

PERCEPTIONS TOWARD SCHOOL AND SELF OF GRADUATING SENIORS DEEMED  
AT RISK OF SCHOOL FAILURE ENROLLED IN NON-TRADITIONAL AND  
TRADITIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS

by

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(Under the Direction of Myra N. Womble)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of self as a person, of self as a student and of school of graduating seniors deemed at risk for school failure enrolled in non-traditional and traditional high schools in Georgia. This study wanted to determine if there were significant differences in these students' perceptions (self-concept, student self, school) based on gender and socio-economic status. Graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure were of particular interest in this study because they represent students who have overcome significant barriers in their academic and personal lives to graduate from high school. The findings were discussed in relations to the dependent and independent variables of the study. The results and the conclusion for the study were also presented, in addition to recommendations for further research and practice.

INDEX WORDS: At-Risk Students, High School Dropouts, Non-Traditional High Schools, Urban Learners

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my brother, Neil Ganaway Washington.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Despite aggressive and ambitious legislation, numerous dropout prevention programs, and promising initiatives, the national high school graduation rate has not significantly increased in nearly 40 years. After peaking at 78.7% in 1969, the graduation rate showed a steady decline over the next 31 years. By the year 2000, the graduation rate had fallen to 71.7% (Laird, DeBell, Kienzl, & Chapman, 2007). A Department of Education report released in October, 2009 stated a national graduation rate of 73.9% for 2006 – 2007. While this report showed a slight increase from the previous year (73.2%), the national graduation rate has not reached the heights of the 1969 average of 78.7% (Stillwell, 2009).

Unfortunately, federal legislation has not made a major impact on the national graduation rate. Lawmakers have attempted to create public laws that address the needs of students. However, the aforementioned statistics show that aggressive and ambitious legislation has not produced noteworthy increases in the graduation rate in over 40 years. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) was instituted with goals to reform the national public education system. However, very little emphasis was placed on improving the graduation rate through dropout prevent programs and initiatives.

In a national education report, Georgia has been identified as one of the five states with the lowest graduation rates. This report also lists the state as one of the 17 states that produce 70% of the nation's dropouts (Balfanz, Almeida, Steinberg, Santos, & Fox, 2009). This is despite the fact that in its final Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) report for 2009, the Georgia Department

of Education reported a state graduation rate of 78.9% (GDOE, 2009). These results showed that Georgia has made noteworthy improvements since its 63.3% graduation rate in 2005 (GDOE, 2006). According to the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA), Georgia's high schools produced 88,003 graduates in 2009 (GOSA, 2009a). This is an increase of 13,470 from 2006 when only 74,533 students completed high school with a diploma (GOSA, 2006d). While it is commendable that Georgia has shown steady increases in its graduation rate over the years, there are still many young people who have allowed personal and/or academic challenges to prevent them from successfully completing high school. The 2009 AYP report card also showed that 3.8% of all ninth through twelfth graders (519,190) dropped out of school (GOSA, 2009c). That translates into 15,575 Georgia students who left school without a high school diploma.

State governments also adopted legislation to reform local education systems. For example, Georgia passed the A+ Education Reform Act in 2000. This act was the state's attempt to improve the effectiveness of public schools through mandated standardized tests and mandated maximum class size. The goal of the legislatures was to promote academic achievement and improve the state's high school graduation rate (Georgia Encyclopedia, 2009). In addition to state legislation, statewide dropout prevention programs were also implemented to improve Georgia's graduation rate. In 2005, when Governor Sonny Perdue implemented the Georgia Graduation Coach Program, the state's graduation rate was 63.3% (GDOE, 2006). This state-funded program placed a graduation coach in every public middle school and high school in Georgia. It was the aim of this program to positively affect the graduation rate through building relationships with at-risk students and providing them with intervention services to keep them in school.

Another state initiative to improve academic achievement and the graduation rate was the reformation of the state curriculum. Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) was developed by Georgia's Department of Education (GDOE) to replace the Quality Core Curriculum (QCC). GDOE reports that this curriculum is more rigorous and challenging for students. It was designed that way to increase student achievement through more focus on core academic subjects, such as math, science, social studies, and English.

Georgia has also implemented dropout prevention programs and initiatives to improve academic achievement. Charter schools, career academies, and virtual schools have been instituted to meet the needs of students who have not been successful in traditional learning environments. According to Simmons (2007), non-traditional high schools have historically worked to provide minority and academically challenged students with a quality education, a feat that traditional high schools have not been able to accomplish. Previous research has also suggested that once students at risk of school failure enroll in non-traditional high schools, they experience a change in their perceptions regarding school and themselves (Fulkerson, Harrison, & Hedger, 1999). These changes in perceptions can potentially translate into increased academic achievement and increased graduation rates. These non-traditional schools are more successful than the average traditional high school because they utilize innovative teaching methods and strategies to accommodate the varied learning styles of students by keeping them engaged and interested in learning (National Education Association [NEA], 2009). Intervention strategies such as individualized learning environments and aggressive support services are designed to defend against the dropout risk factors and reduce students' chances of prematurely leaving high school. However, Prevatt and Kelly (2003) concluded that there was no one best strategy to

address the dropout problem, but the concept of non-traditional high schools is one strategy that seems promising.

### *Implications of the High School Dropout Issue*

The educational crisis of high school dropouts has considerable implications for American society, the economy, and for the individual citizen. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2009) claimed that high school dropouts “represent a tremendous loss of human potential and productivity, and they significantly reduce the nation’s ability to compete in an increasingly global economy” (p. 3). There are three areas of implications for high school dropouts. These are increased likelihood of low wage employment, dependence on public assistance, unemployment, and criminal behavior (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009; Christenson and Thurlow, 2004; Harlow, 2003; Laird et al., 2007). Each will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

An overwhelming percentage of high school dropouts are unemployed and living in poverty (Laird et al., 2007). These conditions cost the American economy billions of dollars in lost revenues and lost wages every year (Christenson and Thurlow, 2004). Local, state, and national economies are adversely affected by a poorly educated society. When there are high dropout rates, there are more people in the workforce who earn low wages. Lower wages result in less tax revenue for local, state and federal governments. In addition to less tax revenues for governments operations, more money is spent on social programs when society produces less income (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009).

Statistics show that high school dropouts are more likely to use social programs such as the federal food stamp program, welfare, and housing assistance subsidies (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). For instance, it was reported that 14% of high school dropouts

between the ages of 25-34 received welfare assistance versus 5.8% of high school graduates of the same age group (Smith, Young, Choy, Perie, Alsalam, Rollefson, & Bae, 1996). Also, high school dropouts were twice as likely to receive food stamps as those individuals who have graduated from high school. According to a 2005 statistic, 20.5% of high school dropouts received food stamps in comparison to 9.3% of high school graduates and 1.3% of college graduates (Invest in a New Jersey, n.d.).

One of the ways in which the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reports the unemployment rate is by educational attainment. Individuals are grouped based on the level of education they have obtained: high school dropout, high school graduate, and college graduate. In their latest report, BLS lists the high school dropouts group as the group with the highest percentage for unemployment. It was reported that 15.2% of high school dropouts were unemployed compared to 10.1% of high school graduates and 4.9% of college graduates (BLS, 2010). The U.S. Census Bureau (2007) also reported a tremendous gap of earning potential between high school dropouts and college graduates. The average median income in 2006 for high school dropouts was \$17,299 versus \$26,933 for individuals with a high school diploma. The average income increases more significantly to \$36,645 for individuals with an Associate Degree and to \$52,671 for those with a Bachelor's Degree (U.S Bureau of the Census, 2006).

Another issue associated with dropouts is an increased likelihood of criminal behavior. One thought is that high school dropouts are less likely to hold stable employment and may feel compelled to commit crime for money. A report from the Justice Policy Institute (2007) confirmed that criminal behavior is more prevalent in individuals who have dropped out of high school. As a direct result of financial instability caused by inadequate preparation through education and job training, a disproportionate number of individuals who have dropped out of

school enter the revolving door of the penal system. Statistics showed a disturbing trend among individuals who have chosen to drop out of high school. A report from Harlow (2003) found that correctional populations in local, state, and federal prisons are less educated than the general population. According to Harlow, high school dropouts account for 75% of state inmates, 70% of city/county inmates, and 60% of federal inmates. Unfortunately, criminal behavior is more prevalent among individuals who have dropped out of high school than among graduates. One survey of 18 years old dropouts, reported that 11% of them had been arrested and 8% had spent time in a juvenile home (Schwartz, 1995). While Amos (2008) believes that the decision to drop out of high school is not synonymous with criminal behavior, persons arrested and/or incarcerated are more likely to be high school dropouts (Amos, 2008). Additionally, it has been theorized that individuals who are uneducated are more likely to commit crime, because they do not have the same value systems as individuals with professions and other stable employment.

It is evident that individuals' decisions to drop out of high school are not decisions that affect only those individuals. Those decisions indirectly affect the community at large. The consequences of having dropouts in society are widespread because of the economic impact. Unfortunately, individuals without high school diplomas are unable to command higher salaries and benefits. As a result, these individuals earn lower wages from low skilled jobs. The economic repercussions of low-wage workers produce financial strains on government systems that depend on lucrative tax bases. It also affects private industries that depend on educated workforces (Amos, 2008).

#### Statement of the Purpose

Despite the growing attention on student achievement and academic rigor, there appears to be a gap in research regarding why students drop out of high school from a student's



perspective. Britt (1995) stated that the effectiveness of dropout prevention programs and initiatives such as the non-traditional high school could be improved by having a better understanding of the perceptions of students who are at-risk for school failure. More recent studies also suggest that students must be consulted regarding their views, experiences, and concerns as dropout prevention programs and school initiatives are developed (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as a student and the perceptions of school of graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure enrolled in a non-traditional and in a traditional high school in Georgia. In addition, this study also determined if there were significant differences in these students' perceptions (self-concept, student self, school environment) based on gender and socio-economic status (SES).

The results of the study described the non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors' perceptions of self as a person, of self as a student and school perceptions. In addition, the results would detect the differences between non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure on perceptions of self as a person, a student and of school. It would detect the differences between female and male non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure on perceptions of self as person, student and of school. Also, it would detect the differences between the SES of non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure on perceptions of self as a person, student-self, and of school. The rationale for conducting this study was to determine if there were differences between non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors' on perceptions and to examine possible differences between perceptions based on gender and SES. The results of this study not only adds to the body of literature for educational research, but it also provides educators with

additional information as they attempt to develop more useful programs and initiatives to improve the effectiveness of dropout prevention programs and initiatives and thereby improve Georgia's high school graduation rate.

### Research Questions

1. Describe non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors' perceptions of self as a person, of self as a student and of school for graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure enrolled in a non-traditional high school and in a traditional high school.
2. What is the difference between non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure on:
  - a. perceptions of self as a person
  - b. perceptions of self as a student
  - c. perceptions of school
3. What is the difference between female and male non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure on:
  - a. perceptions of self as a person
  - b. perceptions of self as a student
  - c. perceptions of school
4. What is the difference between the SES of non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure on:
  - a. perceptions of self as a person
  - b. perceptions of self as a student
  - c. perceptions of school

## Research Hypothesis

Graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure enrolled in a non-traditional high school will have more positive perceptions (perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as a student and perceptions of school) than graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure enrolled in a traditional high school.

## Conceptual Framework

### *The Urban Learner Framework*

The conceptual framework chosen for this study is the Urban Learner Framework (ULF; Research for Better Schools, 1994). The ULF was developed by the Urban Education Project at Research for Better Schools (RBS). It was originally designed to train educators on strategies to help urban students learn. The framework's guiding principle stated that educators must first change their negative mindset toward urban learners (Williams & Newcombe, 1994). The specific strategies presented in the ULF are based on four themes that originate from educational research about urban school improvement and urban school reform. The ULF model became a new approach for explaining the different academic aptitude of urban learners. The four themes of the ULF suggested that the preconceived perceptions of urban learners as deprived, failing/low-achieving, unmotivated, and at-risk should be changed. The new approach suggested that urban learners are culturally different, with unrecognized abilities and underdeveloped potential. They are also engaged, self-motivated, effortful, and resilient.

The ULF's concepts and principles will be useful to support implementation of the study and to interpret the findings. For the purpose of constructing a conceptual framework, the four themes were aligned with the variables in the following manner.

1. Perceptions of graduating seniors (self, student self, and school environment) –

First theme: Cultural diversity and learning

2. Perceptions of graduating seniors (self, student self, and school environment) –

Second theme: Unrecognized abilities and underdeveloped potential

3. Perceptions of graduating seniors (self, student self, and school environment) –

Third theme: Enhancing ability development through motivation and effort

4. Perceptions of graduating seniors (self, student self, and school environment) –

Fourth theme: Resilience

### Significance of the Study

Examination of the literature pertaining to the dropout rate in the U.S. showed that despite numerous intervention programs and initiatives operating around the country, the graduation rate continued to decline for 40 years (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Greene, 2002; Laird et al., 2007; Swanson, 2005). Britt (1995) suggested that the dropout rate has not been significantly impacted by these efforts because current programs do not address the specific needs of at-risk students. Important issues such as the failure to address students' negative perceptions regarding school have been disregarded. Instead, many programs and initiatives are implemented based on available funding and not on student needs. Perhaps, there is too much emphasis on academic remediation and not enough focus on social and emotional issues (Britt, 1995). Therefore, findings from this study will add to previous research and fill in gaps regarding the collection of data from at-risk students' regarding their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about self-concept, student self, and school environment (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Britt, 1995).

Outcomes from this study may be useful to educators to improve their best practice as school-based dropout prevention programs and initiatives are constructed or undergo reform. The expressed needs of at-risk students should be addressed as educators seek to incorporate more effective strategies aimed at improving the graduation rate. For instance, results of this study

might direct educators to focus more on social and emotional problems encountered by at-risk students as well as academic issues. Additionally, if education stakeholders are aware of and better able to understand the perceptions of at-risk students about school and self, their ability to modify ineffective teaching and instructional methods may improve. Results of this study have the potential to improve local level education policy by providing new, student-focused information to administrators responsible for the formation of local level policy and procedures that affect the operation of non-traditional programs or initiatives.

### Definition of Terms

#### *Academic Perceptions Inventory*

Originally name the Affective Perceptions Inventory, the Academic Perceptions Inventory (API; Soares, 2007) was developed by Drs. Anthony and Louise Soares in 1973 to measure the concept of self. The instrument attempts to dimensionalize the construct of self with independent and interrelated factors that uses an individual's roles, situations, and areas of personal success and failures. The API is comprised of nine separate and independent scales to measure attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about the self as it relates to classroom experiences, self as a person, self as a student, self in an educational setting, and self relative to the following subject areas: English, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, the Arts and Physical Education. The API was formulated into four levels: Primary for grades Kindergarten to third grade, Intermediate for fourth to eighth grades, Advanced for ninth to twelfth grades, and College for undergraduates (Soares, 2007).

#### *Alternative School*

According to a GDOE (2001) definition, alternative schools provide for the educational needs of students who have been removed from their home school due to disruptive and/or

violent behavior. In addition, students who have been released from Department of Juvenile Justice facilities must attend alternative schools for a specified time before they return to their home school.

#### *At-risk*

At-risk can be described as actions and/or circumstances which create barriers that threaten academic success for students. At-risk actions include, but are not limited to truancy, grade retention, teen pregnancy, school suspensions, substance abuse, and criminal behavior. At-risk circumstances include, but are not limited to poverty, parental abuse/neglect, homelessness, parents who are high school dropouts, and a household where English is the second language.

#### *Non-traditional high schools*

Also referred to as alternative high schools, non-traditional high schools characteristically have small student body enrollments, small teacher-to-student ratios, flexible school structure for course scheduling, supportive environments, self-paced instruction, and post-secondary preparation (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Raywid (1997) described these schools as departures from the traditional schools because of downsizing the student body, providing student and teacher choice, establishing student engagement, and utilizing authentic assessments.

#### *Self-concept*

Purkey (1988) describes self-concept as “the totality of a complex, organized, and dynamic system of learned beliefs, attitudes, and opinions that each person holds to be true about his or her personal existence” (p. 2).

#### *School Failure*

In the context of this study, school failure is defined as has “not graduated from high school or completed a state-or district approved educational program” (Young, 2003, p. 1). The

decision to drop out may have been preceded by retention, poor performance in school, truancy, and/or suspension due to disciplinary problems (Georgia Family Connection Partnership [GAFCP], 2001).

## CHAPTER 2

### A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a framework for understanding the perceptions of graduating seniors deemed at-risk for academic failure enrolled in non-traditional and traditional high schools. To understand the perceptions of these students is to understand their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings in regards to themselves as a person, as a student, and school. To build a comprehensive foundation for this study, a systematic and thorough examination of the existing body of literature was done. The review of literature begins with an examination of the study's conceptual framework. It continues with a synopsis of the high school dropout problem in the United States with special emphasis on Georgia's current status. The review will then explore some of the literature related to at-risk students, the associated risk factors, and how those risk factors affect graduation possibilities. The review continues with an overview of the study's three dependent variables (self-concept, student self, and school perceptions) and the variables affect on high school graduation. The review of literature concludes with a summation of non-traditional high schools. It will include research-based definitions, a comparison between non-traditional and traditional high schools, examples of successful non-traditional high schools, and characteristics of successful non-traditional high schools and programs.

#### Conceptual Framework

The purpose of either a conceptual framework or a theoretical framework is to set the foundation of a research study. The chosen framework guides the planned research because it



defines the independent and dependent variables and it explains how these variables are connected. In addition, the background, guiding principles, and educational implications of the framework will link the research study to established and existing theories. Therefore, when organizing a study, it is important to adopt a framework that is appropriate and compatible to the context of the research. Conceptual and theoretical frameworks are both able to support and guide research studies, but each has its own unique functions.

According to Jenson (1994), the difference between a conceptual framework and a theoretical framework is in its level of conceptual organization. He explained that conceptual frameworks have a lower level of organization than theoretical frameworks. They are formed when one or more concepts and/or models are woven together to explain a particular event. Theoretical frameworks, on the other hand, are considered to be a higher level of conceptual organization. In this type of framework, theory is used to present or explain a particular event using an interrelated set of variables (Creswell, 2003).

Creswell (2003) defined theoretical framework as the method of using theory in research to provide explanations for the relationship that exists between the independent and dependent variables. The theory in a theoretical framework guides the formation of research studies by providing a scaffold to organize the study around. According to Creswell, a quantitative study is guided by a deductive approach of research. This approach forms research questions from the theory. Once the questions are established, they are used to examine the theory. Next, the variables are operationalized and defined for the study. An applicable instrument is then chosen to measure the attitudes, behaviors or perceptions of participants. Lastly, the data collected from the administration of the instrument will produce scores that will support or refute the theory of the study.

A conceptual framework is defined as the method of using a set of broad ideas and principles in research to provide explanations for the relationships and behaviors that exist between the independent and dependent variables (Creswell, 2003; Reichel & Ramey, 1987). Unlike a theoretical framework, the conceptual model is more abstract because it does not use a theory as its guide (Burns & Groves, 2001). Instead of using a theory, a set of ideas, principles or concepts are used as a starting point for how to build the research study. The conceptual framework sets up the research study with parameters to construct the study's agenda and guide the ensuing investigation of independent and dependent variables (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Therefore, the conceptual frameworks must be solid enough so that the interrelated concepts explain the existing relationships in the study (Washington State University, n.d.).

Therefore, the similarities of the theoretical framework and the conceptual framework are that both frameworks substantiate the research study. Additionally, both frameworks also provide a schema for the research study. The schema gives the researcher an efficient way to organize facts and explain the relationship between variables (Creswell, 2003). Frameworks provide an opportunity for the ideas in the study to be connected to existing bodies of research, theories, and concepts (Krumme, 2002).

In addition to the differences previously discussed, an excerpt from a Washington State University's research methods class web page (n.d.) identified a few more. First, it stated that the theoretical framework differs from the conceptual framework because the theory, instead of concepts or ideas, is used to connect the study to the research question. Secondly, the theory is said to be a discussion of related concepts, while a concept represents several interrelated ideas.

Lester (2005) suggested that conceptual frameworks are most appropriately used when the research problem addresses a complex situation that cannot be explained with a single theory.

For instance, this research study addressed the complex issues of the dropout rate and the perceptions of at-risk graduating seniors. Since these particular issues are complex, a framework that is not comprised of multiple concepts would not be adequate. Therefore, a conceptual framework was most appropriate for this study and studies like it, because conceptual frameworks are based on multiple themes with various theories (Kinney, 1994).

### *The Socio-Cultural Theory of Education*

Two possible frameworks were identified to support and guide this research study and both included principles that addressed the unique circumstances of at-risk learners. The first framework was the Socio-cultural Theory of Education. Although the title suggested that this framework was purely theoretical, it was identified by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) as a conceptual and theoretical framework. The socio-cultural theory included contemporary themes in philosophy, literary and aesthetic criticism, theology, cognitive, and social science. The framework used a myriad of themes to approach learning through the participation in socio-cultural activities. For example, CREDE encouraged the natural socialization of children by their parents and caretakers. When children exhibited questioning behavior regarding their surroundings, adults were admonished to use these occurrences as teachable moments. It was suggested that these ordinary moments would actually play a pivotal role in the educational development of learners. Thus, the use of socio-culturally activities would heighten the innate curiosity of students and learning would take place. Additionally, the educational implications of this theory proposed that assisted performance must be integrated into the socio-cultural activities. Used effectively, assisted performance increases academic success for all types of learners, because it addresses the various developmental levels.

Assisted performance is defined as direct instruction, demonstrations, practice sessions, and exploratory instructional conversation.

Although the Socio-cultural Theory of Education framework possessed some relevant elements, the theory lacked vital principles that were relevant in regards to the independent and dependent variable of the study. Therefore, the framework was considered inappropriate and it was not selected for this study.

### *The Self-Determination Theory*

Another framework that was considered for this study was the Self-Determination theory (SDT). This theory, developed by Deci and Ryan (1985), is considered a macro-theory. It is considered a macro-theory because SDT is comprised of a set of four mini theories: the organismic-dialectical meta-theory, the cognitive evaluation theory, causality orientations theory, and basic needs theory (2008). Deci and Ryan explained that the mini-theories of SDT were developed to explain a set of motivationally based occurrences. The organismic-dialectical meta-theory assumed that people have natural tendencies toward psychological growth and development. The cognitive evaluation theory addressed the effects of social contexts on intrinsic motivation. The causality orientations theory described the differences people have regarding self-determined behavior. The guiding principle of SDT is “the degree to which people endorse their actions at the highest level of reflection and engage in the actions with a full sense of choice” (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The educational implications for SDT were related to identifying the level of amotivation in at-risk students. In a study conducted to identify why high school students lack motivation in the classroom, researchers attempted to increase their understanding of academic amotivation in high school students so that appropriate curricula and other interventions are presented (Legault, Green-Demers & Pelletier, 2006).

The self-determination theory framework was not chosen for this study, because it lacked the relevant elements to build and support the context of the study. Most significantly, the framework did not possess the necessary concepts to connect the study and the dependent and independent variables.

### *The Urban Learner Framework*

The Urban Learner Framework was selected because it was the most appropriate framework to guide the development of the study and to interpret its findings. The ULF framework included four major themes that were directly related to this study: cultural diversity and learning, unrecognized abilities and underdeveloped potential, enhancing ability development through motivation and effort, and resilience. The four themes of the ULF were aligned with the study's dependent variables as described below.

1. Perceptions of graduating seniors (self, student self, and school environment) –  
First theme: Cultural diversity and learning
2. Perceptions of graduating seniors (self, student self, and school environment) –  
Second theme: Unrecognized abilities and underdeveloped potential
3. Perceptions of graduating seniors (self, student self, and school environment) –  
Third theme: Enhancing ability development through motivation and effort
4. Perceptions of graduating seniors (self, student self, and school environment) –  
Fourth theme: Resilience

The ULF is comprised of concepts that explain that urban learners have the capabilities to be academically successful despite the accepted misconception that at-risk students will experience school failure. The authors of this framework incorporated various theories to explain

that educators have been ineffective in their attempts to create successful learning environments and ineffective in their attempts to teach urban learners (Kinney, 1994).

In the first ULF theme, the term *deprived* is replaced with culturally *different* (Williams & Newcombe, 1994), because the cultural diversity of students should not be considered a deficiency. Educators should accommodate these differences with instruction that includes the traditions, languages, and experiences of all their students' cultures. It is more difficult for students of various races/ethnicities to experience academic success in classrooms when their differences are not integrated into their coursework curriculum (Vanterpool, Lipman, Presseisen, 1994). Theme 2 rejects the notion that urban learners are failures or low-achievers. Instead, their academic failure is seen as unrecognized abilities and underdeveloped potential. The ULF suggests that strategically planned instruction and assessment be incorporated in classrooms to bring out these abilities and potential. Theme 3 promotes urban learners as engaged, self-motivated, and effortful, instead of unmotivated. Vanterpool et al. suggested that urban learners were more likely to experience academic success when they hold positive self-concepts. For these reasons, educators must provide school environments with high expectations for all students, reward students for their efforts, and view their errors as learning opportunities (RBS, 1994). The fourth theme is resilience. According to Williams and Newcombe, resilience is an energy or strength which gives individuals the ability to overcome adversity in life. It has been recommended by RBS that the term resilience should replace the more commonly used at-risk. Not only does at-risk have a more negative connotation, it describes urban learners' current conditions. Resilience, however, describes their state of mind and who they are as individuals.

According to the RBS, these themes can be applied in various school environments to help students with similar barriers and challenges become academically successful. The universal

principles used to develop the ULF are beneficial to any educator who wants to improve student achievement and decrease the performance gap for urban learners (RBS, 1994). The adaptability of this framework is further evident from its use by various types of educational facilities across the nation. One of the activities listed in the ULF overview is a series of collaborative efforts with central offices and classroom teachers in small urban regions. This is in addition to places such as Baltimore, Newark, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C. The ULF has also been used by the Learning Bridges. This is a comprehensive, research-based company which provides training and continuing education to educators. Learning Bridges has adopted the ULF as a part of its curriculum to train teachers in the concepts of improving the academic achievement of low-performing students (Learning Bridges, 2008). Hamline University's (2007) Graduate School of Education also uses the ULF. The university uses the framework modules to train new and veteran teachers on how to create classroom environments and plan appropriate instruction for urban learners. Trinity University of Washington, D.C. is yet another university that uses the ULF. This university offers training in the contemporary perspectives on the urban learner and has used ULF as the foundation for its Teaching and Learning Excellence programs (Forbes-Berthoud & Ocampo, 2007).

Previous research has suggested that there are relationships between factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, and SES and the dependent variables: at-risk students' perceptions of self and school (Awad, 2007; Brittt, 1995; Choi, 2005; Ensminger et al., 1996; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Janosz et al., 1997). The ULF concepts address the relationships between the variables in this study. For example, Theme three, enhancing ability development through motivation and effort, addresses the relationship between positive self-perceptions and academic success. Britt (1995) stated that the use of culturally relevant elements in the curriculum and

positive feedback and correction is extremely encouraging to students. These instructional strategies help students develop more positive self-concepts and higher levels of self-efficacy. The ULF suggested that as these positive characteristics are enhanced, students are motivated to obtain academic success. Theme four explains the concept of resilience and its relationship with perceptions and academic success. Britt stated that resilience is enhanced when teachers provide personalized support, relevant classroom experiences, and high expectations. It is suggested by the ULF that the supportive behavior of teachers at school can positively influence students who experience negative incidents outside of school. As a result, students seem to develop more positive perceptions regarding their situations and abilities and eventually experience more academic success.

As applied to my study, this conceptual framework supported the expectation that the independent variables: gender and SES of the at-risk graduating seniors in the study influence the dependent variables: perceptions of self, student self, and school environment of at-risk graduating seniors. This framework hypothesized that the success or failure of these students depends upon the cultural sensitivity of classroom instruction, the recognition of students' abilities and potential from teachers, the importance of motivation, support and nurturing, and the cultivation of resilience in students (RBS, 1994). These relationships are consistent with the belief that the perceptions (self-concept, student self, school environment) of graduating seniors deemed at-risk for academic failure are influenced by their enrollment in non-traditional versus traditional high schools.

#### The High School Dropout Problem in the United States

In an open letter to the public, Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006) gave warning to the American people regarding the high school dropout epidemic. The authors proclaimed that



too many young people make the decision to leave high school without earning a high school diploma. Bridgeland et al. (2006) also stated that the student's decision to drop out of high school have both personal and societal repercussions.

Personal repercussions of dropping out of high school include the increased likelihood of unemployment, poverty, and criminal behavior. Students who decided to leave school prematurely forfeit a higher standard of living for themselves and their families. Unemployment is more prevalent for individuals who do not have marketable skills and no education. The BLS (2010) reported that the unemployment rate for February 2010 was 9.7%. This figure translates into 14.9 million unemployed Americans (BLS, 2010). However, for individuals without a high school diploma, the unemployment rate increased to 15.6%. Furthermore, the statistics showed that as individuals' educational attainment increased their unemployment rate decreased. For instance, high school graduates posted a 10.5% unemployment rate and college graduates experienced a 5% rate of unemployment (BLS, 2010). Statistics also show disparities among the employment participation rate for individuals with different levels of education. For example, the participation rate was 46.2% for high school dropouts, 61.9% for high school graduates, and 77% for college graduates (BLS, 2010). Without employment to sustain their way of life, many of these individuals face the plight of poverty. U.S. Census Bureau (2008) statistics show that 32.2% of Americans who live at less than 125% of the poverty level are high school dropouts compared to 16% for high school graduates and 4.9% for college graduates. Households with insufficient income are often reliant on public assistance to provide for the necessities of life. The inability of these individuals to obtain adequate employment to substantiate an independent lifestyle requires them to rely on government aid to meet their basic needs. These include food stamps to buy food, housing subsidies to maintain shelter, and Medicaid to cover medical

expenses. While public assistance is a useful safety net for individuals who experience situations of unemployment, it can be also be a way of life for individuals who have no education and/or marketable skills. Providing various types of public assistance to needy citizens is no cheap feat. For example in 2008, the U.S. government spent \$34.6 billion federal dollars in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (SNAP) or food stamp benefits (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2010). As previously stated, a disproportionate number of these recipients are high school dropouts. Data from a 1992 NCES report shows that dropouts were twice as likely to receive public assistance as citizens who graduated from high school. Therefore, the inability of individuals to provide for the basic necessities of life has resulted in negative effects on the country's economy. Conditions such as low wage employment, unemployment, and public assistance cost the American economy billions of dollars in lost revenues (Christenson and Thurlow, 2004). Comparing dropouts against individuals who completed high school, Rouse (2005) stated that dropouts contribute 40% of the federal and state tax revenue that their counterparts contribute. This can account for a combined income and tax revenue loss of over \$200 billion to the American economy when a single group of students fail to graduate from high school. These overwhelming figures prove that as students make the decision to drop out of high school, their personal decision result in societal repercussions.

Aron (2006) cited that 39% of school districts had at least one alternative school or program for at-risk students in the 1<sup>st</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> grades. This figure translates into 10,900 different programs to help students stay in school. These non-traditional options were available for students in 88 to 92% of the reporting school districts. Since many at-risk students live in urban areas, it is understandable that schools in urban areas with large minority student populations and

districts with high poverty rates were more likely to have such non-traditional programs (Aron, 2006).

The issue of graduation rates for high school students continues to be a major challenge for school systems around the country. A study by the Manhattan Institute reports that the national graduation rate fell from a reported 72% in 1991 to 71% in 2002 (Greene, 2002). The statistics from this report are consistent with the findings in a 2004 study conducted by The National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy. In this report, Haney, Madaus, Abrams, Wheelock, Miao, and Gruia (2004) state that the 8<sup>th</sup> grade to high school graduation rates have fallen steadily from 78.4% in 1992 to 74.4% in 2001. This national condition mirrors the state of the high school dropout problem in Georgia. Based on the 2001 Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) calculations by The Urban Institute's Education Policy Center, Georgia rated 48<sup>th</sup> out of 51 in the national graduation rate listing. Georgia's 55.5% graduation rate only surpassed Nevada (54.7%), Florida (53%), and South Carolina (50.7%). More recent data from the Georgia Department of Education (GDOE) reported that the state had a 65.4% graduation rate for the 2003–2004 school year. Taking under consideration that these statistics originated from different sources and used various methods of calculations, a common theme still emerges. The dropout rate for Georgia presents a dismal picture.

Even though Georgia is one of the fastest growing states in the United States, (US Census, 2007) it has the enormous challenge of contending with one of the worst high school graduation rates in the country (Swanson, 2001). Not to mention that Gwinnett, DeKalb and Cobb Counties, three of the most populous counties in the metro Atlanta area, have three of the worst graduation rates for African-Americans and Latinos in the country (Greene, 2002). Georgia will not be able to continue to grow economically and attract industry, if its educational

system is substandard. A substandard school system translates into a poorly prepared and uneducated workforce. An uneducated workforce cannot produce a strong economic base. Georgia cities need skilled workers and college graduates, so good-paying jobs are generated (Ohlemacher, 2006). Therefore, it is vital to Georgia's future as a viable and economically strong state that its schools are successful at producing students who are prepared for postsecondary education and training.

The reality of these statistics should be a wakeup call to the educational system. These statistics are unacceptable and it is imperative that initiatives that are more effective are developed and implemented to curtail this crisis. Furthermore, these alarming statistics present a bleak picture for the country's educational system in a highly competitive global economy. According to a Workforce Development Task Force report, in its current state, Georgia's workforce cannot attract industries and businesses because of its under-skilled workers. The Governor's Guide reminds us that in order to compete in a global economy, we must train and educate workers to be highly skilled. The result of a shortage of skilled workers for businesses will eventually mean a slow economy; therefore, it is important that policymakers recognize the trends of the 21<sup>st</sup> century educational system and pass policies that will accommodate the changing face of this country's students. As the educational community struggles to develop initiatives and strategies to curtail the dropout problem, millions of students continue to walk out of high school without their diploma. Therefore, a new vision for reaching disenfranchised students must be created so that future workforces will be equipped with the necessary skills, abilities, and knowledge to compete globally.

### Students At-Risk of School Failure

The independent variables for this study were gender and SES. These variables were chosen for this study because of their important relationship with at-risk students and school failure. According to a 1992 study from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), minority students from families in a low SES are more likely to experience school failure. The NCES study also reports that gender is a significant variable regarding school failure. Donnelly (1987) states that within school populations, a disproportionate number of minority males experience school failure. Therefore, it was essential to include the variables of gender and SES in this study, because of their tremendous influences on students' perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as a student, and perceptions of school.

Academically at-risk students face barriers that impede their ability to graduate from high school. These barriers can be categorized into social/family background, personal problems, and social factors (Westfall & Pisapia, 1994). Within these three categories, there are characteristics and indicators which are used to identify students as at-risk. For the purpose of this study, academically at-risk students will be defined as students who are truant, disengaged from school, pregnant, parenting, and/or off-track for graduation (Herlihy, 2007).

In a longitudinal study completed in 1995, Bekhuis substantiated that unsafe school environments are a risk factor for students dropping out of high school. Bekhuis reported that students who feel unsafe at school are more likely to drop out of school than students who do not experience this sense of danger. Bekhuis admitted that his findings cannot provide a causal explanation of why students leave high school prematurely; however, he did state that students are more likely to drop out when their school environments are violent and dangerous. The results of his study also suggested that students may drop out when they experience constant

threats of physical violence. Loukas (2007) expanded on this thought and suggested that students' perceptions regarding their school climate is an important aspect to student behavior and student outcomes. He maintained that students who experienced school connectedness or the feelings of closeness or belonging with others at school are more likely to experience academic motivation and achievement. Loukas recommended that school personnel increase students' school connectedness through the implementation of school safety programs and the adoption of violence-prevention programs.

Bekhuis' longitudinal study also established a relationship between unsafe schools, race/ethnicity, and SES. According to the findings, students who were categorized as a minority (Black and Hispanic) and low SES were most likely to be exposed to unsafe schools. This finding is consistent with a 2002 longitudinal study that reported 35% of Black students, 50% of Hispanic students and 16% of White students were identified as low SES. These Black and Hispanic students were also more likely to feel unsafe at school than their White counterparts (Ingels, Burns, Charleston, Chen and Cataldi, 2002).

In another longitudinal study (Ensminger, Lamkin, & Jacobson, 1996), the affect of neighborhoods was considered when students dropped out of school. Results indicated that students who resided in middle-class neighborhoods had an academic advantage over students who lived in lower class neighborhoods. More specifically, the study concluded that male students who lived in middle-class neighborhoods were more likely to graduate from high school than males from low SES households. However, the same conclusion was not made regarding the influence of the neighborhood on female students. There were no distinguishable differences in the high school graduation rates for females in white-collar neighborhoods and those in poverty-ridden neighborhoods. Even though neighborhood affects was identified in this study as

a risk factor for students at-risk of school failure, Ensminger et al. (1996) determined that any variation of graduation rates for groups of students may be explained by other factors.

Other risk factors can be categorized as student and school factors. In their 1999 longitudinal study, Goldschmidt and Wang described student-level characteristics as gender, race/ethnicity, family characteristics, and student characteristics. Family characteristics included single parent households, low SES, parental educational attainment, and parental involvement for school. Student characteristics included behavior, grade retention, employment, and academics. School-level characteristics were described as school choice (private and public schools), community, school policy and practice, and student enrollment. The community characteristics included urban, rural, and low SES. School policy and practice included remedial English, grade retention, and behavior. Student enrollment characteristics included average attendance and Hispanic, Black, and Asian ethnicities.

Goldschmidt and Wang (1999) considered student and school risk factors listed in The National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) for examination of issues related to students dropping out of school. It was the goal of the study to uncover the differences in how middle and high school dropouts are affected by risk factors. The results showed that as students get older, various risk factors affect them differently. For instance, student-level risk factors have a significant effect on the probability of high school students dropping out of school. This study revealed that family characteristics such as single parent households, lack of parent education, and lack of parental involvement increases the likelihood of students dropping out of high school. For middle school students, student characteristics are influential in students' decisions to drop out of school. Grade retention and bad behavior are strong indicators that students will drop out. In addition to these results, the study also found that the influences of school related risk

factors increased the odds once students entered high school. These school-level factors included attending a school with a large percentage of students who have been held back and/or a large percentage of students who misbehave.

The findings of Janosz, Le Blanc, Boulerice and Tremblay (1997) were consistent with previous studies about school dropouts. The basis of their longitudinal study was to identify predictors of high school dropouts, determine if these predictors were stable over time, and provide data for the development of dropout prevention programs and potential dropout screening practices. When common risk factors, such as school, family, behavioral, social, and personality were examined, it was concluded that school risk factors were better predictors of school dropout than family risk factors. Results showed that grade retention, poor grades, and a feeling of school disconnect were better predictors of dropout behavior than low SES backgrounds or dysfunctional family behavior. However, Janosz et al. (1997) warned that not all of the school risk predictors have equal influence over students. For instance, grade retention was identified as the most powerful predictor of all school risk factors.

Janosz, Le Blanc, Boulerice and Tremblay (2000) conducted another study about school dropouts and predictors. This particular study was unique because it involved an analysis and classification of school dropouts. According to these researchers, previous studies had not focused on the categorizing of various types of dropouts. Instead, all dropouts were usually studied in a single sample. In their opinion, this was a mistake. Students who dropped out of school are all unique individuals with unique problems (Janosz et al., 2000). Despite the fact that they may experience many of the same risk factors, these factors do not influence them at the same time and in the same way (Tesseneer & Tesseneer, 1958). They have also suggested that by studying these students as one sample, incorrect conclusions may have been cited, because



important relationships and characteristics were not identified. The main objective of that study was to develop problem-solving techniques to study and prevent school dropout through a typological approach. The classification of dropouts was done using some common school factors, such as academic performance, perceptions toward school, and misbehavior because they are often reliable predictors of school dropout (Janosz, Le Blanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997). During the course of this study, Janosz et al (2000) used two different longitudinal samples and were able to identify a 4-type solution: Quiet, Disengaged, Low-Achiever, and Maladjusted dropouts. The results show that no one model can be used to meet the needs of students at-risk of dropping out of school or institute a dropout prevention program. This unique method of clustering show that school related risk factors differ in influence and impact among at-risk students (Janosz et al., 2000).

#### Risk Factors of Students At-Risk of School Failure

Goldschmidt and Wang (1999) stated that although there is a lot of research on student dropouts and the related risk factors, there is little research that examines school-level risk factors associated with student dropouts. They suggest that a thorough investigation is needed to identify potential dropouts. Demographic, student achievement, family, and socioeconomic variables must all be examined. The following section attempts to provide insight into these additional considerations of risk factors.

#### *Identification of Risk Factors*

Although the term at-risk can be used to describe various types of socially dysfunctional behavior, the term will be used exclusively in this study to refer to the academic vulnerability or susceptibility of students leaving high school without a diploma because of a variety of risk factors. For the purpose of this study, the term at-risk will be used to describe high school

students who are truant, disengaged from school, pregnant, parenting, and/or off-track for graduation. This definition is the consensus of the authors reviewed in this chapter and was constructed using research based descriptions of students who exhibited specific characteristics in relation to dropping out of school.

The Georgia Department of Education (2007) describes some at-risk factors as academically disengaged from and bored with school, academically unprepared, and economically disadvantaged. Westfall and Pispia (1994) identified social/family background, personal problems, and school factors as three central groups of factors that identify students who are most likely to drop out of high school. Within these three central groups are common characteristics such as low socioeconomic status, parent dropout, teenage pregnancy/parenting, criminal behavior, absenteeism, grade retention, and dissatisfaction and frustration with school. Druian and Butler (1987) asserted that students who eventually drop out of high school fit a stereotypical profile that includes being a minority from a low socioeconomic family with a single parent. In addition, these students will also have low academic skills and low self-esteem. Donnelly (1987) added that these students have parents with little education and little educational expectations for them. Findings showed that typical dropouts experience academic underachievement as early as elementary school, low standardized test scores, and absenteeism. This study also identified characteristics prevalent in the families of at-risk students' background. These characteristics included single-parent households, low socioeconomic status, and a lack of parental involvement.

In the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 88), Kaufman, Bradbury, and Ownings examined specific demographic variables prevalent in students who are most likely to drop out of high school. When gender was the factor, males were more likely than females to

drop out. Students categorized as minorities (Black, Hispanic, and Native American) were more likely to drop out than were White students. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to drop out of school than were students from higher SES backgrounds.

Hauser, Simmons, and Pager (2000) determined that two significant factors related to school dropout are students' metropolitan and suburban residence. Findings in this study state that students from metropolitan cities are more likely to drop out of high school than were students from suburban areas. Howely and Huang (1991) also report that there are differences in the high school dropout rates for students in central cities, suburban areas, and rural areas.

There are also students who are at risk of dropping out of school, but do not fit the profile of the typical dropout. According to Knoeppel (2002), there are students who are simply bored with school. They are smart, creative students who see no relevance in the daily events of a traditional classroom. These students also become dropouts, because they lose interest in school and eventually stop going to class. In addition, there is a growing population of at risk students who are not minorities or poor. This new group of at risk students is from middle to upper socioeconomic families and they are at risk because of their lifestyles. These students participate in self-destructive behaviors, such as illegal drug use and drinking alcohol. Their academic failure is unlike the academic failure of those students who lack the necessary support system needed to be successful. For example, these students live in stable school districts, have parents who are high school and even college graduates, and have both parents at home (Druian & Butler, 1987). The growing trend of a new breed of at risk students is a great topic for future research.

## The Perceptions of Graduating Seniors at Risk of School Failure

The dependent variables examined for this study were the perceptions of self as a person (self-concept), the perceptions of self as a student (student self), and school perceptions of graduating seniors at risk of school failure. These three variables consider the attitudes, beliefs, and feelings of an individual and can be explained in the following ways. The self-concept variable is how individuals look at themselves. The second variable, student self, is what these individuals think about themselves academically. The third variable, school perceptions, is how individuals think about their school, teachers, classmates, and administrators (Soares, 2007).

### *Definition of Self-Concept*

Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton (1976) define self-concept as people's perception of themselves. It is formed through the experiences people have with the environment and through the experiences people have with the significant people in their lives. Manning (2007) expands the definition to describe self-concept as perceptions of ability in both academic and nonacademic areas. Academic self-concept can be categorized into subject areas such as English, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies. Non-academic self-concept can be categorized as social, behavioral, and athletic (Shavelson et al., 1976). Self-concept was also positively correlated with academic performance and maybe a consequence of high achievement (Manning, 2007). Soares and Soares (1969) described self-concept as how individuals believe themselves to be at the moment and the different ways individuals think about themselves.

### *Definition of Student Self*

The term student self is a unique term developed by Soares and Soares (1969) to describe how individuals think about themselves because of the different things they do in academic environments. The term encompassed how individuals view themselves as students and how they

feel about school and school-related activities. During the development of The Self-Perceptions Inventory (SPI), self-concept was used because the expressions, self-perception and self-concept, were viewed as too general. Therefore, this term was constructed to express the meaning of specific constructs and dimensions to an otherwise nonspecific term.

Since student self is an original term developed by Soares and Soares (1969), a review of additional literature was done to provide more clarity to the term. A term closely related to student self is academic self-concept. Academic self-concept addresses some of the same constructs that are addressed by student self. For instance, Lent, Brown, and Gore (1997) used academic self to describe what students believe, perceive, and feel about their academic performance. West, Fish, and Stevens (1980) described academic self-concept as how students perceive, think, and feel about their academic skills. Furthermore, academic self-concept can also be used as a predictor for academic achievement (Choi, 2005), because it speaks to how students perform in their present academic environment (Awad, 2007). In addition, the term can also include how students compare themselves against other students in regards to their academic performance and abilities (Cokley, 2000).

#### *Definition of School Perception*

School perception describes how students feel and think about teachers, administrators, classmates, school work, and school activities (Soares, 2007). Their opinions and views regarding their interactions and relationships with these people are influenced by events and experiences in their academic environment (University of Connecticut, n. d.).

School perceptions are heavily impacted by students' feelings of isolation because of race/ethnicity, SES, and gender (Pollard, 1993; Brittt, 1995). Brown, Higgins, Pierce, Hong, and Thomas (2003) suggested that these demographic variables are strong factors in influencing

students' perception of school. For instance, students from ethnic backgrounds are more likely to experience feelings of isolation and alienation in school environments (Brown et al., 2003). In addition, they are more likely to perceive school as boring and teachers and administrators as unconcerned (Britt, 1995) than student who are not from ethnic backgrounds. When gender is considered, female students seemed to exhibit more resilience and problem-solving skills than male students, while male students were less likely to effectively cope with school related problems and conflicts (Britt, 1995). Previous research also states that students from low SES backgrounds have a more negative perception of school than do students from higher SES backgrounds. It is suggested that students feel this way because teachers and administrators convey feelings of apathy and disinterest towards them (Brown et al., 2003; Britt, 1995). Negative school perceptions are also more prevalent among students from certain ethnic backgrounds. They experienced more instances of rejection and alienation, because of their inability to fit in with other students (Brown et al., 2003).

School perception can also be a predictor for students' academic achievement. Very often, students who have negative perceptions about teachers, school, and classmates drop out of school prematurely, while students who have positive perceptions of school experience academic success and social acceptance. In response to these findings, it is suggested that dropout prevention programs and initiatives must address this issue if any significant improvements are to be made (Britt, 1995).

### Non-Traditional High Schools

This study examined the perceptions (perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as a student and perceptions of school) of at-risk students enrolled in a non-traditional and traditional high school. The results were used to infer whether the perceptions of at-risk students

enrolled at a non-traditional high school were more positive than were the perceptions at-risk students enrolled in a traditional high school. Therefore, this section provides a definition of non-traditional high schools and an analysis of the primary differences between non-traditional, traditional, and alternative high schools. An historical perspective of non-traditional high schools is also provided. A review of successful non-traditional high schools such as Performance Learning Centers (PLCs) is presented along with discussion about PLCs and non-traditional programs in Georgia and other types of non-traditional or alternative education programs. This section concludes with a review of the characteristics of non-traditional high schools.

#### *Non-Traditional High Schools Defined*

In this study, non-traditional high schools will be generally defined as specialty schools within the Georgia public school system with the mission of reclaiming dropouts and retaining high school students at risk of dropping out by integrating innovative and alternative methods of teaching and learning (GDOE, 2007f). These non-traditional high schools' main purpose is to support academically at-risk students in their goal of graduating from high school by providing small teacher-to-student ratios, aggressive counseling, credit recovery opportunities, flexible class scheduling, computer-based curriculums and a variety of support services (Kerka, 2003). Traditional high schools will be defined as comprehensive high schools from grades 9–12 within the Georgia public school system. These traditional schools differ from non-traditional high schools in their purpose, curriculum, instructional methods, and organization. For example, traditional high schools place emphasis on tracking, seat time, standardized assessments, closed classrooms, and hierarchical, centralized, and authoritarian structure (Martinez, 2003). However, the best practices of successful non-traditional high schools include organizational structures,

curriculum and instruction, and system-wide features which are more student-centered, flexible, and autonomous (GDOE, 2007c).

The existing definitions for non-traditional high schools are tainted by ambiguity and a lack of uniformity and generalizations of the term are made difficult because of this (Lange and Sletten, 2002). A literature review by Lange and Sletten (2002) suggested that a clear definition of non-traditional and/or alternative education still does not exist after forty years. Although there may not be a clear definition for which everyone will agree with, non-traditional and/or alternative education can be described as providing educational opportunities to at-risk students outside of the walls of traditional classrooms. (Lehr, Lanners, & Lange, 2003). Although, Lange and Sletten (2002) did provide some common traits of non-traditional high schools: mission of dropout prevention and voluntary and long-term enrollment of students.

For the purpose of this study, non-traditional high schools were generally defined as specialty secondary level schools with the mission of reclaiming dropouts and retaining high school students at risk of dropping out by integrating innovative and individualized methods of teaching and learning (Georgia Department of Education [GDOE], 2007). The mission is to provide an alternative route for students to earn a high school diploma and prepare for post-secondary opportunities. These non-traditional high schools support academically at-risk students in their goal of graduating from high school by providing small teacher-to-student ratios, aggressive counseling, credit recovery opportunities, flexible class scheduling, computer-based curriculums and a variety of support services (Kerka, 2003; Martin and Brand, 2006).

Non-traditional high schools provide individualized learning environments for students who are at-risk for dropping out of high school because of social, family, and personal barriers (Westfall & Pisapia, 1994). Research suggested that students who are affected by these types of



risk factors are more likely to drop out, if they are not exposed to effective intervention programs. Previous research also stated that students who were truant, disengaged from school, pregnant, parenting, and/or off-track for graduation at traditional high schools report a more positive experience at non-traditional high schools. This change of school perception has been attributed to safer school climates, friendly students, and caring adults (Fulkerson, Harrison, Hedger, 1999).

#### *Traditional, Non-traditional, and Alternative High Schools: Primary Differences*

Traditional high schools are comprehensive high schools from grades 9–12 within public and private school systems. These traditional schools differ from non-traditional high schools in their purpose, curriculum, instructional methods, and organization (Martinez, 2003). For example, traditional high schools place emphasis on tracking, seat time, standardized assessments, closed classrooms, and hierarchical, centralized and authoritarian structure (Martinez, 2003). Wherein, the best practices of non-traditional high schools focus on organizational structures, curriculum and instruction, and system-wide features that are more student-centered, flexible, and autonomous (GDOE, 2007). Students at traditional high schools are also offered a choice of curriculum paths to prepare them for postsecondary activities. These curriculum paths include college preparatory and international baccalaureate for those students who are preparing for enrollment at four year colleges and universities and career and technical for those students headed for technical colleges and trade schools (EdSource, 2007).

Alternative high schools should not be confused with non-traditional high schools. While non-traditional high schools provide innovative and individualized methods of teaching and learning for at-risk students to earn a high school diploma, the purpose of alternative schools is to temporarily house students who have been removed from their home school because of

infractions of their schools' disciplinary policies. Students who are removed from regular classroom settings and placed in alternative learning environments are expected to participate in the same type of required academic coursework and assessments as they did in their home schools. Alternative schools are required to provide the same instructional materials, resources, and textbooks students received from their home schools; thereby, allowing them to continue to earn course credit during their internment (GDOE, 2007b). In addition to these mandated requirements, GDOE has also proposed additional criteria for alternative education programs to ensure the effectiveness and credibility of every program in the state. Some of the suggestions include highly qualified teachers and administrators, academic and behavioral support services for students, high expectations for students, strictly enforced discipline code, and required parental involvement (GDOE, 2007a).

### *Historical Perspective of Non-Traditional High Schools*

The purpose of this historical perspective is not to present a history lesson regarding the beginning of formalized education and the development of alternative education in the colonial period. However, it is meant to construct a comprehensive picture of non-traditional high schools using historical background, key historical eras, and a review of previous literature on non-traditional programs and high schools.

Upon review of the literature about non-traditional high schools, it is evident that there is very little consensus on non-traditional high schools (Lange & Sletten, 2002). For one, much of the literature uses alternative and non-traditional interchangeably. This practice can lead to ambiguity and confusion. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, a distinction was made between the two terms. Non-traditional high schools are self-enrolled schools with a mission to provide innovative teaching and learning methods for at-risk students to earn a high school

diploma (Communities in School, 2007). Alternative schools are learning environments for students who have been temporary removed from their assigned schools because of suspensions (Martin & Brand, 2006).

Non-traditional programs, as they are known today, developed during the 1960s (Copa & Pease, 1992; Martin & Brand, 2006). Martin and Brand (2006) asserted that the modern movement for non-traditional education began during the period of the civil rights movement. This was an era of social reform and change with the passing of landmark acts such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Vocational Education Act of 1962 and the Amendments of 1968 and 1976, and the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which birthed Upward Bound, Job Corp and Head Start (Copa & Pease, 1992). This period of revolution in America's history permeated all areas of people's lives, including education. Copa and Pease (1992) wrote that educational stakeholders called for a shift in curriculum from subject matter to student. Separate vocational high schools were also instituted to provide specialized instruction to students who had no aspirations to attend a four-year college. This move led to an integration of academic and vocation education in the late 1960s. Eventually career pathways were created for students to continue their education after high school and articulation agreements were developed between high schools and community colleges beginning in 1968 (Bragg, 1999).

The Open Education Movement of the 1970s was characterized by its community approach (Copa & Pease, 1992). Parents, teachers, and students partnered with their schools to make decisions, schools experienced autonomy from local school boards, and curriculum delivery became less stringent (Copa & Pease, 1992; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Manolakes, 1972). The Open Education Movement produced many educational alternatives for students in the 1970s. Programs such as Schools within a School were developed to provide smaller learning

communities for students in large high schools. Continuation Schools were instituted to address the individualized needs of high school students who had dropout or gotten pregnant (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Despite the establishment of these successful programs, the Open Education Movement had its critics. Manolakes (1972) argued that these alternatives programs should not take the place of traditional education. Although these programs provided innovation and change to American education, he warned that these programs should not be received as the answer to every educational problem. Manolakes (1972) went on to suggest that a limited number of the open classrooms would be beneficial in appropriate communities.

The educational climate in the 1980s was much different than the previous decade. Copa and Pease (1992) labeled this era as a return to basics. Lange and Sletten (2002) stated that it was a time when non-traditional programs streamlined and targeted its focus on core subjects such as English, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. McKee and Conner (2007) concluded that the eighties were a time when non-traditional education streamlined down to servicing students who were deemed at risk for academic failure. Schools struggled with various approaches to meet the needs of these students. Some tried modified curricula; others tried partnerships with local businesses to provide vocational training (McKee and Conner, 2007). It was also in 1983 when the iconic, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, was issued. The main theme of this report and the entire educational community of the 80s was academic rigor. According to Lange and Sletten (2002), non-traditional schools had evolved into punitive-based facilities and the conservative atmosphere of the day had replaced the innovations of past decades (Copa & Pease, 1992).

The 1990s began the present era of non-traditional and alternative education. It was a pivotal time in educational history because of a strong emphasis on accountability for schools

and teachers. In Georgia, GDOE formed an Alternative Education Program Advisory Panel in response to the passing of the A+ Education Reform Act of 2000. This panel established standards and indicators for measuring student achievement at alternative and non-traditional schools (GDOE, 2007). According to state education officials, these standards and indicators were needed to improve the effectiveness of alternative and non-traditional schools and establish relevant goals. The following year, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was enacted. This bi-partisan education reform bill significantly impacted the country's alternative and non-traditional schools with mandatory performance, attendance and graduation rates objectives (McKee & Conner, 2007). Aron (2006) suggested that the enactment of NCLB was a positive for alternative and non-traditional school because the essence of what the law represented advocated for those students whom fail in traditional schools.

Non-traditional and alternative education continues to be a significant part of the transition of American education. Various types of non-traditional high schools and alternative education programs have been established to assist at-risk students in graduating from high school and transitioning into the world of work. This shift in focus addresses the need for 21<sup>st</sup> Century students to not only earn a high school diploma but prepare for postsecondary opportunities. One way of achieving these goals is through vocational training and dual enrollment programs for high school students. Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006) confirmed that students excel through the establishment of high expectations through the setting of multiple goals (graduation and post-secondary preparation).

The evolution of alternative education shows a timeline of how legislation, initiatives, and reform were instituted using approaches that were reactionary instead of proactive. Perhaps

this historical perspective reveals the need for education stakeholders to operate with more foresight when developing policies, instead of responding out of hindsight.

*Non-Traditional High Schools: Performance Learning Centers (PLC)*

Partially funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, these non-traditional schools were established by Communities in Schools of Georgia (CISGA). Performance Learning Centers were founded to provide an alternative to students who have been unsuccessful in traditional learning environments. PLCs pride themselves at providing business-like environments, intense academic programs, and project-based learning to assist students in graduating from high school and preparing them for post-secondary education opportunities. There are currently 29 PLCs throughout Georgia (Communities in School of Georgia, 2007).

Its student body is comprised of individuals who have dropped out of school, at least 16 years old or have attempted a year of high school, want a non-traditional school setting, and desires scheduling options that are more flexible. Classroom settings are made up of a teacher/student ratio 1 to 15. Students are required to complete 100 hours of volunteer work as a part of the mandatory Service Learning course before graduation. The premise of this requirement is that it will allow students to gain work-based skills and experience to prepare them for their future career (Clarke County School District, 2007).

*Classic City Performance Learning Center (Athens, GA).* Classic City PLC is located in North Georgia. At this PLC, most courses operate through an online curriculum and are supplemented with various projects and off-line activities. Classroom settings are small with a maximum of 15 students per class. Students also have the opportunity to participate in dual enrollment at Athens Technical College. This provides them the opportunity to earn college credit and credit towards graduation (Clarke County School District, 2007).

### *Other Non-Traditional High Schools*

The movement toward non-traditional high schools includes a variety of approaches in addition to the successful programs provided through Performance Learning Centers. This next section reviews aspects of other non-traditional high schools found in Georgia.

*McClarín High School (Atlanta, GA).* Frank S. McClarin was founded in 1991 as an open campus non-traditional high school to assist students in overcoming academic, family, physical, financial, and young parenthood situations. At McClarin, students have the choice of completing their high school program of study to earn a high school diploma or the requirements to receive a GED. However, the school does not offer any extracurricular activities, because of its focus on intense, concentrated study. As a part of their non-traditional curriculum, students are provided with both independent-study and structured classroom settings. Students also have the opportunity to participate in a dual enrollment program with the Atlanta Technical Institute. The school operates on normal school day with a 4 X 4 block schedule, Monday through Friday (Fulton County School System, 2007).

*Phoenix High School (Lawrenceville, GA).* Located in the Atlanta metropolitan area of Lawrenceville, Phoenix High School was established in 1988 as an alternative option for students to complete their high school education. Because of the curriculum offered at Phoenix, students have the choice of earning a College Preparatory and/or Technology/Career Preparatory diploma. A unique characteristic of Phoenix is that their school year is organized into four 9-week grading terms called mini-semesters. These shorter sessions allow students flexibility in their class schedules. It also provides them with the opportunities to attend school in the afternoon or evening to get ahead or make-up classes. The success of the school is evident. It has

provided opportunities for approximately 5,000 students to earn their diplomas in the past 18 years (Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2007).

*Savannah Corporate Academy (Savannah, GA).* Located on the Savannah Technical College campus, this non-traditional program was designed to serve students at risk of academic failure earn their high school diploma. Participation in this program allows students to participate in life skills and career development programs and receive specialized support services. The program's curriculum includes individualized learning using computer-assisted instruction, flexible scheduling, and dual enrollment. Class sizes do not exceed a teacher/student ratio of 1:15. Because of its successful work with at risk students in Savannah, this program was recognized as one of the most successful Dropout Prevention Programs in the state by CISGA. It was also selected as a Distinguished Alternative Education Program of Academic Excellence (Savannah Chatham County Public School System, 2007).

Continuation schools are another type of non-traditional school that was created to meet the needs of students who were not successful in traditional high schools. Just like the Career Academy, continuation schools believe students should have small classes and a caring adult to connect with. This program also emphasizes career technology education, along with curriculum integration of academic and elective courses. Continuation schools in California have made a considerable impact in the school system. According to Knoeppel (2002), the dropout rate would be significantly higher in the state without the presence of continuation schools. However, this article does bring to light a criticism of some non-traditional programs, standardized test scores. A weakness identified in this piece of literature uncovers non-traditional schools challenge of preparing students for high stakes tests. It is suggested that the flexibility of scheduling and



instructional strategies that allows teachers to reach at risk students is also responsible for low standardized test scores.

### *Characteristics of Non-Traditional High Schools*

As stated in the historical perspective section of this literature review, non-traditional education as we know it today started almost fifty years ago (Copa & Pease, 1992; Lehr, Lanners, & Lange, 2003; Martin & Brand, 2006; McKee & Conner, 2007). During this time, the field has developed into a mixture of programs aimed at helping to educate special populations (McKee & Conner, 2007). Because of this variation, non-traditional schools and programs have little cohesiveness in their missions and purposes. There are different enrollment criteria, funding sources, curriculums, staffing requirements, and populations in every school or program (Lehr, Lanners & Lange, 2003). For example, the enrollment requirements can vary from mandatory enrollment because of discipline issues to voluntary enrollment because of learning barriers (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr, Lanner & Lange, 2003). Different enrollment requirements necessitate different curriculum and educational programs. Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006) identified three types of educational programs: high school diploma, GED programs, and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. High school diploma programs required strict adherence to state and district standards. GED curriculum can include test preparation, workforce readiness, and literacy (Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006). ESL programs are highly individualized. Much of the instruction is small group and one-on-one. Lehr, Lanners, and Lange (2003) named four common curriculum themes: academic, social services, community-based, and individualized instruction. Academic programs at non-traditional schools address state standards using a mixture of instructional methods. This includes personalized and individualized learning plans. Fulkerson, Harrison, and Hedger (1999) wrote that non-traditional schools and programs with a

social services theme provide support for those at-risk students who experience sexual, physical and substance abuse. These programs and schools' aim is to not only educate their students, but provide treatment through referrals and collaborations (Fulkerson et al., 1999).

In much of the literature, researchers attempt to provide a better understanding of non-traditional schools and programs by categorizing them into broad divisions. Raywid (1994) is cited repeatedly in literature for her organization of distinct types of alternative and non-traditional schools, specifically Types I, II, and III as described in the next section.

*Type I (Popular Innovations).* The aim of these schools is usually high school graduation for students who are at risk for academic failure because of specified risk factors. Enrollment is usually voluntary, curriculum is individualized, and support services are provided.

*Type II (Last Chance Programs).* These programs are referred to as *last chance* because students have been removed from traditional classrooms because of code of conduct violations. These violations have mandated that students attend these programs or school for a specified period before they can return to their home school. These punitive based alternative schools and programs are often criticized for their lack of academic rigor and tendency to expose students to negative learning environments (Martin & Brand, 2006).

*Type III (Remedial Focus).* The goal of remedial programs is to provide students with academic and/or behavior assistance. Academic assistance is usually characterized by remediation for state assessments, credit recovery for failed classes, and GED preparation (Martin & Brand, 2006).

Aron (2006) identified characteristics most common in non-traditional programs. These characteristics, academic instruction, instructional staff, student supports, and educational setting are described in the next section.

*Academic Instruction.* The curriculum includes traditional standards, but the delivery is non-traditional. Teaching and learning methods are student focused, individualized, and self-paced. Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006) add that key components such as high expectations, challenging career/technical studies, work-based learning, and literacy programs should be included.

*Instructional Staff.* Teachers, counselors, and administrators should choose to be on staff at non-traditional schools and programs. They should have the appropriate knowledge, skills and abilities to work with a student body of at-risk learners. Teachers should be certified in their content area, maintain high expectations of students, and cultivate healthy, positive relationships with students.

*Student Supports.* Site based management is an important tool for operating non-traditional programs and schools. Since student disconnect is a significant risk factor for dropping out of school, these schools must encourage students to take ownership of their learning and their school. This begins by providing students with flexible, individualized programs, consistency in rule enforcement, academic and behavioral services, and preparation for post-secondary opportunities.

*Educational Setting.* Many researchers agree that non-traditional educational settings are needed to meet the needs of students who have dropped out of high school or who are at risk of dropping out of high school. The literature supports the concept that non-traditional environments are a better fit for at risk students. Zweig (2003) maintains that non-traditional schools provide at risk students the opportunity to complete high school in an environment that is more comfortable and appropriate. This environment is created when at-risk students are separated from other students, work-based activities are incorporated into the curriculum,

counseling and support services are provided, and small class sizes are mandated. This type of non-traditional environment is not a 21<sup>st</sup> century initiative. The concept of creating a more student friendly environment emerged on the education scene over 40 years ago in response to growing dropout rates and declining graduation rates in American schools (Kemple & Snipes, 2000).

The common theme that appears in the literature is the positive influence of small educational settings with a sense of community. Studies have shown that students are more likely to succeed when caring adults take a personal interest in them. Teachers and counselors are able to make a more significant impact in students' lives when they take the time to get to know them (Knoeppel, 2002).

Kerka's (2003) findings regarding the characteristics of non-traditional programs are consistent with previous studies. She identified eight factors that contribute to students staying in school when they are at risk of dropping out. Some, if not all of these factors are mentioned throughout much of the literature that exists about non-traditional programs. Effective alternative programs must include *caring adults*, such as teachers, counselors and mentors, who take the time to develop trusting and supporting relationships. The educational environment must produce a sense of *community*. Students have been found to be more successful when their schools are more personal and less bureaucratic. The *asset approach* emphasizes the positive traits of students. The rationale is that if students view themselves as valuable, they are less likely to participate in risky, irresponsible behavior. Next, *respect* is an important part of the relationships between adults and students. They learn how to interact with teachers and peers in respectful exchanges. This next factor is extremely effective in all educational settings, *high expectations*. High expectations for academic achievement is a positive influence on all students, but

especially on students who have been identified as at risk of dropping out of school. Kerka (2003) identifies *holistic, comprehensive, multidimensional development and responsibility* as the next factor. This includes attending to student needs, interests, and individual learning styles. Because non-traditional schools typically focus on the whole student, *authentic, engaging learning that connects school and work* is a relevant factor to incorporate into the programs. Students are able to make the connection between the academics of school and the application of that knowledge at work or in life. The last factor is *support and long-term follow-up services*.

There is previous research to illustrate how the unique characteristics of non-traditional settings can influence the graduation rate of students who are at risk of dropping out of school. The career academy was established nearly forty years ago as an outreach to students who were at risk of dropping out of high school. These academies were developed around many of the principles identified in an article by Kerka (2003). For example, the career academy was created as a school-within-a-school to combat the issues connected with large schools. Because of the class size, students experienced more interpersonal support from caring adults than was typically experienced in traditional schools. They also participate in work-based learning activities. These activities provide experiences that connect school academics to real work situations. Kemple and Snipes (2000) reported findings that support the hypothesis that non-traditional educational settings can make a difference in the graduation rate of students who are risk for dropping out of high school. They stated that the students enrolled in Career Academies were less likely to dropout, more likely to come to school regularly, and graduate on time. These comprehensive findings resulted from a long range study of 1,700 students at nine Career Academies over a six-year period.

Finally, according to Raywid (1997), students at *small schools* are more successful, because of the class sizes. It is this one characteristic that has the most influence on student success than any factor. Small schools also provide a safer school environment, encourage disconnected students to become involved, and motivate students to graduate from high school.

### Summary

There is very little debate in the educational community regarding the effectiveness of non-traditional programs keeping at risk students in school. Current research confirms that these types of programs have an impact on students who are at risk of dropping out of high school. Impact refers to differences between outcomes for at risk students enrolled at non-traditional schools and those outcomes of at risk students enrolled at traditional schools (Kemple & Snipes, 2000). The literature is also very consistent regarding the necessary factors that are needed for an effective non-traditional school. At-risk students require additional support when they are in high school and non-traditional educational settings can provide the necessary tools to ensure that these students graduate. Although many of these schools have been successful at reclaiming a percentage of dropouts, educational communities are still faced with the challenge of making more significant improvements on the graduation rates. Turpin and Hinton (2000) suggest that educators, schools, parents, and the community are all needed to educate students who are at risk for dropping out of school. Perhaps future research could determine if more collaborative initiatives are needed to ensure significant improvements more often. Further research also needs to be done regarding the direct impact non-traditional schools have on the overall graduation rate. Previous research regarding student outcome (graduation rates) was inclusive because many school systems require students to return to traditional high schools to graduate (Turpin & Hinton, 2000).

## CHAPTER 3

### METHOD

This chapter describes the method and procedure used to conduct this study. The sections included are a review of the (1) purpose, (2) research questions, and (3) research hypothesis. The (4) design, (5) population and sample, (6) instrumentation, (7) procedures, and (8) data analysis are also presented.

#### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of self as a person, of self as a student and of school for graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure enrolled in a non-traditional high school and a traditional high school. In addition, this study sought to determine if there were significant differences between students' perceptions based on gender and socio-economic status (SES).

The results of the study were used to describe perceptions of self as a person, of self as a student and of school for non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors' who were deemed at risk of school failure. The results also determined if there were statistically significant differences between the perceptions of graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure on perceptions of self as a person, of self as a student and of perceptions of school, based on gender and SES.

### Research Questions

1. Describe non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors' perceptions of self as a person, of self as a student and of school for graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure enrolled in a non-traditional high school and in a traditional high school.
2. What is the difference between non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure on:
  - a. perceptions of self as a person
  - b. perceptions of self as a student
  - c. perceptions of school
3. What is the difference between female and male non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure on:
  - a. perceptions of self as a person
  - b. perceptions of self as a student
  - c. perceptions of school
4. What is the difference between the SES of non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure on:
  - a. perceptions of self as a person
  - b. perceptions of self as a student
  - c. perceptions of school

### Research Hypothesis

Graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure enrolled in a non-traditional high school will have more positive perceptions (perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as



a student and perceptions of school) than graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure enrolled in a traditional high school.

### Design

A cross-sectional survey research design was used for this study. Cross-sectional survey designs are typically employed to gather data in a standardized form from a pre-determined population using questionnaires or interviews during a single contact. Responses are examined and analyzed for generalization to a target population. A cross-sectional survey, as opposed to other designs, was more effective because its aim was to examine a situation by describing the factors associated with that situation, such as attitudes, behaviors, feelings, experiences, and associations (Kelley, Clark, Brown & Sitzia, 2003). This study collected data during a one time administration of the Academic Perceptions Inventory (API) developed by Soares and Soares (2007). The API was given to intact groups of graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure. The intact groups consisted of participants enrolled in two non-traditional high schools and one group enrolled in a traditional high school. Responses from this survey provided data of students' perceptions of the self as a person, of the self as a student, and of school. The survey responses also provided data to examine and analyze any differences between the independent (gender and SES) and the dependent (perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as a student, and perceptions of school) variables.

There were advantages and disadvantages in using the cross-sectional survey research design. Owens (2002) identified four of those advantages. They include uniqueness, probability sampling, standardization of measurement, and analysis. Survey designs are unique tools in conducting research using real-world observations. Based on the design of the survey, data can be collected by qualitative or quantitative methods. Secondly, surveys have the advantage of

probability sampling or the unbiased representation of a target population. Since surveying everyone in a target population is impractical, it is acceptable to survey a sample of that population and generalize back to the larger population (Kelley et al., 2003). Thirdly, surveys produce a standardization of measurement. This means that surveys are designed to yield consistent information from all participants. Data collected from a cross-sectional survey can also complement existing data. In longitudinal studies, surveys are used to trend data when different samples from a target population are studied at different times and when cohorts are analyzed over time (Whelchel, 2003). Finally, surveys are used to access populations that are normally difficult to reach. For instance, postal questionnaires, web surveys, and email surveys are all used to reach large samples of people covering wide geographical areas (Kelley et al., 2003). In addition, surveys can be effectively administered in group settings. Surveys can also produce a relatively large amount of data in a short period of time and many times only require a single contact with participants (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). These methods are both time-and cost-effective.

The disadvantages of cross-sectional survey research designs are socially desirable responses from participants, researcher biases, and non-response rates from potential participants (Lindner & Wingenbach, 2002; O'Conner, 2004). In survey research, there is always the possibility of collecting more socially desirable responses than truthful ones because participants may feel compelled to say what they think the researcher wants to know (Trochim, 2006b). This occurs more often when the participant knows the researcher. Less than honest responses to questions about their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings on surveys are also likely when participants are too embarrassed to provide true responses. Another disadvantage of using survey research is researcher biases. Researcher biases are present when surveys contain questions that are

systematically unfair and loaded. The researcher's preconceived notions may surface as survey questions are constructed; therefore, it is imperative to watch the wording of questions and not make them one-sided (Trochim, 2006a). An unsatisfactory non-response rate in regards to survey research is another disadvantage of this design. Unsatisfactory non-response rates are concerns for researchers who use postal questionnaires and Internet-based surveys to collect data.

However, Heberlein and Baumgartner (1981) suggest that a follow-up letter, another copy of the questionnaire, and a self-addressed envelope should be sent to the non-responders a few days after the stated deadline. This strategy may encourage individuals to participate and return the survey.

Other areas of concern for this study are the potential threats to internal and external validity. The biggest threat to internal validity will be instrumentation. Administrators of surveys should not influence participants in ways that will affect the accuracy of findings. Participants' answers should not be coaxed or manipulated in any way. On the contrary, participants should always be encouraged to answer openly and honestly. The external validity or generalizability of research findings to the target population will be impacted by the use of cross-sectional survey research. Because these surveys are typically exploratory, data collected from them cannot be used to make the type of inferences that can be made from data of experimental or quasi-experimental research.

### Population and Sample

The target population for this study was graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure enrolled in a non-traditional and in a traditional high school in Georgia.

### *Sample Selection*

To conduct this study, a sample was obtained from the population of graduating seniors deemed at-risk for school failure enrolled in both non-traditional and traditional public high schools in Georgia. Therefore, a purposive sample was used in this study. This method of non-random sampling was utilized because the researcher purposely targeted individuals within a specific population and locations.

The sample for this study included participants who are enrolled in three high schools across Georgia, two non-traditional high schools and one traditional high school. The schools are located in three different geographical locations: Metro-Atlanta, Middle Georgia, and South Georgia. However, these three schools are similar, in that they all serve at-risk students. Participants making up this sample were graduating seniors who were deemed at risk for school failure. Their at-risk status was determined by their enrollment in their respective high schools. Both non-traditional high schools were established to serve students who are at risk for dropping out because of specific behavior patterns: poor academics, grade retention, and truancy. Participants enrolled in the traditional high school are considered at-risk because of their school's Title I categorization by the U.S. Department of Education (ED, 2005). It is determined that these participants are at-risk for school failure because Title I schools service economically disadvantaged students with academic issues. Therefore, all participants are identified as at-risk because they are enrolled in schools that serve at-risk students. These three schools were selected to participate in this study because of location. By including schools from different geographic areas in Georgia (metro, middle, and south), the participants would provide a diverse representation of at-risk seniors.

The non-traditional high school located in Metro Atlanta was established as a charter school in 2006 to serve students who had not been successful in a traditional high school environment. These students were in danger of dropping out of their traditional high school due to at-risk behavior such as chronic absenteeism, grade retention, and/or academic failure. The school has a two-person board and is staffed with a multi-disciplinary faculty. Currently, the school has a total enrollment of approximately 100 students in grades nine through twelve (DeKalb County School System, 2010).

The second non-traditional high school selected for this study is a part of the South Georgia Regional Achievement Center. The school has a total enrollment of approximately 90 students in grades ten through twelve. For the present school year, there is a graduating senior class of 45 students. This non-traditional high school operates as a Performance Learning Center (PLC). The PLC concept was developed by Communities in Schools of Georgia (CISGA), a community-based organization that advocates for educational opportunities for all students. Its mission is to reach students who are not successful in traditional high school environments and who are at risk of dropping out of high school. The PLC program was established in this South Georgia school district to provide an alternative educational setting for at-risk students to earn a high school diploma. The PLC incorporates computer-based curriculum, project-based learning, service learning, and postsecondary preparation (CISGA, 2007).

The third site and the only traditional high school selected for this study is located in Middle Georgia. It is a Title I school with an approximate enrollment of 855 students. Ninety-seven percent of the student body is Black and 2% is White. There are no other races or ethnicities reported (GOSA, 2009c).

There was a one-time survey administration at each of the three sites. The administrations yielded the following: non-traditional high school in Metro Atlanta provided  $n = 23$  surveys, non-traditional high school located in South Georgia provided  $n = 38$  and the traditional high school in Middle Georgia provided  $n = 126$ . This resulted in  $N = 187$  surveys submitted by graduating seniors deemed at-risk for school failure enrolled in non-traditional and traditional high schools in Georgia. Of the surveys submitted ( $N = 187$ ), 30 (16%) contained some missing values and were addressed using the pair-wise deletion option. There are other acceptable statistical treatments for non-response items on a survey, including deletions and imputations. Some of the more basic options such as like list-wise deletions will not include surveys with any missing responses. The entire survey is omitted because of one or more missing responses. Imputation is another treatment of non-response items. Mean substitution is an imputation option that replaces the missing value with the mean of that variable. Unlike list-wise deletion, pair-wise deletion only omits the missing value from the analysis of that variable. This method is recommended for studies with small sized samples because valuable data is not lost through the removal of cases (Johnson, 1998) which made it the best option for this study.

The purposive sampling method is typically used for exploratory and descriptive research (Kelley et al., 2003). Therefore, this was an appropriate method of sample selection because of the nature of this study. The size of the sample selection for this study was also limited to at-risk students who have been classified as graduating seniors. The sample for this study was determined by (a) the number of graduating seniors currently enrolled at the non-traditional high school at the time of the study and (b) the number of graduating seniors enrolled at one of the school district's traditional high schools at the time of the study.

### Instrumentation

The Academic Perceptions Inventory (API) was chosen to collect data for this study because this instrument measures the concept of self (see Appendix A). The scales measure three components of self-perceptions that aligned with the dependent variables of the study. The dependent variables for this study are the perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as a student, and perceptions of school. The API was originally created to develop profiles of students in school environments by examining their perceptions of self as a person and as a student. Moreover, the scales of the API also attempt to assess the self-perceptions of students' abilities and interests through the measurement of specific traits that exist within a school environment. The authors identified these traits during the developmental stages of the instrument from groups of diverse students. Originally created in 1975 by Drs. Anthony and Louise Soares, the instrument has experienced major revisions three times with the most recent revision in 2007. The results of these major revisions are the creation of four levels of the API: Primary (Kindergarten – 3<sup>rd</sup> grade), Intermediate (4<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade), Advanced (9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade), and College. While the authors made modifications on each scale to coincide with the reading abilities and knowledge of each academic level represented, all scales of the API remain consistent with each other (Soares, 2000). The Advanced Level (9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade) was used for this study.

API's Advanced Level has ten scales: Self-Concept, Student Self, English Perceptions, Mathematics Perceptions, Science Perceptions, Perceptions in the Social Sciences, Perceptions in the Arts, Perceptions in Physical Education, and School Perceptions. For the purpose of this study, only three of those scales were used: Self-Concept, Student Self, and School Perceptions. At the top of each scale, blank lines are provided for the collection of student information,

including name, school, city, gender, grade, and date. This section was not used for this study. Instead, a researcher-developed demographic data form was included (see Appendix B). The demographic data form queried participants about their gender, race/ethnicity, and their families' SES. Next, a brief statement is included to explain the content of the scale and an example follows. Each scale is two pages in length with 22 Likert-type response lines. Each response line has dichotomous traits on either end. The positive statements are on the left side and the negative statements are on the right side. The participants are required to place a check mark on the response line in one of the four blank spaces to indicate to what extent they believe, feel, or behave. There are no neutral options available; therefore, it is considered a forced-choice format. This type of format is believed to prevent participant non-responsive answers (Jones, 2005, p. 68).

All levels of the API, including the Advanced Level used in this study, are scored using the same method. The scores assigned to each of the four blank spaces on the response line are as follows: +2 = very positive, +1 = more positive, -1 = more negative and -2 = very negative. The highest value (2) corresponds to the more positive statement on the left side of the response line and the lowest value (-2) corresponds to the more negative statement on the right side of the response line.

The updated validity and reliability coefficients for the Advanced Level of the API were reported by the author in a recently revised copy of the test manual (Soares, 2007). The original and revised coefficients are found in Table 1.



Table 1

*Validity and Reliability for the Advanced Level of the API*

Scales	Validity (Original)	Validity (Revised )	Reliability (Original)	Reliability (Revised)
Self Concept	.58	.62	.86	.85
Student Self	.69	.69	.82	.82
School Perceptions	.52	.59	.66	.68

Although there are other available inventories that measure constructs related to perceptions of self, the API was used because it measures the specific constructs of the study. The dependent variables are perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as a student, and perceptions of school. The three API scales (Self-Concept, Student Self, and School Perceptions) address the constructs of interest and investigated in this study. The scales also conceptualize the constructs by exploring the beliefs, feelings, and behaviors of graduating seniors deemed at-risk for school failure and enrolled in non-traditional and traditional high schools in Georgia. For instance, the Self-Concept scale measures how students view themselves. The items on this scale explore students' personality traits and their relationships with others. The Student Self scale measures how students think about themselves academically. The items on this scale measure how students feel about school and extracurricular school activities. The School Perceptions scale examines how students view teachers, administrators, classmates, school work, and school activities. The items on this scale measure how students view their interactions and/or relationships with individuals from school (Soares, 2007).

### Procedure

This study was conducted with a purposive sample of graduating seniors deemed at-risk for school failure. They are enrolled in schools from three school districts in Georgia that served at-risk students. The sample was comprised of students enrolled in a non-traditional high school in a Metro Atlanta school system, students enrolled in a non-traditional high school in a South Georgia school system, and students enrolled in a traditional high school in a Middle Georgia school system.

Prior to the start of this research study, approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Georgia had to be obtained. Per university policy, any graduate research activity involving human subjects is subject to IRB review. Applicable activities include the administration of questionnaires and surveys, interviews and the observation of human behavior (Office of the Vice President for Research [OVPR], 2010).

Since this research study met the criteria for needing IRB approval, the process began in May, 2009 of assembling all of the required documents for the application. A Consent form, a Parental Permission form, a demographic data form, and a recruitment PowerPoint presentation were created. A copy of the Academic Perceptions Inventory and letters of authorization from the participating high schools were also needed. The traditional high school in Middle Georgia was the first site to provide authorization in May, 2009. This authorization was obtained after an email request and a face-to-face meeting with the principal. A formal letter of request on University of Georgia letterhead was presented to the principal. An overview of the research study was given and a brief proposal was made to include the school's graduating seniors in the study. The principal expressed his support and directed all future contact to the Student Activities Coordinator. The letter of authorization was obtained from the school's principal May,

2009. The decision was made to submit the IRB application prior to securing a second site. IRB states that applications should be submitted as soon as possible, even without letters of authorization from participating institutions. Although final approval cannot be obtained without these supporting documents, the application will still go through the review process (OVPR, 2010). Therefore, an application and supporting documents, including the consent forms, the API survey, the demographic data form, the recruitment PowerPoint presentation, and a letter of authorization from the traditional high school were submitted to IRB May, 2009.

The second site to provide authorization was the non-traditional high school located in Metro Atlanta in September, 2009. This authorization was also obtained after an email request and a face-to-face meeting with the school's principal. A formal letter of request on University of Georgia letterhead was presented to the principal at the onset of the meeting. Again, an overview of the research study was given and a brief proposal was made to include the school's graduating seniors in the study. This principal likewise expressed his support and directed all future contact to the school's administrative assistant. A letter of authorization was prepared and signed that same day. It was submitted to IRB October 13, 2009 and final approval was received later that same day.

When IRB approval was obtained October, 2009, the data collection process began. The first survey administration took place at the non-traditional high school in Metro Atlanta on November 19, 2009 at noon. The school's administrative assistant coordinated the date and time for the survey administration. This particular date and time was agreed upon because there was a scheduled Senior Meeting after the school's Thanksgiving celebration. Because the survey administration would take place immediately following lunch, the complimentary meal would not be provided. Arrangements were also made for a brief presentation to be given to potential

participants prior to the scheduled administration. The school's counselor permitted a brief recruitment presentation before she met with seniors regarding graduation requirements. Since this meeting took place in the school's cafeteria, there was not an opportunity for the PowerPoint presentation to be shown. However, adjustments were made and the seniors were given background information on the upcoming survey administration and the value of their participation. Details regarding the research study were given and seniors were given the opportunity to ask questions. Parental Permission forms were distributed to those seniors under the age of 18. They were informed that in order to participate, they were required to submit the signed permission forms on the day of the administration.

On the day of the scheduled administration, the graduating seniors were assembled to the Media Center by the Senior Class Faculty Advisor. To ensure strict adherence to the time restriction of 20 minutes, the surveys, demographic data forms and consent forms were placed on the tables in the Media Center, prior to their arrival. Writing utensils were also made available. A brief appeal was made to the senior class, inviting them to participate in the day's survey administration. Emphasis was made on how invaluable their participation would be to the research study. There were 24 out of 32 graduating seniors present that day and with the exception of one student, everyone agreed to participate. Participants over 18 completed the mandatory consent forms, while the signed parental permission forms were collected from participants under 18. Once all required consent forms were completed and collected, the participants proceeded to complete the demographic data form and survey. There was a yield of  $n=23$  surveys collected.

The second survey administration took place at the traditional high school in Middle Georgia on December 2, 2009 at 9:30 a.m. Contact was made in November, 2009 with the

school's Student Activities Coordinator/Administrative Assistant to coordinate the scheduling of the survey administration. There was only one Senior Class meeting scheduled before the end of Fall Semester and it was on December 2, 2009. This was a result of the school's policy to limit the scheduling of activities that interrupted instructional time. This was the school's third year with a Needs Improvement (NI) status. They had failed to meet the state's Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements and it had resulted in a mandated administrative takeover from state of Georgia officials. Therefore, this particular date and time was agreed upon because it was the only scheduled Senior Meeting. No other meetings or school assemblies were planned before the end of the year. Furthermore, the school's calendar for Spring Semester had not been completed and he could not speculate as to when there would be another Senior Class meeting. This posed a problem. No arrangements could be made for a recruiting presentation prior to the scheduled administration in December. Because of this scheduling issue, both the recruiting presentation and the survey administration would have to take place on the same day. It was also mutually agreed upon that no complimentary meal be served that morning. Additionally, there would not be an opportunity prior to December 2, 2009 for Parental Permission forms to be distributed to graduating seniors under the age of 18. This would prohibit any underage senior from participating in the survey administration.

On the day of the scheduled administration, the graduating seniors assembled in the school's cafeteria with their teachers. To ensure strict adherence to the time restriction, the surveys, demographic data forms and consent forms were placed on the tables, prior to their arrival. Writing utensils were also made available. A brief presentation and appeal was made to the senior class. Emphasis was made on how invaluable their participation would be to the research study. Because of the time restraints, the PowerPoint presentation was not used and no

complimentary meal was served. With the exception of the seniors under 18 who could not participate, everyone else agreed to take part. Participants over 18 completed the mandatory consent forms, the forms were collected, and the participants proceeded to complete the demographic data form and survey. Out of the 131 surveys distributed, there was a yield of  $n=126$  usable surveys collected.

A request to add a third site to the research study was made to IRB in February, 2010. It was necessary to add a third site because the yield from the non-traditional high school was only  $n = 23$  compared to the  $n=126$  yield from the traditional high school. This resulted in two sample sizes that were too unequal to make a desirable comparison. Therefore, an authorization to conduct a survey administration was obtained from a non-traditional high school in South Georgia. This school was characteristically comparable to the non-traditional high school in Metro Atlanta. Both schools had very similar school enrollments, staff size, and their mission statements were nearly identical. The local school district established this school as a Performance Learning Center (PLC) to provide an alternative educational setting for at-risk students to earn a high school diploma. The PLC concept was originally developed by the community-based organization, Communities in Schools of Georgia (CISGA) to reach students who are not successful in traditional high school environments and are at risk of dropping out of school (CISGA, 2007). Since 2002, CISGA have established PLCs in 29 different school districts in Georgia and has recently expanded its mission to school districts in North Carolina and Virginia (CISGA, 2008). Some of the main components of PLCs are multi-discipline faculty, computer-based curriculum, project-based learning, service learning, and postsecondary preparation.

A completed IRB Continuing Review/Amendment form, a letter of authorization from the school, a revised Consent form, a revised Parental Permission form, and a revised Demographic Data form were submitted February 5, 2010. Final approval for the amended study was provided February 26, 2010.

The third survey administration took place at a Performance Learning Center in South Georgia on March 3, 2010. The school's principal coordinated the date and time for the survey administration. In the first two survey administrations, the procedures included a one-time administration during a Senior Meeting, as to not interfere with scheduled instructional time. This strategy proved to be successful at both sites. However, at this non-traditional high school in South Georgia, students participate in a daily assembly called Morning Motivation. Each morning, students meet for 15-20 minutes for a student led program. It is a time when students showcase their talents and share words of inspiration. It was agreed upon that the survey administration take place during Morning Motivation. Arrangements were made so that a brief presentation could be given to potential participants on the day before the scheduled administration. At the close of Morning Motivation, a brief recruitment presentation was made about the next day's survey administration. Emphasis was put on the value of their participation in the survey. An overview of the research study was given and students were provided the opportunity to ask questions. Parental Permission forms were distributed to those seniors under the age of 18. They were informed that in order to participate, they had to turn in the signed permission forms.

On the day of the scheduled administration, the graduating seniors assembled in the cafeteria. The surveys, demographic data forms and consent forms were placed on the tables in the cafeteria, prior to their arrival. Writing utensils were also made available. An invitation was

extended to the senior class and underclassmen to participate in the day's survey administration. There were 53 students that agreed to participate. Consent forms and parental permission forms were collected from participants and they proceeded to complete the demographic data form and survey. There was a yield of  $n=38$  surveys collected.

The decision to use group administrations for data collection was the only practical method for this research study. During the planning stages, it was decided to conduct group administrations at each high school. The method would reach more students in less time and large amounts of data could be collected in a short period of time. There was also the fact that high school students are more accessible for group administrations during school hours than as individual respondents at home. Additionally, group administrations would provide an environment where students could ask questions and receive support. These advantages are not characteristic of other survey methods, such as postal questionnaires and email surveys. Both of those methods would require participants to respond without the gentle influence of others, particularly the researcher (Kelley et al, 2003).

### Data Analysis

The independent variables for the study were gender and SES. The dependent variables perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as a student and perceptions of school, were measured to determine if differences in perceptions exist between at-risk graduating seniors at non-traditional and at-risk graduating senior at traditional high schools. The data analysis includes descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, and frequencies of the dependent variables. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to perform all statistical tests.



The API stated that self-perceptions or self-concepts consist of independent and interrelated factors. Self-perceptions are dependent upon individuals' roles, situations, and areas of success and failure. Individuals develop their self-concept through experiences, observations of others, successes and failures, and the quality of relationships with significant others (Soares, 2007). So, in an attempt to 'dimensionalize' self-perceptions, they created an instrument with scales designed to measure attitudes, beliefs, and feelings as they relate to the self as a person, self as a student and school experiences. In this study, three dependent variables were used to determine participants' attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about themselves as a person and as a student and about school. All three API scales (Self-Concept, Student Self, and School Perceptions) used in this study measured responses from very positive: +2 = very positive, +1 = more positive, -1 = more negative and -2 = very negative. The values for the responses are not printed on the API scales. However, Soares (2007) included this information in the scoring instructions section of the API test manual. For each of the three scales, the overall scores range from 22 to -22. Low level ranged perceptions would be indicated by scores of -8 to -22. Scores of -7 to 7 would indicate mid-level ranged perceptions, while scores ranging from 8 to 22 would signify high level ranged perceptions.

Table 2 provides a detailed summary of the data analyses for the research questions for this study. The table includes the five research questions, the independent and dependent variables, and the appropriate data analysis for each research question.

Table 2

*Data Analyses for Research Questions*

Research Questions	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Data Analysis
1. Describe the non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors' perceptions of self as a person, of self as a student and of school for graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure enrolled in a non-traditional high school and in a traditional high school.	Type of School  Categorical  Non-traditional and Traditional	Perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as a student and perceptions of school  Continuous	Means, standard deviations, frequencies
2. What is the difference between non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure on: a. perceptions of self as a person b. perceptions of self as a student c. perceptions of school	Type of School  Categorical  Non-traditional and Traditional	Perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as a student and perceptions of school  Continuous	One-Way ANOVA  Tukey Kramer
3. What is the difference between female and male non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure on: a. perceptions of self as a person b. perceptions of self as a student c. perceptions of school	Gender  Categorical  Male and Female	Perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as a student and perceptions of school  Continuous	One-Way ANOVA  Tukey Kramer
4. What is the difference between the SES of non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure on: a. perceptions of self as a person b. perceptions of self as a student c. perceptions of school	Socio-economic status  Categorical  Lower, Middle, and Upper	Perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as a student and perceptions of school  Continuous	One-Way ANOVA  Tukey Kramer

### *One-Way Analysis of Variance*

The statistical test used for this study was the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The ANOVA determines whether there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of three or more groups on a dependent variable (Gall, Gall, & Bogg, 2007).

The continuous dependent variables of this study were perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as a student and school perceptions. The selected instrument for this study was the API. The three API scales utilized for this study was Self-Concept, Student Self, and School Perceptions. The dependent variables were aligned to these scales in the following manner: the Self-Concept scale measured the dependent variable - perceptions of self as a person, the Student Self scale measured the dependent variable - perceptions of self as a student, and the School Perceptions scale measured the dependent variable - school perceptions. The independent variables for this study were type of school, gender, and SES. In this study, types of schools were categorized as non-traditional and traditional. The gender category consisted of female and male and the SES category was comprised of three income levels: Lower, Middle, and Upper. The income levels of this study were based on historical income tables from the U.S. Census Bureau. The U.S. Census Bureau (2007) published a table that included income limits for each fifth and top five percent of US households. The table reported information for all races from 1967 to 2006. The limits are as following: lowest - \$20,035; second - \$37,774; third - \$60,000; fourth - \$97,032 and lower limit of top 5% - \$174,012. For use in this study, three ranges were created with information from this table. The Lower income status = \$20,035 and below, the Middle income status = \$20,035 - \$97,032 and the Upper income status = \$97,032 and above. Demographic data reported by the 187 respondents in this study regarding SES resulted in only 1.6% of students being in the Upper SES category. Because there were so few

respondents who reported in the Upper SES category, the Middle (37.4%) and Upper SES categories were combined to form the variable Middle/Upper SES for statistical analysis.

In a research study where the objective is to find significant differences between the means of three or more groups, the one-way ANOVA is used. Using the ANOVA entails conducting separate analyses on each of the three dependent variables, perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as a student and perceptions of school. The advantage to using this statistical test is a more concise and succinct analysis of each dependent variable. The disadvantage would be potential overlap of variance between the dependent variables. In addition, the probability of a Type I error increases when multiple ANOVA tests are performed. When multiple tests are used for correlated variables, there is a greater chance that the groups would be identified as significantly different when they were not (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2007).

This research study uses the one-way ANOVA, a statistical data analysis, to determine if the study's research hypothesis is supported by the data collected from the sample selections. As previously stated, the one-way ANOVA will test this study's hypothesis and use the data to assess whether the observed differences among sample means are statistically significant. Additionally, the ANOVA determines if the variation is due to chance or a true difference among population means (Moore & McCabe, 1999). The ANOVA "compares the amount of between-groups variance in individuals' scores with the amount of within-groups variance. If the ratio of between-group variance to within-groups variance is sufficiently high, this indicates that there is more difference between the groups in their scores on a particular variable than there is within each group" (Gall et al., 2007). The result or the effect of this statistical test produces a probability value (p-value). The p-value is a numerical measure of the statistical significance of a

hypothesis test. The  $p$ -value will determine if the null hypothesis will be rejected. For instance, if the  $p$ -value is less than .05, it means that the data collected supports the research hypothesis and the null hypothesis should be rejected. It also means that the results of the statistical data analysis are statistically significant (Creech, 2010b). The statistical significance for social sciences research is commonly accepted at a .05 level (Trochim, 2006c). Historically, it has been accepted as the “maximum acceptable probability for determining statistical significance” (Cowles & Davis, 1982, p. 553). Sir Ronald Fisher initially reported the  $p = .05$  in 1925, but that pronouncement was based on historical works dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Early statistical efforts concluded that  $p = .05$  was appropriate because of the concept of probability (Cowles & Davis, 1982). This study used a  $p < .05$  level of significance was used for all statistical tests.

Huck (2004) refers to them as inferential procedures, but post hoc comparisons and planned comparisons are merely means to understand and interpret data from a research study. A priori or planned comparisons are used to answer specific questions with less risk of a Type II error. Post hoc comparisons are additional tests in a research study which are conducted after significant differences are found because the  $F$  test alone cannot tell which of the means are different (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). Therefore, post hoc tests are necessary for two reasons. First, it explains why the ANOVA yielded a significant  $F$ . Secondly, post hoc tests are designed to identify and explore the pattern of  $\mu$ s and show exactly where the differences lie in among them (Huck, 2004). There are three post hoc comparison tests suitable for unequal group sizes: Tukey Kramer, Scheffé, and Bonferroni-Dunn. Among post hoc procedures, the Scheffé is known to be flexible, conservative, and most used. However, it is not an appropriate choice for complex comparisons (Stevens, 1999). The Bonferroni-Dunn is a strong post hoc procedure when ANOVA makes mean comparisons and the problem of inflated Type I errors arises (Huck,

2004). However, it is not the best choice for this study because of the presence of unequal sample sizes. For the purpose of this study, the Tukey Kramer procedure will be used if any statistically significant differences are found. In addition to controlling the overall  $\alpha$ , identifying differences, and examining and interpreting pairwise comparisons straightforwardly, the Tukey Kramer procedure will be used because it is preferred in most post hoc situations when the sample sizes are unequal (Stevens, 1999).

When reporting statistical findings, it is recommended by the American Psychological Association (APA) to include effect size. Unlike statistical significance results, effect size is used to show the strength of any significant differences in group comparison studies. Statistically significance reports the probability of discovering the observed relationship by chance or sampling error (Olejnik & Algina, 2000). Effect size is a measure of the strength of an observed difference between two or more measured variables (Gall et al. 2007). When effect size is included in statistical findings, a more complete description of the effect of the independent variables on the dependent variables is revealed (Pappas, Sheikhzadeh, Hagins, & Nordin, 2007). In this study, effect size will be calculated using Cohen  $d$  to show the strength of any significant group differences. This statistic will give a more complete description of the effect of the independent variables on the dependent variables (Pappas, Sheikhzadeh, Hagins, & Nordin, 2007). Cohen suggested that small effect size is 0.2, medium is 0.5, and a large effect size has a 0.8 (Huck, 2004).

### Limitations

The nature of this study required that intact groups were used as the selected samples. At the time of the survey administration, the graduating senior class enrollment at the non-traditional high school in Metro Atlanta was 32 and the non-traditional high school in South

Georgia was 45. However, the enrollment at the traditional high school is much larger. There are approximately 160 seniors slated for graduation in May, 2010.

The limitations or the natural conditions that restrict the scope of the study and that may affect its outcome are as follows:

1. The study will only include graduating seniors from two non-traditional high schools. One school is located in the Metropolitan Atlanta area and the other school is located in South Georgia. Based on the characteristics of the non-traditional high schools, the average school enrollments ranges from 75-80 students (ICF International, 2009). Therefore, the selected sample size of graduating seniors will be small. According to Krejcie & Morgan (1970), since the sample will be a relatively small number, there is not a required sample size.
2. The study will include graduating seniors from one traditional high school in Macon-Middle Georgia. The student body enrollment for the 2008 – 2009 school year was 855 and the current senior class is 160. Therefore, the sample will be a small number relative to the population of graduating seniors in Georgia.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

The purpose of this cross-sectional study was to examine the perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as a student and perceptions of school of at-risk graduating seniors attending a non-traditional and a traditional high school. In addition, this study sought to determine if there were significant differences in these students' perceptions based on gender and socio-economic status (SES). Perceptions were measured using the Academic Perceptions Inventory (API; Soares, 2007). There were three API scales used in this study: Self Concept to measure the perceptions of self as a person, Student Self to measure perceptions of self as a student, and School Perceptions to measure perceptions of school. Independent variables were gender and socio-economic status (SES).

This chapter provides results based on an analysis of the data obtained for each research question. Results are presented using descriptive and inferential statistics. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was utilized for data analysis.

#### *Demographic Characteristics of the Sample*

Three different survey administrations of the API were conducted to gather data from graduating seniors deemed at risk for school failure. The administrations took place at two non-traditional high schools and one traditional high school, all located in Georgia. Twenty-four surveys were administered to the first non-traditional high school and 23 (96%) useable surveys were returned. Fifty-three surveys were administered to the second non-traditional high school and 38 (72%) useable surveys were submitted for a return of 61 (79%). One hundred and thirty-



one surveys were administered to students enrolled in the traditional high school and 126 (96%) useable surveys were returned. Therefore, a total of 187 useable surveys were collected and were the final sample used in analysis for this study.

In addition to completing the API survey, students were also asked to complete a Demographic Data Form (Appendix B). Based on the responses from participants, it was discovered that 97% of the respondents were Black, 55% were female, and 67% were enrolled in a traditional high school (67%). Specifically, respondents enrolled in the non-traditional high school were male (56%), Black (90%) and of Low SES (51%). Whereas, respondents enrolled in the traditional high school were female (59%), Black (100%), and of Low SES (66%). Detailed demographic information from the self-reporting Demographic Data Form is shown in Table 3.

Table 3  
*Demographic Characteristics of the Sample*

Characteristic	N	%
Race/Ethnicity		
Black	181	96.8
Hispanic	2	1.0
White	4	2.1
Gender		
Female	102	54.5
Male	85	45.5
Socio-Economic Status		
Low	114	61.0
Middle	70	37.4
Upper	3	1.6
Type of School		
Non-traditional high school	61	32.6
Traditional high school	126	67.4
Non-traditional High School: Gender		
Female	27	44.3
Male	34	55.7
Non-traditional High School: Race/Ethnicity		
Black	55	90.1
Hispanic	2	3.3
White	4	6.6
Non-traditional High School: SES		
Low	31	50.8

Middle	29	47.5
Upper	1	1.6
Traditional High School: Gender		
Female	74	58.7
Male	52	41.3
Traditional High School: Race/Ethnicity		
Black	126	100.0
Hispanic	0	0.0
White	0	0.0
Traditional High School: SES		
Low	83	65.9
Middle	41	32.5
Upper	2	1.6

### Results for Research Questions

#### *Results for Research Question 1*

*Describe non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors' perceptions of self as a person, of self as a student and of school for graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure enrolled in a non-traditional high school and in a traditional high school.*

Each of the three Academic Perceptions Inventories (API), Self-Concept, Student Self, and School Perceptions, used in this study is comprised of 22 statements with Likert-type responses ranging from +2 to -2. The measured responses are +2 = very positive, +1 = more positive, -1 = more negative and -2 = very negative. Respondents placed a checkmark on one of the four spaces on a continuum line to indicate the extent to which they agree with the more positive statement on the left side of the line or the more negative statement on the right side of the line. The mean and standard deviations were calculated for each inventory based on gender and SES, the independent variables. Results indicate a *more positive* self-concept for students attending non-traditional ( $M = 1.23$ ,  $SD = .52$ ) and traditional ( $M = 1.28$ ,  $SD = .49$ ) high schools. Male and female students scored within the *more positive* range ( $M = 1.21$ ,  $SD = .58$  and  $M = 1.21$ ,  $SD = .59$ ) with regard to the student-self inventory. Students in the lower and middle/upper

SES groups both scored within the *more positive* range with regard to perceptions of school. However, the mean score for students in the lower SES group ( $M = 1.00$ ,  $SD = .73$ ) was slightly higher than the mean score for student in the middle/upper SES group ( $M = .91$ ,  $SD = .77$ ). These results, necessary to describe the perceptions of self as a person, of self as a student and of school for graduating seniors deemed at risk for school failure enrolled in a non-traditional high school and in a traditional high school, are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

*Academic Perceptions Inventory Descriptive Data for Independent Variables (N = 187)*

Variables	<u>Self-Concept</u>		<u>Student Self</u>		<u>School Perceptions</u>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Type of School:						
Non-traditional	1.23	.52	1.21	.61	.92	.72
Traditional	1.28	.49	1.21	.58	.98	.76
Gender:						
Female	1.29	.47	1.21	.59	.97	.72
Male	1.23	.54	1.21	.58	.96	.78
SES:						
Lower	1.28	.50	1.24	.57	1.00	.73
Middle/Upper	1.23	.51	1.17	.61	.91	.77

Table 5 presents a summary of responses for the Self-Concept scale. The Self-Concept scale queried respondents regarding their thoughts about themselves as a person and their thoughts about themselves at school (Soares & Soares, 2007). The summary of the responses in Table 5 showed a range of scores from -0.19 (*I trust people. /I do not trust people.*) to 1.89 (*I like myself./I do not like myself.*).

Table 5

*Academic Perceptions Inventory Descriptive Data for Self-Concept Scale*

Self-Concept Statements	N	M	SD
I am a happy person./ I am not a happy person.	187	1.53	0.76
I like to be with others./ I like to be alone.	187	0.84	1.17
I am kind to people./ I am not kind to people.	184	1.45	0.82
I have many friends./ I have few friends.	186	0.94	1.32
I like myself./ I do not like myself.	187	1.89	0.48
I am a calm person./ I am a nervous person.	187	1.27	0.97
I do well in school./ I do not do well in school.	187	1.39	0.92
I am a kind person./ I am not a kind person.	187	1.60	0.68
I try to help others./ I do not try to help others.	187	1.40	0.85
People like me./ People do not like me.	187	1.45	0.80
I like people./ I do not like people.	187	1.11	1.09
I do what I think is right./ I do what others want me to do.	186	1.65	1.03
I trust people./ I do not trust people.	187	-0.19	1.43
I do many things well./ I do not do many things well.	187	1.45	0.78

I can control my temper./ I cannot control my temper.	187	0.77	1.39
I work well with people./ I do not well with people.	187	1.36	0.83

*Note.* Adapted from Academic Perceptions Inventory, by Dr. Louise M. Soares & Dr. Anthony T. Soares, Copyright 2007

Table 6 presents the results of the responses from the Student Self scale. The Student Self scale investigates the perceptions of how an individual thinks of himself or herself as a student. It measures the different ways students think about themselves because of the different things they do at school (Soares & Soares, 2007). A most interesting result for this scale showed the lowest mean score of .74 for *I do my homework on time./I do my homework late*. However, the highest mean score of 1.84 for *I am intelligent. /I am not intelligent*.

Table 6

<i>Academic Perceptions Inventory Descriptive Data for Student Self Scale</i>			
Student Self Statements	N	M	SD
I like to learn./ I do not like to learn.	186	1.53	0.71
I work hard in school./ I am lazy in school.	186	1.48	0.76
I learn quickly./ I learn slowly.	185	1.19	0.95
I do well in school./ I do not do well in school.	184	1.41	0.86
I have many friends in school./ I have few friends in school.	186	0.82	1.37
I like to work with others in school./I like to work alone in school.	185	0.95	1.19
Other students like to work with me in school./Other students do not like to work with me in school.	186	1.28	0.98

I do my homework on time./ I do my homework late.	187	0.74	1.24
I am neat in school./ I am sloppy in school.	187	1.40	0.97
I help others in school./ I do not help others in school.	187	1.26	0.93
I like people at school./ I do not like people at school.	187	0.78	1.26
People like me at school./ People do not like me at school.	186	1.26	0.95
I am cheerful in school./ I am sad in school.	187	1.03	1.19
I am intelligent./ I am not intelligent.	187	1.84	0.48
I get good grades in school./ I get low grades in school.	187	1.33	0.88

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*Note.* Adapted from Academic Perceptions Inventory, by Dr. Louise M. Soares & Dr. Anthony T. Soares, Copyright 2007

The findings for the School Perceptions scale are shown in Table 7. This scale measures how students look at school, classmates, teachers, and administrators (Soares & Soares, 2007). Interestingly, the results for this scale have the lowest mean scores out of the three scales in this study. The lowest score for the scale is 0.29 (*My school has many social activities./My school has few social activities.*) The statement *my teachers like me./My teachers do not like me.* rendered the highest mean score at 1.36.

Table 7

*Academic Perceptions Inventory Descriptive Data for School Perceptions Scale*

School Perceptions Statements	N	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
My teachers like me./ My teachers do not like me.	187	1.36	1.04
My teachers work hard./ My teachers do not work hard.	187	1.09	1.20
My teachers help me to do well./ My teachers do not help me do well.	186	1.13	1.19
My teachers enjoy being at school./ My teachers do not enjoy being at school.	186	0.95	1.29
I like my teachers./ I do not like my teachers.	187	1.05	1.23
The students seem to like me./ The students do not seem to like me.	184	1.22	1.05
I have many friends at school./ I have few friends at school.	187	0.80	1.38
I work well with the other students./ I do not work well with the other students.	186	1.09	1.10
Administrators support the faculty./ Administrators do not support the faculty.	187	1.10	1.25
My school has many social activities. /My school has few social activities.	187	0.29	1.53
My parents are proud of my school work./My parents are not proud of my school work.	187	1.30	1.07

*Note.* Adapted from Academic Perceptions Inventory, by Dr. Louise M. Soares & Dr. Anthony T. Soares, Copyright 2007

### *Research Question 2*

*What is the difference between non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure on:*

- a. perceptions of self as a person*
- b. perceptions of self as a student*
- c. perceptions of school*

Results indicate that there were no statistically significant differences between non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure on the Self-Concept  $F(1, 1) = .36, p = .55$ , Student Self  $F(1, 1) = .00, p = .99$ , and School Perceptions  $F(1, 1) = .22, p = .64$  scales. The alpha level is  $p < .05$ .

### *Research Question 3*

*What is the difference between female and male non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure on:*

- a. perceptions of self as a person*
- b. perceptions of self as a student*
- c. perceptions of school*

The results presented in Table 11 for the one-way ANOVA compared the mean of four student groups based on one independent variable. For data analysis, students were arranged in four groups: female/non-traditional, female/traditional, male/non-traditional, and male/traditional. This research question sought to determine the difference between perceptions of non-traditional graduating seniors and traditional graduating seniors based on gender. However, the results indicate that there were no statistically significant differences in students' perceptions of self as a person, of self as a student, of school. The results are as follows: Self-



Concept  $F(3,3) = .86, p = .46$ , Student Self  $F(3,3) = 1.58, p = .20$ , and School Perceptions  $F(3,3) = .94, p = .42$  at the .05 alpha level.

#### *Research Question 4*

*What is the difference between SES of non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure on:*

- a. perceptions of self as a person*
- b. perceptions of self as a student*
- c. perceptions of school*

SES or socio-economic status was self-reported by respondents on the Demographic Data Form. Only 1.6% of the respondents categorized themselves as upper SES. Thirty-seven percent of the respondents reported were middle SES and 61% were lower. For statistical purposes, the middle and upper SES categories were combined for a more succinct analysis. Again, students were arranged in four groups: lower SES/non-traditional, middle-upper SES/non-traditional, lower SES/traditional and middle-upper SES/traditional. The results of the one-way ANOVA indicate that there were no statistically significant differences between at-risk non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors' perceptions. The results for the Self-Concept scale  $F(3,3) = .35, p = .79$ , the Student Self scale  $F(3,3) = .23, p = .88$ , and School Perceptions  $F(3,3) = .28, p = .84$  at the .05 alpha level.

#### *Summary*

This chapter reported the findings for each of the four research questions. Summary tables were provided to present the results of the analysis of data. The results presented in this chapter reported no significant differences regarding the effects of type of school, gender, or SES

on the perceptions of self as a person, of self as a student and of school for graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure enrolled in non-traditional and traditional high schools.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter provides a summary of the study, a review of its findings, and conclusions drawn from the findings regarding the perceptions of at-risk students enrolled in non-traditional and traditional high schools. Recommendations for future research and recommendations for practice are also provided.

#### Summary of the Study

The problem that prompted the conception of this study is the high school dropout crisis in the United States. The most recent report released by the Department of Education in October, 2009, identified a national graduation rate of 73.9% for 2006–2007. According to the GDOE, Georgia's graduation rate exceeded the national's average with an overall graduation rate of 78.9%. This is a considerable improvement from 2003 when only 63.3% of the state's student received a regular high school diploma. However, Georgia must continue to work hard to ensure that its students graduate from high school and are prepared to continue their education in a post-secondary institution or compete in a global workforce (GDOE, 2010). Unfortunately, there are those in the educational community who are not as optimistic regarding Georgia's steady improvement in increasing the graduation rate. A national report released in July, 2009 claimed that Georgia had reached crisis level because of its graduation rate. Not only did the report deem the state as one of the 17 states that produce 70% of the nation's dropouts, but it also stated that Georgia was one of five states with the lowest graduation rate (Balfanz et al., 2009).

Specific demographic variables are prevalent in students who are most likely to drop out of high school. The two variables isolated for this study were gender and SES, variables often used when examining risk factors for dropping out of school. These two student-level characteristics are commonly used to examine any relationships that may explain the attitudes, beliefs, and feelings of individuals. School factors, such as gender and SES, were identified because of the strong influences these characteristics have on the likelihood of a student dropping out of school. Studies related to dropout rates often refer to how gender and SES increases the likelihood of negative outcomes (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Hammond et al., 2007; Kaufman, et al., 1988). Therefore, because of their overriding influences, discussions related to the high school dropout issue are incomplete if gender and SES are not included.

Although race/ethnicity is a prevalent risk factor for high school dropouts and school failure, this variable was not included in this study because of the racial characteristics of the selected sample. For example, at least 97% of the respondents from the three schools identified themselves as Black on the self-reporting Demographic Data Form (Appendix B). Therefore, the sample was not diverse and did lend itself to comparative or interpretative analysis.

Gender had been identified as a factor to consider during discussions regarding high school dropouts and school failure. Poor academic performance and negative school experiences are common for male students. Coupled with the disparity in treatment regarding school discipline and social pressures to underachieve, it is suggested that males, especially black males are negatively impacted by their school experiences (Davis & Jordan, 1995). Gender gaps have been prominent in high school graduation rates. According to Greene and Winters (2006), when gender is introduced as a risk factor, males have been identified as more likely to drop out from

high school than females. For example, 65% of male students graduate in comparison to 72% of female students (DOE, 2005b). Even though a more recent DOE report found no measurable differences in the graduation rate between females and males, this small fluctuation does not dismiss the fact that male students are at a higher risk of dropping out of high school than females (Laird et al, 2007). Therefore, this study included gender as an independent variable because it has been established as a factor related to students who have been deemed at risk of school failure. However, the findings of this study revealed no statistically significant differences between male non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure on perceptions of self as a person, of self as a student, perceptions of school.

The socio-economic status of students is another factor to consider when discussing perceptions, school failure, and high school dropouts. Students from low income households are more likely to be illiterate and experience school failure (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Moreover, the dropout rate for students from low SES households is approximately six times greater than the rate of their peers from upper SES households. However, this trend has also experienced a change. From 1995 to 2005, the percentage of high school dropouts from lower SES households has decreased (Laird et al, 2007). SES, like gender and race/ethnicity, are characteristics that can influence the behavior, thoughts, and beliefs of students (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Therefore, SES was included in this study as an independent variable. Yes, results of this study showed no significant differences between the SES of non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure on perceptions of self as a person, of self as a student, perceptions of school.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of self as a person, of self as a student and of school for graduating seniors deemed at risk for school failure enrolled in non-

traditional and traditional high schools in Georgia. In addition, the intent of this study was to determine if there were significant differences in these students' perceptions (self-concept, student self, school environment) based on gender and SES. Graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure were of particular interest in this study because they represent students who have overcome significant barriers in their academic and personal lives to graduate from high school. Recent studies have suggested that these students must be consulted to gain insight into their attitudes, beliefs, and feelings as dropout prevention programs and initiatives are developed (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). Very often, these programs and initiatives are created without addressing the needs of the individuals to be served. Britt (1995) stated that the effectiveness of programs and initiatives, such as non-traditional high schools, could be greatly improved if decision-makers had a more comprehensive understanding of the perceptions of at-risk students.

The Academic Perceptions Inventory (API) was administered to graduating seniors deemed at risk for school failure to measure the Self-Concept (perceptions of self as a person), Student Self (perceptions of self as a student), and School Perceptions (perceptions of school) of students often considered at risk of school failure. Collection of this specific data provides insight into the specific needs of students at risk for school failure. This data can also serve as a means to connect uninformed teachers to their learners at risk of school failure. Additionally, administering these scales to groups of graduating seniors deemed at risk for school failure provides information about successful students who overcame personal and social barriers to complete high school.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Describe non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors' perceptions of self as a person, of self as a student and of school for graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure enrolled in a non-traditional high school and in a traditional high school.
2. What is the difference between non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure on:
  - a. perceptions of self as a person
  - b. perceptions of self as a student
  - c. perceptions of school
3. What is the difference between female and male non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure on
  - a. perceptions of self as a person
  - b. perceptions of self as a student
  - c. perceptions of school
4. What is the difference between the SES of non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure on:
  - a. perceptions of self as a person
  - b. perceptions of self as a student
  - c. perceptions of school

The review of literature for this study sought to provide a framework for understanding the perceptions of graduating seniors deemed at risk for school failure enrolled in non-traditional and traditional high schools. The review began with a discussion of the study's chosen framework, the Urban Learner Framework, and other possible frameworks related to this

research. Also included in the review were attempts to define and describe students at risk for school failure. The literature review concluded with a thorough explanation of the study's dependent variables (perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as a student, and school perceptions).

The at-risk students in this study were selected using a purposive sample. All students chosen to participate were at-risk graduating seniors. The graduating seniors from the two non-traditional high schools were identified as at-risk for school failure by their enrollment in their non-traditional high schools. Both of these schools were established to serve students who were at risk for dropping out of high school. The schools' goal is to retain and graduate students who previously exhibited such at-risk behavior as truancy, low academic achievement, and grade retention. The graduating seniors from the traditional high school were identified as at-risk students because of their enrollment in a Title I high school. Title I status is determined by criteria established by the U.S. Department of Education. The criteria for Title I status is synonymous with at-risk factors. For instance, two reasons a school is categorized as Title I are the percentage of students identified as economically disadvantaged (low-SES) and the percentage of students who experience academic failure (grade retention, low test scores).

There were 61 participants from the two non-traditional high schools representing Metro and South Georgia school districts. The remaining 126 participants were at-risk graduating seniors attending a traditional high school in Middle Georgia.

### Summary of Findings

The first research question was designed to provide a description of the perceptions non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors enrolled in a non-traditional high school and in a traditional high school have about self-concept, student self, and of school. The findings of this



study showed that graduating seniors from the traditional high school had more positive perceptions than students had at the non-traditional high schools.

The second research question sought to determine a difference between non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure on perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as a student, and perceptions of school. Results of one-way ANOVAs determined that there were no statistically significant differences between students enrolled in non-traditional and traditional high schools on scores for Self-Concept  $F(1, 1) = .36, p = .55$ , Student Self  $F(1,1) = .00, p = .99$ , and School Perceptions  $F(1,1) = .22, p = .64$  scales at  $p < .05$ .

The third research question examined possible differences in the perceptions of self as a person, the perceptions of self as a student, and the perceptions of school for non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure, based on gender. The results indicated that there were no statistically significant differences in Self-Concept  $F(3,3) = .86, p = .46$ , Student Self  $F(3,3) = 1.58, p = .20$ , and School Perceptions  $F(3,3) = .94, p = .42$  at the .05 alpha level based on gender.

The fourth research question used the one-way ANOVA analysis to detect any statistically significant differences between SES of non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure and Self-Concept (perceptions of self as a person), Student Self (perceptions of self as a student), and School Perceptions (perceptions of school). The results of the ANOVAs showed no statistically significant differences between graduating seniors of lower SES and graduating seniors of middle/upper SES. For the Self-Concept scale:  $F(3,3) = .35, p = .79$ , for the Student Self scale:  $F(3,3) = .23, p = .88$ , and for the School Perceptions scale:  $F(3,3) = .28, p = .84$  at the .05 alpha level.

## Conclusions

The research hypotheses for this study stated that graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure enrolled in a non-traditional high school would have more positive perceptions (perceptions of self as a person, perceptions of self as a student, and perceptions of school) than would graduating seniors deemed at-risk of school failure enrolled in a traditional high school. However, the results of this study did not support the hypothesis. Additionally, there were no statistically significant differences found between these students' perceptions and the type of school they attended, neither their gender nor their SES. Consequently, the results of this study are also contrary to findings of previous research (Fulkerson et al., 1999; Martinez, 2003; Westfall & Pisapia, 1994) which has suggested that because of aggressive intervention strategies, intensive social support, and innovative instructional methods, students enrolled in non-traditional schools will have more positive perceptions than their contemporaries enrolled in traditional schools.

These unexpected results may be explained by the similar characteristics of the respondents. The demographic data showed that there is very little diversity among participants. As shown in Table 4, 97% of the respondents were Black and 61% were of lower SES. It is possible that the influences of student-level characteristics (gender and SES) were more profound than the interventions and strategies performed at the non-traditional high schools. That is, respondents' replies could have been influenced more by their experiences as economically disadvantaged Blacks than their experiences as students in a non-traditional high school. Goldschmidt and Wang (1999) discussed how risk factors described as student-level characteristics and family characteristics can considerably influence individuals. There were no statistically significant differences found that would explain the fact that neither group showed

very positive perceptions about self as a person, as a student, and of school. Because of previous studies, low scores were anticipated of the traditional graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure, but not of the non-traditional group (Fulkerson et al., 1999; Martinez, 2003; Westfall & Pisapia, 1994). There are two plausible explanations of the results for this research question. Perhaps, some non-traditional high schools do not offer relevant support services to their students because of restrictions related to budgetary issues (Britt, 1995; RBS, 1994). Fulkerson, Harrison, and Hedger (1999) wrote that the aim of non-traditional schools is to not only educate their students, but to provide support services for their personal and social challenges. By providing these types of relevant services, a supportive and caring educational environment is created for students and their perceptions of self and school are improved (Fulkerson et al., 1999). Another plausible explanation is that relevant services may be offered at the non-traditional high schools, but students do not utilize the services as expected. The low scores of graduating seniors deemed at risk for school failure enrolled in non-traditional high schools may be an indication that students are apathetic towards themselves and school. They may not be interested in receiving support services because they are not interested in improving their conditions or may not believe these services will benefit them.

As shown in Table 6, graduating seniors from the traditional high school had a mean score of 1.28 for the Student Self scale, 1.21 for the Student Self scale and .98 for the School Perceptions scale. This is in comparison to the respective scores of 1.23, 1.12, and .92 from graduating seniors from the non-traditional high schools. The mean score for both groups of students with regard to self-concept, although low, is within the positive range. This suggests that these students in the non-traditional and traditional high school do have positive attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of themselves even though there is obviously more work to be done to

improve their self-concept. Additionally, graduating seniors who self-reported as being from a low SES background had more positive perceptions than graduating seniors who self-reported as being from a Middle/Upper SES background. For example, mean scores for graduating seniors in the low SES category were 1.28, 1.24, and 1.00 for the three scales and all three scores were higher than the scores of graduating seniors from the middle/upper SES category (1.23, 1.17, and .91). All three scores were higher than the scores of graduating seniors from the middle/upper SES category (1.23, 1.17, and .91).

These findings are not what were anticipated based on previous research that suggests students from low SES backgrounds tend to have less positive opinions and beliefs about themselves than those from higher SES backgrounds (Brown et al., 2003; Pollard, 1993). However, there are a number of reasons why this result may accurately represent these students from a low SES background. Perhaps these students at risk of school failure do not fit the profile of a typical dropout. There are students who are simply bored with school. They are smart, creative students who see no relevance in the daily events of a traditional classroom. These students also become dropouts, because they lose interest in school and eventually stop going to class (Knoeppel, 2002). If this description is applicable to the low SES students in this study, it may be that their slightly positive scores on the three scales (self-concept, student-self, of school) collectively were enough to bring them to where they are now—graduating seniors and no longer students at-risk of school failure.

Finally, females showed slightly higher perception scores than their male equivalents. For the Self-Concept scale, females had a mean score of 1.29 compared to the male score of 1.23. Both female and male graduating seniors enrolled in both non-traditional and traditional high schools had the same score of 1.21 for Student Self and almost the same score for School

Perceptions (.97 and .96). The Academic Perceptions Inventory defines student self as how individuals think about themselves because of the different things they do in an academic environment. Considering this definition of student self, the fact that students at the non-traditional and traditional schools both scored 1.21 is unusual and interesting. It is unusual because a non-traditional school would be expected to have an environment that would better nurture students at risk of school failure than a traditional school. It is interesting because such nurturing would be expected to have a much stronger positive effect on how students think about themselves and the activities in which they participate at the non-traditional school. However, this finding also suggests a similar sense of student self for both groups. This could mean that even if both schools strived to provide the academic and social supports needed and provided aggressive counseling and mentoring services, does not mean these students were taking full advantage of such opportunities.

There were additional interesting results with regard to the students' scores on the three scales of the API perception inventory even though there were no results illustrating statistically significant differences or interactions. The at-risk graduating seniors enrolled at the traditional high school consistently rendered more positive perception scores on the Self-Concept, Student Self, and School Perceptions scales than their counterparts at the non-traditional high schools. These results are contradictory to previous research cited in this study (Fulkerson et al., 1999; Martinez, 2003; Westfall & Pisapia, 1994) which showed that students enrolled in non-traditional schools are more likely to express more positive perceptions than students in traditional schools. In addition to the presence of innovative academic instructional strategies, highly qualified faculty, student support services, and small teacher-to-student ratios in classrooms, the non-traditional high schools selected for this study also encompasses features

such as caring adults, a sense of community, the asset approach (emphasizes positive traits of students), respect, and high expectations (Aron, 2006; Kerka, 2003). Both non-traditional high schools focused on servicing the needs of at-risk students in their community. However, the traditional high school, which provided the sample of traditional high school graduating seniors at-risk of school failure, does not have many of the characteristics thought to be deterrents to at-risk school failure. Instead, it is identified as a Title I facility and had a 53% graduation rate in 2009. Under NCLB criteria, this traditional high school has not met Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for five consecutive years. For this traditional high school, it means that they did not meet the AYP criteria for academic performance and graduation rate (GOSA, 2009c). However, despite the many academic challenges of this school, the graduating seniors' perceptions were quite similar to those of the students enrolled in the non-traditional high school. Of even greater interest is that fact that in some instances, the graduating seniors at this traditional high school were even more positive about their self-concept, student-self, and perceptions of school (based on mean scores) than the non-traditional high school seniors.

### Recommendations

Although this study utilized a small sample selection of at-risk students from Georgia, the results may have the potential to assist local level educational stakeholders by providing them with student-focused information for the formation of policies and procedures that affect the operation of non-traditional programs and dropout prevention initiatives. The results of this study may not have produced statistically significant differences based on gender and SES, but it has provided insight into the perceptions of at-risk students enrolled in both non-traditional and traditional high schools from three very different geographical areas in Georgia. The diversity of the cultures that is represented in this study is beneficial in that it provides a picture of what at-

risk students look like from across the state. Based on the findings from this study, the following recommendations are made for further research:

1. It is recommended that a replication of this study be conducted using much larger samples from other non-traditional and traditional high schools in Georgia. With responses that reflect the population, a replicate study will produce findings that can be generalized back to the population (Bartlett, Kotrlik, & Higgins, 2001).
2. It is recommended to conduct a similar study using freshman students deemed at risk for school failure enrolled in non-traditional and traditional high schools to determine if the results of the current study are unique to graduating seniors or if the study would yield similar results.
3. Further research also needs to be done regarding the direct impact non-traditional schools have on the overall graduation rate. Previous research regarding student outcome (graduation rates) has been inclusive because many school systems require students to return to traditional high schools to graduate (Turpin & Hinton, 2000). Therefore, further research is recommended to identify the effectiveness of non-traditional high schools and the graduation rate by surveying graduating seniors enrolled in non-traditional high schools that do not return their students to traditional high school for graduation.

Based on the findings from this study, the following recommendations are made for practice:

1. This study found that there are no statistically significant differences between non-traditional and traditional graduating seniors deemed at risk of school failure on perceptions of self as a person, of self as a student, and of school. In fact, the

descriptive data in this study illustrated that perceptions were low for students enrolled at the non-traditional and traditional schools. Indeed, both groups' perceptions were low in terms of the different ways they think about themselves, how they view themselves as students in an academic environment, how they feel about school and school-related activities, and how they feel and think about teachers, administrators, classmates, school work and school activities. This finding led me, and should lead educators to ask, "What can be done to elevate students' perceptions, especially in terms of their low perceptions about themselves as students and about school?" Therefore, educational stakeholders should construct dropout prevention programs and initiatives based on the specific needs of students deemed at risk of school failure. In addition to varied instructional strategies, perhaps more focus should be placed on the social and emotional needs of students. Practices such as establishing support groups for teenage parents or victims of childhood abuse could be considered. According to Britt (1995), current programs and initiatives have been implemented based on available funding and not student needs. The lack of focus on at-risk students' social and emotional needs at non-traditional high schools may explain why the perceptions of these students show no statistically significant differences from students enrolled in traditional high schools.

2. School administrators at non-traditional high schools should consider providing teachers with ongoing professional development opportunities specifically focused on at-risk students. Teachers are able to demonstrate more practices that are effective when they are knowledgeable of the unique aptitudes and learning styles of their at-risk learners. Kinney (1994) argued that instructional strategies specifically targeted



- towards at-risk learners could help develop more positive perceptions of self and school.
3. Motivation and effort for at-risk learners to be academically successful could be increased using rewards and recognition. For instance, administrators and teachers could sponsor a bi-annual awards night for students. This or similar strategies could reward and recognize students for *most improved average* or *perfect attendance for the semester*. This strategy is currently one of the components of the Performance Learning Centers framework. The PLCs regularly recognize their students for academic achievements and extra-curricular accomplishments (CISGA, 2008).

### Summary

This study was designed to examine the perceptions of graduating seniors deemed at risk for school failure enrolled in non-traditional and traditional high schools. The topic of perceptions of at-risk students is related to a much wider known educational issue, the high school dropout rate. As local school districts struggle to identify and implement effective strategies to lower the dropout rate, and thereby, increase the number of high school graduates, it is imperative that decision-makers incorporate the unique needs of at-risk learners into programs, initiatives, and policies. However, there must also be mechanisms of accountability in place to ensure that adopted strategies are being used and the needs of these students are being met.

As a result of conducting this survey research study, it is hopeful that the findings are used to explore further the dynamics of perceptions and their role in the success and/or failure of at-risk students, especially those enrolled in non-traditional high schools. By investigating these students' beliefs, feelings, and behaviors, decision-makers can formulate and implement plans that are more relevant for increasing the number of students who complete high school with a

diploma and who are prepared academically, socially, and emotionally, to enter the workforce or continue their education at post-secondary institutions.

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## APPENDIX A

## ACADEMIC PERCEPTIONS INVENTORY

*(Copy is a sample received by mail from Dr. Louise Soares, author of the inventory)*

## ACADEMIC PERCEPTIONS INVENTORY

API/Advanced Level

## SELF CONCEPT

NAME/NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

GENDER: ☐ Male ☐ Female

SCHOOL: \_\_\_\_\_

AGE/GRADE: \_\_\_\_\_

TOWN/CITY: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

We are all different in the ways we think about ourselves. There is nobody else like you in all the world. What kind of person do you think you are right now? Give a picture of yourself by placing a check in one of the four spaces on the line between the words at both ends of the line. Each space tells how well the words agree with the way you look at yourself as a person. Look at the words at both ends of the line before you decide where to place your check.

## EXAMPLE:

I am	:	:	:	:	I am
strong.	:	:	✓	:	weak.
	very	more	more	very	
	strong	strong	weak	weak	
		than	than		
		weak	strong		

- |     |                           |   |   |   |                              |     |
|-----|---------------------------|---|---|---|------------------------------|-----|
| [1] | I am a happy person.      | : | : | : | I am not a happy person.     | [1] |
| [2] | I like to be with others. | : | : | : | I like to be alone.          | [2] |
| [3] | I am kind to people.      | : | : | : | I am not kind to people.     | [3] |
| [4] | I have many friends.      | : | : | : | I have few friends.          | [4] |
| [5] | I like myself.            | : | : | : | I do not like myself.        | [5] |
| [6] | I am a calm person.       | : | : | : | I am a nervous person.       | [6] |
| [7] | I do well in school.      | : | : | : | I do not do well in school.  | [7] |
| [8] | I am a kind person.       | : | : | : | I am not a kind person.      | [8] |
| [9] | I try to help others.     | : | : | : | I do not try to help others. | [9] |

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*Conts. → 13 pairs*

## ACADEMIC PERCEPTIONS INVENTORY

API/Advanced Level

## STUDENT SELF

NAME/NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

GENDER: ☐ Male ☐ Female

SCHOOL: \_\_\_\_\_

AGE/GRADE: \_\_\_\_\_

TOWN/CITY: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

People are different in the ways they think about themselves because of the different things they do. At the moment you are a student in school. What kind of student are you? Give a picture of yourself as a student by placing a check in one of the four spaces on the line between the sentences at the ends of each line. Look at the words at both ends of the line before you decide where to place your check.

## EXAMPLE:

I am	:	✓	:	I am
happy in	:	more	:	sad in
school.	:	happy	:	school.
	:	than	:	
	:	sad	:	
	:	happy	:	

- |     |  |   |   |   |     |
|-----|--|---|---|---|-----|
| [1] | I like to learn.                               | : | : | I do not like to learn.                               | [1] |
| [2] | I work hard in school.                         | : | : | I am lazy in school.                                  | [2] |
| [3] | I learn quickly.                               | : | : | I learn slowly.                                       | [3] |
| [4] | I do well in school.                           | : | : | I do not do well in school.                           | [4] |
| [5] | I have many friends in school.                 | : | : | I have few friends in school.                         | [5] |
| [6] | I like to work with others in school.          | : | : | I like to work alone in school.                       | [6] |
| [7] | Other students like to work with me in school. | : | : | Other students do not like to work with me in school. | [7] |
| [8] | I do my homework on time.                      | : | : | I do my homework late.                                | [8] |
| [9] | I am neat in school.                           | : | : | I am sloppy in school.                                | [9] |

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*Conto. → 13 pairs*



## ACADEMIC PERCEPTIONS INVENTORY

API/Advanced Level

## SCHOOL PERCEPTIONS

NAME/NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

GENDER: ☐ Male ☐ Female

SCHOOL: \_\_\_\_\_

AGE/GRADE: \_\_\_\_\_

TOWN/CITY: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

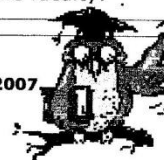
How do you look at school and the people in it? Give a picture of your school as you see it by placing a check in one of the four spaces on the line between the words at the end of each line. Look at the words at both ends of the line before you decide where to place your checkmark.

EXAMPLE:

School is easy	very	:	more	:	more	:	very	School is hard
for me.	easy	:	easy	:	hard	:	hard	for me.
		:	than	:	than	:		
		:	hard	:	easy	:		

- |     |                                      |   |   |   |   |     |
|-----|--------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|-----|
| [1] | My teachers like me.                 | : | : | : | My teachers do not like me.                 | [1] |
| [2] | My teachers work hard.               | : | : | : | My teachers do not work hard.               | [2] |
| [3] | My teachers help me to do well.      | : | : | : | My teachers do not help me to do well.      | [3] |
| [4] | My teachers enjoy being at school.   | : | : | : | My teachers do not enjoy being at school.   | [4] |
| [5] | I like my teachers.                  | : | : | : | I do not like my teachers.                  | [5] |
| [6] | The students seem to like me.        | : | : | : | The students do not seem to like me.        | [6] |
| [7] | I have many friends at school.       | : | : | : | I have few friends at school.               | [7] |
| [8] | I work well with the other students. | : | : | : | I do not work well with the other students. | [8] |
| [9] | Administrators support the faculty.  | : | : | : | Administrators do not support the faculty.  | [9] |

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Conts. —→ 13 pairs

APPENDIX B  
DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FORM

**DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FORM**

Directions: Please check **one** response for each category.

**Gender:**

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male

**Race/Ethnicity:**

- ☐ Black
- ☐ Hispanic
- ☐ White

**Household Income:**

- ☐ **\$0 — \$20,035 per year** [Equivalent to one person in the household working full-time (40 hours/week) earning no more than \$10/hour.]
- ☐ **\$20,035/year — \$97,032/year** [Equivalent to one person in the household working full-time (40 hours/week) earning between \$11/hour and \$47/hour.]
- ☐ **\$97,032/year and above** [Equivalent to one person in the household working full-time (40 hours/week) earning more than \$47/hour.]