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Stuck in the Middle: A Qualitative Study of Middle School Students Displaying Problematic Behaviors and their Perspectives Regarding Significant School Related Issues

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STUCK IN THE MIDDLE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS
DISPLAYING PROBLEMATIC BEHAVIORS AND THEIR PERSPECTIVES REGARDING
SIGNIFICANT SCHOOL RELATED ISSUES

By

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Presented to the College of Education
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in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Education

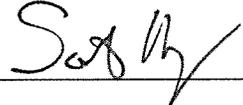
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“STUCK IN THE MIDDLE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS DISPLAYING PROBLEMATIC BEHAVIORS AND THEIR PERSPECTIVES REGARDING SIGNIFICANT SCHOOL RELATED ISSUES,” a Doctoral research project prepared by ARTHUR PALACIOS in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in the Educational Foundations and Leadership Department.

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ABSTRACT

This study originated with questions about students who display problematic behavior in school and their unique school experience. Generally, student voices regarding their perspective about their own school experiences are absent in the scholarly literature. This lack of attention led to this investigation. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions held by a small sample of middle school children who evidence a pattern of disciplinary problems as determined by school referral data. The target students were solicited from two middle schools in the same district that met the criteria for problematic behavior and were willing to participate. A qualitative approach was determined to be the best process to produce appropriate data and personal interviews were conducted with a sample of middle school students. Four Thematic Codes were identified, indicating significant insight into these students' perspectives about academic performance, parental involvement in school, teacher relationships and respectful classroom and school settings. Suggestions for further research and recommendations to school leaders as a result of these findings are presented and hold potential for significant impact in middle school settings.

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Thank you, Debbie. I am so blessed to be your husband. You have loved me, encouraged me and fought beside me through every circumstance we've faced. There is no truer friend, no greater love and no stronger ally than you. Thank you for believing in me, long before it was a good idea to do so. My heart has always been yours, and I am confident that you have freely given me your own. Thank you for running this race with me, I love you, dearest.

I am amazed that before this degree was ever a possibility and long after every earthly honor fades away, I was loved and chosen by God. I have walked in cool places and in the heat of the day; I've held on during storms and trusted in His presence when the darkness was so complete I couldn't see my hand before my face. He has been faithful and His loving kindness has sustained me; I will bless his name. Thank you, God. I put you first in all things and thank you for this and every other good thing.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Academic achievement and barriers to this goal continues to drive political and social preoccupation with the effectiveness of schools. The evidence of this concern can be found in the legion of documentation requirements and specific measurements woven throughout the No Child Left Behind Act and the current version of federal mandates aimed at school accountability. Students at risk for school failure have great impact on the rating schools receive by both federal and state monitoring agencies. Middle school students are of particular concern, as they exist in a crucible of cognitive and developmental changes associated with their age group (Wood, Murdock, & Cronin, 2002).

Fully understanding the nature of the perceptions held by students who display problematic behaviors and, thus, are at risk is worthy of careful consideration (Loeber, Russon, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1994; Nelson, McMahan, & Torres, 2012; Nichols 2008). Engagement in negative behaviors is common among adolescents and a strong association between students displaying this type of behavior and school failure is commonly recognized by scholars and practitioners (Fleming et al., 2005). However, some suggest that quantitative measures may not be able to fully reveal the significance of student perceptions due to the differences in “relative value” student’s hold for an issue (Nichols, 2008). Additionally, student voices often take a less significant position in research to the reports offered by adults (Loeber et al., 1994; Nelson et al., 2012; Nichols 2008).

Statement of the problem

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions held by a small sample of middle school children who evidence a pattern of disciplinary problems as determined by school referral data. Specifically, using in-depth interviews the research examined the perspectives voiced by a purposive sample of approximately 10 middle school students on a variety of issues, including self-perceptions of their own academic performance, their thoughts on the importance of parental involvement with school, relationships with teachers, and general beliefs about classroom and school climate. The objective of this investigation was to gain a greater understanding of the school experience of this important group of students.

Research questions

The following four questions guided this study's inquiry into exploring the perceptions of middle school students who demonstrate disciplinary problems:

1. How do the participants self-report about their own academic performance?
2. How do the participants describe the importance of parental involvement in schools and academic success?
3. How do the participants describe their relationships with teachers?
4. How do the participants describe their experience at school as it relates to classroom and school climate?

Key Terms

Academic Achievement – passing grades and meeting proficiency on state standardized tests equal to appropriate grade level measures.

Attachment Figure – any individual who provides a supportive role characterized by trust, encouragement, protection, open communication as well as being responsive to the academic and social emotional needs of a student.

Autonomy - independence in one's thoughts or actions.

Belongingness – expectancy for school success, intrinsic interest in school and academic efficacy.

Competence - the ability to do something successfully or efficiently.

Hope Theory – focuses on the qualities of a person who expresses a higher degree of optimism, possesses greater levels of happiness and experiences less anxiety and depression than their otherwise comparable peers.

Internal Locus of Control - the belief that the course of one's life is largely up to oneself.

Intrinsically Motivated - motivation that comes from inside an individual rather than from any external or outside rewards, such as money or grades. The motivation comes from the pleasure one gets from the task itself or from the sense of satisfaction in completing or even working on a task.

Present Time Orientation – adolescent attitudes that emphasize the present and do not overtly place value on delayed gratification.

Problematic Behavior – actions and attitudes in conflict with universally accepted expectations and standards in a classroom or school.

School Climate – a multidimensional construct that includes physical, social, and academic dimensions (Loukas, 2007).

Self-Efficacy - the belief in one's capabilities to achieve a desired goal or a desired outcome.

Limitations and Delimitations

The nature of interviews as a means of gathering data can be problematic for researchers as sometimes study participants report what they believe is expected instead of their true beliefs (Wesely, 2012). This tendency, known as the social desirability effect, is a common occurrence in qualitative research. Clearly this would be problematic, creating concern about the veracity of student perceptions. Although this issue poses a threat (which may be related to why there is little available on these topics that reflect student perspectives as opposed to the view held by adults), I believe that the value of student views is greater than the risk of less than honest reports. The interaction between this researcher and potential participants must be based on trust and honesty. I am aware that the key to candid conversations and a sense of “truth” in the sharing of personal views and perceptions about the research questions lies in the authenticity of the researcher and the research activity.

Another limitation lies with the lack of generalizability when working with non-probability samples. That is, the small sample used in this research will not allow for general statements about all middle school students experiencing problematic behaviors. However, the insights gained from the sample will help to inform our understanding of the complexities and intricacies of students facing similar situations.

A third important limitation of this study is the issue that collecting self-perceptions as data, a very indirect method of research, is inherently subjective and vulnerable to manipulation. This aspect of qualitative studies should prompt a sober response from researchers who believe that there is value in knowing what others think, feel and are willing to share in a process that is open ended and personal. As such, the

researcher has a special responsibility to carefully analyze and report data in ways that do integrity to themselves, the data, and the participants. In spite of these concerns, I believe a qualitative approach presents the greatest opportunity for gaining insight into student views.

An important delimitation of this study is that I have decided to focus on middle school students. Certainly the views and experiences of high school students are important and worthy of investigation. However, I have elected to delimit the study to middle school students due to a combination of access factors, personal/professional interest, and, perhaps most importantly, the fact that middle school years represent a critically important period in a young person's maturation.

I have also delimited the study to two middle schools in one Oregon district. This decision is based on the mere fact that I have access to students in these schools. Moreover, the focus on one district will generate information and insights important to me and my immediate colleagues. Thus, this delimitation allows for a focused concentration that has a practical utility for this district.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Researchers, educators, and parents have all voiced concern over student discipline and academic achievement. A relatively large body of research can be found over this issue. In this review I divide the literature into four sections. I will briefly examine the literature on student behavior and academic success; students and parent relations and issues; students and teacher relations and issues; and student behavior and classroom and school climate. I conclude the review with a summary of the existing literature.

Student Behavior and Academic Achievement

Researchers agree that a relationship exists between low academic achievement and problematic student behaviors (Aluja & Blanch, 2004; Christensen, Young & Marchant, 2004; Hester, Gable & Manning, 2003; Kaiser, 2007; Kaiser & McLeod, 2004; Khoo & Oakes, 2003; Montague, Enders & Castro, 2005). Aluja and Blanch (2004) conclude that problematic behaviors adversely impact academic achievement. Kaiser and McLeod (2004) report decreased academic achievement for students demonstrating a high level of problematic behaviors and the opposite for students with low levels of problematic behavior. These researchers also contend that problematic behaviors in primary grades raise the likelihood that students would repeat a grade, a pattern that is a predictor of failure to complete high school. Moreover, Kaiser and McLeod add that grade retention in middle school is an even stronger predictor of failure to complete high school.

Montague et al. (2005) report that academic achievement for middle school students, as represented by reading and math performance, can be predicted by early elementary grades with relative accuracy. The same authors indicate that primary grade teacher ratings of problematic student behavior serve as a good predictor of problematic behavior for older students. Additionally, researchers have found that the risk for academic failure due to problematic behavior exists as early as preschool for children regardless of social class or ability level (Kaiser, 2007; Weis & Smenner, 2007).

Katzir-Cohen, Meltzer, Miller, and Roditi (2001) found that the traits of effort, motivation and persistence are critical to the pursuit of academic success among students who struggle academically. Their participants self-reported that they were hard workers with above average levels of effort. Teachers rated these same students' efforts as average but still lower than the efforts of average achieving students who do not struggle. Evidence provided by other research also suggests that there is no difference in the self-perception of average achieving students and struggling students (Montague & van Garderen, 2003; Tabassam & Gainger, 2002).

Chen and Zimmerman (2007) note a recent shift in research focusing more on the accuracy, or self-calibration, of student's self-efficacy beliefs. They contend that students often fail to have a clear perspective regarding their potential performance and in fact, display confidence inconsistent with their actual capabilities. Interestingly, previous research has shown that some students have unrealistically positive self-concepts and view themselves as motivated, hardworking, strategic, and academically competent even when they are performing poorly in their classes (Montague & van Garderen, 2003). Teachers who see success and effort as connected tend to see struggling learners that find

success as high achievers. Those students who experience ongoing failure in spite of effort find themselves trapped in a cycle of failure (Katzir-Cohen et al. 2001). Katzir-Cohen et al. (2001) found that if these typically struggling students happen to find success after trying hard in their initial school experiences, they will begin to believe that they can impact their academic outcomes based on effort.

Kaiser (2007) notes that there is often an inconsistency between parent and teacher reports regarding problematic student behavior and the severity of the impact it has in the school setting. In a study focused on motivation for problematic behaviors it is suggested that students are more likely to engage in unapproved behaviors when they believe there is little to gain from other more appropriate behaviors (Borders, Earleywine & Huey, 2004). Unfortunately, Hester et al. (2003) notes that even minor behavior infractions can have a significant negative impact on learning environments.

Christensen et al. (2004) report that early interventions for students displaying problematic behaviors can result in inappropriately placing students in special education programs. Several researchers (see for example, Katzir-Cohen et al. 2001; Lackaye & Margalit, 2006) found that numerous negative experiences in school can cause some students to believe that effort is useless and, subsequently, develop negative attitudes about school that persist throughout their school experience. Research has shown that students who struggle academically generally assign failure to personal ability and effort, but success to luck or chance (Padeliadu & Sideridis, 2001; Tabassam & Gainger, 2002). Researchers further argue that academic performance may be influenced by non-cognitive factors such as self-perceptions of competence, self-worth, academic self-efficacy and a simple belief that they “can do it” (Cusick, Wiest & Wong, 2002; Lackaye

& Margalit, 2006; Montague & van Garderen, 2003). Thus, Wesely (2012) suggests that investigating learner attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs can be an important contribution to finding out more about students. For instance, according to recent research, motivation and need are closely related and for some students a need for a sense of competence, connection, and autonomy form the basis for self-motivation and a sense of well-being (Allen, Gregory, Hafen, Hamre, Mikami, & Pianta, 2012). Holcombe and Wang (2010) observes that engaged students find success, as measured by better grades and higher performance on standardized tests, as a result of regular attendance, focus on learning, following school rules and avoiding disruptive behaviors. According to Allen et al. (2012), “individuals who believe they are capable of performing well in a particular subject tend to achieve success” (p. 246).

Related to these findings, research on nonintellectual student characteristics that include qualities like autonomy, internal locus of control and self-efficacy allow cognitive strengths to be fully developed and applied to meaningful academic work (Seon-Yeong & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006). Allen et al. (2012), addressing the lack of data regarding the factors associated with increased student engagement in the classroom, notes that the few studies pursuing this issue suggest that student autonomy is associated with student engagement. Moreover, Cusick, Wiest and Wong (2002) argue that research does indeed link perceived autonomy and academic outcomes.

Alvarez et al. (2002) report that motivation experts hold that two motives, achieving success and avoiding failure strongly direct personal behavior. Although some researchers contend that learner attitudes, perceptions and beliefs about their own ability to learn are often static (Wesely, 2012), others note that making choices, having some

level of control over personal learning, developing strong and supportive relationships with teachers and peers, and the opportunity to show academic competence, are innate needs for adolescents (Van Ryzin, 2011). Many researchers have conceptualized that student beliefs about their own ability to succeed are directly related to their own anticipated success (Aelterman, Creemers, Rosseel & Petegem, 2007; Chambers, Hylan & Schreiber, 2011; Chen & Zimmerman 2007; Clark, McQueen, Rinn & Rumsey, 2008; Cusick et al., 2002; Harter, Rumbaugh-Whitesell & Kowalski, 1992; Kelly-Jackson & Jackson, 2011; Lackaye & Margalit 2006; Tabassam & Gainger, 2002;).

Sanchez Fowler, Banks, Anhalt, Hinrichs Der, and Kalis (2008) contend that traditional grades in school simply measured a student's willingness to cooperate and work hard rather than true cognitive engagement in learning new concepts. Research by Patrick and Ryan (2001) too found that a focus on promoting performance goals was less associated with developing positive school related skills and more associated with disruptive behavior. They also suggest that this type of focus was actually harmful to an adolescents' motivation and correlated negatively with students' perceived academic competence. Proficiency-driven curriculum, according to Hertzog (2005), consigns at risk, low achieving and slow learners to dull and repetitive skills instruction in the pursuit of proficiency, denying them opportunities to grasp critical underlying concepts. Hertzog (2005) and Noguera (2008) also note that a significant difference in the type of instruction frequently offered students of color, low economic status, recent immigrants and learning disabled tend to focus on specific skills rather than strategies that transfer to a variety of academic demands.

Kaiser (2007) suggests that along with instructional strategies, designing effective interventions for problematic student behaviors has value as a focus for early childhood interventions and requires further research and program design. According to Borders et al. (2004) an effective strategy for providing interventions for students displaying problematic behaviors is to address the lack of academic skills which indirectly impacts inappropriate behaviors.

Hester et al. (2003) suggest that focusing on adult behaviors holds greater potential for impacting problematic student behaviors in school. They contend effective focus would include consistent implementation of any intervention, along with predictable daily routines, clear expectations, teaching specific skills to meet those expectations and always following through with specific consequences for inappropriate behavior to avoid offering tacit approval. Smith and Daunic (2004) report that training classroom staff to meet the needs of students displaying problematic behavior rather than providing special programs for students would prove more cost-effective in the long-run.

Brown-Lee, Pye, Rawana and Whitely (2010) notes that there is growing support for a focus on strength-based as opposed to deficit-based approaches as a perspective for working with students who struggle with behavior and academics. The foundational assumptions that all individuals, including children, have strengths and working with a child's strengths is a preferable way to address behavioral and academic difficulties. These scholars further note that even children with low academic performance scores and greater teacher rated behavior problems have some resources at their disposal.

According to Jones and Hensley (2012), one of the key factors to self-determination by individuals is the degree to which their environment allows them to

make choices and exert control over their life. Allen et al. (2012) note that environments that support autonomy are associated with increases in motivation. Indeed, the appropriate environment may be the most salient developmental context for adolescent growth. They further contend that changes in student-reported engagement among middle school students were significantly influenced by perceptions of autonomy. The positive impact of instructional strategies, such as Cooperative Learning, was reconsidered by Van Ryzin (2011). He questioned the assumption that peer support and collaboration cause the effect. Instead he posited that increased perceptions of autonomy play a critical role and may be the cause. Namely, he argued that the expanded role students play in regulating their own learning is essential to positive outcomes.

Smith and Daunic (2004) contend that students may be taught to self-monitor their own thought processes. Thereby they can govern their behavioral choices and recognize specific cues that would encourage them to generate alternative responses and make appropriate choices. Following this procedure, students would monitor the outcome of their choices and presumably develop a new set of behaviors that provide preferential outcomes. Wood et al. (2002) considered self-monitoring as an intervention, focusing on a set of behaviors that were linked to academic performance to ameliorate student academic failure. They found that teaching a specific set of expectations and skills to allow students to self-monitor their own academic behaviors provided powerful feedback to initiate change. These changes occurred in several settings and were maintained over time. Although this was a small study, it established baseline data about the ability of students to self-monitor behavior in multiple settings, changing specific problematic behaviors with direct impact on academic performance. This study was unique in that the

skills taught were dependent on student behavior choices for implementation and not on teacher behaviors or the general classroom setting, although they were supportive of classroom expectations (Wood et al., 2002). Delpit warns (as cited in Hertzog, 2005) that, “The teacher cannot be the only expert in the classroom. To deny students their own expert knowledge is to disempower them” (p. 246).

Students and Parent Relations and Issues

Allen and Fraser (2007) claim that parents play the greatest role in student lives in regards to developing character and encouraging academic achievement. Cusick et al. (2002) assert that a sense of academic competence, actual academic achievement and a positive self-perception result from the strength and security of the student-parent relationship. They also claim that student perception of positive parental relationships contribute to success in academic settings. Simply put, parental involvement in schooling is linked to positive school outcomes like achievement, attendance, and improved school climate (Allen & Fraser, 2007).

Alvarez et al. (2002) reports that academic self-concept and achievement was the variable most positively affected by parental involvement. Additionally, strong relationships with parents produce higher degrees of independence, self-confidence and motivation for students (McQueen, Reynolds & Rinn, 2011). Indeed, McQueen et al. (2011) suggest that those adolescents who maintained a close relationship with their parents developed greater levels of independence and self-confidence than those whose parental relationships were not strong. Allen and Fraser (2007) also emphasize long-standing awareness of the link between positive school-home partnerships and improved school outcomes.

Students and Teacher Relations and Issues

Patrick and Ryan (2001) and Cusick et al. (2002) suggest that early adolescents show more interest in school when they feel supported by teachers who demonstrate caring, friendliness, understanding, dedication and dependability. Aelterman et al. (2007) and Allen et al. (2012) likewise report that when student perceptions of teachers are positive, they do better at school. Further, Cusick et al. (2002) report that students who perceived that their teachers support their own autonomy, or academic independence, were more likely to feel a greater sense of competence and be more intrinsically motivated. Likewise, Allen et al. (2012) assert there is a strong relationship between how much control students perceive they have over their setting and how connected they are to what they are learning.

Baran (2010) reports that the descriptors students feel are characteristics of caring teachers include the practice of pushing their students to achieve higher levels of academic achievement through high expectations for all, being strict about doing work, the ability to make learning fun, being helpful, giving positive feedback, helping students stay out of trouble, being aware and sensitive to student emotions and providing a safe environment for all students. Thompson and Webber (2010) describing teacher expectations note that weekly meetings between students and teachers in order to set goals as especially important in student achievement. McQueen et al. (2011) assert that teachers can have a direct effect on the academic potential and feelings of worth of all students.

Sutherland and Snyder (2007) note that students with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD) may advance in school but often do not progress at a rate equal to their

peers, even compared to those with learning disabilities. They go on to suggest that the challenges these students present, which include lack of motivation, classroom disruptions and aggressive behavior, may often prevent teachers from being able to teach. They claim that, “These problematic relationships with teachers may contribute to students with EBD having low rates of positive teacher attention, such as academic talk, teacher praise, and opportunities to respond to academic requests” (Sutherland & Snyder, 2007, p. 103).

According to Sanchez Fowler et al. (2008), potential preventative interventions for high-risk youth include understanding the factors that enhance or impede positive school adjustment. Sanchez Fowler et al. (2008) go on to state that students who possess positive social behaviors in classrooms experience better quality teacher-student relationships. Patrick and Ryan (2001) argue that since schools and classrooms are inherently social and that students require both academic and social behaviors to succeed, it is up to teachers to create environments that support success. Moreover, research suggests that warm, supportive teacher interactions can motivate students from low social and economic status (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson & Schaps 1995).

Bae, Bempechat, Holloway and Li (2008) contend that there are critical links between what teachers expect of students as academic learners, subsequent teacher instructional practices, students’ interpretation of these teacher expectations and student academic achievement. Additionally, researchers claim a demonstrated increase in the ability of students to discriminate teacher feedback mechanisms and classroom conditions as they mature cognitively, growing in their ability to understand the significance of

teacher expectations, and their response to learner performance (Cusick et al., 2002; Bae, et al. 2008; Baran, 2010).

Student Behavior and Classroom and School Climate

Aelterman et al. (2007) report that research on student perceptions of classroom climate has value as an indicator on the nature and quality of the learning environment in schools. Batanova and Loukas (2011) explored the role that social interactions plays in the life of a student, especially those who fear negative evaluation and how it can drive the pursuit of approval. Like other researchers, they report that the elements of successful school environments include good instruction, caring relationships, active involvement in learning activities, equal access to these opportunities regardless of ability levels and opportunities to express curiosity (Aelterman et al. 2007; Allen et al. 2012; Baran, 2010). One study also notes that student self-efficacy originates from past performance, exposure to and identification with efficacious models (vicarious learning), verbal support from others, and experience of emotional or psychological arousal in the context of task performance (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006).

Batanova and Loukas (2011) also discuss the notion that empathy is a powerful ability to assess another individual's feelings and to take the perspective of others. The pursuit of acceptance, avoidance of rejection and empathy all figure into how students fulfill their social roles at school. Along those lines, Patrick and Ryan (2001) note the importance successful peer relationships hold in school adjustment and academic achievement. In similar fashion, McQueen et al. (2011) report that students who are unpopular among their peers have lower social and academic self-concepts. Jones and

Hensley (2012) assert that interaction among developing peers is necessary for the positive growth of self-determination.

Other researchers confirm that positive peer interactions also support positive academic outcomes (Cusick et al., 2002; Holcombe & Wang, 2010; Patrick & Ryan, 2001). Baran (2010) states that, “students are less likely to fall through the cracks in a school with a strong sense of community” (p. 1). Brattistich, et al. (1995) also note that students experience school as a community when their need for belonging, autonomy, and a sense of competence are met.

Instructional programs or classroom settings that are perceived as positive by students, parents and teachers may be successful simply because students are expected to succeed (Piechura-Couture, Heins & Tichenor, 2011). Sanchez Fowler et al. (2008) claim that any individual who provides a supportive role characterized by trust, encouragement, protection, open communication as well as being responsive to the academic and social-emotional needs of a student can be an attachment figure in that young person’s life.

Research has found that schools which provide a sense of community and a supportive, caring climate can promote healthy adolescent development and enhance school performance (Chambers, et al., 2006; Van Ryzin, 2011). The characteristics of these schools may include components such as a safe and orderly environment, positive relationships between students, teachers, school staff, and the community at large as well as a commitment to parental involvement. The positive outcomes noted in this research include less disruptive behavior, higher academic achievement and resilience. Battistich et al. (1995) note the most effective schools are those that systematically address not only the instructional practices that improve academic performance but also the support

systems needed by students to succeed in school. School connection and engagement are linked with greater academic achievement and superior psychological adjustment for secondary school students (Van Ryzin, 2011). Chambers et al. (2006) claim that students do better and are motivated at a higher level when they perceive their school implements learner-centered practices that involve caring. Research documents that the impact of school climate is greater on cognitive factors (i.e., academic achievement) than on overall student wellbeing. In other words positive school settings have power to influence learning gains (Aelterman et al. 2007).

Patrick and Ryan (2001) state “a sense of relatedness or belonging at school is associated positively with students’ expectancies for success and intrinsic value for school – both indicators of motivation” (p. 438). Van Ryzin (2011) refer to autonomy and belongingness as developmental nutrients that support student needs in the school environment. Nichols (2008) conceptualizes the term “belongingness” as academic achievement, expectancy for school success, intrinsic interest in school, and academic efficacy. Conversely, a lack of belongingness includes at risk behaviors like smoking, drinking, and absenteeism. Nichols (2008) also noted that higher levels of belonging are associated with higher levels of optimism and lower levels of depression, social rejection and school problems. Additionally, Nichols (2008) points out the lack of research regarding individual students’ belongingness beliefs, especially students with diverse backgrounds.

Two separate studies (Harter et al., 1992; Lackaye & Margalit, 2006) report that as students move into upper grades there is an increased school focus on performance, evaluation, and competition. As a result, often the academic skills they acquired in the

elementary setting are not easily transferred to success in these new settings. Researchers also report this stage of adolescence is precarious due to a drop in academic confidence and sense of a lack of support from teachers (Cusick et al., 2002; Patrick & Ryan, 2001). For some students the shift to changing classroom settings, multiple teachers in their day may lead to a growing doubt in their ability to succeed, questions about the value of doing their work, and decreased effort toward academics. Research from Lackaye and Margalit (2006) and Allen, et al. (2012) specifically indicates that the transition to middle school requires students to re-establish their identity which also includes developing a sense of efficacy, social connectedness, and academic status in a new, larger setting. This challenge often results in reduced belief in adult support, decreased self-esteem, lower grades, depression, and behavior problems.

Researchers Lackaye and Margalit (2006) also relate that at the middle school level, academic self-concept is associated with students' perceptions of themselves as hard workers who were willing to make the effort to learn. Conversely, at least one study reports that the major reasons staff and faculty believe students avoid the academic setting were non-academic personal and social issues like fighting, home responsibilities and gang related pressures and activities (Nelson et al., 2012). Another researcher noted that parents and teachers experience decreasing levels of knowledge regarding childrens' internal thoughts and feelings as they mature (Loeber et al., 1994).

Considering students who struggle with learning and behavior difficulties, Elliot and Ray (2006) found that these students tend to present relatively lower levels of social adjustment than their higher achieving peers. Other researchers report that students with behavior difficulties are often inappropriately placed in programs designed to support

students with learning disabilities (Cook et al., 2012). Additionally, research suggests that students who are disadvantaged in some way may form groups focused on anti-achievement values if the school fails to meet their needs for belonging (Battistich et al. 1995). Sutherland and Snyder (2007) argue that students struggling with behavior in school often experience academic failure at a higher rate than their peers. In this light, it is important to note that, “students who attend school regularly, concentrate on learning, adhere to the rules of the school, and avoid disruptive behaviors generally get better grades and perform better on standardized tests” (Holcombe & Wang, 2010, pp. 633-634).

Mello and Worrell (2006) argue for research that would explore a connection between a present time orientation and at risk behavior. Specifically, adolescent attitudes that emphasize the present are associated with early sexual intercourse, selling drugs, and weapon use. Similarly, considering student attitudes, Van Ryzin (2011) offers the unique conception of “Hope Theory” which focuses on the qualities of a person who expresses a higher degree of optimism, possesses greater levels of happiness and experiences less anxiety and depression than their otherwise comparable peers. Van Ryzin goes on to relate these qualities to the educational setting, reporting that higher-hope students tend to set more challenging school-related goals for themselves and perceive that they will be successful in attaining these goals even if they do not experience success immediately. Additionally, Van Ryzin (2011) claims that hope has been linked to higher scores on achievement tests for grade school children and higher overall grade point averages in high school.

Lackaye and Margalit (2006) claim that when students focus on the positive, it helps to broaden thought-action repertoires thereby allowing a greater level of information processing. This expansion actually enables new approaches to thought and action, increased creative, flexible thinking, and the likelihood of broadly conceived coping strategies. These views hold promise for greater resilience, a growing arsenal for handling future challenges and ongoing development of psychological resources for improved overall well-being.

Mello and Worrell (2006) report that how students perceive time is critically important in learning, academic achievement, and educational attainment. According to these researchers, thinking into the future is related to the delay of gratification and motivation. Consequently, academically achieving students tend to be more optimistic about their future and less pessimistic about their present than their less academically achieving peers. They also note that other forward-looking constructs, such as hope, may be predictors of positive academic outcomes. Van Ryzin (2011) asks whether or not hope, rather than engagement in learning, could be the key catalyst in promoting more positive perceptions of the school environment and accelerating improvements in school performance; an intriguing idea to say the least.

Conclusion

The review of literature has shown that problematic student behaviors have impact on adolescent academic achievement. Lopes (2005) asserts that parents and other adults in particular increase the level of frustration that students experience with the imposition of unrealistic expectations. Alternately, parents and teachers play a critical role in the lives of students through powerful support of positive outcomes. Kaiser (2007) contends this

clearly supports the notion that adult behaviors are critical in providing effective interventions in school.

The research has shown that early prediction of school failure is associated with students demonstrating problematic behavior as early as elementary school. Hester et al. (2003) assert that interventions implemented in classrooms will only be successful to the degree that they overcome problematic behavior. Researchers point out that student self-perception has value as a focus for additional investigation as it is associated with improved academic performance. It was also noted in the studies reviewed that adults are often out of touch with student perspectives as children enter adolescence.

Moreover, research shows that there is a strong link between parent involvement and positive school outcomes. Similarly, it has also been revealed that students benefit from positive, consistent and caring teacher interactions in the classroom. Simply, when students experience classroom and school-wide environments that are positive and supportive, they thrive. Fleming et al. (2005) reinforces this idea when stating that there is a strong connection between positive behavior and positive academic outcomes. Finally, Smith and Daunic (2004) report that when teachers implement interventions with fidelity, students benefit. Van Ryzin (2011), Patrick and Ryan (2001) and Nichols (2008) all note that when learning environments foster and support the development of positive, future-focused approaches with students they find greater academic success, even when that success is not experienced immediately.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

My intent in this research was to examine perceptions on academic performance held by students who are documented to have displayed disciplinary problem behaviors.

As stated in chapter 1 four research questions guided the investigation:

1. How do the participants self-report about their own academic performance?
2. How do the participants describe the importance of parental involvement in schools and academic success?
3. How do the participants describe their relationships with teachers?
4. How do the participants describe their experience at school as it relates to classroom and school climate?

It is important to reemphasize that this study is an exploration into the self-reported perceptions of a sample of students. The review of the literature has demonstrated that much can be gained from this investigative approach.

Setting

I recruited 10 participants from two middle schools located in the same district. One of these schools served as a primary target recruitment location and the other school as a secondary target recruitment location. Ultimately, I found it necessary to use both schools to recruit participants.

There are a total of 6,638 students in this district. The following five disaggregated demographic groups and the percentage of total enrollment they represent

are comprised of economically disadvantaged (identified by qualification for free and reduced cost meals), 57.9 %; English Learners (EL), 14.2%; students with disabilities, 12.6%; Hispanic/Latino, 33.1%; and White, 57.9%. Total student population for the middle schools is 1,545, with the same disaggregated groups represented at the following percentages, economically disadvantaged, 62%; English Learners, 27%; students with disabilities, 15%; Hispanic/Latino, 33%; and White, 64% (*State Report Card, n.d.*).

The primary target school went into service in 1994, while the secondary target school began to serve students in 1977. In order to protect the identity of those involved in the research, I do not identify any of the participants or the schools by name. Each of the middle schools in this district serve students in grades 6 through 8. Although the two schools are not of equal size, all other aspects of the student body are comparable. The most significant sub-group among this school's population is Hispanic/Latino, representing approximately 30% of the total student body. This number is within three percentage points of the total population of Hispanic/Latino students in the district across all schools. According to discipline records, Latino students are not over-represented in discipline data. The overall ratio of teachers to students is approximately 28.5 to 1, meeting district goals at the middle level. The middle schools each have two administrators, principal and assistant principal, one female and one male in each school.

Research Design and Sampling Strategy

The research consisted of in-depth, personal interviews with a purposive sample of students (see Appendix A). A qualitative approach was selected as I desired to document the perceptions of students in as detailed fashion as possible. Nichols (2008), commenting on the limitations of existing research that relies on surveys for gathering data, argues that

quantitative measures may be unable to get to actual student perceptions due to the relative value placed by individuals on an issue. Qualitative approaches are better suited to articulate the complex personal perceptions held by young participants.

Participants for this purposive sample were recruited from students who had received two or more discipline referrals while attending middle school. I was familiar with the potential pool of participants as a result of my professional work in both middle school settings. It was clear that some of these students were so highly engaged in disciplinary responses due to a high number of referrals that honest participation would not be possible and I removed these names from the list. I was hopeful that I had established a sufficiently positive relationship with the remaining potential participants that they would be willing to participate in an honest way. The parents of 26 students from the primary research target school were sent an invitation to participate letter (Appendix B) and six from the secondary research target school for a total of 34 families approached. Twelve families from the primary school responded positively and two from the secondary target school accepted the invitation to participate in the study.

Interviews were conducted with 10 of the 14 students who responded to the invitations. These participants represented both target school locations, both genders, but only 7th and 8th grades. I was unable to schedule interviews with the remaining four students due to scheduling conflicts, and in one case, an inability to contact the family. I met primarily with participants in their home school after their school day had ended, but in three cases, interviewed them off campus with parental approval. We met outdoors on the patio of a local coffee vendor, a community park and on the playground of an elementary school near a participant's home. Table 1 provides demographics for the list

of participants identified in numeric order and indicating whether they were a member of the primary target school or the secondary target school, grade, and gender.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

<u>Participant #</u>	<u>School</u>	<u>Grade</u>	<u>Gender</u>
Participant 1	1	7	Female
Participant 2	1	7	Female
Participant 3	1	7	Male
Participant 4	1	7	Male
Participant 5	1	7	Male
Participant 6	1	7	Male
Participant 7	1	8	Female
Participant 8	1	8	Male
Participant 9	1	8	Male
Participant 10	2	8	Male

Data Analysis

I needed to deeply consider the data at every step of the analysis process. Nelson et al. (2012) report that the process used to synthesize qualitative data need to be considered, interpreted, and reconsidered in order to reasonably recognize patterns and themes.

The data were carefully considered for themes and patterns. In order to achieve appropriate data analysis I employed an analytical strategy common among qualitative researchers. Specifically, I used a three stage coding strategy involving initial coding, focused, coding, and thematic coding. In initial coding I identified all major concepts discussed by the participants and provided each one with a code for labeling. At this stage of the data analysis I made no attempt to group the responses into similar categories. During the focused coding process the codes identified through the initial coding were

collapsed into similar categories. Ultimately I was able to identify six salient themes articulated by the participants. I refer to these themes as “focused codes” because they emerged from the focused coding stage of the data analysis. Finally in thematic coding I looked for patterns and connections between the focused codes. Specifically, this part of the process meant that I attempted to answer the four research questions structuring this study by considering how the focused codes inform my investigation by relating to those questions. This process required that I think conceptually about the meaning and relationships of the focused codes. Ultimately, I was able to articulate four “thematic codes” (or simply themes) which address each of the four research questions structuring this investigation.

Research Ethics

Because the participants are a “double” vulnerable population (they are not only students, but also students who have been identified as having disciplinary behaviors), special ethical precautions were required for this investigation. First, I obtained informed consent from both the parent/guardian of the student as well as informed assent from the students him/herself. Additionally, I acquired a letter of permission from the district superintendent and informal permission from the principal of each school.

All research materials are locked in a secure location. I am the only person with access to these materials. Secured research materials include signed letters of consent, recordings of interviews, and transcriptions of interviews. All materials that could possibly identify individual participants will be destroyed by me personally no less than three years following the successful completion of this research.

As mentioned above, I do not only refer to participants or their respective schools by name. This procedure also helps protect the anonymity of the students.

Potential Contributions of the Research

As the literature review revealed, research on the perceptions held by students who are identified with disciplinary difficulties is lacking. My desire is that this dissertation will begin to help fill the gap in the literature by providing some understanding on how this group of students understands their own educational experiences. As is the case with any personal, human experience, the study of perceptions is complex and demanding. Yet, scholarly gain can be achieved by accurately documenting the perceptions of this important group of school age students.

Additionally, I believe this deeper understanding will lead to greater ability to respond to student needs. That is, the greater insight educators have on the intricate nature of the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of students who are dealing with disciplinary issues in their schools, the greater the opportunity to meet their individual and collective needs.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this research study was to explore the perspectives held by middle school students displaying problematic behaviors regarding significant school related issues. These issues focused on how participants self-report about their own academic performance, the importance of parental involvement in schools and academic success, relationships with teachers, and the relationship between their own school experience and classroom and school climate. Short interviews were conducted and participant responses provided the data for this study.

The participants themselves were selected based on behaviors they've demonstrated in school that have led to disciplinary responses from administration. Examples of this behavior include incidences of defiance where teachers have asked the student to comply with a specific request and the student refuses. These refusals include requests to be quiet, sit down, slow down, or to come with the teacher to the office. Student refusals have sometimes occurred loudly, at times including physical actions like throwing books, binders, backpacks, slamming doors, or simply walking away. Examples of disrespectful behaviors include calling teachers names, mocking or mimicking the teacher when they give directions, using profanity or vulgar hand gestures to indicate their disapproval of the teacher in that moment. Some of these students have been given very specific directions to follow by administrators in response to inappropriate behavior, but have persisted in the prohibited behavior.

Participant behaviors have also included incidences of harassment at varying levels, including verbal attacks directed at peers, sometimes using social media to “cyber-

bully” another student or impugn their character. Harassment among this participant sample has included physical contact such as pushing, shoving or simply refusing to be thoughtful of others during open gym activities or walking in hallways. Some harassment has been much more targeted and included lying to a target’s family about what the target has shared at school or falsely reporting abuse with devastating results at school. Asking questions that are embarrassing to answer or drawing unwanted attention to a student has also occurred among these students.

Nearly universal among this sample group is the behavior of refusing to work in class, which quickly escalates into conflicts that lead to classroom and school consequences. This group of students has become desensitized to teacher frustration and in some cases, consequences, for failing to engage in classroom activities. One example of this escalation came when a teacher reminded a student who was reading during a classroom work session to return to the assigned task. The student refused to put their book down when the teacher confronted them. After the second teacher reminder, the student swiped everything off their desktop onto the floor and shouted, “f_ _ king leave me alone!” This initiated a significant school consequence.

Through my professional work I have developed a relationship with the ten students who ultimately participated in this study. I believe they felt a degree of confidence and trust in me and as a result, they were willing to participate. I believe this provided a favorable environment for a successful qualitative study where participant interviews would produce the data to be considered.

The interviews consisted of fourteen guide questions (Appendix A) and follow up questions dependent on each unique conversation. Participants were mostly candid, the

essence of which I will attempt to capture within the content of this analysis documented with excerpts from their interviews. Nevertheless, the participants were middle school students and while they were generally candid, many of their responses were short and pointed. Many of the responses were, in fact, simple “yes” or “no” answers.

Indeed, seven out of the fourteen questions actually required a yes or no response, although in most cases the question also generated an unsolicited explanation from the participant. When no explanation was offered, I used follow up questions in order to render additional information. The final question included in the guide questions was open ended and participants had the option to offer additional thoughts and experiences on a topic of their own choosing (see Appendix A). All but one of the participants chose to take advantage of this opportunity and offered input regarding a topic of their choice. The yes or no responses to the seven questions and whether or not participants chose to respond to the final question are reflected in Appendix C.

Focused Codes

As indicated in Chapter 3, the interviews were carefully read and reviewed multiple times in order to identify initial codes in the responses. The refinement of the initial codes resulted in the identification of six focused codes. Once focused codes were finalized and labeled, further consideration led to the identification of four major thematic codes which correspond to the four research questions structuring this study. In essence, this last stage of the data analysis process required that I engage in theoretical conceptualization of the data (that is, thematic coding) in order to ascertain patterns and connections among the data. In this section, I present the six focused codes emerging from the data analysis.

Focused Code 1: Academic Performance

The first focused code is illustrated by the fact that the majority of participants indicated a value for positive academic performance, with five of the ten participants reporting that they felt their grades were historically A's and B's, the highest of marks, and that occasional lower grades were inconsistent with their overall performance. One student went so far as to note that this was the case for his 6th grade experience, even earning him Honor Roll recognition, although he was uncertain if that was a 4.0 or a 4.8 or what the numeric value actually represented. He was confident to report that he had continued to achieve at that level in his second year in middle school so far. Two of the remaining five reported that they were also currently finding success at a high level after struggles in their earlier middle school experiences. One reported, "I never cared, really. I never did my schoolwork. I never paid attention. I did try sometimes, but I didn't always want to try." Two of the remaining three reported that they were currently doing much better and felt like their grades were mostly positive. Only one of the 10 reported that he was currently failing and this was due to his dislike for school in general and his refusal to perform, "F's. Pretty much because I don't really like middle school, I don't really like school at all because I'm more of, like, an outdoor person." He claimed that he was fully capable of doing better, but was unwilling to try and so his failing grades were purposeful and by his own choosing.

Focused Code 2: Preference for Successful Subjects

The second focused code is indicated by the fact that most of the participants also reported that they preferred subjects where they find success, noting a variety of reasons. Some offered that these preferred subjects are easy or not that hard. One participant

reported that he was able to quickly grasp concepts in math and complete assignments faster whereas in other subjects, like science, it was difficult to keep things organized in a meaningful way. Other participants reported that they get good grades, find the content interesting and useful or that they like the way their teacher teaches the class. A few of the participants reported that they like the subject, to the point of describing it as their passion. Some included their view that they are really good at the particular skills needed to perform well in the subject area. One of the participants, while considering which subject to offer as her favorite, reported, “I love language arts because I love my teacher...I like the work that we do and I like writing, but then I get my grade back and it’s not...I don’t like the grade.” This participant eventually offered two different subjects as her favorite because she felt her grades were a better match between effort and outcomes.

Focused Code 3: Personal Academic Potential

The third focused code centers on the fact that all of the participants responded to the third question about their personal academic potential. While their explanations had a great range, they all reported they felt that their actual performance, whether strong or weak, was not a true representation of what they were capable of actually performing. Participant responses included statements like, “I...I would probably say not, because sometimes I feel like I’m doing a lot more than they (grades) show, I guess.” Another student reported that, “I’d like to do better than I actually do.” And finally, a common sentiment shared by the participants is revealed by the statement of one student, “I don’t try enough, as well as I could.”

Focused Code 4: Parental Involvement

The fourth focused code relates to three questions included in the interviews about parent involvement. The participant's thoughts on parental involvement revealed mixed responses. Most students indicated a belief that they benefit from parent involvement. These benefits were seen primarily as indirect, with parents encouraging their students to do better, "they want to know how good I'm doing and they push me to see if I could do any better." Another participant noted that, "parents should just, you know, push their kids a little bit." One participant thought that this encouragement extended as far being able to, "make sure you end up going to a good college, and that you get the best education that you can 'cause you can only do it once." This same participant reported that her mother took time to listen to her concerns about school, checked in with administrators if she were in trouble and counseled her about making better decisions about negative behavior at school. "Stuff like that, things that are really important to talk it out."

One participant noted that parental involvement might increase students' awareness of student performance and cause them to push their students a little bit. This same participant shared that as a result of his own parents' involvement in school, he realized that he was struggling, "my parents sort of started pushing me and taking privileges away. It shouldn't have come to that," the participant confessed. Amusingly, this participant reported the following parental warning, "You will not get a good job if, you will be a bum on a couch at your mom's house playing video games! I can tell you, that's not fun!" Several participants noted that parents in the school helped the setting in general by providing support for school activities like PTA or book fairs. Additionally,

participants stated that the presence of parents would likely provide a sense of accountability to students with information possibly getting back to their own parents about their classroom behaviors. One participant noted that it was unlikely that bullying behavior would occur if a parent were present to stop it. Seven out of 10 of the participants reported positively that their parents helped them with academic work, with one additional participant reporting that his parents supported his homework efforts, but expected him to do the work himself and only checked for accuracy until the task was completed successfully. Another participant reported that, “whenever I have homework I go home, my mom, for some reason, she just loves helping me out with homework. Like she’ll like just stop making lunch and she’s like, she’s just like, ‘ok, let me help you with that.’ I’m like, ‘ok!’” This type of parental support was very direct.

However, some of the students identified a few negative effects associated with parental involvement in school. The sentiments of two 8th grade participants stated it most clearly. One student reflected, “...it just depends on what level they are participating on, like with your social, no, I don’t want that.” The other 8th grade student stated, “Well, some things! When it’s dating, that can get out of hand!” A few of the participants shared a worry that there was potential for a negative impact to students socially when parents were involved in their lives at school, especially when it came to social interactions between boys and girls. Another participant shared his worry in this way, “Like, just saying this out loud, what if there was a girl I liked and I was passing a note and my mom was asking me, ‘ooh, she’s cute!’ That would be annoying!” Another student reported that parents often write endearing notes to their students in and on their lunches, which is more typical for elementary age students than middle school. “I’ve seen

that happen, I really have. And they're (students) just like, 'uh, thank you, thanks for the lunch!' Then I've seen them just throw away that note and I'm like, 'oh!'" These comments were offered as sincere worries.

Focused Code 5: Relationships with Teachers

The fifth focused code relates to the relationship the participants report with teachers. Most of the participants reported that they liked at least some of their teachers. The reasons they offered included traits that they considered positive. One participant reported being cool and fun was why he liked his teacher. Others felt that knowing how to both have fun and get work done as the qualities they found endearing. The ability to listen and provide a place to share concerns and struggles was noted by several participants as the quality that made them appreciate their teachers. One student related that when teachers were interested in what he valued personally, such as sports and hobbies, he felt validated. When I asked if he had any teachers that did this, he admitted there were a few. Teachers that give chances when a student misbehaves but still hold the line for expectations was a quality that one participant noted. Another participant, sharing about his favorite teacher, stated, "...he's a really, really fun and interactive teacher that I love to just sort of talk to and...especially since teachers, like, I usually talk to adults more than kids about my personal life because, uh, well...I really don't know why." Clearly, this participant's value and need for interaction is great.

Empathy in teachers was important to the participants. One student (who had little to say that was positive about teachers) related an insight on his attitude toward the one teacher he did like, "She understands where I'm coming from as well. That's why I like

her.” Another participant reported, “I really feel like my teachers know me really good, and that they understand what I’m going through.”

It is significant to note that half of the participants reported that they did not believe that it was important for students to like their teachers in order to do well academically. Several participants shared that they believed students should be focused on learning, doing their work and following rules. A few noted that they themselves had disliked a teacher in the past, but had still chosen to work. One participant offered this view, “...if they do like their teacher, then they’re just like, ‘Oh, I want to impress him or her!’ instead of like, not doing their work, so they try to do their work...better.”

Participants reported that they believed that it might be academically helpful to like your teachers. Several reported that they had witnessed students who refused to work in classes when they disliked their teacher. One student reported about their 4th grade teacher, “If I had liked Miss (4th grade teacher) I probably would have, probably would have been a lot better year. I did not like that teacher!” Another student reported that if students didn’t like their teacher they might fear repercussions for a bad performance. A different participant reported, “With me, if I hate a teacher, I don’t do it because I’m stubborn, yeah.” Finally, one participant warned that, “If they make it hard on the teacher, then they’ll just make it hard on them.” This was certainly a unique and ominous view of student-teacher relationships.

Focused Code 6: Classroom and School Climate

Three of the last four interview questions focused on the participants’ perceptions about the school setting specifically prompting responses about what participants liked best about their classrooms and school. Additionally they were asked whether or not they

felt like their classroom settings were respectful to students. The responses revealed the sixth focused code, that of the nature of the classroom and general school climate.

The students in this sample held a generally positive view about classrooms, as defined by teacher interactions and the environments they created. Essentially, the students affirmed that classroom settings were respectful to students. Many participants focused on positive relationships with peers as the reason for their perceptions, “kids in that classroom...are nice and are always there to help you.” One participant noted, “My teachers are really motivating, but I love seeing my friends, especially since I’ve built good friendships this year, and I’ve tried to stay away from people who are going to lead me into bad things, like last year.” Another participant specifically stated, “...relationships, friendships I have with my teachers...” as the reason for why she appreciated her classroom settings.

The majority of the students reported teacher actions to maintain order, suppress bullying, provide interesting, stimulating surroundings, and playing appropriate music were among the positive attributes of school. Six of the 10 participants made reference to feeling safe in their classrooms. Illustrative is the comment of one student who related, “Teachers usually try and make sure that other people don’t bully and treat you in bad ways that you don’t like.” Another participant clearly stated, “I can succeed knowing that I have a classroom to be in that I feel safe and secure in. And knowing that nothing bad is going to happen. I know that I’m safe in school. I’m safe in the classrooms that I’m in.” Several of the responses noted specific behavior from peers and teachers they interpreted as kind and supportive, leading to a feeling of safety. One participant related

his own experience as a bully to a peer in a previous school year and his actions to repair that harm as an example of how students grow and learn to treat others more positively.

Three of the participants spoke to a common concern regarding bullying in very specific terms. They described behavior that occurred in halls, common areas and through social media, rather than in classrooms, "...kids are just out of control, I guess." These concerns included pushing, shoving, teasing and mean-spirited comments made to others. In their view much of this behavior occurs in front of staff but goes without appropriate response. One student explained, "...some kid will say something really offensive or racist or like, hypocritical and the teacher doesn't even, like, do anything. I'm like, 'did you just hear that?'" One of the three reported that these behaviors persist because no response has been made so the perpetrators feel like they won't be caught, "I just feel like sometimes kids just do whatever they want, feel like they can get away with it because they are, and I just don't like that feeling."

Reflective of the digital age, students were concerned about cyber forms of bullying. One of the participants reported that one personal text attack could, "...destroy friends, friendships and start people to bully other people because they're taking it out; their emotions out on someone else." Each of the participants also offered remedies to their concern. Most notable in this regard was an insistence on increased teacher awareness. Two of the participants suggested that teachers should be encouraged to be in the hallways during passing times and increase their presence in common areas to help police bad behavior. Their suggestions reinforced the intensity of their concern, "I like that (the administrators) walk around because that enforces the law, but I think, like, I'm not really sure, but I think more people should be out in the hallways, or something, more

people should notice or we should have check-ins, I'm not sure those are the only things I can think of." The responses of these three participants revealed an important concern regarding bullying in schools. These three students agree that while it is difficult for teachers to respond to bullying, nevertheless, it is critical that they do so.

Four Thematic Codes and the Research Questions

After careful consideration of these six focused codes, it became evident that these could be compressed into four unique major themes. That is, the thematic coding process on the data analysis resulted in the identification of four major thematic codes. Sometimes thematic codes are simply referred to as "themes." For instance, Bernard and Ryan state: "Thematic codes are the most common kinds of codes. These are the codes we use for marking instances of themes in a set of data" (2010, p. 76). Each of these major thematic codes ("themes") coincide with the four research questions guiding the investigation.

Thematic Code 1: Present Performance Does Not Reflect Potential Performance

Research Question #1: How do the participants self-report about their own academic performance?

Although students answered questions one and two in a number of different ways, in question three they all reported a belief that their performance did not reflect their actual ability to perform. Some students were very succinct in their responses, noting strong performances with A's and B's as grades, one student noting that he had been on the Honor Roll, although he was uncertain about the criteria. Other students, however, made very thoughtful, almost painful confessions about their struggles to find academic

success. One female participant shared in a very honest way, “Well, I really do try my best in school, but sometimes I’ll try really hard and I will get the grade back and I will be really disappointed...it makes me feel really bad. And my parents, they punish me for it and I feel like I’m trying my best.” In fact, she shared that although Language Arts was actually her favorite subject, loving both the work and the teacher, she reported that she would officially offer Math and Science instead as her favorite subjects because the grades she received were more consistent with what she expected from her efforts.

Another participant who confessed that they hated most everything about school, admitted that, “...I listen and I pay attention and I just don’t write it down on paper because I don’t like writing, but I can do the work, I just choose not to because I don’t want to.” He went on to claim, “Yeah, if I wanted to do it, I’d probably get an A on it but if I didn’t want to do it I would fail it...purposely.” I asked the participant if his current school experience reflected this way of seeing things and he responded, “Yeah, cause I don’t really like the classes, but I have to do it, so...sometimes I get A’s, sometimes I get B’s and sometimes I get F’s.”

In spite of the variety of views about their actual academic performance, all the participants expressed the view that these outcomes did not reflect what they could actually do. In further consideration of their responses, I realized that the data indicate a universal belief about their academic abilities, whether they were receiving high marks or not with their actual grades, they still expressed doubt that they had done all they could with their work. Some of them shared that their transition to middle school had been so difficult that they had been unable to perform in their first year or even second year and were just now improving their performance or finally finding success, “...like 6th grade, I

think I, if that grade would get an overall, it would be an F. Seventh grade, it's getting better, but not there, I would probably give it like a D-. And then maybe 8th grade I wouldn't give it an A+, but I would give it a B, um, I'm trying my hardest to improve from the disasters of 6th and 7th grade.”

Others shared that they still struggled in certain subjects, but were making sincere efforts to improve. Only one participant expressed dislike for school in general as the reason for his failure to perform. However, even this student felt compelled to assure me that he possessed the ability, but was simply refusing to reveal it. Their comments seemed to indicate a universal belief among the participants that there was more that they could do academically. Additionally, they seemed to possess a desire to assure me that they possessed the ability to perform at a greater degree than their grades would currently validate, regardless of the status of their actual grades.

Thematic Code 2: Parent Involvement at School Benefits Students

Research Question #2: How do the participants describe the importance of parental involvement in schools and academic success?

Although the participants were able to see the positive and negative issues associated with parental involvement in school; nevertheless, nine out of 10 participants indicated a benefit from parental involvement in school for students. One participant noted that, “...they can know what your grades are, and if they're like, low, then they can help you get them back up.” Another participant agreed, stating, “They could help me and where I need to, need help with schoolwork.” It was also reported that, “...they can like really see how their kids are doing and if they're like, not doing so good on one subject they can encourage their children to do better in that subject.” One participant

reported about her mom's effort to help with her math homework, "...my mom has seriously put on Facebook, she'll put up the problem on Facebook and say, 'I can't help my daughter!' Facebook sometimes helps, but yeah, she tries every week..." Finally, in regards to parents supporting students directly with their academic work, one participant reported, "When I need it. If my grades are bad I just ask her for help and she will."

Another participant reported, regarding parental involvement in school, "I really do think it's an important thing because they know what is going on, they know what is going on with your life, pretty much, because you spend most of your time at school..." Another participant also talked about how important parental involvement could be, offering the following conversation as an example, "...being there and like, 'Hey, I heard you had a bad day,' or even like 'I heard you got, like, you said this in class and maybe we need to talk about it. Maybe you shouldn't say that.'" It was also noted that, "...with your academics, I do find that very helpful because then they can give me advice....it really is nice to know that I have somebody academic to help me in that way."

One participant offered a much broader view of how a parent's involvement could be a benefit, commenting about her own parents' involvement, "...they're trying to just be nice and help around and try to be involved. I think that really, cause they're helping not only you, but they're helping your school. They're showing their appreciation to your school by helping." It is clear that when 90% of the participants respond positively to the question, there certainly is a deep belief that parental involvement at school benefits students.

Thematic Code 3: Belief that Teachers Care About Their Students

Research Question #3: How do the participants describe their relationships with teachers?

Without exception, all the participants reported a belief that teachers cared about their students and provided reasons for this belief. Several participants reported that teachers listened to students, showing interest in them personally and that they, "...try to get to know them a lot more and help them with any problems that they have in school." Many reported that teachers are fun and take time to provide experiences that were relevant to student lives. For instance, one participant that shared about a recent field trip that had opened her eyes to the overwhelming medical needs in developing countries and human rights issues facing people all around the world and what a particular organization was doing about it, "I like learning about other things, besides stuff we have here, about other people...I did not know that was going on!" Several participants reported that their teachers modeled kindness in their classrooms and held kids accountable when inappropriate behavior occurred. One very quiet participant who required significant coaxing to talk was willing to reveal that he thought teachers showed care when they helped with work in class, "if like...a kid is struggling with a math test, I mean...like a ...math quiz or something...they help them." There were also comments from participants about what they believed teachers could do that would result in specific improvements in the setting on the topic of bullying. Participants believed that if teachers would exert additional levels of commitment, such as increased efforts to supervise the general settings on the campus, the outcome would be positive, "Yeah, cause sometimes I'm glad there was a teacher in the hall because someone said

something and they're like, 'Hey, you need to go down!' Sometimes it's really handy, and I think all teachers should be out there, if they can."

These participant comments support the view that teachers care and indicate a level of trust in teachers held by the participants. I believe that this may be a very powerful understanding when considering how to improve the school experience for students in general.

Thematic Code 4: Belief that Teachers Create Classrooms and Schools that are Respectful to Students

Research Question #4: How do the participants describe their experience at school as it relates to classroom and school climate?

Although these participants were all selected due to their struggle in school, they universally expressed the belief that teachers develop and implement procedures and practices that foster school settings that are characterized by respect for students. One participant noted the absence of corporal punishment, "...it's not like a desert where we're being whipped and forced, you know, to do the assignment!" Another participant shared an example of a favorite teacher and how she would respond if she had inadvertently offended a student, "...if she says something and you might get offended by it, she'll come up and she'll full out and she'll apologize, she'll like, 'Oh, I'm sorry, I won't do that again.' And like, that's really, that makes me feel good when someone does that, it makes me think highly of them."

The most critical participant still admitted that the teacher behavior he found offensive was actually admired by most other students, "...him trying to make everyone laugh and like him. Most of the kids do, it's like, most kids like him, I used to think he

was good, until I was actually in his class.” One participant shared that he felt as if some teachers actually attempted to provoke their students so they would be in trouble, “It’s like, like, like...he embarrasses you, in front of everybody. You get mad, sometimes. He says things sometimes, like...like...he just says stuff to try to get you mad, talk back.” In spite of these comments, this same participant still reported that he felt classroom settings were generally positive places where students were respected.

The perception of trust and caring were closely tied together for the students in this study. For some participants, it was as simple as, “...because, that’s their job...” For others, they expressed a confidence that teachers cared, “I’m pretty sure all teachers care about their students. If there were, like a kid getting picked on they definitely would like send the other kid to the office or tell them to stop or separate them...” Most of the participants expressed a similar opinion and believe that teachers do their best to serve students. Additionally, the belief that classrooms are places designed to support teachers in their work with students through the presence of technology, learning resources and the careful implementation of school rules supported the perspective that students were respected in their learning environment.

Summary

Participant responses led me to recognize six focused codes from the data. These focused codes ultimately came together conceptually to form four major thematic codes. Each of these thematic codes addressed the four research questions guiding the study. Moreover, taken together, the themes expressed in these data demonstrate that personal interviews are important in the exploration and documentation of student perspectives

about important school related issues. In chapter five I will endeavor to offer perspective about why these themes have significance to school leaders.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The absence of research studies that present the perspectives of middle school students displaying problematic behaviors about their school experience led me to pursue this topic. The unfortunate result of this lack of attention is that virtually nothing is documented in the scholarly literatures providing insight from middle school students themselves. Through the process of interviewing a small purposive sample of participants who met the criteria for this study, I believe I had a unique opportunity to honestly engage these participants on significant school related issues.

I was rewarded with participants freely, albeit at time sparingly, sharing their perspectives about these school related topics. It was clear that some participants were motivated to include underlying messages about their personal struggles in school and the level of success they were having in overcoming these struggles. One participant was very clear about his dislike for school and cast his struggle in the light of personal choice, indicating that he was experiencing academic failure as an expression of thoughtful defiance and could alter the course of his performance if he were motivated to do so. My investigation led to the discovery of four major themes that I believe are significant and reveal the perspective of this particular sample of middle school students. The importance of these themes lie in the fact that they were expressed nearly universally among the participants.

Implications and Recommendations

Thematic Code 1: Present Performance Does Not Reflect Potential

Performance

Implications. Participant responses revealed that students believe that their academic performance, whether positive or negative, did not reflect what they were truly capable of accomplishing. I believe that this is a positive indicator of a hope that they can do better. All ten of the participants expressed this view uniformly, regardless of whether they self-reported A's and B's in classes or not, they still believed that they could do better.

Research suggests that both students who struggle with problematic behavior and students who do well behaviorally share a belief that they have the ability to perform well. Teachers, however, do not share this belief and report that students struggling with behavior also struggle with academic performance (Montague & van Garderen, 2003; Tabassam & Gainger, 2002). The participants in this study held true to the research regarding students, reporting that they believe that they could do better, whether they reported strong or weak academic performance. Research reports that even when students are performing so poorly that they appear to be on a trajectory for school dropout, they may still report positively about their performance (Chen & Zimmerman, 2007). The participants of this study seemed to be more realistic about their present performance, but still universally reported that they believed they had the potential to perform better academically.

Montague and van Garderen (2003) and Chen and Zimmerman (2007) report that student accuracy in self-reporting about their performance seems to be skewed, in fact,

they have a poor sense of self when it comes to reporting about their own academic performance. Although this may be true of most students, I believe that the participants of this study were honest in their reflections about their academic performance and quite vulnerable as they shared frustrations and disappointments about their academic performance. This honesty extended to confessions about why they were experiencing failure in their academic performance in middle school.

Research suggests that if a student has initial success, they will go on to have more success (Katzir-Cohen et al., 2001). Many of the participants in this study reported that they had experienced high degrees of failure early in their middle school career, but had improved over time. Many of the stressors associated with transitioning to the middle school setting from an elementary setting challenge student self-perception and these students require time to redefine how they behave as an effective student in order to do well (Allen et al., 2012; Cusick et al., 2002; Harter et al., 1992; Lackaye & Margalit, 2006; Patrick & Ryan, 2001).

Research also suggests that when students fail, they tend to believe that it is a result of their own lack of skill or effort, but when they succeed, they assign it to luck or chance (Padeliadu & Sideridis, 2001; Tabassam & Gainger, 2002). The participants in this study, however, reported that their success was due to teacher interventions and supports, parental expectations and their own hard work. One student who reported a high degree of failure in school also noted that this was mostly due to his own choices and refusal to perform, in spite of his ability to do so. Interestingly, research suggests that the simple belief that “I can do it,” may positively influence academic performance (Cusick, Wiest & Wong, 2002; Lackaye & Margalit, 2006; Montague & van Garderen,

2003). This is encouraging for the participants in this study who expressed this “can do” belief in their universal report that they believed they could do better.

Smith and Daunic (2004) suggest that students can be taught to self-monitor their own thought process, creating an ability to guide and make decisions about how they’re doing academically which would lead to preferential outcomes. Participant responses about academic performance certainly suggest that students are reflective about their performance and desire to do better in school.

Recommendations. School leaders must realize that the transition to middle school is intensely stressful to students and leaves them feeling insecure about their ability to deliver what they are capable of performing, even when they do perform well. School leaders should explore academic supports that normalize this struggle. School leaders should make the effort to teach strategies for gaining support in a more systematic, overt way to help students find greater success.

For instance, relevant questions might include: “Exactly how do you ask for help from a teacher?” “How can you help adults to understand your needs?” “How do students build confidence in their ability to perform when, for the first time, they are faced with the reality of letter grades to measure their efforts?”

School leaders should consider developing and offering students that are new to middle school a Summer Academic Boot Camp, designed to allow students to hear directly from the teachers what expectations will look like and what other students’ have done to meet these demands. Many districts offer this type of program for Kindergarten students before they begin their first public school experience.

Additionally, Parent training could be offered by school leaders to new middle school parents before the end of 5th grade, during the summer and in early fall, to help new middle school parents learn how to support their students through the transition. Building a greater awareness of the unique challenges their students will face in the 6th grade could provide a great support to families (for both parents and students). These and other supports could be employed to close the gap between what students are actually able to perform and how they would hope to perform as middle school students.

Thematic Code 2: Parent Involvement at School Benefits Students

Implications. Nine out of ten positive participant responses to question five, regarding whether or not participants believed there was a benefit from parental involvement in school for students forms the basis for theme two. Participants expressed a number of different reasons why they believed this to be the case, including direct and indirect supports to students in the school setting.

Research asserts that a sense of academic competence, achievement and positive self-perception are the result of a strong, secure relationship between students and parents (Cusick et al. 2002). Additionally, there is a strong link between positive outcomes and parent connections at school, including achievement, attendance and even improved school climate (Allen & Fraser, 2007). Alvarez et al. (2002) assert that self-concept and achievement is the area most positively affected by parent involvement. According to McQueen et al. (2011), this kind of connection with parents fosters high degrees of independence and motivation for students. Allen and Frasier (2007) reference a long-standing awareness that the link between good connections with home and school has positive outcomes for school. Research clearly supports the participant belief that a

positive connection exists between parental involvement and positive outcomes at school, indicated by interview responses.

Recommendations. School leaders should consider the significance of this perspective in light of the traditional roles that parents play in middle schools. Every effort should be made to counter the belief that parents are not welcome in the setting and that middle school students are embarrassed by the presence of their parents in their school. Clearly, participant responses illustrate the academic benefit of parent awareness of what is happening with their students and efforts to increase communication between the classroom teacher and parents should be made. These efforts could include simple invitations to interact through available media such as phone calls, emails and other traditional forms of communication. Beyond that, school leaders should note that giving parents some insight to the pitfalls of involvement, like actions that students see as coddling and intrusive to their social roles in school are potentially uncomfortable to their student. School leaders should work to provide parents some coaching on how to support their student academically. This could be accomplished through Parent Work Nights where teachers invite their parents into the school to get a preview of what students will be learning or to share strategies for support at home. School leaders might develop a home-school liaison where an invitation to include parents in after school supports gives parents an opportunity to help students with review or late work. Inviting parents into the school to support supervision during arrival and dismissal of students and lunch and activity times is a great strategy that elementary schools use frequently, but could be “normalized” for middle school with thoughtful leadership by school administrators. These and other strategies could be employed by school leaders to provide a benefit to

their students through the inclusion of parents in the community of learners at their school.

Thematic Code 3: Belief that Teachers Care About Their Students

Implications. Participant interviews also indicated that they held a deep trust in the fact that teachers, as a group, would rise above other concerns that were expressed and universally care about their students. This perspective is refreshing to realize that a group of students that most likely receive negative responses from teachers due to their display of problematic behaviors still hold the view that teachers care about students. The potential impact this perspective holds for the possibility of responding to teacher interventions and other efforts to support these participants and the group they represent as a sample is tremendous and should encourage the efforts of school leaders.

Research reports that when student perceptions of teachers are positive, they do better at school (Aelterman et al., 2007; Allen et al., 2012). The practice of pushing students to achieve, having a high academic expectation for all students, practices that are helpful to students and providing a safe environment for all students are the behaviors that are perceived as positive teacher practices (Baran, 2010). Research also suggests that teachers can have a direct effect on academic potential and students' feeling of worth (McQueen et al., 2011). When students move on to problematic behaviors teachers are often prevented from being able to teach, students who struggle in this way have low rates of positive teacher attention, receiving lots of teacher interaction, but little of this is positive (Sutherland & Snyder, 2007). The research also suggests that when students demonstrate positive social interactions in class this leads to better teacher-student

relationships (Sanchez Fowler et al., 2008). Patrick and Ryan (2001) state directly that it is up to teachers to create environments in their classrooms that support success.

The research suggests that there is a demonstrated increase in the ability of students to discriminate teacher feedback mechanisms and classroom conditions as they mature (Cusick et al., 2002; Bae et al., 2008; Baran, 2010). As students get older, they begin to understand that their teachers' instructional practice directly impacts their own school experience. Participant responses to the interview questions about their teachers demonstrate the view that most of their teachers actually care about them. Participant responses also suggest that they feel positive about the work their teachers do, that their teachers are providing a safe environment at school, are engaging them instructionally, and have high academic expectations and push them to succeed.

Recommendations. School leaders must realize that students inherently trust that their teachers care about them and in response, should encourage and solicit teachers to offer after school supports to students. These supports could be offered both in an individual, classroom-to-classroom manner as well as an organized, building wide basis. Efforts should be made to develop a school-wide culture that clearly illustrates what caring teachers do as a guideline for staff and a touch point for students. School leaders should remind teachers that students need to feel safe and secure and it is relatively easy to achieve this with thoughtful, school-wide practices that address these concerns. The development of school-wide practices that go beyond traditional safety drills should include an instructional framework that delivers information to students, encourages reflection and feedback from the entire school community and regularly reteaches and reinforces these practices to create and maintain a feeling of security.

Thematic Code 4: Belief that Teachers Create Classrooms and Schools that are Respectful to Students

Implications. Participant perspectives reveal the belief that teachers develop and implement procedures and practices that create classrooms and school settings that can be characterized as respectful towards students. This should be encouraging for school leaders since a positive outlook about where students are educated can only lend power in the effort to accomplish this task. I believe that teachers would be encouraged to know that this perspective is an underlining support to the work that they do in their classrooms. It is also encouraging to note that even though these participants have struggled to meet the expectations held in these academic settings, they believe in them.

Batanova and Loukas (2011) offer a list describing positive learning environments that includes traits like good instruction, caring relationships, active involvement in learning activities with access for all, regardless of ability levels. This view about school environments includes student perspectives about themselves that are influenced by past performance, exposure to positive learning models that include support from others and positive emotional and psychological arousal in the context of doing school work (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006). This is strong support for the importance of participant perspectives about the positive nature of their own learning environments in regards to their personal needs.

Other research suggests that students are less likely to be overlooked in a school that has created a strong sense of community where student needs for belonging, autonomy and a sense of competence are met (Baran, 2010; Brattistich et al., 1995).

Researchers go on to describe community-focused schools as places where students succeed because they are expected to do so (Piechura-Couture, Heins & Tichenor, 2011). The description of positive school settings in research and the connection with participant reports is further strengthened when the list of school characteristics include a safe and orderly environment, positive relationships between students, teachers, school staff and the community at large as well as a commitment to parental involvement, less disruptive behavior, higher academic achievement and resilience (Chambers et al., 2006; Van Ryzin, 2011). Battistich (1995) reports that instructional practices and support systems may be what really help students to find success in the classroom. In other words, positive school settings have the power to influence learning gains when students feel that their school settings respect them as an individual.

Nichols (2008), addressing the need for belongingness, includes the elements of academic achievement, expectancy for school success and an intrinsic interest in school and being an effective student. The value for this sense of belonging, according to Nichols, includes students' reporting higher levels of optimism and lower levels of depression, rejection and school problems. The universal report by study participants that school is respectful to them as individuals gains significance in light of this research.

Van Ryzin (2011) offered research regarding Hope Theory that focuses on student qualities such as a higher degree of optimism, greater levels of happiness, less anxiety and depression. Hope Theory, according to Van Ryzin, is seen when students set more challenging school-related goals, hold the perception that success is inevitable and even if it is not happening yet, will occur soon. Additionally, students embracing hope score higher on standardized tests and tend to hold higher GPA's in high school. Many of the

participants in this study note that although things didn't go well when they started middle school, they are doing pretty well right now. Some expressed the view that though they've had some trouble, they are trying hard right now or that they really are trying in spite of their challenges or outcomes.

A positive focus, according to Lackaye and Margalit (2006), may increase a student's level of information processing, creating new approaches to thought and action, increased creative, flexible thinking and coping strategies. These researchers also contend that a positive focus can increase resilience, the use of problem solving strategies and psychological resources for overall wellness. Finally, hope may promote a positive perception of school environments and accelerate improvements in school performance (Mello & Worrell, 2006; Van Ryzin, 2011). I believe that participants indicated a sense of hope and a positive perception of their school setting when they reported, universally, that regardless of some past experiences that may have been negative, they believed that their teachers implemented practices that created school climate that was positive and respectful to them as individuals.

Recommendations. School leaders must realize that students believe that their school settings are respectful. This belief can be fostered and maintained through specific practices that can be identified, developed, enhanced and employed universally in a school setting. Teachers and staff should be attentive to student behavior and hold high standards that are routinely enforced. School expectations should be taught in all classrooms and school settings with teachers leading the way by example. Student leaders should be recognized and encouraged in their positive behaviors to influence other

students and make it clear that the student body is respected. Students need to have a genuine voice and be truly heard by school staff.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research about why students feel that they are not performing to potential, whether they are performing well academically or not, has potential value for school leaders. Researchers may want to consider focusing on this theme alone and contrasting the data with mainstream students who are not facing a behavioral struggle in order to discover if there is also a difference in how these two groups' perspectives may differ.

Additionally, further research to explore the themes that teachers care about their students and classroom settings are respectful would be valuable, both to discover other indicators for these views as well as whether or not a different sample would result in similar results.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored the perceptions of 10 participants solicited from two specific middle schools in the same school district and therefore the inferred significance of the themes shared from this data may not reflect the views of all middle school students. This is a possibility that is always present when non-probability samples provide the data to be considered in a research study. The recognized themes and their implications were carefully developed from thoughtful reading and rereading of the interview data, but are limited by the perspective of a single researcher and thereby may not hold the same level of significance for a different research team.

Yet, I believe the four themes and corresponding recommendations represent significant insight into the perspective of this sample of middle school students and have

the power to inform those school leaders that work with students on a daily basis.

Ultimately, it is up to school leaders to seek understanding about the experience of all students in our schools and, as a result, design programs and practices supporting the pursuit of success for every one of our students. A review of the available research on this topic revealed a gap in the literature on the perspectives of students displaying problematic behaviors. It is this absence of insight that led to this study. Thus, it is my hope that this work will provide insight, inspiration and motivation for others that will result in additional research work that will benefit all middle school students.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE QUESTIONS

Interview Guide Questions

1. What kind of grades do you think you've earned in middle school?
2. What would you say are your best subjects?
3. Do you think your grades show your actual academic potential?
4. Do you think it is important for your parents to be involved in your school?
5. Do you think parent involvement helps students do better at school?
6. Do your parents help you with academic work?
7. How do you feel about your teachers?
8. Do you think your teachers care about their students?
9. Describe what a great teacher looks like in terms of what they do that makes them great.
10. Do you think it's important for kids to like their teachers in order to do well in school?
11. What do you like best about your classrooms?
12. Do you feel like your classroom settings are respectful to students?
13. What do you like best about school?
14. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

APPENDIX B
LETTER OF CONSENT

Letter of Consent

Dear Parent:

My name is Marty Palacios. I am an administrator in the XXXXXX School District and a student in the Doctor of Education degree program at George Fox University. I am conducting research for my doctoral dissertation that includes interviews of middle school students regarding their views on significant school related issues. This letter seeks your permission to include your student in this study.

Participation will include an interview on several topics of significance that include academic achievement, parental involvement in school, relationships with teachers, and classroom and school climate. I will conduct these short interviews on school campuses. Each interview will be digitally recorded, transcribed and once the study is completed, will be destroyed.

I will follow carefully designed procedures to keep the identity of all participants confidential and all research materials secure. The information that is obtained during this study will not become a part of your child's school records. Dr. XXXXXX, Superintendent of Schools for XXXXXX School District has provided a Letter of Cooperation in support of this research.

Please discuss this opportunity with your child and complete the section at the bottom of this letter to indicate whether or not you give permission for your child to participate. I will contact parents to schedule an interview time and location. Each student will receive a \$10 Wal-Mart gift card as a token of thanks for their participation. The results of this study hold potential for a deeper understanding of student perspectives that will support the efforts of professional educators.

If you have any questions or concerns or would like to discuss this request for permission further, please contact me at XXXXXX Middle School at (503) 565-4403 or by email at Mpalacios@msd.k12.or.us.

Respectfully,
 Marty Palacios
 Assistant Principal, XXXXXX Middle School
 Doctoral Candidate, George Fox University

_____ Yes, my student has my permission to participate in this research study.

_____ No, my student does not have my permission to participate in this research study.

Parent Name (please print)

Parent Signature

My signature below indicates that I also agree to participate in this research study with my parent's permission.

Student Name (please print)

Student Signature

APPENDIX C

YES/NO RESPONSES TO INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

