A View from the Principal's Office: A Grounded-Theory Exploration of Principals' Perceptions of Non-Academic Barriers to Learning: Implications for School Social Work

DISSERTATION

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By

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Abstract

The importance of the principal has been found to be a critical factor in student and school success. School principal responsibilities traditionally encompass operations and management. However, many principals are unable to fulfill these expectations because of students' social and behavioral issues. Consequently, this qualitative study explored principals’ perceptions, experiences, and resources needed to address non-academic barriers to learning. Tape-recorded semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and a demographic questionnaire provided the sources for data collection. The purposive sample was comprised of 19 principals from urban and suburban schools. Grounded-theory methods and a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software program were used to analyze data. Following data analysis, four major themes emerged: (1) the hustle; (2) support from home; (3) it-factor; and (4) student baggage. Additionally, three sub-themes emerged: (a) relationship building; (b) the need for additional pupil-support services; and (c) university training. The findings revealed that principals believe that specific resources are needed to address non-academic barriers to learning, including: (1) additional pupil-support staff; (2) more parental involvement to bridge home to
school; (3) collegiate courses on non-academic barriers; and (4) educator training on rapport-building skills.

The results of this study provide information for educators to identify gaps in knowledge preparation to work more effectively with students and families. The results also inform educators of pupil-support service staff of appropriate methods for combating non-academic barriers to learning and providing resources in schools. This study is beneficial for school social workers for understanding the needs of education administrators, resource service gaps in school systems, and avenues to advocate for change with education reform policies. Recommendations for school social work research, practice, and education are included.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to pupil-support staff workers and educators.
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Fields of Study

Major Field: Social Work
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Integration of NVivo 8 into the Research Process
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research encourages researchers to be transparent about their biases. Creswell (2003) indicates that qualitative researchers should identify their personal values, assumptions and biases at the onset of the study, and it is certain that my childhood experiences and employment history have influenced my motive to conduct this study. An elementary school teacher for 38 years, my mother taught third through fifth grade special education students. When reminiscing about spending time in my mother's classroom, I consistently remember her having teaching difficulties. Her students were talkative, extremely active, and demonstrated a variety of emotional and behavioral outbursts that significantly interfered with instruction delivery. To refocus her students' attention, she would often shout, "1-2-3; all eyes on me!" The students would concentrate for a moment but their uncontrollable behaviors would escalate again. Throughout the years, I recall my mother stating, "I am not a teacher, but a tamer of students." As a young person, I wondered if there was something that could be done differently to help teachers, rather than sending students to time-out or to the principal's
office. I questioned, "Are there better ways to connect with students?" and "What services should be provided to support the entire school function?"

I realized at a very young age that I wanted to influence the lives of students and the education system. I believed that, in order to influence students and schools, change had to occur simultaneously inside and outside the school context. This passion led me into the field of school social work. As a school social worker, I witnessed how non-academic factors impede student achievement. My experience as a school social worker allowed me to work with students, teachers, parents, pupil support staff, and principals from a variety of school districts. A common theme among educators and those affected by school systems are the lack of resources and minimum efforts to address non-academic issue such as poverty, substance abuse, and bullying. Although addressing non-academic barriers to learning and providing resources to school systems is what the profession of school social work is all about (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar 2009), many education administrators are unaware of the purpose and role of school social workers. Consequently, school social work positions are sparse in number (Agresta, 2006).

For this study, I asked principals about their perceptions, experiences, and stories concerning non-academic barriers to learning. Additionally, I asked them to consider the resources that are needed to effectively address non-academic issues that impede learning. The information that follows will document the principals’ insights, and will consequently contribute knowledge to school social work research, education, and practice.
1.1 Statement of the Problem

The American school system is experiencing a silent crisis (Barton, 2005; Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). It is estimated that 3.8 million youth aged 18 to 24 are neither employed nor in school (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2004). Each year, one-third of all public high school students fail to graduate (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Swanson, 2004). In 2008, in our nation’s largest cities, approximately 600,000 students dropped out high school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Graduation rates among Whites and Asians are approximately 76% to 80%. Graduation rates for minorities are worse: half of African-American, Hispanics and Native Americans fail to graduate from public high school with their class (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Swanson, 2004). These statistics have been the driving force of education reform policies. The current education reform policy, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), represents one of the most complex federal education reform policies in the history of the United States (Fusarelli, 2004). This law intends to address academic barriers to learning by "closing the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advanced peers" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). NCLB’s aim is to decrease the achievement gap and improve student performance to demonstrate 100% proficiency on standardized tests by 2014.
The primary objective of NCLB policy is to help at-risk students succeed academically. However, the policy does not consider psycho-social factors that contribute to the achievement gap (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). Research indicates that poor academic performance strongly correlates with social risk factors (Fraser, 2004; Frymier, 1992), and these social risk factors are prevalent within and around the school community. In the 2007-2008 school years, an estimated two million students aged 12 through 18 were victims of non-fatal crimes (Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009). Seventy-five percent of public schools reported one or more violent crime incidents. Twenty-five percent of public schools reported that bullying occurred among students on a daily basis, and 32% of students reported having been bullied at school. Twenty-three percent of students reported that gangs were at their schools and 18% reported they carry a weapon (Dinkes, Kemp, & Baum, 2009).

In addition to unsafe school and environmental conditions, numerous students are unprepared for learning as a result of malnourishment, inappropriate school clothing, and lack of medical care (Adelman & Taylor, 2000; Dryfoos, 1994; Harris & Hoover, 2003; Simpson, Bloom, Cohen, & Blumberg, 2002; Swerdlick, Reeder & Bucy, 1999). Research indicates that non-academic factors impact the academic performance and school completion rates of adolescents (Battin-Pearson, et al. 2000; Newcomb, et al. 2002; National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2005). Some of these factors include but are not limited to:
• poverty (Ackerman, Brown, & Izard 2004; Borman & Rachuba, 2001; Child Trends Data Bank, 2008; Halle, Kurtz-Costes, & Mahoney, 1997; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Rothestein, 2008; Swanson, 2004);
• peer group instability (Berndt, 1995; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2008);
• poor neighborhood quality (Bowen & Bowen, 1999; Boyle, Georgiades, Racine, & Mustard, 2007; Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002; Ceballo, McLoyd, & Toyokawa, 2004);
• teen parenthood (Softas-Nall, Baldo, & Williams, 1998; Zachry, 2005);
• single-parent homes (McLanahan, 1997);
• parent education attainment (Boyle, et al. 2007; Davis-Kean, 2005);
• substance abuse (Ellickson, Tucker, & Klein, 2003; Jeynes, 2002); and
• family history of substance abuse (Chen & Killeya-Jones, 2006; de la Rosa, Holleran, Rugh, & MacMaster, 2005).

When students experience one or more non-academic factors, the probability of absenteeism and student drop-out rates increases (Laird, Lew, DeBell, & Champman, 2006; Romero & Lee, 2007; 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Many of the aforementioned non-academic factors are prevalent within urban school districts (Copper & Jordan, 2003; Somers, et.al, 2008).

Minority students represent over 75% of the seven million students within the 61 largest urban districts in the country (Council of the Great City Schools, 2007). Urban districts have a disproportionate number of poor and minority students who are prone to a plethora of precipitating social, economic and contextual factors that place them at risk of
school failure (Borman & Rachuba, 2001; Bryan, 2005; Cunningham, 2003; Rotenstein, 2008; Stoiber & Good, 1998). The reality for most inner city schools is that over 50% of students manifest behavioral and social-emotional problems that interfere with their education performance (Adelman & Taylor, 2005).

Despite the challenges that are evident in urban schools and communities, research has found that suburban schools likewise feel the pressure of students who participate in risky behaviors and have non-academic barriers (Atav, 2004; Greggo, Jones & Kann, 2005; Greene & Forster, 2004; Hensel & Anderson, 2006). A national survey of 20,000 students in seventh to twelfth grade found:

- Forty percent of twelfth grade urban and suburban students used drugs. Twenty percent of suburban seniors were more likely to drive while on drugs in comparison to 16% of urban seniors.
- Seventy-four percent of suburban seniors reported trying alcohol in comparison to 71% of urban seniors.
- Suburban students were more likely to drive intoxicated 22% more often than urban students.
- Suburban students participated in delinquent (i.e., fighting and stealing) and risky (i.e., sex and drug usage) behaviors just as much as urban students (Greene & Forster, 2004).

Irrespective of geographic school settings, non-academic barriers to learning are important to explore because at-risk behaviors are correlated with student achievement
Moreover, the success or failure of students dictates the future productivity of our society (Noguera, 2003).

1.2 Purpose of the Study and Significance to School Social Work

Numerous studies have found several factors that improve the academic success of at-risk students (Borman & Rachuba, 2001; Floyd, 1996; Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997; Slaughter-Defoe, Andrews, & Zhang, 2002; Scheurich, 1998). Research indicates at-risk students succeed academically when experiencing:

- a strong attachment to the school (Diaz, 2005; Johnson, Crosnoe & Elder, 2001; Libby, 2004; McNeely & Falci, 2004; McNeely & Nonnemaker, 2002);
- a safe and orderly positive school climate (Adelman & Taylor, 2005b; Hoy, 1997; Hernandez & Seem, 2004; Roach & Kratochwill, 2004);
- positive student expectations (Gill & Reynolds, 1999; Wood, Kaplan, & McLoyd, 2007; Trusty, 2002);
- parental involvement (Halle, Kurtz-Costes, & Mahoney, 1997; Lindsay, 2002; Lee & Bowen, 2006); and
- home-school-community partnerships (Adelman & Taylor, 2000b; Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Rak & Patterson, 1996).

The role and importance of the principal has also been found to be a critical factor in student and school success. Numerous studies have found principal leadership to be positively correlated with student success owing to the influence principals have upon school climate (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998; Jacobsen & Polin, 2006; McGuigan &
Hoy, 2006; Mullen & Patrick, 2000). School principal responsibilities traditionally encompass operations and management (i.e., planning, budgeting, scheduling, and teacher supervision) to more complex oversight (i.e., closing achievement gaps) (Anthes, 2002; Chan & Pool, 2002; Houle, 2006). Although literature on education reform indicates strong principal leadership qualities should consist of: instructional leadership, diversity, empowering teacher leadership, and professional development training (Jones, 2002), most principals are unable to fulfill these expectations due to students' social and behavioral issues that compete with their school administrator role (Dake, Price, Telljohann, & Funk, 2004; Kimball & Sirotnik, 2000). For that reason, the purpose of this study is to examine principals’ experiences and perceptions of non-academic barriers to learning. The expectation is that an increased understanding of factors that principals perceive as non-academic barriers to learning will serve to bridge the gap between life in schools and the best practices to inform school social work research, education, and practice.

1.3 Proposition Research Statements

This research study presumes the following propositional knowledge statements that aid in narrowing the focus of the study (Mertens, 2005). Yin (2003) defines propositions as, “statements akin to hypotheses that state why you think you might observe a specific behavior or relationship” (p. 238). For this research project, the following propositions were held by the researcher:
(1) NCLB holds school systems and educators responsible for academic outcomes of all students.

(2) NCLB education reform initiatives of content standards, standardize testing, school choice, and closing the achievement gap will be enough to overcome all non-academic barriers to learning.

(3) Each research participant has his or her own collection of responses related to non-academic barriers to learning.

(4) Principals are trained to focus upon academic barriers to learning but are not trained to focus on non-academic barriers to learning.

(5) Principals tend to seek services from pupil-support personnel, such as school social workers, to address non-academic barriers to learning when such services are available.

(6) Principals will have a limited understanding about the role and services provided by school social workers.

(7) School social workers are trained to address non-academic barriers to learning.

1.4 Methodological Overview

According to Creswell (2007), qualitative methods are used to develop concepts, categories, and hypotheses that can be later tested by quantitative means. Numerous quantitative studies have identified different variables of non-academic barriers to learning and how they affect student academic outcomes (Ackerman, Brown, & Izard, 2004; Boyle, Georgiades, Racine, & Mustard 2007; Davis-Kean, 2005; Jeynes, 2002). However, few studies exclusively explore principals’ perceptions of non-academic
barriers to learning. This writer found only one empirical study similarly related to the proposed topic. To address this deficiency in the scholarship at hand, this study surveyed 21 principals and seven assistant principals from Canadian inner-city schools about their perceptions of student at-risk factors. A 52-item instrument was administered to principals that consisted of five domains that impact students' academic performance: student, family, school, community, and society-based risk factors. The study found that principals' perceived student-based and family-based risk factors as strongly contributing to student risk. On the other hand, society, community, and school-based risk factors were perceived as mild to moderate contributors to student risk (Johnson, 2000).

The limited amount of quantitative studies that explore principals' perceptions of non-academic barriers to learning, suggests that a qualitative study is warranted. Qualitative research is suited for this study to achieve a deeper understanding of principals' lived experiences and to develop stories to describe non-academic barriers to learning from educators’ perspective. Traditionally, educators are not trained in addressing student and family needs outside of the academic realm (Gardiner, 2006). However, from this researcher's perspective, non-academic barriers to learning are the primary challenges that principals endure daily. Principals tend to seek services from pupil support personnel, such as school social workers, to address non-academic barriers to learning when services are available. Therefore, qualitatively exploring principals’ experiences and perceptions of nonacademic barriers to learning will contribute to future quantitative studies to inform school social work research, education, and practice.
1.5 Research Questions

This research study will explore the following three research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of principals on non-academic barriers to learning?
2. What are principals’ experiences of addressing non-academic barriers to learning?
3. What resources do principals think are needed to successfully address non-academic barriers to learning?

1.6 Research Limitations

With any form of research, the selected methodology has limitations. Qualitative research methods do not require the random selection of informants. Therefore, research findings risk social bias because the informants may provide responses that will present themselves in the most positive way possible (Glesne, 1999). One of the primary data collection methods in this study was interviewing. Fontana and Frey (2000), indicate ethical dilemmas during the interview process, such as the researcher's degree of involvement in a study, may be harmful, they warn of the pitfalls of and deception in covert methods possibly being used by the researcher to gain information.

Qualitative researchers are the primary instrument and must make considerable efforts to become aware of their bias (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative research is limited because of its subjectivity and small sample size that may not be representative. Thus, qualitative findings cannot be projected to wider populations (Glesne, 1999). Yet the goal of this researcher was not to generalize findings to other populations. Rather, it is hoped
that the results of this study can be used as a guide to promote awareness for future research in the field of school social work and education.

1.7 Definitions

Defining terms promotes clarity of findings (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996). The definitions germane to this study include:

- At-risk students: Students who experience arduous social-emotional, socioeconomic, physical, or academic challenges that may interfere with their likelihood of graduating from school (Fraser, 2004).
- Education reform: A variety of different programming initiatives developed to produce strategic change in America's education practices.
- No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA): NCLBA mandates for high quality academic assessments and accountability systems, and for curriculum and instructional materials to be aligned with state academic standards to measure student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b).
- Non-academic barriers to learning: Any behavioral, social-emotional, and/or toxic environment problem that interferes with students' instruction, education performance, and bio-psycho-social development (Adelman & Taylor, 2005).
- Principal: An educator who holds decision-making, managerial, and administrative authority for a school.
- Pupil-support staff: One of seven sub-functions within the expenditure support services. It includes attendance, social work, guidance, health, psychological...
services, speech pathology, audiology, and other student support services (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

- **School Culture**: The behaviors, attitudes and actions of people within a school. The meaning of values, customs, interactions and qualities that are in the school. School culture emphasis a blend of the school's vision, mission, and beliefs.

- **School guidance counselors**: "Professional school counselors are certified/licensed educators with minimum of a master's degree in school counseling making them uniquely qualified to address all students' academic, personal/social and career development needs by designing, implementing, evaluating and enhancing a comprehensive school counseling program that promotes and enhances students success" (American School Counselor Association, 2009).

- **School nurse**: "School nursing is a specialized practice of professional nursing that advances the well being, academic success, and life-long achievement of students. To that end, school nurses facilitate positive student responses to normal development; promote health and safety; intervene with actual and potential health problems; provide case management services; and actively collaborate with others to build student and family capacity for adaptation, self-management, self-advocacy, and learning" (The National Association of School Nurses, 1999).

- **School psychologist**: “School psychologists are responsible to collaborate with teachers, parents, and school personnel to provide a supportive learning environments for students. School psychologists address students' learning and
behavioral problems, suggest improvements to classroom management strategies or parenting techniques, and evaluate students with disabilities and gifted and talented students to help determine the best way to educate them" (United States Department of Labor, 2009).

- School social workers: School social work is a specialty in social work that customarily functions as the liaison between school, home, and community. School social workers provide consultation to education staff and collaborate with school administrators regarding education policies, programs, and practices. School social workers are responsible to aid in the social, emotional, psychological, and physical challenges of students to promote academic achievement. In many states, school social workers are certified or licensed, with the status often following the NASW Standards for School Social Workers (Allen-Meares, Washington, Welsh, 2000; Social Work Dictionary, 2005).

- Speech therapist: "Speech-language pathologists are professionally trained to prevent, screen, identify, assess, diagnose, refer, provide intervention for, and counsel persons with, or who are at risk for articulation, fluency, voice, language, communication, swallowing, and related disabilities. In addition to engaging in activities to reduce or prevent communication disabilities, speech-language pathologists also counsel and educate families or professionals about these disorders and their management" (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2000).
• Urban schools: Schools located in major cities or metropolitan areas. Schools are typically associated with a high level of poverty and lower amount of money spent on education per child (Kozol, 1992).

• Suburban schools: Schools located on the outskirts of major cities or metropolitan areas.

1.8 Overview of the Chapters

The current research study is organized into five chapters. Chapter one provides a statement of the problem, purpose of the study and significance to social work, proposition research statements, methodological overview, research questions, research limitations, and operational definitions. Chapter two provides an integrated review of literature. Chapter three consists of an overview of the methodology, data collection procedures, and trustworthiness utilized in the study. Chapter four illustrates thematic analysis of research findings. Chapter five presents a conceptual model and discusses implications to social work research, education practice, and policy.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

Theories are systematic interrelated statements, constructs, or concepts intended to explain observed phenomena. Theories help to make meaning of the world in which people live (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002; Rubbin & Babbie, 1997). Zastow and Kirstman (2007) explain that theories are an organized group of principles, concepts, and ideas to explain observable trends or occurrences that happen in our world. Theories are important in social work because they guide the way we think, help us analyze the world around us, and assist in problem solving.

Within the first portion of this chapter, I will present the ecosystem theory. I will discuss this theory with an emphasis on general systems theory (GST) and ecological theory (perspective). I will elaborate on major concepts of the theories and apply them to school systems throughout.

Within the second portion of this chapter, I will present a literature review about at-risk students. I will compare at-risk behaviors between urban and suburban school students. Additionally, I will discuss how education reform agendas (i.e., NCLBA) does
not take into consideration non-academic barriers to learning that thwart student and school success.

I will discuss the importance of principals and how they function in roles outside their area of expertise to manage non-academic barriers to learning. Lastly, ecosystem theory concepts will be applied to examine the influence education reform, students' non-academic barriers to learning, and principals roles have upon school systems.

2.2 Ecosystem Theory: Details of General System Theory and Ecological Theory

The ecosystems perspective is a combination of ideas from two schools of thought: general systems theory (GST) and ecological theory (Meyer, 1995; von Bertalanffy, 1988; 1968). These theories originated from the life sciences of ecology and biology. Webster's Dictionary (1997) defines ecology as "the complex of relations between a specific organism and its environment" (p. 429). Biology is defined as "the science that deals with the origin history, physical characteristics, life process, and habits" (p.140). Ecological theory exemplifies a mutual perspective that individuals are influenced by and adapt to their environments, whereas the aim of GST focuses on wholeness and formulating principles of organizations. Ecosystem theory is actualized when general systems and ecological theory concepts are combined and applied to understand how people fail or succeed to have a precision of fit within their environment (Rothery, 2001). To better understand ecosystem theory, I will exclusively discuss general systems and ecological theory's concepts.
2.3 Overview of General Systems Theory

The founder of GST, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, was a theoretical biologist. He sought to explain that life follows an order and that existing order is a subset of the general order (Von Bertalanffy, 1988; 1968). According to Mattaini and Meyer (2009):

GST is a general science of wholeness that describes sets of elements standing in interaction, or the systematic interconnectedness of variables, such as people and their environments. It is an organizing conceptual framework in which otherwise unconnected elements are integrated into a synthetic view and fall into place.

(p. 3)

GST emphasizes that systems are sets of interacting elements. The ecosystem perspective borrows major and minor concepts from GST. The main concepts of GST are: boundaries, closed systems and open systems. Minor GST concepts are: input, output, feedback, homeostasis, entropy, and negative entropy. These are functional concepts to examine organizational structures to help illustrate how systems work (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007).

2.3.1 System Boundaries

To appreciate the objective of GST, it is necessary to describe a system. Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2007) define a system as, “a set of elements that are orderly and interrelated to make a functional whole” (p. 12). GST suggests that all social systems are simultaneously part of other systems, while functioning as a whole system (Schriever, 1998). All systems are entities that are surrounded by boundaries that are impermeable or
permeable. Payne (1991) asserts that all system *boundaries* have physical and mental energy that is exchanged with outside influences. *Boundaries* operate to distinguish the system from its environment and to protect the parts from influences in the environment that might interfere with the system functioning (Norlin & Chess, 1997). For example, prior to entering into some schools, everyone must successfully pass through a metal detector. This safety precaution is an example of a *boundary* to protect students and school staff from negative environmental influences.

### 2.3.2 Closed System and Open System

Similar to boundaries, all systems can be categorized as either closed or open. Payne (1991) describe a *closed system* as a sealed vacuum flask where no transactions exist across system boundaries. In contrast, an *open system* is connected to the environment, allowing for an exchange between it and other systems. The difference between *closed systems* and *open systems* is thus the extent of communication. Rothery (2001) discuss the distinction between *closed systems* and *open systems*:

Systems that exchange information relatively freely are considered open, whereas systems that rigidly restrict the flow of information are relatively closed. Social systems like families are never completely impervious to influences from outside, so they are always open to some extent and can only be relatively closed. Completely open boundaries lead to a loss of identity and other risks, whereas boundaries that are completely closed result in deprivation, starvation, and eventual death. (p. 71)
The boundaries of schools systems are permeable and they exist on a continuum of openness ranging from being very open to slightly open (almost closed systems). Schools are open because of information exchanges from other systems. For example, outside systems that influence schools are federal education reform policies, state departments of education, and teachers' unions. Schools are responsible to adhere to the legal stipulations from these outside influences. Typically, in smaller or suburban school districts, the communication between the external environment (i.e., parents and the surrounding community) and the school is readily accessible and easy to navigate, comparable to an open system. However, the opposite is experienced in large school districts. Often the communication in large or urban school districts is restricted, in effect closing the school system to parents and the larger community, who experience difficulty communicating and navigating the system (Woolley, et al. 2004).

2.3.3 Inputs, Outputs, and Feedback

When system boundaries are open, they receive inputs from external entities. Open systems are viable because their boundaries are permeable to outside influences and systems are able to filter and select inputs to channel and maintain its vitality (Martin & O'Connor, 1998). Norlin and Chess (1997), indicate that inputs are essential resources that are necessary for the survival and development of a system. Inputs represent information that is fed into the system from its environment. The information that is fed into a system results in the generation of energy, such as external materials and human resources. A system will either retain or release information from its environment, a phenomenon called outputs. GST denotes that when a system is open, it experiences an
input-output transaction process with other systems to accomplish its purpose (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; 2001; Kazemek & Kazemek, 1992). As a result of a system's input and output, information generated about an organization known as feedback, "a set of processes through which organizations develop mechanisms to receive information on their performance in order to correct problems" (Schriver, 1998, p. 435).

2.3.4 Homeostasis, Entropy, and Negative Entropy

Systems receive either positive or negative feedback about their outputs and overall performance. An organization's energy, information, and type of feedback will determine if a system will experience a state of homeostasis or entropy. Most organizations desire a homeostatic existence. Schriver (1998) illustrate homeostasis as:

A moveable balance established by organizations taking in energy and information, using it, then exporting it in return for needed resources in a functional way. It is a movable balance in the sense that it represents a continuous but dynamic state of change rather than a static state. (p.435)

Homeostasis occurs when a system maintains a continual state of balance. If something interrupts the balance, the system will adjust itself to regain stability (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007).

In contrast, a system that is unstable, disorganized, and chaotic is in a state of entropy. According to Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2007), "Entropy is the tendency of a system to progress toward disorganization, depletion, and death. Nothing lasts forever . . . As time passes, older agencies and systems are eventually replaced by new ones" (p. 14). Norlin and Chess (1997) describe entropy as:
A measure of disorder . . . This principle holds that the general trend of events in nature is toward states of maximum disorder and the leveling down of differences. In practical or layperson's terms, things wear out, run down, decompose. This is true of all matter . . . Entropy, then, refers to a process in which order is lost--in other words, the process of disorganization. (p. 33)

The general system theorist Von Bertalanffy (1968) explains that systems require a process of order and not disorder. Therefore, systems should seek strategies to reverse entropy. A system that attempts to move from disorder to order experiences the state of negative entropy. Negative entropy is, "A process necessary for organizations to fight off entropy " (Schriver, 1998, p. 435). Negative entropy is the course of action of a system to move towards growth, progression and development (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007).

2.4 Overview of Ecological Theory

Ecology theory, often referred to as the ecological perspective, was coupled with general systems theory in the 1970s to strengthen its meaning (Rothery, 2001). The interest of ecology within the social sciences stems from the work of A.G. Tansley, a botanist, who introduced the term “ecosystems” (Norlin & Chess, 1997). According to Meyer (1995), ecology "is the science that is concerned with the adaptive fit of organisms in their environments . . . Ecological ideas denote the transactional processes that exist in nature and thus serve as a metaphor for human relatedness through mutual adaptation" (p. 19). The field of ecology is concerned with the physical world around us. Capra (1996) describes that all systems are networks that influence each other through consistent interactions. Rogoff (1982) declares that "human behavior is embedded in context, that
context is not so much a set of stimuli that impinge upon a person as it is a web of relationships interwoven to form the fabric of meaning" (p.149). The pioneering scholarship of Tansley, von Bertalanffy, Brofrenbreener, and other theorists provides a framework to examine the effects of humans and their social environments.

2.4.1 Ecological Theory Model

Unlike GST, the ecological theory emphasizes the relationship between people and their environments, rather than how systems function. Ecological theory can be viewed as complex layers representing the interaction that people exhibit within their environment. A major contributor of the ecological perspective is Urie Bronfenbreener (1979). He often is referenced for his foundational ecological theory model which demonstrates how individuals interact and are influenced by environmental structures (Birnbaum, et al. 2003; Bowen & Powers, 2005; Clancy, 1995; Corcoran, 2000; Eliadis, 2006; Moon & Ando, 2009; Voisin, et al. 2006). Bronfenbreener's (1979) ecological theory model identifies four major systems that have an impact on human behavior. These systems are: (1) microsystem, (2) mesosystem, (3) exosystem, and (4) macrosystem. Bronfenbreener (1979) defines the microsystem as "a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (p. 22). The microsystem represents an individual's contact with significant others, such as students interacting with their teachers. A mesosystem "comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (such as a child, the relations among home, school, [and] neighborhood peer group)" (Bronfenbreener, 1979, p. 25). The third
ecology system is the *exosystem*, which is referred to as "one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person" (Bronfenbreener, 1979, p. 25). For example, *exosystems* that impact students are school and parent schedules, state standardize assessments, and bus transportation routes.

The final ecological system is *macrosystem*. Bronfenbreener define *macrosystem* as "consistencies in the form and context of lower-order systems [micro-, meso-, and exo-] that exists . . . at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies" (Bronfenbreener, 1979, p. 26). The *macrosystem* consists of broad societal influences such as social norms and customs, but also includes defining principles such as values and laws.

### 2.4.2 Life Model

These layered systems are essential to understand how environments influence individuals. To build upon the work of Bronfenbreener, other theorists explored the reciprocal relationship between the environment and the individual. Numerous studies conducted within a variety of different fields have sought to understand the relationship of the environment upon humans and vice versa (Betz, 2001; Conyne & Cook, 2004; Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2002; Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Kassambira, Edwards, & Walsh, 2006). In the field of social work, Gitterman and Germain have applied the ecological perspective to different populations and within a variety of different contexts (Germain, 1995; 1994; 1991; 1984; 1985; Gitterman & Shulman, 2005; Gitterman, 2001; Gitterman & Germain, 2008; 1999; 1995). The authors discuss several ecological theory concepts
for examining the influences of people and the environment. These ecological concepts are referred to as the life model. The life model consists of the following seven concepts:

1. **ecological thinking and reciprocity of person-environment exchanges**;
2. **person: environment fit, adaptedness, and adaptation**;
3. **habitat and niche**;
4. **abuse or misuse of power, oppression, and social and technological pollution**;
5. **the life course**;
6. **life stressors, stress, and coping**; and
7. **resilience and protective factors**. (Germain & Gitterman, p. 51)

### 2.4.3 Ecological Thinking and Reciprocity of Person-Environment

The first life model concept, *ecological thinking and reciprocity of person-environment exchanges*, stresses that, "ecological thinking emphasizes the reciprocal relationships among people and their environment, not simply to a lone characteristic of an individual or the environment, but to particular relationships between them" (Germain & Gitterman, p. 54).

### 2.4.4 Person: Environment Fit, Adaptedness, and Adaptation.

The second life model concept is *person: environment fit, adaptedness, and adaptation*. This concept evaluates how people deal with and strives to enhance their level of fit within an environment. Germain and Gitterman (2008) explain the difference between a good and poor environmental fit. The authors state that "a good' environment fit evolves between a person and [his or her] environment, [when] the person perceives
the availability of sufficient personal and environmental resources and experiences a condition of *adaptedness*" (Germain & Gitterman, 2008, p.54). The authors explain that *adaptedness* is an existence that sustains human welfare and growth to support the environment. In contrast, a *"poor" environmental fit*:

Evolves between a person's perceptions of environmental resources and his or her needs and capacities, he or she experiences stress . . . When the perceived fit between their personal and environment is unfavorable, or merely adequate, the person-alone or with help-may improve the level of fit by adaptive behaviors.

(Germain & Gitterman, 2008, pp. 54-55)

Germain and Gitterman (2008), suggest that when people experience a *poor environment fit*, they have an option for personal change through *adaptation*. *Adaptation* is a personal responsibility to seek individual and/or environmental changes to improve the level of *personal environmental fit*. The authors explain that *adaptation* involves deliberate efforts to change *adaptive* behaviors. These *adaptive* behavior activities include:

(1) change oneself (i.e., learn new skills) in order to meet the environment's perceived expectations or demands, and take advantage of opportunities;

(2) change the environment so that the social and physical environments are more responsive to one's needs and goals; or

(3) change the person: environmental transactions (e.g., teacher and student) in order to improve fit. (Germain & Gitterman, 2008, p. 55)
It is important to note the dynamic quality of the adaptation process, which will never end because people consistently evolve and environments constantly change.

2.4.5 Habitat and Niche

Where people live and the positions they hold in life are essential to determine the degree of fit. Ecological theory give emphasis to the concepts of habitat and niche. A habitat is one's living location, physical, social, and cultural setting. Examples of a habitat include but are not limited to: urban, suburban, and rural communities, schools, residential facilities, hospitals, and religious organizations. It is essential for humans to exist in healthy habitats to promote goodness of environment fit. The concept niche refers to positions that people occupy such as social positions and achieved roles (Germain & Gitterman, 1999).

2.4.6 Abuse or Misuse of Power, Oppression, and Social and Technological Pollution

The ecological concept of abuse or misuse of power, oppression, and social and technological pollution is similar to Bronfenbreener's exosystem because individuals are affected by organizations, policies, and politics. German and Gitterman (2008), discuss how dominant people and systems impact others and the environment:

The abuse of economics and political power leads to poor schools, chronic unemployment or underemployment of those whom the schools failed to educate, lack of affordable and safe housing, homelessness, inadequate health care . . .

This abuse of power creates and maintains such social pollution as poverty; institutional racism and sexism; repressive gender roles in family, work, and community life . . . They are expressions of destructive relationships between
person and environment, in which the social order permits some to inflict grave Injustice and suffering on others. (Germain and Gitterman, 2008, p.56-57)

2.4.7 Life Course

The life course analyzes human existence of conception to old age through the lens of cultural, societal, and institutional influences. The life course views human existence beyond conventional stages of life span development theories (i.e., Erik Erikson's psychosocial stages of development) and considers how interpersonal transactions, life transitions, life events, bio-psycho-social changes, and socialization processes influence individuals. The life course co-emphasizes six elements:

(1) The distinctiveness of human diversity . . . The life course experience, instead of forcing all people to individualize personal and collective life experience, instead of forcing all people into predetermined, universal developmental stages.

(2) The self-regulating, self-directing nature of human beings and their innate push toward growth and health.

(3) Environmental diversity . . . that takes into account the effects of poverty or prejudicial discrimination upon human development and functioning.

(4) Newly emerging family forms and structures and their unique tasks and developmental issues in addition to those faced by traditional family structures and forms.

(5) Rapid shifts in societal and community values and norms in today's world.

(6) The critical significance of global as well as local environments. (Germain & Gitterman, 2008, p.57)
2.4.8 Life Stressors, Stress, and Coping

The life course depicts the realities of human existence because the human experience is not predetermined and sequential, but consistently evolving in varying transitional stages. As a result of consistent and often unexpected changes that occur in life, individuals either cope or respond to stress. For that reason, the next life model, *life stressors, stress, and coping* will be briefly discussed. *Life stressors* are traumatic and life-altering events that disturb a person: environment fit. When a *life stressor* is experienced (i.e., medical diagnosis, death of a family member, pregnancy, etc.), it is a challenge to adapt to a previous state of existence. The authors describe *stress* as a person's physiological and psychological response to a *life stressor* without having the personal or external resources to cope with the event (Germain & Gitterman, 2008; 1999). *Coping* is a form of adaptation that entails dealing with negative circumstances to overcome problems.

The authors explain that *coping* may involve an attempt to change oneself, the environment, or both. Barker (2007) recommends four types of coping skills. The first skill is the need to solicit information and obtain resources to help with functioning. Second, people need *coping* skills to assist them with goal setting and planning for the future. The next step is developing *coping* skills to control emotions. The fourth skill is self-control to counter the impulse for immediate gratification.
2.4.9 Resilience and Protective Factors

When individuals have the ability to cope and adapt to life events, they are resilient. The final Germain and Gitterman life model is *resilience and protective factors*. Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2007), define resiliency as: "The ability of an individual, family, group, community, or organization to recover from adversity and resume functioning even when suffering serious trouble, confusion, or hardship" (p.9). Germain and Gitterman (2008) describe *resilience* as:

The tendency to rebound or recoil, to return to prior state, to spring back. The process of "rebounding" and "returning to prior state" does not suggest that a person, family, group, or community is incapable of being wounded or injured. Rather, in the face of adversity, a person can bend or lose some [of his or her] power and capability, yet recover and return to a prior level of adaptation. (p. 63)

*Protective factors* are biological, psychological, and/or environmental supports that prevent or lessen the impact of a stressor. The authors suggest that good decision making, healthy family relationships, a caring adult, and external resources such as social organizations and support networks are examples of protective factors.

The ecology theory concepts of micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro- systems facilitates an understanding of how people and the environment affect one another. Germain and Gitterman built upon the foundational ecological theory by illustrating a life model that consist of seven concepts to determine the degree of environment fit and adaptation to life events.
2.5 At-Risk Students

Numerous studies use the ecosystem perspective to understand the impact of student risk factors in schools (Atav & Spencer, 2002; Bandura, 1997; Bronfenbreener, Johnson, Burle; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2008; Ripple & Luthar, 2000; Solbert, Carlstrom, Howard, & Jones, 2007; Sung & Sachi, 2009). Lack of school success has been well researched to find that it interferes with future opportunities and adjustment into adulthood (Maugham & Ruttler, 1998; Taylor, 2005). Therefore, those who work with young people, especially those in education systems, have a responsibility to understand the multiple causes of student learning problems and provide sufficient resources to ameliorate those difficulties.

According to Adelman and Taylor (2002), no classification method can identify student learning problems for research, practice, and policy-making purposes. For that reason, the authors developed a model for viewing learning disabilities on a continuum called the transactional perspective. This perspective attempts to differentiate learning disabilities from the environment which may predispose students to learning disabilities. Viewing students from a transactional perspective is imperative because those who are given an incorrect diagnosis of having a learning disability may perceive their disability as a pathology, while the cause is environmental (Moses, 2010; Strambler & Weinstein, 2010). Not separating a person's environment as a disability triggers unnecessary interventions, class misplacement, time wasted, and financial loss. Furthermore, such
misdiagnoses prohibit practice, research, and policies from identifying the variety of causes that contribute to students’ lack of school success.

Numerous research studies have found that student’s lack of success in schools is associated with a wide range of non-academic factors such as student, family, school, and environmental risk factors (Atav & Spencer, 2002; Bryan, 2005; Finn & Rock, 1997; Gerard & Buehler, 2004; Greene & Forster, 2004; Johnson, 2000; 1998; 1997; Levin, 2004; Ripple & Luthar, 2000; Solberg, Carlstrom, Hoard, & Jones, 2007). Risk factors can be described as any event, condition, or experience that increases the probability of a negative outcome for youth (Fraser, 2004; Richman & Fraser, 2001). Research has found that student at-risk factors involve a variety of circumstances such as poverty (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Gifford, et al., 2010; Saporito & Sohoni, 2007); substance use (de la Rosa, Holleran, Rugh, & MacMaster, 2005; Hill, 2008; Peleg-Oren & Teichman, 2006); teen pregnancy (Berry, Shillington, Peak, & Hohman, 2000; Chapin, 2001; Monahan, 2002); student mobility (Gasper, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2010); trauma (Hilarski, 2004; Maschi & Bradley, 2008); violence (Benda & Corwyn, 2002; Eitle & Turner, 2002; Pryor, Sarri, Bombyk, & Nikolovska, 1999); lack of community resources (Bowen & Richman, 2002; Schultz, 2007); inadequate school contextual factors (Cooley & Shen, 2000; Crosby, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2004); neighborhood quality (Boyd, Cooley, Lambert, & Ialongo, 2003; Ceballo, McLoyd, & Toyokawa, 2004; Cooley, et al. 2009; Dearing, 2009; Lambert, Ialongo, Boyd, & Cooley, 2005); parental devaluation of education (Mendez, Carpenter, LaForett, & Cohen, 2009; Ryan, Casas, Kelly-Vance, Ryalls, & Nero, 2010; Van & Orozco, 2007); and racial discrimination (Blanchett,
Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Bryan, 2005; Stelle, 1992; 1995; Stelle & Aronson, 1995; Stelle, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002; Wenglisky, 2004). These issues have been identified as affecting the bio-psycho-social development of youth as well as predisposing students to school failure.

Researchers have remarked that the broad range of risk factors have put approximately one-third to one-half of students at risk (Adelman & Taylor, 2005; Henson, 1995; Johnson, 1998). According to Johnson (2000):

Educational [outcome] concern with at-risk students is, not simply, that they are failing to learn, but that they will enter adulthood illiterate, dependent upon drugs and alcohol, unemployed or underemployed, as a teenage parent, dependent on welfare, or adjudicated by the criminal justice system . . . The ultimate risk that students face is to become disconnected from the functions of society, from economic productivity, and as citizens in a democracy. (Johnson, 1997, p. 35)

The author identifies educational risks to include the concepts of risk outcomes and risk factors. She defines risk outcomes as, "Specific negative situations in school and in life, for example, adolescent pregnancy, school failure, early school withdrawal, suicide, incarceration, and adult dependency” (p. 1). Risk factors are "Attributes and circumstances that predispose students to experience risk outcomes" (p. 1). Johnson identifies 28 inner-city Canadian principals and assistant principals to rate their perceptions of risk factor categories that contribute to academic, personal, and social failure. The study classifies risk factors into five categories:
(1) student-based risk factors -- cognitive and behavioral abilities, substance usage, sexual activity, school attendance, language behaviors of youth, etc.

(2) family-based risk factors -- parent and sibling characteristics such as parent and sibling alcohol and substance use, family violence, criminal activity, parent devalues education, and English the second language spoken in the home.

(3) school-based risk factors -- teacher stress, lack of appropriate programs, limited school resources, rigid education program, school gangs, dilapidated school building, school violence, large class size, etc.

(4) community-based risk factors -- poverty, crime, and lack of community resources, low income neighborhood, high unemployment, and high crime neighborhood.

(5) society-based risk factors -- public attitudes and social policies that negatively impact students, including racism and cultural intolerance (p. 1).

The study found that principals' perceive student-based and family-based risk factors as strongly contributing to student risks of school failure. The study determined that principals' believed that school-based, community-based, and societal-based risk factors moderately contributed to student risks.

2.5.1 At-Risk Students in Urban School Districts

Within the academic literature, numerous studies identify students who attend urban school districts to be at-risk of school failure because of a combination of individual, family, peer, school, community, and society risk factors (Bryan, 2005;
According to Bemak, Chi-Ying, and Siroskey-Sabdo (2005), "When youth are faced with challenges from social problems, such as poverty, violence, or racism, disruptions in family and community life may occur, hindering the emotional, social, and academic growth and development of children and youth" (p. 377).

In urban school districts, a disproportionate number of poor and minority youth is represented (Council of the Great City Schools, 2007). Urban and ethnic minority adolescents tend to have multiple precipitating non-academic factors and stressors that put them at risk for school failure (Bryan, 2005; Hess, 2000; Irving, & Hudley, 2008; Osborne, 2001; Somer, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2008). Research indicates that poor and minority youth are more likely to experience acts of violence in or around school (Carpenter-Aeby, Salloum, & Aeby, 2001; Ceballo, McLoyd, & Toyokawa, 2004; Whitted & Dupper, 2005), attend poorly funded and overcrowded schools (Hess, 2000; Snipes & Casserly, 2004), and have inexperienced teachers (Crosby, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2001).

Such problems within urban school districts have been associated with a widening achievement gap (Becker, & Luthar, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Noguera, 2008; Wenglinsky, 2004), poor quality education (Darling-Hammond, 2004; 2000; Haifeng & Cowen, 2009), suspension and expulsions (Dupper, Theriot, & Craun, 2009; Kaushal & Nepomnyaschy, 2009; Theriot, Craun, & Dupper, 2010), high truancy (Schulttoffel, 2000; Teasley, 2004), low standardized assessment scores (Fleming, et al. 2005); high
dropout rates (Hess, 2000; Knesting, 2008; Ripple & Luthar, 2000), and psychological problems (Gerard & Buehler, 2004; Strambler, Michael Weinstein, & Rhona, 2010).

According to Miller (1995), the social construction of minority student failure can be pinpointed by the lack of community and parental resources. He explains that the urban school community needs five capitals to support children and their families:

(1) human capital that provides knowledge and skills required to function in a technological complex society;
(2) social capital to provide societal norms, social networks, healthy relationships between adult and children;
(3) health capital to ascertain the ability to sustain good health through nutrition and preventative care;
(4) financial capital to establish the income and savings that provide the ability to purchase other resources and advantages; and
(5) polity [political] capital to benefit the community at large to provide for all of its members by focusing upon the interdependent nature of society today (Schuttoloffel, 2000, p. 3).

Miller’s theoretical argument demonstrates that individual student effort is not enough to improve student achievement. He and others believe that academic change must be systematic and comprehensive (Adelman & Taylor, 2004; Snipes & Casserly, 2004).
2.5.2 At-Risk Students in Suburban School Districts

In contrast, suburban school districts typically have the capitals to support students and families (Greene & Forster, 2004). Students who reside in affluent neighborhoods tend to perform better academically, score higher on achievement assessments, and have higher graduation rates than their urban counterparts (Borg, 2007; Diamond, 2006; Ferguson, 2002; Gosa & Alexander, 2007; Ogbu, 2004). Suburban schools are typically different than urban schools in academic expectations, providing ascetically superior facilities and smaller bureaucratic structures. However, there is little difference between urban and suburban student involvement in risky behaviors. Research studies have found that suburban students are involved in and experience just as many risk factors as urban youth (Atav & Spencer, 2002; Bradshaw, 2009; Chen & Killeya-Jones, 2006; Chen, Sheth, Elliott, & Yeager, 2004; Greene & Forster, 2004; Penhollow & Young, 2005). That statement may seem surprising because suburban neighborhoods have been defined by a media image of new automobiles driving through beautiful communities with white picket fences, perfect manicured lawns, and perfect children coming home from school to stable, organized households with fresh-baked cookies. However, Greene and Forester (2004) found that suburban students are involved in just as many risky behaviors as students in urban districts. The authors explain that the media ignore the daily realities that occur in suburban districts by solely focusing upon the utopian images that are portrayed. Their study analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (2007) to find that suburban high school
students have sex, drink, smoke, abuse substances, and engage in delinquent behaviors as often as urban high school students:

- Urban and suburban high schools are virtually identical in terms of widespread sexual activity. Two-thirds of all suburban and urban students in grade 12 have had sex. Forty-three percent of suburban and 39 percent of urban students in grade 12 have had sex with a person with whom they did not have a romantic relationship.

- Pregnancy rates are high in both suburban and urban schools, although they are higher in urban schools. Fourteen percent of suburban and 20 percent of urban girls in grade 12 have been pregnant.

- Over 60 percent of suburban and 54 percent of urban students in grade 12 have tried cigarette smoking. Thirty-seven percent of suburban twelfth graders have smoked at least once a day for at least 30 days, compared to 30 percent of urban twelfth graders.

- Alcohol use followed a similar pattern. Seventy-four percent of suburban and 71 percent of urban students in grade 12 have tried alcohol more than two or three times. Sixty-three percent of suburban and 57 percent of urban twelfth graders drink without family members present. Twenty-two percent of suburban and 16 percent of urban twelfth graders have driven while drunk.

- About four out of ten twelfth graders in both urban and suburban schools have used illegal drugs. Twenty percent of suburban and 13 percent of urban students in grade 12 have driven while high on drugs.
• Urban and suburban students are about equally likely to engage in other delinquent behaviors such as fighting and stealing (p. 2).

Regardless of the geographic suburban or urban school location, studies have found that students that experience risk factors may hinder their academic achievement and social acumen. In the works of Adelman and Taylor (2002), the authors determine the best way to think about risk factors should be in terms of potential external and internal barriers to development and learning. The authors refer to at-risk internal and external barriers as non-academic barriers to learning.

2.6 Non-Academic Barriers to Learning: Exploration of Risk Factors and Mental Health Services Needs in Schools

Non-academic barriers to learning are a pervasive reality in schools. The data from Center of Disease Control (CDC) report the prevalence of major mortalities (i.e., juvenile violence, suicide, homicide) and morbidities (i.e., alcohol and other substance use, STIs, teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, physical abuse) of youth. The CDC conducted a national school-based survey using the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS). The YRBSS reports findings of national, state, and local non-academic health-risk behaviors among youth. In 2007, the study surveyed more than 14,000 adolescents to find:

• 1.5 million students among the ages of 12 to 18 were victims of nonfatal crimes, with 85% of public schools that reported at least one violent crime, theft, simple assault, or other incidents to occur at their school.
Eighteen percent of high school students carried a weapon such as a gun, knife, or club and six percent carried a weapon onto school property. The report found that over 35% of students have been in a physical fight during the 12 months before the survey. The report also indicated that approximately 10% of high school students had been hit, slapped, or involved in a physical injury by their boyfriend or girlfriend.

Seventy-five percent of students had tried alcohol at least once and 44% of students drank alcohol within 30 days of taking the survey. The study specified that 22% of students were offered, sold, or given drugs on school campuses. Likewise, the survey revealed that 38% of high school students had used marijuana, seven percent of students had used a form of cocaine (i.e., powder, crack, or freebase), and 13% of students had sniffed glue, breathed the contents of aerosol, or inhaled paints or sprays one or more times during their lives.

Nearly 50% of high school students reported having sexual intercourse. Approximately 757,000 pregnancies occurred among young women aged 15 to 19 years. Over 9.1 million cases of sexually transmitted diseases and 5,089 cases of HIV/AIDS occurred among persons aged 15 to 24 years.

Twenty-eight percent of adolescents reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for two or more weeks. Eleven percent of high school students reported to have made a plan on how they would attempt suicide and
approximately seven percent of students attempted suicide one more times during 12 months before the survey.

These findings raise serious concerns, as numerous research studies indicate that morbidity factors have a neurological impact on adolescent brain development and growth (Tullis, DuPont, Frost-Pineda, & Gold, 2004; Sabbagh & Leslie, 2007; Winters, 2004). While a single non-academic barrier may cause some hindrance, the accumulation and complex interaction of several barriers increase the probability of mental health problems.

The need for mental health services to be provided for children and youth in schools is well documented (Cohen & Angeles, 2006; Rones & Hoagwood, 2000; Taylor & Adelman, 2000; Weist, Ambrose, & Lewis, 2006). As much as 22% of the general population of children and adolescents indicates evidence of mental health or addictive disorders (Cohen & Angeles, 2006; Shaffer et al. 1996). Research demonstrates that mental health problems are precursors to non-academic barriers to learning such as delinquency, substance abuse, and sexual behaviors that may result in academic failure (Capalidi, Stoolmiller, Clark, & Owens, 2002; Tolan & Dodge, 2005; Weist, et al., 2000).

Results from the 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health indicate that youth aged 12 to 17 received treatment or counseling for emotional or behavior problems in the past year. Twelve percent received their treatment or counseling in a specialty mental health setting, 11.5% received services in an educational setting, and 2.8% received services in a general medical setting. Mental health is not inherent only with the child, but within the exchanges among the individual child, family, school, service
systems, and community in which the child exists. Schools are a significant provider for mental health services for children because they are the sole institution that provides an invaluable point of accessibility to nearly all students and families (Taylor & Adelman, 2000).

2.7 Non-Academic Barriers to Learning and Education Reform

When mental health needs or non-academic factors are not dealt with early in childhood, they can lead to a downward spiral of long-term consequences such as school failure, poor employment opportunities, and adult poverty (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). However, non-academic barriers to learning are not being addressed in education reform initiatives. The argument of some educational scholars is that schools should not be forced to address social problems that they did not create (Levine, 2005), and that the primary objective of education reform initiatives is to close the achievement gap. Yet the achievement gap lies within gender, socioeconomic status, and race disparities between minority and non-minority groups (Paik & Walbert, 2007). Nevertheless, education reform has sought to measure the achievement gap through standardized assessment scores, grade point averages, and student drop-out and completion rates (Davison, Seo, Davenport, Butterbaugh, & Davison, 2004).

Throughout history, education reform has provided funding, created programs, and passed laws (i.e., 1954 Supreme Court Brown versus the Board of Education, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) with the goal of closing the achievement gap. Often these laws not only served as a vehicle to address the widening achievement gap, but to examine critical issues in American society (Blanchett, Mumford, &
Beachhum, 2005). Education policy makers have sought to confront the widening achievement gap by focusing upon school governance, operation structures, quality teaching instruction, and accountability standards (Borek, 2008; Fuhrman, 2003; Hunt, 2008; McClur, 2004; Riley, 2002).

The most recent education reform policy is the NCLBA. This law intends to "close the achievement gap between high-and-low performing children, especially the achievement gap between minority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advanced peers" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Congress' Statement of Purpose in passing the NCLBA is to "meet the educational needs of low achieving children in our Nation's highest poverty schools, limited English proficient children, migratory children, children with disabilities, Indian children, neglected or delinquent children, and young children in need of reading assistance" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

The NCLBA represents an unprecedented increase in federal support for education and a significant shift in education policy, while the federal government has a major influence upon shaping the goals and outcomes of education (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). NCLB establishes a comprehensive framework of standards, testing, and accountability that has been absent in previous federal legislation (Fusarelli, 2004), and it removes the discretion from local and state education authorities to determine the goals and outcomes in schools (Sunderman, Orfield, & Kim, 2006). The NCLBA approach to promoting academic achievement and addressing the achievement gap is to evaluate schools according to Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). To meet AYP, school
districts must develop challenging academic content standards that are consistent with federal guidelines. Student achievement will be determined through annual testing assessments in grades three through eight in subjects of reading, math, and science, with one additional examination during high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Through the standard of AYP, by 2014 all students must demonstrate proficiency within their 12 years of formal education to meet the national goal of 100% proficiency for all children (Fusarelli, 2004; Wenglinsky, 2004).

No Child Left Behind has made its mark on all aspects of the education system, teacher responsibilities, system structure, service modality, and accountability expectations within schools (Viadero, 2004; Wenglinsky, 2004). As a result of its demanding accountability, schools across the country are not meeting NCLB assessment standards. Two years after NCLB was enacted, one of every 20 schools failed to meet AYP and it is projected that school district failure will continue to increase (Popham, 2004). When schools fail to make AYP, a variety of escalating interventions occur, such as the loss of federal funding, supplemental tutoring for low achieving students, and school choice (Mead, 2007). A school deemed as failing to meet AYP inspires public ridicule, anxiety, and shame affecting not only educators but also to students and the community (Osborne, 1999; Steele, 1995; 1997).

The policy of school choice is based upon the hypothesis that giving parents the power to decide where to send their children to school will lead to improved academics (Belfield & Levin, 2003; Hoxby, 1998; Levin, 2004; Levin & Belfield, 2003). A premise of school choice is that it will promote competition, which in turn will cause schools and
school districts to continue to improve, attracting students. School choice under the auspices of education reform promotes program activities of intra-district, inter-district, vouchers, and charter schools to increase academic achievement among students (Eckes & Trotter, 2007; Gibelman & Lens, 2002; May, 2006). Furthermore, when schools do not make AYP in four consecutive years, adverse consequences occur, such as replacing the school staff by terminating teachers and principals, state takeover, privatization or conversion to a charter school (Mead, 2007; Quinn, 2005).

Despite previous and current education reform initiatives, the achievement gap continues to persist and widen between minority and non-minority students, children with disabilities, and socioeconomic groups (English, 2002; Education Commission of the States, 2003). Thus far, little evidence has been found that indicates NCLB has reduced gaps in academic achievement or increased academic success of at-risk students (Education Trust, 2003; Orfield, Losen, & Swanson, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2001b). By exclusively focusing on closing the achievement gap through high-stakes testing, teacher instruction, and curriculum standards, NCLB ignores the non-academic barriers to learning that impede student learning, growth, and development (Somers, Owens, & Piliawksy, 2008; Uwah, McMahon, & Carolyn, 2008).

Critics of education reform believe that the NCLB goal of 100% student proficiency is unattainable (Meier & Wood, 2004; Noddings, 2005; Sunderman & Kim, 2007). W. James Popham, Professor emeritus of the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at University of California Los Angeles, states:
Anyone who spends even a few hours in today's public schools will recognize that teachers will be unable to get every single child in school to reach a meaningful proficiency level on any sort of sensible achievement test. One hundred percent of children reaching proficiency has a potent political ring to it, but is an altogether unrealistic expectation (Popham, 2000).

Others disapprove of NCLB because of its failure to consider the social and contextual factors that influence learning. Many ask how we can have standardized assessments when our educational systems, communities, and resources are unequal. Schools vary from district to district because of socioeconomic factors, property taxes, availability of resources, and environmental contextual factors. Lagana-Riordan and Aguilar (2009) argue that in order for the NCLBA to close the achievement gap, policy must take into account three factors: (1) ethnicity, poverty, and inadequate school resources; (2) personal and family characteristics; and (3) quality of the school environment. The authors point out that NCLB ignores factors of ethnicity, socioeconomic conditions, and school resources by not addressing the fundamental causes of inequality:

It is clear that students from different communities respond to educational resources in different ways [. . .]. However, NCLB does not take community differences or issues of multiculturalism and diversity into account [. . .]. If NCLB continues to neglect to consider the impact of community and, more broadly speaking, place on academic success, it is likely to fail to improve learning for all students. (pp. 138-139)
The authors go on to discuss personal and family characteristics such as non-academic barriers to learning that mark students' academic performance:

NCLB does not adequately take these factors into account. For instance, policy stipulations do not address the impact of nutrition, adequate housing, safe communities, or adequate health care on a child's ability to attend and excel in school beyond implying that even students in difficult situations should be expected to perform academically. When families do not have access to such services and conditions, children are more likely to struggle academically. (pp. 139-140)

Lagana-Riordan and Aguilar (2009) also indicate that NCLB does not recognize the influence of mental health problems that increase the probability of underachievement in children:

It is estimated that 20 percent of children have mental health problems severe enough to impede their learning, but only one-fifth of these children receive the services that they need . . . NCLB does little to address student mental health and its influence on academic success, with the exception of stating that states can apply for federal funds to address student mental health concerns. Consequently, some scholars have argued that NCLB overlooks the overall well-being of children in schools. (p. 140)

Finally, the authors express that the quality of the school environment is a fundamental element that is not considered in NCLB policies.
Lagana-Riordan and Aguilar (2009), discuss the differences between a supportive school environment versus a negative atmosphere. Their work is similar to other research that emphasizes the importance of resiliency and student protective factors such as having a strong attachment to the school (Diaz, 2005; Johnson, Crosnoe & Elder, 2001; McNeely & Falci, 2003; 2004; Libbey, 2004; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002); positive peer networks (Fraser, 2004); a safe and orderly positive school climate (Adelman & Taylor, 2005b; Hoy, 1997; Hernandez & Seem, 2004; Noonan, 2004; Roach & Kratochwill, 2004); having at least one caring adult (DuBois, Hooway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Fraser, 2004); and parental involvement (Halle, Kurtz-Costes, & Mahoney, 1997; Lindsay, 2002; Lee & Bowen, 2006) to contribute towards a positive school environment.

A negative school environment is often caused by those in authority, such as the principal or teachers. Lagana-Riordan and Aguilar (2009) point out that teachers’ attitudes and perceptions about students can influence their academic performance. Moreover, the authors found that the insatiable focus upon testing has increased teacher work-related stress. The authors’ statement reflects other studies that report high teacher turnover rates, loss of creativity in the classroom, and increased pressure placed upon teachers to teach according to state standards (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; Perreault, 2000; Mulvenon, Stegman, & Ritter, 2005).
2.8 Principals, Education Reform, and Non-Academic Barriers to Learning

Not only are teachers experiencing increased pressure and stress caused by the demands of NCLB, but principals are as well. It is well established that the performance of the principal is a critical factor for school and student success (Cistone & Stevenson, 2000; Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998; Jacobsen & Polin, 2006; McGuigan & Hoy, 2006; Mullen & Patrick, 2000). The traditional role of the principal has focused upon operations and management of the school such as: planning, budgeting, hiring and firing teachers, overseeing the cafeteria, coordinating bus schedules, and teacher supervision (Grubb & Flessa, 2006; Portin, 2001). In light of education reform requirements, the principal’s role has become increasingly complex (Anthes, 2002; Malone & Caddell, 2000). Several studies report that NCLB policies have caused additional pressure and stress upon principals with the added responsibility to close the achievement gap and to be the instructional leader of the school (Chan & Pool, 2002; Friedman, 2002; Houle, 2006; Stark-Price, Munoz, Winter, & Petrosko, 2006). In this era of accountability, Grubb and Flessa (2006) state: "Policy makers have imposed new requirements, and the principal is responsible for enhancing progress on multiple (and often conflicting) measures of educational achievement. The frustrations with the lack of time, the lack of resources, and the pressures of external requirements have grown substantially" (p. 519).

Education reform initiatives are not the only external requirements that principals endure. The socio-psycho-economic challenges that families and students bring into the school add to the principals’ workload, and every day principals address multiple psycho-

Changing families and communities and the resulting stress placed on children, issues outside of school competing with the school for available learning time for students, and the use of instructional practice that do not respond to the increasing knowledge necessary for success in the context of our ever-changing society have been identified as factors that affect the work of . . . principals. (p. 144)

Along with accountability legislation to reach NCLBA goals, social issues have added to responsibilities of principals. A cross-case study comparison was conducted to inquire of teachers, parents, counselors, and principals' perceptions about the NCLBA demonstrates this reality. The study found that principals believed that more than accountability should be considered in reform initiatives. One principal in this study stated, "To ignore contextual issues is impossible [. . . ]. It is impossible to just look at the academics without being aware of the influences of the environment, language, poverty, hunger, violence, domestic issues, and parental involvement” (Hopps, Lowe, Tourse, & Cooper, p. 223). The principal's statement reflects a broader criticism of education reform policies as a result of its exclusive focus upon academics, school governance structure, instruction methods and standardized assessments while perpetually ignoring non-academic barriers to learning (Adelman & Taylor 2005; 2005b; 2000; 2000b; Somers, Owens, & Piliawky, 2008; Uwah, McMahon, & Carolyn, 2008). Therefore, this predicament raises the following questions: To what extent are school principals aware of non-academic barriers to learning and to what extent are principals
addressing non-academic barriers to learning? Are principals equipped to apply best practices to meet the needs of students and families?

Non-academic barriers compete with accountability standards and cause additional responsibility and stress for principals. Several studies have found that the reasons for principal stress were related to increased responsibilities above their trained role. These added responsibilities and stressors result in burn-out, principal shortages, and high turnover (Cistone & Stevenson, 2000; Chaplain, 2001; Friedman, 2002). According to Savery and Detiuk (1986), the authors found that principal stress was due to role overload and role conflict. What additional roles are principals fulfilling that is causing a role overload? What additional roles are principals performing that is causing an increased conflict? According to Borg and Riding (1993), four major sources of stress are affecting school administrators. These sources of stress are: (1) lack of support needed to resolve conflict, (2) inadequate resources, (3) workload, and (4) work conditions and responsibilities. What support staff is needed to resolve conflicts for principals? What resources are needed to alleviate some of the principals' workload responsibilities?

Some critics believe that schools are not responsible for addressing non-academic barriers to learning. However, a statement from the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents (1989) states, "School systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their student. But when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge" (p. 61). By exclusively focusing on closing the achievement gap through high-stakes testing, teacher instruction, and curriculum standards, NCLB ignores the non-academic barriers to learning that
impede student learning, growth, and development (Somers, Owens, & Piliawky, 2008; Uwah, McMahon, & Carolyn, 2008).

2.9 Application of Ecosystems Theory to Education Reform, Non-Academic Barriers to Learning and Principals

Schools are systems that are influenced by their environment, such as the surrounding community and society. To explore the influence of these external environments (i.e., as education reform and non-academic barriers to learning) on schools, it is useful to apply the Ecosystem Theory. The Ecosystem Theory concepts that will be applied are: *macro-, exo-, meso-, micro-systems, input, output, entropy, negative entropy, and homeostasis*. Additionally, to examine the influence of education reform, students' non-academic barriers to learning, and the role principals have upon school systems, I will discuss the Ecosystem Theory life model concepts of: *person environment fit, life course development, niche, misuse of power, adapt, stress, coping, and resiliency*.

Schools are systems with permeable boundaries and are therefore significantly affected by their environment. Environmental influences that impact schools exist on *macro to micro system* levels. An application of *macro-systems* are government policies, such as the No Child Left Behind Act. This education reform policy (*the macro-system*) has a trickledown effect that impacts other systems on *exo-system to micro-system* levels. For instance, state departments of education (*the exo-system*) must enforce standards of accountability through assessments. The school system (*the meso-system*) must *adapt* its environment (i.e., teaching modalities) and daily practices (i.e., limited recess and special classes such as art) to adhere to state accountability standards (*the exo-system*) and
education reform policies (*the macro-system*). Moreover, students (*the micro-system*) are required to take examinations in grades three through eight and an additional exam in high school to ensure proficiency of state standards (*the exo-system*) to meet the national goal (macro-system) of 100% proficiency for all children by 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2004; Wenglinsky, 2004). If students do not successfully pass these assessments, they will in most states not receive a high school diploma (Fusarelli, 2004).

Many students are unable to pass standardized assessments because of external environmental influences (Lacinda-Gifford & Kher-Durlabhji, 1992; Parker, 2001; Mulvenon, Stegman, & Ritter, 2005; Steele, 1995). Education reform agendas (*the macro-system*) fail to take into consideration students' non-academic factors (*the micro-system*). Students' non-academic factors (*the micro-system*) has a bottom-up effect that directly influences all other systems on *meso-system* to *macro-system* levels. Students' (*the micro-system*) input of non-academic barriers to learning has a significant impact in schools (*the meso-system*). Students (*the micro-system*) must adapt to school requirements and expectations (*the meso-system*) but it is difficult to *cope* and do well academically because of external environment concerns (i.e., poverty, hunger, lack of school clothing, peer pressure, drugs and alcohol, etc.). When these non-academic barriers to learning are not addressed systematically by school systems (*meso-system*), the learning process of students (*the micro-system*) and outcome goals (standardize assessments and AYP) of schools (*the meso-system*) are negatively affected (Adelman & Taylor, 2006, 2005). Complicating the issue, when outcome goals of schools are not met (*school system in a state of entropy*), state departments of education (*the exo-system*) may
enforce sanctions such as state takeover, reconstitution of teachers and the principal, and the conversion of schools to charter schools (*process of negative entropy*) (Friedman, 2004; Richard & Olson, 2004). When these situations occur, education reform goals (*the macro-system*) are not actualized.

External influences can determine the interactions and transactions of persons within their respected environments (Allen-Mears, Washington, & Welsh, 2000). Often students do not have an optimal school learning environment (*"poor" person: environment fit*) due to the multiple at-risk factors and non-academic barriers to learning they experience. The ecosystem theory concept, *life course development*, emphasizes viewing human life from a bio-psycho-social-cultural viewpoint. Education reform policies such as NCLB fail to take into consideration the bio-psycho-social and cultural needs that students exhibit on a daily basis. The education reform policy's lack of attention on issues such as poverty, malnutrition, mental health, and unhealthy school and community environments affect students' academic performance (*demonstrates misuse of power*). When students are not able to concentrate on academics due to non-academic factors, the result is increased *stress* among students, teachers, and principals.

It is unmistakable that education reform agendas and non-academic barriers to learning impact the entire school’s successful functioning. Principals function in various roles. Their *niche* is to function as administrator of the school, manager to ensure a safe learning school environment, and supervisor of teachers as the instructional leader (Anthes, 2002; Grubb & Flessa, 2006; Malone & Caddell, 2000). Principals often have to *adapt* their role as the school administrator to elevate students' at-risk factors. Principals
not only have to deal with problematic situations but ideally should instill hope and promote *resiliency* among students. Thus, principals' multiple roles extend above their formal training, resulting in increased *stress* in their attempts to manage both academic and non-academic responsibilities (Cistone & Stevenson, 2000; Chaplain, 2001; Savery & Detiuk, 1986). Many questions emerge. Has their managing of academic and non-academic factors worked? Are principals able to successfully create a "*good* person: *environment fit* for students? Are schools in a state of *entropy* resulting from the failure to systematically address non-academic barriers to learning? What external resources do principals perceive are necessary to create *homeostasis* in schools? What services do principals need that will positively influence on students' academic and non-academic factors (*micro-system*)? What external services are needed to improve the school system (*the meso-system*), state standards of accountability (*exo-system*), and education reform agendas (*macro-system*)?

2.10 Conclusion

School systems are a microcosm of society; what occurs in our schools reflects the conditions of our society. Schools are valued institutions that have helped to build the stability of our nation and promote the future productivity of our society (Noddings, 2005). Ideally, schools should be a safe haven to promote learning without occurrences of behavioral disruptions and crime. However, schools have increasingly become a breeding ground of non-academic barriers to learning -- barriers such as social, emotional, behavioral, and mental illness, and traumatic and criminal activities that affect youth and
the productivity of educators (Adelman & Taylor, 2006; 2005; 2005b; 2000a; 2000b; Adelman, Taylor, & Schnieder, 1999; Atav, 2002).

Whether they occur on or off school campuses, these non-academic barriers to learning can affect the overall health and well-being of adolescents, interfere with educational goals, and delay normal healthy development (Fredland, 2008). Non-academic obstacles can result in victimization of both students and educators (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Henry, 2000; Johnson, 2009; Sela-Shayovitz, 2009). Students who experience non-academic barriers to learning are at increased risk of poor academic performance (Fraser, 2004; Levin, 2004; Johnson, 2000; 1998), are prone to truancy (Ringwalt, Ennett, & Johnson 2003; Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010; Teasley, 2004), and frequently drop out of school (Hess, 2000; Kaplan, Turner & Badger, 2007). These non-academic barriers have also led to higher teacher turnover, early retirement for educators, and, as mentioned, increased stress and responsibility of principals (Crews, Crews, & Turner, 2008; Karcher, 2002; Smith & Smith, 2006).
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Non-academic barriers to learning are a burgeoning reality in schools, yet few studies have focused on this topic exclusively from a principal’s perspective. Social workers have an ethical responsibility to be knowledgeable of fields that we work with (National Association of Social Workers, 2001), and this study seeks to address the gap in social work knowledge by qualitatively examining principals’ experiences and perceptions of nonacademic barriers to learning in both urban and suburban school settings. In participating in this study, principals shared their feelings, experiences, and stories when working with students, parents, education staff, and their community.

Since I am attempting to understand principals’ meanings and impact of non-academic barriers to learning, I chose a qualitative research design. All schools are diverse and dynamic, therefore, a qualitative research design was implemented to provide an opportunity for principals to voice their lived reality. As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) pointed out:
The word qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created. (p. 10)

A fundamental purpose of qualitative inquiry is to discover and describe meanings, differences, patterns, and processes of subjective experiences (Creswell, 2007; 2002). This method of research explores how, not why, persons organize and make sense of their world (Schwandt, 1997). According to Padgett (1998) qualitative research design should consist of the following three elements: (1) exploration of a topic of which little is known; (2) exploration of an emotionally sensitive and in-depth topic; and (3) capturing the “lived experience” from the perspectives of those who actually participate in and create meaning from the environment under scrutiny. No studies have been conducted to explore principals' lived experiences of non-academic barriers to learning, nor has such data been used to inform the school social work profession. This study sought to gain in-depth discovery of principals' perceptions and experiences of non-academic barriers to learning by means of the following research questions:
1. What are the perspectives of principals on non-academic barriers to learning?

2. What are principals’ experiences of addressing non-academic barriers to learning?

3. What resources do principals think are needed to successfully address non-academic barriers to learning?

Within this chapter, I will describe the qualitative research design, access, ethics, data collection procedures, analysis approach, and the trustworthiness of methods utilized in the study at hand.

3.2 Access and Ethics

3.2.1. Access

Prior to conducting research, a full review of my study was approved by my institution's Human Subject Review Board. To initiate the study, I was required to gain access by obtaining authorization to work with people, a process that required seeking permission from gatekeepers. Taylor and Bogdam (1998) explain how researchers should access organizations:

[Researchers] usually gain access to organizations by requesting permission from those in charge. These persons are usually referred to as gatekeepers. Getting into a setting involves a process of managing your identity and projecting an image of yourself that will maximize your chances of gaining access. You want to convince gatekeepers that you
are a nonthreatening person who will not harm their organization in any way. (p.29)

For this study, the gatekeepers were principals. To gain accessibility and authorization to conduct my research with principals, I sent to principals a solicitation letter (see Appendix A). This letter explained the purpose of my study. If the principal agreed, I requested a letter of permission from the principal to gain authorization to conduct my study at their school. Once the permission letter was received, submitted, and approved by The Ohio State University's Human Subject Review Board, I scheduled an appointment with the principal to conduct an individual interview and/or non-participant observation.

3.2.2. Ethics

In an effort to prepare myself to meet the challenges of research involving human subjects, I completed the National Institute of Health (NIH) Office of Human Subjects Research Web-Based training course that certifies my legitimacy to conduct research. When conducting my research, I wanted to be sensitive and ensure that I would not violate the principals’ confidentiality and trust. Therefore, I remained attentive to any possible unintentional ethical errors that may have presented negative repercussions in participants' professional or personal lives.

Each participant received an informed consent form that outlined the purpose and expectations of my study (see Appendix B). The participants were made aware of four major informed consent points: 1) their participation was voluntary and they could freely choose to stop participating at any point within the study without penalty; 2) there was no
anticipated risk, stress, discomfort, compensation or other direct benefits to participate in the study; 3) the procedures and tasks consisted of individual interviews and/or non-participant observation; and 4) the information shared is for research purposes only and will remain strictly confidential. In order to maintain confidentiality, I did not use participants' names in any of the write-ups and used pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

3.3. Participants, Settings, and Sampling

For this study, I chose principals from urban and suburban schools. By selecting participants in different geographic locations, I allowed principals to share their experiences of challenges that occur within schools. I desired a diverse set of participants that represented an array of viewpoints. Therefore, principals were purposely selected from elementary, middle, junior high, high school and K-8 grade schools. I wanted the principals to be diverse both in grade levels and cultural backgrounds, so the sample of principals was diverse in age, race, education attained, years of teaching, and principal experiences. A comprehensive picture of the principals' characteristics and settings within this study can be found in Appendix C.

A distinct difference between quantitative and qualitative research lies within their sampling procedures. Quantitative research seeks the usage of probability sampling (i.e., random sampling), whereas qualitative research focuses upon non-probability sampling techniques (i.e., snowball or purposive sampling) (Creswell, 2002). For this study, purposive sampling was used. Purposive sampling is a qualitative sampling method that deliberately selects participants and sites to understand the research phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2002). Purposive sampling provides an in-depth
understanding of phenomena rather than generalized statistical techniques (Patton, 2002). This research sought to gain a deeper understanding of principals’ perceptions and experiences of non-academic barriers to learning. Principals’ interpretations provide a lens into educators' culture and subjective work experience to inform school social work education, research, practice, and policy.

Creswell (2002) suggests that 20 to 30 interviews should be completed in a grounded-theory qualitative study. However, Patton (1990) cautions qualitative researchers not to restrict themselves to a predetermined number of interviewees:

Purposeful samples should be judged on the basis of the purpose and rationale of each study and the sampling strategy used to achieve the study’s purpose. The sample, like all other aspects of qualitative inquiry, must be judged in contexts – the same principle that undergirds analysis and presentation of qualitative data. (p.185)

Qualitative sampling procedures are vague and indistinct in comparison to quantitative research (Creswell, 2002). To compensate, Davies (2007) recommends when conducting purposive sampling to have a:

“Core sample . . . large enough to include a range of people that will allow you to explore different and comparative experiences relevant to your question [and] some who, you know in advance, will present data that may challenge the assumptions you find yourself making” (p. 146).
I purposely collected a sample of 19 principals from urban and suburban school districts. By conducting this research with multiple principals at a variety of school sites, I allowed diverse voices to contribute to an understanding of non-academic barriers to learning.

3.4 Data Collection

I collected data over a five-month period beginning in March and ending in July 2009. I collected three forms of data: demographic questionnaires, individual semi-standardized interviews, and non-participant observations. Table 3.1 provides a brief overview of the data I collected:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Data</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demographic questionnaires</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
<td>Principals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-participant observations</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Approximately 5 to 8 hours</td>
<td>Principals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-standardized Interviews</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
<td>Principals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 Data Overview

3.4.1 Demographic Characteristic Profile

The demographic questionnaire was designed to collect specific data about principals (see Appendix D). These data were based upon the following characteristics of: gender, race, age, highest level of education attained, years of principal experience, years of teaching experience, school district location, school building level, support staff employed and weekly availability of support staff. The data collected from the
questionnaire demonstrated the diverse backgrounds of participants. Gathering participants' demographic information provided insight into their beliefs, perceptions, and experiences. The questions were chosen to provide sufficient information to interpret the data without asking participants to disclose detailed personal information. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire after the non-participant observations or individual interviews.

3.4.2 Non-participant Observations

A non-participant observer is a researcher who visits a pre-determined site to observe and record notes without becoming involved in the behavior and activities of the participants (Creswell, 2002). The role of the non-participant observer is that of an outside spectator who records activities such as: organizational structures; verbal and non-verbal interactions; social roles among group members; nominative values; and deviants (Berg, 2004). Davies (2007) likens the non-participant observer as a camera in which the researcher advantageously views a targeted phenomenon passively and reflectively.

The process of being a non-participant observer can be ambiguous due to the lack of concrete structure within observations. Creswell (2002) provides six strategies for conducting a non-participant observation:

[1] select a site to be observed that can help you best understand the central phenomenon . . . [2] ease into the site slowly by looking around; getting a general sense of the site; and taking limited notes, at least initially . . . [3] at the site, identify who or what to observe, when to observe, and how long to observe . . .

(p. 201)

Within this study, I conducted nine non-participant observations in six urban schools and three suburban schools. I kept a field log to record my observations (see Appendix E). I intentionally sought the following observations during my non-participant observations to record within my field log:

- School neighborhood surroundings and resources (i.e., home owners, rental community, businesses, cleanliness, abandoned buildings, etc.).
- School building external structures (i.e., playground, football field, track field, condition of building, etc.).
- School building internal structures (i.e., metal detectors, lighting in hallways, space availability for support staff offices, etc.).
- School-building decor (i.e., student artwork, school vision and mission markers, school goals, etc.).
- Administrative office (i.e., friendliness of receptionists, length of wait time to be greeted by staff, telephone etiquette, etc.).
- Principal's office (i.e., office decor, organization of desk and book cases, amount of time spent in their office, etc.).
- Principal's non-academic interaction with staff, students, and parents (i.e., suspending students, counseling students, meeting with parents, conflict mediation between teacher and student, etc.).
- Principal's academic interaction with staff, students, and parents (i.e., classroom observations, etc.).

During my observations, I took handwritten notes and documented principals’ verbal responses and interactions. I did not seek to obtain any identifying information about students, school staff, and parents, so their identities were not included within field notes.

### 3.4.3 Interviews

Creswell (2002) indicates that the non-participant observer requires less access than does participant observation. Participants experience a greater degree of comfort with non-participant observation than with participant observation because the researcher does not join in activities being observed. However, non-participant observations are typically less apt to yield in-depth understanding of the varied attitudes, opinions, and experiences that come from interviewing (Berg, 2004). According to Seidman (2006):

> The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypothesis, and not to evaluate as the term is normally used . . . the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning that they make of that experience. (p. 9)

Within this study, I conducted semi-standardized interviews with principals in urban and suburban schools. Semi-standardized interviews are predetermined questions based on a topic of interest. Interviewers are permitted to probe interviewees for answers beyond the
interview format, which may cause respondents to deviate from the core topic of interest (Berg, 2004). According to Seidman (2006) the interview process is valued in education:

Social abstractions like education are best understood through the experiences of individuals whose work and lives are the stuff upon which the abstractions are built. If the researcher’s goal however is to understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience, then interviewing provides a necessary, if not always completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry. (pp. 10-11)

Additionally, Berg (2004) summarized six benefits of utilizing the semi-standardized interview method: (a) the interview structure is flexible; (b) questions may be reordered during the interview; (c) the wording of questions may be modified; (d) language is adjusted to the need of the interviewee; (e) the interviewer may reply to interviewee's inquiries and make adjustments; and (f) the interviewer may amend or retract probes between subject interview sessions (pp. 79-82).

The challenge of interviews is that they are labor-intensive, it often being difficult to access participants, and interviews are time consuming to conduct and subsequently transcribe tapes and analyze data (Seidman, 2006). Another challenge is that the structure of interviews is primarily contingent upon the interviewer. Therefore, it is imperative that the researcher allows enough time for the voice of interviewees to be realized, and researcher bias should be reflectively analyzed in order not to contaminate the study (Davies, 2007; Patton, 2002).
Within this study, I conducted 19 semi-standardized individual interviews with urban and suburban principals in their school settings (see Appendix F). The interviews lasted approximately one hour. Each interview was audio recorded to focus upon the dialogue. After the interviews, I took field notes to document my thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of the interview experience. A skilled transcriptionist transcribed the taped interviews verbatim. Audio tapes were reviewed to confirm accuracy of transcriptions and to promote "closeness" to the data to obtain clarity and understanding of participants' subjective realities. The semi-structured interviews resulted in a significant increased awareness of principals' attached meaning of non-academic barriers to learning.

3.5 Methods of Data Analysis

A constructivist framework and grounded theory were used to organize, collect and analyze the data. Constructivists seek to understand how people construct meaning of their lives as they engage with the world (Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 2001). According to Schwandt (2000), constructivism signifies that, "Human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as we construct or make it . . . we do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth" (p. 197). For that reason, I believe principals occupy a unique position for providing understanding about how educators perceive non-academic barriers to learning and their impact upon students and the whole-school function. Because principals' viewpoints are socially constructed through an education and administrative lens, their perspectives provide powerful insights of school culture, climate, and education reform that can inform school social work research, practice, education, and policy.
In addition to the constructivist framework, grounded theory was used as a conceptual framework for data. Grounded-theory methods consist of systematically inducted guidelines for gathering, synthesizing, analyzing, and conceptualizing qualitative data for constructing theory (Charmaz, 2005). Taylor and Bogdan (1998) indicate that the objective of grounded-theory research is to relate categories one-to-another and to uncover overarching categories and themes that may emerge.

A constructivist grounded-theory approach views the data as a reality that is shaped through social and cultural experiences (Charmaz, 2000). A constructivist approach to grounded theory reaffirms the importance of studying people in their natural settings. Grounded theory recognizes that the categories, concepts, and theoretical level of analysis emerge from the researchers interactions within the field and questions from the data (Charmaz, 2000). The constructivist approach to grounded theory pushes researchers to pinpoint what research participants’ definition as real and to explore where their definition and meaning of reality takes them. Within this study, I was interested in understanding how principals "recognize, produce, and reproduce social actions [and] ...come to share an inter-subjective understanding of specific life circumstances" (Schwandt, 1997, p. 19).

To investigate principals' social actions and to answer the research questions, a grounded-theory method was applied. Strauss and Corbin (1994) state that grounded-theory methodology is, "Developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed" (p. 273). For this study, the methodological approach required for data collection to be gathered from the ground up (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As the
researcher, I could not separate the process of data collection from the process of data analysis. Within qualitative research, analysis begins early and simultaneously with data collection, coding, and memo writing. The initial phase in analyzing qualitative data is to develop a code or indexing system. Patton (2002) recommends that, after interviews have been transcribed, the researcher should seek to identify codes and categories to classify and label emerging patterns in the data. Schwandt (1997) defines coding as "a procedure that disaggregates the data, breaks it down into manageable segments, and identifies or names those segments" (p. 16). The technique of creating these categories is "largely an intuitive process, but it is also systematic and informed by the study's purpose, the investigator's orientation and knowledge, and the meanings made explicit by the participants themselves" (Merrian, 1998, p. 179).

According to Creswell (2003): "Coding is the process of organizing the material into 'chunks' before bringing meaning to those chunks" (p. 192). Schwandt (1997) explains that, "Coding requires constantly comparing and contrasting various successive segments of the data and subsequently categorizing them" (p. 16). This endeavor is referred to as the constant comparative method and is a procedure for analyzing data in grounded-theory research. Creswell (2002) states that grounded-theory research is a process of "generating and connecting categories by comparing incidents in the data to other incidents, incidents to categories, and categories to other categories" (p. 451). According to Charmaz (2000):
The constant comparative method of grounded theory means: (a) comparing different people (such as their views, situations, actions, accounts, and experiences); (b) comparing data from the same individuals with themselves at different points in time; (c) comparing incident with incident; (d) comparing data with a category; and (e) employing a category with other categories. (p. 515)

Grounded theory employs a systematic design of data analysis, which entails open, axial, and selective coding. Open coding, sometimes referred to as line-by-line coding, is the initial step to assist researchers. Creswell (2002) indicates that the goal of open coding is, "to form initial categories of information about the phenomenon being studied by segmenting information" (p. 411). Open coding allows the researcher to divide data and group them into categories to distinguish processes and identify potential gaps in data. Berg (1995) suggests four guidelines when conducting open coding:

1. ask the data a specific and consistent set of questions; 2. analyze the data minutely; 3. frequently interrupt the coding to write a theoretical note; and 4. never assume the analytic relevance of any traditional variable such as age, sex, social class, and so forth until the data show it to be relevant. (p. 186)

When reading through the individual interviews, I conducted open coding by documenting repeating ideas in the margin of the transcripts. During this initial phase of data collection and analyses, I consistently asked questions of my data and jotted down my thoughts and ideas. Charmaz (2000) states that "line-by-line coding keeps us thinking about what meanings we make of our data, asking ourselves questions of it, and
pinpointing gaps and leads in it to focus on during subsequent data collection” (p. 515), and by meticulously filtering line-by-line through the data, open coding began to reveal probable categories.

Following open coding is axial coding. This second phase of coding involves constructing categories centered on the core phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2002). Axial coding in grounded theory includes organizing, classifying, re-categorizing, and condensing data emerging from the open coding phase by linking categories and subcategories. Creswell (2007) explains the process of axial coding as:

The researcher takes the categories of open coding, identified one as a central phenomenon, and then returns to the database to identify (a) what caused this phenomenon to occur; (b) what strategies or actions actors employed in response to it; (c) what context (specific context) and intervening conditions (broad context) influences the strategies; and (d) what consequences resulted from these strategies. The overall process is one of relating categories of information to the central phenomenon category. (p. 237)

The coding phase typically involves intense coding around an identified category. In this study, I went back and forth through the data comparing participants’ responses to construct theoretical categories. I connected the categories and related concepts from excerpts to identify categorical themes that described principals' non-academic perceptions and experiences. The categories that emerged from the data are: the hustle, it-factor, support from home, and student baggage. Additionally, during axial coding the researcher is responsible to build a conceptual model to determine if sufficient data
supports the study's interests. According to Creswell (2007), drawing a coding model is essential to describe the central phenomenon, casual conditions, context, strategies, intervening conditions and consequences in a visual diagram (see Appendix G).

The final coding stage is selective coding, a process which entails filtering through large amounts of data to provide indicators fit for emerging theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2000). Creswell (2007) stated that selective coding is "the final coding phase" and in this phase, "The researcher takes the central phenomenon and systematically relates it to other categories, validating the relationships and filling-in categories that need further refinement and development." Within my study, a story evolved of principals' experiences, perceptions, and resources needed to address non-academic barriers to learning. Throughout the coding process and analysis, four major themes were created: 1) the hustle, 2) it-factor, 3) support from home, and 4) student baggage. As a result of the selective coding process, I was able to filter through the data to discover sub-themes that related to the major categories. These sub-themes are: a) relationship building, b) university training, and c) the need for pupil-support staff.

In the final stages of the data analysis, I conducted theoretical sampling by returning to the field to fill in gaps of identified categories that needed to be refined. Creswell (2007) indicates that this process involves researchers selecting, "A sample of individuals to study based on their contribution to the development of theory" (p. 240). Charmaz (2000) explains that theoretical sampling is used to "develop . . . emerging categories and to make them more definitive and useful. Thus, the aim of this sampling is to refine ideas, not to increase the size of the original sample. Theoretical sampling helps
Throughout the overall processes of data collection and analyses, I sifted through large amounts of data to clarify meanings and establish categories to develop theory. I determined to suspend data collection when my theoretical categories were saturated with data and no new information was expressed by participants to contribute towards my study. According to Creswell (2002), data collection and analyses should be curtailed when researchers achieve saturation:

This process weaves back-and-forth between data collection and analysis, and it continues until the inquirer reaches saturation of a category. Saturation in grounded theory research is a state in which the researcher makes the subjective determination that new data will not provide any new information or insights for the developing categories. (p. 450)

3.6 Analysis Approach with CAQDAS

To assist this researcher, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) was used to organize my data to prevent loss of information. According to Glesne (1999), "Data analysis involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read, so that you can make sense of what you have learned" (p130).

For this study, I used QSR International's NVivo 8, an advanced software tool for organizing, sorting, coding, retrieving, storing, and analyzing various forms of data. The program allowed me to store my transcripts, memos, annotations, as well as to manage an
audit trail. Figure 3.1, modified from the work of Robertson (2007), illustrates how NVivo 8 was used to help organize my data throughout the research process.
Figure 3.1 Integration of NVivo 8 into the Research Process
3.6.1 *Data Organization, Processing, and Coding*

NVivo 8 is a sophisticated data analysis tool that allowed me to store my data in one central location. This software was essential in my research as it helped to store and organize the transcribed interviews and field notes from non-participant observations. Additionally, I used NVivo 8 to document the following: Audit trail (to keep track of my research process), memos (to indicate various ideas that I had throughout the data analyses), and annotations of reflective feedback from participants' comments.

The NVivo 8 program provided a number of user-friendly resources to process my data efficiently. When coding, the software helped me to organize and process text from my transcripts to identify major ideas, categories, and themes that emerged from the data analyses. The coding process within NVivo 8 involves the creation of nodes. According to QSR International (2008), a node is, "A container for a theme or topic within your data " (p. 110). There are four major forms of nodes: 1) free nodes; 2) tree nodes; 3) cases; and 4) relationships. A free node is a "stand-alone" node that is unorganized and does not have a clear connection with other nodes, but can be used to capture emergent ideas. Tree nodes are organized in a hierarchical effort to assist in managing a growing data structure. They exist from a general category (parent nodes) to more specific categories (child nodes). Similar to tree nodes, case nodes can be organized into hierarchies. Cases bring together specific attribute information about a participant (i.e., gender, age, race). Relationship nodes can be used to organize and connect two project items (QSR International, 2008b).
In this study, I utilized free nodes, tree nodes, and cases. My free nodes were based upon participants' responses and review of the literature. Similar to the open coding process, free nodes assisted me to reflect upon the data to determine emergent ideas and potential key categories (see Appendix H). My next step involved converting free nodes to tree nodes. This coding process is similar to axial coding were categories are, "refined, developed and related or interconnected" (Gibbs, 2002, p. 167). My tree nodes represented a hierarchical organizational structure of data because general and specific tree node categories emerged (see Appendix I). Additionally, the program allowed me to create and store cases of each participant’s demographic information. Participant demographics were exported into charts based upon my categories of research interest. Organizing, processing, and coding my data through NVivo 8 was beneficial because it allowed me to discover commonalities across documents, to generate reports, and to organize and store my data.

3.6.2 Memos

Memos significantly contributed information in this study. According to Charmaz (2002):

Memos record researchers' states of analytic development. Memo writing helps researchers: (a) to grapple with ideas about the data, (b) to set an analytic course, (c) to refine categories, (d) to define the relationships among various categories, and (c) to gain a sense of confidence and competence in their ability to analyze data (p. 517-518).
In consulting the memos, I was able to capture emerging ideas and potential patterns, and to document reflective thoughts during data collection and analyses. The memo process was beneficial because it served as a resource that allowed me to achieve deeper meaning throughout the research process. I was able to write ideas that were developing and to reference the academic literature to validate participants' comments. I stored my memos within NVivo 8 to refer back to my notes and interviewees’ comments during the analysis process. Maxwell (1996), states that memos are important, "In order not to lose the original context from which they developed" (p. 79). The memo process helped me to acknowledge my subjectivity and to recognize my rationalization of decisions that were made throughout the research process.

3.7 Establishing Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the rigor in qualitative research and the quality of investigations that make research findings valid and noteworthy to audiences (Schwandt, 1997). Four criteria to determine trustworthiness in qualitative research are: (1) credibility, (2) transferability, (3) dependability, and (4) confirmability.

3.7.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the validation process where the researcher provides assurance of fit between the respondents and the researcher (Schwandt, 1997). Credibility is achieved through triangulation, which is a validation criterion for checking researchers' integrity of emerging data. Triangulation involves the use of multiple data sources, investigators, perspectives and/or methods (Schwandt, 1997). Within this study, I utilized
three types of triangulation: (1) data triangulation, (2) methodological triangulation, and (3) investigator triangulation.

I established data triangulation by interviewing 19 and observing nine principals within a variety of urban and suburban schools districts. Selecting a diverse sample of principals from different geographic locations, building levels, races, gender, and years of teaching and principal experience contributed towards the credibility of the study.

The next validation process to establish credibility is methodological triangulation. Methodological triangulation involves the researcher using multiple methods for obtaining information (Berg, 2004; Seale, 1999). Within this study, I obtained information from the scholarly literature, interviews, non-participant observations, and demographic questionnaires. By collecting multiple forms of data, I demonstrated the rigor required for methodological triangulation.

The final form of credibility to ensure trustworthiness in this study is investigator triangulation. Seale (1999) express that investigator triangulation involves multiple persons engaged in a continuous discussion of data to reduce researcher bias. Within my study, investigator triangulation was attained through member checking and peer debriefing. Member checking involves feedback from respondents about the researchers' findings and interpretations (Creswell, 2007; Schwandt, 1997). I shared my interview transcripts with participants to prevent personal biases. I did not share with participants my interpretations of findings because it could have influenced their responses.
Additionally, this research ensured triangulation through peer debriefing by consulting with skilled colleagues who are experts in the fields of social work and education. According to Maxwell (1996), peer debriefing is a key step to establish triangulation because it allows the researcher to obtain constructive feedback, and I received valuable feedback from five peers who analyzed all the participants' transcripts. The skilled peers included two doctoral degreed social workers. One social worker is a professor who specializes in advocacy and policy initiatives. The second expert is a school social worker located in an alternative high school. The third skilled professional holds a degree in education with a specialization in curriculum development. The fourth and fifth peer specialists serve as human service professionals with three to five years of work experience. All peer colleagues had exposure to and/or experience in the field of qualitative research. This trustworthiness process was beneficial because it allowed me to share my ideas with trained colleagues who were offered advice about the procedures that I used to describe and analyze my data.

3.7.2 Transferability

Transferability is the process of generalizing findings from one context to another (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). With grounded-theory studies, the ability to generalize to wider populations is limited. According to Trochim (2005):

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings. From a qualitative perspective transferability is primarily the responsibility of the one doing the generalizing. The qualitative researcher can enhance transferability by
doing a thorough job of describing the research context and the assumptions that were central to the research. The person who wishes to "transfer" the results to a different context is then responsible for making the judgment of how sensible the transfer is. (p. 126)

This researcher utilized techniques of reflective journaling and thick description to establish transferability. Throughout the data collection and analyses, I documented my experiences, dispositions, feelings, thoughts, emotions, and attitudes through reflective journaling. According to Berg (2004), "The opinions, preconceived notions, and general feelings about certain observed situations are . . . legitimate entries in field notes" (p. 175). The reflective journal provided a record of introspection and understanding into my research experience.

Additionally, I provided thick description to contribute to the transferability of the study. According to Schwandt (1997), thick description is:

Not simply a matter of amassing relevant detail. Rather, to thickly describe social action . . . to begin to interpret it by recoding the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations, and so on that characterize a particular episode. It is this interpretive characteristic of description rather than detail per se that makes it thick. (p. 161)

Thick description was actualized from semi-standard interviews and non-participant observations. Creswell (2002), states that, "with such detailed description, the researcher enables readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred because of shared characteristics" (p. 209).
Dependability

Qualitative researchers seek for dependability because results are unstable and subject to change (Creswell, 2007). According to Trochim (2005) dependability, "emphasizes the need for the researcher to account for the ever changing context within which the research occurs. The researcher is responsible for describing the changes that occur in the setting and how these changes might affect the conclusions that are reached" (p. 126). Within this study, I exemplified changes that occurred in the research process. I achieved dependability by providing a traceable and logical system of documentation by maintaining an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Schwandt (1985), an audit trail is:

An organized collection of materials that includes the data generated in a study; a statement of the theoretical framework that shaped the study at the outset; explanations of concepts, models, and like that were developed as part of the effort to make sense of the data (often the product of memoing); a description of the procedures used to generate data and analyze them; a statement of the findings or conclusions of the investigations; notes about the process of conducting the study; personal notes; and copies of instruments used to guide the generation and analysis of data. (p. 6)

I stored my audit trail through the use of QSR International, NVivo 8. The audit log was useful because it allowed me to keep track of decisions made, the rationalization for the decisions, and an organizing system to see emerging data through the analytical process.
3.7.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is concerned with the objectivity of the study. In particular, qualitative researchers bring a unique perspective and a degree of bias to a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability within qualitative research emphasize that others can confirm and strengthen the study's results (Trochim, 2005). Scwandt (1997) defines confirmability as, "establishing the fact that the data and interpretations of an inquiry were not merely figments of the inquirer's imagination. Confirmability called for linking assertions, findings, interpretations, and so on to the data themselves in a readily discernible way" (p. 164). Within this study, I employed confirmability techniques through audit trails, field notes, and reflective journaling. As a result of implementing a variety of trustworthiness strategies, rigor in this research study was enhanced.

3.8 Role of the Researcher

Qualitative research encourages researchers to be transparent about their biases. Creswell (2003) indicates that qualitative researchers should identity their personal values, assumptions, and biases at the onset of the study. As the primary data collection instrument, I recognized how my family and employment experiences have influenced my motive to conduct this study. My mother was an elementary school teacher for 38 years. She taught third through fifth grade special education students. When reminiscing about spending time in my mother's classroom, I consistently remember her teaching difficulties. Her students were talkative, extremely active, and demonstrated a variety of emotional and behavioral outbursts that significantly interfered with instruction delivery.
As a result of my mother's influence, I believe that change must occur simultaneously inside and outside the school context to positively influence both students and schools. This passion led me into the field of school social work. As a school social worker, I have witnessed how non-academic factors impede student achievement. My experience as a school social worker afforded me the opportunity to work with students, teachers, parents, pupil support staff, and principals from a variety of school districts.

This study is admittedly affected by the biases I have brought to it, which stem from my personal and employment experiences. I have attempted to ameliorate the effects of these biases by establishing trustworthiness. Davies (2007) indicates that the qualitative researcher must be prepared to enter the research process allowing for the data to determine the study outcomes. While I was conducting this study, I made an effort to ensure objectivity by recognizing my prejudices and separating them from my analysis. I made deliberate attempts not to allow my own subjectivity to counteract with what the interviewees expressed. This effort was achieved through various trustworthiness strategies such as peer debriefing and reflexive journaling, procedures that monitored my subjectivity and provided an outlet to share my findings and interpretations with peers.

3.8 Conclusion

By utilizing traditional qualitative research methods (i.e., purposive sampling, individual semi-standardized interviews, trustworthiness, etc.) and computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, this study sought to understand principals' perceptions, experiences, and resources needed to address non-academic barriers to learning. As a
result of data collection and analysis, the information will be used to inform school social
work research, practice, policy, and education.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter presents the major findings of the current study, based on individual interviews, non-participant observations, and demographic questionnaire. A summary of the participants' demographic characteristics and the thematic analysis of the data findings will be presented. As previously indicated, the purpose of the study is to explore principals' perceptions, experiences, and resources needed to address non-academic barriers to learning. I am specifically interested in how these results can be used to inform school social work education, research, practice, and policy. Again, this study explores the following three research questions:

1. What are the perspectives of principals on non-academic barriers to learning?
2. What are principals’ experiences of addressing non-academic barriers to learning?
3. What resources do principals think are needed to successfully address non-academic barriers to learning?
4.1 Demographic Characteristic Profiles

This section outlines the demographic characteristics of the participants I interviewed. This demographic profile information was compiled from the individual interviews and field notes. The population for this study consisted of 19 principals. All demographic data collected was self-reported. The following information was collect from the informants: gender, race, age, highest degree of education attained, years of principal experience, years of teaching experience, school district location, school building level, support staff employed and weekly availability of support staff. A detailed profile of each participant can be found in Appendix C.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Category</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
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<td>African-American</td>
<td>30-39</td>
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<td>Number of Participants</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentages</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1: Distribution of Frequencies and Percentages of Principals by Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Age

Table 4.1 shows the researcher attempted to recruit equal numbers of female and male principals. Forty-seven percent of participants were female and 53% were male. The majority of participants were African-American (58%) and 42% were Caucasian. Table 4.1 also illustrates that nearly half of the participants were 50-59 years of age, 5% were
between the ages of 30-39, 26% were between the ages of 40-49, and 21% between the ages of 60-69.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Principal Experience</th>
<th>Years of Principal Experience</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Master's Plus</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Numbers of Participants</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentages or Mean</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>5%</td>
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</table>

Table 4.2 Distribution of Frequencies and Percentages of Highest Degree Attained, Years of Teaching and Principal Experience

Table 4.2 indicates that over 50% of the participants have a Master's Plus Degree in Education. A Master's Plus Degree consists of additional courses beyond a Master's Degree to acquire certification in a specialized field in education. Forty-two percent have Master's Degrees and five percent of participants hold a Doctoral Degree in Education. The range of teaching experience was 1 to 25 years with a mean of 14 years. The mean years of principal experience was 13 years with a range of 2 to 32 years.
Table 4.3 demonstrates that nearly half of the participants were principals or assistant principals in high schools. Twenty-one percent of participants were principals in kindergarten through eighth grade schools. Sixteen percent of participants were elementary school principals and middle school principals. Fifty percent of participants were from suburban and urban school districts.
Table 4.4 Distribution of Employed, Not Employed, and As Needed Pupil Support Staff

Table 4.4 indicates that the majority of pupil support personnel employed in the participants' schools are school nurses and school psychologists. Next were guidance counselors, speech therapists, and finally school social workers. School social workers represented the lowest number of pupil support staff employed within a school; however, school social workers represented the highest category of needed pupil support staff.
Table 4.5 demonstrates that school guidance counselors have the highest weekly work schedule, working three to five days a week. Next school psychologists, working one to two days a week. Finally, the least represented pupil support staff is school social workers.

4.2 Emerging Themes

To ensure a comprehensive thematic analysis, research efforts were guided by grounded theory approaches (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Analysis began early and simultaneously with data collection from individual interview transcripts, documents within the field, and demographic questionnaires (Charmaz, 2000). Patton (2002) states
that the initial phase in analyzing qualitative data is developing a code or indexing system. He recommends that after the interviews have been transcribed, the researcher should seek to identify codes and categories to classify and label emerging patterns in the data. This researcher's approach for developing a coding indexing system was to disaggregate the data by cutting the text down into manageable interpretive parts. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) explain that text related to specific research concern is called *relevant text*. The authors recommend to keep only the relevant text and discard the text that is not related to one's research interest. When reading through the transcripts, research participants used analogous words, phrases, and constructs to express similar repeating ideas. Repeating ideas were then written in the margin of the transcripts. Consistently repeating ideas that emerged from the data were organized into categories. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) indicate when organized groups of repeating ideas are formed, themes emerge from the data.

To help determine themes, I used peer debriefing. Four peer experts were given copies of transcripts to read. Each expert was instructed to code the transcripts line-by-line and write repeating ideas in the transcript margins. These experts indicated repeating ideas and themes that emerged from the data. As a result of comparing and contrasting these themes along with the researcher's, several themed categories emerged from the data.
4.3 Description of Themes

Throughout this paper I will discuss four major themes. Each theme represents a different barrier to learning as described by the principals interviewed. The four themes are: 1) the hustle; 2) support from home; 3) it-factor; and 4) student baggage. These themes are organized by least significant to most important (as indicated by CAQDAS frequency of participants' excerpts and consultation from expert panel). A brief description of the four major themes with their corresponding sub-themes is presented below:

The Hustle

At the current time, when people hear the term "the hustle," it tends to have a negative connotation, such as the one described by Webster's Dictionary: "to obtain money by aggressive or dishonest means". However, there are a variety of other meanings for the word hustle such as:

1. to shake up
2. to push or knock about one's way
3. to work or act rapidly or energetically
4. energetic action or effort; drive

In analyzing and reporting the findings of this study, I decided to use a combination of two of the above mentioned definitions. In this study, the category known as "The hustle" involves pushing or knocking about one's way in an energetic action or effort; drive. This theme describes the lack of resources available to participants' schools. As a result of the
lack of resources, principals have to hustle to seek financial and supportive resources for their students, families, school, and community.

*Support From Home*

Support from home is an additional theme that emerged from the data. Each principal discussed the significant role of the parent and/or guardian for academic success, as well as to control risky youth behaviors. Principals described their perception, lived experiences, and resources needed to address non-academic barriers to learning. A sub-theme here is pupil- support staff. Within this sub-theme, respondents indicated that pupil support-staff should be used to meet non-academic needs of students and their families.

*It-Factor*

Throughout my research, respondents have consistently identified the importance of the role of teachers (i.e., how they relate to their students on a personal and professional level). Principals described characteristics of teachers they deemed "exceptional" in comparison to those viewed as mediocre or average (lack the it-factor). These exceptional teachers seem to have the "it-factor." The it-factor is a teacher's ability to deliver instruction successfully while maintaining and nurturing a positive relationship with their students. Teachers who possess the it-factor have mastered the fundamental skills of engagement. A sub-theme of the it-factor is effective university education program training and the need for additional pupil-support staff.
Student Baggage

This theme illustrates principals' perceptions of social, emotional, behavioral, and environmental obstacles that students experience with their academic endeavors. For example: poverty, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, divorce, etc. These obstacles tend to hamper student success or weigh them down, hence the term "student baggage." Sub-themes for student baggage are relationship building and the needed resource of additional pupil-support staff.

4.4 Emerging Themes and Research Questions

Themes will be discussed throughout the remainder of this chapter in the context of the research questions. Direct excerpts from transcripts and non-participant observations are used to illustrate major themes. Please note research participants' names used are pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. Also, school district locations are illustrated within each excerpt to designate the subjective reality of respondents.

4.4.1 Principals' Perspectives Concerning Non-Academic Barriers to Learning

The Hustle

Several principals discussed how education reform policies impact school infrastructure because of a lack of funding. An African-American male principal from an outer-suburban school district expressed how the lack of state and government subsidy leads to a devaluation of education:

When the rubber hits the road, take a look at the percentage of our federal budget . . . If you had it in a pie chart what sliver is to education preventive things? What are the designated budgets of our state and federal government? There is where your priority lies. Now until that changes we are always going to be holding things together with duct tape. [Wilson, suburban school district]
His statement is supported in the literature as several studies criticize education reform initiatives due to the lack of supplying economic and social supports for academic success (Austin, 2005; Imazeki & Reschovsky, 2004; Kantor & Lowe, 2006; Mathis, 2005; Osborne, 2005). Two other principals also made reference to education reform in regard to the No Child Left Behind Act; and how it has affected schools:

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has a lot of mandates but it doesn't provide the money for the mandates. . .School districts are property taxed and most of your property are either foreclosed or renters. If it's not a strong home owner community, you're not bringing in property taxes or you don't have industry in your city to help support . . . Then you [the schools] do not have a lot of money. [Vikki, urban school district]

2014 we all are going to be at 100%, then what? We all know there isn't such a thing as 104% . . . I am challenged by the pursuit, but worried about the conclusion. When we are not there it seems to be punitive. School districts that didn't make it, the consequence is less funds? That doesn't make sense. If you have trouble getting there, you don't need less funds, you need more funds. [David, suburban school district]

The original intent of the education system was to prepare students to be productive citizens in society (Roosevelt, 1930). But how can students be adequately prepared if the government lacks in funding provisions? A respondent expressed his disdain for the education system and how it has lost its vision to develop the whole student. This lack of vision is detrimental to current and future productivity of our society:

It's a national tragedy you go into the inner-city . . . you've got many schools of graduation [rates] less than 50%. What else are they [kids] going to do? They have no skills, no knowledge, no means to even see the need for it . . . We can't on one hand say that the health of our country rests on [the] educational system and we know in poor rural areas or in inner-city areas our educational system is failing. Yet we are not willing to provide the resources . . . How are we preparing you [students] for life at today's world? Our schools are always a step and a half
behind. But as your schools goes, your civilization goes and that's to maintain the strength of America. The schools better step up to the plate. Because if this generation of kids are not prepared to lead 20 years or 30 years from now, you better believe the very hungry in India, China and Middle Eastern kids will. So this is almost a country thing, a patriotic thing . . . It's a bigger picture than just benefiting one kid's individual life. It is to maintain the level of production of our country beyond or long after we're gone. [Wilson, suburban school district]

Wilson's viewpoint is supported by research as several studies discuss how education policies do not offer substantive solutions to reduce social and economic inequalities in schools (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004; Fege, 2006; Hurst, 2007; Warner, 2002).

Principals verbalized the view that non-academic resources from the community are essential to help students and schools thrive. Respondents illustrate that community backing and resources are just as important as finances:

It only takes a little vision and understanding on how to leverage a [school] system . . . The only difference between inner-city and suburban schools is the pressure brought to upon the school board and school by parents . . . The expectations and the pressure put on by the community makes a difference in schools. [Joe, suburban school district]

What can we do to prepare these kids for the future because they're not thinking about the future nor do they have hope. Students are not connected in any kind of way to the community at large. They live in a circle. So there are no bridges for them out of this community. So how do we [educators] create those bridges so these kids can really negotiate their way out of this place? [Joe, suburban school district]

I think in low performance schools our children are dealing with more challenges on a day to day basis within their environment and it falls on the shoulders of each building to make sure that you have the necessary resources . . . We still lack resources that are needed from one building to another. I think it's almost just like putting a Band-Aid on something that needs major surgery. [Fred, urban school]
Support from Home

Several principals' perceive that support from home determines successful or unsuccessful students. Numerous studies substantiate their belief to indicate parental involvement has positive effects on student achievement (England, Luckner, Whaley, & Egelund, 2004; Giles, 2006; Halle, Kurtz-Costes, & Mahoney, 1997; Jeynes, 2007; McWayne, Hamptom, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004; Mo & Singh, 2008; Rath, et al; Turner, 2000). Principal responses below exemplify this theme:

 Most of the kids that are doing well . . . have good parental support. [Donna, suburban school district]

 I think a lot of it comes from their home life and how much parents are pushing or not pushing for their child to be successful. [Wendi, suburban school district]

 It is the support from home . . . It is a challenge which hurts our kids, because if the support is not there, it really puts them at a deficit. [Nat, suburban school district]

 I would say it's probably about 70 percent of the kids are running the households in this country. They tell their parents what to do and how to do it. There is very little direction and they come into school with that same kind of attitude. [Corey, urban school district]

 I think it's sad that schools have to do what really is the job of the parents. [DeEtra, urban school district]

 Parents didn't always live up to their expectation of being a parent . . . Some of them, I think, have abdicated their parental responsibilities. [Jonathan, suburban school district]

 If the parents are absent or not as strong as they need to be, then that's going to create other problems. Lack of caring about school, skipping classes, experimenting with alcohol, inappropriate sexual relationships, so on and so forth. [Nat, suburban school district]

 Motivation is not being reinforced at home that school is important . . . I show you that support by making sure that you follow a simple rule by coming in a
dress code. It does impact what they [students] do here and how motivated they [students] are. If they [students] don't feel as though they're supported they [students] are the last to grasp what we [educators] are able to offer them...I need staff and people who can step it up for them and help motivate them...Students have so many variables that impacts them and it usually comes from the outside and it impacts their motivation to learn. [JoEthel, urban school district]

Several high school principals discussed how parental involvement in schools declines as students progress from grade school to high school. Research indicates reasons for decreased parental involvement include: a) schools not initiating contact or seeking parent participation in activities; b) schools not contacting parents about students' academic progress; c) high schools not asking parents to volunteer; and d) parents wanting their children to express autonomy (Spera, 2005). One principal sets a high expectation among his teaching staff to communicate with parents. Sometimes, despite parents' resistance to communicate with the school, he believes that the school is responsible for exhausting all possibilities when trying to reach parents. He stated:

I'll have teachers say, "I've tried to call home and I can't get the parent and we are out of things to do." My response is, "What do we do when we get no help from anyone, because it is our responsibility, so what do we do?" The response I'm always looking for is, "We do everything we can, we don't stop and we don't give up" [Corey, urban school district].

Another principal discussed how he attempts to communicate with parents:

I always tell them [parents] being that age, they [students] need help and they [students] need some involvement because when going to kindergarten and first grade you've got home-room mothers that bake cookies. Then all of a sudden you're dealing with a whole variety of things. I say that when you [students] get to high school you got things like dating, jobs, [and] students get a range of freedoms by getting a driver's license. Some of them end up [having] sex, [using] drugs, [and] alcohol. Somebody like me that comes along and says, "Hey by the way, what are you [student] going to do with the rest of your life?" You mix all
that stuff together along with peer pressures of today and you get a lot of alphabet soup. [Jonathan, suburban school district]

However, the majority of principals that I interviewed believed the decline of parental involvement in today's schools is rooted in social-economic factors. The following excerpts from respondents illustrate this sentiment:

In the inner city most people talk about you don't have a daddy in the home. Out here in the suburbs, it's kind of the same, but you'll have two parents. They work 80 hours a week because they have a $500,000 home and the child is running wild and on drugs. I mean the kids here are off the hook because there is nobody at home. Yeah, two parents are in the home and they have good jobs but they are not there for their children. [Wendi, suburban school district]

Suburban schools . . . are now changing in their social economic demographics. We will have more and more challenges . . . how we are going to deal with them is going to be based on the year and the programs. So we get a lot of instances where parents are not getting it. And they [parents] want us to save their kids and I'm not so sure that we are equipped to do that, just because of the suburbs. [Roger, suburban school district]

Very few kids sit down with their parents and have an adult meal, that doesn't exist very much. These are the kids that I deal with and because of the economy, more and more parents work two jobs. Therefore, the kid is basically responsible for his or her own, getting food and getting themselves to school on time and things like that. Kids today have to grow up much quicker and take on more responsibilities. [Jonathan, suburban school district]

I think a lot of times when people have more money, they have a tendency to throw money at the kid rather than spend time with them. [Such as] knowing who their friends are and what activities they are involved in. [Nat, suburban school district]

I think the biggest challenge with the not affluent kids is being prepared for school. The home environment is not preparing kids for school. [Corey, urban school district]

School is not the most important thing to parents on the list even if it is getting them to school on time, doing homework, or things like that because a lot of parents are on survival mode. Can I keep my children in this apartment or in this house, feed them, clothe them, and stay away from harm . . . It is just a hard life for them [families]. Some kids never go out to play because the neighborhoods
are too bad. Some of them lack clothing and being cared for, their hair, the cleanliness of their clothes. Those are the biggest challenge for parents. [Kyanna urban school district]

**It Factor**

Numerous studies indicate the significance of the teacher role in contributing towards the academic and social development of students (Blankemeyer, Flanner, & Vazsonyi, 2002; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Kesner, 2000; Murray & Greenberg, 2000). Research found that teachers can promote positive outcomes, ameliorate risks, or further perpetuate perilous student behaviors (Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2006). As for the it-factor, principals believe the teachers who have "it" encompass a passion for teaching and possess the ability to engage in non-academic factors through relationship building with students.

I would describe the "it" as somebody who number one likes kids. Somebody who loves working with kids. Somebody who is very, very flexible, somebody who does not ask a child to conform to what their idea of things should be. The person who is "it" says here's a kid with a problem . . . an individual problem that doesn't look like anybody else's problem and I need to find a way to help that kid learn and it doesn't necessarily have to be my way. It can be his [student's] way, the parent's way. It can be what is best for that kid. I think that is kind of the "it". I'm willing to move outside of my comfort zone to educate somebody . . . way outside my comfort zone. [Corey, urban school district]

[Corneita] is my relationship teacher. The kids will talk to her and they'll tell her their secrets. Do you know what I mean? She somehow gets them comfortable. [DeEtra, urban school district]

The "it" is a full package and every school probably has some "its." The natural teacher is someone that knows their curriculum. They could teach without ever writing a lesson plan. They know their kids, they know what turns each little child on and what buttons to push in each child . . . They have a plan, they're firm, consistent and their classrooms are structured. They have behavior and classroom management under control. They're not intimated or afraid of other kids in the building . . . They know those parents even if those parents don't come up to the school. They're in contact with those parents. [Vikki, urban school district]
The biggest thing we can do in education is form relationships. If I tell the teachers, kids don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care. [Jonathan, suburban school district]

Respondents also expressed their views of low performing teachers and the impact these teachers have upon student performance. The following excerpts describe principals' perceptions of teachers that lack characteristics of the it factor:

Professionally, the biggest struggle for me are low performing teachers. Not necessarily that I can't help them, but when they don't want help or don't see the struggles in their ways or their pedagogy. Mostly that's around relationship building [with students]. They don't have the demeanor, the "it" of teaching. They struggle not to be able to do the very fundamental things, like talking or having conversations with students, let alone teaching the information . . . I mean obviously, you and I both know that's how you make gains with students is by building rapport and establishing a relationship of trust and mutual respect. When those elements are missing you can see it in the classroom, but it is very difficult to help coach someone on how to become better at that. To me it's a very natural kind of intuition piece that some people just don't have. They may know science content really well and that's great. But you can't teach if you can't get along and build relationships in my opinion. [Donna, suburban school district]

If you're not compassionate, if you could care less about the welfare of these children then you make it a personal responsibility. There is something wrong with a teacher that has a 50% to 60% failure rate. That means there's something they're not getting which means it's your responsibility as a teacher, you adjust. Especially white teachers, they don't have "it." They don't have respect and sometimes I don't think they know. When you come from a major research university it's all good what you read in a book and what your professors tell you [the teachers]. But once you [teachers] get here [schools] . . . then you need to learn how to adjust. You must be able to say, "o.k. this is reality" and a lot of them [teachers] have a difficult time doing it. They [teachers] can be smart as a whip, but they [teachers] don't know how to deliver [teach] to kids. [Wendi, suburban school district]

I think teachers, educators, principals, anyone that's working with children you need to be passionate about what you're doing. Children can pick up on whether you care about them or if you have their best interest at heart. When you are no longer passionate about what you do, it is expressed and relays to children. So you may need to stop and find something else to do. [Fred, urban school district]
Whenever we are interviewing . . . if we got somebody that can't build relationships, we're not going to hire them. I don't care if they are a Harvard grad and got straight A's. I don't care. I don't care because all they're going to do is come in here and they're going to make life miserable for about 120 kids. [Nat, suburban school district]

**Student Baggage**

Students present a plethora of social, emotional, and behavioral factors that defines their academic performance and overall functioning of the school system (Ackerman, Brown, & Izard, 2004; Atav, 2002; Bowen & Bowen, 1999; Greene & Forster, 2004). The majority of principals interviewed discussed how non-academic issues influence and deter academic outcomes. The respondents also discussed their views of student non-academic obstacles to learning:

You have challenges . . . I've got just under 1600 kids in this building. Sixteen hundred kids come from 1600 different homes, 1600 different value systems, and 1600 different support systems from home. You've got some students that bring a ton of baggage here and quite honestly, education is not the highest priority on their list. [Wilson, suburban school district]

**Poverty and Substance Abuse**

Students have so much baggage that you don't know about. They might not share [students' problems because it] interferes with them learning. They're coming with economic issues . . . living in their house with their electricity turned off . . . They may get a shower once a week when they go to their grandmother's house. But this is how they have learned to live. This is what they do because students come with barriers, such as not having proper clothing and being hungry. We have kids here that are starving and they take their [extra]breakfast home to eat later. [Vikki, urban school district]

The lower socioeconomic class kids frequently come to school hungry. They come to school in the same clothes every day. They just don't have the things that they necessarily need or the parent guidance or mentoring . . . The wealthier kids have that piece, but they also have money to buy drugs. I think drugs are a big problem for wealthier kids. [Corey, urban school district]
On the increase is substance abuse by our young people, whether it be alcohol or right now the drug of choice is marijuana. [Nat, suburban school district]

**Violence**

The changing face of American suburbs . . . have completely changed. Now we have that broad spectrum of kids that are bringing their issues. You see gang activity in the suburbs. You see drug activity that you haven't seen and you see a lot of violence. An article listed some of the statistics on violence in the suburban schools and if you look at the number of students suspended for fighting, the number of weapons taken out of suburbs, it's staggering. It's something that ten years ago is probably exponentially higher. [Wilson, suburban school district]

**Mental Illness**

There's no way our schools should be failing the way they are. There is no way and a lot of our kids are coming from situations where they're depressed. A lot of them suffer from post traumatic syndrome . . . if you see violence, even if it's not perpetrated upon you. Seeing it causes a reaction. But living with it every day and seeing it every day depresses you . . . Probably a number of our kids in inner-city schools are clinically depressed. We're just starting to deal with it in some circles and hopefully there is going to be enough national pressure put on it to do something about our neighborhoods. Schools are a reflection of our neighborhoods. And I can tell you right now thousands and thousands of young people are being wounded or killed. If it were a war, there would be a national outcry to do something about it. [Joe, suburban school district]

The students know the terminology, they know it better than me. When I was growing up you had the class clown. But now there is ADHD, bi-polar, anti-social personality disorder. [Natasha, urban school district]

4.4.2 Principals' Experiences Concerning Non-Academic Barriers to Learning

**The Hustle**

A principal from an inner-city school district illustrated her experience of a lack of financial support provided to her school. She described:

Here in eighth grade my kids aren't even using microscopes because the district does not provide us with enough funds to buy them. We only have money for necessities. So like next year, I have 300 kids. I have a budget for $9,000 for the whole school year. $1,500 of that is going to the librarian. So I have $7,500 for a
whole year. That is for field trips, supplies, materials, and newspapers . . . you can't! $7,500 is not a lot of money. I can't even buy awards and certificates. Right there is a big challenge because our kids need the proper exposures. [Vikki, urban school district]

Consequently, due to the limited financial input, Vikki has to *hustle* to find alternative resources. She has to rely on her community to fill in gaps that the school district does not provide. She divulged her vital relationship with the community as follows:

> You rely on the services of the community or your church. My church is in the neighborhood I grew up. So my church is in this [school] community. I go to my church a lot for services. I ask for all kinds of things, whether it's monetary services, clothing or community linkages for students. So you just do what you can do. I even ask to take kids to the barber shop. [Vikki, urban school district]

She further illustrated that community support not only encompasses financial resources but also a sense of responsibility from the patrons within the community. She disclosed that community support, parents and additional pupil-support staff are essential to the school's success and its ability to give back to the community:

> I have to encourage my parents to write petition letters to help with school supplies and dress-code clothes. We have an ongoing relationship with a local clothing store and this particular store has a program that works with our district . . . Every year I remind the CEO by writing a letter introducing who I am and who my school is. This company even takes my kids clothes, dry clean, press them and bring them to the school. [Vikki, urban school district]

This lady from our city's newspaper came out to our building because we had a community meeting. They gave five boxes of food supplies which was passed out all in one day and of course we still needed more, but we were so grateful. The challenge is that people [donors] come out for one time shop and we never see those people again but we invite them back each year. We will have another fundraiser . . . so you just keep on going but I am going to keep on asking. [Vikki, urban school district]

I have a parent club and Mrs. Bennings does not have any problem reporting kids who are trying to break into the school. I got a call from her once at 11:30 p.m. in the evening. She said, "I am watching a kid right now and he's trying to break in and he is climbing the wall." I then called the security and they came and they got
him. Your community is also a very strong support. So if we had all of our [pupil]
support staff needs met, we'd be able to reach out to the community more. [Vikki,
urban school district]

Another principal shared a story of how members within the school community
demonstrated concern for school safety through a warning:

There was a phone call from somebody in the neighborhood and they said, "Don't
bring the kids outside because there's a woman outside who is naked and I called
the law." Now you know, they didn't teach us what to do with that at the
university. I'm thinking, "okay, who prepares you for this?" I mean it's almost
dismissal. Fortunately, she was detained before the kids left. [DeEtra, urban
school district]

Support from Home

Numerous studies have found that parent involvement has a positive impact on
student achievement and success in schools (McWayne et al., 2004; Gutman & McLoyd,
2000; Dodd & Konzal, 2002). Unfortunately, parental involvement in schools can be
complicated. Research has found that school bureaucratic obstacles and lack of school
friendliness deter parental support in schools (Halsey, 2005; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel,
2001; Reily, 2008). Additionally, research indicates that parents are disinclined to be
involved with schools for a variety of reasons, such as: low socio-economic status (Pryor,
2001; Sacker, Schoon, & Bartley, 2002); language barriers (Daniel-White, 2002;)
low education attainment (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000); and previous negative school
experiences (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000).

Throughout my research, principals consistently expressed the importance of
having relationships with parents. These relationships strengthen the communication
between home-to-school and promote academic achievement among students. In this
vein, the following example of non-participant observation is instructive:
JoEthel: Elementary School Principal

I had the opportunity to observe JoEthel during a principal-parent-student conference. The meeting initially was going to be held in the principal’s office but the principal moved us to the cafeteria. As we walked in silence to the cafeteria, I believed the principal decided to meet in a location other than her office because it allowed the student and parent to feel non-threatened and comfortable. The cafeteria was empty except for a few custodial workers sweeping the floor. The mother submissively sat down across from the principal and the daughter sat two seats away from her mother. The mother wore an over-sized baby blue t-shirt, torn jeans, and sandals. Her hair was wet and she smelled like she had just finished smoking a cigarette before entering the school.

The purpose of the meeting was for the principal to discuss with the parent the behaviors her child had displayed in class. The principal firmly and respectfully informed the mother that if her daughter continued to misbehave in class she would be removed from the school. Suddenly, the mother yelled at her daughter, "Stop moving in your seat!" Then the mother turned back to the principal, and in a calmer voice explained how uncontrollable her daughter is at home and how appreciative she (the mother) is that the school has been working with her to try to improve daughter's behavior. As soon as the parent and principal began talking again, the daughter began fidgeting again. This time the principal stared at the student and told her in a low firm voice, "Stop moving." Instantly, the student stopped moving and sat quietly for the remainder of the meeting.
At that moment I realized that the student respected, listened to, and followed instructions from the principal, but not from her mother. The mother expressed that her daughter's behavior will change because she is seeking counseling and medical assistance to calm her behaviors. The principal shook the mother's hand and told her that she could call the school at anytime if she needs anything. The student and mother left after the meeting. As soon as the meeting was over, I wanted to talk with the principal about the parent-student meeting, but another incident occurred that demanded the principal's attention. However, later on in the day during our interview, JoEthel expressed that the expectations for students at home and those at school are very different. She believes that a bridge is needed to close the gap between home and school boundaries. She stated:

> I look at behaviors first and I think a lot of it is due to the little follow up with parents. There's not a correlation between the expectations at home and at school. I know that we can't control what goes on at home, but we have a set of expectations and a process that we're trying to follow to change behaviors. I see where we are being successful, but I see a challenge and a barrier for students when they go home because many times there is not a follow through. You know, they are permitted to have the behaviors at home that we are trying to change. So at school, it's a real, real challenge with trying to figure out a way that we can work with the total child, the total environment, and I haven't gotten there yet. [JoEthel, urban school district]

To fill these barriers, research has found that establishing positive communication with families is essential (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004; Halsey, 2005; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001). The following quotes demonstrate principals' efforts to build relationships and positively communicate with parents:

> I tell parents all the time, "pay now or pay later and to pay later is to pay bills. Do the right thing with your children, spend the quality time with them because if you don't, there's issues later on. Spend quality time with your children, [such as] take
them to the museum, to the park, or play baseball with them out in the backyard things like that." [Fred, urban school district]

What I learned is they [low socio-economic parents] love their kids. They love them as much as anybody, maybe more than wealthy people because that's all that they have is their kids. But they just don't know how to raise a kid because they are generally young when they have the kids and they just don't know. So I took it upon myself. This is part of my job is to show them another way, to tell them, "You know the kid doesn't run the household, you do mom, you do dad." I think parents appreciated it because I didn't just throw their kids out [of school]. [Corey, urban school district]

There are a lot of one-parent households. More women than men that are trying to raise the student and even in some cases I have grandparents. I laugh because the grandparents are kind of naive. They've never seen these types of games and you know when kids don't go to school and they [grandparents] will say, "Well I dropped them [the student] off every day." I will tell them [grandparents], "They [the student] are going in the front door and out the back." [Jonathan, suburban school district]

During a non-participant observation, Jonathan, expressed the importance of a positive relationship with parents. The following is an occurrence during a non-participant observation:

Jonathan: High School Assistant Principal

When I first met Jonathan, he was on the phone, sitting in a large burgundy leather chair and shifting through papers in a hurried manner. His office was clean, and aside from the small pile of papers he was sorting through, was very well organized. While still on the phone, he managed to find the paper he was looking for and he handed it to me. The paper was worn with scratched markings in blue, black, and red ink. It contained a list with approximately 20 names and phone numbers. As I looked over the list, he hung-up the phone up and proceeded to tell me that the paper I was holding was his “J-list kids” (as in "Jonathan's list of kids"). He explained that the J-list kids are the
names and phone numbers of problematic parents that he frequently calls. He explained that he often has to call these parents to inform them either that their child is having problems at school.

As he was sharing this information with me, Jonathan's office phone rang and his secretary informed him that one of the parents was on the phone. He accepted her call and informed the parent that she would be placed on speaker-phone. He asked her permission if I would be able to listen to their phone conversation because I was observing him for the day. The parent agreed and continued with the conversation on speaker-phone. The principal explained to the parent that her son had been expelled from school as a result of hacking into the teacher's grading computer system and trying to change his grade. He told the mother that her son would not be allowed to return to school and that they should enroll into a virtual high school. There was a long pause and the mother began to weep. She expressed that she had lost her other son to heroin and she didn't want to lose this one. The principal conveyed to the parent that he respected how she felt, but that due to legal circumstances he had no other choice. Jonathan tried to provide the mother comfort and encouragement by sharing that her son is a good kid with strong academic skills who had, unfortunately, made a bad choice. He recommended that the mother seek family counseling and he provided her with contact information to a virtual high school and a social service agency. As soon as he finished the phone call, he began to share with me how important it is for educators to establish relationships with parents and students. He insisted that when educators discipline students, it should be done with dignity.
Principals collaborate with parents for a variety of reasons (i.e., student discipline, school activities, fund-raising, tutoring, volunteering, etc.). Often, interacting with parents can be a difficult experience (Whitaker, 2003). Several principals shared their stories when working with parents:

Talking to the child and talking to the parent is the same thing . . . parents walk into the school and they think that this [the school] is the old fashioned Jerry Springer show. [NaTasha, urban school district]

We have a lot of kids who have full-time jobs . . . We have a population of parents who are using drugs themselves, who are failing to parent their children. I think that's major when there isn't that support from home. [Donna, suburban school district]

Parents come in really upset asking, "Why are you taking my kid's phone?" I have to say, "Well you might want to take a picture of this [look at this], here is your son with bags of marijuana and money." So it is difficult because it is uncomfortable for parents [Nat, suburban school district].

It is amazing what is going on now in the suburbs . . . parents are clueless when I tell them that 99% of girls out here are having sex. They [female students] say that they may do a different guy every week and in their mindset that is no big deal . . . There is no big deal to send naked pictures to your boyfriend . . . Parents don't understand this is the reality and parents are in my office crying. Parents must understand that this is becoming the norm. Do you understand how horrible it is to call a parent and say, "Your daughter was around the building on her knees." [Wendi, suburban school district]

I think that society is a mess and there is no standard. So you don't know what you are going to have or what you are going to get, especially with parents. For example, I had a student in kindergarten. He was the age of a first grader because he was retained. This young man last week was hitting some kids and the staff person was trying to stop him. She's laying him down and he takes his fist and hits her jaw, which pushes up against her tooth and cuts the inside of her jaw. He is in kindergarten, so when the parents came to the school to get him, they were hugging him and using profanity. I was thinking, you know he just hit someone and you are hugging him? [DeEtra, urban school district]
Teachers are a foundational element for instilling academic and life success strategies into students. Throughout the individual interviews, principals expressed their value of teachers. Principals designated successful teachers that encompass the it factor by those that have the ability to build relationships with students. Their viewpoint aligns with research, as numerous studies indicate student academic achievement depends upon non-academic factors such as creating a positive attachment with a caring adult (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Libby, 2004; Habegger 2008); school connectedness (McNeely & Falci, 2003; 2004; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002); and a sense of belonging in schools (Shaunessy, & McHatton, 2009; Johnson, 2009). Although scholarly literature supports the importance of student relationship building, several principals found that university education programs do not prepare teachers with the skill-set to build relationships with students. Respondents expressed:

I think maybe the university does a disservice to people and what I mean is that they take their money and the people take the courses, but they never get it. What I mean is the essence of being a teacher and how you get kids to do things? My complaint of my teachers is that you have to develop a relationship. If a kid comes through that door, I close the door we sit down and we talk. How do I do this? Discipline with dignity. I respect them . . . but the problem is that I developed a relationship with the kid. However, you [the teacher] have them every day for 50 minutes for 180 days and you can't develop a relationship? [Jonathan, suburban school district]

I mean obviously, you and I both know that's how you make gains with students is by building rapport and establishing a relationship of trust and mutual respect. When those elements are missing you can see it in the classroom but it is very difficult to help coach someone on how to become better at that. To me it's a very natural kind of intuition piece that some people [teachers] just don't have. They may know science content really well and that's great, but you can't teach if you
can't get along and build relationships in my opinion. [Donna, suburban school district]

You know if I can get them [students] hooked, I can get them to do for me. I try to instill this into the teachers, is that you got to develop these relationships and your classroom discipline will go down. The kids will be more actively engaged in your lessons because you actually enjoy what you are doing. Once the kid thinks they let you down personally, that's when you have them. [Jonathan, suburban school district]

A lot of times your top notch students [teacher students] as far as grade point averages are going to stay in a suburban area and they're not going to go to the urban or the rural areas . . . so there is always a disparity. So, I do not think universities prepares them [student teachers] at all. They're just in a dream [unrealistic view of what is occurring in schools] and have no clue just for real, for real, what's really going on. So, I don't know how universities [are] going to do that, they really need to do something. Because things have changed, ever-changing and it's just too difficult and when they [student teachers] get out in places [schools] they're just like, what do I do? [Wendi, suburban school district]

What university prepares you for the parent who is inappropriate? I had a parent that came in [to the school] in a sheer top with no bra on. Whoopee! What class is that in? [Laughing] You know [what I mean]? [DeEtra, urban school district]

The importance of relationship building is essential for student achievement and an overall healthy school climate. However, a group of principals discussed their experiences with teachers that do not have relationship building skills and lack it-factor qualities. These principals explained that teachers' unions support and protect mediocre teachers. The following are excerpts of principals' experiences:

You got unions, it's a political thing because some [teachers] seriously don't need to teach . . . It's all based on interactions with people and honesty [as a principal] being able to look at a union person and say, "Do you really want to back this individual [teacher]? Because my [principal] job and I assume your expectation as a union individual [representative] is to get [quality teachers], not a weak link that you've come in here to argue to support.” [Roger, suburban school district]
You can't actually interview anybody. There is no interview process. They [teachers] just get appointed and it is done by seniority. So if there are 10 openings or 10 different schools, the person with the highest seniority picks the school they want to go to and the grade they want to teach that is open at the school. Then they go to the next person and the next. So the ability to hire isn't there anymore. And that may not be all union, it may be the district too because they move around so many teachers. And so many teachers transfer from all the changes . . . I think it is golden opportunity as a principal to interview the teachers . . . I want to hire many teachers. I want to be able to say, you are a good teacher but you are really not right for this building. [Kyanna, urban school district]

Unions have a place initially to raise working conditions, but once all that is done, their only other mission is to protect people who aren't doing the job . . . Even a lot of teachers will tell you our union is the most unprofessional organization. The people [teachers] that do average to really good work, don't like the union. They [teachers] don't like what they stand for and they [teacher union] know what they are doing. The biggest obstacle which is the union. It creates so many obstacles because they [teachers’ unions] don't want to be successful. They don't want people [teachers] performing above the middle point. Average or a little below average, but don't you dare be really good because you're going to make the rest of us look bad and that is what the union perpetuates. I think if anybody puts us out of business, it will be the unions [teachers' union]. [Corey, urban school district]

The teachers’ union is a big challenge, it keeps good things from happening. [Kyanna, urban school district].

The whole district is union. But in my building, union is not ever brought up. We [the school] don't discuss and nothing is ever done by the union. We are a non-union building. I do not have union meetings. I do not have a union conference committee for fighting for my teachers because the union says this or that . . . so we call ourselves a non-union building. The people here [teachers’] mind-set for the most part is that they [teachers] are here for the good of the order of the students . . . Buildings where the union is strong, [negatively] impacts everything. It impacts morality, it impacts performance, it impacts everything . . . It's a horrible thing...it's not that they have too much power, I think they use it in the wrong way . . . The union protects them [mediocre teachers]. It's wrong because your [teachers] job is to teach students. You [teachers] are not the customer. The students are the customer. [Vikki, urban school district]
Adolescence is marked by a period of consistent psychological, social, biological, and cognitive changes. Teenagers desire increased autonomy, self-determination, and individuality. The bio-psycho-social development that students experience often creates challenges for educational staff, especially principals. Due to many schools not having sufficient pupil-support service options, principals are forced to intervene to resolve students' risky (i.e., violence, alcohol and drug use, etc.) and disruptive (i.e., fighting, gossiping, bullying, etc.) behaviors.

**Ronda: Kindergarten through Eighth Grade Principal**

During a non-participant observation, I witnessed a principal spend an entire day attempting to resolve problematic student behaviors. When I arrived to the school parking lot of principal Ronda's kindergarten through eighth grade school, I knew I was going to have an interesting observation experience. All schools have their own personality. As soon as you walk into a school, the culture of the school is evident. At Ronda's school, the main entrance doors of the school were unlocked. The only entrance security method was through a metal detector. I went through the metal detector and it beeped, indicating that I should be inspected before entering into the school. However, there was not a security officer or education staff overseeing the detector or entrance. In disbelief at how easy it was for me to enter into the school, I proceeded to walk in.

The school was built in the 1970's and the internal decor of the school did not have any personality or school spirit. The lights in the hallways were dim and the walls were bare. Eventually, I found the administrative office. It was 9 o'clock in the morning.
and the office was packed with students sitting on a long wooden bench waiting to see the principal. Just looking at the body language of the students I could tell they were in some kind of trouble. They didn’t seem to care.

I was greeted by the secretary and told to take a seat. While I was waiting, I heard persistent yelling in a closed office. I thought, the person yelling must be the principal and I was happy that I wasn't the student in her office. While I was waiting to meet with the principal, a male teacher entered into the office carrying a young boy like a sack of potatoes. The student was struggling and trying to fight the teachers tight grip. The teacher presented the student to the secretary and explained that the student had been kicked out of his classroom for fighting and was not permitted back into the class. The secretary told the student to take a seat and wait to talk with the principal. The student didn't say a word and ran out of the office. I thought to myself, “This is not a school, it’s a zoo.” The principal finally finished her meeting and instructed her secretary to write-up the young boy with whom she had just met with for in-school suspension. The suspension was for the remainder of the day the boy would also have five days out-of-school suspension, starting the following morning.

The principal then invited me and two students into her office. Her desk was piled high with papers. Her walls were decorated with school policies and laws. During the meeting with the students, she wanted to know why they had been fighting. As the students began to explain, she interrupted them and told them because they had been fighting, they would have to serve in-school suspension for the remainder of the day, and then they will be serving out-of-school suspension for the next five days. When the
students left, she stated that she had already suspended five students and it wasn't yet lunch time. As I spent the entire day with this principal, she suspended a total of 15 students.

What I observed throughout my day with Ronda was that she constantly dealt with non-academic factors as opposed to academic issues. Ronda expressed, "I am not the instructional leader . . . I don't have time to lead anything because I am always putting out fires with our students."

During my interviews, several principals shared their experiences addressing students' non-academic barriers to learning:

**Discipline Problems**

Look at my world . . . This is what I do all day long [addressing students' behavior and discipline problems]. I have to be nice and calm to them [students]. [For example, asking a student] "Johnny, why did you go upside his [student] head? Would you please tell Mrs. NaTasha Thomas, why did you decide to go upside his [student's] head today and it is 3:30 p.m.? When I want to get out of here and it's Friday! Can't you have done this on Monday?" I have another student that says, "I want to kill myself, I want to jump off the first floor window." But what I really want to say, "Honey [student], go to the second floor [laughing]!"

[NaTasha, urban school district]

**Substance Abuse and Violence**

School is nothing but a microcosm and a snapshot of what the community is. So the same issues that we are facing in our schools we're facing in our communities. For suburban communities you are getting almost exasperating parents saying, "We moved here to escape these issues. We've got someone on our street that we know is dealing drugs or we've got a kid smoking weed at the bus stop." That's unheard of, we've got gang fights at our parks. We've got issues that we've never had to deal with. [Wilson, suburban school district]

I've got one little girl for lack of better description, she's been hooked on heroin and she's run away [from home] about four to five different times. She's about 16 and has a boyfriend that's 24 years old that pushes heroin. So keeping her in class and at school has been a major undertaking and sometimes the parents raise an eye or two. They [parents] don't form relationships with their kid or the kids get upset with them [parents] and they [students] don't listen. Students turn to us
[education staff] because I think they feel that sometimes we form relationships more than the parents. [Jonathan, suburban school district].

In this building there is a drug issue that's much bigger than I was prepared . . . we have a lot of kids using and abusing heroin. Things that I would call a higher-end drug. I know heroin is now much cheaper than it used to be. Heroin, ecstasy . . . we have a lot of kids using and abusing alcohol . . . that concerns me. [Donna, suburban school district]

Sex and Technology

With texting, the technology has become a big problem as well. Students are now sexting [sending naked pictures on cell phones] . . . Our kids are very sexual . . . It [technology] has provided many more platforms for kids to harass, bully, and threaten each other. [Corey, urban school district]

[Students] are not practicing safe sex. Whenever students come to my office, you're getting the safe sex talk . . . Forget about having a baby, you're talking about HIV. We're talking about students are all sleeping with each other right now without condoms. [Kyanna, urban school district]

Students are involved with substances they shouldn't be and it has an impact on learning, it has to. If they are worried because they sent a naked picture of themselves to their boyfriend. Now the next day shocked because he's not their boyfriend anymore. But what is he going to do with that picture? They're down in the office crying and worrying about how soon they're going to appear on Facebook and all those things. It has to distract them. [Nat, suburban school district]

Mental Illness

Your principal-ship depends upon where you are. I'm dealing with a lot of social issues . . . I don't feel as though I'm really not addressing academic issues . . . I'm used to bi-polar, schizophrenic, manic-depressive all those type of stuff. [NaTasha, urban school district]

So many children out here [suburban school district] are mentally ill . . . bi-polar and things like that . . . out here in the suburbs they've been labeled. [Wendi, suburban school district]

There was a young girl that was hearing voices that [told her] she wanted to kill herself. That girl is schizophrenic. She is depressed and she is being bullied because the kids tease her because she is dark and thin. [NaTasha, urban school district]
4.4.3 What Resources do Principals Think are Needed to Successfully Address Non-academic Barriers to Learning?

The Hustle

What is required to be a principal is more complex than ever before. A plunging economy, lack of fiscal support, and current educational reform, have led principals to face an array of core roles (Anthes, 2002; Chan & Poole, 2002; Ediger, 1996; Leone, Warnimont & Zimmerman, 2009). These roles may change on a daily basis and range from a cultural or instructional leader to a chief operating or executive officer (Boris-Schlacter & Langer, 2006; Portin, 2001). As a result, principals have to work innovatively, or "hustle," to find monetary and supportive resources. Three principals illustrate their desired resources:

I'm always looking at what resources can I bring into the school on a regular basis that will really have a key connection with kids. Something that's going to keep them [students] on a positive track. A relationship [counseling or mentoring programs] that will keep them [students] going in a positive direction. [DeEtra, urban school district]

The school [School district administrative office] says I need a school psychologist and a nurse every day. Even if my nurse isn't here every day, I need a school social worker. I need a social worker full-time, every day that can make referrals for parents and refer my students to outside agencies. I need a social worker that can provide in-services and gather students and parents from the community. [Vikki, urban school district]

I probably would try to speak with my corporate sponsor, someone with some money or I am going to have to beat the bushes myself as a principal and try to get a social support service program in my building. If I can't I will have to try to refer my students to these agencies outside of the building . . . If you have a health care agency in your building like a social support service agency and their intake is maybe about 25 students and you have about 50 students in your building that need those resources, what do you do then with the other 25 students? [Fred, urban school district]
Support from Home

Several principals indicated pupil-support staff as a key resource to strengthen support from school to home. Pupil-support staff consists of different occupations. These occupations range anywhere from guidance counselors and school nurses to school psychologists, speech therapists and school social workers. Although principals recognize that pupil-support staff is a much-needed and valuable resource, these positions are decreasing due to an increase in education reform priorities (i.e., standardized assessments) and budget cutbacks (Nelson, 2009; Vogt, 2009; Vogt, 2009b). Consequently, because of a lack of federal and state funding (and budget cutbacks), schools often contract with an outside agency for social workers, or sometimes school social workers are hired as external consultants with grant funding. Often these social workers and other support-staff workers may be responsible for up to 25 schools within a district. Providing services in multiple schools limits the ability to create school-to-home partnerships and sustainable change is unachievable (Gleason 2009). Several of the principals I interviewed expressed their desire for pupil-support staff within their building as a resource to bridge the gap between school and home and create relationships with parents:

In my building, I need a person that would function like a family liaison. They're a person that can help bridge a gap and be a mediator or whatever you need between the school and the home for staff and parents. [Fred, urban school district]

My biggest challenge is dealing with parents and students . . . If I had more support staff, I could do better with some of those areas . . . It really takes support to really deal with some of the issues that different populations bring. [DeEtra, urban school district]
There has to be a piece to try to get those parents reconnected and find value in their kid's education. I don't think they devalue education. I just think they have different social skills . . . We have that group [of parents] that don't show up for parent-teacher conferences or don't come to open houses. It's difficult to work with those kids when you don't have the support [pupil-support staff]. [Donna, suburban school district]

You know it is understanding that really you work with what you have and what you have is not in your control. Yet we see what's not in our control [is] really impacting what we do here. I constantly struggle with having a handle on what I can control. I can control what's happening here and I want to reach out for more. Now I want to bridge the gap between here [school] and home. I want to do more with parents because it's like I can get them [students] under control, but I'm treating the symptom. I need the parents in order to get to the cause so we [school system] can get a true difference, a sustained difference with our children and not one that's for the short term . . . We need a program to bridge the gap between school and home. For instance, the child could have problems today and I don't want to send him home, but I can't keep him in the classroom. So that's where we could have a bridge he's [the student] still being educated, but at the same time, somebody's [pupil-support staff] working on the social and emotional development. [JoEthel, urban school district]

Principals explained that effective training is the most critical resource teachers need to address non-academic barriers to learning. This training should come from colleges and universities from which teachers are receiving their education. Principals also expressed the need for teachers to be equipped with better relationship skills, and made aware of the realities that occur within different school settings (i.e., urban, suburban, and rural school districts). Such understanding and insights are applicable to the research conducted by Ronald Ferguson's (2008) Tripod Project. His research found that instructional practices should consist of content, pedagogy, and relationships. Although universities traditionally prepare teachers with content and pedagogical approaches, the art and skills of establishing teacher-to-student relationships is lacking within education programs (Alvarez, 2007; Duck, 2007; Koller & Bertel, 2006; Melnick
& Meister, 2008). Several of the principals I interviewed illustrated their understanding of this dilemma and expressed their opinion that universities need to better prepare teachers with relationship building skills:

I think universities need to do a better job. [Some colleges allow] you to choose where you want to do your student teaching and I don't think [agree with] that . . . I think you should do your student teaching in an environment that is totally different from what you come from. I think that will better prepare the teachers who deal with different situations and how to handle things . . . I don't think universities prepares them [teachers] at all. [Wendi, suburban school district]

What I learned in school was not nearly as beneficial of what I learned within these walls. You can't prepare for interacting with children in a classroom. You can get the rules, guidelines and I see it when I interview teachers coming out of college. I tell them one of the things that you really need to do is start your whole lesson about building a relationship. They can teach you how to do that in school. [David, suburban school district]

I could think of probably a hundred things that you just didn't get in a university setting. To me this is a people job. It is very much about people. Whether it is the kids or the staff. [DeEtra, urban school district]

It is my belief that in colleges and universities, they teach content, they don't teach people. And the core of what school should be about is teaching people. [Donna, suburban school district]

You go to the university and you get books. [Teachers need to experience the] reality of this is what you will deal with. I think that makes all the difference. So I think what colleges or universities don't give is the real thing. The books are not going to help you when Jamal's mama comes up [to the school] cursing you out because you gave Jamal a U [unsatisfactory]. Or when Valerie's mother don't understand why she [the student] got an S [satisfactory] in Art. Because her daughter knows how to draw and they're pictures on the parents' refrigerator . . . Books doesn't teach you how to deal with that. Books doesn't teach you how to deal with [students] who come to school and is sleeping every day but can pass that test and you think she [a student] is not paying attention. So I think there are so many things that need to be addressed [from colleges and universities]. Student- teachers, they particularly need hands on [training]. [Vikki, urban school district]
Teachers must have an attitude towards students of being here to help whatever a student needs. Teachers need to know what is going on with students by knowing some of their personal history. Because when a kid thinks that you care, the worse kids in the world . . . will not clown in your class . . . this helps with class management. [Wendi, suburban school district]

I really want to have teachers that want to care and invest in these kids. Because if you do not build relationships, then you don't get academic excellence. [Kyanna, urban school district]

Think back to your favorite teachers in high school. Why were they your favorite teachers? No one will say, "Well because they were so smart or because they did this or that." They're gonna say, "They cared about me. I loved their class. They knew me as a person." We will all say the same thing, "Those [teachers] could build relationships." Those are your successful teachers. They can reach kids. They care about kids. They want all kids to be successful in the classroom. So successful teachers builds relationships with kids and they take ownership. [Wilson, suburban school district]

The people who have the ability to hook are those people who show a genuine interest in the kids. Those teachers who know something about the students in the room beyond their academic achievement scores. The ones that are willing to go to football games, basketball games, but also, go to the places which their students work . . . They take the time to get to know the kid. [Donna, suburban school district]

The biggest thing we can do in education is form relationships. If I tell the teachers, "Kids don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care." [Jonathan]

Additionally, principals expressed the need for pupil-support staff to provide consultation to teachers. They indicated that teachers often need training in areas such as how to handle non-academic challenges in the classroom; relationship building skills; classroom management strategies; and behavior de-escalation strategies. These principals shared the following:

I would hire someone specifically to do nothing but work with my teachers. . . to make them better and help them with their instructional methods. When you get kids in a confrontational situation [for support-staff] to show them skills such as de-escalating versus escalating. There are actual techniques [such as] looking
square up or not looking, because this is threatening or that's non-threatening body language or verbiage. But, I would have someone who did nothing but help my teachers be better. Be in the classroom, help them, give them advice, and meet with them. [Wilson, suburban school district]

You have psychs [school psychologists]. I think that if we could change the rule of psychs [school psychologists] to get in the classroom more and really work with teachers on solid instructional practices. I think they [school psychologists] are an untapped resource. We send kids to get them tested. So, I would like to see the opposite happen. If I could have a social worker or twelve [social workers] working with families and be in classrooms. I think there is so much that goes on [with students] and teachers have so much to do too. They [teachers] don't have the time, in their minds, to get to know some of the things that are happening with students. So involving that third party [school psychologist or school social workers] to kind of be the link between home and school would be great! It comes down to the three R's to me: relationships, relevance, and rigor. [Donna, suburban school district]

Student Baggage

The needs of students extend beyond the academic realm. Although principals typically have minimum training on how to manage "student baggage," they are frequently responsible for handling students' non-academic needs (Leone, Warnimont, & Zimmerman, 2009). To better prepare principals to meet the demands of students' non-academic barriers, one principal commented on her desire for courses in the social service field:

They [students] know the terminology better than I do. We [principals] need courses in social work and psychology. . . I am knee deep and nose deep in social services. I might get into education . . . the only thing I do is paperwork. I go sit in the class and I evaluate [a teacher], "Great job Mary Anne!" Of course it's going to be a great lesson because they know I'm too busy doing social work. So yes, I can do educational things and sometimes I get excited . . . but when I am done I have to come back and deal with social work issues. But they [school district] give us more classes on leadership. I don't need leadership. I need more classes on bi-polar and all this other stuff that they are throwing at me. I need ADHD, attention deficit and all that other kind and type of stuff. [NaTasha, suburban school district]
Kyanna: Kindergarten through Eighth Grade Principal

Several principals also believe a valuable resource to address non-academic barriers to learning is to have additional pupil support-staff. During one of my many non-participant observations, I observed a principal who expressed the need for school nurses and school social workers after dealing with a student injury. The principal, Kyanna, was conversing with me in her office. After a brief conversation, she stated that it was time to get the cart because it is close to lunch. Kyanna went into a storage closet and brought out a metal cart that held a portable speaker and microphone. She informed me that I would soon understand why this equipment is important.

When we entered the lunchroom, it was quiet, aside from the two cafeteria workers organizing the food items. The cafeteria was filled with rows of long white tables and basketball rims that appeared to be unused. On one side of the room was the lunch line and on the opposite side was a stage with red curtains. Kyanna and I sat down on the stage and began to talk. Then the school bell rang and shortly after, the quiet cafeteria became noisy with entering students. The students wore white or light-blue shirts with dark blue pants or skirts. The teachers escorted the students to their assigned tables. Some of the teachers told the students to put their head down on the table while others shouted “be quiet!” Once all the students were in their seats, the principal turned on the speaker and began to give directions. She informed the students that I was observing their school for the day and they were to exhibit their best behavior. As soon as the announcement was finished, the teachers left the cafeteria and the principal began to call the grades to line up to get their lunch. As I was observing the situation, the only
adults in the room were the principal, cafeteria workers, and myself. The principal was responsible for overseeing close to 100 students by herself for approximately 30 minutes.

The weather was warm and students were permitted to go outside for recess. Half of the students went with the assistant principal for recess and the other half remained inside until it was time for the two groups to rotate. In the middle of our conversation, Principal Kyanna learned on her walkie-talkie that there had been a student injury. A student was bleeding terribly. As she ran to the administrative office, she found a young boy crying with his hand on his head and the back of his shirt covered with blood. The assistant principal explained that the student had been playing football and when he ran to catch the ball he hit his head on a sharp metal piece on the fence. The assistant principal then left to return outside because she had to continue to monitor the children at recess.

The student had a deep cut on his head and the bleeding would not stop. The principal searched a closet to find a first-aid kit. She pulled on purple gloves and told the student to take off his shirt. She placed pressure on the cut and at the same time informed her secretary to contact his mother. She told me to find a clean school shirt in the closet for the boy.

Kyanna commented that she didn't know that being a nurse was part of her job description. She explained that the school nurse comes to the school only once or twice a week. As we were talking, the secretary told the principal that she had contacted the mother. The secretary explained that the mother could not leave work to pick up her son and she wanted to know if there was someone at the school who could take her child
home. The principal then expressed, "Do you understand why I say, I need a nurse and a school social worker?"

During my interviews, several principals also expressed the need for additional resources of pupil-support staff:

I would hire a behavioral psychologist who could do staff development, parent involvement and oversee student counseling. I'd have every child attached to a counselor or school social worker. [JoEthel, urban school district]

I feel like the challenge I face is having additional support staff . . . For example, my nurse is here like a day a week. My guidance counselor is here one day a week and you know just having those kinds of supports would make such a big difference in how we're able to function. [DeEtra, urban school district]

Kids, they need somebody that is going to sit and listen to their problems. Not give advice all the time . . . but you got to have someone that really cares. [Luke, urban school district]

I think every building needs some type of health agency program where students that experienced some kind of trauma or loss of a loved one or any of those kinds of things . . . they need some type of mechanism or person that they can talk to, so they can express their feelings. I need people who are good listeners . . . and have the best interest of children at hand. Sometimes that's all that's needed too is somebody that's gonna listen. Somebody that is sympathetic and somebody that will point the family and children in the right direction. [Fred, urban school district]

A student that has never been in school, not kindergarten, never . . . so he gets enrolled at eleven years old as a kindergartner. I can't send an eleven year-old to kindergarten. I need my psychologist so she can properly assess him to get him into a proper special education program and in a different classroom. [Vikki, urban school district]

Contextual factors, such as spacing within school buildings, affect the need to provide a safe location for students to discuss their emotions and meet their non-academic needs. These principals expressed the following:
You're running into the challenge of space. Space is a issue because you know you want these programs [support programs] in your building. But, then if you don't have space then that's a problem too. You know they [pupil support-staff] need space. They need a place because of confidentiality and securing records and things like that. And a lot of times I have had problems with just finding space for my day to day staff, let alone staff that's coming in to set up a shop one or two days a week or so. [Fred, urban school district]

Adults not being home with their children in the evening. Kids are being left with an older sibling. Parents would say that they won't pick up their child when they are sick for whatever reason. This is an issue because we don't have anywhere in the building to keep them when they are sick because we do not have a full time nurse. [Kyanna, urban school district]

We decided we are not going to lock up kids anymore. What that did was that it sent out a clear message to kids that you are not going to be locked up. We are going to sit and talk. I took that area where the room was [disciplinary room] and I put two sofas in there, a rug, some plants and we called it the processing area. If kids had a problem they could go there and talk with a staff member. If they were screaming and shouting . . . if they are out of control . . . we would stand by and watch them. They would kick the wall. I don't care if you kick the wall, just don't kick me. [Corey, urban school district]

4.5 Conclusion

Upon the completion of individual interviews, non-participant observations, and field notes, the following themes emerged quite frequently:

- "The hustle" - principals' drive to acquire resources.
- School home-support - the need for parental involvement in the child's education and pupil-support staff to connect home to school.
- "It-factor" - teacher that do or do not possess the ability to build teacher to student relationships.
- Student baggage - student non-academic issues (i.e., drug usage, mental illness, sex, violence, etc.)
These themes were identified by the principals as non-academic barriers to learning. The importance of relationship building, the need for improved university teacher training, and the lack of additional pupil support-staff were sub-themes and found to be resources needed to address non-academic barriers to learning.
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

This chapter discusses the study findings and implications for social work. The chapter will initially discuss a summary of research question findings in sequential order, followed by describing an emerging framework and conclusion. Lastly, I will recommend implications for social work practice, policy, education, and research.

5.1 Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore principals' perceptions, experiences, and resources needed to address non-academic barriers to learning. Utilizing qualitative research methods, this researcher collected data from individual interviews, non-participant observations, and a demographic questionnaire. The purposive sample consisted of 19 principals from urban and suburban school districts in different school grade levels (i.e., elementary, middle, junior high, and high school).

In the course of data collection and analysis from individual interviews and non-participant observations, the following four major themes emerged from participant responses: (1) the hustle; (2) support from home; (3) it-factor; and (4) student baggage. Additionally, three sub-themes emerged which are relationship building, the need for
additional pupil-support staff, and university training. The following section discusses how each of the research questions were answered in relationship to these overarching themes and sub-themes.

Research Question One: What are the Perceptions of Principals on Non-Academic Barriers to Learning?

The Hustle

Findings from the individual interviews, non-participant observations, and demographic questionnaire indicate principals' perceptions of non-academic barriers. The participants discussed how NCLB impacts school infrastructure: they view it as being an unfunded mandate. Approximately 12 out of the 19 principals believed that government and state funding is not enough to support students holistically. These principals' perceptions are comparable to research studies that indicate the lack of financial support for education reform policies (Brokowski & Sneed, 2006; Liu, 2008; Stover, 2007). As the result of the lack of funding, several principals from urban school districts resorted to the hustle by aggressively seeking external resources and community support for their students and school.

Student Baggage

The majority of principal perspectives of non-academic barriers to learning consisted of the themes student baggage, home-to-school support, and the it-factor. These principals believe factors such as poverty, substance abuse, sex, inappropriate use of technology, mental illness, lack of parental support, and violence put many students at risk of school failure. Their perceptions are supported by research that has found
adolescent risky behaviors and family, social, and neighborhood contextual factors have an adverse impact upon students academically (Diamond, 2006; Fraser, 2004; Levine, 2004; Penhollow & Young, 2005; Weist, et al., 2005; Woolley, et al., 2008). The principals in this study believe that these challenging student behaviors and uncontrollable circumstances place an extra burden or "baggage" upon students and positions them to be at risk for school failure.

Support from Home

All of the participants perceive the lack of support for students from home as a non-academic barrier to learning. Regardless of geographic location (i.e., urban or suburban schools), the principals see a pattern in students' attitude towards education that is contingent upon their parents' stance on education. The principals believe that a students’ home environment that supports or devalues education will determine their academic work ethic to succeed or fail in school. One of the participants commented that she wants parents to commit to being involved in their child's education. She stated, "I would like to have the right for parents to sign a meaningful contract stating that they will be involved in their child's education" [Kyanna, urban school district].

The principals also perceived that parental involvement declines as students ascend in grade levels. The principals' view is that parental involvement at school and at home is directly and positively related to socio-economic factors. The principals believe that financial pressures have caused parents to work multiple jobs, forcing them to be away from home. This scenario results in children raising themselves and also leads to the parents’ lack of school involvement.
It-Factor

Similar to student baggage and lack of support from home, all of the principals believe that teachers play a major role in the success or failure of at-risk students. Their perceptions are supported by several studies that have found the significant role of teachers in student achievement (Fowler, Banks, Anhalt, Der, & Kalis, 2008; Liew, Chen & Hughes, 2010; Martin, Marsh, McInerney, Green, & Dowson, 2007). The participants also believe that students who have teachers who are not passionate and fail to build rapport with students is a non-academic barrier to learning.

Relationship Building

All principals expressed the importance of relationship building with students. One of the participants provided an example of how he values and builds relationships with students:

I try to build good relationships with kids and sometimes when there's a kid that I know is getting ready to fall off the cliff, I try to go out of my way to speak to them and talk with them. I ask questions about them to build some kind of connectivity and sometimes I pull them aside. [I will say], "Look this is what I am seeing and this is what I need for you [the student] to do." I will tell students, "Nobody's out to get you, we want to help you, and if I didn't care, I wouldn't be talking to you." Sometimes students are so disconnected with school or they don't see the value of it. Some of the homes that some of these kids go to is sad. I mean it just breaks your heart. So being open and communicating our values and expectations works the best. [Wilson, suburban school district].

According to Ferguson (2008), relationship building is a key component in teaching and students' academic success. In explaining this dynamic, he used a three-legged stool metaphor. He explained that two of the three legs are designated for pedagogy and
content (academics) and the third leg requires relationships (non-academic). His research findings indicate that effective teaching requires a balance of curriculum, content, and teachers’ relationship building with students.

Research Question Two: What are Principals’ Experiences of Addressing Non-Academic Barriers to Learning?

Support from Home

The principals in this study report the lack of support from home, teachers’ ineffective collegiate preparation, and student baggage are the major non-academic barriers to learning that they consistently address. Research studies indicate that parent involvement has a positive impact on student achievement (England, Luckner, Whaley, Egelund, 2004; Giles, 2006; Halle, Kurtz-Costes, & Mahoney, 1997; Jeynes, 2007; McWayne, Hamptom, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004; Mo & Singh, 2008; Rath, et al., 2008; Turner, 2000). However, during the interviews, a majority of principals remarked that parents are not parenting. For example, one participant stated, "[Many parents are not raising their children], we [the schools] are raising children honestly right now."

[Natasha, urban school district]

As a result of the lack of parental support at home and at school, the principals take the position that it is their responsibility to consistently work to build relationships and establish positive communication with parents. One of the participants, Roger from a suburban school district, stated, "It's part of my responsibility to help build, not only just a community of learners, but a community. I live in an area that's an old community that people graduate, come back, and stay." Likewise, during my non-participant
observations, I witnessed principals providing advice, suggesting resources, and remaining calm in combative parent-principal telephone conferences. Principals expressed that they often have to function outside of their primary duties to engage parents, provide parenting strategies, and give parents advice on how to raise their children to be successful in school and life.

*It-Factor*

All of the participants identified the value of teachers. Principals discussed the differences between teachers who possess the it-factor in comparison to those who lack it-factor qualities. During the individual interviews, the participants perceived that poorly performing teachers are those who are not passionate about teaching and who fail to build relationships with students. Several of the principals acknowledged how teachers’ unions support and perpetuate poorly performing teachers. Nine out of the 19 principals believed that mediocre teachers are supported by the teachers’ union. The majority of participants from urban school districts strongly believe that teachers’ unions are a hindrance to schools and unsupportive of students. Their perceptions are supported by studies that explore teachers’ unions support on academic achievement (Eberts, 2007; Thomas, Wingert, Conant, & Register 2010; Urbanski, 2003).

Additionally, principals perceive that collegiate programs in the field of education did not provide educators with effective training. Participants indicated that teachers lack knowledge and preparation of the daily realities that are experienced in urban and suburban schools. Their perceptions are supported by research studies that have found university programs fail to provide adequate preparation and curriculum
development on how to deal with classroom management and discipline problems (Alvarez, 2007; Duck, 2007; Huntley, 2008; Koller & Bertel, 2006; Melnick & Meister, 2008; Westling, 2010).

Student Baggage

All participants expressed their concern about the conditions of youth and their involvement in risky behaviors. During my non-participant observations, I observed seven out of nine principals deal with non-academic factors throughout their day. I observed principals conduct meetings with students and parents that mirrored counseling sessions. These principals provided counseling, gave advice, and provided students and families with outside referral information on issues such as bullying, sexting, parent-child conflict, and gang involvement. During the individual interviews, principals opined that students’ involvement in risky behaviors will affect their academic performance and ultimately have a negative impact on the future productivity of our society.

Research Question Three: What Resources do Principals Think are Needed to Successfully Address Non-academic Barriers to Learning?

Need for Collegiate Courses and Relationship Building Training

Principals believe that the resources needed to address non-academic barriers to learning are: 1) additional pupil support staff; 2) training on relationship-building skills; and 3) collegiate courses on non-academic barriers. Several principals indicate that courses at the collegiate level are needed to inform and prepare educators about students' non-academic barriers. Principals believe that additional courses are needed, incorporating information about mental illnesses; training on how to build teacher-student
relationships; practical classroom management skills; and strategies on how to deescalate negative student behaviors. Their perceptions reflect the work of Koller and Bertel (2006), as the authors indicate:

According to Satcher's *National Action Agenda for Children's Mental Health* (2001), 1 in 10 youth in the United States suffers from a mental disorder severe enough to limit daily functioning in the family, school, and community setting. Although federal and state government agencies are increasingly aware of the prominence and depth of this problem, to date, no universal systemic changes have been made to mandate pre-service teacher competency in the recognition and early intervention. (p.199)

*Pupil- Support Staff*

The majority of principals (16 out of 19) determined that more pupil-support staff are needed to bridge the gap between home and school to increase parental involvement and alleviate non-academic factors. As it now stands, principals have to handle these non-academic challenges, and they often lack supportive resources to deal with them effectively. For example, a principal shared how he built a relationship with a student who was experiencing difficulty at home:

I am always amazed of children that have problems will come to school. I had a student that would run away from home because the student was getting beaten. We used to have a wooded area but now it's a new development. He [the student] built a refrigerator box house and would stay in there when he would run away from home. He [the student] would go there and spend the night but he would come to school on time the next day. His dad always knew, that if he couldn't find his son at home on Sunday that if he would call the school on Monday, the student would be here [at school]. I would ask the student, "Why do you want to run away from home?" He [the student] would say that, "My dad
would get mad at me and when he comes home from work and things are not going well, he takes it out on me." So the student felt safe coming here [to school]. He probably should have received an attendance award because he went through a rough element and would still come here [to school]. [David, suburban school district]

This student demonstrates resiliency, and it is amazing that he could manage to come to school despite his negative circumstances. I can only imagine how much that student could have achieved in school if more pupil-support services were in place to help the student and his father.

Principals deal with numerous student risk factors, and many of the participants desire additional support services. During an interview, a principal described his vision for a school with pupil-support resources:

My vision would be that I would have a school campus. On the campus, right next door to the school, I would have a health agency office with social workers and counselors . . . Also an office that can help parents with issues that they're encountering on a day to day basis with need assistance such as utility bills and things like that. I would have all of that encompassed on my campus where all of [the needs] could be addressed [such as] probable crises to deal with students that may be attempting suicide. I would have [social supportive services] all right here [on school campus]. [Currently] the things that I deal with on a day to day basis occurring in the building, I have to call out and the folks have to come from downtown, but I would have all of that [social supportive services] on my campus. [Fred, urban school district]

Principals are on the front line dealing with multiple responsibilities such as education reform demands, functioning as the instructional leader, and addressing students' behavior and emotional problems. Principals perceived that effective collegiate training of student risk factors and additional support staff are resources that are needed to address non-academic barriers to learning.
5.2 Conclusion

At the onset of the study, I acknowledged that my personal and employment experiences that brought biases to this study. Therefore, while conducting this study, I followed qualitative method protocols to achieve as much objectivity in the analysis of the project as was possible. Even with my efforts to remain objective, my proposition assumptions are consistent with the study findings:

(1) NCLB holds school systems and educators responsible for academic outcomes of all students.

(2) NCLB education reform initiatives of content standards, standardize testing, school choice, and closing the achievement gap will be enough to overcome all non-academic barriers to learning.

(3) Each research participant has his or her own collection of responses related to non-academic barriers to learning.

(4) Principals are trained to focus upon academic barriers to learning but are not trained to focus on non-academic barriers to learning.

(5) Principals tend to seek services from pupil-support personnel, such as school social workers, to address non-academic barriers to learning when such services are available.

(6) Principals will have a limited understanding about the role and services provided by school social workers.

(7) School social workers are trained to address non-academic barriers to learning.
The current NCLB education reform initiative goal is to close the achievement gap and address all students’ needs through the vehicles of content standard assessments, AYP, and school choice. During the individual interviews and non-participant observations, principals discussed that NCLB holds educators responsible for the academic outcomes of all students. Critics of NCLB expressed that its policies do not consider the many factors that interfere with learning and teaching (Adelman and Taylor, 2002; 2004). According to Adelman and Taylor (2006):

If schools are to ensure that students succeed, school improvement designs must reflect the full implications of the word all. Clearly, all includes more than students who are motivationally ready and able to profit from demands and expectations for "high standards." Leaving no child behind means addressing the many who aren't benefiting from instructional improvements because of a host of external and internal barriers interfering with their development and learning.

(p. 4)

Principals believe that non-academic barriers influence student school performance and annual yearly progress scores. As a result, many principals deal with non-academic factors in hoping to alleviating them to help students succeed academically.

The majority of participants functioned above their primary administrative role to take care of non-academic barriers to learning. Due to principals' multiple responsibilities, their availability and expertise to strategically address non-academic barriers to learning is often ineffective. All of the principals expressed the need to have additional pupil-support staff to handle non-academic barriers. They believe that having
additional supportive services in schools would allow them to focus upon school management, instructional leadership, and the demands of education reform.

Pupil-support staff traditionally consists of school guidance counselors, school psychologist, school nurses, speech therapists, and school social workers. The participants I interviewed revealed that pupil-supportive staff were available in their school two to five days a week. The principals reported various levels of pupil-support staff; some of them were faced with only two days of staff per week, while others could rely on supportive staff five days each week. The least represented yet most highly requested pupil-support staff were school social workers. Four out of 19 principals had a school social worker on staff, and five out of 19 stated that they needed a school social worker in their school. During the interviews, several principals described the role of school social workers but they weren't aware of the specialized profession of school social work nor were they knowledgeable of the services that school social workers provide.

5.3 Emerging Framework

The data analysis methodology used for this study is grounded theory. Grounded theory is often referred to as a process not an end product (Charmaz, 2000). By utilizing this approach for data analysis, the researcher presents a framework by which to incorporate principals' perceptions, experiences, and resources needed to address non-academic barriers to learning (See Appendix J). Qualitative researchers frequently use multiple data sources to confirm findings. This framework gives credibility to the study's findings by triangulating emergent themes to the assumptions and research questions.
The conceptual linkages discovered during the data analyses yielded four emergent themes generated from individual interviews, non-participant observations, and a demographic questionnaire. As a result, the themes of: 1) the hustle (lack of resources), 2) support from home, 3) it-factor (lack of it-factor qualities); and 4) student baggage were instrumental to identify gaps in education reform policies and the daily realities experienced in schools that contribute towards school failure. Based upon principals' perceptions to address non-academic barriers to learning, the sub-themes are reported as outcomes within this framework. The sub-themes of: a) additional support staff (i.e., to provide resources, link parents to school, and address student baggage) and b) effective university training (i.e., to gain knowledge of non-academic barriers to learning and relationship building) are recommendations to contribute towards school success (See appendix J).

The results of this study are useful for those in the professions of education and social work. This research is beneficial for educators to identify gaps in knowledge preparation with working with students and families. Also, this study will inform educators of pupil-support service staff of the appropriate means to combat non-academic barriers to learning and provide resources in the schools. This study will likewise assist school social workers in understanding the needs of education administrators, resource service gaps in school systems, and avenues to advocate for change with education reform policies.
5.4 Implications for Social Work Practice, Policy, Education, and Research

Increasing accountability standards, education reform initiatives, non-academic barriers to student learning, and lack of financial support have put tremendous pressure on school systems—especially on principals. (Nettles & Herrington, 2007; Paris & Urdan, 2000; Sunderman, Orfield, & Kim, 2006; 2006b). Yet, schools are not likely to close the achievement gap and demonstrate student academic success until students’ non-academic barriers are addressed in a systematic manner (Adelman & Taylor, 2005; 2005b; 2000; Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). According to Adelman and Taylor (1999):

Schools committed to the success of all children must be redesigned to enable learning by addressing non-academic barriers to learning. Enabling is defined as providing the means or opportunity; making possible, practical, or easy; giving power, capacity, or sanction to. The concept of an enabling component is formulated around the proposition that a comprehensive, multifaceted, integrated continuum of enabling activity is essential in addressing the needs of youngsters who encounter barriers that interfere with their benefiting satisfactory from instruction. . . . the reality that school reform initiatives are unlikely to produce desired student results as long as they are limited to prevailing approaches. Specifically, we stress that reformers primarily focus on teaching and generally ignore functions that are essential to enable teaching and learning. Thus, the concept of an enabling component is meant to underscore that school restructuring has to encompass more than instructional reform. Beyond the
classroom, the concept calls for weaving together school and community resources to address problems experienced by teachers, students, and families. It encompasses efforts to promote healthy development and foster positive functioning as the best way to prevent many learning, behavior, emotional, and health problems and a necessary adjunct to correcting these problems . . . These include a wide array of school-wide interventions to provide prescribed student and family assistance, respond to and prevent crises, support transitions, increase home involvement, and outreach to develop greater community involvement and support. (pp. 278-279)

Alleviating students' non-academic needs and empowering parents with resources will have a direct and greater influence on narrowing the achievement gap than will education reform mandates (Adelman & Taylor, 2006; 2000; 1999; Davison, Seo, Davenport, Butterbaugh, & Davison, 2004; Fusarelli, 2004; Hursh, 2007). Principal participants and research studies acknowledge that both academic and non-academic interventions are needed within schools to close the achievement gap and support the entire school functioning (Bryan, 2005; Chan & Pool, 2002; Noddings, 2005; Paik & Walberg, 2007).

Due to the resource limitations in NCLB, school social workers have a responsibility to address the gaps in education reform policies. School social workers should provide their voice to provide strategies to advocate for students, families, and school systems. According to Lagana-Riordan and Aguilar (2009), "social workers should advocate for education policy change that looks beyond test scores to the multidisciplinary best practices that help at-risk students succeed in school" (p. 142).
School social workers have a unique lens for exploring education policies from a variety of system levels and best practices. Therefore, school social workers have a responsibility to inform education practitioners, policy makers, and researchers about the non-academic needs of vulnerable student populations. Many within the field of education are limited in their knowledge of and exposure to students' non-academic needs. Therefore, social workers should provide a significant contribution to knowledge and empower educators of the best practice methods in areas such as mental illness, mental health interventions, effective communication, and relationship-building skills. All of these non-academic modalities can be used to enhance school systems to support academic achievement and school success.

To assist education systems in this process, pupil-support staff, in particular school social workers, are a valuable resource. Besides functioning as a truancy officer, school social workers often carry a case-load that encompasses working with individual students from the at-risk sub-group identified by NCLB (i.e., special education students). School social workers should work not only with handling attendance issues, but also intervene to help the non-academic needs of students by working holistically in school systems and the school surrounding community. For example, it is imperative that school social workers provide direct services to students and families, make available consultation to school educators, establish relationships with the community, and build partnerships with local businesses and organizations. School social workers must connect all system levels to best serve students, families, and support schools. This type of
systems integration of school, home, and the community is best carried out by a school social worker and not a social worker from an outside agency.

As a result of education systems’ limited knowledge of the role and resource of school social workers, more empirical-based research is needed. More research is needed to explore the effectiveness of school social workers and their influence upon academic achievement. Furthermore, additional research is needed to explore the differences between having a school-based social worker in comparison to a social worker from an outside agency. Lastly, more scholarship is needed to explore the impact of NCLB on students’ and educators’ attitudes towards school.
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Appendix A: Solicitation Letter
Dear Jonathan Gray,

The reason I am contacting you is to request your participation in a study to explore principal’s perception and experience of non-academic barriers to learning.

As a previous school social worker and a current Ohio State University doctoral student, I have had numerous opportunities to work closely with education administrators from various school districts. It is hoped that the findings from this study will increase the understanding of factors that principals perceive as non-academic barriers to learning and thus inform education policy and school social work education and practice.

The study is performed as fulfillment of the requirements for my Ph.D. degree in social work at the Ohio State University. If you choose to participate in this study, I will schedule a time to meet with you observe and interview you at your convenience. During this time I would like to interview you concerning your perceptions about and experiences in dealing with the non-academic barriers of the students in your school. This interview will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour. With your permission I would like to audiotape the interview in order to focus on the conversation. Only I will have access to the tape, the recordings will be transcribed and I will remove any identifiers during the transcription. The tape will then be erased and your identity will be kept confidential and your identity will not be revealed in the final manuscript.

In addition, I would like to shadow you (a non-participant observation) for approximately 4 to 5 hours on one day. During this period I will not directly participate in any activities and will take field notes of my observations. Also, in the field notes your identity will be kept confidential. If I have additional questions after I reflect on the observation and interview, I will contact you for clarification. I estimate that conversation will last 30 minutes or less.

I will contact you by phone in a few days to clarify and answer any questions you may have about this project and possibly schedule an observation and interview time.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions at 614-330-4676 and/or prather.14@osu.edu

I am thanking you in advance for you consideration to participate in this study.

Respectfully,
JoNataye Prather, MSW
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form
The Ohio State University Consent to Participate in Research


Study Title:

Researcher:

JoNataye Prather

Sponsor:

Not applicable

This is a consent form for research participation.

You are invited to participate in this research study: “A View from the Principal’s Office: Exploration of Principals Perception and Experience of Non-Academic Barriers to Learning: Implications for School Social Work.” This is a request of consent for your research participation. The information that I am about to share with you contains important information about this study and what to expect if you decide to participate.

Your participation is voluntary.

Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and will receive a copy of the form.

Purpose:

Before you consent to participate, I would like to share with you the purpose of the study and your role as a participant. As an Ohio State University student and previous school social worker, I am very interested in exploring principal’s perception and experiences of non-academic barriers to learning. Working under the direction of Dr. Gilbert Greene within Ohio State University’s, P-12 Project, Human Service Committee afforded me numerous opportunities to work closely with education administrators from various school districts. It is hoped that the findings from this research study will increase
understanding of factors that principals perceive as non-academic barriers to learning to inform school social work.

**Procedures/Tasks:**

The study is performed as fulfillment of the requirements for my Ph.D. degree in social work at the Ohio State University. If you choose to participate in this study, I will schedule a time to meet with you observe and interview you at your convenience. During this time I would like to interview you concerning your perceptions about and experiences in dealing with the non-academic barriers of the students in your school. This interview will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour. With your permission I would like to audiotape the interview in order to focus on the conversation. Only I will have access to the tape, the recordings will be transcribed and I will remove any identifiers during the transcription. The tape will then be erased and your identity will be kept confidential and your identity will not be revealed in the final manuscript. In addition, I would like to shadow you (a nonparticipant observation) for approximately 4 to 5 hours on one day. During this period I will not directly participate in any activities and will take field notes of my observations. Also, in the field notes your identity will be kept confidential. If I have additional questions after I reflect on the observation and interview, I will contact you for clarification. I estimate that conversation will last 30 minutes or less.

**Duration:**

You may discontinue your participation in this study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with The Ohio State University.

**Risks and Benefits:**

There are no anticipated risks, stress, discomfort, compensation or other direct benefits to you as a participant.

**Confidentiality:**

All information collected will be solely used for research purposes. Confidentiality will be strictly observed. No names will be used in all documents that pertain to you; instead, a code will be assigned to you and will appear in all documents pertaining to you. Names of participants will not be connected to interview information. Furthermore, the coding key to the names of the participants will be destroyed following data analysis.
Efforts will be made to keep your study-related information confidential. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released. For example, personal information regarding your participation in this study may be disclosed if required by state law. Also, your records may be reviewed by the following groups (as applicable to the research):

- Office for Human Research Protections or other federal, state, or international regulatory agencies;
- The Ohio State University Institutional Review Board or Office of Responsible Research Practices;
- The sponsor, if any, or agency (including the Food and Drug Administration for FDA-regulated research) supporting the study.

**Incentives:**

There are no incentives to participate in this study. However, your contribution will provide education and school social workers with a better understanding of how to address the needs of the entire school functioning.

**Participant Rights:**

You may refuse to participate in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you are a student or employee at Ohio State, your decision will not affect your grades or employment status.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. By signing this form, you do not give up any personal legal rights you may have as a participant in this study.

An Institutional Review Board responsible for human subjects research at The Ohio State University reviewed this research project and found it to be acceptable, according to applicable state and federal regulations and University policies designed to protect the rights and welfare of participants in research.

**Contacts and Questions:**

For questions, concerns, or complaints about the study you may contact Gilbert Greene at 614-292-2302 and/or at greene.44@osu.edu. You may also contact JoNataye Prather at 614-330-4676 and/or at jnprather@hotmail.com

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you
may contact Ms. Sandra Meadows in the Office of Responsible Research Practices at 1-800-678-6251.

If you are injured as a result of participating in this study or for questions about a study-related injury, you may contact Gilbert Greene at 614-292-2302.

**Signing the consent form**

I have read (or someone has read to me) this form and I am aware that I am being asked to participate in a research study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. I will be given a copy of this form.

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**Investigator/Research Staff**

I have explained the research to the participant or his/her representative before requesting the signature(s) above. There are no blanks in this document. A copy of this form has been given to the participant or his/her representative.

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Appendix C: Demographic Summary
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Appendix D: Demographic Questionnaire
Exploring Principals’ Perceptions and Experiences of Non-academic Barriers to Learning

The Ohio State University
College of Social Work
1947 College Road
Columbus, Ohio 43210
This questionnaire will take *approximately 5 minutes* to complete. Feel free to leave any questions unanswered. Once you have completed the questionnaire, please place within the attached envelope and seal it. Please return the envelope to me before I leave your school today. If you have questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

**PART 1**
For questions 1-11, please complete the following questions with the most appropriate information that best describes your school:

1. County: □ Cuyahoga □ Franklin □ Other: __________________________
2. School district: _______________________________________________
3. School location: □ Urban □ Suburban
4. Building level: □ Elementary school □ Middle school □ Jr. high □ High school
5. Student population: _______________________
6. What is your teacher to student ratio: __________
7. Percentage of students that receive free lunch: _______________________
8. Percentage of students that receive reduced lunch: _______________________
9. What is the racial composition of your staff:
   _____ % of African-American/Black _____% of Caucasian/White
   _____% of Asian _____% of Latino _____% of Other
10. What pupil support-services do you have on staff? Please check if they are hired through your school district or an external organization.

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<td>□ Other: ____________</td>
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CONTINUE TO NEXT PAGE
11. **How many days per week does your support-staff work within your school?**

- Guidance counselor: □ One □ Two □ Three □ Four □ Five □ Other:
- School nurse: □ One □ Two □ Three □ Four □ Five □ Other:
- School psychologist □ One □ Two □ Three □ Four □ Five □ Other:
- School social worker □ One □ Two □ Three □ Four □ Five □ Other:
- Speech therapist □ One □ Two □ Three □ Four □ Five □ Other:
- Other: __________ □ One □ Two □ Three □ Four □ Five □ Other:

**Part II**

For questions 12-17, please complete the following demographic questions with the most appropriate information that best describes you:

12. Gender: □ Male □ Female

13. Race: □ African-American/Black □ Caucasian/White □ Asian □ Latino □ Other

14. Age: ______

15. Highest level of degree attained: ___________________________________________________________________

16. Years of teaching experience: ___________________________________________________________________

17. Years of principal experience: ___________________________________________________________________

**CONTINUE TO NEXT PAGE**
Thank you for taking the time to complete the questionnaire. *Your assistance in providing this information is very helpful.* If there is any other information that you would like me to know (i.e., concerns, questions, or ideas), please comment in the spaces provided below.

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Appendix E: Non-participant Observation Form
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Appendix F: Semi-standardized Interview Questions
1. What are some of the challenges that you experience as a principal?

2. What are some of the issues and challenges that your students face that deeply concern you as a principal?

3. Tell me how these challenges interfere with student learning? (any personal examples or stories)

4. To what extent do you think issues outside of the school impact student motivation to learn?

5. Do you ever feel like things should just be left alone or the way they are?

6. How do you respond when these challenges occur?

7. What methods have worked for you when addressing these challenges?
   - Which ones (methods) don’t work?

8. Are these challenges met and solved by any of your staff?
   - Do you have enough support staff in your school?

9. Do you have a program on how to help students address these challenges?

10. If these challenges were met and solved, what would you do with the extra time you would now have?

11. If money was not an object, and you could hire one person to help you with these challenges, who would you hire and what specifically would you want them to do?

12. Do you use community resources and if so what are they?

13. Has educational reform (like NCLB, etc.) had an impact on your students?
Appendix G: Theoretical Model
Lack of Resources ("The Hustle")
Principals' determination to acquire resources for their school.
This includes but is not limited to:
- Requesting donations from businesses
- In search of partnerships from non-profit organizations
- Seeking assistance from neighborhood community
- Promoting support and involvement from student families
- Persuading teachers to do work above their contractual duties
- Implementing school-wide fundraisers
- Seeking position of pupil-support staff workers
- Advocating for additional funding from school district

Lack of Support from Home
Principals' perceptions and experiences with parents:
- Parents have a negative past experiences with schools
- Parental support declines from grade school to high school
- Parent not at home because of financial factors
- Parents are not preparing their children for school
- Schools are not communicating consistently with parents
- Education is not valued in the home
- Schools difficult system to navigate for parents
- Parents do not communicate with teachers

The Lack Of "It-Factor"
Teachers that lack "it-factor" qualities such as:
- Ability to build a positive rapport with students
- Educating students beyond academics
- Involvement in extra-curricular activities with students
- Ability to recognize non-academic barriers that impact learning
- Teachers efforts to communicate with parents for positive and negative concerns
- Ability to provide resource materials to the school
- Willingness to perform duties above their contract
- Ability to deal with student discipline

Non-Academic Barriers to Learning

School Failure

Student Baggage
Principals' perception of social, emotional, behavioral, and environmental obstacles that students experience with their academic endeavors. For example:
- Mental illness; poverty; teenage pregnancy; alcohol usage, drug usage; gang involvement; intimate relationships; peer pressure; media pressure; malnourishment; lack of transportation; English as a second language; lack of intrinsic motivation, parents divorce; parents using drugs, parents don't value education; community violence, low self-esteem; sex; bullying; cyber bullying; sex-tiing, carrying weapons; trauma; no hope for the future; single parent household; fighting; technology; lack of clothing, hygiene issues, etc.
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Appendix J: Conceptual Framework
Lack of Resources ("The Hustle")

Lack of Support from Home

The Hustle
Pupil-support Staff

Support from Home
Pupil-support Staff

Non-Academic
Barriers to
Learning

School

Failure
Success

Non-Academic
Barriers to
Learning

Lack of "It-Factor"

Student Baggage

"It Factor"
University Training
Pupil-support Staff

Student Baggage
Pupil-support Staff