summary to better explain each of the six major themes. An overview of the themes is presented in table form (Table 1). The six major themes with sub-themes in parentheses are as follows: (a) Characteristics of the inmates as k-12 students (single parent/lack of parental involvement, moving residences or changing schools, lack of supervision, and experiencing a traumatic event/injury), (b) Student-staff interaction (negative teacher experiences, positive teacher experiences, lack of positive administrative experiences, and extent of counselor involvement), (c) Engagement (positive elementary experiences), (d) Disengagement (apathy, middle school difficulties, and lack of extra-curricular activities), (e) Negative outcomes (school failure, skipping school, suspensions or expulsions, fighting, drug use, and dropping out), and (f) Inmate reflection and advice (regret, self-blame and advice for students, teachers and administrators).

The emerging themes were systematically organized within the context of the conceptual framework of the study (Figure 4). The first theme, characteristics of the inmates, was developed

from Hall's (2006) suggestion for identifying characteristics of prisoners when they were k-12 students. A lack of family and criminal background information prevented an extensive list of characteristics. However, the questions pertaining to their educational experiences did reveal identifying characteristics as stated in theme one. Theme two provides an in-depth look at the relationships established between students and teachers. Three sub-themes emerge from theme two: negative teacher experiences, positive teacher experiences, extent of counselor involvement, and lack of positive administrator relationships. Theme three, engagement, reveals the positive experiences the inmates had in school. According to the inmates, the period with the most engagement was the elementary years. Theme four, disengagement, dealt with the moments where the inmates experienced a disconnect with the schooling environment. Three sub-themes emerged from the major theme of disengagement: apathy toward school, middle school difficulties, and lack of extra-curricular activities. Theme five, negative outcomes, was the result of the combined negative forces of COPEr characteristics, school disengagement, and negative school staff interactions. These negative outcomes may also be considered facets of theme one, COPEr characteristics. An additional facet of theme one is a lack of extracurricular activities which resides in theme four, disengagement. Theme six, inmate reflection and advice, displays exploratory data regarding the prisoners regret of their educational choices, self-blame, and suggestions for students who are in similar situations to those they were in and teachers and administrators who have to interact with such students.

Table 1 is a representation of the themes that emerged from the study, along with their sub-themes. Following the table, the conceptual framework (Figure 4) is presented highlighting the contextualization of the themes within concept mapping of the study. Following the conceptual framework, a detailed description of each theme/sub-theme is included.

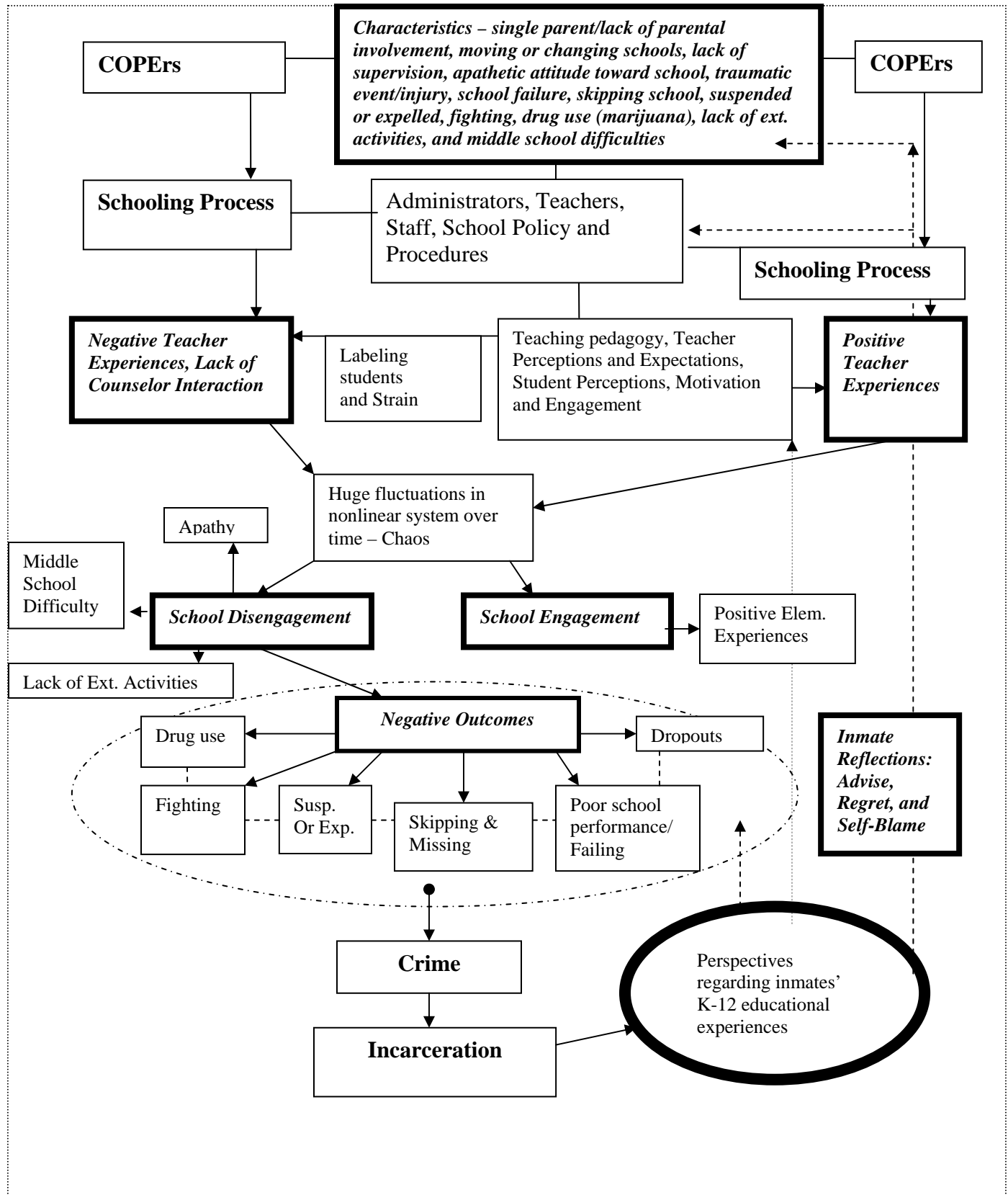
**Table 1 Emerging Themes**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
<b>(1) Characteristics of inmates as former K-12 students</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Single parent/guardian</li><li>• Moving or changing schools</li><li>• Lack of Supervision</li><li>• Traumatic event or injury</li></ul>
<b>(2) Student-staff interaction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Negative teacher experiences</li><li>• Positive teacher experiences</li><li>• Extent of counselor involvement</li><li>• Lack of positive administrative relationships</li></ul>
<b>(3) Engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Positive elementary experiences</li></ul>
<b>(4) Disengagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Apathy</li><li>• Middle school difficulties</li><li>• Lack of Extracurricular Activities</li></ul>
<b>(5) Negative outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• School failure</li><li>• Skipping school</li><li>• Suspensions or Expulsions</li><li>• Fighting</li><li>• Drug use</li><li>• Dropping out</li></ul>

**Table 1 Emerging Themes (Continued)**

<b>(6) Inmate reflection and advice</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Regret and Self-Blame</li><li>• Advice for students, teachers, and administrators</li></ul>
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**Figure 4 Non-linear and Dynamic, At-risk Student Education – A System in Chaos**  
Thematically developed conceptual mapping for the findings



## **Theme # 1 The Characteristics of the Respondents as K-12 Students**

Hall's (2006) study of prisoners in a correctional education program suggested that by interviewing prisoners about their prior educational experiences, researchers may help identify characteristics of school-aged children that predict possible incarceration. Furthermore, she added that a study focusing solely on past educational experiences would provide teachers with a starting point for identifying COPER (Children of Promise in Education) behaviors from a unique source – a former COPER. The present study was able to identify characteristics of the respondents during their schooling years. The twelve characteristics identified were: (a) single parent/lack of parental involvement, (b) moving or changing schools, (c) lack of supervision at home, (d) apathetic toward school, (e) traumatic event/injury, (f) school failure, (g) skipping school, (h) suspended or expelled, (i) fighting, (j) apathetic attitude toward school, (k) middle school problems, and (l) drug use. The respondents possessed several characteristics found in the literature. Most of the respondents had a single parent/guardian home-life, moved or changed schools, and had extended unsupervised periods at home. In addition, the respondents noted instances of traumatic injury or events that caused problematic behavior, such as withdrawal, depression, and anger.

In addition to the sub-themes mentioned are facets of the *characteristic* theme which are presented in the disengagement section and negative outcome section. A facet is similar to a theme but conceptually different (Shank, 2002). In the case of this study, the sub-themes for characteristics of the respondents were elements inherent or out of their control. These characteristics are single parent/guardian home and lack of parental involvement, moving or changing schools, lack of supervision at home, and traumatic event or injury. Facets of the characteristics theme are elements that were within the control of the inmate to some degree.



These facets were apathy toward school, school failure, skipping school, suspensions or expulsions, fighting, drug use, lack of extra-curricular activities, and middle school problems.

Janosz, LaBlanc, Boulerice, and Tremblay (1997) revealed that longitudinal and cross-sectional studies have consistently shown that family background, *school experience*, antisocial behavior, and personality traits are good predictors of a school dropout. In addition, they show that dropouts are more likely to come from families of low socioeconomic status (SES). These families are typically characterized by structural disadvantages such as single parent/guardian, parents with low levels of education, large family size, and other dropouts in the family.

Rumberger (1987) revealed that dropouts are more often boys rather than girls and tend to be ethnic minorities. The present study interviewed males with a majority African-American ethnicity to reflect Rumberger's findings and to reflect the dropout ratio in the state of Louisiana.

#### *Theme # 1a Single Parent/guardian Home and Lack of Parental Involvement*

The respondents reported living in a single parent/guardian home and experiencing a lack of parental or guardian involvement at some point in their educational journey. The respondents indicated that parental involvement in the early years of their educational experiences was good but deteriorated as the journey progressed. The respondents stated that their parents or guardians were not around as much as they got older. They also noted their parents' inability to help with the homework as it became more complex in later grades. Ron described his situation:

My mom helped with homework at first, but I guess it got to be too much for her, she let me do it myself. During elementary she helped with what she could, but as I went on through school....she didn't...with my mom working all the time, she never did stuff with me.

When asked if his parents were involved with his education, Ron responded, “I was with just my mom...sometimes, I mean, she had to work. She had to support me and my sister and we never really had too much help with our work and stuff as we got older.” Ron tried to explain his mom’s lack of involvement, but when further probed about who was there for him when he got home from school, Ron admitted, “Nobody.” Dexter described his mom’s lack of involvement after the elementary years:

She was not interacting like she was in elementary. She stayed monitoring my grades, but not as much. She came to school a couple of times and checked up on me, but it wasn’t like when I was in elementary.

Eddie stated his parents helped him with his homework in elementary, but middle school was a different story.

I was young; they helped me with my homework. They pretty much showed me. They made sure I was at school and things like that. They did their job for the most part from the first through the fifth grade...my parents weren’t as involved in middle school... ‘cause they felt like, you know, you are on your own.

When asked what he thought would have helped him make the right decisions in school, Eddie responded, “I think my dad. I would listen to him, but he wasn’t around as much.”

The parental involvement in the respondents’ early educational years was evident in the data. This involvement decreased as the COPers began to make the transition from the early schooling years to the middle schooling years.

### *Theme # 1b Moving or Changing Schools*

The respondents experienced moving to different residences or changing schools throughout the schooling journey. Some experienced multiple moves or school changes. Ron went to three different middle schools.

I went to School A, then School B, then School C. I went to three middle schools in Town X. We moved four times...I liked moving, but I didn't like the schools because it would be a new set of kids every time, you know. Teachers didn't know me, so it was like starting new every time.

Willie noted:

My grades started to slip in the sixth grade, and then we kind of moved back and forth. I went to another school, I guess that kind of slowed me down. And then I went back, and I think I went back one more time.

When asked how many times he moved, Robby gave an answer of "Ten."

The respondents experienced difficulties in adjusting to their new environments. Each time they moved they had to make new friends, learn new teachers that didn't know them, and become familiar with a whole new schooling environment.

### *Theme # 1c Walking To or From School and Lack of Supervision at Home*

The respondents reported periods of unsupervised activity while they walked to or from school and when they got home. Although it is not uncommon for students to walk home, COPERs may be more likely to engage in misbehavior while walking unsupervised. Janosz and his colleagues (1997) noted that family processes have been studied and results indicate that dropouts come more often from families characterized by a lack of supervision and a permissive parenting style. Dennis remembered his walks to school and deviant behavior as he recalled,

“Every morning I would just miss the bus and walk, maybe five miles to school and home from school. I would walk with my buddies so we could smoke pot. That was in the sixth grade.”

Dexter ran the streets at night in middle school; a much different time than when he was young.

Dexter remembered, “In elementary I was still young. I was under supervision. When middle school came and I was older...I was runnin’ the streets all night.”

The inmates were under the supervision of a parent, guardian, or relative when they were younger. When they got older, they were seen as being more independent by this supervision.

This independence materialized during the middle school years when these young COPERs were perceived as being young men. This difficult circumstance is noted by The Carnegie Corporation of New York’s report *Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century* which states that many adolescents are exposed to adult like pressures, but do not experience adult rewards such as belongingness, purpose, and usefulness (<http://www.carnegie.org>).

#### *Theme #1d Traumatic Event or Injury*

Many of the respondents experienced events that were difficult to deal with. They did not have the coping skills nor support faculties to address their feelings of depression, anger, and apathy. Compounding these events was the period in which they occurred – adolescent development. Alat (2002) noted that children may experience traumatic events such as violence, physical accidents, abuse, or sudden death of a family member and that children exposed to these traumatic events may experience cognitive and affective difficulties. These cognitive difficulties may include academic and learning difficulties, developmental delays and lowered IQ. Some children may affectively exhibit traits such as anger, irritability, lower tolerance for stress and helplessness (Alat).

Nate reflected on a difficult time in his educational and life journey by describing what happened to him on the first day of school his eighth grade year.

About two weeks before the first day of school of my eighth grade year, my grandmother got sick. She had cancer and had to have surgery. They gave her too much radiation. It made a big knot on her side. They said she was doin' alright. On the first day of school, they called me out of class at 8 a.m. and told me she passed away...I was in a deep, deep depression...I mostly stayed to myself...Nothing motivated me, I was too depressed.

Arnold remembered a severe accident in the sixth grade that put a strain on his middle school experience. Arnold stated, "In the sixth grade I got hit by a truck. I broke both pelvic bones. I was out of school for a long time." According to Arnold he had to stay in a hospital in another part of the state.

These events, whether death of a relative, an accident, or injury playing football, created difficult circumstances for these young students. In Nate's case, he never recovered emotionally from the death of his grandmother, "his lady". His depression was not recognized by the school, and he slipped further into disengagement from the schooling process. Nate was perceived as a student who didn't care.

## **Theme #2 Student-Staff Interaction**

Student-staff interaction was a major theme that evolved from the data. The inmates had positive and negative experiences with the school staff. This section focuses on the interactions the inmates had with their teachers, counselors, and administrators. Student-staff interaction sub-themes are negative experiences with teachers, positive experiences with teachers, lack of counselor involvement, and lack of positive administrative interaction. The importance of positive student-staff interaction is found in the literature. According to the literature, Jordan and

McDill (1996) suggested that schools can influence students by fostering supportive relationships between and among students, teachers, and adults. Social relationships with adults other than parents influence the social and cognitive development of children and adolescents, thus influencing their success or failure in school (Nettles, 1991). In addition, Irvine and Fraser (1998) identified a teaching style in which black children learned best. The teaching style was not only firm but demanding and authority-based. Irvine and Fraser called these teachers “warm demanders.” The following sub-themes of student-staff interaction will focus on the interactions the inmates had with the teachers, counselors, and administrators as they navigated their way through the schooling experience.

#### *Theme # 2a Negative Experiences With Teachers*

This section provides data regarding the perceptions of the inmates’ negative experiences with the teachers at their respective schools. The respondents provided data regarding poor school experiences with their teachers. The data revealed the inmates’ perspectives regarding the negative characteristics of their teachers. The characteristics revealed in the data are: (a) lack of individualized instruction, (b) low expectations, (c) non-caring, (d) deficient explanations, (e) poor attitude, and (f) favoritism.

Consistent with respondents’ negative descriptions of their teachers, Foote, Vermette, Wisniewski, Agnello, and Pagano (2000) described characteristics of “bad teachers.” Their qualitative study discovered strong themes regarding the perceptions of administrators, parents, and students with respect to “bad teachers.” These teachers were described with regard to instruction as being disorganized, not providing enough explanation, and using poor methods to convey their topic. One respondent in Foote and his colleagues’ study stated that the teachers’ methodology lacked clarity, enthusiasm and novelty, and focused on “just getting by.”

The inmates' responses validated the literature regarding their perspectives of teachers who they considered to be "bad teachers." These ineffective characteristics transcended all three stages of the schooling process – elementary, middle, and high school. The following inmate responses were organized with the individual respondent disclosing strong elements at these respective stages. Reggie responded when asked about the classes he did not do well in, in middle school and why.

The teachers would have an attitude or something, just like lazy with their work, you know, if you ask them a question, they would get mad at you...I felt like if I asked a question, they shouldn't give an attitude. I didn't want to ask no more questions.

Dennis described his difficulty learning, teacher's expectations, and favoritism.

I had trouble comprehending, and when it came to me actually doin' the work, they pretty much looked at it as a joke, you know. They gave up on me, too. It was a two way thing. When I started to show interest, they really didn't show that much interest...they'd try and help me a little bit, but most of the time, they would get another student to help me or they would just put me off a lot...they would let me sleep and everything. They pretty much just let me do what I wanted. I would draw when I wasn't sleeping. They wouldn't mess with me; they would wake me up every once in a while. I guess they would have to just show equal interest in every student. Not to where they just pick or choose, that happens in every classroom, everywhere, even in jail, in the kitchen, anywhere you go, you gonna have your favorite students and your favorite workers. Even though they may not have that much interest in them, they need to display it anyway and help them just the same.

Nate described an incident in elementary when his teacher called him a name.

My first grade teacher would call me names. She called me a fat pig one time and nappy head. I got sent home one day because I called her a name. My grandmother told me to do that. She said if she calls you a name again, call her one back, so I got sent to the office.

Nate's memory also displays the home-school conflict that may have compounded discipline matters. Eddie described the favoritism shown by his science teacher in middle school.

I remember him, because he would throw favoritism. A guy called me a nigger one time in class, and I punched the dude. And he knew there wasn't nothing he could do the way he allowed the students to act and let them get away with stuff. If the kids thought they would get suspended they wouldn't say things like that or think they could get away with it. I remember him looking at me. I got suspended. But they couldn't really say I was wrong, you know because it was racial.

When describing the low expectations some of his teachers in high school had, Eddie exclaimed, "In those classes you could jump out the window and go smoke weed, go walk around the football field, smoke weed, nobody really didn't give a damn in those classes." Brian reported that the teachers in middle school who didn't care were, "just there to do their job. That's what it seemed to me. If you learned it, you learned it, and if you didn't, oh well." Brian went on to describe some teachers treating students differently in middle school.

Some of them, they know of the students, know their family, and all that, you know. They are special and they get more attention. If they didn't have any relations to you, it didn't matter who you were or what you did. If you failed or passed, that was your business.



When asked how teachers dealt with him in middle school when he came into the classroom, Brian illuminated the lack of explanation given concerning directions.

There were some teachers who didn't like me because I was struggling, and I always had questions about the subject, and they didn't feel like explaining it or have the time to. They just thought I wasn't paying attention when they were saying directions, but I just needed more intense directions. I just needed someone to explain the directions more. If they wrote it on the board, and I didn't understand it, how about coming to explain it to me. Tell me exactly what I was supposed to do.

Brian describes circumstances where his teachers were ineffective in teaching to his learning needs. Contrary to Brian's recollection of his ineffective teachers, Blanton, Correa, and Sindelar (2006) noted that research has found that effective teachers provide clear explanations, maximize the opportunity for students to respond during instruction, present new material in small steps, and provide regular feedback.

Foote and others (2000) also described the "bad teachers" classroom management strategies. Ineffective teachers were noted as having too much discipline or not enough, ignoring misbehavior, or yelling all the time. These teachers took classroom management to a personal level, were inconsistent in applying consequences, and displayed favoritism. It was also noted that "bad teachers" were very poorly skilled in their interpersonal exchanges with students. These teachers did not interact with their students during class, and when they did, it was perceived as uncaring. Arnold described his teachers in middle school and one teacher, in particular, that exhibited too much discipline and favoritism.

Some teachers were cool, and some teachers I didn't like. I felt they didn't like me. I had this one teacher, she would talk to me crazy, any little thing I would do, anything. Any

little thing I would do they would send me to the office. If it would be somebody else did something, they would think it was me.

When further probed about teachers treating him differently, Arnold stated, “At every school though, teachers treat everybody different. Favoritism with some kids and other kids, it was different. The females got treated different. They stay getting stuff from the teachers.”

When Robby was asked how the teachers talked to him, he answered with a smirk on his face:

Not like cussing, but in a rude tone. Like trying to put you down, and it would just get aggravating...just like smart-aleck comments. Not really comments, but you know when somebody talks to you, you can tell in their voice they are sarcastic about it, like that...my reading teacher in the fifth grade treated me different than my science and math teacher. Because I was a better student in some classes, some of the teachers liked me better than other teachers. I mean you can tell when one teacher likes you more than the other teacher.

Robby continued to discuss his negative experiences by addressing favoritism:

There were your good students and your bad students and the bad students always got treated differently from the good. The good students really would not get in too much trouble. If the bad student would do something and the good student would do the same thing, the good student wouldn't get in trouble as much as the bad student.

Robby then gave an example of a teacher's low expectations and student disengagement. Robby stated, “I would just sleep in class. They let me. It was either let me sleep or start some trouble. Most of the teachers would let me sleep.” The teachers in this instance ignored Robby's sleeping in class in order to control his disruptions.

Ron simply described a lack of communication with his teachers by stating, “They never really sat down and talked to you about nothin’. I mean I really didn’t communicate with any of my teachers, except maybe for a couple in high school.” Ron further explained his perception of the difference in teaching style and his learning differences.

They were different. Some would read out the book- just stand in the front of class and read to you. A lot of times I might not understand what they are talking about but they would just keep reading. Others would write it on the board with markers. Some would have movies that you would watch. I like that right there, having a movie, you could relate to the subject. I like the T.V. part the best. I remember doing good on those tests. If I could see it, I don’t know, I guess it helped me. If I had to read it or listen to it, it was more difficult.

According to Gremler (1996), “an individual’s learning style is the way that person begins to process, internalize and concentrate on new material...every person has a learning style – it is as individual as a fingerprint” (p. 24). Ron had a learning style that he appreciated and understood, but did the teacher understand Ron’s individual learning needs?

The respondents’ negative experiences with teachers validated the literature regarding ineffective teacher characteristics and effective teacher characteristics (Foote, 2000; Blanton et al., 2006). This section detailed the data concerning the inmates’ perceptions of their negative experiences with their teachers. The inmates experienced a lack of communication and caring from their teachers which exacerbated their poor understanding of teacher directions, subject content and perception of favoritism. Also noted was the inmate’s learning styles and the question of whether their teachers effectively addressed these individual styles.

### *Theme # 2b Positive Experiences With Teachers*

This section provides data regarding the perceptions of the inmates' positive experiences with the direction leaders of the school. The literature and data described the characteristics of the "bad teachers" as they traveled through the schooling journey. The respondents also provided data regarding times where they felt good about school and the characteristics that the school level personnel possessed. These characteristics are on the opposite end of the spectrum from the previous section on ineffective teachers. The characteristics revealed in the data are: (a) individualized instruction, (b) high expectations, (c) caring, and (d) the ability to explain directions and content.

As stated in the previous section, Blanton, Correa, and Sindelar (2006) noted that research has found that effective teachers provide clear explanations, maximize the opportunity for students to respond during instruction, present new material in small steps, and provide regular feedback. Robby described teachers he liked and their characteristics.

They tried to help you a lot more, and like if you didn't understand something, you would tell them and they wouldn't try to make fun of you like most of the teachers would make fun of you. You know, the way they would do the problem and you would tell them that you didn't understand it, and they would just do the problem over again the same way they just did it. Then you still don't understand it, and they would still do it the same way. But some of the teachers would break it down and actually sit down with you *one on one*.

When Robby was asked about the teachers he thought cared about him, he stated, "My elementary teachers would try to talk to me to keep me coming to school and do my work. They tried to help me, you know, want to see me do better. They showed me some love."

Brian described a teacher he liked who taught him in the second grade and fifth grade.

It seemed to me she had the most accomplishment with me. She was always on my case, instead of just overlooking things. She made sure I was going to learn something than me just being there.

When asked about the teachers he liked in middle school and what made them different, Brian noted, “They were more understanding, to the point of when you did have a question they explained it to you where they wanted you to learn what they were talking about.” When describing his reading and language teacher in middle school, Brian smiled and said:

I made straight A’s. She made sure I understood it. When I asked her to explain it, she would come and explain it. When I had trouble, she would come and point it out as opposed to other teachers who said that I didn’t listen when they told me the directions the first time. But if I didn’t understand her directions, she would come and put it right there in front of my face on how to do it.

As Irvine and Fraser (1998) suggested in the literature, Dexter described his elementary teachers’ “warm demander” approach.

...nice and pushy at the same time. They kept me focused and motivated. They would pull me to the side and always motivate me to keep going and that proved to me that if they take that much time from themselves to keep me motivated, there must be something that makes them a good teacher.

Dexter’s teachers’ teaching style exemplifies the “warm demander” characteristic associated with effective teachers of African-American children and of all children. This characteristic of his favorite teachers carried over to middle school.

She made learning easier and more simple. She made it fun, at a high level. I never seen a teacher that could tell that many jokes dealing with the subject and you still get it. She had the attitude that sometimes she was mean, but she was so nice with it that you just understand.

Dexter went on to describe his favorite teacher in high school.

My Algebra I teacher was awesome. She motivated me and I was hittin' on all cylinders, and then in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, how could I forget [Teacher X]. She just broke it down so plain and simple in science that science became my favorite subject because just her love for science was passed on to me where I had that passion for science. She kept me going and she used to tell me that there is not a lot of people that can come into my class, see she wasn't just a piece of cake, that can come into my class and pass and not take notes.

Tony described his high school English teacher by stating that "...she was alright. She would try to help you. She wouldn't try to leave nobody. Everybody got it, and then she would move on."

When Eddie was asked to describe the good experiences with his teachers, Eddie remembered his Kindergarten teacher and other teachers that cared.

She was just a friendly person. She treated you like she really cared for you. She might not know you personally, but as a person she treated you with a genuine respect. So I took a liking to her...she helped me take a liking to school. I wanted to make her happy, because she was nice to me. They would do little things that they didn't have to do, like give you candy. They would go the extra step and try to help you learn. You might be having trouble with some things, and they would that extra step to make sure you understood it. Like one on one, if you were having trouble with a problem.

Eddie remembered the teachers he liked in middle school as being involved.

It was like they really wanted you to get involved. Some people you can tell if they don't like being there, you get that from them, like do this or do that. But these teachers, they would help anybody that needed help.

Eddie described the positive experience of high expectations and caring in the classroom from a high school teacher.

My English teacher, she just gave a damn about you. I was struggling in English. She just had the craziest expressions. She made you read and read and read. I went from D's and U's to A's in that same year. She really gave a damn about you. She was so upbeat. She was like, "Come on, you can do it. You're not this; you're not the statistic they make you out to be." She was a strong black woman. She wanted you to make it. She motivated you. I mean, I loved that woman. I passed that class.

When Dennis was asked about the teachers he liked and why, he passionately responded:

I had a couple of them, when I was in the special class that is actually a good program. It was different. I sat in that one class, and they actually gave a shit. They would teach you whatever you needed, and they wouldn't just put you off, if you were having trouble with something, you learned it pretty quickly...Mrs. Simon, she was a good teacher. She knew I really didn't care about school too much, but she tried to keep me into it. When other teachers were showing that they really didn't care about my grades, she stayed on me to better my grades. I actually made an A on my report card a few times because she stayed on me.

Reggie recalled his effective teachers this way.

They made sure that you understood it. What they were doin' on the board, they would ask you if you had any questions and go over it. They would come to my desk and show me...If I did something wrong, they would call home and talk to my parents about me.

The respondents revealed that their perceptions of effective teachers were more than just understanding the content. A good teacher was there for them, provided one on one help, encouraged them, and helped them understand the material in a way they could comprehend. Irvine's characteristics of a "warm demander" teaching style were prevalent throughout the data.

Individuals trained for personal interaction with students on a psychological and emotional level are the school counselors. The next section describes the inmates' perceptions of their lack of interaction with school counselors.

#### *Theme # 2c Lack of Counselor Involvement*

Unfortunately, COPErs need the most intervention at school and do not seem to be getting it according to the data. The respondents reported either not having frequent contact with counselors or having none at all. Most could recall only meeting their counselor once or twice throughout their schooling journey. It was obvious that most of respondents did not have a well-defined relationship with counselors during their schooling journey and most of the contact came when it was too late. The respondents reported that they had limited contact with their school counselors.

When Tony was asked if his middle school had a counselor, he smugly retorted, "I remember talking to the lady only one time." Robby echoed this finding when asked if he talked to the counselor in middle school, "I never talked to them." When Willie was asked if he ever talked to the counselors at his school, he stated, "I never had anything to do with them."



Eddie responded when asked if he ever talked to a counselor or met with them:

Hell no! She didn't waste time. They did things for their friends of people they liked; I mean, I was bad. I was selling drugs and smoking weed, and they didn't want to have anything to do with us.

The respondents' limited contact with school counselors and the literature on school counselor roles suggest that school counselors may not have time to deal with the complex demands COPers need. Baker (1996) revealed that school counselors often engage in tasks that are not directly related to their training. Baker suggests that the counselors' professional tasks such as individual counseling, group counseling, classroom guidance, and consultation have often been neglected because counselors must perform non-counseling tasks.

#### *Theme # 2d Lack of Positive Administrator-Student Relationships*

For the most part, administrators were omitted from the respondents' conversations. There were no substantive meaningful relationships established between the respondents and the administration. The recalled interactions were negative in nature such as disciplinary actions and statements the administrators made to them. Tony stated, "The principal put me in detention. That did not help. Maybe instead of punishing me it would have helped if they would have sat down and talked to me." Dexter remembered that the sight of one of his administrators used to "haunt him" because she was mean. Nate suggested that his administrators should have got to know him and find out what was going on at home. Ediger (2006) noted that too frequently, administrators lack knowledge about the home setting of the child, employment factors of the parents, educational level of the parents, and parental aspirations that the parents hold for their children. Ediger also notes that administrators need to make their presence more visible in the school setting. The respondents had contact with administrators, but it was mostly regarding

discipline matters. Based on the data, the administrators and COPers did not engage in meaningful relationships.

### **Theme # 3 Engagement**

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), engagement is a growth-producing activity through which the individual allocates attention in active response to the environment. The construct of engagement was investigated by Marks (2000). In a study of student engagement in instructional activity, Marks noted that a positive school environment is favorable to learning. She concluded that supportive classroom environments, in which students encounter teachers with high expectations and receive help from teachers and peers, promote the engagement of all students. The common thread or phenomenon exposed in the present study's data was that the respondents enjoyed or had positive elementary experiences. The respondents were most engaged in the schooling process during the elementary stage.

#### *Theme # 3a Positive Elementary Experiences*

The respondents described the elementary years and the role the teachers played in their enjoyment of the learning environment. The respondents reported a variety of reasons why they enjoyed their elementary years. Many of them fondly recalled field trips, Grandparents' Day, and other family oriented events associated with the school. They also recalled the majority of their elementary teachers who were "warm demanders" (Irvine and Baker, 1998), the individual instruction they received, smaller learning environments, and parental involvement in the early years. Robby described his early elementary experiences.

I think I just liked school at that young of age. I just liked going to school. Until I got older and stuff and got a bunch of friends. I started having problems at home and I hated going to school. I didn't want to have nothing to do with school and after a while I just

got to where my mom wasn't doing too much for us so I had to go do it on my own. I just fell out of touch with school.

Arnold described his elementary experiences with fondness for his teachers and a strong sense of confidence.

All my teachers seemed to like me. They wanted me to do right. They stayed on my back. I remember one teacher, she was a sweet lady. She brought us candy. That time was straight then. That is when I was on the right track.

Brian started to illuminate the differences between elementary and middle school.

Elementary school, those were the good years. I did those fine. I think it was a lot easier. They would work with you more in elementary school. Middle school is bigger and more demanding. Instead of trying to help you, you had to do this or you missed out.

The participants' innocence during the elementary years was evident throughout the data. It was a simpler time for these young students. The pitfalls, obstacles, and chaos had not yet overcome their abilities to cope. When Dexter was asked about his educational experiences, he stated:

Elementary was a breeze, you know, fun. I wish now I could compare school the way elementary used to be. You didn't have a lot of things to worry about. Back then I was firing on all cylinders. That was the best time. I had a blast.

Ron's description of elementary provided a glimpse of parental involvement, success, and fun.

In elementary my mom helped me out real good. She helped me with my homework and made sure I did it and stuff. She made sure I was there on time. That is when I did good in school. I had fun in elementary.

When asked if there were moments he did not want to be in school, Ron responded

emphatically “No, not in elementary!” Early parental involvement seemed to contribute to these young students’ success. Eddie stated, “I was young, my parents helped me with my homework. They pretty much showed me. They made sure I was at school and things like that. They did their part from the first to the fifth grade.” When asked if there were moments when he did not enjoy school in elementary, Eddie responded “No, not in elementary. I loved school then.” Irvin quite simply summed it up with “Elementary was the fun days basically, you know what I am saying. Everything was good!”

The respondents enjoyed elementary, but school disengagement was beginning to deepen toward the end of the elementary years and at the onset of middle school. This chasm between the respondents as students and their schooling environment grew wider until their point of dropout in middle school or high school.

#### **Theme # 4 Disengagement**

Disengagement from the schooling process occurs when the student loses interest in school mentally or emotionally, or both. Rumberger (1995) describes disengagement as a long and complicated process that begins early with missing school, experiencing academic difficulties, and experiencing behavioral difficulties. In addition, Fine (1987) and Reich and Young (1975) revealed that case studies indicated that a common thread among dropouts’ school careers was cumulative records of poor school experiences. These poor school experiences may lead to other difficulties. Janosz, LaBlanc, Boulerice, and Tremblay (1997) suggested that dropping out is a symptom of school disengagement.

The data demonstrated that the middle school stage signified poor school experiences and established the framework for other difficulties. Three sub-themes of disengagement emerged

from the data. The inmates reported an apathetic attitude toward schooling, middle school difficulties, and lack of extracurricular activities.

#### *Theme # 4a Apathy and Dislike of School*

The respondents reported an attitude of not caring and a dislike of school. This form of disengagement in the schooling process was another characteristic producing negative outcomes. Once apathy pervaded a mental and emotional state, it became more difficult for the educational system to continue to be effective for these students. Hwang (1995) noted that in many American schools, effective teaching is often outright impossible due to rampant student apathy to learning. The respondents reported in the present study an apathetic attitude as the schooling years progressed to their dropout point. Ron explained that he started giving up due to his poor academic performance.

I didn't really understand some of the work. I would ask questions, but still didn't understand. I was still passing in the ninth grade. In the tenth grade, I started going down again in grades. I started giving up in the tenth grade.

Irvin noted that one of his teachers tried to help him overcome his attitude.

Even though I had that "I don't care attitude," one of my teachers would stay on my ass, trying to get me to do something. She went and told the coaches she didn't want me to play if I didn't pass the test. That made me pass the test and study a little harder... Once I had to sit out of football because of my injury and surgery, you know, I didn't care no more.

Tony noted his decrease in effort after a bad report card. Tony stated, "I just remember trying the first six weeks, still getting bad grades, and then, you know, might as well not even try. Arnold knew he was on his way to dropping out.

I kinda knew I was gonna dropout. I felt it coming; I didn't care for school no more.

I lost interest in it. I felt I was smart, it just wasn't on paper...I wasn't interested in my subjects no more like I was in elementary.

When Dexter was asked about his subjects in middle school, he responded, "It dropped from all subjects were my favorite to I really don't care anymore." Dexter also discussed circumstances that may have contributed to this attitude and that applied across several themes throughout the findings. While describing an incident where a teacher accused Dexter of making threats to her, he stated.

Everything that I did from that moment became a very big deal, and practically started showing favoritism and everything that I said was considered violent and I was a threat to the school. I was told I was a threat to the school. In reference to that, them telling me that we really don't want you at our school, but we really can't kick you out, it would look bad on our part. A principal telling you we don't want you here. Why don't you go to an all-black school, and we would just make sure you can go there, but we can't just kick you out. Like I said, it was just the beginning of the end. I am working, but I am not playing football, so I had too much time. And that is when drugs started playing with me. I started smoking marijuana my junior year. I started hanging out with the wrong crowd and hanging on the streets. I said, well the school don't want me there, and they can't kick me out. I still came to school, but *I didn't care anymore*. My grades are still enough to get me by and the girls played a big factor. Now I am known as the hit-man of the school, like a bully. I am just not the one you want to pick on. I got in fights and got suspended in my freshman and sophomore year.

Dexter's teacher's perception was that Dexter was a troublemaker and threat to the school. Mageehon (2003) suggested that disengagement of students from a school perspective is caused by a disconnection from peers and teachers or because of school personnel perceptions that they were troublemakers. Dexter became more disengaged in school because of the way the teacher and principal felt about him. When Ron was asked about his like or dislike for school, he added to this finding by explaining:

I really didn't care. School was like a waste of time to me. I don't know. It wasn't important to me. Now, I see it is important. I wish I wouldn't have dropped out. But back then, I really didn't care...*I didn't like school* when I was sitting in class and kids were laughing at you and stuff like that. Times like that, you know, picking on you because you were quiet, who knows why – bullies looking for something to laugh at. When Ron was asked how that made him feel, he responded with intensity, "I was pissed off, pissed off at the world. Pisses me off. It pisses me off now thinking about it. If I could find them motherfuckers now I would hurt them." When asked how his teachers handled this, he angrily replied, "They never really did nothing. That was one of the main reasons *I hated school*, because people fucked with me all the time. I was a small, little skinny kid. I was stupid looking." Ron demonstrated the frustration and anger in his apathy and dislike of school. The teachers' lack of intervention in cases of bullying really bothered Ron.

The respondents' apathy and dislike of school was a deterrent to academic success and school engagement. Their apathetic attitude seemed to increase at the middle school level. The middle school stage proved to be a difficult period in the schooling process for these young COPErs.

#### *Theme # 4b Middle School Difficulties*

School disengagement was experienced by many of the respondents during the middle school stage. This disengagement created difficulties and negative outcomes. This critical time is noted by Elias and Butler (1999). They observed that the “middle school years are a time of cognitive awakening, realignment of social influences, intense psychological change, and more often than not, emotional turbulence” (p. 74). A concluding report for the adolescent stage was presented by the Carnegie Council’s *Great Transitions: Preparing adolescents for a new century* (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1995). The report noted that middle grade education was largely ignored in the education reform of the 1980’s. The report states:

In the move from elementary school, where a student has spent most of the day in one classroom with the same teacher and classmates, to a larger, more impersonal environment of middle school... an adolescents capacities to cope are often severely tested. Such an abrupt transition coincides with the profound physical, cognitive, and emotional changes of puberty... that for some students can result in a loss of self-esteem and declining academic achievement.

([http://www.carnegie.org/sub/pubs/reports/great\\_transitions/gr\\_chpt4.html](http://www.carnegie.org/sub/pubs/reports/great_transitions/gr_chpt4.html).)

The respondents reported a deterioration of their schooling experience between their elementary experiences and their middle school experiences. The middle school years provide students with more rigorous work, a growing independence, and more responsibility. These students without the mechanisms and support experienced events that might have ultimately contributed to an unfortunate future. Blackorby and Wagner (1996) and Werner (1993) noted that adolescence is an important transitional period for all students; it is a particularly critical period for students with disabilities (COPers).



Ten of the twelve inmates easily identified the period in their schooling years where they experienced difficulty and the reasons why. When Irvin was asked when he started getting into trouble in his schooling journey, he stated, “When I got to middle school.” Eddie stated that he didn’t start using drugs at school until he got to middle school. Arnold quite simply articulated, “[Middle school] is when everything just went wild.” Ron noted that the most difficult time period for him was the middle school years. Their grades and behavior deteriorated at a critical juncture of transition in the schooling process. Eddie recognized this juncture from his perspective.

When you get to the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade you are maturing more, so they wanted to treat you differently, because you starting to get ready to be an adult. They showed you respect. I guesst they didn’t want to baby-fy you like in elementary, but once you got there, you still just a kid.

Dexter described his change to middle school.

OK. Now here comes the turmoil! Elementary school was easy, but now, middle school, going out of zone. I was going to school in a whole different part of the city. It was a change where I didn’t know a lot of people, and it became a time when popularity was a big part of it. My middle school years, the sixth and seventh grade, we wore regular clothes, not uniforms. My mom worked for us to have what we needed, but if you didn’t have the popular stuff, I was the talk of the school. But I still maintained, if not the best grades, enough to get me by. It is passing still, but it is not at the level I know I can excel at.

Willie noted that his elementary experiences were good, and when asked what changed, he stated, “It got tougher. The work got tougher. Grades went down. It started in the sixth grade,

and then we kind of moved back and forth.” Brian expanded on the more demanding middle school years.

Elementary was a lot easier. They work with you more in elementary. Middle school is more demanding. Instead of trying to help you, you had to do this or you missed out...It’s like, how would you say, a kid going downstairs to something bigger, more older people in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. You got classes changing, certain periods, all that changed. When you were in elementary school, it was easier; you only had a couple of teachers that knew everything about you. But when you went to middle school you had five or six different ones, and you just go to their class for an hour and go into another one for an hour. They really don’t get to know who you are.

When asked whether he felt that it was important for teachers to know the students, Brian continued:

I think it is a big factor in a child, you know to learn something. If they don’t know about the child, how can they help him with their issues? That’s the way I see it. And if you have a certain problem with a certain subject and if they don’t know what’s going on, how can they relate to you, you know.

Robby discussed his difficulties in middle school.

In the sixth grade I did good for a little while until I started getting a lot more responsibility because I was getting older. I didn’t like the environment I was in, I didn’t like the students too much, I didn’t like the teachers too much and it all went downhill from there.

The middle school years were a difficult time for these participants. Most students possess the mechanisms and support to handle these difficult years in their development, but

COPers are more likely to experience negative outcomes (Murray, 2002). During the middle school years, school disengagement was deepening, and the slope was getting steeper. The respondents as COPers succumbed to peer pressure and made bad choices. Their school performance was deteriorating; their relationships with their teachers were eroding; and the organization of middle school (i.e. changing classes, having larger classes, and having several teachers) was complicating matters.

#### *Theme # 4c Lack of Extracurricular Activities*

Another identifiable characteristic of the respondents and their disengagement in the schooling process was their lack of participation in extra-curricular activities. At the time of dropout, none of the inmates was involved in extracurricular activities. Some participated in activities that engaged them for a period of time, but injuries and academic eligibility problems caused them to drop out of the activities. Research suggests that extra-curricular activities work to improve peer interaction, identification with the school, increase academic achievement, and reduce the likelihood of dropping out (Camp, 1990; Finn, 1989; McNeal, 1995; Sweet, 1986).

Irvin noted how extra-curricular activities kept him motivated to do well academically and kept him interested in school. Irvin stated, “You know if you don’t make the grades, you can’t play a sport. So I paid more attention because of that.” When asked what got him excited about school, he exclaimed, “Game day!” Irvin, however, experienced a traumatic physical injury and had to have surgery. He was told he could not play anymore.

...After that happened I really didn’t want to go to school, you know. That was the only reason I wanted to go to school. After that happened, I really didn’t care anymore.

Reggie noted his love for basketball in school.

I loved playing basketball. I was on the team in middle school and some of high school. I

had a good coach. He tried to make me do right. I scored 22 points and my birthday was on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Coach was proud of me...I didn't play basketball my eleventh grade year because I didn't make the grades the year before.

Reggie dropped out of school in his eleventh grade year. At that point he had nothing to hold him there. In Reggie's case, becoming ineligible in sports caused him to become disengaged with school. According to the Louisiana High School Athletic Association (2007), in order for a student-athlete to maintain eligibility, he or she must maintain a minimum average of 1.5 based on a 4.0 grading scale. This translates to a minimum C average. Maintaining eligibility and staying involved in extra-curricular activities can keep the student attached to the school, but when the activity was no longer available, the student loses grip on engagement in school – especially if extra-curricular activities were a significant part of their school life. The respondents' disengagement with school produced the likelihood of susceptibility to negative outcomes.

### **Theme # 5 Negative Outcomes**

The section discusses the negative educational outcomes experienced by the prisoners. Negative outcomes were the end-result of a variety of factors such as COPER characteristics, poor school experiences, and school disengagement. Consistent with the literature (Janosz, Leblanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997), dropouts' schooling experiences are usually negative. Janosz and colleagues revealed that dropouts have a history of poor grades, grade retention, poor motivation or academic aspirations, truancy, problem school behavior, poor relations with teachers and other students, and less involvement in extra-curricular activities. Janosz and colleagues also noted that dropouts were more likely to use drugs and have more deviant friends.

### *Theme # 5a School Failure and Poor School Performance*

Researchers have noted a strong correlation between students' academic failure and delinquent behavior (McEvoy & Welker, 2000). The respondents in the present study reported failure at various grade levels before dropping out. The dominant reason for dropping out was "giving up" due to school failure. Two of the twelve respondents failed grades in elementary, five respondents failed in middle school, and seven respondents failed in high school.

Dennis failed every grade from the first through the eighth. He stated that he figured out the system and just failed every year so the school would socially promote him the next. When Willie was told in his eleventh grade year that he would have to repeat because he missed too many days, he stated, "I just gave up. I didn't try to go back. I missed out on my senior year." Reggie also failed his eleventh grade year and chose not to go back. He stated that he had no desire to go back. Brian cited his frustration as the reason he failed the sixth grade twice. Brian stated, "It was the lack of understanding, and I couldn't get anyone to explain it to me. The teachers made it to where you put down whatever you think it is, that's your job."

When Arnold was asked why he thought he failed the fourth grade, he bluntly noted, "I couldn't do nothing about it. It is what it is." Arnold and the other respondents felt their misfortunes of school failure were somewhat out of their control. This perspective gave them a reason to negotiate withdrawal or disengagement with themselves and the school system.

### *Theme # 5b Missing School or Skipping*

The respondents reported skipping school or missing days that put them further behind in their work. Kagan (1990) noted that truancy was a school experience of dropouts. The respondents noted the majority of missing school days or skipping started in middle school and

continued in high school. In Dexter's case he noted falling behind and subsequently failing his eighth and tenth grade year.

I wasn't one of the ones behind in class, but missing school, I ended up falling behind, and I wasn't able to keep up, and I guess that is why I ended up not taking my leap test my eighth grade year, and had to repeat eighth grade again...In the tenth grade, I was exhausted, but I gotta keep going. But I started slacking off and skipping again.

Eddie responded when asked what caused him to drop out his eleventh grade year.

It had been an ongoing thing. I moved out of my mom's house and moved in with my sister. My mom didn't know what to do with me. I lived with my sister, and I had to help my sister pay bills, so I sold drugs. I sold drugs all night, so I would wake up and try to go to school, but I couldn't, or I would just go and sleep in class...What made me quit was I had missed too many days, and then I had to quit. I couldn't get those doctor excuses like everybody else.

In Eddie's case, missing too many days and not having excusable absences led to his dropping out. Eddie felt he tried to go to school, but the street life drained his ability to keep up with the schooling process. Eddie also exemplified what West (1991) defined as an in-school dropout. West defined an in-school dropout as a student who is physically present in school, but has disengaged from the schooling environment. When Eddie was physically at school, he was disengaged in the learning environment because he was sleeping in class.

Skipping school also led to the school's reaction in the form of consequences. One form of consequence administered by the school for skipping school or class was suspension, and, if the incident was severe enough or habitual, the school system administered the most severe consequence, expulsion.

### *Theme # 5c Suspensions or Expulsions*

According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2006), 42 % of boys have been suspended from school at least once by the age of 17. The respondents exceeded this percentage as all of them reported being suspended at least once during their schooling career. Ten of the twelve respondents were suspended during middle school or high school. Only two of the respondents reported being suspended in elementary. Most of the suspensions were for fighting, while Robby and Reggie were expelled for hitting a teacher and principal. Not all of the suspensions were for violent behavior. Tony was suspended for having marijuana on campus and Nate was suspended for simply not having a pencil in class.

### *Theme # 5d Fighting*

Morrison, Anthony, Storino, and Dillon (2001) revealed that studies have found fighting or physical contact to be one of the most frequent behaviors, along with disobedience and defiance that result in office referrals. The respondents reported that they were involved in fighting at school that led to disciplinary action that exacerbated their difficulties in staying engaged in school. When asked why he got into fights in school, Reggie stated, “I don’t know, I guess because I was the biggest person, (the students) thought I was bad or something.” Reggie’s situation demonstrates labeling by other students as a fighter. When asked at what point he dropped out of the eleventh grade, Reggie responded:

Toward the end. I got in trouble with the principal. He said I hit him and I was running a gang. He stuck his hand in my pocket, and I pushed his hand away, and he called the police. They came and got me. I had a bunch of cousins at the school, and he said that we were a gang. The police came, and because I was 17, they took me to jail... It happened at eight a.m., and my daddy came and got me at seven p.m. He fussed at me. He went and

asked the principal what happened, and the principal said that I hit him. I got expelled and I didn't go back for my senior year. I failed my eleventh grade year so I didn't want to go back.

Dennis was asked not to come back to school. When asked why, he explained:

They brought me in and told me just don't come back, (laughing) don't come back. I remember I hung around with the little potheads and shit. We would smoke pot behind the schools... every morning. I would miss the bus and walk, maybe five miles home with all my buddies just too smoke pot, and that was in the sixth grade. I was fighting a lot; I was with a different group of kids. Mostly I fought all the preps. I hung around all the skateboarders. They didn't like us, because of our baggy pants, fighting, smoking pot; it was just different I guess.

When asked why he was getting into trouble in middle school, Irvin responded, "Fights. Half of the time I didn't know what I was fighting about. I was skippin' school and all kinds of trouble. Dexter also reported numerous fights throughout his schooling years and was expelled for threatening a teacher.

I got suspended over fighting in elementary. Over the course of elementary I got into a number of fights, like going to the fourth or fifth grade. That is when neighborhood battles start to become a big issue. And that carried over into school...that is what my trouble mostly came from, fighting...I was expelled because my teacher said I threatened her. I felt like I really didn't. She expressed herself in a statement that she felt was right, and I replied in a statement that I felt was right. For her to say that I threatened her and to seem so hysterical, it just fired me up.



When asked why he was “put out” in the seventh grade, Brian stated, “I was a violent person...I didn’t get along with too many people. They made me mad.” When asked what he thought made him become an angry person, Brian described a traumatic event that led to his being made fun of, and his subsequent anger.

Well, my grandfather died my seventh grade year...I was real close to him, and I missed school for about a week. And when I went back to school, you know how kids are, mean, real mean and when they pick on you about stuff like that it is just not fair...they laugh at you, you know, Ha! Ha! Your grandfather died... And being unsteady and lost over here, I would sit there and think about other things instead of doing my work. And people would mention something like that, like what you doing thinking about your grandfather, and that just made me mad...I handled it by fighting.

When asked how his teachers, counselors, and principals handled that, Brian replied:

I think they took it as I was a violent child...They always thought I was in the wrong. It was always me. I was supposed to go tell someone, like tell the teacher...what they gonna do? I fought in class, in the hallways, in the bathroom, wherever somebody said something wrong... I just kept blowing up because I held so much in, you know when you get picked on about touchy emotions.

Robby described the beginning of his troubles in the schooling journey.

About the fifth grade I started getting into fights at school, cussing the teachers out and all kinda of stuff...I really didn’t have much problems with the teachers, just the way some of them talk to you and stuff made you feel offensive.

The frustration and anger of their educational journey culminated into situations where they acted out in some form of violence, such as fighting.

### *Theme # 5e Drug Use*

Another negative outcome was the experimentation with drugs, particularly marijuana. Eight of the twelve respondents reported drug use during their educational years. Furlong, Casas, Corral, Chung, and Bates (1997) showed that students' drug use at school contributed to aggressive acts such as fighting. And as stated in the negative outcome section, fighting, most of these respondents were involved in fighting at school. According to a report conducted by the Justice Department (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006), half of high school seniors stated they tried illicit drugs at least once, with marijuana being the most common drug used. More than three quarters of the seniors surveyed had tried alcohol, and two-thirds of eighth graders tried alcohol. And finally, almost one in three high school students said they were offered, sold, or given drugs at school in the past year.

Robby and Arnold stated that in middle school they began bringing drugs to school and smoking pot behind the gym two to three times per day. As mentioned earlier, Dexter began using drugs, smoking pot his junior year in high school. And in this day and age of high stakes testing, Tony noted that the first time he used drugs was on the morning of the the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) test. The LEAP test is a standards-based test used to show the level of proficiency a student demonstrates in each of the subject areas tested. Students are rated at one of five levels: advanced, mastery, basic, approaching basic and unsatisfactory. The LEAP exam is used to determine promotion to the fifth and ninth grades. To be promoted, students must score at the basic level or above on either the math or English language arts test. Students who do not meet these requirements are offered free summer school and retake the test at the end of the summer (Louisiana Department of Education, 2007). Tony remembered the morning of the LEAP test.

Yeah. Right before school. The day before the test I had skipped, this guy had some weed, but we couldn't find a lighter all day. But the next day of the LEAP test, that morning, I was going to school and I seen him and we met up before school.

When asked if he thought it affected his performance on the test, he replied, "Oh, yeah! I was ready to get out of there." The drug use continued for Tony and his friends. Tony further noted, "It continued. We would leave class and walk back to the parking lot, my friends and I. We would stop and smoke."

Other respondents also noted their experiences with drugs. When asked if he talked to his counselors or teachers about his problems, Eddie stated "I talked to the weed. That's all I talked to." Irvin stated that when he skipped school during the day he went to get high, and Dennis began smoking "weed" in the third or fourth grade. When asked if he got into that type of activity at school, Dennis replied:

Not 'til I got to middle school. I hung around with a lot of potheads and shit. We would smoke pot behind the school...Every morning I would miss the bus and walk, maybe five miles home with all of my buddies just to smoke pot, and that was in the sixth grade.

The inmates reported drug use at school, on the way to school, and away from school. The negative outcomes reported: poor school performance, missing or skipping school, suspensions or expulsions, fighting, and drug use, contributed to the most debilitating outcome from their perspective – dropping out.

#### *Theme # 5f Dropping Out*

All of the participants in this study were former school dropouts and were enrolled or had completed a GED program at the prison. According to the Bureau of Justice statistics report regarding educational and correctional populations, Harlow (2003) revealed that nearly 75% of

state prison inmates, almost 59% of federal inmates, and 69% of jail inmates did not complete high school. Not all dropouts become prisoners, but the prison population experiences an unusually large dropout rate from school when compared to the general population's school dropout rate of about 30% (Diplomas Count, 2006).

Most of the respondents in the present study dropped out in high school, with Dexter being the only one to make it to his senior year. Brian, Robby, and Dennis dropped out in middle school. Brian, Robby, and Dennis's earlier dropout point may be attributed to experiencing extreme circumstances compared to the other respondents in the early years of their schooling journey. Brian noted "fighting all the time" which led to numerous suspensions and eventually expulsion. Robby discussed moving "at least ten times" in elementary school alone, and he also noted that his mom's boyfriends "beat" him because he was getting into trouble. And Dennis failed every year twice from the first to the eighth grade. Dennis also noted that he began "smoking dope" when he was in the third grade.

The negative outcome of dropping out was a culmination of many events experienced by the respondents throughout their schooling journey. Dropping out was an outcome that the respondents regretted the most. The next section details the inmates' regret, self-blame, and advice they offer stakeholders in the schooling process – students, teachers, and administrators.

### **Theme # 6 Inmate Reflection**

As the analysis process continued to evolve and the themes started to emerge, I found myself immersed in the reflections of the inmates regarding their regret and advice for students, teachers, and administrators. Their thoughts, although spontaneous, were a mixture of reflections from isolated time, confinement, regret, and what could have been – if only they could go back. If they had a time machine, things would be much different than they were now. Now, with

nothing but time on their hands and thoughts of the past emerging, they accepted blame for their conditions.

The regret the respondents had was palpable. Their faces relaxed in relinquished despair when reflecting and some would shake their heads. The answers seemed clear now, not mired in a fog of having all the answers back then. Their regret centered on the fact that now they see the value of an education and if they just would have received an education, they would not be in the predicament they now resided.

The advice the inmates had for students, teachers, counselors, and administrators was consistent with their previous revelations regarding the themes. The characteristics the respondents most wanted from their teachers and administrators, and the advice they had for students were good communication, encouragement, and a good attitude. The respondents simply wanted positive relationships with school staff.

#### *Theme # 6a Self Blame and Regret*

This section is divided into two sub-themes: self-blame and regret, and advice for students, teachers, and administrators. In Hall's (2006) study of prisoner-student perceptions of correctional education, she revealed regret as an emerging theme from the data. Her research participants regretted the behavior and lack of effort they exhibited up until they dropped out of school.

When Irvin was asked what would have prevented him from coming to prison, he stated, "If I had a different attitude or different outlook on things like I do now, it could have prevented a lot of things." When Reggie was asked why education is important to him now, Reggie responded, "If I would have gotten my high school diploma, I wouldn't be in jail. I would have a job or something." This statement exhibits the conceptual framework of the study regarding

Chaos theory, whereas, the occurrence of events, no matter how small, cause bifurcation moments and subsequent tracking to possible positive outcomes, or in this case, possible negative outcomes.

When asked the same question, Dennis responded convincingly:

I missed out on it. I want as much knowledge as I can possibly gain anywhere. As much as I have messed up in my life, education is the only thing that is left to better me. That is life, what you know is what you gonna be. If you don't know shit, you ain't gonna be shit. And you gonna be sittin' in here.

When asked what he wished he would have done differently in high school, Arnold stated, "Stayed in school and finished, and I wouldn't be going through this right now." When Arnold was asked what could have been done differently for him, Arnold responded, "My parents did enough; it would have been on me. I made the mistakes. I chose to go to the streets. School tried to help, but it was all me." Eddie echoed these sentiments by regretfully stating, "I wish I would have just got my education, I mean I had the opportunity, making good grades. It was life after school. That is what it was." Ron responded to the same question posed to Arnold.

Honestly, I think the teachers pretty much did all they could in their power. It was really just me not giving a damn. I didn't care. Dropping out was all my fault. I can't really blame nobody else, now, as far as what they could have done to help me. I don't know what they could've done. My mom, I put her through so much shit, bless her heart.

When talking about his attitude, Irvin noted, "If I had a different attitude or different outlook on things like I do now, it could have prevented a lot of things." Dennis surmised, "I have thought about this quite a few times. If I could go back, I would go back and kick my ass. I messed around and was sleeping in class."

The respondents wished they had a better attitude during their schooling years. They regretted the fact that they did not finish high school and perceived this shortcoming as a reason they were in prison. The inmates placed the blame, not on the school system or their parents, but on themselves. The present study revealed similar results to Hall's (2006) study of prisoner-student perceptions of correctional education. She revealed that the inmates regretted the fact that they did not complete high school. Her participants also regretted their behavior and lack of effort they exhibited up until they dropped out of school.

#### *Theme # 6b Advice for Students, Teachers, and Administrators*

This section focuses on the inmates' recommendations for students, teachers, and administrators who are in similar circumstances as what they have described in the data.

This sub-theme is divided into three areas of advice: students, teachers, and administrators.

##### *Students*

The advice the inmates had for students was to "open up more" to their teachers, counselors, and administrators. Secondly, their hope was for students to "not give up" and stay in school. Thirdly, they wished the students would stay away from the wrong crowds to avoid trouble and lastly, they wanted the students to understand how drugs destroy the focus on school.

When recounting the death of his grandmother on the first day of school in the eighth grade, Nate advised students to open up.

Talk to somebody. Open up, don't hold it in. Let somebody know what is going on. I wished I would have opened up. Holding that in was stressful. You know, I was having a hard time sleeping. It was hard.

Brian also recommended that students talk to someone. Brian stated, “Talk to somebody. Teacher. Counselor. Someone about what is going on. Like if you are getting picked on and you get angry.”

When Dennis was asked what advice he could give students who are in a similar situation as he was, he responded that students must not give up.

If you give up hope so early, you got to keep on pushing. It is a rough world out there, and if you give up, you ain’t showin’ anything. You got everything you need to be the best person you can be.

Dexter, leaning forward in his chair, stated, “First and foremost, don’t give up. Stay away from the wrong crowds. Keep education first.” Brian’s advice for students was to ask for more explanation and he encouraged students to seek help from the counselors.

Don’t let it go the first time, and they don’t explain it to you. Find out how you are supposed to do it. If they don’t help you, get somebody who can. You can go talk to the counselors. Go talk to the counselors, and they can put you in touch with somebody to help you understand.

Tony suggested that students stay away from drugs. He proclaimed, “Leave drugs alone and stay focused. It will pay off in the long run.” Likewise, Arnold stated, “Stay in school; don’t choose the streets and drugs. Ain’t nothin’ in the streets but time. You will come and sit in the jailhouse with me.”

The inmates’ advice to students who might be in similar situations as they were in was a simple method of communication. Central to this method was learning to open up and share your thoughts and feelings. The inmates felt that teachers, administrators, and counselors would not be able to help anyone if he cannot tell them what is bothering him. Of the negative outcomes



mentioned in the previous sections, drugs were the outcome the inmates cautioned against the most.

The inmates' advice was not limited to students. The next two sections detail the advice the inmates have for teachers and administrators.

### *Teachers*

The advice the respondents had for the teaching profession was again centered on communication and encouragement. When Dennis was asked what he would tell his teachers if he could go back in time, he said:

Encourage me and keep on me about trying to improve my grades. I think it has a lot to do with everything. If I would have done good then, I probably wouldn't be in here now. It probably would have changed my life.

Reggie also spoke of encouragement by advising teachers to, "Talk to a person right. Encourage them." Dexter discusses concern teachers should show students:

Well, I think you have to be concerned. Like a student that was in my position, the teachers are not concerned anyways. They call roll and I am here or not; they gettin' their same paycheck, you know, but if a student feels if you are concerned, like, hey, coach I feel like this is going on and I can't make it, you just have to be able to know when to listen and how to push that student when they are dealing with a crisis such as this one. Just keep motivating them.

Brian revisited teacher explanation as something to improve on:

The proper directions, to explain things more. I know there are still kids today, they don't know what the teachers are trying to tell them to do. Some students don't even ask them to help either. I tried to get help but told me I wasn't listening the first time.

Robby encouraged teachers to communicate better with the students:

I mean if they could see that a student is in a predicament, and they really want to help, pull that student off to the side, and ask questions and tell them how to succeed in school and what they can be like instead of always telling them what to do.

The respondents felt it was important for their teachers to have a good attitude as well. They suggested that attitude was a “two-way street.” The elements of individualized instruction, good explanations, and caring were also present.

#### *Administrators*

The advice for administrators was aligned with the advice for teachers. The inmates stressed communication and encouragement as being critical elements to the success of students who are in a similar situation as they were in. Nate described the way he dropped out of school and his advice for principals.

They kicked me out. The principal told me I was holding up a desk. They said they were tired of seeing me in the office. They said bye, you can go. I remember it like it was yesterday. I walked up the street to the store, bought a beer and went and sat under a tree. If I could talk to that principal today, he probably wouldn't want to talk to me. If I was in his shoes, I probably would have done the same thing. But sometimes it ain't always right what you are doin', you know. You are just feeding a person to the wolves. Sometimes you gotta find out what is going on, try to find out what they are thinking about, try to find out what is going on at home.

Dexter advised principals this way.

First, you can't degrade a person, that was one thing that discouraged me, I am finally back to school and I get called to the principal's office and the whole class looked at me

like damn, what you did now? And they was like I was just calling to check up on you, I hadn't heard anything about you, but I am just keeping an eye on you. It just made me feel uncomfortable. I mean I am not just taking up space, I am doing my work, going to class, working after school, living by myself, if they could just see that and have more of an understanding. Instead of just categorizing me as like in this group. The favoritism aspect just discourages a person. This is just the way I grew up.

Dexter's advice is an exemplar for labeling theory. Rist (1977) suggested research on the educational experiences of those students who are differentially labeled by school staff. Dexter's principal labeled him as a behavior problem, and as Rist noted, some students may start to see themselves as failures and act accordingly.

Tony would have liked the principal to not just punish but communicate. Tony stated, "The principal would put me in isolation or detention. That didn't help. Maybe, instead of punishing me, it would have helped if they would have sat me down and talked to me."

The respondents seemed to view the administrators as the most non-caring members of the school staff. The administrator's job was perceived as applying consequences and punishment. What the respondents suggested was a caring administrator that could communicate and understand their circumstances.

### **Summary of the Findings**

Six major themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews with the inmates. The first theme, characteristics of the respondents, provides a portrait of the respondents as they were students traveling on the pathway of school. These characteristics, when examined scientifically, become indicators for possible school-student intervention. As the students progress developmentally through the schooling system, these characteristics may raise red flags at

critical stages of their development. The twelve characteristics revealed were: (a) single parent home and lack of parental involvement, (b) moving or changing schools, (c) traumatic event or injury, (d) school failure, (e) walking to and from school and lack of supervision, (f) missing or skipping school, (g) fighting, (h) suspension or expulsion, (i) apathy or dislike for school, (j) lack of extracurricular activities, (k) drug use (marijuana), and (l) middle school problems. As stated, strain theory suggests that youths are compelled to remain in certain family and school environments. If these environments are perceived as aversive, negative, or painful, there is nothing the young person can do legally to escape. This situation is frustrating to the young student and may lead to delinquency (Agnew, 1985).

It should be noted that the disengagement and negative outcome themes could also be considered characteristics of the respondents; however, these thematically developed characteristics deserve separation for their strong elements.

The second theme that emerged was the respondents' interaction with school staff, in particular, the teachers and counselors. The respondents described their negative and positive experiences with their teachers. The positive characteristics of their teachers were: (a) they had provided individualized instruction, (b) they had high expectations for their students, (c) they cared about the students, and (d) they provided good explanations regarding directions and content. The negative characteristics of their teachers were: (a) they were unskilled at providing individualized instruction, (b) they had low expectations for the students, (c) they did not seem to care about the students, (d) they provided poor explanations regarding directions and content, (e) they had a poor attitude, and (f) they showed favoritism amongst students. Labeling theory suggests that because of the manner in which schools label students, schools serve as an instrument in the creation of delinquency (Sadovnik, Cookson, & Semel, 2001). The respondents

felt that labeling existed in the form of favoritism. Some students, the good ones, were treated better than the poor performing students or students with behavioral concerns.

In addition to the positive and negative characteristics of the teachers, the respondents noted the lack of counselor involvement in their schooling journey. The respondents did not have continuous or sustained counselor interactions with counselors except when it was time to drop-out. In fact, some of the inmates had either never met with a counselor throughout their k-12 schooling experiences could not remember an encounter.

The third theme that emerged was engagement. An interesting theme developed through the analysis of the data in that most of the respondents had positive elementary experiences. Their early schooling years were joyful and fun. The respondents had overall positive interactions with their teachers, their guardians were involved in the schooling, they were supervised at home more, and the cumulative effects of their environments had yet to manifest into full-blown difficulty.

The fourth theme that materialized was disengagement. The respondents disengaged from the schooling process gradually as the years progressed. Three elements of disengagement that emerged were apathy and dislike of school, middle school difficulties, and lack of extra-curricular activities. The respondents' lack of caring about their education led to withdrawal from their teachers, subjects, and activities associated with the school, such as extra-curricular activities.

The middle school stage of the schooling process illuminated where the cumulative negative experiences and factors began to bifurcate in a scientific, chaotic pattern of difficulty. The middle school years became a time of turmoil for these young students. Once the cycle of difficulty started to spiral out of control, there were no support mechanisms in place to help

mend or control the chaos. Chaos theory suggests the concept of tiny “initial differences in a multitude of factors (e.g., teacher attention, teaching materials, motivation, home background, student background knowledge) could, in the course of time, lead to significantly and totally unpredictable differences in outcomes” (Cziko, 1989, p. 19). By the time the high school stage of the schooling process came, the students were on their way to dropping out. The effects had exponentially multiplied to the point of exhaustion for these young students on the cusp of adulthood. They were completely disengaged from their schooling environment and just waiting for the moment when they could drop-out, if they had not already done so in middle school.

The fifth theme revealed was the negative outcomes that occurred from the precursor of disengagement. The respondents experienced school failure/poor school performance, missing or skipping school, suspensions or expulsions, fighting, drugs, and dropping out of school.

The sixth theme revealed was inmate reflection. The inmate reflections were in the form of regret and advice they had for students, teachers, and administrators. Almost all of the inmates experienced regret and if they could have done something differently, it would be to finish their education. They expressed that without a sound education, the most enticing path for them was the path to prison. They cherished the thought of being able to go back in time and make changes.

The respondents also had advice for students, teachers, and administrators that mirrored the previous themes and theory. Central to their advice were: good communication, encouragement, and a good attitude. The respondents felt if these elements existed, then there would be better relations with the school environment and more student engagement in learning. If the schooling environment understood the backgrounds of the inmates and identified the strain they experienced, the inmates may have engaged in the learning environment because the school

staff would not have labeled them and set in motion a chaotic series of negative outcomes. Even though all of the respondents had different life and school experiences that were unique, they shared underlying currents of experiences that were strong enough to devour the weak and send them to the depths of hopelessness.

Table 2 displays a summary of the findings regarding characteristics, negative outcomes, and advice. The table displays the characteristics of engagement, disengagement, effective teachers, and ineffective teachers. The table also displays the negative outcomes associated with school disengagement, and the advice the respondents had for students, teachers, and administrators.

**Table 2 Summary Table of Chapter Four Findings**

<b>Engagement characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Elementary teachers were “warm demanders”</li><li>• Individualized instruction</li><li>• Smaller learning environments</li><li>• Parental involvement</li></ul>
<b>Disengagement characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Dislike of school</li><li>• Middle school difficulties</li><li>• Lack of participation in extra-curricular activities</li><li>• Negative Outcomes</li></ul>
<b>Negative outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• School failure/poor school performance</li><li>• Missing or skipping school</li><li>• Suspended or expelled</li><li>• Fighting</li><li>• Drug use (marijuana)</li><li>• Dropping out</li></ul>
<b>Characteristics of ineffective teachers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lacking individualized instruction</li><li>• Having low expectations for students</li><li>• Not caring about the students</li><li>• Providing deficient explanations regarding directions and content</li><li>• Having a poor overall attitude</li><li>• Displaying favoritism among students</li></ul>



**Table 2 (Continued) Summary Table of Chapter Four Findings**

<b>Characteristics of effective teachers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Providing individualized instruction</li><li>• Having high expectations for their students</li><li>• Caring about their students</li><li>• Providing good explanations regarding directions and content</li></ul>
<b>Advice for students</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Communicate more with teachers, counselors and administrators</li><li>• Don't give up, stay in school</li><li>• Avoid the wrong crowds</li><li>• Stay away from drugs</li></ul>
<b>Advice for teachers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Communicate more with the students</li><li>• Show that you care about the students</li><li>• Encourage the students to do better</li></ul>
<b>Advice for administrators</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Communicate more with the students</li><li>• Become more aware of the students personal circumstances</li><li>• Encourage the students to do better</li></ul>

The following chapter is a discussion of the findings and their implications for elementary education and secondary education, higher education teacher programs, and correctional education.

## Chapter Five

### **Discussion**

### **Introduction**

#### *Overview of the Study*

The conceptual framework for this study was created based upon the researcher's interpretation of the literature regarding the educational experience of dropouts and the contributing factors leading to dropping out. The literature on dropouts and their educational experiences within the schooling environment, the literature on delinquency and crime, and the theory associated with these elements formulated a conceptualization of negative educational experiences as a contributing factor to incarceration.

Since such a large percentage of the prison population is made up of former dropouts, the purpose of the study was to understand the educational interplay between school staff (teachers, administrators, and counselors) and the perceptions of male inmates who were former students in need. As a result, the data and discussion from this study may benefit several facets of education: elementary, middle, and high school education; higher education; and correctional education in adult prisons.

The primary focus of the study was to address the following primary research question: What are the educational experiences of male inmates regarding their k-12 educational experiences? Aspects of this general research question were explored through related sub-questions: (a) What were the characteristics of the inmates in their schooling years? (b) How did the prisoners' educational experiences influence their education? (c) What were the prisoners' engagement levels (positive or negative) like during their educational years? and (d) Did the

prisoners think that their education experiences influenced life-choices, possibly leading to their incarceration?

The method of gathering the data was one-on-one interviews conducted with 12 respondents at the Southwest Correctional Center. The participants were male inmates who were enrolled in the prison's GED program or former graduates of the program. The participants shared their educational experiences from kindergarten through the grade level which they dropped out or were expelled. This phenomenological examination of their educational experiences provided the researcher a window to a perspective rarely heard from: male prisoners who were school dropouts.

The remainder of this chapter is focused on: (a) a discussion of the findings of the study, (b) the revised conceptual framework, (c) the study's implications, and (d) recommendations for future research. The first section reviews the COPEr term and is followed by the discussion of the findings section, which connects the study's findings to the literature review in chapter two.

#### *Review of Key Term – COPEr(s)*

Patton (2006) suggests the synonymous term for “students at-risk”. Rather than “at-risk children”, Patton uses the term “children of promise” to exemplify a positive approach and overcome an underlying pattern of labeling students negatively as “at-risk”. Causey and Freeman (2003) used “promise” in their positive representation of students at risk of school failure. This paper suggested an expansion of “promise” in chapter two. This expanded viewpoint of at-risk has been used throughout the paper in the form of an acronym, COPE (Child/Children Of Promise in Education). This new form was introduced for two reasons: 1) to accommodate the mission of the paradigm shift in viewing at-risk students, and 2) to establish an acronym that in its definition gives meaning that allows the acronym to stand on its own.

The *Encarta Dictionary* defines cope as follows: “to deal successfully with a difficult problem or situation.” This definition gives substance to the student facing difficult circumstances and then successfully *cop*ing with these problems. In order to distinguish between the individual student and multiple students at promise, COPER will refer to the child at promise and COPERs will refer to children of promise throughout the document. This paper has painted a portrait of the COPER during the schooling journey. It is important to note that philosophically COPERs never cease being COPERs. COPERs experiencing negative outcomes during their schooling journey are still “at-promise” and “we have a responsibility to ensure that they are allowed access to the tools that will ensure that their impact on our world will be positive rather than negative” (Causey & Freeman, 2003, p. 418-419).

The first section, discussion of the findings, connects the study’s findings to the literature review in chapter two.

### **Discussion of the findings**

This section provides a discussion of the study’s findings as they relate to the literature in chapter two. It will examine each theme and the similarities and differences between the findings and the literature. Six major themes emerged from the data. The emerging themes were: characteristics of respondents as K-12 students, student-staff interaction, engagement, disengagement, negative outcomes, and inmate reflection.

#### *Theme #1-Characteristics of the Respondents as k-12 Students*

The literature regarding characteristics of COPERs shows that student characteristics may help to predict later outcomes. Several researchers concluded that the characteristics used to identify students at risk of school failure do predict later outcomes (Headley, 2003; Kagan, 1990; National Center of Education Statistics, 1995). The characteristics revealed in the literature were:

low socio-economic families, single parent/guardian homes, parents with low levels of education, large family size, low reading levels, and lack of adult supervision for extended periods of time.

The respondents in the present study possessed characteristics found in the literature. Most of the respondents had a single parent/guardian home-life and had extended, unsupervised periods at home. The respondents did not discuss their reading levels, but the average reading level of prison inmates in the state of Louisiana is the fifth grade level (Hall, 2006). This may explain why their elementary years were fairly good considering that their reading levels may have been average for that time period. In addition to the characteristics noted in the literature, the respondents noted instances of traumatic injury or events that caused problematic behavior, such as withdrawal, depression, and anger; and they reported moving residences or changing schools.

In addition to the characteristics mentioned are facets of the *characteristics* theme, which are presented in the disengagement section and negative outcome section. A facet is similar to a theme but conceptually different (Shank, 2002). As an example, Shank uses a diamond to describe the difference between a theme and facet. A cut diamond's surface has many angles and faces. Shank conceptually relates that the core of the diamond and the diamond itself is a theme and the many faces are facets of the diamond – each providing its own uniqueness and contribution to the overall structure of the diamond. In the case of this study, the sub-themes for characteristics of the respondents were elements considered inherent or beyond their control. These characteristics are single parent/guardian home and lack of parental involvement, moving or changing schools, lack of supervision at home, and traumatic event or injury. Facets of the characteristics theme are elements that were within the control of the inmate to some degree, and

that may have been born out of the characteristics noted. These facets were apathy toward school, school failure, skipping school, suspensions or expulsions, fighting, drug use, lack of extra-curricular activities, and middle school problems.

*Theme # 1a – Single parent/guardian home and lack of parental involvement*

The literature addresses the importance of the family in the success of the student. According to the U.S. Department of Education (1998), a child's first longstanding teachers is his or her parents (Hawes & Plourde, 2005). Rosenblatt and Peled (2002) agreed that parents contribute significantly to school effectiveness and to students' success. Overall, the respondents indicated that parental involvement was good in the elementary years and deteriorated after that. The involvement of the parents coincides with the perceived engagement in the schooling process in the elementary stage. In the elementary stage, the respondents' parents/guardians or even family members helped them more with their homework and went to the school for school events like field trips and Grandparents' day. As the schooling journey progressed, parental involvement decreased, and student disengagement increased.

*Theme # 1b – Moving or changing schools*

Three-fourths of the respondents experienced residential movement and changing schools during the schooling process. Coleman's (1988) analysis of school completion found that the number of residential moves the students experienced had the strongest effect on dropping out of school. The data in the present study aligned with the literature. The present study revealed that Ron went to three different middle schools while struggling to adjust to his new environments each time; Willie moved so much that he could not recall the order of moves, just that he moved back and forth; and Robby stated that he moved ten times. The effects of the moves were

cumulative and caused further stress on the respondents as young students. The respondents noted the difficulties in having to adjust to new educational surroundings.

*Theme #1c – Walking to or from school and lack of supervision*

The respondents' experiencing an extended lack of supervision is consistent with the literature. Janosz, Leblanc, Boulerice, and Tremblay (1997) revealed that dropouts come from families characterized by a lack of supervision. In addition, Kingrey, Pruitt, and Heuberger (1996) reported that violent students were much more likely to have experienced high-risk behaviors, such as walking through unsafe neighborhoods. The respondents indicated that they walked to or from school and engaged in delinquent behavior such as smoking marijuana. As an example, Dennis walked to school to "smoke pot with [his] buddies" in the sixth grade. The respondents were unsupervised as they walked home from school, and once they returned home from school, there was a continued general lack of supervision. For example, when Dexter got home from school in the middle school years, he stated that he "ran the streets" at night.

*Theme # 1d – Traumatic event or injury*

Absent from the literature is the prisoner's perspective that traumatic events influenced their disengagement from the schooling process. Maschi (2006) recognized that researchers are in agreement that trauma places youths at risk of juvenile delinquency. What is not recognized is the disengagement from the schooling process that a traumatic event may have caused the inmates. More than half of the respondents experienced various forms of trauma throughout their schooling years. The trauma experienced varied. Nate experienced the death of his grandmother, Irvin witnessed his best friend get shot after the eighth grade middle school dance, and Dexter broke his leg in football. The respondents struggled with these events and generally had no opportunities to deal effectively with their emotions.



## *Theme # 2 – Student-Staff Interaction*

The respondents noted the degree of interaction with the adults or staff at their respective schools. The respondents identified negative and positive characteristics of their teachers that appear to be consistent with the literature. The perceptions expressed by the inmates mirror the literature that schools are able to influence students by fostering supportive relationships between students and teachers or adults (Jordan & McDill, 1996; Nettles, 1991). Most of the literature cites studies regarding the importance of interactions between teachers and students (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2001; Clark, 1995; Goodenow, 1992; Roussel, 2000; Sizemore, 1981; Tournaki, 2003). The perspectives of COPEs regarding perceptions of their relationships with school administrators are not present in the research literature. The present study contributes to the literature documenting the perception that school administrators were often not seen as caring individuals on the school campus. The final sub-theme detected was the lack of involvement with school counselors. The perspectives of COPEs regarding their perceptions of their relationships with school counselors were also not present in the literature.

### *Theme #2a – Negative experiences with teachers*

The characteristics of ineffective teachers were extracted from the respondents' perceptions of their negative experiences with teachers. These negative experiences contributed to the disengagement between the schooling process and the respondent as student. Foote, Vermette, Wisniewski, Agnello, and Pagano (2000) described characteristics of "bad" high school teachers. Foote and others revealed characteristics similar to the negative experiences recalled by the inmates with their teachers. As noted in chapter four in the findings, this finding validates research by Foote and colleagues and also contributes to the literature regarding characteristics of ineffective teachers. According to the respondents, the teachers did not provide

individualized instruction. Overall, they had low expectations for the students, were non-caring, provided deficient explanations of directions and content, had a poor attitude, and displayed favoritism amongst the students. Reggie described the teachers of the classes he did not do well in as “having an attitude”, “being lazy”, and “getting mad at you if you asked a question”. A study conducted by Tidwell (1998), showed that dropouts believed an improvement in the attitude and the behavior of the teachers, specifically in their sensitivity and tolerance, is needed. Kelly (1991) addressed low expectations by suggesting that the school staff’s low expectations and impersonal teacher-student relations can produce poor engagement and poor academic achievement in school. Dennis pointed to his desire that teachers show equal interest in every student and not show favoritism. Dennis’s notation is validated by Foote and his colleagues’ study which showed that a teacher’s poor classroom management style displayed favoritism.

*Theme # 2b – Positive experiences with teachers*

Contrary to the negative characteristics of teachers were the positive characteristics of the teachers the respondents perceived as students in grades k-12. Chang (2005) noted that the school culture, content knowledge, personal values, teaching strategies, and the understanding of students’ characteristics all become integrated in the teachers’ pedagogical reasoning process to help them take teaching action. The respondents identified positive behavior of effective teachers that was similar to Chang’s findings. The positive characteristics of teachers identified by the inmates were: (a) providing individualized instruction, (b) having high expectations, (c) caring about the students, and (d) providing sufficient explanation of directions and content. An example of these characteristics is when Robby noted the “one on one” help he received and the caring attitude of his elementary teachers who showed him “some love” by wanting him to do better and showing him how to do better. Irvine and Fraser (1998) identified a teaching style that

was not only firm but demanding and authority-based. This characteristic style was described as being a “warm demander.” In a case study of the beliefs of three white teachers of mostly black children in a public grade school, Cooper (2003) revealed that the teachers displayed an authoritative discipline style but returned to a friendlier tone and demeanor almost immediately. For example, Dexter describes his elementary teachers as being “nice and pushy at the same time.” Eddie’s high school teacher had high expectations for him in a caring environment. Eddie remembered her saying, “Come on, you can do it.” For the respondents in the present study, this warm demanding teaching style was more prevalent in the elementary years. The next sub-theme, lack of counselor involvement, provides examination of the counselors’ role, and lack thereof, with the inmates as students.

*Theme # 2c – Lack of counselor involvement*

The lack of counselor involvement theme was not found in the literature as a contributing cause of disengagement for the student. The school counseling profession has undergone a gradual change. The school counselors’ tasks have increased to areas outside of their training and need (Baker, 1996; Fitch, Newby, Ballesteros, & Marshall, 2001). Baker suggested that school counselors’ professional tasks such as individual counseling, group counseling, classroom guidance, and consultation are often neglected because counselors must perform non-counseling tasks. Fitch and colleagues examined the perceptions of future school administrators regarding the role of the school counselor and concluded that school counselors often times perform duties unrelated to their role. The inmates expressed their lack of interaction with the school counselor while attending school. As Willie noted, “I never had anything to do with them.” The lack of counselor involvement may have contributed to further disengagement from the schooling

process. The absence of intervention from the professionals assigned to deal effectively with COPErs was evident in the data.

#### *Theme #2d - Lack of positive administrator-student relationships*

A lack of positive administrator-student relationships is not present in the research literature. Most of the literature focused on the interactions between the student and teacher, but as Ediger (2006) noted that too frequently, administrators do not have relationships with the students and have scarce visibility around campus. The present study's finding contributes to addressing the lack of attention in the literature to the importance of school administrators and students having more personal relationships besides negative ones constructed through discipline. The respondents recalled punitive disciplinary actions and encounters related to negative statements that administrators made to them. Tony stated, "The principal put me in detention. That did not help. Maybe instead of punishing me, it would have helped if he would have sat down and talked to me." Dexter remembered that the sight of one of his administrators used to "haunt him" because she was mean. He also remembered that his high school principal told him the school did not want him there. Nate suggested that his administrators should have gotten to know him and find out what was going on at home. The inmates had contact with administrators, but it was mostly regarding discipline matters. Based on the data, the administrators and COPErs did not engage in meaningful relationships that were perceived by the respondents as positive.

#### *Theme # 3 – Engagement*

School engagement is characterized by many elements, some of which have already been analyzed, such as positive teacher experiences. The sub-theme that emerged from the engagement theme was the inmates' positive elementary experiences. Johnson, Crosnoe, and

Elder (2001) noted that aspects of the educational experience, such as participating in school, paying attention in class, making an effort to learn, feeling good about school, and belonging to the school as a viable member are less understood elements in research. The respondents provided a qualitative glimpse into this element known as engagement. As Marks (2000) noted, supportive classroom environments, in which students experience high expectations and received help from teachers and peers, promote the engagement of all students. In addition, parental involvement increases the likelihood that the student will be engaged in the school and thus, experience success (Rosenblatt & Peled, 2002). The present study revealed that the elementary years were generally a good period of school engagement. The elementary years were a blend of two key elements: parental involvement and caring teachers.

*Theme # 3a – Positive elementary experiences*

The respondents remembered their elementary years as being fun. They recalled that their teachers were, as Irvine and Fraser (1998) suggested, “warm demanders.” They also remembered that the school had more opportunities for parental involvement such as Grandparents’ day, field trips, and other family-oriented events at the school. At this point in their schooling, it was easier for parents to help with homework. The subject matter was not complicated yet, compared to the more challenging material presented at the middle and high school level, so the parents with limited education could still help.

The following theme examines the disengagement between the respondents and their schooling environment. The sub-themes examined are: apathy and dislike of school, middle school difficulties, and lack of extra-curricular activities.

#### *Theme #4 Disengagement*

In the case of the respondents in the present study, the end result of the disengagement was dropping out of school. Roderick (1993) suggested that an important element of poor school performance translating into school withdrawal is disengagement from the schooling process. The phase of disengagement for the inmates was gradual, as the negative experiences accumulated and provided a basin for other difficulties and negative outcomes. Three sub-themes were detected from the major theme of disengagement: apathy and dislike of school, middle school difficulties, and a lack of extracurricular activities. These sub-themes are also considered facets of the *characteristic* theme.

##### *Theme # 4a – Apathy and dislike of school*

The respondents slowly developed an apathetic attitude or dislike for school. As noted in chapter four, this form of disengagement in the schooling process was a disengagement characteristic that contributed to negative outcomes. An apathetic attitude continued to widen the gap between the COPER and the schooling process. The respondents' "don't care" attitude and subsequent schooling problems were similar to what was noted by Hwang (1995). Hwang stated that in many American schools, effective teaching was often outright impossible due to rampant student apathy to learning. Ironically, ineffective teaching, as demonstrated in the sub-theme negative experiences with teachers, might have contributed to the students' apathetic attitude or general dislike of school.

##### *Theme # 4b – Middle school difficulties*

The period of the schooling process where the most disengagement occurred was the middle school years. This section analyzes the data and literature with regard to this difficult time period. The findings are consistent with the literature regarding the middle school years as a

difficult stage for learners. Elias and Butler (1999) observed that the “middle school years are a time of cognitive awakening, realignment of social influences, intense psychological change, and more often than not, emotional turbulence” (p. 74). Ten of the twelve respondents identified the middle school years as the period of schooling during which their problems mounted. The respondents noted a distinct change between their elementary education and their middle school education. Their elementary educational experiences allowed for more individualized instruction than did the middle school experiences. The respondents also noted that middle school was more demanding, and the teachers were more business-like. The middle school stage showed a shadow of disconnection between the teacher and student that lurked and followed them as they moved through this critical stage. As an example of the teacher-student disconnection affecting learning, Brian questioned how teachers could teach a child to learn something if they did not really know the child. Hertberg-Davis and Brighton (2006) suggested that in order to respond to the growing academic diversity, teachers must recognize the fact that their students have different needs, and thus, must commit to differentiating instruction. Brian, a middle school dropout, expressed his frustration with the lack of individualized instruction:

Some teachers did not like me because I was struggling. They thought I was not paying attention when they were giving directions, but I just needed more intense directions. If they wrote it on the board, and I didn't understand it, how about coming over and explaining it to me.

George and Alexander (1993) noted the middle school stage as being a highly diverse learning environment. Middle school level teachers are faced with students' developmental, social, psychological, and cognitive needs (Fletcher, Bos, & Johnson, 1999). Not surprisingly, the

respondents in the current study were exposed to larger learning environments and a gradual disconnect with the school staff developed in middle school.

#### *Theme # 4c – Lack of extra-curricular activities*

At the time they exited the schooling process, none of the respondents was involved in extra-curricular activities at school. This was a characteristic of disengagement from the schooling process. As Fine (1989) suggested, extra-curricular activities play a significant role in improving peer interaction and identification with the school. The lack of involvement in extracurricular activities, however, may have contributed to a disconnection between the inmate-students and the educational process in the present study. The disengagement from the schooling experience and other factors such as their home life may have played a significant role in the negative outcomes that subsequently followed this disconnection with school. The next section displays these outcomes as perceived by the prisoners.

#### *Theme # 5 – Negative Outcomes*

Disengagement from the schooling process can produce negative outcomes such as poor school performance, skipping school, being suspended from school, fighting , using drugs, and dropping out of school (Janosz, Lablanc, Boulerice, Tremblay, 1997; Kagan, 1990; Todis, Bullis, Waintrup, Scholtz, & D’ambrosio, 2001). Janosz and colleagues conducted a longitudinal study of two independent samples of two generations of high school students to determine dropout factors over time. The study verified empirical literature (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) by revealing that dropouts have a history of poor grades, grade retention, poor motivation or academic aspirations, truancy, school problem behavior, poor relations with teachers and other students, and less involvement in extra-curricular activities. Dropouts are more likely to use drugs and have more deviant friends. Furthermore, McLeod and Kaiser’s (2004) longitudinal study tracing



the effects of childhood emotional and behavioral problems on school performance concluded that the association between children's problems and educational outcomes is strong. The respondents, as dropouts, confirmed the literature. The respondents had poor academic performance, skipped classes and school, were suspended and expelled for school behavior, fought with other students, and used drugs. The first sub-theme is poor school performance.

*Theme # 5a – Poor school performance*

The dominant reason noted by the respondents for dropping out was “giving up” due to school failure. An apathetic attitude seemed to develop once the respondents fell behind academically. Evidently, they did not have the desire to catch up or persevere. The respondents stated that they felt their misfortunes were out of their control, and this perspective gave them a reason to negotiate withdrawal and disengage from school.

*Theme # 5b –Missing school or skipping*

Another sign of disengagement was the fact that the respondents reported skipping school or missing days of school. This, again, was consistent with the literature regarding the characteristics of school dropouts. The respondents' desires and needs fell outside of the schooling environment, and thus, this form of disengagement led to the schools' punitive disciplinary actions related to this behavior. The consequences handed down by the school to the student inmates were suspensions and, if habitual, expulsions.

*Theme # 5c – Suspensions and expulsions*

Ironically, suspensions led to more school absences and further disconnection due to students falling behind and performing poorly in school. As noted, the U.S. Department of Justice (2006) showed that 42 % of boys had been suspended from school at least once by the age of 17. All of the inmates reported being suspended at least once during their schooling

career. Ten of the twelve inmates were suspended during middle school or high school. Only two of the inmates reported being suspended in elementary. Most of the suspensions were for fighting.

#### *Theme # 5d – Fighting*

One of the most common behavioral problems reported by the inmates was fighting. This aligns with the literature regarding fighting, as Morrison, Anthony, Storino, and Dillon (2001) revealed that studies found fighting or physical contact to be one of the most frequent behaviors that result in office referrals and suspensions. Seventy-five percent of the respondents reported that they were involved in fighting at school that led to disciplinary action that exacerbated their difficulties in staying engaged in school. Irvin stated that he got into numerous fights during the middle school years, and Brian noted that his anger over dealing with his Grandfather's death caused him to lash out at students who would pick on him.

#### *Theme # 5e Drug use*

Janosz and colleagues (1997) revealed that dropouts were more likely to use drugs. The literature aligned with the fact that the inmates reported drug use, specifically marijuana, during their schooling years. More than half of the inmates reported smoking marijuana during the schooling years. Furlong, Casas, Corral, Chung, and Bates (1997) found that students reporting frequent drug use at school were more likely to be involved in acts of aggression. As noted, the respondents reported getting into numerous fights at school. The choice of drug for the respondents aligned with Snyder and Sickmund's (2006) report that the most common drug used by high school students was marijuana.

### *Theme # 5f Dropping out*

The most important negative outcome of the respondents was the point of dropout with the school system. According to Harlow's (2003) study, nearly 75% of state prison inmates, almost 59% of federal inmates, and 69% of jail inmates did not complete high school. In comparison to the general population school dropout rate (30%), the rates documented by Harlow were unusually high. This critical negative outcome appears to have been the culmination of many factors, events, and circumstances experienced by the inmates over the course of their schooling career. Dropping out was the outcome the inmates regretted the most. The following theme and facets of the theme examine the inmates' reflections of their regret, self-blame, and advice for school stakeholders.

### *Theme # 6 Inmate Reflection*

This section reveals the respondents' reflections of the interview discussion, their feelings about dropping out, and their advice for students, teachers, and administrators. In reflection they noted regret and self-blame and had advice for stakeholders in the schooling journey for students, teachers, and administrators. The advice the inmates had for students, teachers, and administrators contributed to the gap in the literature regarding a scarce perspective from inmates regarding k-12 education.

#### *Theme # 6a Self blame and regret*

Consistent with Hall's (2006) findings was the inmates' regret regarding the lack of effort they exhibited up until they dropped out of school. They wished they had another chance to go back and change their attitude toward school. If they could, they felt they would not have placed themselves in their current state of incarceration. This finding contributes to the education's perspective regarding chaos theory in that events, through the course of time, greatly affect an

outcome. In this case, the inmates' poor schooling experiences bifurcated to tracks of negative outcomes and may have ultimately led to incarceration.

#### *Theme # 6b Advice for students, teachers, and administrators*

This section focuses on the inmates' recommendations for students, teachers, and administrators who are in circumstances similar to what they have described in the data.

This sub-theme is divided into three areas of advice: students, teachers, and administrators.

##### *Students*

The advice the inmates had for students was central to establishing relationships with their teachers, administrators and other students. The inmates suggested that the students communicate and "open up more" to their teachers, counselors, and administrators. If Nate would have discussed his feelings of depression after his grandmother's death, school personnel might have been able to effectively intervene and change his life-course. Secondly, they hoped that students "would not give up" and that they would stay in school. Thirdly, they recommended that students stay away from the wrong crowds to avoid trouble. Lastly, they wanted students to understand how drugs destroy one's focus on school. These simple recommendations for students may contribute to present and future COPers' success in school.

##### *Teachers*

The advice the respondents had for members of the teaching profession was centered on communication and encouragement. Dennis felt that teachers communicating with and encouraging the students was important. He noted, "I think it has a lot to do with everything. If I could have done good in school, I probably would not be in [prison]." The inmates felt that teachers should show that they care about students by "talking to a student right" and "encouraging them."

### *Administrators*

The advice for the administrators was similar to the advice for the students. The inmates stressed communication and encouragement as being important to establishing relationships with students. Dexter noted that administrators should not label the students as troublemakers. Dexter stated that an administrator at his school caused him to feel uncomfortable by bringing him into the office to check on his behavior. The respondents, including Dexter, also felt that administrators should become more aware of students' personal circumstances.

### **Summary**

This study examined the perspectives of male inmates regarding their k-12 education. This study's core finding was interaction: interaction in the form of relationships established between the inmates as students and their parents, teachers, counselors, administrators, and the school. This interaction, or lack thereof, emerged from their experiences within the school system up until the point in which they dropped out. The findings are divided into four basic parts: inmate characteristics, positive and negative experiences of school attachment, negative outcomes associated with disengagement, and inmate reflection.

The respondents had distinct characteristics that were displayed in their schooling journey. The twelve characteristics revealed were living in a single-parent home and lacking parental involvement, moving or changing schools, experiencing a traumatic event or injury, failing school, walking to and from school and lack of supervision, missing or skipping school, being suspended or expelled, disliking school, fighting, lacking extracurricular activities, escalating middle school problems, and using drugs (marijuana). These identifying characteristics might be red-flag indicators for students who are advancing through the schooling process.

The study's findings reveal what the inmates liked and disliked about school. These negative and positive experiences were distinguished by categorizing the experiences into staff interaction, engagement, and disengagement. The respondents limited contact with counselors and administrators and the perceived disconnect as the schooling years progressed between teachers and students contributed to school disengagement. As the disconnect widened, the inmates as students became more apathetic, frustrated, and disgruntled. The respondents identified characteristics of effective and ineffective teachers. Aligning with the literature, the respondents recognized teacher behavior conducive to good teaching and interaction with students, and negative teacher characteristics associated with poor teaching and interaction with students. The middle school years were the accelerating point for this process of school disenchantment. The matriculation of negative experiences into the inmates' worlds contributed to negative outcomes.

These negative outcomes were identified as school failure or poor school performance, skipping or missing school, suspensions or expulsions, fighting, drug use, and dropping out. These negative outcomes only made matters more complex as school actions and consequences exacerbated the extent of school disengagement and created a cyclical pattern of negativity.

The final part of the findings was the respondents' reflections regarding their thoughts on why and where things went wrong and their advice to stakeholders in the schooling process. The respondents illuminated the theoretical framework for the study with their reflections. They experienced strain and the outcomes associated with being negatively labeled, which contributed to the theoretical concept of chaos in which changes in initial stages influenced broader outcomes such as incarceration. The respondents felt that their poor schooling experiences and dropping out of school strongly contributed to their incarceration. As mentioned, they identified

many educational components that affected their schooling journey, but they still did not blame the school system for their fate. The questions to be pondered are as follows: Were the respondents knowledgeable enough to understand what happened along the way? Had they been conditioned to accept blame as the only alternative to their demise? The respondents, as young COPERs, may have become products of their environments at home and school. The interaction of factors in the COPERs' educational system such as teacher-student attention, student engagement, and student-staff interaction, produced a chaotic state leading to various outcomes. This non-linear state over time stabilized into several tracts of outcomes. In the case of the respondents, the majority of their possible tracts were negative, thus increasing the chance of incarceration.

The following section is an explanation of the changes proposed for the conceptual framework of the study (Figure 5).

### **Revised Theoretical Framework**

#### *Review*

As noted in chapter one and chapter two, the conceptual framework for this study was centered on research that demonstrates the interaction of educational, social, psychological, and scientific disciplines as being dynamic, multifaceted, and non-linear. Crowell (1989) stated, "Education has separate subjects, separate skills, separate objectives, separate evaluations, linear methods, and isolated classrooms" (p. 61). The components of education have been assessed separately, such as, curriculum, instruction, and student performance. Likewise, linear systems have been dominant in criminological thought (Milovanovic, 1996). Milovanovic (1997) gives an example of a linear and non-linear system – criminal justice and social justice, respectively. He states that criminal justice linearly focuses upon the single, acting person, whereas, social

justice non-linearly focuses upon the conditions of life in the whole society. Relating Milovanovic's framework of criminal justice to education, education linearly focuses on the single, acting student; and a non-linear focus of education emphasizes the student and his interactions with his educational environmental conditions.

What is necessary is the dynamic understanding of the interrelationship of all systems in the COPER's life (Crowell, 1989; Cziko, 1989). One way of understanding these interacting systems is to conceptualize a child's interactions within their different environments. For example, an incident in one class a student attends may destabilize the ecosystem of another class (Sadovnik, Cookson, & Semel, 2001). Specific theories and perspectives that shape the conceptual framework for this study are as follows: chaos theory, labeling theory, and strain theory.

Strain theory posits that the negative circumstances and negative relationships between COPERs and their schooling environment place strain on the COPERs' ability to interact within the systems (Agnew, 1992). The strain experienced by the COPERs combined with the school's behavior of labeling students as poor performing students or students with behavioral problems (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951; Rist, 1977; Sadovnik, Cookson, & Semel, 2001) contributed to the COPERs sensitivity to initial conditions. In non-linear systems, this sensitivity to initial conditions created a non-linear sequencing of events that further exacerbated their unstable environments, thus leading to incarceration (Gleick, 1988; Gribbin, 2004; Marion, 2002; Trygestad, 1997; Walthrop, 1994).

#### *Revised Theoretical Framework*

The revised conceptual framework (Figure 5) closely resembles the proposed framework for the study. The modifications to the framework were minor, yet gave a better representation of



the interacting systems and factors that might contribute to educational failure, deviant behavior, and incarceration. The modifications to the original framework were the addition of characteristics of the inmates as students, as well as, the deletion of characteristics due to the study's limitations regarding asking about family background – parent educational level and socioeconomic status. The flow direction among the figure's components stayed intact throughout despite modifications. Sub-themes and facets of the figure's components were added after data analysis. Additional boxes were added as sub-themes to school disengagement and school engagement. An addition to the chart is a cyclical box labeled negative reciprocation. This box illustrates that student disengagement may increase negative outcomes and negative outcomes may further student disengagement. The negative reciprocation box is configured between the school disengagement box and the negative outcome box. The Negative Outcome section of the flowchart was changed to represent the findings of the study. The broad terms – school violence, school crime, and delinquency were dropped from the negative outcome section. Specific outcomes were added to the Negative Outcome box – fighting, skipping or missing school, and suspensions or expulsions. As such, flowing from the incarceration box are four additions: (a) regret and self-blame, (b) advice for students, teachers, and parents, (c) enrollment in a GED program, and (d) the value of education.

The Characteristics section of the flowchart now consists of single parent/lack of parental involvement, moving or changing schools, lack of supervision at home, apathetic toward school, traumatic event/injury, school failure, skipping school, suspended or expelled, fighting, apathetic attitude toward school, middle school problems, and drug use. This box is a representation or portrait of the inmates as they traveled through the schooling process. In the findings chapter, characteristics of the inmates were limited to elements out of the inmates' control. These

characteristics were single parent/guardian and lack of parental involvement, moving or changing schools, walking to or from school and lack of supervision at home, and traumatic event or injury. Additional facet characteristics were added to the flowchart that included outcomes or elements that were somewhat within the inmates' control to provide a better overall portrait of identifiers.

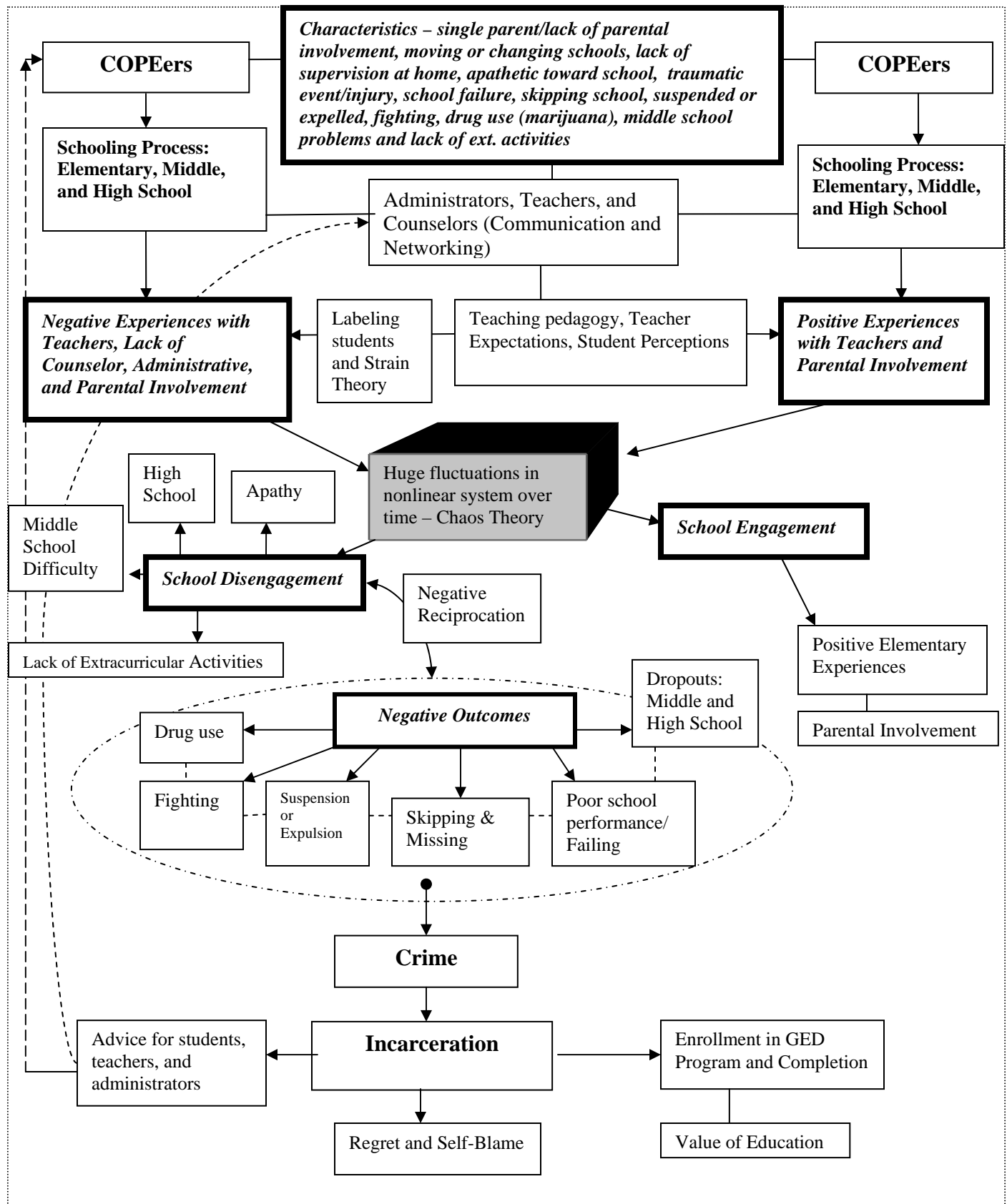
The flow of the chart illustrates the respondents' interaction with the school's administrators, counselors, and teachers. Because of pedagogical teaching styles, school staff interaction, and parental involvement, the inmate-students experienced either negative or positive school experiences. The theoretical review mentioned previously provides a foundation for understanding the theoretical influence in the diagram. The theoretical elements of the study interact at the core of the flowchart producing the tracts of behavior in the form of school disengagement or school engagement. The three dimensional effect of the chaos theory box is a representation of the theory's influence on all levels of the chart. In theory, all of the boxes in the chart could have lines leading to the chaos box and away from it. However, for simplifying the understanding of the chart, only the major themes of positive and negative experiences with teachers and disengagement and engagement are connected to the chart with lines. For example, when the students were labeled by their teachers as troublemakers and experienced the strain of transition to middle school and high school, the cumulative effects and subsequent negative outcomes demonstrate chaos theory's influence on the cause and effect conceptualization of several boxes in the chart. School disengagement now consists of four branch boxes: apathy toward school, middle school difficulty, lack of extra-curricular activities, and high school. An additional box – high school – was added to the disengagement box. Although high school was not a major theme revealed in the data, it deserves display in the chart to represent the continued

disengagement from the schooling process after the middle school years. The school engagement box has one branch, positive elementary experiences and its component, parental involvement.

Flowing from school disengagement are negative outcomes. When the inmates became disengaged with the schooling process and strain was present, they acted out in misbehavior. The negative outcomes which might also be considered characteristics are poor school performance, skipping or missing school, suspended or expelled, fighting, drug use, and dropping out in middle school and high school. The dotted line oval around the negative outcomes section simply groups the outcomes together and signifies their possible relationships. These negative outcomes may negatively reciprocate school disengagement causing a vicious cycle leading to dropping out, crime, and incarceration.

The incarceration box now has flowing from it the inmates' participation in a GED program because of the newfound value they place on education, the regret and self-blame experienced by the inmates regarding their educational history, and the inmates' advice for students, teachers, and administrators to prevent possible negative outcomes such as incarceration. The dotted lines leading from the inmate reflections box and flowing up the chart represent the advice the inmates have for COPers and school staff members that may help change perspectives and outcomes. Staff networking and increased communication was added to the administrators, teachers, and counselors box based upon the advice the respondents had for school staff.

**Figure 5 Non-linear and Dynamic, At-risk Student Education – A System in Chaos**



### **Limitations**

All data were collected from a single all-male correctional facility located in southwest Louisiana, which limited transferability from the results. Since the study only dealt with inmates, there were limitations on generalizing to non-inmate populations and comparing non-inmate and inmate dropout populations.

For the purpose of the study, the investigator delimited the study to explore respondents' educational experiences only. The researcher was, however, able to address peripheral elements of family and crime through the interview data of the inmates' educational experiences. To protect the anonymity of respondents, the researcher chose not to conduct one-to-one follow up and focus group interviews.

### **Study Implications**

After reporting the findings, discussing the findings, and modifying the conceptual framework, I will now discuss the benefits of this study to the field of education at five levels: elementary education, middle school education, high school education, higher education; and correctional education. Elementary, middle, and high school education is a powerful entity for the successful outcome of an educated, law-abiding, successful citizen. Educators at these levels should continue to revisit their professional commitment to education and examine whether change is needed in their approach to connect with their students and produce environments conducive to learning for COPERs. Teacher education programs should continue to re-examine the pedagogical practices associated with producing affective traits in teachers. In addition, these higher-level programs should continue to prepare teachers specifically for middle school level education, instead of preparing for a generalized secondary stage which includes middle and high school. The last level that may benefit from this study is correctional education. Correctional

educators may benefit by having a better understanding of the characteristics of prisoners enrolling in their programs and aligning strategies to better suit their pursuit of an education. The following sections examine implications at each level.

### *The Elementary Experience*

This study's findings validated the literature regarding the inmate population's enjoyment of their elementary experience as compared to the secondary years. This finding is important for school systems and teacher preparation programs to examine why children, even those who dropout, enjoy their elementary experiences. Stephens' (1990) study surveying New York inmates regarding their educational histories revealed that inmates who were dropouts enjoyed their elementary experiences more than they did their secondary experiences. Dunham and Alpert (1987) and Wehlage and Rutter (1986) noted that general enjoyment of the schooling process is important to learning. The present study's findings suggest that the inmates' enjoyment of elementary school coincided with more parental involvement in their education, more positive perceptions of their teachers than in later years, and the organization of the elementary process (i.e. smaller student populations than middle and high school, one-teacher rooms, and no class changes). Elementary education should continue to take advantage and build upon the positive influence it has on the COPers' educational foundation, for this foundation may bifurcate into tracts that lead to educational success.

### *Identifying Characteristics of COPers*

This study identified twelve characteristics that deserve attention with regard to COPers and negative outcomes: single parent and lack of parental involvement, moving or changing schools, traumatic event or injury, school failure, skipping school, suspension or expulsion, fighting, drug use (marijuana), lack of extra-curricular activities, lack of supervision at home,

apathetic attitude toward school, and middle school problems. As noted, Hall (2006) suggested identifying characteristics of inmates as students may ultimately help predict possible incarceration. A school level focus would be to systematically identify these students as COPERs early in the schooling experience or when characteristics surface. Walker, Cheney, Stage, and Blum (2005) suggested that by systematically identifying these students, schools may become more preventive as far as discipline problems are concerned. This alertness to precursors of misbehavior allows the school to efficiently and effectively meet the individual needs of the students. By using screening methods, schools may intervene before poor behavior manifests and creates a vicious cycle of negative behavior, negative consequences, and negative outcomes.

Walker and colleagues acknowledge that school staff may perceive early identification as creating a negative labeling stigma but suggest that in order to adopt such intervention, the school staff must be persuaded that it can be efficient, effective, and inexpensive. In other words, the entire staff must adopt the philosophy of positive labeling to create an underlying, efficacious acceptance.

Stephens (1990) noted that elementary schools and especially secondary schools should consider monitoring students with characteristics that identify a student at risk of dropping out. This would appear contradictory to the negativity associated with the labeling of students. This form of labeling, when applied positively, would be very beneficial to the student and school. Preventive measures are more effective, efficient, and feasible. According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2004), the nation's average annual operating cost per state inmate in 2001 was \$22,650. The per-pupil expenditure for education in the state of Louisiana in 2000 was \$5,804 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003b). More spending for programs on the front end may save society monetarily on the back end. Schools may want to implement drug

education and prevention programs, create and promote more parental participation or interaction with the school, have counselors meet with the students upon identification of a traumatic event, institute anger control sessions, promote extra-curricular activities and create intramural programs to keep the students connected and engaged in the school.

### *Elementary, Middle, and Secondary Teacher-Student Relationships*

Jordan and McDill (1996) suggested that schools can influence students by fostering supportive relationships between and among students, teachers, and adults. This suggestion speaks to the findings of this study regarding the impact teachers have on students through positive relationships. Establishing relationships with students is critical to their development. Even if the gesture is a simple smile as you welcome the student into the classroom or on campus, it is something to build upon. These small positive events occurring with dialogue and interest in young COPERs' personal backgrounds build trust and warmth for future interactions that may require more complex interactions and interventions, such as disciplining the student.

School systems should have opportunities for teachers to be exposed to relationship-building strategies between the teacher and student. The most important aspect of any organization, whether the organization is a business corporation, government body or educational system, is the relationships and trust established between the producer and consumer, politician and constituency, and teacher and student, respectively. Relationship building also promotes more interaction between the teacher and parent or guardian.

Elementary schools tend to offer more relationship-building experiences. Is this just a coincidence, or is the system of education providing the necessary mechanisms early in the life of the COPER, such as teacher-student relationships and more opportunities for parents to be involved in the student's education, such as field trips and Grandparent's day? Stephens's



(1990) study showed that at the elementary level, a high percentage of inmates who were dropouts felt they could trust their teachers. Stephens's data also revealed that a significantly lower percentage of dropouts felt they could trust their secondary teachers. Are students with certain characteristics such as a good family support, good financial status, and few risk factors mentioned previously more inclined to succeed regardless of the relationship established between the teacher and student? Furthermore, are students with more than a few risk characteristics in need of adult modeling and relationship building at school because they may not have those support systems away from school? In the findings of the present study, who go home to a lack of supervision and the streets. In the streets they find resolution through mischief and gang relationships, escape through drug use, and no one to provide help or accountability with homework. If good students with few risk factors have a bad day or experience at school, they may have supportive relationships at home to counsel, nurture, and supervise them. This is not the case with most COPErs. Educators must step in and fill the void in these young people's lives. When Csikszentimihayli and McCormack (1986) asked high school students who had influenced them to become the kind of people they were, 58% named one of their teachers. Ideally, all students should have good parental support in their educational life. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Can schools step in on behalf of parents and positively influence children? It may be necessary in today's society. The school can be a powerful influence in students' lives.

### *Teaching Characteristics*

This section discusses the implications for teachers who may be perceived as "bad" teachers and how they can improve. Foote, Vermette, Wisneiewski, Agnello, and Pagano (2000) described "bad" teachers as being disorganized, not providing enough explanation, using poor

methods to convey their topic, lacking enthusiasm, displaying favoritism, being uncaring about students, and poorly skilled in their interpersonal exchanges with students. According to the respondents, the teachers did not provide individualized instruction, had low expectations for the students, were non-caring, provided deficient explanations of directions and content, had a poor attitude, and displayed favoritism amongst the students.

Sizemore (1981) analyzed a study in Virginia that surveyed a sample of approximately 11,000 high school students about what they considered to be among the most important differences between being a “good” teacher and a “bad” teacher. The results showed that students want teachers who are supportive and view the students as being “good” students. The respondents in the present study also provided data that represents good teaching traits similar to Sizemore’s findings, such as providing individualized instruction, having high expectations, caring for their students, and possessing the ability to explain directions and content.

Teachers should be held accountable for the way they conduct their classrooms, not just for subject matter knowledge. Administrative observations can become formalities and are therefore meaningless in the scope of the real atmosphere or environment in the classroom. Students should be allowed to rate and acknowledge teacher behavior in the form of questionnaires or surveys. Responses would provide feedback for teachers and administrators to modify teaching behavior and classroom management if needed. The rating system should include and be cross-referenced with such items as the ones mentioned previously. If teachers are provided with tools to recognize poor behavior and interventions to help change it, COPEr, the school, and society would benefit from these pedagogically modified practices.

### *Administrative Interaction and Visibility*

The respondents in the study noted a lack of interaction with the school administration, except for in the case of disciplinary matters. Ediger (2006) noted that frequently administrators lack knowledge about the home setting of the child or about the educational level of the parents. Ediger also suggested that administrators need to make their presence more visible in the school day. It is important to mingle with the students and get to know them. Establishing these connections helps in matters of discipline. Visibility of the administration establishes a preventative force for misbehavior in the schooling environment. The respondents' advice for administrators should be reflectively examined by all administrators. Administrators should provide encouragement to students and establish levels of communication. Tony, who dropped out his tenth grade year, stated, "Maybe, instead of punishing me, it would have helped if they would have sat me down and talked to me." Administrators must provide discipline, but they should not be unapproachable. Care and encouragement can go a long way in providing the kind of discipline that exhibits mutual respect between the administrator and student.

### *Counselors Counseling*

Also vital to the identification and intervention of the COPER is the administrator's view of the role of the counselor. The results of this study indicate that the school counselor was absent during critical stages of the respondents schooling journeys. Fitch, Newby, Ballestro, and Marshall (2001) examined the perceptions of future school administrators regarding the role of the school counselor. Their study suggested that school administrators lacked appropriate training and knowledge regarding the school counselor's role and that the school administrator's view of the counselor's role is critical to the counselor's actual job duties. Job duties that are unrelated to the counselor's role, such as record keeping and discipline duties should be

eliminated or decreased; and roles related to their professionally determined functions such as individual counseling, group counseling, and classroom guidance should be adhered to (Baker, 1996).

The respondents' lack of interaction with school counselors may be attributed to this counseling perspective to some degree. If administrators focused on the role of the school counselor and ensured that they were allowed to function in their professional capacity, future students on the path to academic failure may have more interaction with these professionals. This interaction may be the bifurcation point that develops new tracts for the student and subsequent academic engagement.

Another effective role for counselors may be to train teachers, administrators, and even students in the art of interpersonal communication. Most teachers, administrators, and students are not trained extensively regarding this very important skill. Counselor training is centered on the art of communication. Counselors could use this background to provide teachers, administrators, and students with the necessary skills to establish and sustain interpersonal relationships with students and parents (Bemak & Cornerly, 2002).

Another factor that inhibits student-counselor interaction is the student-counselor ratio at large schools. The American School Counselor Association recommends a 250-1 ratio of students to counselors (ASCA, 2005), but according to data taken from the State Non-fiscal Survey of Public Elementary/Secondary Education, that ratio is actually 479-1(ASCA). This large ratio becomes problematic with regard to efficiently providing individual attention to COPers. A remedy is to hire more school counselors to minimize this large ratio. Of concern, however, is the national education budget for fiscal year 2008. According to the National Education Association (2007), the budget eliminates funding for 44 programs, including school

counselor programs and dropout prevention programs. These two areas need additional funding not less.

### *Organizational Structuring*

Schools should creatively organize their structure to reduce the staff to student ratio in order to maximize the opportunity for personal relationships. Organizational structuring, such as schools within schools, teaming, sixth grade campuses, and ninth grade campuses are some types of effective practices that should be replicated. Complimenting these practices should be transition programs that target students, parents, and staff and schools that fully support the programs.

### *Middle School and High School Transition Programs*

The respondents in this study noted the difficult time period in their educational journey was the middle school years. These young teenagers struggled with issues of social influence (peer groups) and negative interaction with their teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents. The elementary years were spent changing classes at most two times a day, having only one or two teachers, and being in a class with about 20 students. The opportunity for personal interaction was significant at this level. This opportunity for interaction, however, decreased once the student transitioned to the middle school level. The middle school years provided the student more independence regarding learning. Students attended multiple classrooms, had several teachers, and were exposed to possibly hundreds of students during the day. The organization of middle school instruction made it more difficult for the respondents to establish meaningful relationships with teachers, counselors, and administrators (Feldlaufer, Midgely, & Eccles, 1988). The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) stated that middle schools have the power to bring back millions of students who are disengaged from the school

setting. Upon completion of middle school, the respondents transitioned to high schools that were larger and offered even more learning independence. These critical transition stages, from elementary to middle school and middle to high school, were critical stages for these COPers.

In a study conducted by Smith (1997), she explored the effectiveness of middle school transition programs on high school retention and student performance. Her study utilized a nationally representative sample of public school students and their transition programs. Her study concluded that those students who had full transition programs available to them in middle school were less likely to drop out of high school than those students who had partial programs or none at all. Full programs were those that had full school commitment in targeting students, parents, and staff. Partial programs were defined as those programs that targeted only one or two of the groups (students, parents, or staff). Transition programs should be implemented from not only middle school to high school, but also from elementary to middle school. And as Smith suggested, these programs should focus on all three groups of stakeholders – students, parents, and staff.

### *Higher Education*

Characteristics of effective and ineffective teachers and the importance of establishing student relationships should be included or continue to be examined in teacher education programs. In a case study analyzing pedagogical content knowledge of teacher educators in a teacher education program at Ohio University, Chang (2005) noted that how teacher educators teach influences student teachers' perception of what teaching is and what education aims for. Chang revealed that the case study's teacher program goals were to encourage every student to participate, exchange ideas, develop communication skills, and develop their interpersonal-relationship skills. One of the many strategies utilized to achieve these goals was to configure

student teachers' desks in a circle facing each other to allow for a more personal teaching environment. In order for prospective teachers to learn teaching methods for non-linear environments, teacher education programs should model behavior and strategies that promote and enhance the interpersonal-relationship skills that are necessary for effectiveness in these environments. After all, these programs produce the next generation of teachers.

In addition, the present study revealed in its findings that the middle school years were more problematic for the inmate as student. Theriot, Alcalá, and Denson (2004) suggested that some teacher preparation programs geared toward general secondary certification are minimizing or not addressing middle level teaching strategies specific to adolescents. These programs may traditionally be emphasizing high school teaching methods. Teacher programs should place emphasis on understanding this critical stage in COPER's schooling journey and pedagogically prepare its teachers for this stage. Teacher education programs could offer more courses with an emphasis on middle school education. Prospective teachers could spend more time in middle schools observing classes, speaking with counselors, and interviewing administrators. Furthermore, prospective secondary teachers could spend observation time in elementary schools to examine the characteristics of elementary teachers that the respondents spoke fondly of.

Teacher education programs and educational administration programs should include more competency-based training regarding identifying unexpected mental health issues facing today's COPERs (Koller & Bertel, 2006). Koller and Bertel (2006) noted that at the pre-service level, administrators and teachers receive little training regarding knowing how to deal with student issues such as depression, stress, anxiety, bullying, and school violence. Koller and Bertel's analysis of pre-service training for teachers and administrators concluded that a paradigm shift is needed to change current pre-service training trends in educating teachers and

administrators. Koller and Bertel suggested that this perspective is needed to properly educate today's youth, especially those with mental health concerns.

### *Correctional Education*

Correctional educators may be impacted by the inmates' regard for the value they place on education while incarcerated. The respondents noted the importance of gaining an education to reintegrate into society. If correctional educators are able to access the educational history of these students, they may be more likely to motivate the students through effective interpersonal communication. As stated, the inmates in GED programs have a new perspective on the value of education. It is important to tap into that perspective and encourage them to completion. The study revealed the importance of establishing a communicative bond between teacher and student. This communication is applicable at all levels of education, including correctional education.

### *Advice for Students*

The inmates provided advice for students to prevent them from making the same mistakes they had made. Their advice for students was: communicate more with teachers, counselors, and administrators; do not give up, stay in school; avoid the wrong crowds; and stay away from drugs. This advice could be used by teachers, administrators, and counselors in moments of counseling, intervention, or disciplinary matters. There are hurdles and obstacles in arranging for students to visit prisons and hear directly from the prisoners. The data from this study may bring the prisoners' voices into the school, classroom, and administrative offices. For example, a student identified as having a poor behavioral history, poor school performance, and on a path to dropping out, may gain a better understanding of possible consequences associated



with this type of behavior if teachers, counselors, or administrators share the inmates' advice with the students.

### *Parental Involvement*

Research documents the importance of parental involvement in the success of students (Gibson & Jefferson, 2006). The inmates noted deterioration in parental involvement as the school process continued. School systems and schools should continue to implement creative ways to involve the parents in the life of their child and the life of the school. As noted earlier, the U.S. Department of Education (1998) stated that parents are a child's first longstanding teachers. This message should be spread throughout the school community by means of letters, town hall meetings, phone calls, and in-home visits. School leaders and staff must look to develop creative ways to get parents involved with the school and their child's education.

### *Louisiana and Education Progress*

The implications presented require creativity, effort, perspective, and, in some cases funding. With funding in mind, there is encouraging news from the state of Louisiana's Executive budget for fiscal year 2007-2008 (Louisiana Division of Administration, 2007) regarding funding designated for education. Louisiana has committed increases in general funding to provide COPERs the opportunity to participate in early childhood education programs. The high school redesign initiative will also see increased funding as well as summer school remediation programs. The purpose of the High School Redesign Commission is to meet and recommend actions in redesigning the state's public high schools to meet the needs of all students in Louisiana. The state has also been recognized for achievement in the areas of accountability, improving teacher quality, and equity funding. According to national rankings, Louisiana is currently first in accountability, first in improving teacher quality, and sixth in

equity (Louisiana Division of Administration, 2007). What remains to be seen are the benefits of an education system making significant improvements in accountability, quality, and equity. Will these lofty rankings and additional funding in Louisiana's educational system contribute to reducing the state's high ranking for per capita incarceration rates? Time will tell.

### **Recommendations for Theory Development**

Chaos theory suggests that minor changes to initial conditions may cause huge fluctuations in nonlinear systems over time (Gribbin, 2004). This study adds to the literature regarding Chaos theory's application to the discipline of education and the conceptualization that slight changes in initial states may greatly affect learning and behavioral outcomes. As this study demonstrated, seemingly small interpersonal exchanges between students and staff members may have contributed to larger states of negative behavioral outcomes, disengagement, dropping out, crime, and incarceration. In *Leading Organizations*, Marion (2002) suggests this theoretical perspective clarifies the leader's role as one of building networks. "Leaders should initiate, encourage, catalyze, and make connections" (Marion, 2002, p. 313). The present study's findings contribute to this perspective regarding the importance of the leader's understanding of the holistic organization and the organization's elemental interactions.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

This study demonstrated the need to examine the perceptions of inmates regarding their educational experiences. Their perspectives address a phenomenological gap in the literature regarding educational experiences. The inmates' experiences provide data that may continue to change the landscape of educating students who are at-risk of school failure – COPers. Evidence of this viewpoint was provided by Nate when he was explaining the advice he would give students who were in a similar situation to the one he was in. Because Nate's grandmother

passed away in the eighth grade, Nate became depressed but suppressed these feelings and did not tell anyone. When the researcher asked when was he able to finally open up and discuss that traumatic event in his life, he stated, “This is the first time I have ever told anybody about how I felt.” This revelation is too late for k-12 intervention, but it may provide a new tract for one man’s learning and emotional awareness to succeed in the prison GED program. This revelation may also provide educators with a perspective to guide them in helping youngsters facing similar situations during their schooling journey.

Further research in this area could be broken into the distinct stages of the schooling process – elementary, middle, and high school. For example, interviewing inmates with an emphasis on the middle school years would provide richer data from a crucial time in the educational journey. An examination of each may provide richer data. A study could be conducted to examine the perspectives of administrators on dropouts. Another study could be developed to solely examine the behavior of COPERs in the schooling process. This data may help to shape the understanding of COPERs’ behaviors at distinct stages of their journey.

From this researcher’s perspective, a study should be done to examine the family and criminal backgrounds of inmates. Due to possible risks to participants in this type of study, the participants could be former or recently-released prisoners. This type of study could establish how their educational, criminal, and family histories interact and influence one another.

A study of incarcerated juveniles’ educational experiences could provide another layer of rich data. Incarcerated adolescents could provide richer and fresher perspectives than the memories of adult prisoners who dropped out of school at least five years from the point of the interviews. Another study could compare Louisiana’s increased funding and rankings with crime

statistics and incarceration rates to see if education is making a difference in crime and incarceration reduction.

Future research could also focus on examining the role of school leaders in educating COPers. A study could be conducted to examine the perspectives of inmates, male or female, regarding the role of administrators in their k-12 educational experiences. A similar study could examine the perspectives of inmates regarding the role of counselors in their educational experiences. Future research could analyze the structure or framework of traditional vs. non-traditional schooling routines that impact the communicative infrastructure of school staff. School leaders can be the change agents in promoting an environment that is collegial, collaborative, equitable, and passionate with regard to academic success for all students.

### **Conclusion**

This study adds to the literature that supports the importance of student engagement in the schooling process. This study reinforced the importance of educational stakeholders establishing meaningful relationships with COPers and their families. The results of this study are a response to the lack of literature on male inmates' perspectives regarding their educational experiences. Specific contributions to the literature are: providing a new term for at-risk, the COPER; understanding the impact of additional characteristics of COPers such as traumatic events or injuries; understanding the importance of administrators and counselors in establishing relationships with COPers; gaining a perspective through the form of advice for teachers, administrators, and students; providing higher education teacher programs with perspectives of the importance of establishing interpersonal-teaching relationships; providing correctional education with perspectives that may help in teaching students in their programs; contributing to

chaos theory's influence on education, school dropout rates, and crime; and understanding the role that education may play in reducing crime.

Properly educating our youth can contribute to a reduction in crime. Lochner and Moretti (2004) conducted a study that estimated the effect of education on participation in criminal activity. The impetus for their investigation centered on the question, "Is it possible to reduce crime rates by raising education in potential criminals?" And if so, "Would it be cost effective with respect to other crime prevention measures?" And finally, they noted that "Little is known about the relationship between schooling and criminal behavior" (p. 155). Using census data, FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) data, and data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Lochner and Moretti found that schooling significantly reduces criminal activity. Their estimates suggest that a one-year increase in average education levels reduces arrest rates by 11 %, and in addition, a one-year increase in average years of schooling reduces murder and assault by almost 30 %. They further revealed that a 1 % increase in the high school completion rate of all men ages 20 to 60 would save the United States as much as \$1.4 billion per year in reduced costs from crime sustained by victims and society at large. These numbers validate the need to continue to investigate the association between education and criminal behavior. The present study contributes to the literature in this regard.

How can educational stakeholders make a difference in COPers' lives and on society? A championship sports team once had a sign above the tunnel leading out to the stadium's field that read, "Blame no one, expect nothing, do something." It is easy and commonplace to assign blame regarding failures of our students and children. If stakeholders can strengthen their resolve to address the problem, assign no blame, expect nothing, and do something, we may all benefit. What if all stakeholders, students, teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and even higher

education programs held this perspective? This perspective may be best understood in the form of another acronym. Educational stakeholders can offer HOPE (Helping Other People in Education) to students in need. This synergistic, philosophical approach to helping COPers could provide the momentum that COPers need to survive and succeed in the educational process, thus decreasing the possibility of incarceration. This study contributes to a gap in the literature that provides educational stakeholders with data and implications to offer HOPE to COPers.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **IRB Approval Form**

***University Committee for the Protection  
of Human Subjects in Research  
University of New Orleans***

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*Campus Correspondence*

Drs. Tammie Causey & Cecil Kilacky  
Shannon Lafargue  
348 CEHD

1/11/2007

RE: Perspectives of male inmates regarding their K-12 educational experiences

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures are compliant with the University of New Orleans and federal guidelines.

Please remember that approval is only valid for one year from the approval date. Any changes to the procedures or protocols must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best of luck with your project!  
Sincerely,

Laura Scaramella, Ph.D.  
Chair, University Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research



## **APPENDIX B**

### **Consent Form**



THE UNIVERSITY *of*  
NEW ORLEANS

## Consent Form

### 1. Title of this study

The Perspective of Male Inmates Regarding Their k-12 Educational Experiences.

### 2. Purpose of this study

This study is to learn about the view of inmates' k-12 education. This study may be used to help:

1. Students and teachers talk with each other.
2. Teachers teach.
3. Teachers and students work together to help students learn.

### 3. What you will do in this study

You will talk about your k-12 education for about 1 hour. This is known as an interview. You will speak to me and will be (audio) taped to make sure that when played back all of what you say can be typed. These tapes will be thrown away when the study is over. Your real name will not be used. A fake name will be used. Anything you say can be used in the study.

### 4. Risks

Some people may not like talking about their educational experiences. If you do not want to talk about something, you do not have to. Just let me know and we will skip that topic. Also, some people get tired during the interview. If you get tired, let me know. We can take a break or stop the interview.

### 5. How this may help people

The results of this study may be used to help principals, assistant principals, teachers and students to understand students who need different ways to learn and be ready to do well in school.

6. Can you stop?

If you want to quit, you may do so at any time. Parole boards do not care if you do this study. This study does not affect decisions made by the parole board.

7. Protection of your name and history

Names will not be used on audiotapes or any other part of this study. I will listen to the tapes and type what you say. I will keep the audiotapes and typed reports in a safe and secret place. I will destroy the typed reports and the tapes no later than one year from today (the typed reports will be torn and the tapes will be thrown away). No details will be recorded that could link any information you provide with you. I will not record the date or time of the interview or your name. This way, if someone asked for the information you gave me, I couldn't give it to them because I wouldn't know if it was your information or not.

8. What you will get

There will be no money or other payment for doing this study, nor will good time or other rewards be given to you for doing this study.

9. Questions after this Study

There will be no medical treatment given or physical need for this study. The study does not involve more than a small risk to you. Should there be any questions from doing this study, please feel free to call Dr. Tammie Causey-Konate' or Jim Killacky at [REDACTED]. If you want to talk about your rights, call Dr. Richard Speaker at the University of New Orleans [REDACTED]

10. Oral agreement form to do this study

You have been told of what will happen in this study and the risks for this study. Continuing with the interview is your consent to participate.

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Parole Board Letter**

DEPARTMENT OF  
PUBLIC SAFETY AND CORRECTIONS

INEAUX BLANCO, GOVERNOR



RICHARD L. STALDER, SECRETARY

October 31, 2006

Dr. Laura Scaramella  
Chair  
Institutional Review Board  
University of New Orleans. GP 2001  
New Orleans, LA 70148

Dear Dr. Scaramella:

We are aware that Mr. Shannon LaFargue, a doctoral student at the University of New Orleans, is conducting a study of the male prisoners housed in the Calcasieu Correctional Center, this fall, under the direction and supervision of Professors Causey and Killackey.

Assuming study documents pertaining to specific inmates are not placed in the Headquarters inmate file or transmitted to the Parole Board staff, the Parole Board would be shielded from acquiring written knowledge that an inmate did or did not participate in the study. In the event that an inmate, or anyone else, orally discloses to the board that an inmate participated in the study, such information would be deemed irrelevant to established criteria for determining whether to grant or deny parole.

For these reasons, and based on the assumption set forth in the preceding paragraph, I can state that the Louisiana Board of Parole will not take into account a prisoner's participation in this research study when making parole decisions.

I wish Mr. LaFargue the best in his research undertaking.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "D. Simon".

Diana P. Simon, Chairman  
Louisiana Parole Board

## **APPENDIX D**

### **Certification**



National Cancer Institute

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## Human Participant Protections Education for Research

### Completion Certificate

This is to certify that

**Shannon LaFargue**

has completed the **Human Participants Protection Education for Research Teams** online course, sponsored by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), on 09/01/2006.

This course included the following:

- key historical events and current issues that impact guidelines and legislation on human participant protection in research.
- ethical principles and guidelines that should assist in resolving the ethical issues inherent in the conduct of research with human participants.
- the use of key ethical principles and federal regulations to protect human participants at various stages in the research process.
- a description of guidelines for the protection of special populations in research.
- a definition of informed consent and components necessary for a valid consent.
- a description of the role of the IRB in the research process.
- the roles, responsibilities, and interactions of federal agencies, institutions, and researchers in conducting research with human participants.

National Institutes of Health  
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<http://cme.cancer.gov/cgi-bin/cms/cts-cert5.pl>

8/31/2006

## **APPENDIX E**

### **Permission Letter Sheriff's Office**





**Parish Sheriff's Office**

**SHERIFF AND EX-OFFICIO TAX COLLECTOR**

September 14, 2006

University of New Orleans  
Institutional Review Board  
2000 Lakeshore Drive  
New Orleans, La. 70148

Dear Sir or Madam,

Mr. Shannon Lafargue has been approved by the [REDACTED] Parish Sheriff's Office to conduct a study with inmates incarcerated at the [REDACTED] Correctional Center. He is aware of the security guidelines imposed by this institution and agree to them. He will coordinate his study with GED Instructor [REDACTED], who will provide a list of candidates to participate in the study. The times and [REDACTED] of the study have been approved by this institution and presents no problem. The Sheriff's Office as well as Mr. [REDACTED] will assist in anyway possible.

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]  
Warden

[REDACTED]  
GED Instructor

## **APPENDIX F**

### **Participant Selection Process**



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* NEW ORLEANS

██████████, Warden  
██████████, Education Director  
██████████ Correctional Center

December 15, 2006

Mr. ██████████ and ██████████:

I want to thank you both for your acceptance and efforts in helping coordinate this study. In accordance with the University of New Orleans' Institutional Review Board (IRB), the study will follow ethical and IRB protocol. It is vital that consideration of the rights of the inmates not be comprised in conducting the research. The following information provides criteria for selection of the participants and the procedures to be used by ██████████.

1. Criteria for selection of participants.

- a. incarcerated males
- b. aged 18-30
- c. school dropout
- d. presently or formerly enrolled in the GED program.
- e. attended school in Louisiana.

2. Procedures.

- a. Provide the researcher, LaFargue, with a list of all potential participants based on the criteria mentioned above.
  - 1) Code the inmates by number with their race next to the number.
  - 2) Keep the names and numbers with ██████████.
  - 3) Only send LaFargue the numbered list with race (No Names).

Example: To be kept by ██████████

Name of Inmate	Race	Number
Joe Smith	African American	1

Example: Send to LaFargue

	Race	Number
	African American	1

- b. LaFargue will randomly select participants from the list provided and, in turn, send [REDACTED] the list of fifteen (15) participants to be used for the study.
- c. [REDACTED] will coordinate with LaFargue interview schedules for the participants selected.
- d. LaFargue will inform [REDACTED] when the interview process has been completed with all participants needed.

3. Correspondence.

- a. Please send list of all participants to [REDACTED]
- b. LaFargue phone numbers:
  - 1) Home: [REDACTED]
  - 2) Cell: [REDACTED]
- c. Please provide LaFargue with [REDACTED] e-mail and phone numbers.
- d. This study is being carried out under the direct supervision of Tammie Causey-Konate' and Jim Killacky. If you have any questions or observations, please feel free to contact either or both of them at:
  - 1) Tammie Causey: e-mail: [tcausey@uno.edu](mailto:tcausey@uno.edu), phone: [REDACTED]
  - 2) Jim Killacky: e-mail: [jkillack@uno.edu](mailto:jkillack@uno.edu), phone: [REDACTED]

Thanks again and I look forward to working with you. Please give me a call if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Shannon LaFargue  
Doctoral candidate  
University of New Orleans

## **APPENDIX G**

### **Participant Selection Table**



# THE UNIVERSITY of NEW ORLEANS

Selection of Inmates: This table is to be kept by [REDACTED] for selection records.

Selection Goal: 15 total inmates – 9 African-American and 6 Caucasian

Name	Race	Number
	African-American	1
	African-American	2
	African-American	3
	African-American	4
	African-American	5
	African-American	6
	African-American	7
	African-American	8
	African-American	9
	Caucasian	10
	Caucasian	11
	Caucasian	12
	Caucasian	13
	Caucasian	14
	Caucasian	15

1. Once [REDACTED] selects the inmates for the study, he will contact the researcher, LaFargue.
2. LaFargue will inform [REDACTED] regarding the order of the inmates' numbers to be interviewed.
3. [REDACTED] will schedule the interviews on a date agreed upon with LaFargue
4. LaFargue will inform [REDACTED] when the interviews with the inmates needed has concluded.
5. The anticipated or projected time period for interviewing the inmates is approximately three days.
6. LaFargue **does not need** to know the inmates' names.

## **APPENDIX H**

### **Interview Guide Elementary Stage**

## **ELEMENTARY**

### **Interview Guide - Questions for Individual Interview**

**Research Question:** What are your perspectives regarding your k-12 educational experiences?

Inmate # \_\_\_\_\_ Name/Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary Question: What were your kindergarten and elementary educational experiences like?**

#### **Probing Questions:**

1. Were your parents involved in your school experience?
2. What subjects did you like or dislike and why?
3. Who were some of your favorite teachers and why?
4. How did they show that they cared about you?
5. Who were some of your least favorite teachers and why?
6. What do you wish they would have done differently?
7. Do you think that some teachers treat some students differently than others? In what way?
8. What were the discipline procedures at your school(s) that you remember the most?
9. What or who motivated you to do good in school?
10. Tell me about the moments when you were excited about school?
11. Tell me about the moments when you were disinterested in school?
12. Describe instances when you got into trouble at school?
13. Describe instances when you did well at school?
14. Did you have contact with other school staff such as administrators and counselors? Describe these instances.
15. Were there special event days at your school? Please describe.
16. Did you go on field trips? If so, please describe them. If no, why not?



## **APPENDIX I**

### **Interview Guide Middle School Stage**

## **MIDDLE SCHOOL**

### **Interview Guide - Questions for Individual Interview**

**Research Question:** What are your perspectives regarding your k-12 educational experiences?

Inmate # \_\_\_\_\_ Name/Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary Question:** What were your middle school educational experiences like?

#### **Probing Questions:**

1. Were your parents involved in your school experience?
2. What subjects did you like or dislike and why?
3. Who were some of your favorite teachers and why?
4. How did they show that they cared about you?
5. Who were some of your least favorite teachers and why?
6. What do you wish they would have done differently?
7. Do you think that some teachers treat some students differently than others? In what way?
8. Describe your adjustment to middle school? Was it difficult? Why? What would you have liked to have been done differently by your school?
9. What were the discipline procedures at your schools that you remember the most?
10. What or who motivated you to do good in school?
11. Tell me about the moments when you were excited about school?
12. Tell me about the moments when you were disinterested in school?
13. Describe instances when you got into trouble at school?
14. Describe instances when you did well at school?
15. Did you have contact with other staff members such as counselors and administrators?  
Please describe these instances.
16. Were you involved in extracurricular activities? Tell me about them.

## **APPENDIX J**

### **Interview Guide High School**

## HIGH SCHOOL

### Interview Guide - Questions for Individual Interview

**Research Question:** What are your perspectives regarding your k-12 educational experiences?

Inmate # \_\_\_\_\_ Name/Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary Question:** What were your high school educational experiences like?

#### Probing Questions:

1. Were your parents involved in your school experience?
2. What subjects did you like or dislike and why?
3. Who were some of your favorite teachers and why?
4. How did they show that they cared about you?
5. Who were some of your least favorite teachers and why?
6. What do you wish they would have done differently?
7. Do you think that some teachers treat some students differently than others? In what way?
8. What were the discipline procedures at your schools that you remember the most?
9. What or who motivated you to do good in school?
10. Tell me about the moments when you were excited about school?
11. Tell me about the moments when you were disinterested in school?
12. Describe instances when you got into trouble at school?
13. Describe instances when you did well at school?
14. Did you have contact with other staff such as counselors and administrators? Describe these instances.
15. Were you involved in extracurricular activities? Tell me about them.
16. What advise would you give to students who are in a similar situation as yourself?

17. What would you do differently if you could go back?
18. Why is education important to you now?
19. What do you feel would have made a difference in your educational history and in you?

## Vita

Shannon LaFargue was born on September 25, 1968 in Lake Charles, Louisiana. He grew up in Kinder, Louisiana and graduated from Kinder High School in 1986. He began his academic pursuits with an Associate of Arts degree from East Central Community College in Decatur, Mississippi. Shannon earned his Bachelors degree in Health and Human Performance at McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana, and upon graduating from McNeese, he immediately enrolled in graduate school and earned a Masters of Education degree in 1993 from McNeese State University. In 2004, he entered graduate school at the University of New Orleans to pursue a doctorate in educational administration. Shannon was a teacher and coach at the college and high school levels from 1991 to 2007. In 2007, Shannon entered secondary school administration and is currently the assistant principal at a high school in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Shannon plans to graduate in the near future and continue working in school administration.