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The Effects of Environmental Risk Factors on At-Risk Urban High School Students' Academic Self-Efficacy

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The Effects of Environmental Risk Factors on At-Risk Urban High School Students’ Academic Self-Efficacy

A dissertation submitted to the Division of Research and Advanced Studies of the University of Cincinnati in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTORATE OF EDUCATION (Ed.D) in the Urban Educational Leadership Program of the College of Education, Criminal Justice and Human Services

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ABSTRACT

Meeting the needs of at-risk urban high school students is a serious challenge in schools today. Research shows a relationship between the environmental risk factors that define a student as at-risk and the risk factors which many influence a student’s academic self-efficacy. Many of these risk factors overlap. They include living in a non-nuclear family, being a teen parent, living in poverty, having a parent without a high school diploma or GED, and living in a household where drugs and/or alcohol are used.

The question the research attempted to answer was: How do environmental risk factors affect at-risk urban high school students’ academic self-efficacy? This study investigated five identified environmental risk factors by interviewing students and asking them to complete a guided writing. Questions in the interview and guided writings were aimed at determining if students felt being exposed to environmental risk factors had affected their academic self-efficacy.

The research showed that some students felt their academic self-efficacy had been affected by their exposure to environmental risk factors and some did not. Two of the three participants who were exposed to being a teen parent
felt it had affected their academic self-efficacy. Four of the eight participants exposed to drug and/or alcohol use in their household reported it had affected their academic self-efficacy. Four of the thirteen participants who were exposed to living in poverty reported it had affected their academic self-efficacy. Five of the nine participants exposed to having a parent without a high school diploma or GED reported it had affected their academic self-efficacy. Finally, seven of the fourteen participants exposed to living in a non-nuclear family reported it had affected their academic self-efficacy.

Not all effects on academic self-efficacy which resulted in being exposed to environmental risk factors were negative. Some students reported that being exposed to certain environmental risk factors had actually had a positive effect on their academic self-efficacy and the exposure had made them want to be a better person. Some affects were negative, however. Some participants had feelings of abandonment, anger, and sadness.

In summary, there is not consistency between exposure to environmental risk factors and the effect it has on a student’s academic self-efficacy. Exposure to environmental risk factors affected students in different ways and a few participants did not believe their academic self-efficacy
had been at all affected by exposure to environmental risk factors. Students are unique individuals with unique challenges and their own way of coping with exposure to environmental risk factors.
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CHAPTER ONE
PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RELATED LITERATURE

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this research was to examine the effects of environmental risk factors on at-risk urban high school students’ academic self-efficacy. The study attempted to determine if and how these environmental risk factors contribute to the level of a high school student’s academic self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to the confidence an individual has in certain situations. Academic self-efficacy is more specifically related to “an individuals’ confidence in their ability to successfully perform academic tasks at a designated level” (Shunk in Gore, 2006, p. 93). The level of a student’s academic self-efficacy is important because it is a significant indicator of future academic success for the student.

A study conducted by Gore (2006) examined the extent to which academic self-efficacy determines college student outcomes beyond what was predicted for those same students based on standardized test scores. “Results suggest that academic self-efficacy beliefs predict college outcomes but that this relationship is dependent on when efficacy beliefs are measured, the types of efficacy beliefs
measured, and the nature of the criteria used” (Gore, 2006, p. 92). For example, when the students’ academic self-efficacy was measured at the beginning of the students’ first semester, the “academic self-efficacy beliefs were relatively weak predictors of academic performance” (Gore, 2006, p. 109). However, when academic self-efficacy was measured at the end of the students’ first semester, the scores were much stronger predictors of academic performance. Interestingly, “students’ academic efficacy beliefs are likely to be more accurate to the extent to which the students have experience in the academic arena” (Gore, 2006, p. 110). Meaning, students’ academic self-efficacy scores are stronger predictors of academic success in students who have more experience with academia.

In addition to Gore’s study, there is other literature which supports the connection between a student’s academic self-efficacy and indicators for further academic success. According to Shunk & Miller (2002), “judgments of capability for learning or performing behaviors at designated levels are powerfully related to the academic success that students experience, as well as to other motivation constructs and processes” (p. 1). Due to the evidence supporting the connection between a student’s academic self-efficacy and his/her academic success,
studying the influences on a student’s academic self-efficacy is important.

Most studies on academic self-efficacy focus on particular content areas such as math or reading. This is because “students make more context-specific judgments of their academic self-efficacy as they gain increased expertise in the academic domain” (Bong, 1999, p. 1). Bong designed a study to examine academic self-efficacy among students of varying personal characteristics. Such characteristics included gender, race, and students who were participating in advanced placement courses. Her results were subject specific with relation to the students’ academic self-efficacy. While this knowledge is useful in determining specific areas where students may lack academic self-efficacy, it does not advance the literature regarding the generality of academic self-efficacy and the overall prediction of academic outcomes for these students.

While Bong’s research was specific to a content area, other studies are specific to other areas of concern, such as ethnic background. School performance among students of minority continues to be a concern in our country. Minority students continue to rank at the bottom in terms of academic test scores across the nation. Following
Caucasians, there is a large gap in academic achievement before arriving at the next most successful group of students. This concern is valid and demands much attention from educators as well as politicians. A study conducted by Jonson-Reid et al. in 2005 examined academic self-efficacy among African American youth and how self-esteem related to academic self-efficacy. “Findings suggest that strategies that build a student’s belief in the importance of education may do more to increase academic self-efficacy among African American youths than would a focus on self-esteem” (Jonson-Reid, et al., 2005, p. 5). While this study made a contribution to the literature on African American youth, it would be helpful to find out if their findings are true of all youth, not just African Americans.

Bandura made significant contributions regarding the development of self-efficacy. According to Bandura, “self-efficacy beliefs develop as a result of personal performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, persuasion, and the interpretation of physiological states” (Bandura in Gore, 2006, p. 110). This research study is more specifically concerned with a student’s development of academic self-efficacy and how environmental factors influenced that development. While school instruction is a time where students may develop the majority of their
academic self-efficacy, there are also social factors at school which influence a student’s academic self-efficacy.

“Many social factors apart from the formal instruction - such as peer modeling of cognitive skills, social comparison with the performances of other students, and instructors’ interpretations of children’s successes and failures in ways that reflect favorably or unfavorably on their ability - also affect children’s judgments of their intellectual efficacy”.

(Schunk in Bandura, 1997, p. 174)

It is important to understand all the factors and influences which play a role in the development of a student’s academic self-efficacy. It is also important to recognize the impact a positive academic self-efficacy has later in life. “The stronger the students’ self-instructional efficacy, the more learning they engage in on their own outside the school” (Bergin in Bandura, 1997, p. 175).

Clearly much research has been conducted in the area of academic self-efficacy. However, many studies were specific rather than broad in scope. We do not yet know enough about the generality of academic self-efficacy and how a student develops strong academic self-efficacy. Previous studies showed us why academic self-efficacy is
important as well as demonstrating a student’s academic self-efficacy is a strong predictor of academic success, yet most have left out how, specifically, it is developed and influenced. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of environmental risk factors on at-risk high school students’ academic self-efficacy.

This study was important to conduct because it can help teachers, administrators, and curriculum writers better understand academic self-efficacy and factors that influence the development of a student’s academic self-efficacy. “A strong sense of efficacy fosters a high level of motivation, academic accomplishments, and development of intrinsic interest in academic subject matter” (Bandura & Schunk in Bandura, 1997, p. 174). Ultimately, this better understanding may lead educational leaders to develop curricula and school cultures that support the fostering of positive academic self-efficacy among students. Teachers need to understand the relationship between academic self-efficacy and their students’ performances in the classroom. They can use this understanding to aid in making lesson plans, including more activities, discussions, etc., which will engage more students during class. The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which environmental risk
factors influence the development of a student’s academic self-efficacy.

Research Question
How do environmental risk factors affect at-risk urban high school students’ academic self-efficacy?

Review of Literature
One goal of education is to guide students in their journey to becoming successful citizens of society. There are many such ways to guide students in the right direction. One key factor in a student becoming a successful citizen of society is having a positive academic self-efficacy while in school. Self-efficacy has been defined as “an individuals' beliefs about their performance capabilities in a particular context or a specific task or domain” (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy refers to the confidence an individual has in certain situations. Academic self-efficacy refers to how a student feels about himself/herself in terms of academics. In other words, does he/she think she/he is able or unable to perform well academically?

Understanding the connection between positive academic self-efficacy and academic success is important. Research supports the idea that the more positive a student’s academic self-efficacy, the more academically successful
he/she tends to be. Aside from academic success, there are other benefits to having positive academic self-efficacy. Such benefits include less engagement in risk-seeking behaviors and less emotional instability (Bandura in Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006, p. 55). With the understanding of the connection between academic self-efficacy and academic success, school leaders and teachers can work together to develop a school culture that promotes positive academic self-efficacy.

Academic Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy has been studied extensively over the years. Bandura was at the forefront of the research on self-efficacy. From his research on self-efficacy, other researchers began to be more specific in their studies of academic self-efficacy. Academic self-efficacy is the way an individual feels about his/her academic capabilities rather than just her/his personal attributes and abilities in general. Over time, academic self-efficacy was better understood as researchers studied the development of academic self-efficacy and the relationship between academic self-efficacy and academic success. The important role educators had in helping students to develop a positive academic self-efficacy as it related to academic and personal success in one’s life became clear.
Definition. The terms self-esteem and self-efficacy are often confused and used interchangeably. However, the two terms are completely different in meaning. “Perceived self-efficacy is concerned with judgments of personal capability, whereas self-esteem is concerned with judgments of self-worth” (Bandura, 1997, p. 11). Self-esteem is more closely related to how one feels about themselves and whether he/she likes herself/himself. Self-efficacy refers to if an individual believes he/she is capable of performing particular tasks. The connection between the two terms is weak. “Individuals may judge themselves hopelessly inefficacious in a given activity without suffering any loss of self-esteem whatsoever, because they do not invest their self-worth in that activity” (Bandura, 1997, p. 11). For example, someone may admit to being inefficacious about playing soccer. This does not influence that individual’s self-esteem because the individual does not put any self-worth in playing soccer well. However, there may be a stronger connection between self-efficacy and self-esteem in situations of social importance or cultural expectations. For example, if girls are expected and categorized as good readers, a girl who does not like to read or is not good at reading may believe her self-worth as well as her self-efficacy has been affected.
While self-esteem and self-efficacy are not interchangeable in meaning, both are important aspects of being a successful individual.

“People need much more than high self-esteem to do well in given pursuits...People need firm confidence in their efficacy to mount and sustain the effort required to succeed. Thus, in ongoing pursuits, perceived personal efficacy predicts the goals people set for themselves and their performance attainments, whereas self-esteem affects neither personal goals nor performance” (Bandura, 1997, p. 11).

This shows that one does not necessarily affect the other. One can have low self-efficacy about something in particular and still retain high self-esteem.

The difference between self-efficacy and self-esteem is important to understand when relating self-efficacy to academics. When self-efficacy and academics are compared it is referred to as academic self-efficacy. Academic self-efficacy is defined as “an individuals’ confidence in their ability to successfully perform academic tasks at a designated level” (Shunk in Gore, 2006, p. 93). Academic self-efficacy is important for students to develop and it is important for educators to understand the importance of students developing positive academic self-efficacies.
“Those who are confident of their abilities to master academic skills and to regulate their own learning are more prosaically inclined and enjoy greater popularity and less rejection by their peers than do children who are too burdened with intellectual self-doubts to put much effort into academic activities” (Bandura in Bandura, 1997, p. 176).

Teachers and administrators can aid in the development of students’ academic self-efficacy. However, they must first have a clear understanding of what academic self-efficacy is and how it differs from self-esteem.

Development of academic self-efficacy. There are many reasons a student may develop a particular level of academic self-efficacy. One such factor is socio-economic status. A study conducted by Bandura et al. (1996), “found that the influence of the families’ socio-economic status was entirely mediated through parents’ academic aspirations and children’s pro-social behavior, such that the higher the status of the family, the higher the parents’ academic aspirations for their children and the greater their children’s pro-social behavior” (Bandura in Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006, p. 55). Many youth come from a low socio-economic status, where education has not been stressed by their parents or guardians. From this lack of stress being
put on the importance of education coming from the home, students do not believe it is important, resulting in low confidence towards academics, which in turn results in low grades. Receiving low grades consequently makes the students believe they cannot be successful academically. This is one example which highlights the importance of students developing a positive academic self-efficacy.

Much of what is known about self-efficacy today has been contributed by Bandura. He was the first to suggest that a positive home life is a large contributor to a person’s self-efficacy. “When parents challenge their children academically and show them the value of education, the children are more likely to develop a positive academic self-efficacy and be more successful” (Bandura, 1997). The development of a positive academic self-efficacy is important for teachers to understand, so they aid in this development. In the case of many at-risk youth, teachers play a vital role in the development of academic self-efficacy, considering many of the students do not receive the necessary encouragement from their home environment.

The relationship between academic self-efficacy and success. Literature strongly suggests a positive academic self-efficacy is directly related to a student’s academic success. “Self-efficacy influences several aspects of
behavior that are important to learning” (Lorbach & Jinks, 1999, p.159). It is very difficult for students to develop a positive academic self-efficacy, especially if theirs is currently negative. If a student develops positive academic self-efficacy, other aspects of their learning will most likely be positively affected. Most students need some guidance in developing a positive academic self-efficacy. Cunningham et al. (2000) indicated that, “some students were highly motivated and self-reflective, but the majority of students were not” (p.5). Negative academic self-efficacy is very difficult because “students tend to give up on solving problems rather than attributing their failure to insufficient effort, lack of information, or reliance upon ineffective strategies and trying again” (Cunningham et al., 2000, p.8-9).

Research shows a strong relationship between a student’s academic self-efficacy and his/her academic success. Generally the more positive a student’s academic self-efficacy, the more successful the student is academically. “Judgments of capability for learning or performing behaviors at designated levels are powerfully related to the academic success that students experience” (Schunk & Miller, 2002, Abstract section, ¶ 1). “Self-efficacy has been positively related to higher levels of
achievement and learning as well as a wide variety of adaptive academic outcomes such as higher levels of effort and increased persistence on difficult tasks” (Bandura, 1997; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002 in Linnebrink, 2002, ¶ 9). Students with a positive academic self-efficacy are more likely to try to succeed at higher level questions and activities in order to obtain mastery in the studied content. They are also more likely to go beyond what is expected and be persistent in finding answers to their own questions (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006, p. 52).

Apparently there is a cycle which involves academic self-efficacy, engagement, and academic success. Zimmerman and Cleary (2006) explain that “when students believe that they can perform a task in a proficient manner, they will become more engaged in the activity, work harder, and sustain high levels of effort even when obstacles are encountered” (p.51). In other words, as a student’s academic self-efficacy improves, he/she becomes more engaged in learning, and as a result, becomes more academically successful. By understanding this cycle, teachers can promote learning. This cycle can also occur in the other direction. Teachers need to be aware of the potentially negative direction and make appropriate interventions.
The transition from elementary and middle grades to high school can be demanding and overwhelming for some students. For students who find this transition particularly challenging, there appears to be a link between low academic self-efficacy and participating in risky behaviors. Bandura, et al. in Zimmerman & Cleary (2006) suggested:

If adolescents fail to regulate this demanding academic environment effectively, their academic grades will likely decline - often leading to a loss of self-efficacy about succeeding in school. As their self-efficacy diminishes, adolescents can become embedded in a downward cycle of academic achievement that may involve aligning themselves with peers who possess unfavorable views about the value and importance of school. Conversely, adolescents with a strong sense of efficacy for learning are more resilient and better able to resist the adverse academic influences of low-achieving peers than are those with a weak sense of efficacy (p. 46).

This is not to say that all students do not face challenges and the temptation of engaging in risky behaviors. This is to simply suggest that “those who are more self-efficacious about being able to effectively manage and cope with these
circumstances are expected to have a higher probability of succeeding, even if others have the same inherent ability or skill level” (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006, p. 53).

Benefits of developing a positive academic self-efficacy. There are many reasons it is important that students develop a positive academic self-efficacy. As previously mentioned, there is a strong connection between academic self-efficacy and a student’s academic success. It has also been mentioned that students with a positive academic self-efficacy are less likely to engage in risky behaviors and have an easier time dealing with difficult circumstances. However, there are even more and just as important reasons for students to develop a positive academic self-efficacy. Such reasons include decreasing the likelihood of a student developing a mental illness and empowering students to become more self-directed, independent learners. “Students who are confident in their academic capabilities monitor their work time more effectively, are more efficient problem solvers, and show more persistence than do equally able peers with low self-efficacy” (Schunk & Pajares in Usher & Pajares, 2008, p. 751).

Research has shown a significant relationship between a student’s academic self-efficacy and mental illness.
“Children who doubt their efficacy reduce their academic aspirations, experience greater depression, and develop less prosocial and more problem behavior: Over time, students’ growing doubts about their intellectual capabilities and the resulting deficiencies in academic skill are likely to foreclose occupational avenues for them” (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006, p. 55).

“Individuals who seek to proactively and efficiently manage their lives to achieve self-set goals are often called self-regulated learners” (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006, p. 56). Research shows a reciprocal link between students’ self-efficacy and their self-regulated behaviors. “Self-regulated individuals naturally feel empowered because of their adaptive self-motivational beliefs, particularly with regard to their perceptions of personal capability” (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006, p. 56). Students with a strong, positive academic self-efficacy are most likely to become self-regulated learners.

*Educators’ role in guiding students to develop a positive academic self-efficacy.* Educators need to understand why students perform at particular academic levels and a students’ self-efficacy is certainly one of those reasons. Teachers need to understand the relationship between academic self-efficacy and their students’
performances in the classroom. They can use this understanding to plan more effective lessons, including more activities and discussions, which will engage more students during class. Administrators and curriculum developers also need to understand this relationship so that they may develop curricula which encourage positive academic self-efficacy for students.

There have been many suggestions to help improve students’ academic self-efficacy. These include a strong teacher-student relationship, teacher attentiveness to student needs, self-evaluation, and student participation in extra-curricular activities. “Higher-quality teacher-student relationships predict stronger motivation in the classroom” (Murdock & Miller, 2003, p.393). When teachers strive to be more of a facilitator than a teacher, students respond better to them. Teachers who develop a strong teacher-student relationship will be able to connect with the student and demand more from them. Students who respect their teacher are more likely to complete his/her work, contributing to academic success.

Teachers also need to be sensitive to their students’ culture when developing lesson plans and activities. “Attentiveness to the psychosocial adjustment and school engagement of academically at-risk students are the keys to
academic success” (Borman, 2001, p.21). When a teacher recognizes the cultural differences in the classroom, the students will be much more engaged in the activities and will respond more positively to the teacher.

Self-evaluation is also extremely important in developing a positive academic self-efficacy. “If students learn to monitor their own learning and effectively evaluate their own work, they will join the prepared workforce of the future” (Cunningham et al., 2000, p.2). When students can see their improvements over a period of time, they gradually begin to believe they can be successful in academics. There is more to improving a student’s academic self-efficacy than can be accomplished in the classroom.

“Extracurricular activities are a vital part of any intervention effort to advance students’ social, emotional, and academic development toward the goal of becoming successful citizens” (Young, 1997, p.8). Many at-risk youth do not have a positive extracurricular life outside of school. Some even gear their extracurricular time toward illegal or promiscuous activities. If schools can develop alternative extracurricular options for the students, it may keep them out of trouble and offer the time needed for teachers and students to develop a positive relationship outside the classroom environment.
Another approach gaining popularity for helping students develop positive academic self-efficacy is the idea of a project-based/hands-on curriculum. Freire (2000) discusses the positive influences project-based learning can have on students. Freire’s approach to project-based learning which uses the Critical Pedagogy Theory is one that many educators have the ability to incorporate into their own practice.

Freire first discusses what he calls the “banking” process. In the banking process, teachers are the knowledgeable ones who see it as their duty to instill all their knowledge upon their students, who are the unknowledgeable ones. Freire not only claims this process is not an effective way to learn, it also further encourages the model of the teachers being dominant and the learners remaining oppressed. The oppressed are those individuals who are, “incomplete and are conscious of their incompleteness” (Freire, 1993, p.43). Oppression proves to be a social injustice trying to break free of its chains. In order for this to occur, the oppressors as well as the oppressed must challenge the processes which encourages oppression to remain. In the case of unsuccessful students, they are the most oppressed group within education. They are often undervalued and left to slip through the cracks.
To begin to challenge oppression, Freire strongly supports the idea of project-based learning in education. In project-based learning, students are able to question the social injustice of allowing oppression to continue year after year. With project-based learning, there are two parts of the project – the process in which the project is developed and implemented and the reflection on the end result, both of which are incredibly important in the learning process for students and teachers alike. Students select a project which will have a positive influence on their community. Freire suggests that the projects remain community based and not expand past what the students will be able to accomplish within a reasonable time frame. The students will learn the process for changing things in their own community. An understanding will develop if they challenge what they know is unjust and become positive change agents. They will develop a sense of positive self-efficacy and build their self-esteem. This process shows the oppressors that the oppressed are capable of challenging issues within their community and taking action to make the necessary changes. On the other hand, bestowing knowledge upon the “empty vessels” that students are and then asking them to reiterate that knowledge will not create individuals who challenge the norm, because they
know it is unjust. However, project-based learning throughout all cultures and age groups provide the tools to do this.

With the knowledge gained from participating in a project-based curriculum, students will be able to do much more than reiterate what they have learned; they will be able to apply what they have learned to other aspects of life. Project-based learning will offer students a refreshed way to learn and the ability to question the environment in which they live. Hopefully, in the end, a new generation will rise and accept the challenge of eliminating oppression altogether.

An At-Risk Population

Students who are at-risk of not graduating high school are ultimately at-risk of not being successful in life. Bandura and Maslow contributed much about what is understood about the at-risk population of students with relation to environmental circumstances and how those circumstances impact individuals’ ultimate success, including academic success.

Definition. The term “at-risk” simply refers to youth who are at risk of not completing high school for one reason or another. However, not completing high school is only a symptom of the real problems. Druian (2001)
suggests that demographic, socioeconomic, and institutional characteristics (each of which can be divided into four levels: individual, family or home, school, and community) play a major role in determining which youth are categorized as at-risk (p.3). Some of the aforementioned institutional characteristics include “living in high-growth states, living in unstable school districts, being a member of a low-income family, having low academic skills, having parents who are not high school graduates, speaking English as a second language, being a single-parent child, having negative self-perceptions, being bored or alienated, having low self-esteem, and pursuing alternatives (paid work, marriage, having children)” (Druian, 2001, p.3). Some other factors suggested by Moore (2006) include single parenthood, family dysfunction, and parental substance abuse (p. 2).

Students who are categorized as at-risk often times do not succeed in traditional school settings because they have different needs than those students who do succeed. At-risk youth need specialized attention in the classroom with additional guidance regarding their personal situations, often times including such things as anger management, communication, mental health, violence,
behavior disorders, and other life skills they would not be able to obtain and focus on at their traditional school.

Historically, traditional schools used programs such as ability grouping, grade retention, special education, and pull-out programs to split successful students from unsuccessful students. This is a growing problem which needs to be addressed.

“The personal, economic, and social costs of academic underachievement are high and growing. Each year, increasing numbers of students enter school with circumstances in their lives that schools are ill prepared to accommodate. Yet from this academically and culturally diverse population must come the next generation of scientists, engineers, and other skilled professionals” (Costello, 1996).

Another point to consider when attempting to determine why some students do not perform well in the traditional schools is that many have difficulty sitting in their assigned seats seven hours a day, reading books, answering questions, and listening to lectures. Unfortunately, the situation just described is still typical of most classrooms in traditional schools.

Factors related to at-risk students. Environment has a strong influence on a student’s life. The type of support a
student receives at home as well as the physical characteristics and demographics of the neighborhoods in which they live are strong indicators as to whether a student will become at-risk. School is where students under the age of 18 spend about a quarter of their waking hours. They are going to be influenced by many - teachers and students alike. They must be taught and shown how to make responsible decisions when in these pivotal situations. While school can be a strong positive influence in a student’s life, often times it is not and only seems to create more problems for the student. Students will not succeed and may very well become a drop-out statistic if they do not view themselves as capable or worthy of a quality education. Teachers and administrators are responsible to be sure students are taught the necessary skills to be productive citizens of society as well as ensuring that every student succeeds.

The psychologist, Abraham Maslow, developed a pyramid stating the basic hierarchy of needs, the foundation of which is food and shelter (Maslow, 1954). According to Maslow, while it is important that all needs be met, food and shelter are two which are essential for students to be able to function. Students who do not have their basic
survival needs met at home will not perform at the same academic level as students who do.

School personnel and their staff must understand that many students who have been identified as at-risk do not arrive at school each day with their basic needs met. School is an important aspect of this intervention. “This is the only place where all children can be easily reached regardless of their age, socioeconomic status, cultural background, or ethnicity” (Bandura, 1997, p. 176). Until students have had those needs met, it is unlikely that they will be able to concentrate on school work. When students are unable to concentrate on school work, they may create behavior problems. “Problem behaviors usually go together as part of a distinctive lifestyle rather than appearing in isolation” (Bandura, 1997, p. 177). Unfortunately, it seems many schools fail to recognize this hierarchy of needs which must be met before anything else can be accomplished. Too many schools have not attempted to identify or cater to the deficiencies these students may be experiencing in their lives.

“Educators do not want the additional responsibilities of health promotion and disease prevention, nor are they adequately equipped for the role even if they were willing to undertake it. Moreover, schools are
reluctant to get embroiled in social controversies over drug use, sexuality, and the various social morbidities that place youth at risk. Many educators argue that it is not their responsibility to remedy society’s social ills. They have enough problems fulfilling their basic academic mission” (Bandura, 1997, p. 176).

Whether educators believe it is their responsibility to get involved with the social controversies, it must become the responsibility of school leaders and teachers to help their students not only realize success, but show them the possibilities for a positive future, and encourage them to reach that goal. In order to do this, schools may have to accept the charge of getting involved in community issues and controversies outside of the school walls.

Strategies for serving at-risk youth. Many alternative educational settings/schools are attempting something new and innovative where a typical classroom looks very different from what much of the American society knows and understands education to be. The teachers act as facilitators, guiding student learning, rather than standing in front of the classroom talking at the students for nearly the entire bell. Education takes on a much more “hands-on” approach and it is proving to be effective in
its early stages. According to Hamilton in Druian (2001), effective at-risk programs included such components as strong vocational components and out of classroom learning (p. 4). It has been shown that students learn more, and even more importantly, retain more information through this method than they did when they were not actively involved in their education process (Barnett, 2004, Abstract section, ¶ 3).

Research has shown students are better learners when they are actively involved in their own learning process. The interactive approach varies in degree, anywhere from implementation of videos, computer programs and labs, to activities, discussions, and real-life comparisons to what is being taught. Most teachers who use these methods utilize a combination of these teaching strategies, but by far the most widely used method is the process of connecting what is being taught in the classroom to real-life situations. When these comparisons are made, the students are able to see the applications of what they are learning. Research shows that “interactive teaching is needed for students to transfer their learning flexibly to novel situations they face in and out of school” (Barnett, 2004, Abstract section, ¶ 3).
One study examined two groups of college students. Both groups received and read the same books; however, the control group received no additional instruction, while the other group watched videos related to the topics they were studying. The research supports that, “when students analyze contrasting cases surrounding a previously unfamiliar theme and attend a subsequent lecture that provides a theoretical explanation for the distinctions presented in the cases, their understanding of the concepts represented by the cases aligns more closely with expert knowledge than the understanding of students who had read a summary of the cases” (Beitzel, 2004, p.3). This study shows that while students may still be able to comprehend and understand what they read in a textbook, what they learn is greatly enhanced when they have supplemental instruction and repetition of the same subject matter.

Interactive learning allows students to apply what they learned in the classroom to real-world situations. If there are no hands-on activities, the students have a much harder time taking what they read in a book and transferring it to real situations. Another study examined elementary age children and compared a lecture style of teaching to a hands-on/interactive style of teaching. The results were clear, yet not surprising.
“The interactive group became increasingly engaged as the training sessions progressed and made more on-topic comments. These findings suggest that interactive teaching is needed for students to transfer their learning flexibility to novel situations they face in and out of school. Further, if learning is assessed only by memory tests and specific near transfer, lecture-style teaching may appear misleadingly successful” (Barnett, 2004, Abstract section, ¶ 3).

Research continues to support this theory time and time again. The most popular approach to interactive learning is a process known as inquiry. Inquiry is a hands-on, unstructured approach to learning. It is not necessarily a set of labs with procedures and an assessment. Rather, inquiry is a way of learning in which the students direct their own learning through questioning the world around them and finding the answers through their own procedures and experiments. Teachers, who use the inquiry method, act as facilitators rather than presenters of information. In the lecture style of learning, “the teacher imparts their knowledge to the students. However, in order to gain a genuine understanding of science, the
As research shows, there must be programs designed to provide at-risk students with an engaging education, the encouragement to be successful, and the opportunity to change their behavior without being constantly reprimanded, but rather redirected. One approach to dealing with students who are identified as at-risk is to send them to an alternative educational setting. While separating students who require additional attention and a different way to learn may be perceived as a type of grouping, it should be up to the individual student to determine if the placement is an advantage or disadvantage for her/his academic success. Depending on the foundation of the philosophy of the alternative setting, this can prove to be a positive or negative experience for the student.

Alternative education focuses on different goals, one of which deals with the concept of a learner-centered perspective. Traditionally, teachers made the decisions regarding what their students need to learn and how they need to learn it. They define for the students the curriculum, the standards that will be met, and the process/activities which will take them to meeting those goals. A learner-centered approach, however, suggests that
the teacher designs lesson plans for the students while taking each unique talent and strength into consideration, to aid the learners in their learning process. Students learn to develop their own questions and answers while still addressing the content necessary for them to do well on achievement testing. In a traditional setting it would be a very difficult and overwhelming task to address each individual learner’s characteristics, but given the characteristics of an alternative educational setting, this is an everyday task. The goal of the learner-center approach is to, “increase the likelihood of success for students and their teachers and that the learner-centered principles can become a framework for determining how to use and assess the efficacy of technology in providing qualities and characteristics of the most effective teachers” (McCombs, 2000, p.7). An educator who proves to be successful using the learner-centered approach is one who has set up a positive learning environment in his/her classroom.

The Relationship between At-Risk Youth and Academic Self-Efficacy

There are risk factors which identify a student as at-risk and there are risk factors which indicate whether a student will develop a low academic self-efficacy. What is
notable are the many commonalities between the two sets of risk factors. These commonalities may imply a relationship between at-risk youth and low academic self-efficacy.

At-risk youth are identified as such based on certain environmental risk factors. According to Druian (2001) and Moore (2006), such risk factors include living in poverty, having parents who are not high school graduates, being a single-parent child, living in a dysfunctional family, being a teen parent, and family substance abuse. Bandura (1997) identified some risk factors that influence the development of an individual’s academic self-efficacy. Such risk factors include low socioeconomic status, low parental academic aspirations, and negative home life. Some of the risk factors which identify a student as at-risk can fall under the category of the risk factor, negative home life, for low academic self-efficacy. These risk factors include being a single-parent child, living in a dysfunctional family, being a teen parent, and family substance abuse.

There is a strong relationship between the risk factors which identify students as at-risk and those which indicate the development of low academic self-efficacy. This relationship indicates a strong implication that students who are identified as at-risk will also develop low academic self-efficacy; suggesting that the majority of
students with low academic self-efficacy will fall into the at-risk population within a school. The implications of this relationship are instrumental in the development of educational programs, curriculums, and school cultures.

Summary

Contributions by individuals such as Bandura have helped us realize the challenges many at-risk students face at home and school. This literature helps us to recognize the reasons these students may have difficulty becoming academically successful. If teachers and administrators can work together to develop strategies to help students create positive academic self-efficacies, there will be a turn in education. Being proactive in helping students develop positive academic self-efficacies by teachers using project-based/inquiry learning are important factors in developing successful students. However, it will ultimately be up to the individual students to find it in themselves to become successful advocates for themselves and their communities and possibly even empower others to do the same.
CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

This study was concerned with the effects of environmental risk factors on at-risk urban high school students’ academic self-efficacy. The researcher utilized a qualitative method and worked under the conceptual framework of grounded theory. The data collection included guided writing and interviews with sixteen at-risk urban high school students. Data were collected at the high school where the students attended. This chapter includes an overview of the rationale for qualitative research, an explanation of grounded theory and why the researcher chose this approach, an introduction to each of the participants, and a detailed explanation of the data collection and analysis procedures.

Rationale for Qualitative Methods

The study was performed using qualitative methods; more specifically, narrative analysis. “Narrative analysis extends the idea of text to include in-depth interview transcripts, life history narratives, historical memoirs, and creative nonfiction” (Patton, 2002, p. 115). Due to the nature of what was being studied, it was important to have an understanding of each student’s life and the challenges she/he have faced throughout his/her childhood. It was
important for the audience to feel a connection with the participants in order to feel the sense of urgency for these students to succeed.

This study was concerned with the effects of environmental risk factors on at-risk urban high school students’ academic self-efficacy. There are many implications related to high school students’ academic self-efficacy. The most impactful implication being the level of academic success a student experiences, which may ultimately lead to the level of personal success the student accomplishes. Zimmerman and Cleary (2006) suggest that:

“adolescents’ perceptions of efficacy play a major role in their transition from childhood dependency to adulthood self-sufficiency. Ecologically-oriented research has shown that adolescents’ self-efficacy beliefs emerge from a rich and complex interplay of forces in which these beliefs are both causes and effects of personal and academic functioning as well as future occupational choices” (p. 65).

For this reason, it is important to understand why and how students develop a low academic self-efficacy so that school leaders can be advocates for school curricula which
foster the development of positive academic self-efficacies.

Qualitative methods were used for the study because of the specific information which was to be examined. The researcher sought to determine how students have been affected by environmental risk factors. The literature suggests that such risk factors include being a teen parent, living in poverty, being exposed to drug and/or alcohol abuse in the home, having a parent without a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED), and living in a non-nuclear family. The researcher not only wanted to know which factors influenced students, but more specifically, how students were affected by those factors. The researcher was looking for personal accounts of events and feelings from the students. In the qualitative method, “the researcher makes firsthand observations of the activities and interactions, sometimes engaging personally in those activities as a participant observer” (Patton, 2002, p. 4). The researcher in this study conducted firsthand interviews with the participants regarding the environmental risk factors that have affected their academic self-efficacy and determined common themes among students. “The themes, patterns, understandings, and
insights that emerge from fieldwork and subsequent analysis are the fruit of qualitative inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 5).

This study has the potential to help educators and administrators understand the importance of students developing positive academic self-efficacies. The researcher wanted teachers and administrators to get a real feeling of what students experience at home and how it affects their academic lives. If educators hear the accounts first hand, they may feel more empathetic and be more likely to take student experiences into account when developing school cultures and curricula.

The researcher was looking to develop a new connection which may not fit into one particular theoretical framework. Therefore, she wanted to have the freedom to analyze the data independently of a theory and analyze it for what it was.

Site Location

The necessary criteria for site selection included accessibility to the researcher, a high population of at-risk urban high school students, a district and school willing to participate in the study, and finally students willing to participate in the study and parents/guardians willing to allow their children to participate in the study. The researcher chose a small alternative high school
within a larger school district. The small school was an ideal location for a variety of reasons. First, the researcher had accessibility. Secondly, the location was appropriate because there were a wide variety of students with regards to academic achievement and personal background. The school served a 100% at-risk population. For the purpose of this research, at-risk students were identified as being credit deficient. Students of varying needs and challenges which identify them as at-risk attend the school. Finally, the superintendent of the district and principal of the school were very willing and open to the idea of allowing the researcher to conduct the research within the district.

The research site was a small alternative high school within an urban setting, serving students from a Midwest metropolitan region. The school was roughly 40% African American and 60% Caucasian. Over 90% of the students in the school received free or reduced lunch. This means that 90% of the students were below or just above the poverty line. Most families who had children at the school were non-nuclear. The school accepted students from other local school districts who needed an alternative placement, which their home school could not provide to the student. Students who attended this school were all credit
deficient. However, the reasons for their credit deficiencies varied and included teen parenting, behavior problems, mental health diagnosis, learning disabilities, family challenges which prevented them from being in a traditional educational setting, and court involvement due to illegal activity.

The school is non-traditional in many ways. First, it is a school of choice. This means students are not forced to attend the school, but rather choose to attend. They have decided it is time to concentrate on graduating high school rather than the conditions which put them in the situation of being behind on credits in the first place. The school works on a block schedule. This means students take four classes a day. At the end of the first semester, all students should have earned four credits. Students are enrolled in four new classes during the second semester and should have earned four more credits by the end of the semester. Students have the opportunity to earn a total of eight credits per school year. This provides students the privilege of “catching up” on credits they have fallen behind on.

Students may also enroll in the Career Based Intervention (CBI) class. This class affords students the opportunity to earn high school elective credits for
working. Students simply turn in their pay stubs, hours are added up, and evaluations are completed in order to award students work credits. Consequently, students who are old enough and mature enough to hold a job may earn up to eleven credits in one year. Generally, schools require about twenty-one credits to graduate.

Finally, the school personnel work individually with each student to meet his/her needs. Each student chose the alternative placement for education based on her/his individual needs. For this reason, the staff works to develop Individual Education Plans (IEP) and behavior plans for all students in need of such a plan. The staff works to ensure every student learns and feels safe in the school environment. The school staff and students work to develop a culture of understanding, support, and encouragement for all so that everyone will succeed.

Entry and Role Negotiation

The researcher gave much thought to her role negotiation considering she was an administrator in the building. She simply posted signs asking for student participation in the study. She did not offer extra credit or incentives for participating in the study, nor did she coerce any student to participate. She did not participate in any direct instruction with the students and did not
assign grades to any participants. She did not believe there was a need to build rapport with her students, as she had already done this throughout the course of the school year. She believes participants may have given her more information than they would a stranger when interviewing and completing the guided writing questions. She took on two types of latent roles. The first was acting as a confidante to the student participants. She was there to listen and keep their information confidential. Her second role was to be an advocate for students who have been subjected to environmental risk factors that have negatively impacted their academic success. To the students, she did not appear to be an advocate in this matter; however, that will be her role through her publications.

The researcher believed her social location may have the greatest influence on data collection. She believed this because she, for the most part, studied students who were at or below the poverty line and had been influenced by some seriously limiting environmental factors, which she personally had not experienced. As for her race and gender, she does not believe this had much of an impact on her data collection. She was qualified to study the academic self-efficacy of at-risk students because she had been working
in a setting with a high population of at-risk students since she began her career in education. She had come to understand the students and had developed a sense of advocacy for them.

The researcher has a genuine care for and understanding of the participants. This specific research was chosen because the researcher is highly passionate about it and wants to see change for the people she studied. She worked diligently to develop and maintain strong relationships with students, parents, and community members. She attended all parent meetings and conferences at the school and made the parents and students aware she was there as a supporter for the students’ education. She made herself available to parents with questions and concerns. She developed positive, mutually respectful relationship with students, parents, and community members.

Validity

The research has both internal and external validity. “Internal validity of a research study is the extent to which its design and the data it yields allow the researcher to draw accurate conclusions about cause-and-effect and other relationships within the data” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 97). The research was concerned with determining the effects of environmental risk factors on
students’ academic self-efficacy. It could be assumed that students with low academic self-efficacy have been affected by more environmental risk factors than those students with high levels of academic self-efficacy. To be sure the research is valid, the researcher chose to include students with both high and low levels of academic self-efficacy so the environmental risk factors could be isolated.

External validity is “the extent to which its results apply to situations beyond the study itself—in other words, the extent to which the conclusions drawn can be generalized to other contexts” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 99). Strategies used in this study to enhance the external validity of research were a real-life setting and the use of a representative sample. “Research that is conducted in the outside world, although it may not have the tight controls of a laboratory project, may be more valid in the sense that it yields results with broader applicability to other real-world contexts” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 99). This study was performed in a public school setting with real students who attend a real school. Due to this, the applicability to other real-world contexts exists. In addition, a representative sample was used. Although the sample was fairly limited in its diversity, the results may
be applied to other at-risk urban high school students in other locations.

“To the extent that we restrict our research to people with a particular set of characteristics, we may not be able to generalize our findings to those with a very different set of characteristics. Ideally, we want the participants in a research study to be a representative sample of the population about which we wish to draw conclusions” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 100).

Other validity methods employed for use during this study included a thick description and respondent validation. A thick description is used when “the situation is described in sufficiently rich, “thick” detail that readers can draw their own conclusions from the data presented” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 100). In this research, narrative inquiry was used to tell the stories of each student so the audience could feel a connection to them and their lives. Respondent validation is when “the researcher takes his or her conclusions back to the participants in the study and asks quite simply, Do you agree with my conclusions? Do they make sense based on your own experiences?” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 100). The researcher used this method and went back after analysis
was completed and conducted member checks by asking the students to verify the conclusions of the analysis.

Reliability

Reliability refers to “the consistency with which a measuring instrument yields a certain result when the entity being measured hasn’t changed” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 29). The research was conducted at a site where all participants were considered at-risk. A highly reliable and valid screening survey which helped to identify 16 students with varying levels of academic self-efficacy was used. Primarily two sources of data which include an interview and a guided writing were used in the research.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher promised confidentiality to all participants and explained this in detail in the letter of consent she asked the student and his/her guardian to sign. Separate folders were kept for each student who participated in the study. Each student was assigned a number to keep his/her personal information confidential. The names which corresponded to the numbers were kept confidential. Students’ names were changed, and the names of participants will never be revealed.

All confidential information was kept in a locked file cabinet and will be destroyed three years following the
completion of the study. Collected information includes: an initial survey on academic self-efficacy, guided writings by each participant, and a taped interview with each participant.

Exit Strategy

When it became time for the researcher to exit her role as a researcher, she did a few things. She was sure to make copies of the final report for any students and parents who requested it. She also thanked everyone involved with helping her with the study: student participants, teachers, school administrators, etc. At the end of the study, the researcher felt fortunate. Although she exited the setting as a researcher, she was able to continue to see her participants on a daily basis through her role as an administrator in the school.

Identification of the Participants

Data were collected over a two month time period. The study included 16 students and was conducted between September 2008 and June 2009. Students were first made aware of the study through announcements at the school. The study began as soon as the researcher received approval from the University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board (IRB). Interested students were directed to the researcher. At that point, a letter to his/her
parent/guardian was sent home with the student. The letter explained the study and asked the parent to sign a letter of consent. The researcher made herself available for questions, as well.

Due to the fact that participants were not unique in their challenges, but addressing the challenges was pertinent to the survival of society, the researcher chose to use a sampling technique known as purposeful sampling. Patton (2002) describes purposeful sampling as follows:

“The logic and power of purposeful sampling derive from the emphasis on in-depth understanding. This leads to selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling” (p. 46).

More specifically, the researcher used a type of purposeful sampling referred to as stratified purposeful sampling. This more specific type of sampling “illustrates characteristics of particular subgroups of interest” (Patton, 2002, p. 244). The results of the research can be generalized for particular subgroups anywhere and her findings were not isolated in meaning only for her participants. “The purpose of a stratified purposeful
sample is to capture major variations rather than to identify a common core” (Patton, 2002, p. 240). Other educators can use the results of this research and apply the findings to students with similar situations.

Data were collected about high school students’ academic self-efficacy and the environmental factors they are subject to. In order to collect data on students’ academic self-efficacy, students were asked to complete an assessment survey which identified his/her level of academic self-efficacy, complete a guided writing questionnaire, and participate in a one-on-one interview.

The instrument used to screen students which determined the level of each student’s academic self-efficacy was the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales or PALS (Appendix A). The validity of PALS was established by “conducting confirmatory factor analysis on the 14 personal goal orientation items to examine the factor structure for the three sets of items (mastery, performance-approach, and performance-avoid)” (Midgley, 2000, p. 2). PALS has a reliability alpha coefficient of .79. PALS was developed “to examine the relation between the learning environment and students’ motivation, affect, and behavior” (Midgley, et al., 2000, p. 2). Although the survey is very long in its entirety, each PASL scale may be used individually. The
PALS survey used for this research was titled Academic Efficacy. The alpha coefficient for this particular survey is .79 with a standard deviation of .71. The survey consisted of five questions, which asked students to rank their beliefs about how well they can complete a particular school related task.

Of the 27 students who completed the academic self-efficacy survey, 16 students of varying levels of academic self-efficacy were asked to continue with the study. The lowest possible score a student could have was a 5. This would mean that the student scored himself/herself a “1” on every question. The highest score one could achieve was a 25. Scores for the 27 participants who responded to PALS ranged from 11-25. The top 8 scoring participants’ scores fell between 23 and 25. The lowest 8 scores were a little broader and ranged from 11-17. Participants scoring in the middle were not asked to continue with the study.

The continuing participants included sixteen students who were selected using the lowest eight and highest eight PALS scores. The participants included ten males and six females. All participants were asked to complete the guided writing and interview, and all agreed to do so. Participants are listed in order of highest PALS to lowest PALS score.
Lucas. This is Lucas' first year at the alternative school. He recently enrolled at the school, well after the start of the school year. He is fifteen years old and African American. He was having difficulty at his traditional high school. His principal recommended he try the alternative school. Within his first week he instigated a fight and severely injured another student. He has significant behavior problems ranging from fighting to foul language to drugs. Based on work samples, Lucas is very intelligent but cannot control his behavior. He scored a 25 on the PALS.

Chris. Chris enrolled at the alternative school at the beginning of this school year. He came to the school because his cousin had attended and was able to graduate. Chris had the same plan in mind. However, he did not start off well and chose to steal while on a field trip. This landed him in some trouble and he lost the trust of the staff. He has worked hard to regain that trust and doing well at it. He is Caucasian, seventeen years old, and in 11th grade. He is hoping to graduate this year if he can earn enough credits. This would mean he finished high school in three years instead of four. He scored a 24 on the PALS.
Dante. Dante is African American, seventeen years old, and an 11th grader who is hoping to graduate this year. He came to the alternative school with no credits half way through his freshman year. He had severe behavior problems upon arrival, and the problems persisted through his 10th grade year. His problems included stealing, defiance, disrespect to the staff and other students, foul language, fighting, and possession of illegal drugs. During the beginning portion of his 11th grade year, he realized he could accumulate enough credits to graduate a year early if he worked hard on his grades and stayed out of trouble. He had 15 credits at the beginning of his 11th grade year. The district he attends requires twenty-one credits for graduation and his school offers eight credits per year. He scored a 24 on the PALS.

Tasha. Tasha began the school year at the alternative school as well. She was attending the alternative school because she wanted to continue playing sports for the high school but was unable to stay eligible because of her behaviors which ended up getting her suspended from school, and consequently from the team. Her biggest discipline offense is bullying. She bullies other girls and makes fun of them and then denies she has done anything. She is very good at “pulling the wool” over people’s eyes. She has also
instigated fights, both verbal and physical. Tasha has worked hard this year on her behavior and attitude but still struggles with not bullying others and putting others down. She is African American, an 11th grader, seventeen years old, and plans to graduate on time next year. Tasha has a one year old child. She scored a 24 on the PALS.

Jillian. Jillian is a Caucasian, fifteen year old 9th grader who began at the alternative school at the beginning of the year with her 11th grade sister. She is of average intelligence but has high potential. Unfortunately, she possibly suffers from depression and has appeared despondent this year. She has become withdrawn and her grades have begun to slip. She struggles with self-confidence and this often comes off as appearing rude to others. She scored a 24 on the PALS.

William. William is African American, an 11th grader, seventeen years old, and plans to graduate a year early. This means he will finish high school in three years, rather than the traditional four. Dante and William are good friends both inside and outside school. William began at the alternative school as an 8th grader and has stayed throughout his high school career. He has had considerable behavior problems ranging from foul language to stealing and being disrespectful to staff members. He has worked
hard at becoming a better person and is planning to finish high school this June. He scored a 23 on the PALS.

Erica. Erica is another 11th grader who wishes to graduate a year early. She is seventeen and Caucasian. Erica is currently pregnant with a baby girl, and the baby was due in April. She faced many challenges in her life and is working hard to avoid those problems herself. Her family is very abusive and she has moved from home to home within her circle of family members. She struggles to find a place where she feels she belongs. Unfortunately, Erica is far behind on her credits and may not have the opportunity to graduate early as she hopes. She scored a 23 on the PALS.

Tracy. This is Tracy’s first year at the alternative school. However her sister also attends the school. Tracy is a Caucasian 9th grader and fifteen years old. She is very smart but does not always apply herself. She tends to get caught up in the drama at school and finds that more fun and interesting than receiving good grades. She quite possibly has the highest IQ in the building but does not use her potential. She scored a 23 on the PALS.

Thomas. Thomas enrolled at the alternative school at the beginning of this year. He is African American, fifteen years old and a 9th grader. He did not start off the year well and was sent to the office on a daily basis. His
misbehaviors consisted of stealing, manipulating, lying, cheating, and being extremely disrespectful to the teachers and peers. After being sent to court for truancy and having to face the judge about his rash of behavior problems at school, he decided to clean up his behavior. He has since performed much better at school and is getting along with others. He scored a 17 on the PALS.

**Naomi.** This is Naomi’s first year at the alternative school. Naomi is very intelligent but also mentally ill. Her mental illness interferes greatly with her academic performance and many days she completes no work at all. She passed all of her state proficiencies for graduation with advanced scores. She is a Caucasian 11\textsuperscript{th} grader and hopes to graduate next year. However, she is severely credit deficient because she went an entire school year without earning any credits. She is eighteen years old and the fear is she will drop out of high school before finishing because she is so far behind. She scored a 17 on the PALS.

**Mark.** Mark has been at the alternative school for three years. His work is minimal and poor. He rarely completes assignments and complains most of the time when forced to work. He often ends up in the office for refusal to work or disrespect to the teacher. He is pleasant to be around but does not see the importance of an education.
Unfortunately, he is deficient in credits due to his lack of work. Mark is Caucasian, an 11th grader, seventeen years old, but still may not have enough credits at the end of next year to graduate. He scored a 17 on the PALS.

Caleb. This is Caleb’s first year at the alternative school, and he did not even enroll until recently. He has had a difficult time adjusting the new school setting and is challenged to stay where he belongs. He is often inappropriate with other students as well as staff and gets sent to the office regularly. He has multiple juvenile charges and currently has a probation officer to whom he must report to on a regular basis. Caleb is African American, sixteen years old, and a 10th grader but only earned two credits as a 9th grader. Caleb will be hard pressed to be considered an 11th grader by the end of this school year. He scored a 17 on the PALS.

Sean. Sean has been at the alternative school for two years. He was involved in the fight with Jonte during the year last school year. Sean has a problem with stirring things up and watching them erupt. He enjoys getting others in trouble and is frequently in the office for “running his mouth.” He is a difficult student to handle because he is very volatile and disrespectful to the staff. He is currently on home instruction because of his behavior which
included threatening the school’s resource officer and “cussing out” the principal. He is Caucasian, eighteen, and a senior hoping to graduate this year. He scored a 17 on the PALS.

Emily. Emily came to the alternative school when she was in the 10th grade. She was recommended because she was caught drinking at a school dance. She is now eighteen years old, a senior, and hopes to graduate this year. She is Caucasian. Unfortunately, she has yet to pass the State tests required to graduate. This March will be her last chance to pass if she wants to graduate in June. Emily has a 10 month old baby and has missed considerable amounts of school due to maternity leave. She did not keep up on her work during that time. She scored a 16 on the PALS.

Jeffrey. Jeffrey enrolled late in the year this school year. He came to the alternative school because he was not successful at the traditional school and wanted to continue playing sports. He has had no real problems at the alternative school and seems to be progressing well academically. His only discipline issue revolves around being on inappropriate websites. He has lost his computer privileges for the remainder of the school year. He is Caucasian, seventeen years old, in 11th grade, and hopes to graduate on time next year. He scored a 14 on the PALS.
Jonte. This is Jonte’s second year at the alternative school. He did not start off last year very well. He was a participant in the only fight all year and was deemed the aggressor in the altercation. He spent a long time fighting back from that incident and reestablishing his character. He is now the student council president and is a strong leader in the school. Jonte is Caucasian, seventeen years old, and an 11th grader who wishes to graduate a year early. Jonte scored an 11 on the PALS.

**Conceptual Framework of the Researcher**

The researcher has worked in the alternative school environment for five years, understands the culture of her students, and has grown to appreciate her students for who they are and the resiliency they possess. Throughout the years, working with her students, she began to notice the low self-efficacy her students had with regards to academics. She had not experienced this growing up, for she is from an upper-middle class neighborhood with little diversity and graduated from a high school with a 98% college bound population. Being exposed to students with low academic self-efficacy was something new to her. She began to ask questions:

- What makes these students’ lives different from the way I grew up?
• What environmental risk factors are these students exposed to?
• Is there a connection between the risk factors at-risk students are exposed to and the risk factors that cause a low academic self-efficacy?
• Do the environmental risk factors students are exposed to, in any way, affect the way they feel about themselves academically?

From her curiosity about these questions and her passion for her students, she decided to explore this further. She wanted to find answers to her questions because she knew she was not the only one who did not have the answers. If she could find answers and offer suggestions, she could help students and educators faced with similar situations. Her students were not unique in the environmental risk factors to which they were exposed. This research could help students and educators across the country.

The theoretical framework for the research was grounded theory. Grounded theory is an approach where the data that are collected help to develop a new theory. This approach is opposite of most approaches where the data are grounded in an established theory. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) describe grounded theory as:
“A grounded theory study uses a prescribed set of procedures for analyzing data and constructing a theoretical model from them. The term grounded refers to the idea that the theory that emerges from the study is derived from and “grounded” in data that have been collected in the field rather than taken from the research literature” (p. 140).

Grounded theory is the most appropriate choice to use as a theoretical framework because the researcher did not want the outcomes to be theoretically restricted by any other theory. Patton (2002) describes the relationship between qualitative inquiry and grounded theory in this way:

“Qualitative inquiry is especially powerful as a source of grounded theory, theory that is inductively generated from fieldwork, that is, theory that emerges from the researcher’s observations and interviews out in the real world rather than in the laboratory or the academy” (p. 11).

The researcher had made observations over her years of working with students with environmental challenges at home. From her experience, she developed questions which she decided to research. Due to the idea that “a grounded theory study focuses on a process related to a particular
topic, with the ultimate goal of developing a theory about that process” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 140), she chose to use grounded theory. She did not have an established theory or lens from which she was working and preferred the freedom to generate a theory as she analyzed the data. From her idea to use grounded theory, she was able to create her own theory as she interviewed participants, read the guided writings, and analyzed her transcriptions.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected and analyzed over a three month period. Data collection included an academic self-efficacy survey (PALS), guided writings, and an interview. Every student who turned in a parent/guardian consent form was able to participate in the academic self-efficacy survey. From those results, the top eight scoring students and the bottom eight scoring students were asked to continue with the study and complete the guided writing and interview.

Academic self-efficacy survey. The instrument used to measure students’ academic self-efficacy was the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (PALS). The PALS consisted of five questions which addressed student beliefs about themselves academically. All students who wished to participate in the academic self-efficacy survey took the survey in a controlled environment. Each student sat at a
table by himself/herself. The room was kept quiet and was well monitored. The survey was taken individually by each student. Participants were able to complete the survey within 5-10 minutes. Students were asked to rate their beliefs about five statements on a scale of 1-5 (1 being the statement was “not at all true” about what they believed and 5 being the statement was “very true” about what they believed). Students did not have difficulty completing the survey.

Guided writings. Data on environmental factors were collected through private interviews and guided writings from the students. The guided writings took place in a quiet classroom. Each student sat at a table by himself/herself. The researcher monitored the participants. The guided writing questions were answered individually by each participant. The guided writings gave participants the opportunity to be honest about their responses without having to speak the words. Through the researcher’s experience, many students will express more through writing things down rather than talking out loud, especially about sensitive topics. Some of the guided writing questions were open-ended responses, offering the students the opportunity to write as much or as little as they wanted. Please see Appendix B for the guided writing protocol.
Interviews. Data about the environmental risk factors students were exposed to were also collected through interviews. The interviews took place in a quite classroom or office. The only individuals in the room during the interview were the researcher and the participant being interviewed. Interviews were digitally voice recorded. The researcher used the Interview Guide Approach. In this approach "the interview guide provides topics or subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe, and ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject" (Patton, 2002, p. 343). This approach was chosen so that expanding questions could be asked for further clarification or expanded knowledge for the researcher to use in analyzing the data.

The interview questions were identical to the guided writing questions. This was done for three reasons. One, the researcher was able to read the participants' guided writing responses before the interviews and to ask clarifying and expanding questions to the written responses. Second, students may reveal something in the interview they did not during the guided writing session. Third, the researcher was able to compare the responses from the guided writings and the interview to verify the same general response was given. Please see Appendix C for
the interview protocol. The researcher planned on the guided writings and interviews to be aimed at answering the following question: How do environmental risk factors affect urban at-risk high school students’ academic self-efficacy?

Data Analysis Procedures

After collecting the written responses and finishing the participant interviews, analysis of data began. “Raw field notes and verbatim transcripts constitute the undigested complexity of reality. Simplifying and making sense out of that complexity constitutes the challenge of content analysis” (Patton, 2002, p. 463). A few steps were followed to ensure the most reliable data. These steps include transcribing, thematizing, analyzing, verifying, and reporting.

Transcribing. Transcribing is typing out an interview verbatim. However, it is not as simple as it may sound. When transcribing an interview, the transcriber must include pauses and other seemingly non-related material so the interview can be interpreted properly. Once the transcribing of each interview was complete, coding and analysis could take place.

Thematizing. Thematizing consists of looking for patterns in the data and coding it accordingly. The first
 thing the researcher did was read all the interview transcriptions and guided writings. Once she had an idea of what was being said, she went back through the interviews and guided writings and took notes in the margins. The notes consisted of themes or patterns she identified. She gave them a two-letter identification so other statements that matched could be easily coded. See Appendix D for a list of the coding categories and the corresponding letters. See Appendix E for the coding matrix.

Analyzing. “Content analysis involves indentifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns in the data. This essentially means analyzing the core content of interviews and observations to determine what’s significant” (Patton, 2002, p. 463). First, each individual student’s response were analyzed to determine the effects of environmental risk factors on his/her academic self-efficacy. Once each student’s responses had been analyzed, the students were analyzed as a group. Common themes amongst the students were looked for to determine if there are common environmental risk factors that affect students’ academic self-efficacy.

Verifying. The researcher went back and asked students clarifying and/or expansion questions if she believed it would add value to the study. She also asked students to
do member checks. This involved the students reading what was interpreted from the interview and guided writing and verifying that the interpretation was correct.

Reporting. After the data had been collected, transcribed, analyzed, and verified, the researcher wrote up the findings in a report as her dissertation. The researcher had to decide what to include when reporting the research and which parts to omit. This is difficult because she wanted to be sure to not omit something that could be significant. “Everything is related to everything else in a flowing, even organic fashion, making coherence and organization a difficult and problematic human task” (Patton, 2002, p. 502). She was able to find a balance between description and interpretation which enabled her to share the stories of her participants while at the same time expressing the findings of her research.

Significance and Limitations of the Study

This study was concerned with identifying the effects of environmental risk factors on at-risk urban high school students’ academic self-efficacy. While this study has significance pertaining to this specific topic, it has limitations based on the specific nature of the study.
Significance of the Study

Youth everywhere are faced with environmental risk factors they cannot control, yet are subjected to on a daily basis. These environmental risk factors have many adverse effects on these youth, both academically and socially. It is important for educators to understand the environmental risk factors and how they affect students’ academic capabilities. It is also important for educators to understand the relationship between academic self-efficacy and academic success.

At one point it was accepted that students with greater intelligence would succeed at higher levels than students with lower intelligence. “However, given that the correlation between IQ and achievement is typically only in the moderate range, it seems reasonable to suggest that cognitive potential does not always translate into attained success” (Pajares & Urdan, 2006, p. 52). Additionally, “there is much evidence documenting the significant relation between self-efficacy beliefs and achievement in academic settings” (Pajares & Urdan, 2006, p. 53).

While research shows that students who have a positive academic self-efficacy will perform better in school, research also shows that students with low academic self-efficacy are more likely to face mental health issues.
“Although children’s academic self-efficacy directly enhanced academic achievement, it also influenced this achievement indirectly via reductions in depression, increases in pro-social behavior, and increases in the children’s academic aspirations” (Pajares & Urdan, 2006, p. 55).

“Considerable progress has been achieved in documenting the positive role of self-efficacy beliefs in students’ academic interest, motivation, management of academic stressors, and growth of cognitive competencies” (Bandura, 1997 & Pajares & Schunk, 2001, in Pajares & Urdan, 2006, p. 10). While progress has been made, this study helps to specify environmental risk factors youth face and how they affect students academically. Additionally, this study has a strong element of usefulness. Usefulness suggests that “the project yields conclusions that promote better understanding of the phenomenon, enable more accurate predictions about future events, or lead to interventions that enhance the quality of life” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 155). Educators can begin to understand the relationships between academic self-efficacy and success as well as the relationship between environmental risk factors students are subjected to and their subsequent academic success.
Limitations of the Study

Due to the use of stratified purposeful sampling, the conclusions drawn from the study can only be generalized for other students meeting the particular specifications that were represented in the research. This research is limited to at-risk urban high school students. Additionally, all participants were Caucasian or African American. There were no other minorities studied. Although purposeful sampling aims to make the research meaningful through information-rich stories which the readers can relate to, it does not provide enough information to make broad generalizations about the general public. Another limitation of the study is that students from only one school in the Midwest were studied and the population included only sixteen students. There were no participants from any other schools in any other regions.

Summary

This chapter introduced the participants to the audience so the reader could feel a connection with the participants they were reading about throughout the presentation of the research. The conceptual framework was presented so the reader could understand from which lens (or lack of lens) the researcher was completing the study and analyzing the data. Reliability, validity, and
significance were presented to set the stage for what was to come in the research.
CHAPTER THREE

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

This chapter is concerned with answering the following question: How do environmental risk factors affect at-risk urban high school students’ academic self-efficacy? This chapter presents the individual stories of the participants. Once the data were collected, they were analyzed by each participant and then across the participants to look for patterns in the data. The analysis is presented here.

The aim of this study was to analyze the effects environmental risk factors have on at-risk urban high school students’ academic self-efficacy. The risk factors included teen parenting, household drug and/or alcohol use, living in poverty, having one or both parents without their high school diplomas or GEDs, and living in a non-nuclear family.

Rationale for Data Presentation and Analysis

According to Bandura (1997), Druian (2001), and Moore (2006), there are some environmental risk factors which overlap in determining students to be identified as at-risk and students to be concerned with developing a low academic self-efficacy. These environmental risk factors include living in poverty, being a teen parent, having at least one
parent without a high school diploma or GED, living in a household where there is drug and/or alcohol use, and living in a non-nuclear family. Due to the significant overlaps and the connection between at-risk youth and academic self-efficacy, the question arose: how and in what ways do environmental risk factors affect a student’s academic self-efficacy?

There has been extensive research surrounding at-risk youth, and there has been extensive research around academic self-efficacy. However, there is not extensive qualitative research regarding at-risk youth who have been exposed to these five environmental risk factors and how the environmental risk factors have affected their academic self-efficacy. It is important for educators to understand how environmental risk factors affect students’ academic self-efficacy so they can intervene through avenues such as: helping the student develop a positive academic self-efficacy; providing the emotional and academic support needed so the student does not proceed to be identified as at-risk; and aiding the student in becoming a productive citizen of society so he/she will no longer be exposed to those environmental risk factors and neither will her/his family and future generations.

This research was conducted in a qualitative manner in
order to connect the reader personally with the stories of the participants thereby by enriching understanding the effects of environmental risk factors on urban students’ academic self-efficacy. The researcher believed that through providing real-life experiences and stories with the use of narrative storytelling and the qualitative method of analysis, the results would be more impactful and carry more weight in regards to the implications of the study.

Data Analysis

Each student who was interested in participating in the study was asked to complete the Patterns for Adaptive Learning Scales (PALS) survey in order to determine his/her level of academic self-efficacy. The highest scoring eight and lowest scoring eight participants were asked to continue with the study. Those sixteen participants completed a guided writing as well as a taped interview with the researcher. The guided writings and interviews gave insight into the effects the environmental risk factors which were being studied had on at-risk urban high school students. Information regarding teen parenting, living in poverty, having one or both parents without a high school diploma or GED, household drug and/or alcohol use, and living in a non-nuclear family was collected from
the participants. The interviews were transcribed after the interviews were completed.

Individual Stories of Sixteen At-Risk Urban High School Students

Each participant had his/her own story to tell. From the guided writings and interviews with each student, the researcher was able to depict parts of each participant’s “story”. Each story was unique in nature and provided insight into the importance of understanding the environmental challenges students are faced with every day of their lives. The stories of the eight participants with the highest PALS scores are presented first and the stories of the eight participants with the lowest PALS scores are presented second.

Participants with the Highest PALS Scores

Lucas (PALS = 25, GPA = N/A). Lucas is one of the most difficult students at the alternative school. He is new to the school, so the staff is still trying to get to know him. He was in several fights at his other high school before transferring to the alternative school. He is fairly intelligent but is socially incompetent. He does not read social cues and wants to fight anyone who looks at him the wrong way. He has caused the amount of violence in the school to rise since he has been there. The staff believes
the school is not the best placement for him and that he is in need of something more residential. The district is looking for another placement to better serve his demanding needs.

Lucas was exposed to three of the environmental risk factors and felt his academic self-efficacy had been affected by only one of them. He has been exposed to living in poverty, having a parent without a high school diploma or GED, and living in a non-nuclear family.

Lucas lives with a woman who he refers to as “Mom”, but is not his biological mother. She has legal custody of him but is only related by friendship to his biological mother. However, Lucas has lived with her off and on his entire life, so he knows her very well. He did not believe that living in poverty or living in a non-nuclear family had an effect on his academic self-efficacy.

Lucas did believe that having a parent without a high school diploma or GED had affected his academic self-efficacy. However, when asked about the educational level of his biological parents, his response was, “My mom has her GED I think. My dad dropped out of high school after 11th grade”. Lucas does believe it is important to graduate and stated that he wants to graduate “so I can be a great student and a good person”.

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When asked if there were other factors which have contributed to his academic self-efficacy, he responded with “basketball, football, um math, science, friends, family, and school”. The researcher asked him to clarify if these were positive aspects or negative. He responded “positive things”.

Chris (PALS = 24, GPA = 2.69). Chris is a well-liked student by both the staff and the other students in the school. He presents himself as much more mature than most other male students in the building and seems to be a positive role model for the students. He is a respectful, honest young man who loves to play baseball and hang out with his girlfriend. His girlfriend is pregnant and she is not sure if the baby is his. Regardless, he has decided to stay with her and help her with the baby, even if the child proves to not be his. He has handled the sensitive situation in an responsible manner.

Chris has been exposed to two environmental risk factors; however, he does not believe that either affected his academic self-efficacy. The risk factors he has been exposed to include household drug and/or alcohol use and living in a non-nuclear family. Chris’ mother uses marijuana on a regular basis.
The members living in his home include his dad, step-mom, step-brother, and him. When asked if living in a non-nuclear family has affected his academic self-efficacy, his response was “no, because my life is my life and I want to have a good education and living in a non-nuclear family is not going to change how I feel.” Additionally, when asked what other factors may have influenced his academic self-efficacy, his response was “my family because they tell me I can do whatever I set my mind to”.

_Dante (PALS = 24, GPA = 2.78)._ Dante is an African American teenager, with very dark skin, medium build, but tall for his age. He loves to play basketball during lunch. He usually comes in the door with a due rag on his head, sporting his favorite color, red. He is not a morning person and does not like to be spoken to first thing in the morning. He is a pleasant young man for the most part, until he does not get his way. He has been known to be violent and make threats when he gets angry. Dante has a difficult time taking responsibility for his actions and usually denies he has done anything wrong. He lives in a very small, two-bedroom apartment with his grandmother, sister, and nephew.

Dante was exposed to three environmental risk factors: household drug and/or alcohol use, living in poverty, and
living in a non-nuclear home. He believed all three of these environmental risk factors affected his academic self-efficacy.

When talking about his grandmother’s drug use he explained that he feels sad and angry, and when asked about how her use affected him academically, he explained “it could possibly affect my attitude and if I really want to do the work that is required.” He tries to separate home life from school life, but sometimes it is difficult.

When asked about living in poverty, he said there has been a positive effect on him through this experience. He explained, “I think it has helped me because without money you get to understand life without money.” He felt that he better understands the world because he has had the experience of living in poverty and having nothing.

With regard to living in a non-nuclear family, Dante seemed to have some feelings of abandonment. He stated that “if I had a normal nuclear family, then I would understand how it is to have like a mother and a father. I would have this experience and feel more comfortable with it”. He felt as though he had been impacted in a negative way by not having the opportunity to live with his biological mother and father.
When asked what other factors he thought have influenced his academic self-efficacy, he explained his thoughts on growing up in different environments. He responded to the question with, “uh my environment. Who you grow up around and where you grow up. I’ve been in two different environments. I’ve been in the suburbs and harder. It’s a lot different and it makes you act a lot different”.

It was interesting to hear Dante talk about the way some environmental risk factors (living in a non-nuclear family and living in a household where drugs and/or alcohol are abused) affected him negatively, and yet living in poverty has actually had a positive effect on him.

Tasha (PALS = 24, GPA = 2.44). Tasha is an energetic, social teenage girl. She is tall and slender and plays basketball for the district. She is very good at basketball and outplays most of the boys at lunch each day. She is notorious for bullying other girls, however. She is very sneaky about it and does not get caught often. When she does get caught, she denies it and her mother backs her up. Her mother believes the school picks on Tasha and wants to see Tasha fail. While Tasha can be very pleasant to be around, she has made the school year difficult on herself through the choices she has made.
Tasha has been exposed to four environmental risk factors and feels affected by three of them. She has been exposed to teen parenting, living in poverty, having a mother without a high school diploma or GED, and living in a non-nuclear family. She believes her academic self-efficacy has been effected by all except having a mother without a high school diploma or GED.

Tasha admitted to the difficulties she has faced with raising a daughter and trying to finish high school at the same time. She said, “sometimes I don’t get to study because my daughter is awake and won’t let me get anything done”. Tasha lives with her biological mother and receives some emotional support from her. She and her mother receive food stamps and other government assistance and Tasha works for income as well.

Tasha lives in poverty. Her mother does not work. The only income her family has is the child support which they receive from Tasha’s biological father. She is unaware of the amount of this stipend. She believes that living in poverty has actually had a positive effect on her academic self-efficacy and says, “it has made me a good person and makes me want to succeed.”

While Tasha lives in a non-nuclear family, with just her mother, her daughter, and herself, she believes it has
been a positive experience, and it has helped with the
development of her academic self-efficacy. She explains,
“my mom and my daughter support and encourage me to do
whatever I put my mind to”.

Tasha also believes that having the opportunity to
play sports has helped develop her strong sense of academic
self-efficacy. While these things make her tired at times,
they help support her and keep her going.

Jillian (PALS = 24, GPA = 3.0). Jillian does not
appear to ever be happy or in a good mood. She enjoys being
mean and cruel to others and will not admit when she has
done something wrong. She is a student who goes home each
night and complains to her mother how bad the school is.
Her mother then calls the school or drops by the school to
complain to administration. Jillian is an unhappy young
lady who cannot express what she wants and needs in order
to be happy. Jillian is a student who is probably mentally
ill but is undiagnosed.

Jillian has been exposed to four of the environmental
risk factors: living in household where drug and/or alcohol
are abused, living in poverty, having a parent without a
high school diploma or GED, and living in a non-nuclear
family. She feels negatively affected by all of these
environmental risk factors except living in a non-nuclear family.

The people living in her home include her mother, sister, her boyfriend, and herself. She does not believe this has negatively impacted her academic self-efficacy. However, the other three environmental risk factors which she has been exposed to seem to have had a negative impact on her academic self-efficacy.

Jillian’s mother and mother’s boyfriend drink occasionally. However, it seems her step-father had the biggest impact on her with regards to his abusing drugs. She explained that “my step-dad is a crack head and that affected me until my mom left him”.

Jillian’s mother is the only person in the household working at this time, and she only makes $11.00/hour. Jillian has some bad feelings of self-worth due to her family’s financial situation. She explained, “it made me feel less than others and make my concentration bad.”

Jillian’s mother has struggled with her lack of education her entire life. She has only a 7th grade education. According to Jillian, her mother did try to go back and get her GED, but she failed so she gave up. She believes her academic self-efficacy has been affected by her mother not having her high school diploma or GED.
because she says, “if I have homework or something and I need help she can’t help me because she doesn’t know nothing about what I’m doing so I have to do it on my own or get help from someone else.” Jillian does feel the need to graduate high school. She said “I want to be a better person and have things in life. You can’t go nowhere in life now without it.”

Jillian has been affected severely by the environmental risk factors she has been exposed to. She has strong feelings of low self-worth and a strong sense to need to do better so she can provide for her family better than her mother did for her.

William (PALS = 23, GPA = 2.47). William is a handsome young man with a strong build and a charming personality. He will do anything he is asked but is sneakier than any other student. He enjoys being ornery and stirring things up with students and then sitting back to watch it all unfold. His history of manipulative behavior has put him at risk of being expelled from his past schools. Due to effective intervention at his current school, he has managed to improve his behavior from major offenses to more minor cases of misbehavior. He has been at the alternative school since he was in eighth grade, so he displays an arrogant attitude and false senses of “running the place”.

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This feeling is not shared by the staff, but the students enjoy watching his mischievous behavior.

William has been exposed to two environmental risk factors and believes he has only been affected by one. Neither of his parents have their high school diplomas or GEDs, and he lives in a non-nuclear family.

He does not believe that having parents without a high school diploma has affected his academic self-efficacy. He however, does believe it is important to finish high school. He said, “I want to go to college and go for mechanical engineering. I also want to play sports for colleges. Everyone needs an education to be successful in life. You’ll need an education in order to get good jobs. Also, mostly all jobs have to do something with math and now no one can get a job who can’t use numbers.” Even though William feels strongly about earning his own education, he does not believe that his parents not having their high school diplomas has affected his academic self-efficacy because, “she’s talking about going back and finishing. Also, she still have a good job that she likes and she takes care of everyone in the household.”

William believes living in a non-nuclear family has affected his academic self-efficacy in a negative way. He said, “I grew up without my dad. He used to be around when
I was between five and nine then he just stopped coming around. I guess it was just kind of hard not having a father figure.” He was so upset by his father leaving him, he felt abandoned and worthless. This translated into his school work and he soon was not performing well academically. Eventually, his academic failure transferred into a sense of academic incapability.

William scored 23 on the PALS. He was exposed to two environmental risk factors and believed he was negatively affected by one of them. When asked if there were other factors which influenced his academic self-efficacy, he did not believe there were.

*Erica (PALS = 23, GPA = 3.9).* Erica is a very pleasant young lady. She is pregnant with her first baby. This is her second year at the alternative school. She is trying hard to catch up on her credits so she can graduate a year early. She wants to finish high school so she can take care of her child without having to balance school at the same time. Erica is very trustworthy and is often the teacher’s aide. She is one of only two students allowed in the teacher’s lounge to make copies. She comes to school each day ready to work, which is impressive given the circumstances she comes from. Erica comes from a broken family and moves from family member to family member. She
has had to call the police on her family on multiple occasions for domestic violence. She does not share her feelings and often shuts people out. It is difficult to get her to open up because she is afraid she will get in trouble.

Erica has been exposed to all five environmental risk factors, but believes she has been affected by only two of them. The two she believes have affected her academic self-efficacy are living in a household where drugs and/or alcohol have been abused and living in a non-nuclear family.

Erica is a teen parent but does not believe that her circumstances have had an effect on her academic self-efficacy because she receives substantial financial and emotional support at home. She also lives in poverty and her mother does not have her high school diploma or GED, but does not believe that these factors have affected her academic self-efficacy.

Interestingly, both environmental risk factors which Erica believes have affected her academic self-efficacy, have affected her in a positive way. She feels the need to do better than those around her. She says, “I don’t let anything get in the way of me succeeding. I know to be better than them.”
Erica scored a 23 on the PALS. While she was affected by two of the environmental risk factors, she believed those risk factors actually enhanced her level of academic self-efficacy rather than hindering it.

Tracy (PALS = 23, GPA = 3.0). Tracy is a young, intelligent, attractive young woman. She is in the ninth grade and attends the alternative school because her older sister attended last year and this year and is proving to be successful in the setting. Tracy comes from a poor family and a poor neighborhood. However, everyone in the home works and helps pay for expenses. Tracy is much more intelligent than her sister, but is not nearly as motivated. She is hoping to skate by on her wits for a while.

Tracy has been exposed to three of the environmental risk factors but believes she has only been affected by one of them. The three environmental risk factors she has been exposed to are living in a household with drug and/or alcohol abuse, living in poverty, and living in a non-nuclear family.

Even though her mom and older sister drink and her brother smokes marijuana, she does not believe it has had any effect on her academic self-efficacy. Additionally, she
lives in poverty but does not feel any effect from this on her academic self-efficacy.

Tracy believes that living in a non-nuclear family is the only factor that has affected her academic self-efficacy. In her home, there are seven people living in three bedrooms. The individuals in her home include her grandma, grandpa, mom, older brother, older sister, older sister’s child, little brother, and her. All but her grandma and grandpa live in the basement bedroom. Due to there being so many people trying to live in one room and only one mattress for all of them, they take turns working, going to school, and sleeping. Although other participants felt this type of living situation was overwhelming, Tracy finds it supportive. She likes living in this non-nuclear family because “they are always encouraging me even though I don’t have my whole family there (my dad) they are still there helping me.”

When asked if there were any other factors which affected her academic self-efficacy, her response was, “I don’t think there are any factors that affected the way I feel about my academic capabilities because I disassociate school from home.”
Participants with the Lowest PALS Scores

Thomas (PALS = 17, GPA = .75). Thomas is a very difficult student to have in the classroom. He comes from a large family where the loudest person is the one who is heard. Unfortunately, he brings this same mentality to school with him each day. On top of that, he is overly hyper and cannot sit still for more than one minute. He is constantly running around the room, talking to other students, and avoiding his class work. He comes from a very poor family, but he always seems to be one of the best dressed students in the building.

Thomas has been exposed to only one of the environmental risk factors which were studied, living in poverty. He does not believe though, that this has affected his academic self-efficacy. He does have an understanding of the importance of an education. He mentioned that he plans on graduating high school “so I can get me a good job.”

While Thomas is a very vocal student at school, he was not very vocal during the process of this study. He answered almost all answers with a “yes” or a “no.” It was difficult to get further information out of him, even when prompted to expand. It is ironic that he is often redirected in the classroom for being too social and not
completing his work due to his desire to talk with other students.

Naomi (PALS = 17, GPA = 2.0). Naomi is a mentally ill young lady. She is petite in every sense of the word. She enjoys dressing up and matching her jewelry to her outfit. However, many days her outfit does not meet uniform requirements. This does not seem to bother her though, she simply changes and goes about her day. Naomi has a difficult time gripping reality and often seems to be living in another world entirely. She spaces out during class and has a difficult time completing work because she cannot focus. Naomi is in the foster care system and has been moved from family to family due to her special needs. She often speaks of how painful it is to keep moving because she perceives it as the foster parents not wanting her anymore.

Naomi has been exposed to two environmental risk factors but believes that she has been affected by one of them. She lives in poverty and lives in a non-nuclear home. She believes living in a non-nuclear family has affected her academic self-efficacy. Naomi is currently in a foster home and lives with her foster mother and another foster child, officially. However, she explained that, “there are
some other people staying with us. They don’t exactly live there, but they are just kinda staying with us.”

She explains how living in a non-nuclear family has affected her academic self-efficacy with the lens of a foster child. “Um, it somewhat affect it because I’m not as close to them as I had been with my bio family, well the family I was adopted into. And sometimes it’s hard to communicate with them and let them know how I am and they haven’t seen me all my life to see how I do things and how I best work.”

When asked if there were other factors which affected her academic self-efficacy her response was as follows, “um being adopted into a family with a lot of other kids and only one parent and then being separated as a teenager from all of them. And then struggling with some problems of my own like an eating disorder. My frontal lobe damage that I have been told that I have. My ADHD affects my focus. I process things very slow.”

Naomi was able to think her responses through and answer them thoroughly. She had thought hard about other factors which may have affected her academic self-efficacy, aside from living in a non-nuclear family.

*Mark (PALS = 17, GPA = .85).* Mark is an interesting character. He is tall, overweight, and awkward. He rarely
completes his work and fails most everything, but that does not seem to get him down in the least. He appears to be happy-go-lucky most of the time and socializes with the other students just fine. He has many friends who encourage him to do his work, but he sees no point in it. Mark has been at the school two years and his social skills have improved tremendously. When he first arrived at the school, he would grunt and make random noises in the middle of class. He no longer does that and seems capable of following instruction, he just chooses not to participate.

Mark has been exposed to three environmental risk factors, but does not believe any of them have affected his academic self-efficacy. His mother drinks, the family income is around $300 per month, and he lives in a non-nuclear family with him mother and three cousins. Yet, he believes none of these factors have contributed to his low academic self-efficacy. When asked if there were other factors which may explain his level of academic self-efficacy, he simply said “I really have no idea”.

Caleb (PALS = 17, GPA = 2.3). Caleb is a unique child. He is of average height but slender and possesses many feminine traits. He speaks of sexuality openly and without regard to whom he may offend. He makes inappropriate references to sex without any regard to whom he may offend.
Caleb has a difficult home life. His parents have shared custody, so he travels back and forth between them weekly. When the school needs to call home, they have to ask him whose house he is staying at that week. He takes public transportation to school every day and is often late. When he walks in, he needs some time to talk to the staff and get his day started on the right foot before he can proceed to class. Caleb requires a lot of positive reinforcement in order to have a good day. He is quick to anger and not easy to calm down. He has a behavior plan which allows him to go outside and walk around the school building when he feels like he may do or say something that will get him in trouble. He has a difficult time controlling his emotions, but recognizes that and is working to improve that part of himself.

Caleb has only been exposed to one of the environmental risk factors which were studied and does not believe it has affected his academic self-efficacy. He lives in a non-nuclear family. He switches homes each week. For one week he lives with his father and sister and then the next week he lives with his mother and sister (the same sister - she transitions back and forth, too). He does not believe living in a non-nuclear family has had an effect on his low level of academic self-efficacy.
Both his parents have high school diplomas and college degrees. He does not live in poverty but does not know his combined household income. When asked about it, he stated “I really don’t know, they just provide for me.” When asked what other factors contributed to his level of academic self-efficacy, he responded “me not being in school for a year due to warrants.” This was due to his running away from home and then eventually being arrested. By the time he was arrested, he had missed a significant amount of school.

Caleb did not believe that the one environmental risk factor in this study that he was exposed to had any effect on his academic self-efficacy, but he was able to offer up a different risk factor, not being in school due to being on the run, which he felt did have an effect on his academic self-efficacy.

Sean (PALS = 17, GPA = 1.37). Sean is a disrespectful, rude, entitled eighteen year old who loves to say “I’m 18, I’m grown.” He has a difficult time functioning at school due to his lack of respect for anyone, including students and staff. He has the mentality that he knows everything and that he is invincible. He makes it difficult for others to be around him. He constantly complains, curses, and talks disrespectfully of others. This is unfortunate
because he is incredibly intelligent and has a lot of potential if he knew how to apply it.

Sean has been exposed to only one of the five studied environmental risk factors, and does not believe it has affected his academic self-efficacy. The risk factor he has been exposed to is living in poverty. When asked how living in poverty affected his academic self-efficacy, he replied, “it doesn’t affect my education or my academic capabilities.” However, when asked what other factors may have contributed to his academic self-efficacy, he did have a response: “um I guess I would have to say work a little bit. It never gives me time to get some rest. I work quite a bit and don’t have enough time to go home and think. Just enough to sleep.”

Emily (PALS = 16, GPA = 2.36). Emily is an overweight Caucasian female. She recently had a baby and was trying to balance school and parenting duties. She had a difficult time adjusting back to school after being out for six weeks on maternity leave. She is at risk of not graduating because she has not passed all of her state testing requirements. If she does not graduate, she said she will drop out. She only has one more component of her testing but does not seem determined to pass.
Emily has been affected by all five environmental risk factors which were studied. She believed she has been negatively impacted by all five factors. Most of those feelings revolve around feeling overwhelmed and a need to do better.

Emily is affected by living in a non-nuclear family. She lives with her mom, step-dad, sister, daughter, and cousin. Emily is affected by this because according to her, “I think my mom and boyfriend have a lot do to with stressing me out the most.” When she was asked about other factors that she felt have affected her academic self-efficacy, her response was, “well I think having a very unhappy mother that don’t have anything to do but complains and a boyfriend that don’t help out with the baby affects a majority of my capabilities at school.”

Emily is a teen parent. She became a mother at the age of 17. She does not receive financial or emotional support from home. When asked about the effects of being a teen parent on her academic self-efficacy, she had a few responses. These included, “I have been more tired, more aggravated and stressed. I have taken on more responsibility. I become very tired in class and am distracted at home trying to do schoolwork.” She admits to being overwhelmed, both by school work and home life, but
she says, “I think at school, I still try to stay focused to my fullest.” She feels a strong need to finish school so she can be successful. “Since I became a teen parent, I’ve become more determined to finish school with good grades to go on to college and to get a very good job in a good environment.”

Both Emily’s mother and step-father use prescription drugs. Her step-father receives prescription drugs for pain management. However both of them abuse the drugs. She is not supportive of either of their habits but tries to stay focused on school. “I’m mostly focused on my baby and school.”

Emily lives and is affected by living in poverty. She is unsure of exactly how much her parents make, but she does receive free lunch at school. She believes that she has been affected by poverty because “the house is little and everyone is packed in there and it makes it hard to keep stuff around and I’ll just be stressed at school and not focused.”

Emily’s step-father does not have his GED or high school diploma. His highest level of education is 8th grade. Emily believes that this has affected her academic self-efficacy because, “you can’t really turn to him to help me with my school work, and uh, I really can’t go to them to
help me with my math, and my mom, I don’t think she is as educated as she was.” Emily sees it as important for her to receive her diploma and continue her education in order to provide a better life for her and her daughter. She said, “it is important to graduate high school because you really can’t do nothing big in your life without a diploma.”

Emily has not only been exposed to all five of the studied environmental risk factors, but has been affected by each of them in a negative way. She scored a 16 on the PALS, which was one of the lowest scoring scales.

Jeffrey (PALS = 14, GPA = 1.8). Jeffrey is a respectful young man, until he gets caught with his cell phone. He cannot seem to follow the rule that he has to leave his cell phone in his locker. He believes he should be exempt from that particular rule. Jeffrey is an independent student who keeps mostly to himself and causes little disruption. The students like him but do not go out of their way to interact with him. He is focused on his school work because he is trying to graduate early so he can move out of his parents’ house and in with his girlfriend.

Jeffrey has been exposed to four of the five environmental risk factors which were looked at in this study. These include household drug and/or alcohol abuse,
living in poverty, having a parent without a high school diploma or GED, and living in a non-nuclear family. The only factor which he believed affected his academic self-efficacy was having a parent without a high school diploma or GED.

Even though his mother uses marijuana, he lives in poverty in subsidized housing, and he lives with his mom, step-sisters, and a baby, he does not believe these factors have affected his academic self-efficacy. However, neither of his parents have their high school diplomas or GEDs. They both dropped out in the 10th grade, and this has had an effect on Jeffrey.

When asked how his academic self-efficacy has been affected by his parents not having their high school diplomas or GEDs, he said, “It makes me feel like I don’t need school.” He does realize though, that he does need school. When asked about graduating high school and what his plans were, he said he wanted to graduate, “so I can go somewhere.” He said it was important to graduate high school “if you want to be someone.

Jonte (PALS = 11, GPA = 1.56). Jonte is one of the leaders at the school. He is respectful of the staff and students and rarely finds himself in the office. However, when he does get referred to the office it is usually for
something fairly serious. One office referral this year was for cursing at a substitute teacher and then telling him he was older than a grandfather clock. He is always able to recognize his mistakes and corrects them in the future. He is a likable student but does not put forth more effort than is necessary to pass in any class he takes.

Jonte has been exposed to three environmental risk factors: living in poverty, having both parents without their high school diploma or GED, and living in a non-nuclear family. Of these three environmental risk factors, Jonte believes only having parents without their high school diplomas or GEDs has affected his academic self-efficacy.

Having parents without a high school diploma or GED has only affected him in a way that makes him want to be more successful academically than his parents. When asked if it was important to graduate from high school, his response was, “Well, when I was in elementary school, I really didn’t have a big thing towards graduating. It wasn’t that important. As I’ve gotten older, it’s important to have your diploma I found out so that’s why I want to graduate.”
Analysis of the Stories of Sixteen At-Risk Urban High School Students

The interview and guided writing responses were both informational and heart touching in manner. Some participants were exposed to all five of the environmental risk factors which were studied, and some were exposed to only one. However, every one of the sixteen participants was exposed to at least one of the studied environmental risk factors.

Teen Parenting

Three of the sixteen participants in the study were teen parents. All three of the students were female and two of them said being a teen parent affected their academic self-efficacy. The two who felt that being a teen parent affected their academic self-efficacy were Emily and Tasha. These two girls felt overwhelmed by trying to be a mother and go to school at the same time. This feeling of being overwhelmed translated into feeling “very tired in class and distracted at home trying to do school work” for Emily. Tasha felt she was overwhelmed; she said, “I don’t get to study because my daughter is awake and won’t let me get anything done.”

Erica did not believe that being a teen parent affected her academic self-efficacy. What is interesting is
that Erica receives both financial and emotional support, while Emily receives no support and Tasha only receives emotional support. Erica receives her emotional and financial support from her mom and dad. Emily does not receive any emotional or financial support from anyone. She said, “I don’t really have anyone at all to turn to for emotional support. And I don’t receive any financial support.” Tasha receives some emotional support. She said, “My mom was always there for me.

It is difficult to analyze the data regarding teen parenting because there were only three participants of the sixteen who were even exposed to this environmental risk factor. Even more difficult is that only two of three felt their academic self-efficacy had been affected by being a teen parent. What was most interesting was the link between emotional support for the teen parents and the effect it had on their academic self-efficacy.

Household Drug and/or Alcohol Use

Of the sixteen participants, eight students were exposed to drug and/or alcohol use in their home, and four believed the use had affected their academic self-efficacy. The four who believed the drug and/or alcohol use had affected their academic self-efficacy were Dante, Emily, Erica, and Jillian. Three of these participants, two had
negative feelings toward the people in their home who used drugs and/or alcohol, and two felt they needed to be better than those in their home who used.

Dante said he felt “sad sometimes, mostly angry” but he tries hard to “separate my school and home life.” Emily believes it has affected her academic self-efficacy in a way that makes her want to do better and stay focused on the end goal. She said, “I’m mostly focused on my baby and school.” Erica feels similar to Emily. Her mother, father, and both brothers use drugs and/or alcohol and her response was “I don’t like it at all. My brother and dad know they drink and don’t care what people think. My brother and mom try to hide it.” Her exposure to this type of drug and alcohol abuse led her to say, “I know to be better than them.” Jillian also had very negative feelings about those in her life who used drugs. She said, “my step dad is a crack head and that affected me until my mom left him.”

All four participants who believed drug and/or alcohol use in their home affected their academic self-efficacy had negative feelings about the use. They did not believe they received the academic support needed because their parents were preoccupied with their drug and/or alcohol use. While each participant had her/his own reasons for feeling this way, it prompted them to do better than those in their
homes who were using drugs and/or alcohol. This determination to become academically successful helped boast the academic self-efficacies of these students.

Living in Poverty

Of the sixteen participants, all but three live in poverty. Of the thirteen who live in poverty, only four believed it had affected their academic self-efficacy. These students were Dante, Emily, Tasha, and Jillian. All four of these participants had a different view on how it had affected their academic self-efficacy. The feelings about this effect ranged from feeling it has been a positive effect to feeling frustrated.

Dante believed living in poverty has had a positive effect on his academic self-efficacy. He said, “I think it has helped me because without money you get to understand life without money.” For Tasha, living in poverty has had a positive impact on her academic self-efficacy, much like for Dante. She said that living in poverty, “has made me a good person and makes me want to succeed.”

Living in poverty has been a major stress in Emily’s life and has made it difficult for her to maintain decent grades in school. She said, “The house is little and everyone is packed in there, and it makes it hard to keep stuff around, and I’ll just be stressed at school and not
focused.” Like Emily, Jillian’s experience with living in poverty has not been a positive one. She feels “less than others” and has negative feelings about not having the opportunity to not live in poverty. Living in poverty has been frustrating and overwhelming for Jillian. She is stressed about her mom not making much money and not having enough to live on.

It was interesting to see the different responses students had to living in poverty and how it has affected their academic self-efficacy. Some students reported it had helped them grow as an individual and others that it had hindered their academic success.

Having a Parent without His/Her High School Diploma or GED

Of the sixteen participants, nine have at least one parent without a high school diploma or GED, and five believed it had affected their academic self-efficacy. The students who felt it affected their academic self-efficacy were Emily, Jonte, Jeffery, Lucas, and Jillian.

All five of the participants who believed having a parent without a high school diploma or GED had affected their academic self-efficacy had feelings of needing to do better and feelings of frustration due to their parent(s) not being able to help them with their school work.
Emily has a daughter and believes it is important to graduate high school because, “you really can’t do nothing big in life without a diploma.” She wants to go to college to, “better her life and her daughter’s.” Jonte’s feelings about earning a high school diploma have changed over the years. He did not used to think it was important, but after seeing his mother not finish, he decided it was best for him to earn his diploma.

Jeffery’s attitude has also changed throughout the course of his academic career. He said that because neither of his parents have their high school diploma or GED, it gave him the impression that he, “did not need school.” He now believes that it is important to graduate high school “if you want to be someone.” Lucas’s mother did not finish high school and he believes it has affected him because he “wants a better life.” Jillian’s frustration comes from not being able to go to her mother for help with the school work she doesn’t understand herself. She believes it is important to graduate high school because she, “wants to be a better person and have things in life.”

The environmental risk factor of having a parent without a high school diploma has varying affects on students’ academic self-efficacy in much the same way as the environmental risk factor of living in poverty.
Participants’ responses ranged from feeling frustrated to feeling a need to be better than their parents so they could provide better for their families than their parents were able to do for them.

Living in a Non-Nuclear Family

Of the sixteen participants, all but two live in non-nuclear families and seven of those fourteen living in a non-nuclear family felt it has affected their academic self-efficacy. These students are Dante, William, Emily, Erica, Tasha, Tracy, and Naomi. The feelings students had about living in a non-nuclear family included feeling overwhelmed, neglected, not supported, and believing it had a positive effect on their academic self-efficacy.

Dante and William both had feelings of neglect and abandonment due to their non-nuclear family circumstances. Dante does not believe he knows how it feels to have a mother and a father at home and wishes he knew the feeling. He lives with his grandmother and always has. William feels abandoned by his father. His father was around a little when he was younger and then disappeared. He said, “I guess it was just kind of hard not having a father figure.”

Tasha and Tracy had similar thoughts about living in a non-nuclear family. They both believed it had impacted their academic self-efficacy in a positive way. Tasha
receives a lot of support from her mother, and her daughter reminds her that she can, “do whatever she puts her mind to.” Tracy receives similar support from home. She said living in a non-nuclear family, “makes me feel better. My family is always encouraging me even though I don’t have my whole family there (my dad) they are still there helping me.”

Emily feels overwhelmed living in a non-nuclear family. This is very similar to the feeling she had about living in poverty. She said “my mom and my boyfriend have a lot to do with stressing me out the most.” Erica believes living in a non-nuclear family has affected her in a positive way. She believes that even though her family may not be traditional, she receives support from her mother and brothers and she, “doesn’t let anything get in the way of her succeeding.” Naomi is a child of the welfare system. She is currently in foster care. She said, “I’m not as close to my foster family as I was with my bio family and sometimes it’s hard to communicate with them”. She believes she is unable to communicate her academic needs and abilities to her foster family the way she would like.

Living in a non-nuclear family is the environmental risk factor most common in this study. It is also the environmental risk factor that the most participants
identified as having an impact on their academic self-efficacy. With the other environmental risk factors, there were mixed positive and negative feelings about the impact the environmental risk factor had had on students’ academic self-efficacy. However, with the exception of one student, all other students living in non-nuclear families had negative reactions to that environmental risk factor.

Other Factors

At the end of each interview and guided writing, there was a question which asked, “What other factors do you feel have affected the way you feel about your academic capabilities?” Seven of the sixteen participants had a response to this question. Those students were Dante, Emily, Tasha, Naomi, Caleb, Lucas, and Chris.

Dante explained that growing up in different environments and having the opportunity to experience different living situations helped to influence his attitude, which in turn influenced the way he felt about his academic self-efficacy. Emily believed that having a mother who “don’t have anything to do but complain and a boyfriend that don’t help out with the baby” has caused her to fall behind in school and consequently lower her academic self-efficacy.
Tasha and Lucas have had the opportunity to play sports in high school. This has affected their approach to school and made them want to do better academically. By succeeding academically, this has had a positive effect on their academic self-efficacy.

Naomi believed being a part of the foster care system and eventually being adopted by a family has had a negative effect on her academic self-efficacy. She believes this along with frontal lobe damage and the diagnosis of ADHD has affected her focus, causing her grades to slip and making her feel less academically competent.

Caleb responded to the question by saying, “me not being in school for a year due to warrants.” His absence from school caused him to fall behind in credits and fail his classes. This put him behind academically and caused his lowered academic self-efficacy.

Finally, Chris had an additional factor to add to the mix which had a positive effect on his academic self-efficacy. He said, “my family because they tell me I can do whatever I set my mind to.” This encouraged Chris to succeed in school and as a result, have a positive impact on his academic self-efficacy.

Comparisons between the Top Eight and Bottom Eight Scoring Participants on the PALS
These two groups of participants were more difficult to analyze than originally expected. Due to there being five factors which were looked at for each participant, it is impossible to draw any group conclusions based on the participant falling in the high or low scoring PALS group. After comparing the two groups, there were a few interesting things to note. In general, the students who scored higher on the PALS were exposed to more environmental risk factors than the students who scored lower on the PALS. Additionally, those who scored higher on the PALS generally had more incidences of feelings of impact on their academic self-efficacy from their exposure to the environmental risk factors.

Of the eight high scoring students, all but one (Chris), believed their academic self-efficacy had been affected by their exposure to environmental risk factors. With the exception of one participant, (William), all the high scoring students believed their academic self-efficacy had been positively affected by at least one of the environmental risk factors to which they had been exposed.

Of the eight low scoring students, only two (Emily and Jonte) believed their academic self-efficacy had been affected in a positive way through being exposed to environmental risk factors. All of the rest of the
participants believed their exposure to the environmental risk factors had a negative impact on their academic self-efficacy.

In summary, the students who scored higher on the PALS were generally exposed to more environmental risk factors and had more incidents of feeling their academic self-efficacies had been affected by this exposure than the students who scored lower on the PALS. However, these same students had a much higher incidence of believing this exposure had a positive impact on their academic self-efficacies.

Summary

This chapter provided the data for each participant in a narrative style. First, each participant’s story was briefly described and analyzed with regard to which environmental risk factors he/she was exposed to and which of those she/he believed had affected his/her academic self-efficacy. Responses ranged from feelings of anger and sadness, to feelings of needing to do better than their parents in order to provide a better life for themselves and their families. Quotes from the interviews and guided writings were included when describing each participant. Responses were candid and honest in nature, which gave the reader something to connect to and hold on to. Second, an
analysis of the data across the sixteen participants was conducted for each of the environmental risk factors: teen parenting, household drug and/or alcohol use, living in poverty, having one or both parents without a high school diploma or GED, and living in a non-nuclear family. Chapter four will present a summary of the study, the findings, the conclusions, and implications.
CHAPTER FOUR

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Chapter four presents a summary of the study, the findings, the conclusions, and the implications which results from this study.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of environmental risk factors on at-risk urban high school students’ academic self-efficacy. Risk factors were chosen based on the relationship between at-risk youth and students with low academic self-efficacy. The list of risk factors which identify students as being at-risk is very similar to the list of risk factors which suggest the students who will develop a low academic self-efficacy. Five overlapping risk factors were chosen to be used in this study. The risk factors were: being a teen parent, living in a household where drugs and/or alcohol is used, having one or both parents without a high school diploma or GED, living in poverty, and living in a non-nuclear family.

After careful analysis of the available literature in the field on at-risk youth and academic self-efficacy, the researcher posed some questions which she felt had not yet been answered. The question guiding this study was, “How do
environmental risk factors affect at-risk urban high school students’ academic self-efficacy?”

Chapter One

Each chapter had a different purpose. Chapter one described the literature already available regarding at-risk youth and academic self-efficacy. Chapter One first defined the terms “academic self-efficacy” and “at-risk” in an attempt to provide a foundation of understanding for the reader. Academic self-efficacy is defined as “an individuals’ confidence in their ability to successfully perform academic tasks at a designated level” (Shunk in Gore, 2006, p. 93). Academic self-efficacy is important for students to develop, and it is important for educators to understand the importance of students developing positive academic self-efficacies.

The term “at-risk” simply refers to youth who are at risk of not completing high school for one reason or another. However, not completing high school is only a symptom of the real problems. Druian (2001) suggests that demographic, socioeconomic, and institutional characteristics (each of which can be divided into four levels: individual, family or home, school, and community) play a major role in determining which youth are categorized as at-risk (p.3).
Chapter One also explained the relationship between academic self-efficacy and academic success as well as the relationship between at-risk youth and academic self-efficacy. According to Schunk and Miller (2002), there is a positive correlation between a student’s academic self-efficacy and his/her academic success. Meaning, the stronger a student’s academic self-efficacy, the more successful he/she will be academically. Additionally, Zimmerman and Cleary (2006) explained that students who have stronger academic self-efficacies are more likely to engage in pro-social behavior.

Additionally, there is a strong relationship between the risk factors which identify students as at-risk and those which indicate the development of low academic self-efficacy. This relationship indicates that students who are identified as at-risk will also develop low academic self-efficacy. At-risk youth are identified as such based on certain environmental risk factors. According to Druian (2001) and Moore (2006), such risk factors include living in poverty, having parents who are not high school graduates, being a single-parent child, living in a dysfunctional family, being a teen parent, and family substance abuse. Bandura (1997) identified some risk factors that influence the development of an individual’s...
academic self-efficacy. Such risk factors include low socioeconomic status, low parental academic aspirations, and negative home life. Some of the risk factors which identify a student as at-risk can fall under the category of the risk factor, negative home life, for low academic self-efficacy. These risk factors include being a single-parent child, living in a dysfunctional family, being a teen parent, and family substance abuse.

Finally, Chapter One sets the stage by providing a problem statement and research question which would be answered by the study. The research question was, “How do environmental risk factors affect at-risk urban high school students’ academic self-efficacy?”

Chapter Two

Chapter Two described the data collection procedures, the rationale for using qualitative methods for the study, and the conceptual framework of the researcher. All students at the school where the research was conducted were given the opportunity to participate in the study. All interested participants who had signed consent forms were asked to take the PALS. The PALS results for each student were analyzed. The students with the lowest eight and highest eight scores were asked to continue with the study. These sixteen participants participated in a guided writing
exercise and an interview with the researcher. The interviews were transcribed and both the interviews and guided writings were coded for common themes and patterns.

The researcher was most interested in telling the stories of the sixteen participants and making a personal connection with the reader. She wanted the reader to feel personally invested in the students’ lives and feel emotion for them throughout their story. The methods employed through this study in order to enhance that personal connection with the reader were interviews and guided writings. These interviews and guided writing responses were shared with the reader in chapter three.

Chapter Two also discussed the conceptual framework from which the researcher worked. It explained the rationale for the researcher using grounded theory rather than an already established theory. In summary, she did not know what her results would show and did not want to be constrained by an already established theory. She preferred the freedom to develop her own theory as she analyzed the data. An introduction to each participant was provided in order to allow the reader to make a connection with each participant.
Chapter Three

Chapter Three went into great detail about the results of the study. The chapter described each participant’s story and how each of the environmental risk factors affected his/her academic self-efficacy. The researcher first analyzed each student individually and told his/her story as it pertained to the effects of environmental risk factors on the student’s academic self-efficacy. Each story was told in a way the reader could connect to the student and picture the student in his/her mind. After the individual analysis was complete, the researcher looked for patterns and commonalities amongst the responses.

Some participants were exposed to environmental risk factors but did not believe they had been affected by them. Others strongly believed certain environmental risk factors affected their academic self-efficacy. Each student was unique in his/her beliefs about how being exposed to environmental risk factors had affected her/his academic self-efficacy.

Findings

After collecting and analyzing the data from the guided writings and interviews, nine findings emerged. They are as follows:
1. Of the three students who are teen parents, two found the job overwhelming and found it difficult to find time to focus on school work. In turn, this caused the students to fall behind on school work and believed they could not do it. The student who did not feel overwhelmed received financial as well as emotional support. For the other two students, one receives minimal emotional support and the other receive financial support.

2. Of the eight students who were exposed to family drug and/or alcohol use, four believed it had an effect on their academic self-efficacy. Of the four who felt the effect, three had bad and negative feelings toward those in the household who use. Two felt they needed to be better than that and not fall into drug and/or alcohol use.

3. Fourteen of the sixteen students live in poverty. Four believed living in poverty affected their academic self-efficacy. Of those four, two believed it had impacted them in a positive way. They reported the need to be better than that and believed it had provided them life experience. The two students who believed it impacted them negatively had feelings of frustration and anger.
4. Of the sixteen participants, nine had at least one parent without a high school diploma or GED. Five of those nine believed it affected their academic self-efficacy. All five believed it was an indication they needed to do better than their parents and believed they would not be successful without a high school diploma or GED. Three of the nine did not believe they could receive the academic support at home that they needed to be successful in school because their parents were too uneducated to help them with their work.

5. Of all sixteen participants, fourteen lived in non-nuclear families. Half believed this has affected their academic self-efficacy. Two felt it was a good thing that their entire family was not together and believed that it actually helped raise their academic self-efficacy. The others believed it had a negative impact on their academic self-efficacy. Two reported it affected them negatively because they had feelings of neglect and abandonment. Another felt it was overwhelming to have so many people in his home. One said she did not receive the help she needed because her family was too chaotic.
6. There does not seem to be a relationship between the number of environmental risk factors a student is exposed to and/or affected by and the level of his/her academic self-efficacy.

7. There does seem to be a relationship between how a student believed a particular environmental risk factor had affected his/her academic self-efficacy and her/his actual PALS score. Students who believed their academic self-efficacy had been positively affected by exposure to environmental risk factors scored higher on the PALS.

8. A few students mentioned that after school activities, such as sports, had affected their academic self-efficacy in a positive way.

9. The students with the top eight PALS scores had an average GPA of 2.90, while the students with the bottom eight PALS scores had an average GPA of 1.62. The range of GPAs for the top eight PALS scoring students was 2.44 - 3.9. The range of GPAs for the bottom eight PALS scoring students was .75 - 2.36. The highest GPA for the lowest eight scoring students on the PALS does not even match the lowest GPA for the highest eight scoring students.
Conclusions

Through the qualitative nature of this study, some conclusions were able to be drawn based on the interviews and guided writings with which the participants provided the researcher. The conclusions drawn based on the findings of this study are as follows:

1. Being a teen parent is a difficult job. It has an effect on students’ academic self-efficacy, especially if the student is not receiving financial and/or emotional support.

2. Drug and alcohol use in the home does have an effect on students’ academic self-efficacy. The drug and/or alcohol user in the home is not around or able to provide academic support to the student when needed. This causes feelings of sadness, anger, and neglect. Consequently, the student begins to give up on school and his/her academic self-efficacy suffers.

3. Poverty may not affect students the way people would generally. Most at-risk students have lived in poverty their entire lives and may not know anything different. Therefore, they do not believe it has affected them.

4. Students who have parents without high school diplomas believe they need to do better and make sure they earn
their diploma. This has affected their academic self-efficacy in a positive way because these students felt more encouraged to be academically successful.

5. Family is an important factor in the development of a student’s academic self-efficacy. A positive family structure, whether it be nuclear or non-nuclear, seems to be a stronger indicator of academic self-efficacy than does simply living in a non-nuclear family.

6. Environmental risk factors do in fact affect student’s academic self-efficacy. However, due to the uniqueness of each individual student, he/she may or may not realize/believe it has affected them. Each student is a unique individual who deals with stressors in her/his own way. Some students are in tune with their feelings and can make the connection between what they are feeling/how they are performing and the stressors that caused that feeling/outcome.

7. The way in which a student believes he/she was affected by the environmental risk factors may play a more vital role in the development of academic self-efficacy than the number of environmental risk factors the student was exposed to. Students who felt that being exposed to environmental risk factors had a
positive effect on their academic self-efficacy, generally had a higher PALS score.

8. There may be other environmental factors (not necessarily risk factors) that contribute to a student’s academic self-efficacy (e.g. after school activities). Some positive extracurricular activities may prove to be helpful in developing a positive academic self-efficacy.

9. The comparison of GPAs to PALS scores confirms the literature from Shunk & Miller (2002) that stated “judgments of capability for learning or performing behaviors at designated levels are powerfully related to the academic success that students experience” (p.1). The students with higher PALS scores had all higher GPAs than the students with the lower PALS scores.

10. Predicting academic self-efficacy based solely on the environmental risk factors a student has been exposed to is risky. As presented in this research, academic self-efficacy has much more to do with the way the a student believes he/she has been affected by the environmental risk factor than it is about how many environmental risk factors she/he has been exposed to.
Implications

This research did not find conclusive evidence of the relationship between academic self-efficacy and the environmental risk factors students experience. It cannot be said that students who are affected by more environmental risk factors will develop a lower academic self-efficacy. However, there are implications which need to be taken into consideration both for practitioners as well as for future research.

Implications for Practice

Teachers, administrators, curriculum developers, and counselors. Students who are exposed to environmental risk factors may not realize they are affected by those risk factors. They may truly believe the environmental risk factor has not affected them, but they may not be making the connection in order to see the impact it has had on them. However, the environmental risk factors which students did admit to being affected by did have a strong affect on their academic self-efficacy. Some students are able to compartmentalize their feelings and therefore may believe they have not been affected by the environmental risk factors they have been exposed to. Additionally, research suggests that a student’s view of the world and situations is a more important indicator of academic self-
efficacy than is the risk factors he/she has been exposed to. Therefore, it is important for educators to be aware of the environmental risk factors students have been exposed to because it may be affecting the students without them knowing it.

Students who do not believe a particular environmental risk factor has affected them, may believe that because they do not know any difference. For example, most students in the study who live in poverty did not believe it affected them. This could be because they have always lived in poverty and do not know how their academic self-efficacy would/could change if they did not live in poverty.

Educators can play a significant role in helping students develop a positive academic self-efficacy. As mentioned in Chapter One, there are some things educators can do and encourage students to take advantage of in order to help them develop a positive academic self-efficacy. As suggested by Young (1997), students who participate in extra-curricular activities are more likely to become successful citizens of society. Additionally, Murdock and Miller (2003) and Cunningham et al. (2000) suggested that self-evaluation and strong teacher-student relationships in the classroom lead to a stronger academic motivation and ultimately successful, productive citizens of society.
These suggestions alone will have a major impact on a student’s academic self-efficacy.

Research has shown that students are better learners when they are actively involved in their own learning process. Additionally, it has been shown that students learn more, and even more importantly, retain more information through this method than they did when they were not actively involved in their education process (Barnett, 2004, Abstract section, ¶ 3). The interactive approach varies in degree, anywhere from implementation of videos, computer programs and labs, to activities, discussions, and real-life comparisons to what is being taught. “Interactive teaching is needed for students to transfer their learning flexibly to novel situations they face in and out of school” (Barnett, 2004, Abstract section, ¶ 3).

Another approach teachers and educators can use to help students develop a positive academic self-efficacy is to use the learner-centered approach in class. The goal of the learner-center approach is to, “increase the likelihood of success for students and their teachers and that the learner-centered principles can become a framework for determining how to use and assess the efficacy of
Parents. Parental support is a vital part of student success. Parents have the ability to influence many outcomes in their child’s life. It is crucial that parents play a role in helping their child to develop a positive academic self-efficacy. As Murdock and Miller (2003) suggested, there are many ways a student can develop a positive academic self-efficacy. One such suggestion which parents can play a major role in is student participation in extra-curricular activities. It is important for parents to encourage their children to get involved in positive extra-curricular activities which may boost academic self-efficacy in the classroom.

Self-efficacy researchers. Although the research was inconclusive in showing a connection between the number of risk factors a student was exposed to and his/her level of academic self-efficacy, the research was conclusive in showing that exposure to environmental risk factors does have an impact on a student’s academic self-efficacy. Students are affected by exposure to the risk factors studied, and careful attention must be paid to these factors when academic self-efficacy is studied. Each student is unique in his/her coping style, and some choose...
to use their exposure to environmental risk factors to boost their academic self-efficacy. However, some students have been unable to develop coping skills, and thus their academic self-efficacy has been affected in a negative way.

Implications for Future Research

Research should be focused on these at-risk youth who so often times fall through the cracks of education, and ultimately, society. These youth can be productive citizens of society if ways can be found to help them cope with the environmental risk factors they are exposed to. Research should be concerned with finding out more about the effects environmental risk factors have on a student’s academic self-efficacy. Research should be concerned with finding solutions to the problems at-risk youth face and finding successful educational models for these students. Research should study the effects of students’ academic self-efficacy based on the severity of the exposure and affect of environmental risk factors.

Educator preparation. Teachers may believe they are well prepared to walk into a classroom and conduct instruction based on their particular area of study. However, they may feel unprepared to deal with the students who come to their class everyday with the stress of unfortunate environmental circumstances they face at home.
Teachers need to be exposed to strategies for helping these at-risk students. This is particularly true in the area of helping students to develop a strong academic self-efficacy.

Helping students develop a strong academic self-efficacy includes using strategies that involve students with more engagement, more project-based learning, and involving students in their own learning. “If students learn to monitor their own learning and effectively evaluate their own work, they will join the prepared workforce of the future” (Cunningham et al., 2000, p.2). When students can see their improvements over a period of time, they gradually begin to believe that they can be successful in academics. Teachers have the opportunity to make a monumental impact on students’ academic self-efficacies, and in return on their lifelong success.

Questions for further research. While this research was able to shed some light on how students felt their academic self-efficacy had been affected by exposure to certain environmental risk factors, there are still some remaining questions which could be studied further. Some of those questions are as follows:

1. Of the five environmental risk factors which were looked at, which ones have the greatest
influence/effect on students’ academic self-efficacy?

2. Of the five environmental risk factors which were looked at, which ones have the least influence/effect on students’ academic self-efficacy?

3. Are there other environmental risk factors which may have even greater impacts on students’ academic self-efficacies than those studied?

4. Are there other factors, outside of the five environmental risk factors studied that affect students’ academic self-efficacy?

Summary

This study began reviewing previous reports about academic self-efficacy. There is much literature to suggest that students who are more academically successful have a higher academic self-efficacy. After careful analysis of the literature, the researcher posed the following question, “How do environmental risk factors affect at-risk urban high school students’ academic self-efficacy?” The method used to study this question were qualitative methods through the use of interviews and guided writings.

The researcher transcribed, coded, and analyzed the interviews and guided writings. The researcher first
analyzed the data for each individual student followed by an analysis of the students as a whole, looking for commonalities and patterns. The researcher found that each student is unique and processes the effects of environmental risk factors differently. This results in the students having different feelings about their exposure to environmental risk factors. The most prominent finding was that the eight highest scoring students on the PALS overwhelmingly felt a positive impact on their academic self-efficacy from exposure to environmental risk factors, while the students with the lowest scoring PALS scores felt negatively impacted by exposure to environmental risk factors.

The research concerned with academic self-efficacy is pertinent to the success of the educational system. Considering the lifelong implications of developing a positive academic self-efficacy, research of this caliber should continue so that more questions may be addressed and the results shared with educators and other stakeholders in the educational system.
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Murdock, T. B., & Miller, A. (2003). Teachers as sources of middle school students’ motivational identity: Variable-centered and person-centered analytic


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APPENDIX A

Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (PALS)

Academic-Related Perceptions, Beliefs, and Strategies

Academic Efficacy

The first question is an example.

I like strawberry ice cream.

1  2  3  4  5
Not at all true      Somewhat true     Very true

Here are some questions about yourself as a student in school. Please circle the number that best describes what you think.

1. I’m certain I can master the skills taught in school this year.

1  2  3  4  5
Not at all true      Somewhat true     Very true

2. I’m certain I can figure out how to do the most difficult school work.

1  2  3  4  5
Not at all true      Somewhat true     Very true

3. I can do almost all the work in class if I don’t give up.

1  2  3  4  5
Not at all true      Somewhat true     Very true

4. Even if the work is hard, I can learn from it.

1  2  3  4  5
Not at all true      Somewhat true     Very true

5. I can do even the hardest work in school if I try.

1  2  3  4  5
Not at all true      Somewhat true     Very true
I am interested in how environmental risk factors affect the level of at-risk urban high school students’ academic self-efficacy. It is very important that you answer the following questions honestly and with the most detail you feel comfortable sharing. If you do not feel comfortable answering a question, you may pass on the entire question. You just need to write ‘pass’ as your response for that question. If you have any questions during the time you are writing your responses, please raise your hand or come ask me.

1. What is your age?

2. What grade are you currently in?

3. Have you completed the Academic Self-Efficacy questionnaire?

4. Are you a teen parent? (If no, move to question 5)
   a. If yes, please answer the following questions:
      i. How old were you when you became a parent?
      ii. How many children do you have?
      iii. Do you receive any financial or emotional support? If so, from whom and in what ways?
      iv. What effects on your education have you experienced since you became a parent?
v. Do you feel that being a teen parent has affected the way you feel about your academic capabilities? If so, in what ways? Please explain in detail.

5. Does anyone in your home use drugs or alcohol? (If no, move to question 6)
   a. If yes, please answer the following questions:
      i. Who in your household uses drugs or alcohol? Please list all people. (i.e. mother, father, brother, etc.)
      ii. Explain which drugs or alcohol each person uses.
      iii. How do you feel about their use?
      iv. Are they private about their use? Please explain for each person.
v. Do you feel that being around those using drugs and/or alcohol has affected the way you feel about your academic capabilities? If so, in what ways? Please explain in detail.

6. Do you receive free or reduced lunch?) (If no, move to question 7)
   a. If yes, please answer the following questions:
      i. What is your total combined household income? (how much do both parents or guardians in your home make together? If you only have one parent or guardian, tell how much that one person makes)
      ii. Do you live in Section 8 or government subsidized housing?
      iii. Do you live in a house or apartment?
      iv. How many bedrooms are in your home?
      v. How many people live in your home with you?
      vi. How do you feel that living in a below average income family has affected your education?
vii. Do you feel that living in a below average income family has affected the way you feel about your academic capabilities? If so, in what ways? Please explain in detail.

7. Do both of your parents/guardians have their GED or high school diploma? (If you have one parent/guardian, do they have their GED or high school diploma?) (If yes, move to question 8)
   a. If no, please answer the following questions:
      i. Which of your parents/guardians do not have their GED or high school diploma?
      
      ii. What is the highest level of education for each of them?

      iii. Have they ever expressed disappointment in not finishing school?

      iv. Do they ever mention wanting to go back to get their GED?
v. Do you have older siblings who have not gotten their GED or high school diploma who are old enough to do so? If so, please explain who they are and their highest level of education.

vi. Do you plan on graduating high school? Why or why not?

vii. Do you believe it is important to graduate high school? Why or why not?

viii. Do you feel that having a parent/guardian without a high school diploma or GED has affected the way you feel about your academic capabilities? If so, in what ways? Please explain in detail.

8. Home makeup:

a. Who lives in your home?

b. Are your parents/guardians married?
c. Do your parents/guardians live together?

d. Do you have siblings over the age of 18 living in your home? If so, who?

e. Do you have other family members other than parents and siblings living in your home? If so, who?

f. Do you have any friends or friends of siblings/parents/guardians living in your home?

g. If you answered ‘no’ to any questions b-f, you are considered to be living in a non-nuclear family. If you live in a non-nuclear family, please answer the following question. Do you feel that living in a non-nuclear family has affected the way you feel about your academic capabilities? If so, in what ways? Please explain in detail.

9. What other factors do you feel have affected the way you feel about your academic capabilities? Please explain.

10. Is there anything else you want to share with me or think I should be aware of?

Thank you for your time. You have greatly helped in my research process. Your responses will remain anonymous. If you decide you have questions or concerns after you turn in this writing, please contact me or have your parents/guardian contact me.

Thank you!
Stacy N. Millburg
millbusn@email.uc.edu
513-460-2155
APPENDIX C

Interview Questions
Stacy N. Millburg

Me: “I am interested in how environmental risk factors affect the level of at-risk urban high school students’ academic self-efficacy. It is very important that you answer my questions honestly and with the most detail you feel comfortable sharing. If you do not feel comfortable answering a questions, you may pass on the entire question. You just need to tell me ‘pass’ for that question. Do you have any questions before we begin?”

1. What is your age?
2. What grade are you currently in?
3. Have you completed the Academic Self-Efficacy questionnaire?
4. Are you a teen parent?
   a. If no, move on to next question
   b. If yes
      i. How old were you when you became a parent?
      ii. How many children do you have?
      iii. Do you receive support (financial or emotional)? From whom?
      iv. What effects on your education have you experienced since you became a parent?
      v. Do you feel that being a teen parent has affected the way you feel about your academic capabilities? If so, in what ways? Please explain in detail.
5. Does anyone in your home use drugs or alcohol?
   a. If no, move on to next question
   b. If yes...
      i. Whom in your household uses?
      ii. Do they use drugs or alcohol?
      iii. Which drugs do they use?
      iv. Are they private about their use?
      v. Do you feel that being around those using drugs and/or alcohol has affected the way you feel about your academic capabilities? If so, in what ways? Please explain in detail.
6. Do you receive free/reduced lunch?
   a. If no, move on to next question
   b. If yes...
      i. How much is your total combined household income?
      ii. Do you live in Section 8 housing?
      iii. Do you live in a house or apartment?
      iv. Do you feel that living in a below average income family has affected the way you feel about your academic capabilities? If so, in what ways? Please explain in detail.
7. Do either or both of your parents have their GED or high school diploma?
   a. If yes, move on to next question
   b. If no…
      i. Who does not have their GED or high school diploma?
      ii. What is their highest level of education?
   c. Do you feel that having a parent/guardian without a high school diploma or GED has affected the way you feel about your academic capabilities? If so, in what ways? Please explain in detail.

8. Who lives in your home? (i.e. mother, father, brother, friend, cousin, etc.)
   a. If you live with anyone other than both of your biological parents and siblings, you are considered to be living in a non-nuclear family. If you fall into this category, please answer the following question. Do you feel that living in a non-nuclear family has affected the way you feel about your academic capabilities? If so, in what ways? Please explain in detail.

9. What other factors do you feel have affected the way you feel about your academic capabilities? Please explain.

10. Is there anything else you want to share with me or think I should be aware of?

Me: “Thank you for your time. You have greatly helped in my research process. Your responses will remain anonymous. Do you have any questions for me?”
### APPENDIX D

**Coding Categories**

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<th>Description</th>
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## APPENDIX E

### Coding Matrix

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<th>Affects</th>
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<th>Poverty Affects</th>
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Title of Study:
The effects of environmental risk factors on at-risk urban high school students’ academic self-efficacy.

Introduction:
The researcher is asking Arlington Heights Academy High School students to take part in a research study that I am working on. Please read the following and ask questions about anything you do not understand.

Purpose:
The purpose of this research is to determine how environmental risk factors contribute to how a student feels about themselves academically. Such risk factors include: teen parenting, household drug and/or alcohol use, poverty, having a parent without a high school diploma or GED, and living in a non-nuclear family.

During the 2007-2008 school year, the researcher plans on working with 3-5 students. During the 2008-2009 school year, the researcher will work with between 16 students.

Duration:
The total amount of your child’s time for participating in the study will be 4-5 hours. The survey will take up to 30 minutes, the guided writing to take 1-2 hours, and the interview to take 1-2 hours. This will take place over an 8 week period of time.

Procedures:
Your child will first be asked to complete a survey. The survey will tell me how he/she feels about themselves academically. Once she/he has completed the survey, she/he will be asked to complete a writing session. The assignment will ask he/she to answer some questions. The researcher asks that he/she answer the questions completely and honestly. Finally, he/she will meet with the researcher at a private place in his/her school and will be interviewed alone. The researcher will ask she/he about the environmental factors that affect her/him.

Your child will be asked some sensitive questions. Such questions may refer to drug and alcohol use by anyone in his/her household as well as the total household income.
**Risks/Discomforts:**
The researcher does not expect your child to be exposed to any major risks or discomfort from participating in this study, other than being honest and willing to discuss factors which affect his/her personal life. Your child may choose not to answer any questions that make him/her feel uncomfortable.

**Benefits:**
Your child will not receive any direct benefit from participating in this study. However, her/his participation may help her/him to better understand her/his own feelings about school and determine how he/she has developed that feeling.

**Alternatives:**
There are no other activities planned if your child does not want to be interviewed.

**Confidentiality:**
If the researcher learns any other information that could possibly be incriminating of a student or someone the student talks/writes about, she will keep the information confidential between herself and the student. The researcher does not have any intention of reporting information to the police or other authorities. There is a small chance, however, that incriminating information could be subpoenaed. To protect your child’s identity further, as soon as the researcher has written down the interview, the tape will be erased. The transcript will not contain your child’s name or other information that could identify him/her. Your child’s research data will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s office. Only the researcher’s faculty advisor, Dr. Evers, and the researcher will have access to the data. Your child’s identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law, such as mandatory reporting of child abuse, elder abuse, or immediate danger to self or others. This would include harm to a child by an adult or threat of harm to self. Research data will be stored in a locked file cabinet for three years after the end of this study and then will be destroyed. The data from the study may be published but you child will not be identified by name.

**Offer to Answer Questions:**
If you have any questions about study-related activities, you may call me at 460-2155 or Dr. Evers, my faculty advisor, at 556-6623.

If you have any questions about your child’s rights as a research participant, you may call the Chair of the Institutional Review Board – Social and Behavioral Sciences at 558-5784. The University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board – Social and Behavioral Sciences reviews all non-medical research projects that involve human participants to be sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board – Social and Behavioral Sciences at (513) 558-5784. If you have a concern about the study you may also call the UC Research Compliance Hotline at (800) 889-1547, or you may write to the Institutional Review Board – Social and Behavioral Sciences, G-28 Wherry Hall, ML 0567, 3225 Eden Avenue, PO Box 670567, Cincinnati, OH 45267-0567, or you may email the IRB office at irb@ucmail.uc.edu.
Voluntary Participation:
Your child does NOT have to participate in this study. Your child may choose not to participate or he/she may quit participating AT ANY TIME.

Agreement:
I have read this consent document. I voluntarily agree to allow my child to participate in this research study. I will receive a signed and dated copy of this consent document for my reference.

My child’s name ____________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________     ____________________
Parent/Legal Guardian Signature     Date

_________________________________________________      ____________________
Signature and Title of Person Obtaining Consent    Date
Title of Study:
The effects of environmental risk factors on at-risk urban high school students’ academic self-efficacy.

Introduction:
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Risks/Discomforts:
The researcher does not expect you to be exposed to any major risks or discomfort from participating in this study, other than being honest and willing to discuss factors which affect your personal life. You may choose not to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

Benefits:
You will not receive any direct benefit from participating in this study. However, your participation may help you to better understand your own feelings about school and determine how you have developed that feeling.

Alternatives:
There are no other activities planned if you do not want to be interviewed.

Confidentiality:
If the researcher learns any other information that could possibly be incriminating of a student or someone the student talks/writes about, she will keep the information confidential between herself and the student. The researcher does not have any intention of reporting information to the police or other authorities. There is a small chance, however, that incriminating information could be subpoenaed. To protect your identity further, as soon as the researcher has written down the interview, the tape will be erased. The transcript will not contain your name or other information that could identify you. Your research data will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s office. Only the researcher’s faculty advisor, Dr. Evers, and the researcher will have access to the data. Your identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law, such as mandatory reporting of child abuse, elder abuse, or immediate danger to self or others. This would include harm to a child by an adult or threat of harm to self. Research data will be stored in a locked file cabinet for three years after the end of this study and then will be destroyed. The data from the study may be published but you child will not be identified by name.

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Voluntary Participation:
You do NOT have to participate in this study. You may choose not to participate or you may quit participating AT ANY TIME.

Agreement:
I have read this consent document. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. I will receive a signed and dated copy of this consent document for my reference.

_________________________________________________     ____________________
Participant Signature       Date

_________________________________________________      ____________________
Signature and Title of Person Obtaining Consent    Date

Student Age: _________________  Parental permission received: _________________
The effects of environmental risk factors on at-risk urban high school students’ academic self-efficacy.

Interested in participating in a research study?

We are looking for some Arlington Heights Academy High School students to help with a research study.

You may be eligible participate if you are an Arlington Heights Academy High School student who may or may not have been affected by any of the following:

- Teen parenting
- Living in a household where drugs and/or alcohol is being used
- Living in poverty
- Having at least one parent without a high school diploma or a GED
- Living in a non-nuclear family (living with less or more than your biological parents and siblings)

We are looking to see how any or some of these factors have affected how you feel about yourself academically.

If you want to know more about helping me with this research study, please see me for more information and a permission form to take home to share with your parents/guardian.

Thank you!

Stacy Millburg
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wonderfully supportive and loving parents, Mark and Kathy Millburg. You have always believed in me and encouraged me to follow my dreams. Earning my Ed.D. was one of my greatest aspirations, and it would not have been possible without you. You have supported me through all of the good and bad times and have never discouraged my dreams. You are sincerely the best parents anyone could hope for. I would not be the person I am today if it were not for your interest in my goals and your constant love and support. You are my world. Thank you for helping me realize my dreams.