

DISSERTATION

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES: VOICES OF INCARCERATED MALE YOUTH

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

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Youth who experience academic failure are at a greater risk for involvement in delinquency. Their perceptions regarding educational experiences could reveal some of their challenges or barriers to academic achievement. The purpose of this research project was to understand how incarcerated male youth perceive their educational experiences, and to understand the prevailing themes and commonalities in their stories. A phenomenological approach was used to describe the participants' educational and lived experiences.

One all male juvenile correctional facility in a Southern state was selected for this case study research. The structure is designed to contain youth who have committed at least three or more felonies and remanded by the courts for treatment. Fifteen incarcerated youth, aged 18, were interviewed and provided knowledge and insight into the research questions. Each was assigned pseudonyms to preserve anonymity. Interviews were conducted face to face, recorded, and then transcribed. The themes that emerged from the interviews include: (1) conflicted interpersonal relationships; (2) educational disconnect; and (3) personal demons, all of which impacted their academic journey. Participants were also asked about their earliest educational outlook, as well as their future outlook, as it relates to short- and long-term goals. Their individual and collective responses painted a picture of the factors that led to their academic challenges, criminal behavior and incarceration.

Results for this study indicated that some incarcerated youth make meaning of their educational experiences through a series of complex events, changes and circumstances occurring in their school and personal lives. Some of these relationships were positive

connections that supported and propelled them forward, while conflicting relationships were damaging and often exposed them to unhealthy environments, substance abuse and criminal elements.

Although their experiences varied, it was clear that failure was an ongoing occurrence throughout their academic journey. While for some, the educational disconnect was internal to the school environment; for others, disruptions in their home lives interfered with their ability to maintain regular attendance and remain focused on their studies. Issues with suspensions, expulsion, truancy, retention, academic failure, school violence, poverty and parental neglect seemed pervasive throughout their stories; and some shared feelings of inferiority due to their current academic shortcomings.

Participants revealed personal demons that were defined as dark moments in their lives and had a direct or indirect impact on their academic journey. These were traumatic events, unforeseen and unexpected circumstances occurring in their family, school and community lives. They shared information regarding their earliest educational outlook, which for some seemed positive and provided an opportunity to grow academically and personally, while others experienced adversity and negative outcomes early on.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Research shows that high-risk youth struggle with complex issues and circumstances related to childhood maltreatment, caregiver issues, and difficult social adjustment (Simmel, 2010). This can lead to poor educational performance, delinquent behavior and violence, and, in some cases, arrests. When arrests lead to detention, education is provided in detention facilities. Research shows that over 2.2 million youths are detained annually, with over 110, 000 of them placed in juvenile correctional facilities (Snyder, 2006).

Adjudicated youth are more likely to engage in future crimes (Doren, Bullis, & Benz, 1996; Bullis, Yovanoff, Mueller, & Havel, 2002) and less likely to develop the essential life skills needed to become productive members of society. Snyder and Sickmund (2006) noted that adolescents who continue to engage in delinquent behavior limit their opportunities for stable employment, career advancement, and a variety of living choices as adults. Continued criminal behavior and involvement in the justice system places hardship on our nation's legal and judicial resources. Youthful involvement in criminal activity creates hardships not only for victims and their family members, but for the families of the offenders as well. It also raises the cost of health and social services. This is alarming; especially since the rate of recidivism for youth transitioning out of custody is close to 55 % (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). While it is important to understand why youths fall victim to delinquency, it is even more urgent to understand how society can curtail delinquency and help youth who have been immersed in a life of delinquent behavior with proper molding and social direction (Kilby, 2010).

America's attitudes and approaches to handling adolescent crime has a long history. The evolution of the juvenile justice system dates back to the 19th century, when courts were designed to handle both adults and juveniles in the same way. However, the detrimental effects

of housing youths with adults gained attention, causing many facilities to evolve into reformatory or training schools for youth. Youth housed in these facilities were usually enrolled in school for most of the calendar year (Conward, 2001). In recent years a strong move toward more alternative and evidence-based treatment for juveniles has occurred due to budget restraints placed on states as a result of high juvenile confinement rates (Greenwood, 2010).

The role of education in the rehabilitation of incarcerated youth cannot be overestimated. Providing a quality education to these youth should be an essential component of any program, with the goal of equipping them with tools for success (OJJDP, 1994). Research shows that education decreases the recidivism rate of delinquent youth; unfortunately, it also shows that the majority of this population falls at least two years behind the grade level of their peers. According to The National Center on Education, Disability and Juvenile Justice (EDJJ), at least one of three incarcerated youth is reading at or below the 4th grade level. Even more disturbing are data showing that youth with disabilities are overrepresented in correctional facilities (Casey & Keilitz, 1990; Murphy, 1986). National data show that traditional students account for 7% of those classified with a disability. However, the estimated median of those youth who enter the delinquency system is 33% and in some states, as high as 78% (Morris, Thompson, & Kristin, 2008).

The goal of juvenile correctional education is to provide a quality educational program that serves the unique and diverse needs of incarcerated youth (Foley, 2001). In 2003, the National Institute for Correctional Education (NICE) stated that the highest calling for any correctional enterprise is to engage in a process that motivates persons convicted of wrongdoing to embrace their responsibilities and reenter society. The Institute noted that the function of education in correctional facilities is to contribute to that process by creating a

positive and effective environment for scholastic and vocational learning (NICE, 2003). Because education plays a vital role in the rehabilitation of delinquent youth, it is regarded as the “foundation for programming in most juvenile institutions” (OJJDP, 1994, p. 129).

While the purpose and scope of correctional education has been clearly defined and backed by state and federal requirements, juvenile facilities continue to be plagued by issues. For example, many incarcerated youths struggle with mental disorders that are often overlooked or misdiagnosed (Gemignani, 1994). These issues create a challenge for correctional educational staff charged with helping youth gain the necessary skills to transition back into society.

There is a lack of understanding regarding the unique challenges and needs of youth served by correctional educational systems. Many facilities fail to give adequate attention to the educational rights of youth, and as a result have been met with a series of legal challenges. For example, there are issues with the ability to provide a basic education to youth in their care. Many facilities lack essential resources such as libraries or even books (Leone & Meisel, 1997), and many teachers lack essential skills and knowledge to deal with the unique needs of incarcerated youth. It is possible that philosophical differences exist between mainstream and correctional schools and are compounded by a lack of cohesiveness and incompatibility among school systems. Many correctional education programs are isolated and detached from public education systems.

It is imperative that those responsible for providing an education to incarcerated youth, understand how youth perceive the challenges and barriers to learning. This study will explore the experiences and challenges of incarcerated youth and how these experiences have shaped their perspectives, attitudes, and abilities regarding education. The goal is to capture the voice of the incarcerated to gain a fuller understanding of the underlying complexities that impact their

educational success. While research can provide answers to issues addressing the needs of these youth, there is a need for more information regarding their perceptions of the barriers to educational achievement.

Background

Matherne and Thomas (2001) agree that delinquent acts committed by youth are clearly on the rise in America. In 2006, adolescent males accounted for over 70% of all juvenile arrests (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). What is more alarming is that in vastly disproportionate numbers, children who are poor and who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups populate the delinquency system. The data show that youth of color have a greater likelihood of being incarcerated than their white counterparts (Municie, 2009). The disproportionate numbers of African American youth in the justice system, moreover, reflect the harsh reality that society imposes unequal and discriminatory treatment upon poor children of color (Tulman, 2003). It has been consistently documented that African American and Native American youth are most often removed from their homes and retained longer in child welfare systems. This is also true for many Latino youth, as evidenced by the data from certain states (Belanger, Green, & Bullard, 2008; Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 2010). Multiple placements within those systems can be a destabilizing force in a youth's life and increase the likelihood of his/her involvement in the juvenile justice system. This is especially true for African American and Latino youth (Barth et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2007). It is important to understand that youthful offenses range from minor to serious or urgent. Minor offenses, such as truancy, underage drinking, and running away, are often considered part of growing up and dealt with informally, rather than by arrest and adjudication. However, more urgent offences such as vandalism, assault, carjacking, kidnapping, and murder usually lead to immediate arrest and adjudication.

(Tolbert, 2003). These systems were designed to address more serious delinquent offenses (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Serious offenses require the courts to impose stiffer and more long-term sentences. Furthermore, violence, gangs, and drugs have become all too prevalent. As a result, the juvenile justice system has become flooded with youths at the expense of taxpayers. Because of the numbers and the costs, recidivism has become a central concern for juvenile justice officials, who are charged with equipping youth with essential skills for success (Tolbert, 2003).

According to Coccozza, Trupin, and Teodosio (2003), an increasing number of arrests are overwhelming the juvenile justice system. In 2003 statistics showed that at least 2.3 million youth under the age of 18 were arrested. Snyder and Sickmund (2006) noted that approximately 1.6 million delinquent referrals are reported to juvenile courts annually. Statistics show approximately 24 % of the referrals are due to violations against persons, 39 % are offenses against property, drug law violations account for 25 % of offenses, and 15 % are for disorderly conduct in public (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). With over 130, 000 of these youths being detained in juvenile detention and correctional facilities (Coccozza, Triupin, & Teodosio, 2003). This comes at a time when the juvenile system is already dealing with issues of overcrowding; therefore, a greater number of youths are being released back into society before the end of their sentence.

According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement, the approximate number of youth discharged each year from correctional facilities is about 100,000. Sickmund (2000) believes this estimate to be modest at best, as compared with adult offenders. He notes that juveniles actually serve lesser

sentences in correctional facilities, causing the actual percentage of youth who return to the community annually to be much greater than adult offenders (Sickmund, 2000).

The number of juveniles moving through facilities fluctuates daily and weekly. The frequent flow of juveniles through the system, compounded by problems obtaining data, proves to be a challenge when seeking to gain an accurate picture of the distinctive characteristics of youth who are delinquent (McCroskey, 2006). As juvenile justice systems work to meet the unique needs of delinquent youth, challenges persist and impact rehabilitation. The juvenile justice system must create ways to respond to this population while working to protect their welfare and decrease high rates of re-offending and its impact on the community (Grisso, 2008).

Statement of Problem

Various studies have revealed that adolescent youth who experience academic failure are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior (Maguin & Loeber, 1996) that may lead to incarceration. Evidence shows that academic failure increases the risk for more serious violent behaviors later in life (Catalano, Loeber, & McKinney, 1999; Maguin et al., 1995). However, little is known about the youths' perceptions regarding challenges or barriers to academic achievement. This information would be valuable in assisting reformers, policy makers, and academics advocating for effective practices and addressing the educational needs of incarcerated youth.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to describe how incarcerated youth perceive their educational experiences and understand their educational journey.

Research Questions

- How do incarcerated youth make meaning of their past and current educational experiences?
- What academic-related experiences are most prevalent in stories told by incarcerated youth?

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are being defined:

Recidivism – According to Blumstein and Larson (1971), the word comes from the term *recidere*, which is a Latin term meaning “to fall back.” Recidivism in a criminological sense identifies an individual who has relapsed back into criminal behavior (Blumstein & Larson, 1971).

At-risk Student - Any student who displays characteristics or behavior believed to place them at risk for involvement with the juvenile justice system (Bullis & Walker, 1996; Nelson & Pearson, 1994; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995).

Delinquent – Somebody, typically a young person, showing or characterized by a tendency to commit crime, particularly minor crime.

Delinquent Offense – An act committed by a juvenile that causes referral or placement by a law enforcement agency to juvenile probation agency.

Risk Factors – In this study, risk factors refers to any influence that increases the likelihood of youth to engage in violent actions or behaviors; for example, growing up in poverty.

Educational Rehabilitation – For the purpose of this study, educational rehabilitation refers to the use of education as a part of a prescribed treatment or rehabilitation program administered to incarcerated youth.

Emotional Disturbance - A condition, displayed over an extended period of time, which adversely affects a learner's ability to achieve academic success. The learner usually exhibits one or more of the following characteristics: a) the inability to acquire knowledge that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health impairments; b) difficulty in maintaining interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers; c) unsuitable behavior or attitudes in normal situations; d) unexplained mood swings; and e) tendencies to develop fears as a result of personal or school difficulties (Knoblauch & Sorenson, 1998).

Offender – An individual who commits a crime (Hall, 2007).

Incarceration – The act of being placed in a lock-up facility such as a jail, prison, or juvenile detention center (Waite, 2006).

Learning Disabled - A person who is diagnosed with a disorder affecting one or more psychological process, including comprehension and language, whether verbal or written. The disorder can affect the student's ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or complete mathematical calculations (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

Recidivism – A tendency to relapse into previous behavior especially: relapse into criminal behavior.

Special Education - Extended educational services provided to a student who has been evaluated and determined eligible for such services under one or more of the following categories: intellectual disability; impairments of hearing, speech or language, vision, or orthopedics; emotional disturbance; autism; traumatic brain injury; or another health impairment or specific learning disability.

Violence - According to Manciaux (1993), this is highly subjective, but can be defined as "the use of physical force against a person or other living thing, causing damage" (p. 24).

Significance of Study

This qualitative study is important and needed for the following reasons: (1) a research gap exists regarding the educational rehabilitative practices designed to assist juvenile offenders in correctional settings, (2) most facilities are isolated and detached from mainstream public educational settings, making it difficult to gain access to the population. They are often overlooked by service providers and research entities, due to youth protection policies, (3) literature focuses on outdated pedagogy and minimal practices used to educate juvenile offenders and prepare them for reentry into society (Houchins, Puckett-Patterson, Crosby, Shippen, & Jolivet, 2009), (4) most youth entering the juvenile justice system have high rates of academic failure, including, a history of suspensions and expulsions when compared to their non-confined peers (Sedlak & Bruce, 2010), which creates a challenge for correctional education staff. These youth lack basic academic skills, perform below the appropriate grade level for their ages and equivalent peers, and are likely to have been diagnosed with having an education related disability when compared to non-confined peers (Leone & Weinberg, 2010), (5) most of the information on educational background and status comes from the incarcerated youths themselves; therefore, it is critical to conduct interviews that might reveal gaps in academic success or failure. New information regarding challenges faced by youth today compared to those in previous years is lacking, (6) this study will capture the voices of incarcerated youth and examine some of the underlying factors that impact education.

This study was conducted in a state-operated juvenile correctional facility where youth have been detained for several months. Finally, this study could provide information for researchers who wish to conduct research on the experiences of delinquent youth.

Limitations

Limitations on the study included the fact the participants were housed at the same facility that I am currently employed. I know these students very well due to my role as a juvenile correctional vice principal and work with some of them daily on school-related matters. My relationship was closer to some more than others, as some of these youth may have required more of my attention or services at various points in the academic setting. That may have been due to behavior issues, teacher-peer conflicts, academic performance, mental health, and adjustment issues. Some of these youth develop deep relational attachments to staff as result of past neglect and abandonment, while others have issues being separated from their biological family and view staff as surrogate family members. That said, this limitation presented itself as a strength, as it heightened my awareness and effort to keep the roles of staff member and researcher separate while taking extra measures to ensure that research documents, recordings and interview schedules were kept as confidential as possible.

Researcher's Perspective

The interest in incarcerated individuals surfaced after I received my bachelor's degree and began my first job as an officer at an adult correctional facility. The job required me to perform routine duties in strict accordance with the rules established and set by the facility. A systematic approach was used to maintain order and provide for the safety and security of staff, inmates, and the surrounding community. Inmate movement was monitored in housing pods, at meals, on the recreation yard, work detail, and other areas. My most critical task was to conduct and report on a strategic count of inmates within an allotted amount of time. The interactions, observations, and conversations influenced my awareness and thoughts about different areas of corrections and incarcerated individuals.

My experiences with incarcerated youth began as a Juvenile Correctional counselor for the State of Tennessee - Department of Children Services. The facility was a hardware secure structure in a rural setting enclosed by a fifteen-foot high fence. This self-contained environment housed some of the state's most challenging at-risk youth, all of whom had been remanded by the courts for treatment. These youths required unique and individualized programs to address trauma, developmental, cognitive, and behavioral issues.

Most were confined for approximately six months to a year, with a few serving long-term commitments. Many were diagnosed with a disability, displayed explosive aggression and impulse control, and were vulnerable to the exploits of other youth. The vast majority of the population was economically and socially disadvantaged.

As a counselor, I was able to connect to these youth by engaging them in conversation. In the process, I discovered a host of common social issues that had created a pathway to incarceration. Many youths had a history of truancy, gang affiliation, illegal drug use and distribution, and eluding law enforcement and/or child protective services. Many had parents with ongoing alcohol and substance abuse issues. Some families could not afford three meals a day, suitable clothing, or adequate housing. Youth who had been prescribed psychotropic medications spoke of the side effects and their inability to cope with the dosage. Their backgrounds revealed a world of abuse, poverty, depression, mental illness, violence, drugs, neglect, and gangs. These issues were further compounded by adolescence and the complexities of transitioning into adulthood.

In interacting with these youth, I quickly learned that trust, respect and ability to relate were critical. To this end, I often used my own personal challenges to show my empathy and establish a rapport. On occasion, I was even able to help some of these youths rise above their

circumstances. I used my formal training in education to tutor them and address basic skill deficiencies.

After a year as a counselor, I was recruited by the principal of the on-site school to become a part of the teaching staff; I was responsible for teaching health, physical education, and basic math. It was with some trepidation that I accepted the position, as it was a departure from my original goal of teaching in a rural public school. However, it exposed me to some of the educational challenges faced by disadvantaged youth and provided valuable experiences in addressing those challenges. Many students were sent to the facility in the middle or end of an academic term, or during summer months. Most fell short of the expected grade placement for their ages; some were two grade levels or more behind. The largest group was assigned to the 9th grade, regardless of age, due to a lack of academic credits. Those who were able were placed into the General Equivalency Diploma program and had the opportunity to get high school equivalency credentials. Many of these youth did not have a good understanding of state mandated assessments or the opportunity to take mandated tests due to early release. A lack of parental involvement appeared to be pervasive during all phases of incarceration.

Currently I serve in the role of vice principal at a facility that serves incarcerated youth. This leadership role has further heightened my interest in advanced research regarding this population of youth; specifically, the educational rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents. It is my intention to determine the impact of schooling and academia on youth in the juvenile justice system. Understanding their experiences may give correctional education officials better insight as to how youth perceive some of the challenges they encountered on their educational and personal journeys. This information can be used to strengthen services for youth in the areas of intake, educational counseling, records transfer, literacy, and instruction, as well as the youths'

perception of education. Information can be used to create tools that motivate students and help them adopt a positive outlook on education and the long-term benefits. This research will contribute to the larger scope of rehabilitation by providing optimal treatment to youth who will eventually transition back into a public school system or workforce. Finally, this research can provide educational reformers, policymakers, and those in academia additional resources to advocate for effective practices for incarcerated youth.

My reasons for conducting research are personal as well as professional. As a troubled youth growing up in a small rural town, I faced similar challenges around education and mental health, particularly abuse, parental neglect, depression, and anger. I can relate to incarcerated youth and understand some of their barriers to educational achievement and success. Many incarcerated youth enter facilities with little to no positive experiences with education. They come from poor school districts with minimal resources, supplies, or opportunities beyond attending class. They are deprived of a challenging curriculum and extracurricular experiences due to funding and district support. They are under the care of school leaders who fail to provide a safe and conducive environment that fosters learning. Thus, the value of education is diminished and youth fail to understand the long-term benefits of school.

Many juvenile correctional educators struggle to provide services to incarcerated youth. This problem is compounded by the increasing number of youth with mental health issues and disabilities. There are usually a limited number of quality teachers in juvenile correctional schools, and educational resources and technology are usually inadequate. The transfer of records, gaps in achievement and alignment with public schools create barriers for youth. There is a lack of input from these youth with regards to background information, which impedes providers' efforts to determine appropriate placement or treatment.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

An extensive amount of research has been done regarding the complex issues surrounding at-risk youth. Youths face issues associated with violent activity, criminal behavior, long and short term confinement, and recidivism. Minimal attention has been given to theoretical or practical knowledge regarding the lived experiences faced by youth who come in contact with the juvenile justice system (Marshall, 2012). There are an overwhelming number of youth in correctional facilities, nearly one million around the world. The highest rates of incarceration are in the United States, where 336 of every 100,000 youths will be in a lock-up facility at some point in their lives. This is nearly five times the rate of some other countries (Mendel, 2011).

This chapter examines some of the historical, sociological, environmental, theoretical, and educational issues regarding youth who come in contact with the juvenile justice system: (1) evolution of juvenile corrections and the transition from a punitive to treatment-oriented approach in handling incarcerated youth, (2) some of the socioeconomic and environmental stressors that create challenges for youth. The literature addresses the role of family and the importance of a strong support system as a deterrent to a life of crime, (3) the use of alcohol and drugs leading to delinquent behavior and incarceration, (4) the role of trauma in youth's lives and how experiences can lead to subsequent delinquent behavior, followed by the significance of family communication and how it acts as a deterrent to such behavior.

The chapter highlights some of the theoretical perspectives regarding delinquency and at-risk youth, focusing on specific disabilities and how they impact behavior and education, as well as the outlook and forecast for youth who gravitate toward a life of crime and some of the educational challenges they face. The final two sections examine the topics of recidivism and transition post incarceration.

Evolution of Juvenile Corrections

During colonial times, juvenile offenders were subject to the same punishments as adult offenders, and they usually lived in poor and inhumane conditions (Bartollas, Clemens, & Miller, 2001). This trend continued until the mid-1800s, when penalties for juveniles decreased, and government established separate facilities to house delinquent youth. In 1899, Chicago established a separate court, which eventually led to the creation of juvenile justice systems nationwide (Young & Gainsborough, 2000). During the early nineteenth century a number of reforms were introduced to create placements for juveniles in lieu of placement in adult jails. A greater emphasis was placed on “due process rights”, making the juvenile justice system distinct from the adult system (Bartollas, Clemens, & Miller, 2001). A rise in the number of refuge homes for juveniles spiked during the early 1900s; however, these youth often endured treatment that would now be considered harsh and inhumane (Basta & Davidson, 1988). During this era, rehabilitation for juveniles was defined as the act of isolating youth with the goal of punishing them and protecting society. “For the next seven decades, offender treatment reigned as the dominant correctional philosophy” (Cullen & Gendreau, 1989, p. 109).

In the 1960s, a sharp increase in the youth crime rate began to plague many communities (Tonry, 2004). Nonetheless, The Juvenile Justice and Prevention Act of 1974 began a trend toward deinstitutionalization of juvenile offenders and set the stage for rehabilitative practices. The federal government began efforts to prohibit the incarceration of juveniles and to prevent the placement of young offenders in jails, detention centers, correctional facilities, and other institutional settings (Kobrin & Klein, 1983). The federal government’s efforts resulted in a rise in community-based and diversionary correctional alternatives such as in home detention programs and electronic monitoring.

In the early 1970s, however, there was a sudden and unfortunate reversal in the philosophical debate between rehabilitation and punitive treatment. This “prompted a general critique of the state-run criminal justice system” (Cullen & Gendreau, 1989, p. 109). Liberals challenged the philosophy of rehabilitation and accused the state of acting leniently toward youth who commit delinquent acts (Cullen & Gendreau, 1989). Martinson (1974) took the lead in an influential essay entitled “Nothing Works,” in which he asserted that treatment-based programs had little impact on a reduction in the recidivism rate for juveniles (Cullen & Gendreau, 1989). Martinson (1979) claimed during this era that nothing worked to rehabilitate or treat juvenile offenders. He, along with other criminal justice researchers, asserted that attempts to rehabilitate serious, violent, and chronic offenders were completely unproductive. During the 1970s these assertions cast a bleak shadow over rehabilitative approaches that were more therapeutic than punitive in nature (Tonry, 2004). By 1979, however, Martinson had renounced many of his earlier views by suggesting that some programs and practices may be successful in treating incarcerated youth (Martinson, 1979). Some scholars believed that issues of racial unrest during the 1960s and 1970s influenced the “get-tough” policies in both the juvenile and adult justice systems (Feld, 1999; Tonry, 2009; Tonry & Melewski, 2008).

This punitive stance on juvenile crime persisted well into the 1980s. During this time many states had policies that focused on more punitive consequences for delinquent youth and allowed more juveniles to be tried as adults. This had a significant impact on the juvenile justice system’s philosophy of rehabilitation. Many state and federal entities worked to enact stiffer penalties for juveniles who committed delinquent acts (Bilchik, 1999). Cullen (2005) noted that with the developments of more punitive measures to deal with offenders, federal and state governments focused on policies that were more punitive-based (Cullen, 2005).

It was not until 2005 that scholars began to use more sophisticated instruments to analyze data. They found that issues of abuse, abandonment, and neglect were preeminent factors leading to delinquency and crime (Cullen, 2005). These findings revealed that if juvenile rehabilitation programs are administered and structured well, they can substantially decrease rates of delinquent recidivism (Lipsey & Cullen, 2007). Data from these studies refuted Martinson's earlier claims and revealed positive outcomes for juvenile rehabilitation programs.

Today, opponents of correctional-based treatment argue that being in lock-up facilities only exacerbates the United States' teenage crime problem. Some believed that youth committed to institutions are more likely to be treated like adult criminals than minors. They are often deprived of family and environmental settings, stigmatized by labels, and considered to be socially deviant (Stanton & Meyer, 1998).

Grisso (1993) asserted that the primary objective of juvenile courts has been to provide community protections, punishment, and retribution, especially with regard to juveniles who have committed violent crimes. He believes that many elected officials have worked to enact stiffer penalties for juvenile crimes in response to concerned citizens. This pressure from the community persists, despite recommendations from many professionals who believe that intervention strategies are the most effective way to deal with delinquent crimes (Howell, 1998).

Throughout the 20th century, state policies and practices evolved to focus primarily on rehabilitative models tailored toward the offender and reflected in individualized sentencing (Tonry, 2009; Warren 2007). Major developments in the 21st century brought about further changes and triggered landmark decisions in the areas of juvenile justice and social work (Springer, 2007). Greenhouse specifically noted March 1, 2005, when the U.S. Supreme Court deemed it unconstitutional to execute juveniles in the case of *Roper v. Simmons* 543 U.S. 551,

bringing an end to thirty years of precedent (2005). Before this decision and subsequent policy changes, youths as young as thirteen could be sentenced to death for their criminal acts (Equal Justice Initiative, 2007). Other researchers pointed to studies and data on physical and sexual abuse among youthful offender groups, which changed the way many professionals perceived this population. Studies reveal a high rate of abuse among female offenders due to traumatic and unresolved issues around abuse (McNeece, Tyson, & Jackson, 2007).

Juvenile court judges have been charged with making some important decisions regarding youth cases, particularly the placement of youth based on circumstances and offenses. These judges have a duty to protect society and ensure that effective treatment and rehabilitation measures are administered. This may require them to detain or remand youth to facilities that specialize in providing a safe and secure environment where acute and long-term needs can be met. Undoubtedly prevailing attitudes and beliefs regarding treatment have affected the type, structure, and setting in which youth are detained. In recent years, Juvenile Justice Research has shown that correctional-based settings seem to be the least effective in providing treatment, as compared to diversion and community-based alternatives (Pottorff, 2012).

Pathway to Delinquency

By the time most juveniles enter the justice system, they have already displayed a downward trend in most areas of their life (Rider-Hankins, 1992). More of them began to express deviant behavior at an early age and are usually defiant, hostile, resentful, and frustrated. Youth entering the system have usually been hurt both physically and emotionally. Delinquents have frequently expressed feeling that they are victims of society (Rider-Hankins, 1992).

The majority of incarcerated youths were not first-time offenders. Most had an extensive prior arrest record. They appeared quite “street smart”, yet lacked the skills to make an

appropriate living or to deal with anger and frustration. If there was no intervention, youth experienced failure and grade retention and exhibited behavior problems (Rider-Hankins, 1992). They are a product of their home and community environments. Generally, these young people come from a low socioeconomic environment, are highly mobile, and are from an ethnic minority (Rider-Hankins, 1992). Most are “experiencing significant conflict at home and at school, some have left school early, and many are socially isolated, have poor communication skills, anger management problems and low self-esteem” (Delaney & Milne, 2002, p. 6). Wright and Wright (1994) suggested that delinquency is a failure of socialization. They contend that crises within their family or school, along with the inability to cope with their feelings, is a major contributor to delinquency (Wright & Wright, 1994).

Rider-Hankins (1992) believed that many youths who engaged in delinquent behavior were not successful in previous placements due to their progressively disruptive behavior. Many were placed in alternative homes at a much younger age than other youths, which often were unsuccessful in providing stability for these individuals. These characteristics were some of the earliest indicators of later delinquent behavior (Rider-Hankins, 1992).

The New York State Council on Children and Families (2008) reported that many of the youth have endured maltreatment throughout life, which slowly eroded the safety and security they need to sustain a healthy existence. The background of these youth can be marked by maltreatment and offenses that create chaos in their home, school, and community environments. The cultural and economic environments, compounded by defiant attitudes, can place these youth at risk socially, academically, and legally. Repeated trauma creates a sense of unfairness and, eventually, worsens their current situation. Youth are forced to endure a life of abuse, violence, neglect, drugs, gangs, and poverty. This usually worsens as they move through

childhood, forming new relationships and experiencing greater exposure to their immediate environment. This eventually leads to displacement from those environments and contact with the juvenile justice system. This upheaval continues to affect their sense of security, adequacy, and purpose (New York State Council on Children and Families, 2008).

When youths come in contact with the juvenile justice system, their stability is weakened further by its constraints (New York State Council on Children and Families, 2008). More alarming is the system's role in escalating the lack of economic opportunities for youth. Research shows that while placements in juvenile justice facilities provide some support for youth who engage in criminal behavior, they may be ineffective in helping families resolve issues that may have led to the child initially being placed in the system. Many of these youths "age out" of the system each year without being properly placed in a healthy home environment or engaging in a meaningful relationship (Pecora et al., 2009, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Many youths in this situation are at risk of becoming homeless, recidivating, being unemployed, and suffering from depression (Courtney et al., 2009).

Most youths entering the juvenile justice system have been on a destructive path for a long period of time, often as a result of dysfunction in their internal and external environments. Youth enter the juvenile justice system with a number of issues that create a challenge for staff. Unfortunately, disruptive behavior often hinders the ability to receive adequate treatment and many become trapped within the system as they transition from numerous placements. The juvenile justice system provides some stability and support for these youth; however, it may be ineffective in creating support for the family unit and in addressing issues that youth face upon release. Parental divorce and separation, for example, greatly influence a youth's ability to

sustain a feeling of support, security, and stability. Non-traditional families increase the likelihood of exposure to and involvement in delinquent acts.

Youth and Family

Youth who come from strong, stable families usually thrive. While it is normal to experience brief periods of instability, ongoing trauma greatly affects feelings of safety and security. Instability is usually caused by a complex series of occurrences, rather than a single event. Parents play an essential role in the stability of children and act as a buffer in times of instability. Without this buffer, stress increases and can have a negative impact on the condition of the mind and cognitive processes (Evans, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 2011; Shonkoff & Garner, 2011). When parents respond to unstable situations in appropriate and proactive ways children will maintain a level of stability. Children learn to deal with adverse circumstances, navigate their environment, and maintain emotional stability with family support (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007).

Wright and Wright (1994) noted that a single most important factor in the prevention of juvenile delinquency was a positive home environment. They reported that parents must be actively involved in all the environments in which their child operates. For example, parents must visit the child's school, know the child's friends, monitor behavior, and exhibit fairness and consistency when disciplining their children. Most importantly the child must feel positive parental intervention at a young age (Wright & Wright, 1994). Some research suggests that parents who are aware of their child's whereabouts significantly decrease the rates of negative behaviors and report fewer issues with delinquent youth (Clark, Kirisci, Mezzich & Chung, 2008; e.g., Rai et al., 2003; Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Luyckx, & Goossens, 2006).

Rider-Hankins (1992) reported that minimal family involvement was insufficient in helping to reduce juvenile delinquency. He noted that families are required to do more to reduce the likelihood of delinquent behavior in youth. He contends families of delinquent youth must adhere to instruction regarding techniques for effective communication and positive family interaction. Research on family social control introduced the event of family dinner as a way to solidify child-parent relationships (Fulkerson, Pasch, Stigler, Farbakhsh, Perry & Komro, 2010), and the act of eating family dinners together is connected to less aggression in youth as a whole. Having dinner as a family reduces the rate of delinquency in youth who reside in single-parent units (Griffin et al., 2000).

Cashwell and Vacc (1996) introduced the coercion theory to explain the family environment's influence on the development of an adolescence interpersonal style. They asserted that a family's influence on adolescent's interpersonal style has a strong effect on a teen's choice of peers. They believe that teens with similar interpersonal styles tend to gravitate toward each other and the relationship that develops may increase the likelihood of both youth becoming involved in delinquent behavior. The inner dynamics of the family provide a wealth of valuable information about adolescent relationships. The researchers were particularly interested in family adaptability, cohesion, and satisfaction (Cashwell & Vacc, 1996).

Non-Traditional Families

According to The U. S. Census Bureau (2010), an estimated 28% of children under the age of 18 reside in non-intact family households led by single mothers. At least half of the marriages ending in separation will involve youth who have not reached the age of 18 (Amato, 2000). For every five children conceived, at least two will be exposed to a marriage ending in separation (Bumpass et al., 1990; Price & Kunz, 2003). Matherne and Thomas (2001) noted that

the likelihood for delinquent behavior is increased when youth come from nontraditional families; “For nontraditional families, there was a significant relationship between delinquency and cohesion” (p. 670). Youth in nontraditional family structures tend to have a higher rate of delinquent engagement than those who dwell in traditional family structures. Understanding family cohesiveness is highly effective in predicting the frequency of delinquent acts committed by youth in nontraditional families (Matheme & Thomas, 2001).

Single Parent Homes

According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, “the proportion of children living in single-parent homes more than doubled between 1970 and 2007, rising from 12% to 29%” (OJJDP, 2008). Many youth remain with their mothers after a marital separation and experience the impact of economic hardship due to decreases in resources. This usually has a dramatic impact on the standard of living to which the youth had grown accustomed (Duncan & Hoffman, 1985; Kelly & Emery, 2003). McLanahan and Booth (1989) noted a dramatic reduction in resources affects the standard of living for single parents and forces many to relocate and find housing in neighborhoods that have high crime rates. This can also limit a family’s access to quality education and other resources enjoyed before separation (McLananhan & Booth, 1989). Wright and Wright (1994) reported that the negative attitude of the police and court toward youth of one parent homes increased the likelihood of a child being labeled delinquent.

Kelly and Emery (2003) identified the lack of economic opportunities to be a contributor in delinquent engagement as it relates to adolescent youth. Youth in the guardianship of single mothers experienced a change in residence at least 75% more often than youth in the care of a mother after the first six years post-separation, causing more upheaval and instability in the

children's life. This frequent change in the environment affects the youth's ability to establish and solidify relationships and join meaningful and productive clubs, organizations, or sports (Kelly & Emery, 2003). There is evidence to suggest that single mothers may be less likely to place maturity demands on teens and more likely to engage in ineffective discipline techniques than two-parent families (e.g., Simons, Simons, & Wallace, 2004). The impact of a decreased standard of living may affect a single parent's ability to provide adequate financial resources to the family. She may seek additional employment, such as a second job, which results in reduced time with her children and an increased likelihood that they will abandon school. As stated above, a failure to attend and perform well at school, is one of the risk factors for delinquency, especially when reduced income is also an issue. (McLanahan & Booth, 1989).

Family Resources

The process of change is seldom caused by a single incident or disturbance in one realm. Change is usually triggered by a disturbance in another realm, causing a "domino effect." Low and middle income families seem to be impacted most, due to a lack of available resources during times of change (McKernan, Ratcliffe, & Vinopal, 2009; Mills & Amick, 2010). Matherne and Thomas (2001) noted that the presence of family resources was a deterrent for youth to engage in delinquent behaviors. "With more resources, traditional families may provide a more balanced home environment and devote more time and energy to their children. For example, traditional families may allocate more time for family interaction, such as communication" (Matherne & Thomas, 2001, p. 370).

The lack of safety, fairness, and stability are commonalities shared by many youth from difficult families and impoverished communities. The risk of maltreatment seems greater for these youth and often leads to a more antisocial response to their environment (Maughan &

Moore, 2010). Their responses are more likely to begin in childhood by leaving home and school early, engaging in the use of drugs and alcohol, and connecting with negative peers. If the root causes of their offenses go unchecked, they usually progress to committing more serious, violent, and criminal offenses in adulthood (Farrington & Loeber, 2002; Moffitt, 2007; Vazsonyi, Trejos-Castillo, & Huang, 2007).

The effects of poverty create unpleasant circumstances for individuals, regardless of age, race, and sex. Some youth who grow up in poverty lack essential resources and social opportunities, which leads to serious and complicated outcomes (UNICEF, 2007). While the effects of poverty among adults has received consistent attention throughout the years, there is very little research on the impact of poverty among children. In recent years more global attention has been given to the focus of youth and poverty reduction (UNICEF, 2004). Most youths are dependent on their parents, caregivers and community to provide basic needs (Redmond, 2008; Roelen, Gassmann, & Neubourg, 2009).

The availability of resources and economic stability can adversely affect crime and incarceration. Adequate resources for youth increase opportunities for success and decrease the likelihood of future crime, one parent homes, however, often have limited choices for housing and schooling. Parents should be involved in all facets of a child's life, including school, friends, and discipline at an early age. Youth become vulnerable when they dwell in dysfunctional, chaotic, and violent family units. External factors beyond the home further compromise the safety and stability of youth. Families have the responsibility of creating positive pro-social behavior through adequate structure, effective communication, and activities that enhance the family unit. Family's abilities to provide adequate resources increases opportunities for stability in youth's lives. Resources help parents maintain a more stable home environment and afford

opportunities for time spent with youth. Keeping a healthy family unit intact provides the most promising results for youth. Oftentimes, youths are expected to adjust and adapt to parental divorce, separation, loss and other conflicts.

Exposure to Conflict and Violence

According to Hagan and Foster (2001), exposure to violence, both within and outside the family may increase the risk of involvement in criminal activity. Exposure to pervasive violence in the neighborhood can impact a youth's well-being, even when it is not present in the home (Siegfried, Ko, & Kelley, 2004). When violence is present in both the home and the neighborhood, there is greater likelihood that the juvenile will engage in delinquent behavior (Prochnow & DeFronzo, 1997). Adolescents experience an increasing number of vulnerabilities as their social relationships and geographic spaces move beyond that of family and school; however, the family remains the foundation of their emotional life. Youth who engage in delinquency and display antisocial and/or aggressive behaviors may begin this behavior as early as the preschool and elementary school. Frequent misconduct usually leads to harsher discipline by parents, which exacerbates behavioral problems that continue to be present in adolescence and adulthood (Prochnow & DeFronzo, 1997).

Amato and Sobolewski (2001) noted that children who observe conflict between parents have an increased risk of becoming delinquents. There is a strong association between youth who experience divorce and a willingness to engage in conflict while growing up. This can cause psychological distress that continues into adulthood (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001). A study conducted by Gorman-Smith showed a strong predisposition for involvement in violent crimes when violence existed within shared family relationships (Gorman-Smith, et al., 2001).

External Environment

According to McCord, Widom, and Crowell (2001) a strong correlation exists between growing up in impoverished environments and engaging in delinquent activity. Theories of sociological deviance surmise that "disorganized neighborhoods have weak social control networks; that weak social control, resulting from isolation among residents and high residential turnover, allows criminal activity to go unmonitored" (Herrenkohl et al., 2001, p. 221). While researchers continue to debate the connection of environment and personal factors as a gateway to delinquent acts, most assert that "living in a neighborhood where there are high levels of poverty and crime increases the risk of involvement in serious crime for all children growing up there" (McCord, Widom, & Crowell, 2001, p 89).

There is strong evidence that engaging in delinquent behavior is indicative of a need for acceptance. Most delinquent activities are carried out by groups, not individuals. Youth who search for validation among their peers and discover it in delinquent peers seem to feel a sense of attachment, which makes delinquent acts more appealing and attractive (World Youth Report, 2003). "Statistical data in many countries show that delinquency is largely a group phenomenon; between two-thirds and three-quarters of all juvenile offenses are committed by members of various groups. Even juveniles who commit offenses alone are likely to be associated with groups" (World Youth Report, 2003, p. 191).

Youths' exposure to violence is an important predictor of delinquency. Exposure to violence within the family and the external environment can make a child more receptive to engage in violent behavior. Environmental stressors are important predictors of delinquent behavior in youth. Many youth struggle to navigate unhealthy environments that lack sufficient resources to support growth and development. Many have endured circumstances that hinder

their ability to adapt to the demands of everyday life. Neighborhoods characterized by poverty, violence, unemployment, and a lack of educational opportunities create barriers for many young people.

Alcohol and Drug Exposure

Substance abuse poses significant risks to the health and well-being for teens in the United States (MacKay et al., 2000; Sigda & Martin, 1996). An overwhelming number of American families include a teen who engages in alcohol or some other form of drug use. According to the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA), at least 36% of teens in this country have experimented with alcohol by the time they reach the eighth grade, and 71% have experimented with illegal drugs by the start of their senior year in high school (NIDA, 2011). In 2012, approximately 2.8% of youth ages 12 to 17 misused some form of prescription psychotherapeutics, compared to 5.3% of young adults ages 18 to 25 and 2.1% of those ages 26 or older (SAMHSA, 2013).

A strong correlation can be found between substance abuse and juvenile delinquency (Shufelt & Cocozza, 2006). The relationship between substance use and delinquency during the teen years has significant ramifications for juvenile justice entities (Mulvey, Schubert, & Chassin, 2010), as youths facing apprehension, adjudication, probation, and placement for treatment are involved with alcohol and drugs. As a greater understanding of this connection developed, so have treatment approaches within the justice system. Juvenile justice systems are charged with providing effective substance abuse treatment at the right time to cancel patterns of abuse that could persist throughout an individual's lifespan (Mulvey, Schubert, & Chassin, 2010).

According to Snyder and Sickmund (1995), delinquency is often symptomatic of drug and alcohol abuse and addiction; in fact, high crime rates and drug abuse go hand-in-hand. Many youths experience drugs in the home, in their community, and through family members and peers. Many youths begin experimenting with drugs and alcohol prior to age fourteen (Wright & Wright, 1994). Many start missing school, experience a drop in grades, and engage in unhealthy conflicts with close friends, peers, and family members. Extended drug use affects their ability to focus and impacts other areas associated with healthy brain functionality (NIAAA, 2009).

Family Influence

Juvenile drug abuse is not an individual issue, but part of a larger family dynamic. While a healthy relationship with parents, positive peer selection, community resources, and school support can isolate a youth from drugs (Goldstein, 2011), a lack of those resources increase vulnerability. When adolescents are exposed to behaviors displayed by adults, they often mimic those behaviors. After repeated exposure to dangerous behaviors, youth begin to feel equal to parents and other adults, and these feelings lead to rebellious actions (Rowe, 2012). It is vital that parents partake in communication with youth about the harmful effects of drug use and back up this communication with clear boundaries and consequences in a fair, firm, and consistent manner. Parents must be role models by living within their own parameters (Epps & Wright, 2012).

When parents make choices that lead to disorganization and an inability to control their children, those children are more likely to use drugs and engage in delinquent behavior (Rider-Hankins, 1992). The evidence shows that these families are often dysfunctional due to parental drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness, verbal abuse of children, physical or sexual abuse, poor communication, isolation, and alienation (Rider-Hankins, 1992). Youths from low

socioeconomic backgrounds, homes where one parent is present or where one or both parents are involved with substance abuse or suffer from mental illness, or homes where parents have poor parenting skills are more likely to become delinquent (Rider-Hankins, 1992).

Youths who reside in single-parent homes have a greater likelihood of being involved in high risk activities such as alcohol, drug, and tobacco use (Blum et al., 2000), and were more likely to admit to using alcohol, drugs, or tobacco within the past month (Oman et al., 2007). They also claim that middle school youths from intact families had a greater resistance to substance use (Paxton, Valois & Drain, 2007). Other studies, however, revealed that there is little to no difference between one-parent and two-parent homes (Fawzy, Coombs, Simon, & Bownan-Terrell, 1987). The research indicated that those who lived in homes with a single mother were no more likely to be engaged in substance or alcohol abuse than those who came from traditional homes (Amey & Albrecht, 1998). While an extensive amount of research indicates that siblings and friends have a strong influence on an individual's use of dangerous substances, parents also influence a youth's chances of engaging in substance abuse (Allen, Donohue, Griffin, Ryan & Turner, 2003).

The juvenile justice system is charged with providing effective treatment programs to assist youth in overcoming issues with substance use; therefore, substance abuse continues to be a major concern with regard to policymakers and care providers. As stated above, drug and alcohol abuse is one identifiable factor associated with delinquency; in addition, youths living in communities with high volumes of drug and alcohol use are often exposed to criminal activity. Parental drug and alcohol abuse act as a portal for youth involvement in criminal activity. When parents are struggling with substance abuse, their focus is on their need for drugs, rather than the needs of their child. A parent's inability to control a child in his or her early life also contributes

to juvenile drug use. This is compounded by environmental elements and other elements outside the home. While the research is divided as to whether it is more beneficial to live in a two-parent home, it is clear that youths must have clear boundaries and a healthy support system to protect them from engaging in substance abuse and/or delinquent behavior.

Trauma and Delinquency

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) noted a correlation between the traumatic experiences of young people and their subsequent delinquent behavior. They report, far too many children and young people are victimized by abuse in this country. While some forms of abuse appear sporadic, others are frequent. Abuse can take on many forms, including physical, sexual, emotional, mental or psychological; these may overlap. Regardless of the nature or frequency of the abuse endured by a young person, the impact can be lasting and profound. Childhood trauma is often perpetrated by someone with whom the child has developed a close bond or relationship, such as a guardian, sibling, temporary caregiver, relative, or teacher. The breakdown of trust usually magnifies the impact of the victimization (NCTSN, 2012), with long-lasting emotional implications. “Numerous studies over the past 10 years have shown a clear relationship between youth victimization and a variety of problems in later life, including mental health problems, substance abuse, impaired social relationships, suicide, and delinquency” (Siegfried, Ko, & Kelley, 2004, p. 5).

Siegfried, Ko, and Kelly (2004) noted that abuse affects a young person’s ability to be a part of society. Traumatic experiences can result in a young person challenging societal norms; however, they do not necessarily have to occur at home. Youths often witness and experience violent acts against friends or others in their immediate environment. If youths are exposed to violence in their community or living environment (which is sometimes referred to as a “war

zone”), they are at risk of being traumatized. Research suggests that youth who lack a clear understanding of the concepts of fairness, equality and acceptable behavior may be affected differently by violent or traumatic occurrences. (Siegfried, Ko, & Kelley, 2004).

According to the National Survey of Adolescents, a strong parallel exists between youth who have suffered traumatic or offensive incidents and delinquent behavior (Kilpatrick et al., 2003b). Data show that 47% of boys who are exposed to sexual assaults commit delinquent acts, and at least 20% of females who are sexually victimized commit delinquent acts. Further, 46% of males who are exposed to physical abuse engage in delinquent behavior, and while almost 30% of females go on to engage in delinquent acts after being victimized. However, while these numbers are alarming, the research shows that abuse is not necessarily a precursor for delinquent behavior, and both males and females who have not been victimized may gravitate toward and engage in delinquent behavior (Siegfried, Ko, & Kelley, 2004).

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the number of acts committed by juveniles has declined in recent years; however, the issue is still of significant concern to society. The report indicated that the harmful treatment of children and teens can have a direct impact on the manifestation of antisocial behaviors. “The prevalence of childhood abuse or neglect among delinquent and criminal populations is substantially greater than that in the general population” (Wiebush, Freitag, & Baird. 2001, p. 1). It is important to ask why those children who do not endure abuse or neglect typically do not commit delinquent acts. And although rates of child abuse and neglect have risen, rates of delinquency have declined (Wiebush, Freitag, & Baird, 2001).

The discrepancy in these data clearly indicate research is needed; however, it appears that a prevailing difference between youths who go on to commit delinquent acts as a result of abuse

and those who do not is that the former are more than likely did not receive adequate and timely treatment. Child maltreatment is an urgent issue in the United States, and every state has its own process for handling individual cases of abuse and neglect. One common concern is the absence of access to adequate prevention and intervention. Data revealed that agencies providing services for abused youth are "...overwhelmed by heavy workloads..." (Wiebush, Freitag, & Baird, 2001, p. 5). Many agencies must prioritize which cases will receive urgent attention, which often leads to cases being overlooked, set aside, or dismissed.

Youth who experience trauma are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior. Abuse most often occurs at the hands of someone who has been entrusted to care for and protect the children's wellbeing. When trust has been violated by someone close to the child, it magnifies the trauma. Oftentimes the trauma is overlooked, which causes the youth to experience major issues later in life. Evidence suggests that the victimization of youth can adversely lead to anti-social behaviors.

Communication and Delinquent Youth

Communication is essential in helping children develop cognition, awareness, and perceptions of the world around them. Parents play a key role in helping children regulate emotions through distinct cognitions by maintaining positive interactions with them (Garnefski, Rieffe, Jellesma, Terwogt, & Kraaij, 2007). Clark and Shields (1997) focus on the importance of positive family communication as a deterrent to deviant behavior. They believe communication is an essential element in optimal family functioning and presents major implications for delinquent behavior in youth. Communication directly relates to a child's involvement in delinquent behavior; however, there are documented differences with regard to age, sex, and family structure. These factors can have varying influences on a child's gravitation and

participation in delinquent acts (Clark & Shield, 1997). Parents who are poor communicators usually fail to develop and strengthen emotional ties and offer little resistance to the temptation of children who gravitate toward delinquent behavior (Keller, et al., 2002). If there is unhealthy or inadequate communication between a parent and child, the child is more likely to experience hardship as they grow up (Garnefski, Rieffe, Jellesma, Terwogt, & Kraaij, 2007).

Researchers Clark and Shields (1997) used two communications styles with high school students to determine their relation to delinquent behavior. These communication styles included both open communication and problem communication and were used for a specific period of time. Students who engaged in the open communication felt more confident in their abilities to share issues and problems with parents. Effective family communication is a key element in the bonding between parent and child, as well as the parent's influence over the child's behavior (Garnefski, Rieffe, Jellesma, Terwogt, & Kraaij, 2007).

Parents who communicate in a compassionate and supportive manner and eliminate judgmental tones help children feel understood and accepted. This contributes to children's self-image and self-esteem and acts as a preventive buffer against negative influences. "Some would suggest that it is not only the communication itself that is of high importance, but the *focus* of the communication" (Clark & Shields, 1997, p. 81). The findings seem to support the assumption that communication is important in helping children resolve issues. It is essential that children can trust in and experience open communication with their parents. Parents who encourage open communication help youth develop a support system and help them discover a safety net is available to assist them through any issues or problems they encounter. "While there are some differences between open and problem communication and its relationship to delinquency, the results are clear in suggesting that 'open lines of communication' between the parent or child are

important in the prevention of delinquency” (Clark & Shields, 1997, p. 87). Socially and economically disadvantaged families play a significant role in helping adolescents create positive psychosocial experiences through communication (Rueter & Koerner, 2008).

Positive communication can act as a deterrent to deviant behavior in youth. When researchers compared open and problem communication styles, they found a correlation exists between problem communication and delinquent behavior. Open communication was found to be an essential part of effective parenting. Regardless of the social and economic disparities, it is vital that families promote positive social behaviors through communication.

Theoretical Perspectives on Delinquency

Juby and Farrington (2001) offer three theories to explain the causes of juvenile delinquency. These theories focus on trauma, life course, and selection. The trauma theory suggests that parental absence can have a devastating effect on a child. This, Juby and Farrington contend, is due to the lack of bonding. The life course theory suggests that prolonged separation present multiple stressors for children. These stressors are most commonly associated with separation. Youth often have a diminishing self-concept of themselves and feel a sense of abandonment when parents are absent from their lives. This can have an emotional impact on children as they struggle with social adjustment, the development of healthy friendships, and relationships. They can often project intimidating, moody, and deviant behavior in an attempt to mask pain, fear, anxiety, depression, and loneliness.

Finally, the selection theory makes the argument that disruption in families is more likely to deal with issues of delinquency due to the pre-existing socio-economic means or parenting effectiveness techniques (Juby & Farrington 2001). There is a lack of emphasis regarding the role that fathering has in the behavior and conduct of children, because fathers play a significant

role in the initiation and duration of a child's involvement in delinquent acts. A father's lack of affirmation seems to have more impact on sons who are at risk of gravitating toward delinquency than daughters (Flouri & Buchanan 2002).

Peer Influences

Wong (2005) explored the role of social bonds in juvenile delinquency and suggested that affiliating with peers who work toward positive endeavors minimize the likelihood of youth involvement in delinquent behavior. "In contrast, there are activities that lack long-term objectives, lack a sense of commitment and responsibility, and involve casual or volatile relationships. For example, activities such as smoking and drinking do not serve long-term objectives" (Wong, 2005, p. 322). If youths dedicate more time to behaviors that lack focus, direction, or long-term engagement, they increase their chances of gravitating toward behaviors that are more delinquent in nature. This risk is magnified when these individuals interact with others who also have an absence of positive focus and engagement (Wong, 2005).

Researchers have numerous theories to explain the influences that impact the development of adolescents. The coercion theory is used to explain the impact of environmental influences within the family. Researchers believed the interpersonal style of youth can be strongly influenced by family and impact a child's choice of peers. The trauma theory suggests that a parent's absence in the life of a child disrupts bonding and leaves the children feeling a sense of abandonment and neglect. Life course theory deals with the effects of being isolated or separated from those who have provided nurture, protection, and support. This interferes with the child's life course and leads to stress. The selection theory suggests a family's pre-existing issues can affect parenting techniques, resulting in a child's unmet needs and unhealthy behaviors. A

parent's socio-economic status, resources, parenting skills, and environment impact a child's wellbeing.

Delinquency and Disabilities

Youth with disabilities make up a significant percentage of the juvenile justice population (Quinn, Rutherford, Leone, Ocher, & Poirier, 2005). Youth who come in contact with the juvenile justice system have a greater prevalence of mental health issues than mainstream populations. This was noted by a 2004 report of the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law. Nationally, approximately 70 % of youth in the juvenile justice system have been diagnosed with some form of mental health disorder (Shufelt & Cocozza, 2006). Alone, there is a high rate of mental disorders among youth charged with criminal offenses (Grisso, 2004). Data show at least 70% to 100% of youth who enter the juvenile justice system have been identified (National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice, 2006). While some youth may present a single diagnosis, others are identified as having more complex health related issues. Approximately 70% of youth incarcerated have one or more diagnosable disabilities (Children's Defense Fund, 2012).

The most common disabling conditions among incarcerated youth are mild to moderate mental retardation, learning disabilities, and behavioral disorders. There is no known cause-and-effect relationship between these conditions and illegal behaviors, but some of the social disadvantages and characteristics associated with them may lead to the likelihood of criminal behavior. This is compounded by the disproportionate number of youth entering correctional institutions diagnosed with one or more disabilities, many of whom appear to be minority and male (Schroeder, Guin, Chaisson, & Houchins, 2004). One third of youth who have been incarcerated qualify for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities

Education Act (IDEA), as compared to 10% of their school age peers in general education (Quinn, Rutherford, Leone, Ocher, & Poirier, 2005). Individuals who have been diagnosed with learning disabilities “are more likely to penetrate further into the justice system and to stay longer than non- disabled peers” (Eggleston, 1995, p. 21). It appears that once confined, youth with disabilities receive more disciplinary sanctions and longer confinement periods than non-disabled peers (Leone, 1994).

Researchers and journalists contend that the disproportionate representation and disparate discriminatory treatment of youth with disabilities in the delinquency system has not been sufficiently studied and documented. Estimates of the correlation between delinquency and disabilities vary widely (Tulman, 2003). Evidence suggests that police officers, attorneys, judges, corrections staff, and probation officers are typically unaware of characteristics associated with this population (Rutherford, Nelson, & Wolford, 1997). Data accumulated by these agencies remain scarce and few local, state, or federal entities accumulate enough solid data on youth with disabilities in the juvenile justice system. Most data give an estimate, which can vary depending on the entity collecting data. The prevalence rate of youth with disabilities in the juvenile justice system can range from single digits to well over 90 % of those incarcerated. In addition, these numbers will fluctuate from state to state (Bullis & Yovanoff, 2005; Larson & Turner, 2002; Morris & Morris, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Youth may be more vulnerable to involvement in the juvenile or criminal justice system when they have poorly developed reasoning ability, inappropriate affect, and inattention are misinterpreted by professionals as hostility, lack of cooperation, and other grossly inappropriate responses (Rutherford, Nelson, & Wolford, 1997).

Federal legislation has defined a learning disability as “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations” (Mallett, 2011, p. 4). Causes may include brain trauma, issues with perception, minimal brain dysfunction, and developmental aphasia. Learning difficulties can manifest environment, economic hardships, or cultural circumstances. There appears to be a well-defined link between delinquent engagement and learning disabilities. Youth with learning disabilities account for the majority of students in the juvenile justice population (Mallett, 2011). The research of Rider-Hankins (1992) demonstrated a definite relationship between juvenile delinquency and learning disabilities. Rutherford, Nelson, and Wolford (1989) also noted that youth with learning disabilities and mental retardation in juvenile correction facilities were overrepresented by an average weighted prevalence of 35% and 12.6% respectively. Kvarfordt, Purcell, and Shannon (2005) “estimated that between 28 percent and 43 percent of detained and incarcerated youthful offenders have an identified special education disability, a majority of these being learning disabilities” (Kvarfordt, Purcell, & Shannon, 2005, p. 5).

Tulman (2003) believed that poor educational performance among children in the delinquency system is, in part, due to the high percentage who experience education-related disabilities. Some have not received the benefits of appropriate and effective special education services. Indeed, the majority of the children in the juvenile delinquency system have education-related disabilities and are more likely to engage in delinquent conduct than their non-disabled peers. Also, many educators and delinquency system staff are more likely to label and treat children with education-related disabilities as defiant, based on the characteristics of the disability (Tulman, 2003).

Rider-Hankins (1992) noted that intervention and effective programming for youth with disabilities could act as deterrents to involvement in the juvenile justice system. If special education programs treated learning disabilities as the primary need in rehabilitation and remediation, then the youth's chance of returning to negative behavior should decrease; however, the manner in which to treat learning disabilities was in question. Learning-disabled youth required specific interventions designed cooperatively with courts, school, and medical personnel (Rider-Hankins, 1992).

Tulman (2003) concluded that the school system has failed in its attempt to provide appropriate education to children in the delinquency system. He asserts that poor educational outcomes are pervasive among children in the delinquency system. There is compelling evidence that school and delinquency systems personnel have failed to deliver appropriate educational services to children with disabilities. The decision makers in charge of the delinquency system, particularly incarceration facilities, treat children with education-related disabilities differently than non-disabled peers. This often leads to misdiagnosis and inadequate treatment of youth with disabilities. This is likely to hinder or obstruct adequate treatment and rehabilitation.

The inability of schools to recognize and provide appropriate services for youth with disabilities exacerbates the problems. Researchers use the school failure theory to assert that youth who experience learning, emotional, behavioral, and intellectual disabilities encounter school failure, directly or transactionally. School-related issues may contribute youths to development of a negative self-concept, which leads to school absence, suspension, or delinquent behavior (Osher, Woodruff, & Sims, 2002; Post, 1981). When these youth become adjudicated and receive placement in secure care facilities, the lack of services and support may continue. Very few correctional facilities have programs to help offenders gain marketable skills. When

adequate programs do exist, they often exclude youth with disabilities, as they fail to meet minimum requirements for entry into programs (Gagnon & Richards, 2008).

An overwhelming number of youth in the juvenile justice system are diagnosed with a disability (Rutherford, Nelson, and Wolford, 1989). A disproportionate number of these youth have not been studied or documented. Youths in the juvenile justice system usually struggle academically due to education-related disabilities. Some education-related disabilities go undiagnosed and adults believe the youths are being uncooperative or defiant. The most effective way to address youth with disabilities is through adequate intervention and programming to improve skills. Researchers have used the school failure theory to explain that youth with disabilities can experience school failure directly or transactionally. It is vital that accurate diagnoses be made to ensure academic and educational success.

Forecast Education Outlook

During a single school day, approximately 7,000 youths become dropouts and approximately 1.2 million students fail to graduate as scheduled. The forecast for many of these youths becomes grim as they may face continuous unemployment throughout life, rely on some form of welfare, or find themselves caught in a cycle of transitioning in and out of the prison system (Editorial Projects in Education, 2011).

Education leads to increased opportunities and provides individuals an avenue to improve their lives. Most state constitutions make reference to education and its importance with regard to laws, regulations, and established provisions for organized free and appropriate education (Education Commission of the States, 2000, 2002). Youth who perform academically usually become accomplished adults. Evidence reveals a strong correlation between the attainment of education and positive outcomes in adulthood (National Poverty Center, 2007).

A quality education is vital to achieving positive life outcomes (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009; Crissey, 2009; National Poverty Center, 2007). The health status of individuals who are educated beyond the secondary level generally improves over time, as opposed to those without any formal education (National Poverty Center, 2007). Poverty affects health, wellbeing, and the ability to gain access to adequate care both long and short term. Decreased rates of critical illness can be attributed to increased levels of educational attainment (National Poverty Center, 2007). Youth who gain access to good educational services, satisfy educational competencies appropriate for their age, and gain access to some form of high school and post-secondary credentials usually have a more positive future. This is vital to their success as they move into adulthood to become productive contributors to society. Statistics show that adults who have acquired education beyond the secondary grades fare better with regards to wellbeing, socioeconomics, and employment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009; Crissey, 2009; National Poverty Center, 2007).

When youths drop out of school, the impact of their choices has a direct effect on their ability to generate sufficient income. As of 2009, the yearly income level for an individual who lacked a secondary education was \$19,540, compared to \$27,380 for a high school graduate. While these numbers may not have an immediate impact on the national economy, they will have staggering effects over time (Snyder & Dillow, 2010).

Some youth become disengaged and disconnected from school during the secondary years. Many of these youths feel a sense of alienation and insensitivity from educational staff which can cause or effect low school performance. They believe that no one cares or even notices if they present for class many students feel that the school they attended failed to respond to or reflect the complex real-world challenges they face in life. Other students feel that many of

their classes are boring or irrelevant to issues they face on a daily basis, and some leave due to ongoing academic failure (Bridgeland & di Iulio, 2006). According to the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress, at least 30% of students have reading deficits when entering their freshman year of high school. As textbooks and materials become more challenging, students fall further behind. As a result, many of these students eventually abandon school before earning a diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Youths who deal with complex educational issues have a more difficult time receiving quality educational services than their peers (Leone & Weinberg, 2010). In addition, in foster care systems and juvenile justice placements usually fail to provide the educational services youth are entitled to. This often results in a lack of achievement and a failure to reach educational milestones, gain a high school diploma, and enjoy the benefits of steady work and higher income levels that support individual's wellbeing (Leone & Weinber, 2010). "With quality services and support, children in foster care and those involved with the delinquency system should be able to develop age-appropriate academic and social skills and make successful transitions from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school" (Leone & Weinber, 2010, p. 5). Income disparity seemingly has no relation to demographic or labor market outcomes for individuals with a high school diploma; however, researchers noted that such disparities do exist among individuals with different degrees of educational attainment. Data revealed that those who lacked a high school diploma earned a median income of \$25,705 annually, while those with a high school diploma earned \$35,035 per year. Those who acquired at least some college earned \$40,175. Individuals who held a bachelor's degree earned a median income of around \$55, 864 per year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). A 2011 report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics showed similar results; the unemployment rate for those who had not

acquired a high school diploma was higher than those who had achieved a secondary education or more. In 2011, the unemployment rate was 14.7 % for individuals who did not have a high school diploma, 10% for those with a high school diploma and 4.4 % unemployment rate for those holding four-year degrees (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011).

The high dropout rate continues to be a concern for the American educational system. Every time a youth leaves school without graduating, he/she is limiting opportunities for employment and reaching other life milestones. Despite some challenges, most youth who achieve academic success become accomplished adults who contribute to society. Education plays a vital role in lessening poverty and gaining access to quality healthcare. Those who drop out usually struggle to find and maintain gainful employment throughout life. This affects one's ability to generate sufficient income, which may lead to deviant and unhealthy choices. Youth who struggle academically usually have a tough time receiving a quality education and maintaining consistent employment.

Educational Challenges

Although no single cause can account for delinquent behavior and no single pathway leads to a life of crime, "one of six factors identified as important predictors of delinquency among our nation's youth was poor *educational* performance" (Lieb, 1994, p. 1). Hodges, Giuliani and Porpotage (1994) concurred, adding "one recognized characteristic of juveniles incarcerated in correctional and detention facilities is their poor experiences with elementary and secondary education" (p. 10). Problematic behavior and a lack of academic achievement coincided, often appearing in the early elementary grades. Most youth entering juvenile correctional institutions function at least three years behind grade level (Rider & Hankins, 1992). Research shows that 90% of youth housed in detention facilities as a result of delinquent acts has

a pattern of school truancy (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2002). Poor school attendance appears to be a factor in academic retention and failure. Families usually establish a foundation for consistent school attendance early on; however, stressors can interfere with a student's ability to maintain required attendance. Some youth find themselves in a cycle of behavior-related issues that lead to school suspension, expulsion, fighting, drug-related issues, gang association, and a lack of monitoring (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008).

In comparison with the general population of students, poor academic performance is one prevalent characteristic in the juvenile delinquency population (Baltodano et al., 2005; Chavez et al., 1994; Larson, 1988). These youth have difficulty with language-related tasks, specifically, oral language, vocabulary, reading, and writing, compared to non-delinquent peers (Foley, 2001; Keith & McCray, 2002; Snowling et al., 2000) and have a high risk of non-retention (Foley, 2001) and suspension compared to non-delinquent peers (Baltodano et al., 2005). A large percentage of youth in the delinquency system, as well as adults in the criminal justice system, are severely undereducated (Tulman, 2003). In both groups, reading skills are woefully inadequate. When "speaking with delinquency system probation officers, one is likely to hear that" (p. 4), not a single child in their entire caseload is functioning at or above the appropriate grade level (Tulman, 2003).

An analysis by the National Center on Education, Disability and Juvenile Justice (2003) revealed some typical characteristics of incarcerated youth. First, many in correctional education programs have major deficiency gaps in the acquisition of basic skills, as well as a history of truancy, suspension, and expulsion. Second, delinquent youth often have a history of poor relationships with teachers due to behavioral issues; these issues must be addressed before educators can meet students' academic needs. If they do meet these needs, however, they will

reduce the likelihood of negative and risky behavior when youths detach from the educational process (Osher, Dwyer, & Jimerson, 2006).

Katsiyannis and Archwamety (1999) showed no direct link between juvenile recidivism and poor academic achievement; however, remediation of academic deficiencies has been a good indicator of pro-social behavior, although available research is limited. Studies used small samples of juveniles committed by the courts to community residential facilities rather than juveniles committed to juvenile correctional facilities (Katsiyannis & Archwamety, 1999).

Solid interventions have been shown to decrease criminal behavior and recidivism in youth, and a direct link exists between high rates of recidivism and poor academic performance (Katsiyannis, Ryan, Zhang, & Spann, 2008).

Ricker, Reilly, and Bratton (1999) studied incarcerated juveniles and attempted to determine the link between academic achievement, educational programming, and recidivism. They found 52% of incarcerated juveniles had learning disabilities and were not receiving special services based on respective needs. Black delinquents were found to be low achievers; had lower intelligence quotients and were more likely to re-offend than white delinquents.

Education was directly related to lower rates of recidivism when the educational program was extensive and continued for an extended time period (Glaser, 1996). However, some researchers disagree. Martinson's (1994) statement that "nothing worked" referred to his findings that nothing could prevent a return to delinquency. He warned that attempting to establish a correlation between education and recidivism was an expensive exercise in futility, as recidivism rates were inversely related to educational program participation while incarcerated (Martinson, 1994). In contrast, the more educational programs an individual completed successfully for each six months in confinement, the lower the recidivism rate.

It is important that those in charge of programming for juvenile offenders defend the value of educational programs, demonstrating that education reduces the rate of recidivism (Duguid, Hawley & Parson, 1996). Jancic (1998) found that students who earned their GED while incarcerated had a lower recidivism rate than those who did not. The study found lower relapse for students who earned their high school diploma while incarcerated. Former United States Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger and United States Senator Claiborne Pell supported educational programs in correctional facilities and believed that prison-based education is one of the nation's top crime prevention tools (Jancic, 1998).

Challenges faced by youth can be exacerbated when they are placed in correctional educational settings where a lack of exposure and cultural sensitivity to other groups causes racial tension and intolerance. Correctional staff usually meets this tension and intolerance with a reactive, as opposed to proactive, approach. Other issues include a lack of positive behavioral reinforcements and inadequate treatment of mental health problems (Osher, Sidana, & Kelly, 2008).

Poor educational performance has been identified as a key predictor of delinquency among youth. Many function at or below the expected grade level for their age. These youth have major deficiency gaps and lack the basic skills necessary to function at an appropriate level in the classroom. They are more likely to have a history of truancy, suspension, and even expulsion from school. Placement in correctional educational settings can exacerbate the problem. A lack of exposure and cultural tolerance for diverse groups often leads to intolerance, racial tensions, and territorial behaviors. They are placed in a confined setting with other youths who face some of the same challenges.

Education as an Aspect of Rehabilitation

It is vital that “youth in the juvenile delinquency and foster care systems, perhaps more so than other youth,” receive “high-quality education services and supports to make successful transitions from adolescence to adulthood” (Leone & Weinberg, 2010, p. 7). Education in correctional facilities has a long history in the U. S. Correctional education programs differ in terms of their approach, administration, setting, and students served (Rutherford, 1986). Correctional education moved to the forefront as a treatment alternative for incarcerated offenders in recent years. Although limited, a growing body of evidence shows that incarcerated offenders who receive education and training opportunities are more likely to increase their chances of gaining job opportunities, address intellectual deficits, and decrease the likelihood of recidivating (Western, 2008)

Regarding youth in alternative detention care placements, Weinberg (2007) noted that a greater understanding has emerged within the realm of alternative placements in various local and state educational entities. It is not enough to ensure that all youth are provided safety and security within these placements, education must be a part of the child’s welfare (Weinberg, 2007).

A high standard of education is imperative to the successful transition of delinquent youth as they move from their teen years into adulthood (Krisberg & Marchionna, 2007). Youth must have access to the best educational resources and support systems available. It is the responsibility of internal and external stakeholders to provide total support for these youth and ensure that they succeed academically. Public support for rehabilitation and the adequate treatment of delinquent youth in placement facilities is perceived to save costs in tax expenditures and deter future crimes (Krisberg & Marchionna, 2007).

To understand the role of academics and education in the rehabilitation of the incarcerated, educators must be able to identify and describe individualized learning needs of each youth (Rutherford, 1986). It is important to understand the characteristics and scope of juvenile and adult correctional facilities, as well as the educational interventions employed within the criminal justice system (Rutherford, 1986). The ultimate goal is to provide positive educational opportunities that will engage youth, reduce recidivism, and to help them transition into society as productive workers, citizens, and family members (Leone, Krezmien, Mason & Meisle, 2005).

Students who display educational deficiencies have a greater chance of encountering negative interaction and punishment in and out of school (Gunter, Hummell, & Venn, 1998). Research shows a correspondence between limited teacher-to-student instructional interaction and poor performance (Carr, Taylor, & Robinson, 1991; Wehby, Symons, Canale, & Go, 1998). Negative experiences with school are especially detrimental to delinquent youth; instead, they need to be placed in a setting that fosters their progression toward resiliency (Hart et al., 2007; Kendziora & Osher, 2004). Over the past thirty years, youth advocates, along with the U.S. Department of Justice, have responded to a lack of quality services for detained youth. Advocates have filed class-action lawsuits in response to inadequate educational services and resources for incarcerated youth in juvenile correctional placements. However, the majority of these lawsuits never made it to trial. Many of them were resolved through a consent order or settlement agreement after enduring years of procedural holdups (Leone & Meisel, 1997; National Center on Education, Disability, and Juvenile Justice, 2009).

Delinquent youth encounter a lack of success in public and correctional school settings, and experience issues with enrollment, transfer of school records, high retention rates, and

incorrect classification (Osher, Morrison, & Bailey, 2003; Osher, Woodruff, & Sims, 2002; Scherr, 2007). While in placement, they experience difficulties with class scheduling, barriers to special education and mobile access; threats of suspension and a lack of cooperation among placement entities. These factors have both direct and indirect effects on a youth's educational progress and experiences of the juvenile justice system (Osher, Morrison, & Bailey, 2003; Osher, Woodruff, & Sims, 2002; Scherr, 2007). Many youth who receive short-term placements fail to receive any type of academic or instructional services altogether (Leone & Meisel, 1997; U.S. Department of Justice, 2010).

Many systems appear to be overwhelmed by the educational issues that delinquent youth present when entering their facilities. As educational barriers reflect the reality of student's current academic state, each system is responsible for providing adequate services to address the youth's numerous needs (Kendziora & Osher, 2009; Sebring et al., 2006). Issues often overlap, intersect, and compound each other, which reduce students' likelihood of success. The situation worsens when they are moved from placement to placement repeatedly or simultaneously involved in multiple systems (Osher, Woodruff, & Sims, 2002; Scherr, 2007; Osher, Morrison, & Bailey, 2003).

Educational programs are critical to the services that successfully assist youth with literacy deficiencies as well as related problems with cognitive, functional, behavioral, and learning abilities. Detained youth are likely to re-enter public schools and need the same educational and vocational opportunities provided to their non-detained peers. Youth should have access to course work that leads to a high school diploma or GED, technical and vocational programs, and the opportunity to pursue postsecondary training (CSGJC, 2015).

The National Institute for Correctional Education (NICE) identified challenge encountered in correctional education: students in state-operated institutions are among the most economically and educationally disadvantaged in the nation. An overwhelming number of students come from one-parent families and live in poverty. Students with a history of educational failure often have negative attitudes that perpetuate their situations. Eighty percent of the correctional school principals surveyed identified students' low motivation as a barrier to addressing educational needs. Finding the most appropriate methods used in correctional education continues to be a challenge (NICE, 2003).

For correctional educational programs to be effective, they must offer a variety of approaches for youth. Treatment and rehabilitation are vital to the success of youth in facilities; and important to understand the role of education in the treatment and rehabilitation processes. Identifying and addressing youth's individual needs will give educators the best results when attempting to assist them. Youths who struggle in the classroom are more susceptible to negative interactions and issues outside the classroom. A direct correlation exists between students' success and a teacher's willingness to interact and engage with them. Another issue is the rigor of correctional education programs and compatibility with public school systems. Many correctional facilities become overwhelmed by the number of education-related issues as youth with disabilities, social and economic disadvantages join their ranks.

Transition Recidivism

Gagnon and Richards (2008) noted that youth in our nation's juvenile justice system have received increased attention in recent years. The population is considered to be one the most vulnerable. Disabled youth are vastly overrepresented in this population; and others fall into to a host of other categories that placed them at risk. Economic and social barriers, cultural issues,

urbanization, family, the media, and other issues increase vulnerability of youth to become entangled in the justice system (The World Youth Report, 2003). The adults responsible for overseeing this process are charged with the task of stabilizing these youth and providing tools that support success. Poor transition is a common barrier to successful reentry into society. (Gagnon & Richards, 2008).

Increased knowledge of how and why they have come in contact with the juvenile justice system is an important consideration in assisting youth. Attention should be given to some of the key barriers that hinder youth's ability to make a successful transition to adulthood with the economic means to provide for themselves. Addressing specific developmental needs of these youth and linking them with caring adults can have a positive impact and decrease their chances of relapsing into criminal behavior. The goal is to complete formal schooling, gain employment, and become productive contributors of society. A collaborative effort between juvenile justice stakeholders, education, career development, mental health support, the community, families, and young individuals is the key to success. These entities must collaborate prior to, during, and after the youth's contact and involvement with the juvenile justice system (Gagnon & Richards, 2008).

Transition Programs

Intensive supervision probation. Intensive probation is a common option used to keep track of delinquent youth through surveillance. Common forms include house arrest, electronic monitoring of behavior, and other mechanisms that limit and control the movement of youth on probation (Giblin, 2002). The literature has shown that the close monitoring of delinquents has little effect on decreasing the recidivism (Lipsey, 2009). Increased surveillance can ultimately lead to more technical violations when delinquent youth are being monitored (Giblin, 2002).

Many probation officials choose to continue close visual contact with youth through check-ins and meetings. This can lead to knowledge of new violations committed by specific youth. Although an increase in the number of contacts by probation officials reveals more technical violations committed by youth, data shows it does seem to curtail the number of new offenses (Gibline, 2002).

Boot camps. Boot camps are another tool used to transition youth back into society. They began in 1983 in Georgia and quickly spread to other states. These military-style camps gained popular exposure for their “get tough” and in-your-face approach to addressing inmates (Cowels, 1995) and for their confrontations between staff and inmates when enforcing rules. When compared to four other approaches, including a narcotics maintenance program, group counseling, and residential treatment, boot camps had less of an impact on community transition. On the contrary, many narcotic maintenance programs revealed mixed results with regard to effectiveness, and boot camps showed no effectiveness in addressing relapse into a destructive lifestyle (Tennyson, 2009).

Scared straight. Scared Straight programs emerged during the 1970s as a cost-effective way to discourage at-risk youth from embarking on a path of crime (Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino, & Finckenauer, 2000). The program’s concept was to expose youth to the cruel realities of incarceration. New Jersey created the first “Juvenile Awareness Program”, which was inspired by a documentary that highlighted the success of this method when targeted and delivered to an at-risk population. The success of the initial Juvenile Awareness Program spread this method of programming to spread nationwide (Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino, & Finckenauer, 2000). There is insufficient data to support the effectiveness of the programs. Findings from studies examining

the outcomes showed they actually increased the rates of re-offending from one percent to 30% (Petrosino, Turpin-Petrosino, & Finckenauer, 2000).

Recidivism

Recidivism can be defined as “repetition of delinquent or criminal behavior, especially in the case of a habitual criminal or repeat offender, who has been convicted several times” (VandenBos, 2007, pg. 776). Approximately 25% of delinquent youth over the age of sixteen will go on to commit crimes after reaching early adulthood (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2006). This cycle decreases the likelihood of successful rehabilitation and treatment. The goal is to identify a variety of successful interventions used to address juvenile offenders. This process contributes to a more meaningful existence for juveniles who fall into a delinquent lifestyle (VandenBos, 2007).

Treatment. To be successful an effective intervention is to show a decline in the rates of recidivism after the intervention has been utilized (VandenBos, 2007). Moore (2001) explains that those who complete substances abuse programs are 6.2% less likely to recidivate than those who do not complete programs. Over two-thirds of those who complete substance abuse programs are successful after release. The effects of substance abuse stand out even among offender groups with high rates of recidivism, including males, younger males, black offenders, prior recidivists, and special education inmates. Inmates with precursor offenses who complete a substance abuse program are 13.2% less likely to recidivate. Also, those who indicate a history of criminal behavior related to substance abuse dependence are likely to recidivate. However, those with precursor offenses who do not complete a substance abuse program are more likely to recidivate.

The Florida Department of Corrections (2001) reported that inmates who complete a substance abuse program and participate in a work release program for at least 60 days are 5.9% less likely to recidivate. However, those who complete a program and have no work experience are more likely to relapse into criminal behavior. They report that the recidivism rate for the 3,129 inmates who completed a substance abuse program was 31.4%, compared to 35.4% for those who did not complete a program. This reduction in recidivism translates into approximately 125 inmates not returning to prison, which based on a formula developed by the Office of Program Policy, would save a \$2.4 million annually (FDC, 2001).

In 2001, research by the Correctional Association's "Three State Recidivism Study" concluded that correctional education contributed to a reduction in long-term recidivism by 29% (Steurer, Smith, & Tracy, 2001). In 2005, Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) indicated that recidivism rates for offenders who participate in prison education programs are 46 % lower than the rate of those who did not participate in some type of program (Erisman & Contardo, 2005). Increasing offender's education levels help them to become law abiding, contributing members of their communities when they are released. Tregea (2003) explains "we can't keep the incarceration binge going" (p. 7). He notes that people are looking at restorative justice as part of the crime prevention puzzle. He believes that important components are skills training and the education needed to re-enter society.

Eight percent of Michigan inmates enter prison without having graduated from high school (Tregea, 2003). He explains that two-thirds of prisoners' nationwide lack a high school diploma and most have few job skills. A lack of education or job skills, when combined with the stigma attached to being incarcerated will prevent inmates from going very far. Several hundred thousand inmates each year age-out while incarcerated; however, they still have time to serve.

From the 1960s to 1994, some went to prison colleges but the programs withered under the punitive approach. For some adult inmates, prison colleges are their only contact with the outside world and that involvement in this alternative community of students reduces recidivism (Tregea, 2003).

Moore (2001) concluded that studies utilizing a one-year recidivism measure indicate that participation in transitional programs greatly increases inmate success after release from prison. For this analysis, transitional housing programs and completion of a 100 hour transitional course were offered in select institutions. Using a one-year recidivism measure has historically proven to mask the true success of a program as there is a marked failure among non-program participants between the first and second year. Therefore, it is recommended that transitional programs utilize a follow-up study designed to evaluate the data after it has had a chance to mature. He adds that this will fill in gaps in the transitional data and be a more comprehensive assessment by categorizing services received and allowing for the normal fallout seen after the first year follow-up (Moore, 2001).

Youth who leave the justice system often have poor transition opportunities to ensure a successful reentry into society. It is important to identify specific barriers that create issues for successful transition into adulthood. Strong correlations exist between support from a caring adult and a decreased recidivating. All stakeholders must play an active role in the transitions process, with the goal of helping youth become productive members of society.

Transition programs can have a positive or negative impact on successful reentry into the community. Intensive surveillance is a common practice used to monitor students during probationary periods upon release. Boot camps are popular programs, but show little to no

effectiveness in deterring recidivism. Data revealed that “scared straight” programs actually increase the rate at which youth re-offend and reenter the justice system.

Summary

In summary, the review covers several topics that summarize and evaluate some of the historical, sociological, environmental, theoretical, and educational issues related to youth who come in contact with the juvenile justice system. My goal was to select works that would help me establish the essence of my topic. This literature review describes some of the prevalent issues youth face upon entering the justice system. Many of their lives have been shaped by challenges and circumstances found in their everyday lives. This often impacts abilities to administer successful treatment and rehabilitation opportunities intended to ensure success.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

The goal of qualitative study is to uncover emerging patterns found through close observation, careful documentation, and thoughtful analysis of data. Creswell (1998) defines qualitative research as “an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem” (p. 15). “The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (p.15). Thus, using a qualitative approach allowed me to examine the phenomenon of lived experiences through the voices of youth confined to a juvenile correctional facility. The qualitative method of inquiry promotes subjectivity and utilizes procedures that allowed me to immerse myself into the topics being investigated. I was able to better understand and explore the perspectives and worldviews of the participants. As an educator who is interested in the educational process on all levels, I chose to employ qualitative methodology in my research, because of its relevancy to my study and fit with my philosophical beliefs regarding the best way to immerse myself into the experience of the participants.

Morrow, Rakhsha, and Castaneda (2001, p. 582-583) identified some strengths of qualitative research in studying the experiences of juvenile delinquents. For example, it provides a rich contextual description of the participant’s experiences and focuses on the researcher’s process of self-awareness and self-reflection. This allowed me to collect data using a variety of techniques including: field notes, interview transcripts, recordings, and documents (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). I was able to use this method to capture the voices of those who have been silenced as marginalized groups.

Design of the Study

A phenomenological approach was used for this study. This approach allowed me “to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena” (p. 1) and how participants perceived the phenomena of their educational experiences. This translated into extracting and compiling in-depth information on perceptions by way of qualitative methods such as interviews and discussions (Lester, 1999). The researcher searched “for essentials, invariant structure (or essence) or the central underlying meaning of the experience and emphasize the intentionality of consciousness where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image and meaning” (Creswell, 1998, p.52).

My goal was to capture the educational experiences of incarcerated male youth and understand the essence of their experiences and how they internalized or perceived what they have experienced (Patton, 1990). My intention was to describe the phenomenon, holding true to concrete facts and nothing more (Groenewald, 2004). The phenomenological approach allowed me to carefully link various parts of the discussion between myself and the participants as themes emerged. Good rapport had been established with the pool of participants identified for this study through the classification phase of their detainment. This allowed me to gain information to provide rich thick data to be analyzed (Lester, 1999).

Research Site

The correctional facility that houses the participants and served as the location where the interviews took place is one of three high risk juvenile facilities in a Southern state. The facility is designed to contain some of the state’s most dangerous, aggressive, and high-risk youth. The facility is a hardware-secure structure on 25 acres of land and is enclosed by a 15-foot fence. The core building contains the school, health clinic, laundry, and dining facilities, as well as

administration and classification units. There is a gymnasium, two 24-bed housing units, two 48-bed housing units, two softball fields and three basketball courts within the fenced perimeter. A warehouse and maintenance shop are outside the fence.

The facility provides treatment programs for male youth ages 13 to 18, who have committed three or more felonies. The typical student in this facility is likely to have committed a violent offense toward another person and may have mental health problems or other specialized needs. All students participate in a classification and orientation program upon intake. Based on this evaluation, an individualized program plan is developed for each student by a treatment team comprised of a teacher, counselor, security representative, and family members. The goal is to help incarcerated youth build skills that allow them to move to a less restrictive setting as soon as possible. The facility provides a full program of education, vocational skills, medical services, recreational programs, self-help, and independent living skills. Specialty services include therapy for a broad range of needs, alcohol and drug programs, speech therapy, dental care, and behavior management.

Participants

Establishing trust is especially important in working with at-risk youth and capturing the experiences of those who are incarcerated. Trust is an important factor to consider as many youth are receptive when some type of meaningful relationship has been established. The engagement process is important in building a relationship and essential in quality interactions to be constructed by the researcher and participant. Research shows that a large number of youth growing up in high-risk environments have very few, if any, positive relationships with adults (Field Notes, 2007). Often, delinquent youth become nervous, guarded, and reserved as a result of previous trauma or circumstances surrounding their lived experiences, which make it harder

for the researcher to gain rich or relevant data from their stories. At-risk youth are more receptive to individuals who have established a meaningful, relatable, or non-threatening relationship with them.

The approval for participant selection was first presented to the Department of Children Services (DCS), Research Review Committee. The purpose of this committee is to ensure that research requests are reviewed, approved and executed in accordance with relevant state and federal laws and regulations and with DCS policy. The policy applies to research requests involving possible use of human subjects and confidential DCS data. All of the participants in this study were males age 18. These youth were remanded to DCS custody through an order imposed by a judicial magistrate or court. They are housed in a state operated juvenile correctional facility.

Participants were selected from a list of 100 students based on contact with myself during the classification phase of their program. Students participate in a classification and assessment program used to determine academic scheduling, grade placement, number of existing credits, and transcript analysis. Based on of this evaluation, an individualized academic path is developed for each student. Creswell (2007) noted that it is very important to acquire participants who are more receptive to share information or “their story” (p. 133). My goal was to select the 20 students who I believed would provide richer stories, those with whom I had established more open and receptive rapport with during the classification and assessment process. These youth appeared to be more receptive, vocal, attentive, asked questions during and after the meeting, and provided additional information used to guide the process and address their academic deficiencies.

An Excel spreadsheet was used to help organize and identify 12 to 15 participants for the study. Individual meetings were then held with those individual students to explain the purpose and nature of this study. I played an active role in this process by using my experience as a juvenile correctional counselor, teacher, and principal to help my participants understand the purpose and process of the study. Those participating signed an *assent* form. Participants 18 years of age could proceed with the interview process without parental consent. An initial contact person was used to present the study to participants. Contact with parent/guardian was then made through by letter and phone to explain the purpose of the study, answer questions, and inform them of the consent form to be mailed if they wish to proceed.

Data Collection

In preparation for conducting interviews, I identified the information I needed and from whom it would be obtained. Once informed assent and consent forms were collected, I proceeded with interviewing those students who had signed and agreed to the process. The purpose of the interview was reiterated to all participants, the reason why each was selected, and the approximated or expected duration of the interview. Participants were informed that the information from the interviews would be kept confidential, unless that information posed an imitate threat to the safety of the student or others associated with the facility. Key data from the interviews were summarized and processed immediately following discussions with each participant. Data were collected through the use of a recorder and a reflective journal was used to capture and record data.

Instruments

Audio recordings documented the interviews and capture the dialogue between each participant and myself. The recorded information was manually transcribed for the purpose of extracting relevant data. A journal was used to reflect and document the behaviors of the participants. Observations during the interview were later documented using the journal to capture exchanges between myself and the participant. This gave me an opportunity to reflect on our interactions during the interview to see if other information would emerge as a result of the questions being asked. The location of interviews were in an office that was once used to conduct therapy sessions with youth.

Data Analysis

After recorded sessions with the participants were transcribed, all of the transcripts were read though several times to gain an understanding of what each participant is trying to convey. The goal was to identify and uncover themes and patterns found throughout the transcripts when reading. A list of topics and sub-topics were then created based on the information from the transcripts. My goal was to develop a system for coding each of the themes or patterns that I identified. After a code had been developed for specific content, I began the process of categorizing specific themes and patterns in an attempt to link them to research questions developed for this study. This process was revisited by reviewing transcripts again to ensure that no information was overlooked, and any new patterns were documented and coded.

Validation Strategies

Qualitative research has prompted social and behavioral scientists to carefully review and examine studies that employ this approach. These scientists have used a wide range of strategies

to strengthen research credibility and rigor (Creswell & Miller, 2000). By providing an in-depth description of each participant's voice and experiences, one can create rich descriptions. My goal was to present a rich description of the student's stories and data analysis process to strengthen the credibility of my research. To help the reader connect more closely to each participant's story (Creswell & Miller, 2000), peer debriefing was achieved by working in close collaboration with a colleague who carefully examined and critiqued documents, reports, transcripts, recorded interviews, and general methodology. This feedback helped to enhance the credibility and validity of this research.

An audit trail was constructed during this study and will be kept for a set length of time. This trail was created by keeping field observations, interview notes, recorded conversations, evaluations generated during classification, and any drafts that were produced during the research. A journal was kept and documented any concerns, questions, observations, or thoughts during the interview process. The coding process was used to extract significant and meaningful segments of compiled data. Extracting the data allowed me to generate concepts that I could control (Gough & Scott, 2000). The process of coding the data provided a more efficient analysis and understanding of the information being collected (Lockyer, 2004).

Summary

This research was driven by a need to understand how male youth perceived their educational experiences. Youth who enter correctional facilities with a lack of basic academic skills create a challenge for correctional education leaders. Studies have shown that exposure to some formal education while incarcerated reduces the rate of recidivism among incarcerated youth. Findings from research involving at-risk youth and the experiences that shape their education will help correctional educational leaders to better serve youth. My intention with this

research was to provide a better understanding of how youth perceive challenges and barriers affecting their educational attainment. The goal was to capture the lived experiences of youth and the influences that help to shape their perspectives, attitudes, and abilities regarding education.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter outlines the findings obtained from incarcerated male youth regarding their educational and personal experiences. The fifteen participants were each 18 years of age and housed in a state-operated juvenile correctional facility. Several of them have committed at least three or more felonies, one violent offense toward another person, and may have mental health problems or other specialized needs. Others have a long history of criminal behavior, substance abuse and delinquent behaviors, as well as patterns of academic failure and truancy that often resulted in suspension and expulsion. Many participants have been victims of parental neglect, multiple out-of-home placements, and poverty. During the interviews these young men provided insights into their educational experiences and circumstances, from their earliest memories to the time they were incarcerated, including detailed descriptions of their personal lives, family structure, economic conditions, educational background, types of delinquent behaviors, and relationships with their parents, teachers, and peers.

An analysis of data revealed five overarching themes that impacted their lives, namely, (1) relationships; (2) educational disconnect; (3) personal demons; (4) earliest educational outlook; and, (5) future outlook, as it relates to short- and long-term goals. Participants were asked a series of questions about their educational journey and answered based on their own unique experiences, perceptions, and perspectives. In an effort to maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant.

Data Elements

Within each theme as the data elements are presented, there will be two specific formats. These are single-spaced and indented, with no quotation marks; this is my interpretation of the transcript of the meeting with the participant. First, interpretation of the transcript data were

necessary, because the responses from the participants often contained slang and otherwise revealed a lack of language skills that were understood by me in a one-on-one conversation might have presented a challenge for the reader. Putting some of their experiences into my own words made it easier to clarify and contextualize them without changing the meaning. The second format involves direct quotes from the participants, which I placed in quotation marks.

Participants

Alpha lived with his mother and siblings in St. Louis, Missouri until the 8th grade, when he went to live with his grandmother in Tennessee. He is currently classified as a high school freshman and falls at least three years behind the expected grade level for his age. Shortly after his arrival in Tennessee, he was admitted to the state-operated facility for drug possession. Alpha has goals of becoming a mechanic and pursuing a career in the recording industry after achieving a HiSET diploma.

Change, along with three sisters and one brother, was primarily raised by their mother, although his grandmother was also involved in his care. Over the last few years, however, Change has been living in placement facilities. He is currently classified as a 10th grader, two years behind the expected grade for his age. He was originally admitted to the current facility for violation of probation; however an additional charge was added due to his participation in an escape that occurred in 2014. Change has long-term goals of working a job and maybe even attending college. He is interested in pursuing a career in the field of technology and one day hopes to get married and start his own family.

Determined was raised by his grandmother, stepfather, and mother at different stages of his life. He has three younger siblings -- including a stepbrother -- and a six-week-old daughter. He is currently in the 9th grade, at least three years behind the expected grade level for his age,

and is currently working toward his High School Equivalency Diploma (HiSET) diploma, a difficult task considering his struggles with reading and staying focused. Determined was admitted to the current facility for aggravated assault, armed robbery, intent to sell, burglary and theft of property. He has dreams of attending college and pursuing a career as a certified physical therapist.

Exalted was raised in Franklin, Tennessee by his paternal grandparents after his father was incarcerated shortly after his birth. He remained with his grandparents until age 13, when he returned to live with his father. He believes his mother was absent during his life due to her own youth and inexperience with raising a child; however, in November 2014 he was reunited with her and feels that this current living situation is “better” for him. He is now in the 12th grade and plans on graduating during the 2015 school year. He was admitted to the facility for two counts of criminal responsibility for facilitation of kidnapping, escape, runaway, and violation of aftercare and truancy. After obtaining his high school diploma from within the facility, his goal is to attend a community college for music technology before going on to a regional State University to earn a bachelor’s degree. He hopes to become a music artist or work behind the scenes and eventually own his own music studio.

Exceed, an only child, was raised by his mother and father. He was readmitted to the current facility for violating his aftercare and received an additional charge due to his participation in an escape in September of 2014. Exceed earned a HiSET diploma during his previous placement at the facility and was planning to enter Middle Tennessee State University when he was recommitted. He still wants to attend college when he is released, with an ultimate goal of becoming an entrepreneur. He would like to relocate to another city leaving from the unhealthy community he was raised in.

Faith, along with his older brother, was raised in New Jersey by his mother and stepfather. He was never close to his biological father, who succumbed to cancer in 2014. Faith remained in New Jersey for at least two years after his parents relocated to Tennessee. He eventually followed them, but shortly after arriving in Tennessee he was admitted to the current facility for aggravated burglary times three, theft, domestic assault, simple assault, possession of tobacco, and possession of marijuana. Faith is currently in the 12th grade and hopes to graduate in 2015. His long-term dream is to own a “franchise of mechanic’s shops--auto, diesel, auto mechanics, and diesel mechanics” all over the world.

Heal, who along with his seven siblings was raised by a single mother, was admitted to the current facility for carjacking and robbery. He is currently in the 11th grade but lacks the appropriate number of credits to graduate on time. After several attempts to obtain a HiSET diploma at the facility he was placed back on a regular academic track. He plans on finishing school through an adult education or alternative learning center in the community and then would like to earn some type of secondary certificate.

Overcame was born and raised in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where he lived with his grandparents until his grandmother’s death during his 6th grade year. His mother continues to be involved in his life – and the lives of his two younger siblings - even though he is not in her home. Overcame is currently in the 9th grade, at least three years behind the expected grade for his age. He was admitted to the current facility as a result of participation in several robberies. Overcame is currently working toward earning his HiSET diploma and qualifying for the official test. He would like to attend community college and receive training to become an electrician or a plumber.

Power was raised by his mother and grandmother in Memphis, Tennessee. He is currently in the 10th grade, at least two years behind the expected grade level for his age. He was admitted to the current facility for aggravated burglary, burglary of a building, and theft of property. Power would like to earn his HiSET diploma while incarcerated or when he returns to the community, and has dreams of one day becoming a welder.

Redemption was raised by his mother in Nashville, Tennessee, along with his younger sister and older brother. His brother is currently incarcerated for attempted murder, drugs, and guns, and his father is serving a life sentence for a serious drug offense. This is Redemption's second incarceration; the first time he earned a HiSET diploma, and although he is now in the current facility after being caught with a handgun, he plans on pursuing a trade in welding or mechanics. Ultimately, he dreams of starting his own business someday so that he will be able to provide for his son, who is now two years old. Redemption also had a daughter, who died at birth.

Resilience's mother passed away in 2009, leaving him to be raised by his father and his father's ex-girlfriend. After his father's recent incarceration, the ex-girlfriend became the sole caregiver for Resilience, his fraternal twin brother, his half – sister and stepbrother. Resilience was admitted to the current facility for robbery and handgun possession; it was his first incarceration and the first time he was charged with a crime. Resilience, who graduated from high school in 2014, is very open about his academic struggles and the fact that getting his diploma was no easy task. He plans to attend community college and hopefully play basketball for the school and has expressed an interest in a career as a surgical technician.

Strong, along with his two siblings, was raised by his mother until the age of eight, when a court terminated her parental rights for maintaining an unhealthy home life (his mother would

later die from complications of diabetes). After leaving his mother's home Strong was adopted by an aunt; however, he would also live with at least two other aunts at different points in his life. He is currently in the 12th grade and working to complete three academic credits to earn his diploma. He was admitted to the current facility for his participation in an aggravated robbery. Strong loves to work with his hands and plans on attending community college for automotive engineering. He believes education has helped him grow and overcome some of the challenges from his childhood.

Survivor, along with three other siblings, was raised by his mother and an older sister. His father was never involved in his life and Survivor remains unsure of his whereabouts, although he believes he could be somewhere in Mexico. Survivor was able to earn his HiSET diploma while previously incarcerated and believes it will help him provide for his two daughters and fiancé. He was readmitted to the current facility for two counts of aggravated burglary; two counts of parole violation; failure to appear in court; three counts of aggravated burglary; possession of burglary tools, burglary of a motor vehicle; and handgun possession. He would like to explore career opportunities as a general welder, underwater welder, and electrician. His goal is relocate his family to Panama City, Florida for better job opportunities and a fresh start.

Victory was raised by his father for most of his life, but also lived with an aunt and uncle in Maryland for a time. He is unsure of his mother's whereabouts and speaks to her for about twenty minutes a couple of times per year. He has an older half-sister around the age of 23, from his father's first marriage. He is currently in the 12th grade year of school and would like to obtain his high school diploma in the coming months. He was admitted to the current facility for theft; possession of drug paraphernalia; possession of marijuana; possession of Schedule II drugs (i.e., barbiturates and oxycodone); domestic assault; therapeutic home visit revocation; and

running away. After his release, Victory would like to find a living arrangement in a transitional type setting. He would also like to attend school for diesel mechanics or enter the Air Force to become a fighter jet mechanic.

Warrior is the middle child of seven children. When he was around ten years old his parents divorced, after which he remained in the guardianship of his father. He is currently working on his HiSET diploma and falls at least two years behind the expected grade level for his age. He was admitted to the current facility for three counts of aggravated assault and four counts of aggravated burglary. After he receives his HiSET and is released he plans to follow in his father's footsteps and work for his family's heating, ventilation and air conditioning business. He insists that he has already acquired the skills necessary to be successful in the business from working with his father.

Relationships

Complementary Relationships

When participants were asked to share their experiences, some spoke about the *relationships* that were fundamental to their journeys. They discussed individuals who were essential to their existence, survival, and stability; for some, these were relatives who provided unwavering support, while others mentioned a teacher who provided a safe place for them at school. Still others spoke of non-family members who stepped in during moments of abandonment and neglect. Alpha, Change, and Power specifically mentioned how their grandmothers provided protection from some of the most challenging circumstances. Alpha spoke of his "Granny," who took guardianship of him when he was having behavioral issues while living under his mother's roof.

Granny lived in Tennessee, and as a child he had spent many summers there. As he approached adolescence, he left his mother's home in St. Louis and moved in with Granny full time. It was she who provided the necessary boundaries and supervision needed by a child of Alpha's age and challenges. Granny freed him from his rocky and indifferent relationship with his mother, as well as the nonexistent relationship with his father. However, while his grandmother made him feel loved and supported, she also appeared to be unaware of the impact and damage that prior years of dysfunction and instability had caused.

Alpha was in need of his grandmother's structure and boundaries due to his issues with substance abuse, truancy, and parental neglect back in St. Louis.

Change also had a positive relationship with his grandmother who he went to live with following a major conflict involving both his mother and law enforcement. Apparently, Change was responsible for his mother and siblings being "put out" of their apartment, resulting in a period of homelessness. He talked about how he had broken into one of the other apartments in their complex. "The police found my fingerprints in the house" that was burglarized "and got us kicked out."

His mother, shocked and furious by the eviction, sent Change to his grandmother, who, according to Change "was on my ass, so I had to go to school and get good grades. She was just strict. Wouldn't let me go nowhere..." His grandmother became even stricter after he was caught smoking by searching his room and monitoring his activities. He stated that his mother and grandmother are the only two adults he "really got" in his life.

The structure and boundaries provided by his grandmother were a direct result of his mother's frustration with his out of control behavior. With help from his grandmother, Change's mother was able to focus on finding another living arrangement for her family.

Power explained that his relationship with his grandmother was positive and provided a sense of safety for him when his mother wanted to physically punish him for inappropriate behavior. His grandmother's position on physical punishment was much different than his mother's and the two were often at odds about how to enforce rules or administer discipline. He stated that at some point during his childhood he even went to live with his grandmother in an

attempt to avoid his mother's physical punishments. However, this arrangement was temporary and he soon returned to live with his mother. Eventually, the "whippings" ceased due to his age and size.

These "whippings," as he called them, were the norm in his household and occurred every time Power made a mistake or engaged in inappropriate behavior. They were often severe enough that his grandmother, who didn't believe in physical discipline, had to intervene. And, this time, when his grandmother intervened, she took Power home with her.

Power felt strongly about his mother's form of punishment for his behavior growing up and often used his grandmother's beliefs to help shield him from his discipline which led to ongoing conflicts between his guardians.

Exalted and Faith shared experiences about their grandparents, including living with them for a time. Exalted contributes everything he learned in his life from his grandmother and grandfather, and talked about the support and nurturing from them at a time when his earliest school experience "wasn't that good..." Faith moved in with his grandparents after his mother, her husband and Faith's brother moved to Tennessee. His mother suffered from arthritis and believed a warmer climate would help her condition, but "I stayed because I just didn't want to...change schools and lose my friends and all that teenage stuff." Faith maintains that despite "little bumps in the road, like trouble at school, everything was good" up North; his perception of "good," however, meant more freedom to engage in substance abuse and other negative behaviors, as well as the ability to hide these behaviors from his grandparents.

Faith, Strong, and Redemption shared similar experiences with regard to teachers who helped guide them, made them feel safe, and took time to connect with them. Faith discussed Mr. Perez, who was a teacher and their family's church pastor. When Faith encountered "a little problem in school, he would let me come in his classroom." Miss Kansas also had a positive

impact on Faith and was good at breaking down and explaining educational concepts with him. According to Faith, her ability to use a different approach and modify instructions made her an exceptional teacher.

For Strong, a teacher named Ms. Briant made a difference in his school experiences. According to him, her natural ability to show love, care, and concern for her students “went further than just teaching.”

Redemption was devastated when he had to leave the guidance and supervision of Ms. Wade after being promoted to the next grade. He remembers when he just “sat on the corner of the school and was just there crying because I don’t want to leave school because it was the summer.” In his young mind the end of the schoolyear meant that he would never see her again.

Alpha discussed his 6th grade teacher, Mr. Stephenson, who made him feel valued and accepted. The teacher’s non-judgmental approach created a powerful bond with Alpha and provided him a feeling of security and assurance. Mr. Stephenson didn’t ask about his behavior, mental health issues, or academic capabilities; he simply accepted Alpha for who he was. He explained that his relationship with Mr. Stephenson actually began to change his view regarding teachers and he no longer viewed every teacher as an enemy, but as people who cared for his wellbeing.

This powerful relationship offered him a feeling of security, if only for a brief time. It also taught him that some teachers have the power to relate to their students –even those from unstable homes- and treat them with respect and dignity. Mr. Stephenson, he noted, was that sort of figure, that father figure that kept him on track, didn’t judge, and treated him with respect.

Mr. Stephenson was a teacher whom Alpha felt a deep connection with while at school. He gave Alpha a sense of hope and helped him to build a sense of trust with other teachers whom he encountered on a daily basis.

Power discussed his relationship with a special education teacher at the facility where he is currently detained. Ironically, their relationship was established due to his issues with reading and literacy. Some of his most humiliating experiences at school occurred when he was asked to read aloud. When he refused, his peers and even some of the teachers would taunt him, saying, “You don’t know how to read.” On the occasions when he did attempt to read, “the students, they’d start laughing at me.” Ms. Compassion, on the other hand, was sensitive to his issues and insecurity around reading. She completed an in-depth assessment of his reading ability and discovered that he needed assistance with basic phonemic awareness. She deals patiently with his hyperactivity and is working with him one-on-one until he can transition into a practice session designed to improve his skills.

“Really like... I need extra help with my reading. When I was young my mom worked a lot and wasn’t really there for me... Like she’d help me with it when she could but she wasn’t there all the time. Like...she was there in my life though. But...she had to work. Do this and do that. And I just wish I could’ve just got help with my reading from her.”

Ms. Compassion provided a safe place for Power to address his reading challenges without fear or judgment from others. With her guidance, he felt he could learn to become a better reader.

Exceed remembered Ms. Clinton, a sixth grade teacher who had a positive impact on him in the classroom. Kind and nurturing, Ms. Clinton recognized his ability to perform in the classroom while understanding and being sensitive to his Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). For example, Exceed would often finish assignments faster than his peers and then disrupt the classroom. He seldom completed homework assignments or came prepared to class, and he lacked attention and focus. Still, Ms. Clinton would always find a way to connect with Exceed and provide the stability, guidance and hope he needed to perform in class.

Exceed would often move through assignments quicker than his peers, leaving him with nothing to do and inevitably leading to his “goofing off and stuff.” He was prescribed medication for this condition but stopped taking it because he didn’t like the way it made

him feel. While he excelled in the classroom, he admitted that he “never used to do homework.” Ms. Clinton would always give him extra guidance and attention in class, even when he failed to complete required homework assignments.

Exceed encountered a teacher who was patient enough to understand his unique challenges and provide support for him as he struggled to stay focused in the classroom.

Resilience’s relationship with a lady he affectionately called his “God mama” was an extremely positive influence at a time when he needed it most. Resilience had recently lost both parents – his dad had gone to jail and his mother had died earlier that year of swine flu. After her death, “God mama” had entered into a relationship with Resilience’s father and although they had broken up by the time he was incarcerated, she, without hesitation, took Resilience and his brother into her home. “They weren’t married,” Resilience said, “but it was kind of my stepmama.”

This special relationship he had with his “godmama” would prove to be an invaluable one. “She was there...the whole time my daddy was locked up in there,” and she continued to shelter, feed and protect them to avoid the possibility of their being placed in state custody. “So that’s why I call her my godmama because we’ve got a close relationship.”

Resilience’s relationship with his godmama was very important, especially after the death of his mother and his father’s incarceration. Her support provided the stability he needed to continue his education, remain with his sibling and avoid being placed in state custody.

Survivor discussed his relationship with a teacher and her ability to help him learn and retain information. Somewhere in the middle grades, Survivor began to lose his way, or as he puts it “that’s when it got harder.” He had always grasped new concepts before, but now concepts were more difficult for him to understand and even harder for him to “keep it in my head.” As his performance suffered, so did his attitude about school. Fear and anxiety set in when he made an attempt to seek help from teachers as he didn’t want to be perceived as being “slow” or dumb. This had a huge impact on his attitude, self-esteem, and motivation in school.

Survivor admits that he was fearful of asking questions in class “because it made me feel like I was slow” and strongly believes that teachers should connect with their students on a one-on-one basis. There was one teacher, Mrs. Cross, who did interact with him in this way and made him want to learn. “Mrs. Cross put the information in my head and made it stick in there somehow. And she encouraged me to explore different things in life and pretty much told me...things in life ...would be tough and that I shouldn’t give up.”

Heal remembers the connection he had with his kindergarten teacher, Miss Karen. Her positive attitude and powerful words of encouragement were imprinted in his thoughts and instilled a sense of hope during his earliest educational experiences. Miss Karen taught him to be responsible for his own destiny and reminded him daily that he could achieve whatever he put his mind too. She would often remind him to stay focused and continue to persevere and exceed through difficult circumstances. This was an important relationship for Heal and came at a time when circumstances in his external environment were not the best.

He seemed to have favorable interaction with his teachers, particularly Miss Karen, who taught kindergarten. She instilled in him a sense of hope and reminded him that he would only be as great a man as “he wanted to be and that he had to keep pushing” beyond difficult circumstances. His last experience with Miss. Karen was in the fifth grade, when she came to check on him and see how he had progressed. Her words of resilience and optimism would stay with him as he transitioned into adolescence.

At the start of his academic journey Miss Karen provided powerful words of encouragement that followed him even during some of his most difficult times in school.

Conflicting Relationships

While some relationships were supportive, nurturing, and had a positive impact on participants throughout their journeys, others had the opposite effect. These were the neglectful or abusive parents, negative peers, and teachers who resulted in instability, rejection and abandonment. For some participants, these relationships have a lingering effect on them to this day. Exalted, Faith, Redemption, and Survivor shared such experiences with family members. Soon after Exalted was born his father was incarcerated and he was sent to live with his paternal

grandmother. He remained with her until age 13 when he returned to his father. His mother, he said, didn't take care of him because "She wasn't ready. She was young, like 16 years old and my father was only 18." Faith revealed that he was not close to his biological father, although they did begin speaking more during the beginning of 2014. Shortly after a visit with each other in August of that year his father succumbed to cancer.

As mentioned earlier, Redemption's father is currently serving a life sentence, and his only brother is currently incarcerated for attempted murder, as well as drug- and gun-related charges. Survivor's father was not a big part of his life; Survivor remembers seeing him for just two days when he was young, then he "disappeared for like three or four years." The two have not spoken since Survivor was twelve years old. His father's absence had a strong impact on him, particularly when he saw peers with "a mom and dad."

Determined described rather strained relationships with his mother and stepfather while growing up. During his early childhood he remembers being cared for by his grandmother and stepfather (after his mother and stepfather separated) because his mother was unable to do so. This relationship was a stabilizing force for Determined, but the bond between them eroded when his stepfather accused him of being involved with criminal behavior that jeopardized his family's safety. Determined strongly denied this, but shortly thereafter he was asked to leave the house. After several years apart, Determined went to live with his mother.

She [his mother] didn't always have custody; however after spending his early childhood with her, Determined lived with both his grandmother and his stepfather. They provided him with some stability, particularly his stepfather, until "stuff from the house came up missing, like money." When his stepfather was also robbed at a stoplight, he became suspicious that Determined had something to do with it. After that, their relationship became strained and eventually he was asked to leave his stepfather's home.

He was not at his mother's home very long, however, before he was asked to leave there as well.

His mother had entered into a relationship with another woman, which Determined disapproved

of and did not feel comfortable being around. These feelings manifested as tension and even violence in the home.

Much of the tension between Determined and his mother began when she entered into a relationship with another woman. “I just wasn’t really feeling that type of relationship,” Determined told me. After he and his mother’s girlfriend got into a serious dispute, she no longer wanted him living in their home. His mother agreed, and they established a date by which he would have to move out.

Other issues factored into their decision to kick him out. His mother didn’t approve in his choice of peers, and she and her partner discovered he was concealing drugs and dangerous weapons in their home. This prompted them to ask him to leave immediately.

Determined came home to find “all my stuff already packed and out there in bags.” His gun, which they had found in his room along with “grams of weed” and “some crack,” was lying on a table. Without hesitation, they told him he had to leave right then and there.

Despite his delinquent behavior and family conflicts, being homeless with no money was devastating and stressful for him. It is important to note that Determined was 16 at the time and still in need of the guidance, protection, and care of an adult. Eventually, his mother told the authorities that she was no longer able to care for him. She cited his behavioral issues, negative peer influences, and the indifference he exhibited toward her personal relationships; at one point, she even stated that she was homeless so that the authorities would secure a place for him. Before entering a juvenile correctional facility he had been kicked out of at least four group homes for unruly behavior, running away and fighting. His mother eventually relinquished her parental rights to the state.

Warrior experienced similar conflicts with his biological mother, stepmother, and step-brother. His biological mother’s long-term issues with substance abuse resulted in her being absent for most of his life. He was raised by his dad, but according to Warrior his parents “were

not positive role models.” When he was in the fourth grade Warrior’s parents divorced and he continued living with his father.

Much of Warrior’s anger stems from his mother’s long-term problems with substance abuse and the drug-related activities that eventually led to her incarceration. She has spent the past seven years in prison, where she received treatment for her addiction. She is due to be released on August 3 of this year. His father has had issues with alcohol and drugs and is currently in recovery.

Despite his father’s substance abuse issues the two enjoyed a strong bond until his dad met his future wife. The relationship between Warrior and his stepmother was tense, but over time they worked out their differences and got along better. Originally, Warrior was very close with his oldest stepbrother, who was by all accounts a positive influence on him. Both were talented athletes and excelled academically; however, their relationship would eventually become strained. While his brother chose to continue to focus on sports and academics, Warrior gravitated more toward negative peers, an unhealthy environment, and delinquent behaviors.

When I asked whether they [Warrior and his brother] were close at this time, Warrior replied, “We was, not really, no more.” He didn’t really know what caused their relationship to become strained, but “after I got in to my past schools, I started making bad decisions.” According to Warrior, “He was like, ‘we play football, and we was successful at it and, I don’t know, we just kind of fell off’.” They remain distant to this day.

Warrior deeply regrets that he no longer has a close relationship with his stepbrother. He believes his decision to change schools had a major impact on his ability to remain focused, earn a regular high school diploma, and maintain a positive relationship with his stepbrother.

Resilience shared a similar experience; his father went to prison shortly after his mom died, leaving Resilience lost and alone. Resilience and his father were very close, and his father continued to have the greatest impact on his education and support even after his incarceration. “I almost quit, but my father was like, ‘No, you’ve got to get it, I’ve got to get it for myself.’” Shortly thereafter Resilience was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder -- the stress of trying to

control his emotional life -- namely, managing his interpersonal relationships – coupled with his difficulty in dealing effectively with everyday experiences, had taken its toll.

Suddenly in 2009 his mother died from swine flu. Shortly thereafter, his father was arrested and, “Like the end of the year like around Christmas, right before my freshman year ...he got locked up ...until like the August before I graduated.” For a moment, these events left Resilience, along with a half-sister and fraternal twin brother, without a stable home or guardian.

Resilience was forced to deal with sudden traumatic experiences that were out of his control. The stress of his mother’s death, and his father’s sudden incarceration led to severe anxiety and his instability to cope.

Heal discussed his rather chaotic childhood relationships that were marked by his mother’s illness, homelessness, truancy, and poverty. Specifically, he discussed his role of caretaker after his mother was diagnosed with cancer, which disrupted his education and placed the weight of the world on his young shoulders. According to Heal, this responsibility fell to him because his seven siblings “were all up in age and almost close to finishing school.” His mother “wanted them to just stay focused on their high school diploma and stuff, and thought that it would be better if I missed, because I could catch up. I was on the honor roll at the time.” This rationale led to a defining and highly detrimental moment of Heal’s educational journey.

Heal learned of his mother’s cancer diagnosis around the age of 13. This was a difficult time for him and “kept me up many nights.” Suddenly, he became the parent, attending to his mother’s every need and making sure she took her medication. Money was always a concern, as his mom “couldn’t work, her health was bad and I worried about it, she got to catch up on our bills and stuff.” He recalls the uncertainty and fear of having to move from place to place and the humiliation and frustration being evicted and “put out, before we could get in a place good.”

Before his mother’s illness, Heal’s experiences at school were extremely positive. He was an exceptional student who held a great deal of promise. However, after being pulled out of school by his mother his grades quickly began to deteriorate. This had a direct impact on his

motivation, self-confidence and ability perform in class. Strong spoke of tragic loss, deep rejection, violence and instability in his relationships. The youngest of four children he never knew his own father, who had died when he was just a toddler. While he maintained an ongoing relationship with his mother, he was taken from her earlier in his life due to unsafe and unhealthy living conditions. His aunt cared for him and provided a stable living environment until she grew tired of his behavioral issues and would no longer act as his legal guardian.

In 2005, Strong was adopted by an aunt after a court terminated his mother's parental rights. The court had determined that his previous home life was unhealthy due to issues of domestic violence, chemical use, and instability.

In 2007, Strong began to endure a series of tragic losses that left him afraid, abandoned, and emotionally distressed. A cousin died as a result of being bitten by a spider. "And then it seemed like ever since she died...it's like, every three years or so... somebody close to me had passed."

In 2010, a close male cousin of his also died tragically. But it was on February 3, 2013 that Strong would endure the most devastating loss of his brief life.

His mother, who had diabetes, stopped breathing because "she went too long without her insulin." According to Strong, she had tried to reach her doctor to get her prescription refilled, but he didn't get back to her in time. The cumulative effect of these deaths on Strong manifested as anxiety and stress. He found it difficult to be at school, saying that he would be in the middle of class and suddenly be struck again by his mother's death.

In January of 2014, Strong got into a confrontation with a teacher who, he alleged, "slammed my finger into the door." He insisted that his role in the confrontation "was more of a verbal assault," but school officials and law enforcement disagreed and took him into custody. After a very brief stay in detention, an attempt was made to return him to his aunt and the attempt failed.

The aunt who had adopted him as a small child no longer welcomed Strong into her home.

She refused to take him back. At that point, Strong was left with two options: placement with the Department of Children's Services or relocation to Maryland to live with another aunt. With a bus ticket in hand, he soon found himself alone at the Greyhound station.

Toward the end of the school year and about four months after arriving in Maryland, his aunt [in Maryland] contacted DCS in Tennessee. Apparently, Strong had gotten into some trouble, and, according to him, “she told them she’s just ready for me to go back. So, I got back the same way I got there. On the bus, from Greyhound.”

He returned to the aunt who had raised him, but he would not remain in her care for long. She no longer wanted to deal with him or his issues, and was tired of “raising everyone else’s kids.” Instead, she made the rather drastic decision to sign power of attorney for Strong over to a friend of the family.

Strong’s behavior created a challenge for his aunts until they were no longer willing to care for him. His issues of anger, abandonment, neglect, and tragic loss required a more in-depth and intensive form of treatment and care.

Victory discussed his relationship with an abusive father, who he described as mean and moody. As a result of Victory’s negative behavior and his strained relationship with his father, he was sent for brief periods to stay with an aunt and uncle in Pennsylvania. When he was twelve or thirteen, he went to live with them full time.

He was raised by his father and described him as a mean, moody and unsupportive man who took medication, although he was unsure of the type of medication or the reasons for taking it. He stated that he doesn’t know his mother because “she’s never been in my life.” He went on to say that if he had an opportunity to speak to her he would like to find out why she had never been a parent to him, but added that he does not need anything else from her at this point.

According to Victory, the new living arrangement with his uncle and aunt began as a positive one, but eventually eroded as his arguments with his uncle increased. After about nine months, his aunt and uncle returned him to Nashville to his father. He mentioned that he preferred Pennsylvania to the South, but was not clear as to why.

Power’s mother often defended him in front of others, only to mete out physical punishments once they were behind closed doors. Her form of punishment was physical and

often put her and Power at odds with each other, along with his grandmother. Although Power is aware of his father, there is little to know contact or support and he states “they do not get along.”

He insist that he really doesn’t have a relationship with him because “he’s a liar.” Whenever he needed him financially or for other support he was never there. He mentioned another grandmother who he refuses to talk to any more, and states that she is “a liar” as well. He strongly believes that these individuals have abandoned him in his time of need and have not visited him since his incarceration.

Participants discussed conflicting relationships with parents, guardians, and other adults some of which were caused by and/or led to abuse, neglect, abandonment, substance abuse, a lack of boundaries and incarceration. Others were the result of a new spouse or partner entering the family dynamics. The stresses of changes and inadequate care created ongoing challenges in participants’ home life made it difficult for many of them to remain focused in school and everyday life.

Teacher Relationships

While some participants faced challenges with family and peer relationships, others discussed their conflicting experiences with teachers. The biggest barrier Alpha faced was an inability to connect with his teachers, or more accurately, their inability to connect with him. He discussed how many of his teachers were afraid of him and unable to understand his thought processes or the layers of depression, fear, anger, and aggression. Compounded by a lack of basic skills and mental health issues seemed to interfere with his ability to embrace the educational process.

Strong, Faith, and Resilience faced similar challenges with teachers. As mentioned earlier, Strong was expelled from school and placed into custody for an assaultive confrontation with a teacher who he alleged “slammed my finger into the door.” Faith began “skipping school”

due to his inability to connect with his first period teacher, who he felt couldn't teach. According to Faith, she did not engage with students, just lectured *at* them and expected them to know everything. After several failed attempts to be removed from her class, he made the decision to stop going to first period. Eventually, arriving at school in the middle of the day became the norm and some days he "didn't go at all." A teacher named Ms. Johnson had a particularly negative impact on Resilience, she warned other students not to hang around him because "I'm a troublemaker." The constant criticism made him feel as if something was wrong with him.

While Alpha could see the results of hard work, perseverance, and discipline in others, he doubted his ability to achieve for himself. He felt rejected and overlooked, which caused him to act out in the classroom. He did not embrace the educational process; however, he did embrace his role as "class clown." He was the type of learner who needed teachers to transfer knowledge through one-on-one interaction and then walk him through the concepts; listening to a general lecture in a large classroom was not beneficial for him.

Instead of trying to understand him, he remembers his teachers always asking, "Do you take medication?", "Have you ever taken medication?", "Do you think you need medication?", "Why are you so hyper?", "Why are you so angry?" These questions, of course, only deepened his feelings of being "less than" and unworthy of help.

Determined attended school regularly from kindergarten to his freshman year. He remembers being comfortable asking for help from his teachers and he appreciated their concern and support. However, once he entered high school, his attitude regarding teachers and education in general began to erode. He no longer sought guidance and thought, "Shit, I'm not about to ask them for help. Forget them teachers, they don't do nothing for me." As our conversation continued, however, it was revealed that this change in attitude regarding teachers was due in part to the fact that he had been diagnosed with a learning disability, which hurt his pride and caused him embarrassment in the classroom. Determined no longer viewed teachers as

supportive and nurturing. In his mind he thought they only wanted to embarrass him or expose his poor academic skills.

Determined took issue with any directives or reprimands from teachers when he entered high school. “Like a teacher could tell me right, but I might think it’s wrong.” He didn’t like being told what or how to think, which caused a lot of conflict in the classroom. During his freshman year he stopped attending school and playing sports; this lack of direction opened the door to a lot of negative influences, including drugs and alcohol.

Determined was afraid of being labeled in the classroom as he got older and transitioned to middle and high school. His way of coping was to reject the educational process and avoid seeking help from teachers.

Exalted mentioned that he’s had plenty of confrontations with teachers in the classroom. He discussed his first disruptive and violent incident with his kindergarten teacher after he had stolen cologne from an uncle and took it to school. Apparently the teacher “went to my locker and took it out of my locker and called my uncle. I became upset, took a chair, and threw it toward her, although I missed.” He was placed in school detention and suspended for the incident; in fact, he spent a lot of time in “in school suspension” throughout the elementary grades, and continued to find himself in disruptive and often hostile confrontations with teachers and principals as time went on. His violent and disruptive behavior in the classroom set him on a path of serious school violations. The 4th grade became a turning point and very traumatic time for him. In particular, the powerful words of his math teacher seemed to have a psychological impact his effort and self-esteem.

“My fourth grade math teacher, told me I wasn’t going to make it to the fifth grade and...I was stupid, so I just stopped doing Math. That’s really when I started slacking in school. I mean, to some extent, before that I used to do good. I used to get in trouble a little bit, but I used to do good at school.”

At one point during his 10th and 11th grade year Exalted seriously considered leaving school and dropping out. However, encouragement from his uncle, friends, and others gave him just enough motivation to persevere.

Determined stated, “I had a lot of teachers I hated.” At some point during his academic journey he stopped holding teachers in high regard or viewing them as supportive individuals in the classroom. This attitude had a negative impact on his academics as he entered the secondary grades and eventually stop attending.

He also made clear that his reasons for not seeking help in the classroom from teachers has nothing to do with his low academic skills or a need to mask his reading problems from peers. He stated, “I could care less what people think of me, it’s just me...I don’t know... like my mama always told me to come talk to her if I’ve got an issue going on,” but I never would. I just keep stuff to myself.”

Participants discussed ongoing conflicts with teachers, authority figures, and school officials. For some, an inability to relate to teachers in the classroom presented challenges, while others felt rejected and isolated by teachers who did not understand or know how to deal with behavioral issues. Adult authority created a challenge for those who struggled to find their own identity and manage other stressors in their life. Some conflicts emerged as participants became increasingly aware of their own learning challenges and frustrations. Others exhibited hostile behaviors toward teachers as a result of personal issues with anger, aggression, and a lack of boundaries in their home life.

Peer Influences

Survivor and Determined seemed to find support and affirmation in gangs. Survivor seemed proud and eager to discuss his membership in the Kurdish Pride, a street gang comprised of first-generation Americans hailing primarily from northern Iraq and southern Turkey. The Kurdish Pride is known to be the only ethnic Kurdish gang in the United States. Survivor spoke

of his loyalty to a friend named Sergio, who had murdered the member of a rival gang while the two of them were at a nightclub. “I was with him when it just happened.” In the assault that followed, Sergio was hit in the back with a beer bottle.

His reaction was swift, violent, and changed the course of his life. “He grabs the gun,” Survivor recalled, “runs up to the car and starts blasting.” When it was over Sergio had killed a rival gang member and narrowly missed killing the others in the car. Survivor was grateful that he had lived through it and had not been charged for his involvement in the crime.

The U.S. Marshalls would eventually apprehend his friend and extradite him back to Tennessee, where he remains in an adult correctional facility while awaiting trial.

Much of Determined’s criminal behavior apparently stemmed from his membership in the Crips street gang. Three years ago, he was involved in a gang-related altercation that began on Facebook and erupted into “real-life” violence at Land High School. When a rival gang threatened to shoot up the school, the Crips retaliated, which ultimately led to a showdown that included vandalism, fights, and shootings. Determined was injured during one of these incidents.

“Actually, when I was on the ground I think somebody who had some boots on kicked me right in my face and broke my whole jaw.” After going home, he felt a throbbing in his jaw and his “whole eye was shut.” Still, Determined seemed very knowledgeable about, committed to, and proud of his gang affiliation. I got the sense that his “homies,” as he called them, filled a void that he was missing in his family.

He discussed “a homeboy named G,” who his mother was not fond of and often told him to stay away from. She felt that G was a negative role model and taking Determined down the wrong path; however, according to Determined it was the other way around, that it was “really me that was doing it.” He remembers watching TV shows that glorified illegal ways to make quick money, “and I’m like, damn, we could do that!” While Determined was indeed the instigator of much of their negative and unhealthy activities, it was G who was eventually shot and killed. Determined remains unsure of the details and wasn’t open to discussing his friend’s death.

Power formed unhealthy peer relationships with the intention of making money. He was tired of watching his mother struggle to provide for him, his siblings, and his grandmother, so he decided to find his own source of income. While he was aware that selling drugs wasn't the best option, it was better than going without money. It was preferable to what some of his friends were doing, including stealing from their own mothers. Unfortunately, soon after beginning this "business venture" Power found himself in the powerful grip of drug addiction.

Power turned to friends who were more than willing to educate him on how to make money on the streets; they also taught him that school did serve a purpose: it was the ideal place to find stable clientele for distribution. Unfortunately, these friends used drugs as well, and Power soon found himself surrounded by people who, according to him, "did nothing but smoke weed." Before long, he found himself immersed in the world of drugs and criminal behavior. Eventually, he began using drugs and drugs took over his life. They became his sole pleasure in life, a powerful force that he insisted, demanded all of his time and attention.

Warrior found himself torn between two worlds -- his home environment and a new school where he had the opportunity to focus and excel without negative influences. When he began attending Mount Pleasant High School, which was outside his district, he believed it was a chance for a fresh start. He would spend each school day engaged in positive activities (i.e., athletics) and forming healthy peer relationships, but when he returned home to "the actual neighborhood" he would meet up with his old friends.

"I went to Mount Pleasant to play football with my older brother because he wanted me to really follow in his footsteps. So I went to play for them, but like I wasn't zoned for Mount Pleasant school system. I was supposed to be going to McGavock High School."

Warrior had a decision to make, and it would prove to be a defining moment in his academic journey. Eventually, his friends from the neighborhood convinced him to return to McGavock High School, a move his father opposed, even after Warrior promised to finish out the year in Mount Pleasant.

But Warrior persisted, telling his dad that “I don’t really hang out with nobody from Mount Pleasant” and that school is “too far for me to travel.” Eventually, his father gave in and allowed Warrior to transfer. Once back at McGavock, things began to fall apart. He soon “got mixed up with old peers, started making bad decisions, and didn’t really care about school anymore.” He also lost interest in returning to the football field where he and his stepbrother excelled.

Clearly, the participants’ peer relationships significantly impacted their journey; some of these relationships led to gang membership and violence, which only served to intensify their delinquent behavior. Some, like Power, gravitated toward negative peers with the goal of making money, but soon found himself battling addiction, while others used peer relationships to mask their own deviant, negative and out-of-control behaviors. The pull of old friends caused one participant to abandon his athletic and academic goals and eventually engage in the activities that led to his incarceration.

Educational Disconnect

Educational disconnect, as it relates to participants’ experiences, was defined as an abrupt or ongoing circumstance or influence that interfered with the school process. Although their experiences were varied, school failure was a consistent theme throughout the participants’ stories. For some, the cause of this educational disconnect was internal to the school environment, meaning it occurred within the academic setting; for others, external disruptions (i.e., issues at home) profoundly impacted the participants’ ability to attend school and focus on their studies. Still others described a complex series of events and occurrences that hindered their education and made regular school attendance exceedingly difficult.

Participants spoke about suspensions, expulsion, truancy, retention, academic failure, school violence, poverty, and parental neglect; some admitted to feelings of inferiority due to their current academic abilities. For nearly all of them, school was last on their list of priorities.

Alpha recalled that it was difficult enough to wake up on time, let alone sit through class for an entire day. The structure and academic demands of school were not enough to hold his interest, and most days he would leave and head to the streets to sell drugs. Soon, he was skipping school altogether.

Alpha explained that education was not a priority for him early on and he often found himself hungry, broke, depressed, oppressed, and in a state of utter despair. He was forced to wake up almost every day and provide for himself and siblings due to the negligence of an adult, and his role and reality changed. His basic survival instincts “kicked in” and he was forced to adapt and adjust to what he viewed as realistic in his world, even if it went against the norms of those around him and society at large.

The adult involvement and guidance so critical during this period appeared to be nonexistent. For a long time his mother was unaware of his truancy, and when she discovered it she downplayed its significance, telling him to “get back on track and do better.” She even assisted him in hiding his truancy from his grandmother. His mother’s attitude minimized the value of an education and reinforced the idea that school was simply a state-imposed routine that one endured.

That dysfunction would catch up with Alpha when he was in junior high school. He recalls being in the 8th or 9th grade when he realized the significant gap between his academic abilities and those of his peers. This realization resulted in embarrassment and loss of confidence, and being the class clown did little to diffuse his discomfort. Given the little value he got from school, and the pain it caused him, was one reason he completely gave up. It left a gap in his life that was quickly filled with adjudication, incarceration, and placement in a juvenile detention.

Exceed discussed how things began to change for him in the seventh grade, when he really “didn’t too much care about school anymore.” He did not have a clear reason as to why this happened; he simply stated “it was me.” He didn’t believe any outside factors were to blame for his poor attitude and lack of motivation. While his parents recognized the change and attempted to intervene, he insisted that they were powerless in their efforts because he would often ignore any kind of advice, reprimands, or guidance. His parents weren’t happy about his

decision but according to him “they couldn’t make me.” He went on to explain that riding the “city bus” made it easy to fool his parents. “Just because the bus came and I got on it didn’t mean I made it to school.” Even though Exceed’s parents were concerned and supportive he used manipulation and secretiveness to engage in his delinquent behavior.

In January of his seventh grade year, his out-of-control and rebellious behavior led to his expulsion from school. Exceed was sent to an alternative school but refused to attend and instead spent his days at home or on the streets. Exceed stated that he did not have a good rapport with his seventh grade math teacher, Ms. Halfaway, but didn’t go into detail as to why. He didn’t know “what our conflict was but I didn’t really like her, though.”

He did recognize, however, that he learned differently than his peers. Often times, when the teacher presented a concept on the board he “won’t get it,” despite having tried for thirty minutes or more. His response would always be to “find another way” to understand or acquire the knowledge.

Like Exceed, Exalted also tricked his grandparents into thinking he was going to school. He would wake up in the morning and pretend to “go to the bus then I walk down to my homeboy’s house.” He wasn’t sure, but he believed his grandmother might have found out about his truancy.

Exalted has skipped school a number of times, which has caused him to graduate a year behind his class. He began skipping on a regular basis during his 8th grade year.

When at school, Exalted exhibited serious behavioral issues and frequent confrontations with teachers and other school officials.

Overcame “didn’t like school at all in the early years: and even failed the first grade. There was nothing he liked about the school process and hated attending class the most, saying, “School was boring.” He often managed to cause some type of trouble during the school day, and refused to participate in classroom work. He remembers being suspended several times, beginning in the first grade, for his disruptive and inappropriate behaviors.

As a result of his issues and failure during school, Overcame went to live with his grandparents, who would play a major role in his early education. His grandfather enrolled him in a different school, where he failed the 1st grade for a second time; however, the school decided to let him advance to the next grade.

If you walked into a classroom, “you would just see me sitting there throwing pencils at people, just chilling. Cussing out the teacher and throwing pencils at the teacher and stuff.” This disruptive behavior continued each year, and by the time he reached ninth grade at Brunet School, he was skipping classes altogether and just going to the lunch period. Overcame believed that nothing or no one could motivate him during this time, not even his grandparents. Overcame began engaging in more violent crimes when he was in the 6th grade and his crime of choice was robbery.

Faith’s problems began in earnest during his tenth grade year, when he was expelled from school for various infractions and sent to an alternative school. While Faith did not view this as “a big deal” and stated that “everything was good,” the thought of attending an alternative school every day didn’t “sit well” with him and made him “not want to go to school anymore.” He was eventually expelled for possession of drug paraphernalia, possession of a controlled substance (marijuana) in a school zone, and possession with intent to distribute.

Faith did eventually move to Tennessee to be with his mother and brother. This could have been a fresh start, but the motivation and discipline wasn’t there and he began “skipping school a little too much early in the year.” Eventually, arriving at school in the middle of the day became the norm and some days he “didn’t go at all.”

The root of Power’s educational disconnect seemed to stem from his poor academic skills and repeated school infractions. Power believes that teachers saw him as a failure, “another dumb black male” who would “probably end up a statistic.” He noted that teachers treated him differently than other students, due his poor academic skills and lack of motivation. “I really don’t even care how they see me,” he said angrily, “I’m going to be me at the end of the day.”

Power truly believed that he was a menace to the school system, a kid who burdened principals and teachers with his overwhelming number of deficiencies, issues, and challenges. Some of his most humiliating experiences at school occurred when he was asked to read aloud, and during our interviews he recalled one particular incident when he refused to do so.

When he refused, his peers and even some of the teachers would taunt him, saying, “You don’t know how to read.” He remembers that even when he attempted to read, “the students, they’d start laughing at me.” By the time he entered high school, he had started warning teachers of his inability to read at the beginning of a class or school year or he “would find some way to get out of it.”

Suspensions were common throughout Power’s academic journey and varied from two to five days, depending on the offense. He remembers in the fifth grade being suspended for having a gun-shaped lighter at school. Although the lighter had been passed to him by a friend, the school board placed the blame on Power, which he felt was unfair. His peers became more important than school and family, and by seventh grade he was attending school less and less frequently.

According to Redemption, truancy was never an issue for him; he just abruptly decided to quit for good. In the 9th grade he “started acting like I didn’t care.” He stopped going shortly afterward.

In fact, he wasn’t sure if he finished his 9th grade year at Pearl Cohn High School – he was locked up soon after leaving school. After leaving detention his mother made the decision to home school Redemption. This decision would do more harm than good to his current academic status as he lacked the support, discipline, and knowledge to be home schooled, and he refused to do it.

For Resilience, 9th grade was one of the worst of his school experience. He began “doing like crazy stuff” and getting into a lot of trouble. While he was initially reluctant to discuss his behavior, he eventually told me that during his junior year he skipped school a lot and was often in trouble. Much of his time was occupied by substance abuse, which soon became his sole purpose for skipping. During his final semester at Whites Creek High School he became

extremely unfocused and missed the opportunity to graduate with his class, which devastated him.

“I messed up my school,” he explained, “but somehow I found a way to graduate.” To do this, he attended school during the summer months and participated in a credit recovery program. After he shared this information I remembered our discussions about his sixth and seventh grade years and got the sense that his behavioral issues in school began long before high school and his 9th grade year.

Warrior initially insisted that he never had major behavioral issues at school; however, he did mention getting in trouble for truancy after missing five consecutive days then failing to provide school officials with the appropriate documentation. After a brief pause, he qualified this by stating that it was more than the one-week incident; in fact, he frequently skipped class. However, he followed this up by reiterating that he was a good student. According to him, it was the “family issues, family problems” occurring at the time that interfered with school. These family issues, he says, have since been worked out.

For Heal, the disruption in his education was caused by his mother’s illness. As mentioned earlier, he was forced to stay home and care for her after she was diagnosed with cancer and became very ill. Literally overnight, he had to become an adult and was exposed to the signs and symptoms of a disease he knew nothing about. Heal would soon become disconnected from the supportive teachers, friends, and resources that his school environment provided; this, coupled with his mother’s decision to choose him (rather than her other children) as her caretaker, his disconnect from school and truancy issues led to a change in his attitude about school and the value of a good education.

Change missed school due to a family issue. According to school policy, if a child was dismissed or suspended from school, and a parent was unavailable, supervision of that child fell to an older sibling, even if it meant the older sibling missed school. When Change’s mother had to work, an older sibling had to miss school to watch him, just as he would have to watch his

younger brother when he was suspended. Even when he wasn't permitted on school grounds, Change had to go and get his brother. It was evident during our conversation that his mother's work obligations superseded those of parenthood.

Although Victory attended school consistently, at some point he started only going for half a day and then leaving. He was also referred to and attended the Canton County Alternative School. He enjoyed being involved in football during middle school, but when he reached high school his behavioral issues and instability interfered with his participation and school attendance.

Academic achievement seemed difficult for many of the participants who became disconnected from school process. Instability in their home life, including issues with hunger and poverty, had a profound impact on school attendance and participation. For some lack of adequate adult supervision in the home led to truancy, while others experienced severe parental neglect and/or stayed home to care for a parent with health issues and younger siblings with behavioral issues. Still others endured poor treatment from teachers that caused conflicts in the classroom and eventually led to suspensions and expulsion. A few participants were detained by police for violent and aggressive towards teacher and school officials.

Personal Demons

Participants discussed some of their personal demons as well. For some, these were some dark moments in their lives, for example, exposure to a traumatic experience, instability, and unhealthy habits. For others, personal demons came in the form of mental and personal health issues, substance abuse, criminal proceedings, suicide, homelessness, and moments of hopelessness and regret. Other participants experienced multiple out-of-home placements, nightmares, trauma, incarceration, tragedy, and the loss of love ones. While some of these youth

have been able heal, cope, and move past these dark moments, others continue to battle their demons, often on a daily basis.

Change, for example, is haunted by legal problems and the overall perception of himself as an individual. Currently he is facing charges of escape and violation of probation; however, in the past he has been charged with aggravated burglary, theft under \$500, violation of probation, attempted aggravated burglary, two counts of aggravated burglary, and tobacco possession. He believes that the propensity to do wrong is inherent in his personality and compounded by the way he was raised. Given this negative attitude, it is not surprising that he feels delinquent behavior will always be part of his life. “I mean, I think I can control it, but I think it’s still going to be with me. Like when I first got here, cussing the teachers out, wasn’t doing no work, none of that. I was acting a fool.” Change was an active participant in a high profile disturbance and escape that occurred at the facility in September 2014. He recalls the night of the escape and how he was torn between staying on the grounds and running away.

“I really didn’t want to run,” he said, “and someone told me to stay back, but I always go with my first instinct.” This rationalization seemed to be a consistent theme in Change’s decision-making process, and it eventually led him to adjudication. He remained on the run for three days, surviving off \$100 dollars and some weed. When asked as to how he had obtained the money and the drugs, he refused to say. He wouldn’t even reveal whether he had gotten them in or outside the facility.

While incarcerated, Change proved to be one of the most challenging youths for facility staff and teachers. His rebellious, disrespectful, and defiant behavior hindered his treatment and rehabilitation. Change spoke about the impact of being diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder at age ten, and admitted that staying focused has always been one of his greatest challenges. As the slightest sound can disturb his concentration, he believes he works best in very small academic settings or, better yet, one-on-one. He remembers being “by myself” in MIP (behavior disorder classes) for his “whole middle school year,” which helped him a great

deal. Change has been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder, Anxiety Disorder, Polysubstance Dependence, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which according to him remains an issue to this day.

Determine seemed to lose hope at age fifteen, and discussed how he unsuccessfully attempted to take his life by hanging himself in the bathroom.

He stated that in his mind he really couldn't understand why he was still living. While he had initially considered hurting someone else, he had ultimately decided it was better to harm himself. He has been diagnosed with PTSD but remains unsure of its origin and refuses to take meds for it. He did, however, take Prozac for a time to help him deal with his anger.

Determined discussed his ongoing battle with substance abuse and criminal behaviors. While he originally stated that his substance abuse started after freshman year; however, it was later discovered that he had started indulging in drugs before high school. Determined had been using marijuana since the age of ten, and for several years he has been smoking an average of six or seven blunts a day. As he also sold the drug, procuring it was never a problem. He mentioned that by age twelve he was drinking alcohol nearly every day. While he usually drank a forty-ounce of beer, he actually preferred hard liquor.

Determined was locked up for the first time while a freshman in high school, when he was caught stealing cars. This behavior continued after his release and led to other offenses, including aggravated assault, armed robbery, intent to sell, burglary, and theft of property worth over one thousand dollars. He noted that much of his criminal behavior was tied to substance abuse and addition.

Drug use and intoxication played a major role in his judgment, resulting in poor anger management, criminal, and violent behaviors.

Exalted shared his most recent mistake, which occurred while he was already incarcerated. Exalted was in the Williamson County Juvenile Detention facility for simple assault and unruly behavior when he and another teen overpowered two guards and locked them

in a cell before fleeing on foot. When he was apprehended, Exalted was charged with two counts of criminal responsibility for facilitation of kidnapping, escape, runaway, violation of aftercare, and truancy.

A statement from the Sergeant at the detention center followed the escape, "The fact that they're willing to overpower two workers inside, lock them into a cell and then escape; knowing the seriousness of that situation and not caring? That makes them incredibly dangerous to the community at large." He and his accomplice were eventually detained and placed in a more secure facility operated by the state.

In 2013 Exalted was placed at Wayne's Halfway House for about nine months, where he received alcohol and drug treatment, as well as counseling services. He initially denied having any gang affiliation, but said that some of his friends did. Eventually, though, Exalted attempted to educate and offer what he felt was positive insight about his affiliation with "GD," which he referred to an *organization* rather than a gang. He went on to add that GD no longer stood for "Gangster Disciples," but "Growth and Development."

Faith discussed his long history of substance abuse that started in New Jersey. Before moving to Tennessee he was charged with possession of drug paraphernalia; possession of a controlled substance (marijuana) in a school zone; possession of a controlled substance; and possession with intent to distribute. His record revealed charges of criminal conspiracy and mischief while in New Jersey. While he denies any gang affiliation, he admits he does know and associate with several gang members. Faith also discussed what led to his initial involvement in drug distribution. And his demeanor immediately changed as he shared his reasoning.

Pulling himself straighter in his chair, he told me that it began with an older gentleman who had spoken unkindly about his mother. Faith felt that this was the ultimate disrespect to him and something you just don't do. As "payback" for these disrespectful comments, Faith slashed the man's tires. As Faith stated, "he talked about my mom, and he got his consequences." He was caught committing the offense and eventually ordered to pay restitution and fines for the crime.

Not wanting to place the entire financial burden on his grandparents, he started selling drugs as a quick way to generate money. After all, “they didn’t ask me where the money came from, and I wasn’t going to give them the answer if they did.” During his recollection of the event I got the sense that he still felt completely justified in committing the offense.

Faith continued his illegal activities after moving to Nashville, and by the time he was incarcerated in October of 2014 he had racked up charges of aggravated burglary times three, theft under \$500, and a domestic assault stemming “from an incident when my mama asked me to complete a chore.” Other charges included simple assault, domestic assault, possession of tobacco, and possession of marijuana.

Faith admits that anger, authority conflict, and defiance were at the root of his issues. He spoke briefly about being diagnosed with bipolar disorder and taking the drug Tripletal to manage the condition. He believes that for the most part the medicine has helped him remain calm and stable. As a child he had been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, but didn’t believe it was severe enough to warrant medication.

Power mentioned his addiction and personal demons that lead to criminal behavior and eventually incarceration. His friends did educate him on how to make money on the streets; they also taught him that school did serve a purpose: it was the ideal place to find stable clientele. Unfortunately, these friends used drugs, and Power soon found himself surrounded by people who, according to him, “did nothing but smoke weed.” Eventually, he began using and drugs took over his life. They became his sole pleasure in life, a powerful force that demanded all of his time and attention.

According to Power, his drug use came before family, school, food, and, at times, even his hygiene. He would soon have a criminal history that included legal charges of carrying an imitation firearm (the “gun lighter”), aggravated burglary, burglary of a building, theft of property over \$500, and theft of property. Previous legal charges included theft of property over \$10,000, aggravated burglary, evading arrest, and violation of probation.

One of the most interesting aspects of our conversations was Power's recollection of his dreams. His nightmares were deeply disturbing and he often woke up drenched in sweat. Some of them sprang from deep regret about his illegal activities; however, others were wild and horrific imaginings that he seemed unable to distinguish from reality. I recall one story he told me about a tragic accident involving his mother and how it caused him a lot sleepless nights and worry. However, upon closer examination I realized that this accident had occurred only in his dreams.

His dreams seemed to hold him hostage, to the extent that he underwent treatment for them. Even after entering a sleep study and receiving medication, the nightmares persisted. "I don't know why I be having dreams," Powers told me, "just be having them all the time. I be having flashbacks—like, it's because I done wrong, and what happened to me. I had still like dreamed my mom was in a car wreck. They would monitor my sleep and the nightmares would come. I would wake suddenly sweating and the doctors try to see what's wrong."

Power was unable to connect his dreams with some of the traumatic experiences that occurred in his past.

Alpha's demons emerged from a lack of innocence that deeply affected his educational life. He believed that ignorance of certain "adult" topics at an early age, particularly sexuality, fostered unhealthy development and caused distractions for him, especially in school. Early or inappropriate exposure to sexual content on T V, home, and in adult relationships were harmful, and caused a desire for him to engage in early sexual experimentation and portray sex as casual, unprotected and consequence free.

This is something that he thought was normal. When speaking about his earliest school experiences, Alpha indicated that his priority was not academics, but rather, "Girls, girls was really the main focus for me, chasing girls." Early exposure to unhealthy relationships and rejection, coupled with the absence of a father figure, led to an infatuation with females and a need to engage in sexually promiscuous behaviors.

Alpha's early exposure to sexual content through media and in the home may have fostered unrealistic sexual values and a preoccupation with sex and sexuality.

Redemption explained that much of his criminal history-- a combination of drug distribution, use, and addiction -- began at age 13. When asked what activities he enjoyed, he said that he liked “smoking weed and selling crack,” which may indicate his intentions upon release.

His current legal charges consist of handgun possession; however, he has previously been charged with possession with intent of a controlled substance (cocaine); aggravated burglary; handgun possession; drugs in school zone-controlled substance (cocaine); violating curfew; evading arrest; reckless driving without a license; simple possession; possession with intent; and handgun possession. He stated that he sells drugs, and he carries a gun for his protection. He denied any gang affiliation, and he does not associate with known gang members.

Redemption has experienced a couple of out-of-home placements. In 2012 he was in Hope House, a group home for troubled youth; however, he escaped from the facility. He was placed at Covington Trace in 2012, where he remained for a year. Upon discharge, he said he was noncompliant with the program. He was involved in alcohol and drug treatment, and said that he did not appropriately participate for the first three months but eventually settled into the program.

Strong has endured a violent past and the sudden passing of his mother, which continues to haunt him to this day. His most recent legal charge, for which he was incarcerated, was aggravated robbery; however, in the past he was charged with disorderly conduct, handgun possession, being unruly and out of control, domestic assault, assault, and three separate incidents of violation of probation.

According to Strong, the domestic assault charge came when he and his sister had started arguing and at some point he put his hands on her. Although she had called the police, Strong insisted that she wasn’t hurt during the incident; in fact, he seemed to minimize the incident as a run of the mill conflict between siblings.

The same violent behavior came when he engaged in a confrontation with a teacher who he alleged “slammed my finger into the door.” He insisted that the confrontation “was more of a

verbal assault,” but it was violent enough for school officials and law enforcement to recommend placement in a detention center. Strong continues to be haunted by the death of his mother and if he could go back in time and be granted one wish, it would be to change the circumstances of his mother’s passing and being her back. He went on to say that he had never really talked about the issue at school; he said it was something he had trouble verbalizing so he just “kept it in.” Even when he and his siblings finally attended therapy sessions he still wouldn’t talk about their mother’s death in front of strangers. He said he allowed his sisters “to be my therapist” and that’s “how I got through it.” The death of Strong’s mother was intensified by deep rejection and abandonment of his aunts. In his brief life he had been passed around several times by aunts who no longer had a capability to care for him. He continues to be angered by the actions of adults in his life.

Strong didn’t feel that the individuals charged with his care helped him deal with his pain in any real way. He eventually did receive professional counseling, but it was apparent that he still has a lot of deep wounds from losing his mom.

Strong has dealt with trauma and other ongoing challenges as result of unwelcomed circumstances in his childhood, including the death of his mother. He has now learned to better cope with these issues with therapeutic interventions.

Two devastating events during his childhood had an enormous impact on Survivor, particularly around education. Although he was only in third or fourth grade at the time, Survivor clearly remembers receiving the news of his eldest sister’s death. While she wasn’t the sister who raised him, they had lived for a time in the same house before she moved out and started a family of her own. Her death was a huge blow to the family, especially when they learned of the circumstances surrounding it.

“She was at a party with friends,” Survivor recalls, “at a cookout pretty much, and they gave her some pills and said it would relax her and they would have a good time.”

According to Survivor she had never used drugs before and the pills sent her body into cardiac arrest. They were still reeling from her loss when a few months later his mother was involved in a serious car accident while driving on the highway. After the initial collision, she got out of the car and was hit by another vehicle and “sent flying.”

Fortunately she survived, but she was bedridden for almost two weeks. Not surprisingly, these horrifying events had a significant impact on Survivor and undoubtedly shifted his focus away from school and normal childhood activities.

Victory’s contributes his long criminal history to the absences of adult figures in his life and a lack of supervision. He has been charged with numerous crimes, the most current of which include theft of property worth under \$500; theft of property worth over \$500; possession of drug paraphernalia; domestic assault; possession of marijuana; possession of Schedule II drugs (a class of narcotics that includes cocaine, methadone, and pure hydrocodone); therapeutic home visit revocation on March 4, 2015 and running away from a group home placement. In the past he has been charged with possession of a stolen vehicle; theft of property/shoplifting; running away from a group home placement; violation of probation; possession of drug paraphernalia; resisting arrest; disorderly conduct; burglary; possession of marijuana; and driving without a valid driver’s license. While on probation, he was also caught with salvia divinorum, a naturally occurring drug used to induce hallucinations. Victory discussed his struggles with substance abuse, including the use of cocaine and prescription meds – and alcohol since age twelve. In fact, chemical dependency, along with mental health issues, has been one of the most difficult battles he has faced. Victory spent time in a number of foster homes, treatment facilities, alcohol and drug treatment programs, and youth development programs before returning to the juvenile correctional facility for a second incarceration.

Over the years he has been involved in various forms of psychological/psychiatric intervention. In 2012, he was referred to TASK, a group home that focuses on addition and recovery. He remained in treatment for four or five months but was terminated due to

his behavior. He was then placed in a Youth Development Program and remained there for about a year. In 2014, Victory was placed at the Memphis Recovery Center and discharged when he completed the program the following year. Victory has also struggled with depression and ADHD. While in the TASK program, he was prescribed Wellbutrin, Trazodone, and Seroquel, which are used to treat anxiety and depression, as well as Vyvanse to help with concentration.

Victory has lived with ongoing adversity in his home life, while dealing with his substance abuse and placement in multiple treatment facilities. His addition and ongoing conflicts with his father have led to a history of criminal behavior and incarceration.

Warrior spoke about his criminal history, substance abuse, and parental abandonment issues. He spoke about the guilt he felt about leaving a high school where he was given the opportunity to excel. His criminal charges include three counts of aggravated assault, and four counts of aggravated burglary. Earlier he was charged with three counts of violation of probation; driving without a license; joyriding; aggravated burglary; possession of a controlled substance; and vandalism over \$500. He has pending charges of leaving the scene of an accident. His drug of choice is marijuana, with which he began experimenting around the age of 13 and was regularly using by age 14. His probation officer referred him to Centerstone for counseling; however, he quit after only four sessions, stating that he didn't feel like it was doing him any good.

Warrior believed that his poor decision-making directly resulted in his lack of progress during high school. His decision to leave a high school where he excelled academically and athletically haunts him to this day. He also believes that his relationship with his stepbrother would not be strained if he had remained at Mt. Pleasant High School. As Warrior spoke about the many schools he attended during his childhood, I got the sense that he found the frequent upheaval both overwhelming and perplexing.

Much of Warrior's anger also stemmed from his mother's long-term problems with substance abuse and the drug-related activities that eventually led to her incarceration. He hopes to reconnect with her when he is released from prison.

Participants battled personal demons in the form of anger, criminal behaviors, substance abuse, parental neglect, and multiple out-of-home placements. Others mentioned health-related challenges and the ability to focus and perform in school. Relationships created a challenge for some who encountered frequent and ongoing conflicts with parents, teachers, and adult authority figures. A few found themselves in the grips of substance dependency. Many had frequent run-ins with law enforcement and were eventually convicted of felonies.

Early Outlook

For some of the participants, early educational experiences were a defining moment in their lives. This part of the discussion provided a glimpse into the starting point of their journeys and their early perceptions of school. Some participants spoke of excitement, hope, support, and scholastic achievement during the early years. For some, the ability to achieve academic success in their current situations proved difficult and took a lot of resilience just to get through. Some suffered defeat in their ability to maintain academic success while dealing with risk factors in their external and home life. Many were too young to assume responsibility for their early start and suffered due to poor decisions and actions made by adults.

Positive Start

Determined discussed his earliest educational experiences and how he “was actually interested in school” during that time. He excelled at football and baseball, a talent he seemed to get from his uncle, who had played football while growing up. Sports served as a motivating factor at school, as Determined knew that to play he had to keep his grades up. His mother played a major role in his academics during the early years and worked hard to provide for him and his nine-year-old brother. Determined attended school regularly from kindergarten to his freshman year of high school. He remembers being comfortable asking for help from his teachers

and he appreciated their concerns and supports. Although his attitude and motivation regarding school changed as he transitioned into adolescence.

As far back as he could remember, Exceed enjoyed a stable childhood. He remembers having very positive school experiences, saying that school was “fun and easy,” especially kindergarten, although he didn’t recall much beyond learning his “ABCs” and other fundamentals. Family and “certain teachers” played a major role early on and he received equal support from both his mother and father.

While he attended school regularly and rarely missed days or received suspensions, he admitted that he always had major issues around respecting authority figures, especially when he entered the fourth grade. Aside from a drug awareness program in which he participated during middle school, he didn’t involve himself in extracurricular activities.

Faith’s story began in New Jersey, where it appears he and his older brother enjoyed a fairly stable childhood. His mother and grandparents offered continuous support throughout Faith’s early education and he remembers his elementary school experience as a positive one. When Faith was between two and three years old his mother married his stepfather, who helped raise him. Faith’s life changed in eighth grade, when he moved in with his grandparents; it seems his motivation and focused regarding school began to decline at that point.

Early on, Resilience was a “regular kid” who enjoyed school and learning and got “in a bit of trouble” but was never kicked out or suspended. He enjoyed basketball, art and drawing, and being around friends and family. In the elementary grades he was involved in “this thing called ECM” and Boy Scouts, and in middle school he played Little League. Things changed for Resilience during the sixth and seventh grades. He stopped attending school on a regular basis, and when he did go he said it was only for sports and girls.

Survivor explained that earliest school experiences were very positive. In elementary school he had fun learning new things and engaging with teachers, which gave him a healthy

self-esteem and “made him feel smart.” He did admit to getting in some fights during this time but it “wasn’t like every day, it was more like once or twice a month.”

His mother was very supportive, and instilled in Survivor the importance of education and how it would open doors to college and a career. His father, on the other hand, was not a big part of his life; Survivor remembers seeing him for just two days when he was young, then he “disappeared for like three or four years.” The two have not spoken since Survivor was twelve years old.

Redemption looked back favorably upon his earliest educational experiences. Although his mother appeared to be his only stable support, he was able to excel until his 9th grade year.

These participants were given continued support from significant adults early in their lives. Family members, teachers and coaches provided support and help lay a positive foundation for their future learning success. For some, school was a fun place and the learning process was easy. Another participant understood the importance of maintaining exceptional grades in order to participate in sports. For others, school became a safe place where they could thrive academically and reach their full potential.

Difficult Start

Some participants were met with adversity at the start of their educational journey. For some, poverty, neglect, and a lack of parental/ family support created challenges. Others dealt with academic failure, conflicts with teachers, and behavioral issues during school. A few of them were met with family health issues and took on the responsibility of caregiver. These circumstances created a challenge and set them on a path to absenteeism, truancy, academic failure, multiple out-of-home placements, and, eventually, incarceration.

Alpha’s experiences encompassed a multitude of factors and circumstances that were shaped by his home environment. Much of his focus was on surviving neglect, poverty, and

issues in his home life. His educational experiences were disrupted by other responsibilities to which he felt obligated. Education was not a priority for Alpha early on and he often found himself hungry, broke, depressed, oppressed, and in a state of utter despair. These had a profound impact on his ability to adjust to expectations in school.

From Change's earliest days at Kirkpatrick Elementary, his school experiences were negative. As he stated, "I really didn't even like school back then." He remembers making "straight Fs" during the first grade, adding that "ever since then my grades have been bad as hell." His poor academic performance persisted "through every grade" and there was a strong indication that Change spent much more time at home and in the streets than he did in school.

He was suspended a number of times, beginning in kindergarten and continuing throughout middle school. In fact, he was kicked out so often – once for an entire semester - that he never even made it to either the third or fourth grade (he was unsure which). As suspensions are rare for students in the early grades, I inquired about the circumstances. Change held his head down and said, "I did any and every negative thing you could name." He clearly believed he was a "bad" student who was incapable of learning and performing in an academic setting.

Overcame "didn't like school at all in the early years" and failed the first grade. He consistently caused some type of trouble during the school day and refused to participate in classroom work. He remembers being suspended, even in the first grade, for his disruptive and inappropriate behaviors. He didn't participate in any extracurricular activities during school. As a result of his issues and failure during school, Overcame went to live with his grandparents, who played a major role in his early education. His grandfather enrolled him a different school where he actually failed the first grade for a second time but, the school decided to pass him on. His grandfather would suffer a stroke shortly after he moved in so a decision was made that Overcame would stay and assist his grandparents. He would remain with them until 6th grade, although he insisted that his mom remain in the picture. He remembers visiting her on some

weekends and holidays. His dad has been a part of his life, however, Overcome didn't elaborate as to the extent of his involvement.

His mother played an instrumental part in his earliest educational experiences, yet Strong remembers how difficult it was to focus on academics when he first went to school, and how easy it was to get into trouble because "trouble was right there." He did attend school on a regular basis "most of the time," which is to say that he did miss some days but it never became a pattern. While Strong believes his mother was very involved and supportive of him during the early years, her parental rights were later challenged by the courts.

Victory's perceived his earliest academic experiences to be "fairly easy." He remembers being bored "with the work and stuff" and finishing ahead of time, which often caused him to get into a "whole bunch" of trouble in elementary school. Although he did attend school consistently, at some point he started only going for half-days and then leaving. While he excelled academically during the early years he lacked the support of a father who was uninvolved and a mother who abandoned the family. Victory for the most part received very little supervision and support from his family. Being involved in football during middle school helped some, but it wouldn't be enough to curtail his behavioral issues and instability at home interfered with his participation.

Warrior's early educational experiences were marked by negative peer influence, parental instability and transience. During the elementary and middle grades he attended so many schools that he couldn't name them all. "I went to a different school almost every year," he recalls. His educational opportunities were compromised by an unstable family structure and parents who "were not positive role models." When he was in the fourth grade, Warrior's parents divorced and he went to live with his father. Even with his father's substance abuse Warrior saw him as a

role model and enjoyed their relationship more so before he got married again. While his stepbrother was a positive influence and support for him during the middle grades it would not be enough to keep Warrior on track academically, and he was pulled back into his old environment and negative peer friendships.

Heal's earliest educational experiences appeared to be good until his mother pulled him out of school due to her an illness. His teachers were supportive and he held a great deal of academic promise. Factors related to his mother's cancer diagnosis, homelessness, and poverty created a challenge for him and eventually disrupted his good school standing.

Exalted spent a great deal of his earliest educational experiences angry, uncooperative, and creating chaos in the classroom. As mentioned earlier, his violent outburst toward teachers earned him a number of "in-school suspensions". More troubling was a school suspension for throwing a chair toward his kindergarten teacher. His stubbornness and conflicts appeared to follow him through all grades.

Power's early childhood experiences were marked by disruptive behavior, school suspensions, negative role models, and parental neglect and abuse. He discussed how suspensions were common throughout his academic journey and varied from two to five days, depending on the offense. In the fifth grade being suspended for having a gun-shaped lighter at school.

Some participants had a difficult start in school that left them at a disadvantage for achieving academic success. For some, external factors such as poverty, parental neglect, and societal ailments interfered with their ability to focus on school. For others, mental health issues, learning disabilities, and behaviors created challenges in school. A few participants found it

difficult to concentrate on learning while dealing with sudden and tragic losses, while others were pulled out of school to care for an adult and and/or younger siblings.

Future Outlook

Participants were asked about their plans moving forward. Some discussed long-term goals and others spoke about small milestones they hope to achieve. Some took an opportunity to reflect on the small gains they had made regarding their behavior, attitude, and criminal actions. Others mentioned what they would do differently if given the opportunity to go back. For many of them, obtaining some kind of secondary certificate is in and of itself a major goal. Some had an enormous amount of regret of the time it took them to embrace the rehabilitative process and comply with rules and boundaries. Most recognize this as a pivotal time in their lives, as they will soon be transitioning into adulthood and will be sent to adult prisons if they continue their criminal activities (as opposed to the juvenile facilities they have been in to date). Many participants spoke about specific career goals and where they saw themselves several years from now. Others seemed anxious, afraid, and uncertain about their future after they returned to their communities.

Now 18, Alpha struggles with fear, regret and uncertainty as he prepares to transition back into society. The thing he regrets most is his lack of focus while in school, and while he understands that his environment was the root cause of this lack of focus, he claims he could have paid more attention to his academics had he known the negative impact it would have later on.

While most of his peers are receiving their high school diploma, Alpha knows it will take him longer to reach this milestone. Much of his time at the detention facility was spent causing disruption, displaying aggressive behavior, and engaging in conflicts with students and staff. Once again, education and opportunity were not the priority. Even the

stability he once had with his granny has diminished, due to the passage of time and her advancing age and health issues.

Alpha discussed his long-term goals, which include pursuing a career in mechanics. When he was growing up his uncles were always working on cars and he learned that many people earn a good living working with their hands. They taught him a lot about their trade and he believes he has already gained some valuable skills. He is also interested in a career in the recording industry. Yet while he had a clear understanding of the goals he wished to achieve, the process of how to achieve those goals seemed to cause a lot of frustration. He was reluctant to reflect on where he would be five or ten years from now and responded, "I really don't know, I really don't know." Normalcy and stability seemed to be things he didn't feel he deserved; in fact, he might not have believed they truly exist at all.

Change is 18 years old and plans to finish earning his high school diploma at the Adult Learning Center. He chose this school in part because it offers a one-on-one learning environment. Although he will eventually return to the same crime-ridden neighborhood he grew up in, he remains hopeful that his mom, who has been approved for Section 8 assistance, will be able to relocate soon. Section 8, which falls under the Housing Act of 1937 (42 U.S.C. § 1437f), is a program created by the federal government to provide housing for eligible United States citizens living in poverty, elderly, or disabled. If he could go back and change something, Change said it would be his environment and his behavior. His long-term goals include finding a job and perhaps even going to college, although given his dislike of school he is unsure about that. He is interested in exploring a career in technology and would like to one day get married and start a family.

Change explained how he has recently made some self-improvements that have allowed him to be calmer and more focused. He believes teachers saw him as a kid who refused to help

himself. However, he believes his detainment in the facility has made a positive impact on him. He now realizes that progress comes with maturity, and not everyone is out to do him harm. In fact, after reflecting upon his current circumstances, he came to understand that there are people willing to help him. Change shared in his interview that he has matured a great deal and he is making progress with regard to his behavior.

Determined is currently working toward earning his HiSET and eventually transitioning out of the facility. He has a six-week-old daughter he would like to help provide for and plans on attending college to pursue physical therapy. If he could go back he would “have stayed in school” and not continued “doing all that stuff I was doing.” He realizes now that being locked up isn’t “all that it seems.” He believes that teachers were truly there to support him and his “just being stubborn” is what hindered his academic success.

When I asked what, if anything, he would go back and change, Exceed stated that he would restart the seventh grade. His future goals include attending a State University and eventually becoming an entrepreneur. MTSU appeals to him, he says, because of its location. It will get him out of the Nashville community he was raised in, which is very important to him; on the other hand, he will not be too far away “if something happens at home” with his parents. “I just need a change,” he added. Exceed strongly believes that if he stays around the same people he grew up with he will continue engaging in the types of behavior that got him in trouble. He is aware of the challenges that lie ahead but needs those challenges to remain focused and busy.

Over the course of our discussions, I began to share with Exceed my experiences at MTSU. I assured him that with discipline, perseverance, and focus he would be able to achieve his goal. While Exceed is not on track to graduate with a regular high school diploma, he recognizes and appreciates the opportunity to graduate on time with a HiSET. It was very important for him to acknowledge this accomplishment during our conversation. He ended his story with a statement about tenacity and hope. He reminded me that even though he “got kicked out” of school and was in no position to graduate on

time, he was still determined to bounce back. Being locked up gave him an opportunity to reflect on how to better himself and “make it worth my time.”

If Exalted could go back and change one thing about his life he insist that it would be “nothing, which.” He believes that everything happens for a reason and each experience provides an opportunity to make mistakes, learn, grow, and move on. His future goals are to receive his diploma and attend Nashville State to obtain “a certificate or associates degree in music technology” before going on to Middle Tennessee State University for his bachelor’s degree. Ultimately, he would like to become a music artist or work behind the scenes and eventually own a music studio one day. Exalted believes that he has grown academically and he is “smarter than I used to be.” He currently has a total of twenty 21.5 academic credits with .5 left to graduate. His most difficult subject has been math, science has been the easiest for him.

Faith understands that some of his decisions have had a negative impact on him academically, and he is grateful to have somehow acquired 18 credit towards graduation. Having 18 credits was significant because “he thought” he “had way less from not going to school” and was strongly considering a General Equivalency Diploma. He remembers being kicked out of school and feeling as if he “messed it all up” with regard to his education. Now he realized that despite barriers, mistakes and detention, there is always hope.

A judicial magistrate handed down a determinate (mandatory) sentence until his nineteenth birthday. This has motived him to work extra hard to finish up his credits so he can get his high school diploma as soon as possible. In the meantime, he would like to become “a work student” at the facility, as he believes this will “help me with my time” – in other words, it will make his incarceration go by more quickly. He is well aware that he is unable to return to the high school in his community due to his age and behavior. “They told me, they said, if they find me guilty, if they find me guilty on the charges, you can’t come back to Laverne at all.”

He has a long-term goal of owning a “franchise of mechanic’s shops--auto, diesel, auto mechanics, and diesel mechanics”. This goal was inspired in part by a neighbor who took Faith under his wing and taught him the trade. The mentoring began when Faith came out of the house

one day and saw the neighbor working on a car. The neighbor called Faith over and asked if he wanted to help put suspensions on the car to lower it. Faith's first thought was that, "This is your car. I don't want to mess your car up." Assuring him that it would be fine, the neighbor took him through the process and explained each step. That day, Faith's love for the trade was born. As he ended his story Faith assured me that he would leave the facility in style and bragged about the car he already owns. "You'll see it when I get released," he said. "Me and my mom already have this planned out. When I'm released, I told her, I said bring my car up. I was like, bring your car too. Everybody, we're going to leave out of here in style."

If Heal could go back in time, he would alter the mindset he had about school and "go back and catch up on my credits." He has about 14.5 credits, but admits that many of them were given to him by teachers even though he lacked the requisite knowledge to pass the classes. This has made it difficult for him to pursue a GED, which requires a basic knowledge of ninth and tenth grade content. Still, he remains optimistic that he has a chance to be successful and even to graduate on time. On the other hand, he has been heavily influenced by the uncertainty, missed opportunities, and unwelcome circumstances in his life and sometimes worries that he will not make "it because of a lot of the experiences and stuff that I had growing up." While incarcerated, Heal found himself not taking things seriously, which made it even more difficult to focus on an educational plan after transitioning out of the facility. However, if he had it to do over again he "would take everything seriously." As he transitions from adolescence to adulthood, Heal is fully aware of his failure to achieve some type of secondary certificate. He often found himself confused about which academic track to pursue because he knew his basic skills would create a challenge regardless of what he chose.

Overcame admits that he gets bored easily, but feels he needed more support and motivation from teachers. He appreciates the support Ms. Kane gave him while working to qualify for the GED. His most challenging subject was English, although he is unsure why. “Guess it’s just the subject.” After he is released from custody he plans on splitting his living arrangements between his mom and grandfather. “Because my mom wants me to come stay with her and my granddad wants me to come stay with him.” If he could go back he would change his work ethic and attitude regarding school. Overcame would like to attend a State University and receive training to become an electrician or a plumber; however, he realizes that he must obtain a GED before pursuing this endeavor and is currently attending to classes to qualify for the official test.

Although Power is not on target to graduate with his peers, he is for the first time looking at the future with a glimmer of hope. He would like to get his HiSET diploma while incarcerated or when he transitions back into the community. He has dreams of becoming a welder as one of his brothers is in the profession. Power and his therapist have found a very good welding school in Memphis that he hopes to attend. He believes that if he tries a little harder and engages himself in positive activities, he can succeed. If he could go back and do things differently, he wished he could return to the eighth or ninth grade and move on from there. He loves to work with Mr. Howard, a teacher’s assistant at the facility who is currently painting the classrooms. Power helps out with the project, which gives him an opportunity to release excess energy and work to accomplish a task he can be proud of. The painting project is used as an incentive and helps to maintain his behavior.

One of the best moments of his Redemption’s life was earning his HiSET diploma. He highly recommends a HiSET or GED for students who will not graduate on time due to a lack

credits. His goal is to attend college in Florida or trade school in Nashville, where he would like to pursue a career as a welder or motorcycle mechanic, with a long-term goal of starting his own business.

If he could go back and change one thing about his life, Resilience would return to his freshman year of high school and start from there. He now has a better understanding of the importance of education and “what it brings” to your life. Now that he has graduated he misses school and all of the things he was able to participate in and accomplish, even if the journey was a little rough. He acknowledges the fact that he did not have good grades in school and was just barely able to graduate. He believes that by starting off at Nashville State Community College he will be able to get his grades up and earn enough credits to prove he is able to master academic work at a higher level. He would like to play basketball for the school but is unsure of this goal; however, he would definitely like to pursue a career as a surgical technician. I spoke to Resilience a few hours before he was due to be released from the facility and into his father’s custody. He was excited to tell me of his plans immediately following his release –the first of which was to get a phone and the second was to take a bubble bath, something the rest of us often take for granted.

Strong currently has around 21 academic credits and is on track to graduate in 2015. When I asked him the one thing he would like to change about his life, he immediately stated it would be his mom’s passing. He went on to say that he had never really talked about the issue at school; he said it was something he had trouble verbalizing so he just “kept it in.” Even when he and his siblings finally attended therapy sessions he wouldn’t talk about his mother’s death in front of strangers. He said he allowed his sisters “to be my therapist” and that’s “how I got through it.”

Strong loves working with his hands and has a goal of becoming an automotive engineer. He has connections in the field and upon his release can immediately begin an internship. Education has helped him grow and move forward, and this has given him a great sense of achievement in his life. “It made me feel better about myself,” he says.

When asked about what he would change if he could go back, Survivor insisted that he has *already* changed. He is again focused on his studies and is currently exploring three different vocational careers: welder, underwater welder and electrician. After we discussed the demand for these skills and the earning potential, he narrowed the list to underwater welding. “They make \$125 starting off and I think that would be good for my kids and for my wife and for the job, and I’m not trying to live in Nashville anymore. I’m trying to move to, like, Panama City.” Although he considers Nashville home, he believes there are greater opportunities in Florida and that he and his family can have a fresh start there. Most importantly, Survivor feels he has greatly improved his attitude and outlook during his second detention. He has become more mature, focused, and to earned his GED.

If Victory could go back in time and do things differently, he stated simply that he would “change my behavior.” After he is released he plans on entering a residential living facility before finding his own place. Victory has stated that he was a victim of physical, emotional, and verbal abuse, but while he often reported the abuse he never identified the perpetrator. He insists that he will not go back home to live with his father under any circumstances. He has a goal of attending Universal Technical Institute for Diesel Mechanics. If that does not work out, his backup plan is to enter the Air Force to become a fighter jet mechanic.

If Warrior could go back and do some things differently, he would have “stayed on track, I would have just kept doing my work.” It seemed difficult for him to talk about his decision to

leave Mount Pleasant. “The more I think about it,” he said, “if I would have stayed there, I would probably be graduating in March.” He added, “I don’t know, I just... I gave up.” When I asked him at what point he felt he had given up, he said it was the ninth grade.

Warrior is now at a point in his life where he is ready to put the past behind him and move forward with his goals. He is currently “on the road” to pursue his GED/HiSET. He appeared to be excited about this new found opportunity, which he knew very little about before his incarceration. After he achieves his HiSET and is released into the community, he plans to work for his family’s HVAC business. He has given this some thought and believes it to be a potential career path for him. He has already acquired most of the skills needed for the trade “because my father’s been doing it for a long time” and he has assisted him on many occasions. Although “He wasn’t a positive role model in my life. Neither is my mom, but he was the main one that kept me growing up.” He has considered the possibility of going to college and continuing his education, but he’s “not sure yet.”

Warrior couldn’t say what he had needed from teachers as he was going through the academic process. However, I got the sense that his issues weren’t internal to the schools he attended. Instead, it was the environment outside school that created barriers to education. When I asked if he had gotten along with the teachers, he responded that for the most part he did. He mentioned Ms. Karen, a math teacher who is “really good, actually” and is currently helping him prepare for the math portion of the HiSET test. He went on to say that science is his favorite subject. At the end of our conversation, I asked Warrior if there was anything else he would like to share about his educational experiences.

At first he stated “not really,” but went on to say that things might have gone better “if I would have set goals for myself and just had positive friends.” He also believed that if “some of my family problems would have been resolved, I would have been able to keep my head and my shoulders up... I would be in a ‘good position right now.’” He then sat

up in his chair, pushed his shoulders back and said, “I’m getting my HiSET and I still got a future ahead of me, so...” This sudden change in his demeanor, coupled with his short statement, demonstrated his belief that even in the moments of adversity, there is always a brief ray of hope.

A few weeks later, Warrior passed his HiSET and earned a High School Equivalency Diploma.

Summary

This chapter presented an overview of the findings from interviews with 15 incarcerated male youth and captured their educational experiences, from their earliest memories forward. All of the participants discussed similar and unique experiences as they transitioned through their academic and personal journeys. Their educational and school experiences shaped by a complex series of events and changes in their home lives, schools, and communities. Some of the stories captured experiences that were positive and helped to enhance their current and future academic success, while others shared stories of adversity and the direct impact it had on their ability to fully participate in the school process. Some of their issues evolved from poor choices, peer influence, social, emotional and mental stressors. Five themes emerged across participants and during interviews: (1) relationships; (2) educational disconnects; (3) personal demons; (4) earliest educational outlook; and (5) future outlook, as it refers to short- and long-term goals.

Relationships were an integral part of the participants’ experiences and helped to shape their attitudes and perspectives regarding education. Complementary relationships were those positive connections that served to enhance the quality of their existence. These relationships were with caring adults, siblings, and peers who provided ongoing support and helped them learn important values as they navigated their academic journeys. However, other relationships appeared to be damaging to participants. These relationships exposed them to unhealthy environments, substance abuse, and criminal elements.

Aside from family dynamics, teachers played a particularly important role in participants' lives, both positive and negative. Some teachers developed a fundamental connection with participants during their school lives. These teachers were supportive, sensitive, engaging, and worked to develop, build, and sustain healthy relationships with these youth. They encouraged them academically and understood their unique and differentiated abilities in the classroom, and served them accordingly. For some, teachers provided a safe place when they felt anxious, stressed or overwhelmed during the school day. However, other participants engaged in ongoing conflicts with teachers. These conflicting relationships were often a result of behavioral issues and classroom disruption. A lack of social skills and issues with authority added to conflicts with teachers and school officials. Other participants struggled to overcome academic and achievement gaps that left them feeling isolated and inadequate, especially under the guidance of teachers who lacked patience in dealing with troubled youth.

Peer relationships were discussed among participants. While some peer relationships were positive and served to enhance social growth and development, others set them on a path to delinquency and conflicts with law enforcement. Participants acknowledged involvement in gangs, substance abuse, and criminal behaviors in their peer relationships. For other participants, peers provided a sense of stability, belonging, and protection that was nonexistent in their family structure.

Disruptions in the academic and school process that caused them to lose focus and disconnect from the learning environment. Many of them had behavioral issues, were often absent, and even stop attending altogether for periods of time, which led to disciplinary suspensions, expulsion and academic failure. Youth discussed socioeconomic barriers, poverty, homelessness, and parental neglect in their personal lives. Some dealt with tragic loss, mental

health issues, substance abuse, and the absence of a parent or sibling due to incarceration. A lack of social skills and respect for authority caused many to skip classes and leave school in the middle of the day or not attend at all. For others, school was used as a place to distribute drugs.

Personal demons were defined as dark moments in their lives that had a direct or indirect impact on their academic journey. Some participants experienced traumatic events as the unforeseen and unexpected death of a parent. Others developed powerful drug additions that consumed their day-to-day lives. Several of them had a history of out-of-home placements as a result of their substance abuse and unruly behaviors. Each of the participants experienced adjudication and incarceration for various minor and felony offenses in the community and past placement and treatment settings.

For some their personal demons came in the form of mental and personal health issues; substance abuse; regret; a criminal trial; suicide attempts; moments of hopelessness and homelessness. Other participants experienced nightmares, traumas, incarceration, tragedy and the loss of love ones. Some participants were eventually overcoming the impact of these dark moments in their life while others continue to struggle.

Information regarding the earliest educational outlook for participants revealed a positive start for some youth, while others met adversity early. Those who had positive school experiences received support from caring adults who created opportunities and helped to lay a foundation for success during the elementary years, which is one of the most critical times in their development. Other participants received very little or no support at the start of their academic journey. Their childhoods were marked by unhealthy environments, parental abuse and neglect, as well as, other traumatic experiences occurring in their home, community, and school environments.

One common theme among all of the participants was the desire and dream of a better future. For some, the goal was simply to achieve a secondary school certificate that they could use to find stable employment. Others would like to attend a vocational or trade school to gain or enhance specialized skills. Several would like to attend community college, a four-year college or a university. Participants discussed a variety of career choices and areas of interest they would like to explore as they move forward. Some discussed the fear and uncertainty they felt in achieving their goals, while others expressed an attitude of optimism and hope for the future.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This chapter will discuss the findings of the research on the educational experiences of incarcerated youths in a state-operated juvenile correctional facility. The overall purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how young men made meaning of their educational experiences, as well as experiences outside the school setting, which impacted their academic progress. This chapter has been organized in the following way: discussion of research questions; the relationship of the findings to literature; conclusions and implications of the findings; recommendations for future research on education, delinquency and the incarceration of male youth offenders. The epilogue section will present my experiences, reflections, and conclusions while conducting this research.

Discussion Research Questions

Research Question 1: How do incarcerated youth make meaning of their past and current educational experiences?

Participants made meaning of their past and current educational experiences through recounting specific events in their lives and the feelings associated with those events. By reflecting on and giving voice to their experiences, they were able to gain a better understanding of themselves; and to provide a glimpse into their world, at least their perceptions. It was a process that required a certain amount of vulnerability, trust, and disclosure on the part of both the researcher and the interviewees. Participants explained the disruptions that occurred in their homes and communities and these disruptions led to disconnections from school and learning. Heal shared his feelings about being homeless and dealing with his mother's cancer diagnosis and the impact these had on learning. They expressed feelings of anger and embarrassment and described the loss of trust in teachers and peers who made fun of their inability to adequately

perform in the classroom rather than offering them support. Some of Power's most humiliating moments in school occurred when he was asked to read aloud.

A reoccurring theme throughout the interviews was the way participants connected their educational experiences with their relationships with parents, grandparents, siblings, teachers, and peers. They spoke about the unique roles these individuals played in their lives, both long- and short-term, and how these relationships influenced their decisions and attitudes regarding themselves, education, and life in general. A few described sadness and confusion after the sudden death of their mothers, and how the emotional upheaval impacted their ability to concentrate. Strong, for example, was devastated and unable to focus in school after his mother died from complications of diabetes, and Resilience feared he would be left homeless after his mother succumbed to swine flu and his father was incarcerated shortly after. Many participants expressed a closeness to their grandparents and extended family and acknowledged the supportive roles these individuals played in their lives. The young men found meaning by examining their personal demons and ongoing involvement in criminal activity, substance abuse, and eventually adjudication. Power, for example, revealed his battle to overcome a drug addiction after he began distributing drugs, while others recalled experience, both positive and negative, from early childhood.

As the participants discussed their pasts and their plans as they transition from the juvenile justice system, they helped me look beyond their circumstances and see them as individuals. With astonishing candor, each clearly articulated his desires, goals, fears, and most of all, the need to be accepted and loved.

Research Question 2: What academic-related experiences are most prevalent in stories told by incarcerated youth?

Throughout the interviews, one experience emerged as the most prevalent: absenteeism from the learning environment. In fact, to varying degrees, most of the participants faced ongoing issues associated with poor school attendance. For some, this was both caused and compounded by family members' health and substance abuse; for others, an unhealthy school environment and ongoing conflicts with authority figures led them to skip school. Most of these young men experienced a lack of support from family members who had differing attitudes about education and were not diligent about monitoring school attendance. Still others like Alpha dealt with hunger and poverty, skipped school in order to make money.

In many cases, participants' absenteeism was the result of a disciplinary action (i.e. suspensions, expulsions, and alternative school placements). Many of them received these sanctions, which varied in length and severity, for ongoing violations of school policy. Change, for example, had barely entered Stratford High School before he was sent to an alternative school for poor attendance, fighting, and problems with teachers. Exalted was placed in school detention and suspended for a violent assault on a teacher. He began skipping school on a regular basis during 8th grade.

In most cases the participants' absenteeism was severe enough to rise to the level of truancy. Truancy is defined as the intentional, unauthorized or illegal absence from compulsory education; it often occurs over extended periods of time. Data from the findings revealed that at least 13 of the 15 participants were truant at some point during their academic journey. Power, Redemption, and Overcame had major issues with truancy upon entering their freshman year of high school, while Exceed became truant after he was ordered to an alternative school and instead chose to spend his days at home or on the streets.

Relationship of Findings to the Literature

Areas of direct comparison exist between the data collected on the educational experiences of incarcerated youth and the literature. Poor academic performance, school failure, and chronic absenteeism emerged as common themes in the participants' stories. Various levels of absenteeism caused them to lose focus and fall behind grade-level peers. For some, stressors in the home environment such as poverty, a lack of resources, substance abuse and lack of parental support created challenges. For others, truancy was predicated by a lack of academic success and school support, while others missed school as a result of suspensions, and expulsions, which led to more academic disruptions and failure. This supports research conducted by the Center for Mental Health in Schools (2008) on poor school attendance as a factor in academic retention and failure. They found that youths often find themselves caught in a cycle of destructive behavior that includes fighting, drug abuse, criminal activities, and gang affiliations. Families must provide some type of stability and ensure consistent school attendance early in the child's life and deal with stressors that may interfere with adequate attendance (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008). Bridgeland and di Iulio (2006) added that some youth become disengaged and disconnected from school due to the insensitivity of educational staff; this can cause students to feel alienated, which can lead to low school performance and contribute to a downward spiral. These youths believe that no one cares or will even notice if they are present for class. Many of them feel that their schools failed to respond to the complex challenges they faced in the outside world or prepare them for what they would face in the future. Other students feel many of their classes were boring or irrelevant to their lives, and some left due to the frustration of ongoing academic failure (Bridgeland & di Iulio, 2006).

According to the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress, there was a strong correlation between reading deficits among youth entering their freshman year of high school and the dropout rate. As textbooks and materials became more challenging, students fell further behind, which resulted in many skipping school and eventually abandoning it before receiving a diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Leone and Weinber (2010) connected their findings to youths in the foster care and delinquency system. They noted that youths dealing with complex educational issues have a more difficult time receiving quality educational services than their peers (Leone & Weinber, 2010). In addition, youth in the foster care systems and juvenile justice placements usually fail to receive the educational services they are entitled to. This often results in a lack of achievement and a failure to reach educational milestones, gain a high school diploma, and attainment of steady work and higher income levels that support an individual's wellbeing (Leone & Weinber 2010). "With quality services and support, children in foster care and those involved with the delinquency system should be able to develop age-appropriate academic and social skills and make successful transitions from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school" (Leone & Weinber, 2010, p. 5).

Other researchers, when comparing students in the general population to those in the juvenile system found those in confined settings have poorer academic performance (Baltodano et al., 2005; Chavez et al., 1994; Larson, 1988). This population of youth has difficulty with language-related tasks--specifically vocabulary, reading, and writing--when compared to non-delinquent peers (Foley, 2001; Keith & McCray, 2002; Snowling et al., 2000) and have a higher risk of non-retention (Foley, 2001) and suspension from school (Baltodano et al., 2005). Tulman (2001) indicated that a large percentage of children in the delinquency system, as well as adults in the criminal justice system, are severely undereducated and that in both groups, reading skills

are woefully inadequate. When speaking with delinquency system probation officers, one is likely to hear not a single child in their entire caseload is functioning at or above grade level (Tulman, 2001). Lieb (1994) summarized these points by noting that while no one cause leads to delinquency or crime, “one of six factors identified as important predictors of delinquency among our nation’s youth was poor educational performance” (Lieb, 1994, p. 1).

Information from several participants revealed ongoing behavioral issues at school, beginning as early as kindergarten. While early school experiences appeared to be positive for some, others found it difficult to adjust for various reasons. This dislike for school early on created a path to increased behavioral issues, academic failure, and delinquency. Some of the participants fell at least two or three years behind the expected grade when compared to age-level peers. Hodges, Giuliani, and Porpotage (1994) identified a common thread among incarcerated youth was poor experiences beginning in the elementary and secondary grades. Rider and Hankins (1992) had found that problematic behavior and a lack of academic achievement coincide, often appearing first in elementary school. Most youths entering juvenile correctional institutions function at least three grade levels behind their peers of the same age (Rider & Hankins, 1992). The Center for Mental Health in Schools (2008) notes that families usually play an important role in consistent school attendance during the early grades. The opposite is true: stressors can interfere with a student’s ability to maintain acceptable attendance. Youths without adequate family support often find themselves in a cycle of behavior-related issues that lead to school suspension, expulsion, fighting, drug-related issues, negative peer and gang association (Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008).

There was also a strong connection between participants’ delinquency and illegal substances. Indeed, exposure to drugs and the impact it had on criminal behavior appeared, to

varying degrees, in every participant's story. Some dealt with powerful addictions, while others began distributing drugs as a means of income. This supports research by Shufelt and Cocozza (2006) who found a strong correlation between substance abuse and juvenile delinquency. That said, the relationship between substance use and delinquency during the teen years has significant ramifications for the juvenile justice systems (Mulvey, Schubert, & Chassin, 2010), as these systems are charged with providing treatment that will break behavioral patterns that might otherwise may persist for a lifetime (Mulvey, Schubert, & Chassin, 2010). This includes substance abuse. A greater understanding of the connection between drugs and negative behaviors has developed, so have treatment approaches within the justice system.

Oftentimes, it was not the youth who was abusing drugs and alcohol, but their parents or other guardians. This created toxic living situations that often paved the way for the youth's negative behaviors both in and out of school and increases the likelihood the youth will eventually have a substance abuse issue. Goldstein (2011) supports this by noting that juvenile drug abuse is not an individual issue, but part of a larger family dynamic. While a healthy relationship with parents, positive peer selection, community resources, and school support can insulate a youth from drugs, a lack of those resources can make him or her more vulnerable. When adolescents are exposed to behaviors displayed by adults, they often mimic those behaviors (Goldstein, 2011). Rowe (2012) added that after repeated exposure to dangerous behaviors, youth begin to feel equal to parents and other adults, and these feelings lead to rebellious actions. Epps and Wright (2012) note that it is vital that parents partake in transparent communication with youth about the harmful effects of drug use. They must back up this communication with clear boundaries and consequences in a fair, firm and consistent manner. Parents must become role models by living within their own parameters (Epps & Wright, 2012).

When parents make choices that lead to disorganization and an inability to control their children, those children are more likely to use drugs and engage in delinquent behavior (Rider-Hankins, 1992). Families are often dysfunctional due to parental drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness, verbal abuse, physical and/or sexual abuse, poor communication, isolation, and alienation (Rider-Hankins, 1992). Youths from low socioeconomic backgrounds, homes where one parent is present, where one or both parents are involved with substance abuse or suffer from mental illness, or where parents have poor parenting skills are more likely to become delinquent (Rider-Hankins, 1992).

Most of the participants in this study resided in one-parent homes with the primary caregiver being the mother; several also moved from home to home, staying with grandparents and other relatives at different points in their lives. Many of these youth began experimenting with drugs and alcohol at a young age, which would seem to support the work of certain researchers, who contend that youths residing in one-parent homes have a greater likelihood of being involved in high-risk activities such as alcohol, drug, and tobacco use (Blum et al., 2000) and were more likely to admit to using alcohol, drugs, or tobacco within the past month (Oman, Vesely, Tolma et al., 2007). Middle school youths from intact families had a greater resistance to substance use (Paxton, Valois & Drain, 2007). Other studies, however, revealed there is little to no difference between one-parent and two-parent homes (Fawzy, Coombs, Simon, & Bownan-Terrell, 1987). The research indicated those who lived in homes with a mother were no more likely to be engaged in substance or alcohol abuse than those who came from traditional homes (Amey & Albrecht, 1998). While parents play a role in whether a youth uses drugs and alcohol (Allen, Donohue, Griffin, Ryan & Turner, 2003), an extensive amount of research indicates that siblings and friends also have a strong influence.

Conclusion and Implications

This study provides strong evidence of the need for additional research on and initiatives addressing school truancy. Both the literature and the participant interviews indicate truancy is often a starting point on the path to delinquency, due to the disconnection from the academic culture. The findings suggest that the impact of truancy reaches far beyond the scope of educational entities. Truancy and poor school attendance have a direct connection to poverty, crime, and places hardships on various legal, justice, and governmental systems. While it is true that there is no one cause of youthful offending, adjudication and incarceration, truancy is arguably one of the biggest culprits and indicators of problems. The greatest opportunity to prevent this downward spiral lies in the realm of public education. That said, efforts to curtail truancy cannot solely be the responsibility of schools; nor can it fall exclusively upon the courts and families. When truancy leads to criminal behavior, society as a whole suffers, legally and economically; therefore, community organizations must also play a larger role in supporting at-risk youth. Youth who are truant throughout their school experiences are usually poorly prepared for the workforce, are more reliant on health and social services, and demand greater output from criminal justice resources than individuals who have successfully obtained a diploma (Heilbrunn, 2007). The cost of services are usually absorbed by local and community tax dollars. As this and other studies show, truancy does have an impact on youths as they grow into adulthood, and chronically truant youths are at a greater risk of having physical and mental health issues, living in poverty, and continuing the cycle with their own children who may learn to emulate the same behavior (Baker, Sigmon & Nugent, 2001).

As gleaned through the interviews, attaining a high school diploma or some other type of secondary certification (i.e., GED) is critical for at-risk youth to break negative patterns. This is

the minimum requirement for many jobs and having such a credentials suggests that a candidate has certain basic skills needed to perform that job. Laws and policy are largely ineffective in ensuring that students reach this important milestone; depending on state of residence, youth may only be required to remain in school at a total of nine years or until age 16, which falls short of the average age of high school graduates, 18. No state requires young adults to earn a high school diploma (Education Commission of the States, 2004).

During the course of this study, it became apparent the some of the participants will transition back into the community without having attained their diplomas. Each is due to be released in the months or days leading up to their 19th birthdays. They will often return to the community facing the same challenges they had when incarcerated: poverty, lack of family support and academic issues and without effective transitional measures in place they are extremely vulnerable to recidivism, an escalation of their criminal behavior, and possibly entry into the adult criminal justice system. The research show gaining basic skills, as evidenced by a high school diploma, GED or HiSET, expands their opportunities to obtain future employment and decreases the likelihood of recidivism. (Lichtenberger & Ogle, 2008). If they have not attained a secondary certificate or otherwise demonstrate that they meet minimum requirements, the likelihood of recidivating increases (Lichtenberger & Ogle, 2008; Redcross, et al., 2010).

This study illustrates that early intervention programs are needed to address truancy among at-risk youth. Most youths who enter the juvenile justice system have a history of poor school attendance, often leading to chronic truancy and leaving school altogether. New and existing policies should be examined to address youth and the issues they face as it relates to truancy. It is important to gain more insight on the causes of youth truancy long before they drop out; it may also reveal new resources that can be used to curtail behaviors before a path to

delinquency has been established. Research shows that truancy reduction programs, particularly those that include early intervention, have been shown to result in the decline of criminal behavior of school-age youth (Heilbrunn, 2007). School climate and culture could be an indicator for future delinquency as conditions in the participants' school that contributed to their truancy. Identifying these issues are not enough; schools must go a step further and establish stronger, more creative and immediate protocols to address patterns early on and create progressive methods that address continued patterns before youths end up in the juvenile justice system.

Recommendations

As mentioned above, this study revealed the potential value of further research in the areas of education, delinquency and incarceration of male adolescent youth. The following recommendations emerged from the research and are proposed by the researcher:

1. Captures the educational experiences of incarcerated youth, then follow them beyond the confines of a juvenile detention facility. Regardless of the reason for their incarceration, the ultimate goal is to rehabilitate youths and help them transition back into the community. Such a study could help educators, administrators, and other advocates gain valuable insights into this transition period; specifically, it can help them identify and utilize the most appropriate tools and resources available to help youth continue on a path of success, avoid recidivism and become productive members of society.
2. Conduct a national study to assess the effectiveness and rigor of educational programs in juvenile correctional settings and determine how these programs can be improved. Most programs in juvenile settings have been designed to provide minimal services to youth. Educators within these settings are bound by outdated pedagogy, limited technology,

poorly trained teachers and a transient student population. This is compounded by administrative issues such as the transfer of previous school records and multiple school placements. A large percentage of youth have been diagnosed with some type of mental health issue that requires other specialized services. If these youth are to successfully transition back into their respective communities, correctional facilities must look beyond preventing recidivism and toward preparing them for employment. One positive aspect of many of these programs is mandatory attendance and participation, which eliminates the truancy issue and presents a real opportunity to effect change.

3. Identify interventions that improve juveniles' educational, employment, and recidivism outcomes in less-restrictive settings, such as alternative and traditional schools. Current trends show a decline in the number of juveniles incarcerated in correctional facilities in the United States. Between 1997 and 2011 the number of youth apprehended, redirected, or committed in this country dropped from 105, 000 to 61,000. Evidence shows that incarceration in and of itself may hinder educational achievement and increase the likelihood of recidivism, as opposed to placements in less restrictive settings (Aizer & Doyle, 2013). That said, it must be acknowledged that incarceration is often necessary for violent and serious crimes; however, one can make the argument that juvenile correctional facilities should be reserved for the most dangerous youthful offenders.
4. Determine effective methods, strategies, and decision-making around race-based disparities in the juvenile justice system. While crimes being committed by youth appear to be similar regardless of race, social class, and environment, it appears that youth of color have higher rates of incarceration than their white counterparts. Data revealed that in 2010, youth of color comprised of 17 percent of juveniles committed to

facilities, but accounted for only 31 percent of total arrests (Puzzanchera & Hockenberry, 2013). There has been little to no change in this rate from previous decades, with Latino youth facing similar disparities; however, the data with regard to ethnic disparities appears to be limited (Puzzanchera & Hockenberry, 2013). Their issues usually begin in school with higher rates of truancy, suspensions and expulsion far exceeding those of white youth. Examining these disparities could reveal more concise information regarding the racial and ethnic makeup in the juvenile correctional populations.

Epilogue

This research experience provided me with an opportunity to explore and examine the educational and school-related experiences of incarcerated youth. During my 16 years as an educator within the juvenile justice system my training, knowledge base, and focus have primarily been centered on providing academic and educational services to incarcerated youth. Throughout the course of this project, however, I gained a greater understanding of incarcerated youths' experiences, as well as a heightened awareness of systemic failures and external factors that have potentially hindered their educational achievement.

This study revealed that many of the participants have dealt with a litany of challenges unrelated to education, yet had a direct impact on it. In fact, many incarcerated youth face an overwhelming number of academic and personal obstacles that must be addressed holistically to ensure effective transition and long term success. The depth of these issues in turn created challenges for staff working within facilities due to a lack of mental health training and knowledge on adolescent development, as well as current trends in juvenile corrections. This gap in professional development training must be rectified before staff can move on to the ultimate

goal of providing intensive support that addresses behavioral issues while giving equal or greater attention to education, treatment, and transitional services for youth that extend well beyond release.

While there remains a need for juvenile correctional facilities to house dangerous youth, it is important to give closer attention to how these facilities are structured and resources are utilized and managed. This will ensure that the greatest impact can be made when providing services for youth placed in facilities. The success of educationally disadvantaged youth is dependent upon their ability to overcome inequities they face in education and life as they transition back into the community.

Another ongoing challenge within facilities is to address the vast needs of a new generation of youth being detained; this will require a shift from more punitive systems to a more therapeutic approach, which is not an easy task, given that these facilities have been historically existed for the sole purpose of detaining and securing youth. For this shift to be successful, administrators must understand how to maintain student, staff and community safety throughout the process. In order for a new therapeutic paradigm to be successful, they must take into account that much of the juvenile correctional population is transient and may not be equipped or able to deal with all of their issues within the short time they are incarcerated. This means that community organizations must fill when the resources of the juvenile correctional facilities fall short.

Changes in the Field

When conducting a research project, especially one that involves human participants, the researcher must realize that changes in the research environment can occur suddenly. The overall mission and purpose of the juvenile correctional facility is to maintain a safe and secure

environment for students and staff so that treatment and rehabilitation can occur, while at the same time ensuring the safety of the greater community. Although the majority of youth confined to the facility present no immediate danger to themselves, other students, staff or property, it cannot be ignored that the facility houses some of Tennessee's most dangerous and violent youth offenders. In fact, a series of high profile disruptions and escapes at the research site helped set the course for a very challenging data collection.

The full approval for Educational Experiences: Voices of Incarcerated Male Youth was granted on August 19, 2014, exactly twelve days before the facility would experience two major escapes. On September 1, 2014 at approximately 11:00 p.m., 32 youthful offenders left their rooms during shift change, entered the day area and preceded to overpower 16 to 18 officers. The youths then preceded to kick out metal panels under the window in their dorm and entered the grounds of the facility. Although they were confronted by a specialized fence designed to prevent escapes, impossible to climb, they managed to lift part of the fence from the bottom to gain freedom. It is important to note that while none of the 32 teens who escaped had been charged with murder, all of them had at least three felonies, including burglary and theft, violent crimes and drug-related crimes offenses, as well as a history of running away, foster care problems, and mental health needs.

On September 25, 2014, despite upgrades in security after the earlier incident, there was another escape at the facility. This time, 13 youth overpowered guards and took their keys. In the weeks following the first escape, the facility's structure and dorms had been retrofitted, additional metal plates were added to the doors and a low concrete buffer was placed around the perimeter fence. Still, it was not enough to prevent youth from getting out. The incident had a devastating impact both on community and the facility, including safety concerns, damaged

property and the use of law enforcement resources. The Department of Children Services would eventually renegotiate a long-standing policy that had for years restricted the department's ability to lock the doors of individual youths within the states three youth development centers. After the two escapes, however, this decree was eventually rewritten, and locks were placed on the doors so as to better control students in the event of another disruption.

The escapes had lasting effects on both youth and staff at the facility. It was revealed that despite the safety upgrades made to the facility after the initial escapes, the tension lingered. The knowledge that youth had found breaches in the structure, security, and processes at the facility and had taken advantage of them left staff feeling shocked and unsafe. This had a devastating impact on work attendance and performance, which further eroded the safety within the facility. Morale was down and many of the employees felt unequipped to handle the youth who had remained at the facility, as well as those being integrated back into the population after the escapes. Uncertainty permeated the facility as leadership worked with law enforcement and state officials to investigate what led to the escapes. It was also revealed that while a single hole in the fence structure was the point of egress, the real cause could be traced to a slow but persistent decline in the processes and procedures designed to keep youth and staff safe. Other issues included a high staff turnover rate, which led to a fatigued, overwhelmed and inexperienced staff. It was also revealed that over the past few years the facility had absorbed youths from another facility that closed in the eastern part of the state, and had absorbed new staff from a nearby female facility, which had let staff go because of state cutbacks. Constant changes in both students and staff, as well as changes in leadership and policies may have been a contributing factor to the climate that made the escapes possible. Not surprisingly, there was large scale media coverage of the escapes. The incidents gained national attention on major outlets such as

Good Morning America, CNN and CBS. The Governor's office also took notice, and would play a major role in overseeing the facility's upgrades, including financing the restructuring of the treatment program; the Governor visited the facility to monitor the progress.

A series of community meetings were held after the escapes that included the State Commissioner, State Deputy Commissioner, Director of Youth Development Centers, the superintendent of the facility, and a representative of the district where the facility is located. These meetings were designed to answer the community's questions and concerns regarding the escapes; and discuss the status of those youth who remained at large, the facility upgrades (including the consent decree); and the direction in which the department and facility were moving to prevent further escapes and re-establish a sense of trust with the community. While there was productive conversations at these meetings, they were fraught with the angry comments of the parents and other family members of the youth housed in the facility; the media, former employees, and youth advocates were quite vocal about their thoughts on the escapes. Other individuals wanted to know how they could help, become a resource, and provide services to the youth housed in the facility. In the months following the escapes, and as the state moved into a new fiscal year, a proposal by the Governor to drastically decrease the student population at the facility was presented. In his proposal the state would cut 131 positions at the juvenile detention facility and focus on placing more of its youth in residential settings instead of secure facilities. The other part of his proposal included a move to turn the operations of the facility to a private contractor. Which could possibly free the state of certain fiscal responsibilities and save costs. Under this proposal, the state would save \$7.7 million by handing the reins to a private contractor, eliminating 131 positions at the facility in the process. With federal and other funding included, the governor's proposal included \$727.3 million for the

Department of Children's Services, up from \$726.4 million last year. The proposal to decrease the student population at the facility was approved and triggered massive job losses. However, a proposal to hand the facility over to private providers failed, which may have been due to the facilities structure, age, and size.

Researcher Role

The impact of these events changed the climate at the facility and created a shift in my role as researcher. In an effort to help stabilize the population, for a time my focus was solely directed on the duties of my position. Other challenges included a transient population of youth who could be released from the facility at any time as a result of court orders, step down to a residential placement, completion of their educational program, or aging out. Others could be transferred to other facilities at any time due to safety or behavior issues. Some youth identified for the study were soon to be released; while others were directly involved in the escapes and as a result were being sent to more secure facilities, both within Tennessee and in other states; still others remained on the run. Some the youths were placed in a more secure and isolated part of the facility with restricted access; however, they were eventually able to participate in the study once they returned to the regular population. The decrease in the participant pool necessitated adjustments in the selection process to acquire an adequate number of participants. Other issues included staff shortages due to injury, morale, the rumor of facility job cuts, and staff members who no longer felt safe at the facility. Through careful reflection, reorganizing and planning I was able balance my role of researcher and correctional vice principal to complete the data collection.

This facility and others of its kind have always been criticized by the community, youth advocates, and parents as reformatories with poor or minimal educational services. These

criticisms were amplified after the escapes made the news; however, these negative perceptions can overshadow the true purpose and scope of services these facilities provide. Media coverage hindered gaining parental consent and participation in the study for those under 18, which made it even more difficult to complete.

Despite these challenges, it was critical to maintain and finish the interview process, as each story was significant to the study. As the researcher, it was vital for me to stay abreast of and communicate with participants around each phase of the process – including notifying them ahead of time of follow-up interviews, possible release dates, and potential conflicts with scheduling. It was important to take into account their elevated stress level, given the recent events that had occurred at the facility and remain sensitive to their attention spans, moods and availability for interviews, as many of them had the propensity to lose focus if other things were going on in their lives. For some, interpersonal conflicts, court dates, peer influences, and the usual complexities that come with being an adolescence could easily interfere with their ability to remain focused for an interview. It was important for me to monitor and pay attention to their anxiety, fatigue, and restlessness during the interviews.

Inspirations and Insights

As evidenced in the interviews, the inability to trust has been a major obstacle to these young men. Despite this, they displayed amazing strength and courage in reliving their experiences, and I feel honored that they chose to communicate them to me. This communication was facilitated by an open interview process that allowed participants to speak without restrictions. I believe this was the most appropriate for this sensitive and vulnerable population. The most powerful approach to qualitative methodology occurred through direct observation, and guided yet unrestricted conversations with the participants as they invited me

into their thoughts, stories, and lives. While some participants were more detailed, forth coming, and revealing about their experiences, others appeared more cautious and reserved as to what they revealed. The unrestrictive format helped me gain a deeper understanding of some of the challenges and circumstances that helped to shape their lives; it also required me to give less attention to, or suppress the desire to, find immediate and exact answers to questions and instead allow the participant to control, guide, and lead the conversations. This could not have been achieved through a structured, scripted interview process.

Ultimately, the most important aspect of the research process was the appreciation and deeper understanding of the power and meaning of *voice* as metaphor for empowerment. Voice was given to the participants by allowing them to share their stories and experiences as they lived them. The goal was to create an opportunity for them to speak and have their stories heard, then capture the meaning of their words and put those words into a context that the reader could fully understand and appreciate.

The vulnerability of these youth have placed them at a disadvantage for opportunities and equality. Although their stories and experiences hold great value it is easy to forget and overlook this at-risk population. Giving incarcerated youth a platform to share their thoughts, perspectives, experiences, and feelings around education may help create change within the juvenile justice system. This is significant, as many at-risk and disadvantaged youth can lose their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives, in the difficulty of their circumstances. Their views, opinions, and insight can be a powerful contribution to ongoing reform and efforts to provide the best practices to ensure success. These youth need to feel a sense of value and connectedness during and after their experiences in the juvenile justice system. Their perspectives need to be represented in ongoing change to improve conditions, enhance education and ensure that

effective transition services upon release. Many of them will reenter society and need to be able to demonstrate the growth and skills they have received while incarcerated. The tools they receive while detained should be based on their insights an accurate reflection of the social ailments they hope to overcome. There is nothing as empowering for an individual than to be able to make significant contributions to society and empowering at-risk and incarcerated youth will give them a better chance to overcome the risks of recidivism to live productive lives.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: Participation Assent Letter

Assent Form

Hi!

I am a student at Colorado State University. I am doing a project about the educational experiences of youth who are in a juvenile correctional facility. The project is called Educational Experiences: Voices of Incarcerated Male Youth. I am asking you if it is OK to talk to you about your educational experiences while you are here at this facility.

If you want to tell your story, I will ask you to sign this form before I interview you. The interview will last from 30 minutes to 1 hour, and a tape recorder will be used to record our conversation. You may be interviewed up to 4 times with a total time commitment of about 4 hours. I will ask questions about your educational experiences. Example: Tell me about your earliest times at in school. What did you like about your school experiences? Dislike? There isn't a right or wrong answer --- it is just about what you think. Your name will not be used any time during the study, so no one will know how you answered the questions or what you talked about.

You agreeing to be in this project cannot hurt your treatment program here. You don't have to do it. If you say "yes" now but later change your mind, you can stop being in the research any time by just telling me. All of the information you share will be kept confidential. However, if at any point during the study you share information about causing harm to yourself, I am obligated to report.

I will ask your parents if it is OK that you do this, too (if you are under 18 years old). If you want to participate and tell your story, sign your name and write today's date on the line below

.

Participant

Date

Researcher

Date

APPENDIX II: Participation Consent Letter

Consent to Participate in a Research Study Colorado State University

TITLE OF STUDY: *Educational Experiences: Voices of Male Incarcerated Youth*

PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER: Everett Singleton, MAEd, Location: School, Phone: 615-566-4264, Email: everett.b.singleton@tn.gov

CO-PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER: Timothy Davies, PhD, Location: Colorado State University, Email: Timothy.Davies@ColoState.EDU

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH? You are being asked if your child can participate because he is currently a student enrolled in our school here at Woodland Hills Youth Development Center.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY? The purpose of the study is to learn more about your child's educational experiences. The goal is to capture his experiences and how he makes sense of what he has been through academically. This study will help him describe his journey, and allow him to express any academic milestones, achievements, or challenges. Many students have information regarding past and current school experiences that could be relevant as they move forward and transition beyond the facility. This study will give him an opportunity to talk about the experiences that are important him.

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST? The study will take place at the facility where your child is currently being housed at. There will be a maximum of 4 interviews each one lasting between 30 and 60 minutes for a total time commitment of a maximum of 4 hours.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO? If your child wants to tell his story, he will be asked to sign an assent form before the interview. He will then be invited to an interview to talk about his educational experiences. The interview will last from 30 minutes to 1 hour, and a tape recorder will be used to record our conversation. I will ask questions about his educational experiences. Example: Tell me about your earliest times at in school. What did you like about your school experiences? Dislike? There isn't a right or wrong answer --- it is just about what he thinks. Your child's name will not be associated with the study or used any time during the study and all information is confidential.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS? It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but I have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks. Also, participation in the study or information provided will in know way hinder treatment or services provided to him or interfere with release.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

- This research could provide an opportunity for your child to gain a greater understanding about his educational path and future goals.
- It gives him a platform to reflect on his experiences and understand circumstances regarding his educational status.
- It could also give him a voice and platform to express concerns and challenges about how he receives educational services. Your child could provide insight on how to provide better services and opportunities in the future.
- New information could help DCS Education develop programs that will help students address gaps in achievement and get back on track academically.
- However, your child will receive no direct benefit from participation in this study such as an early release, money, or additional privileges, but his participation may help us better understand his educational experiences.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY? Your child's participation in this research is voluntary. If he decides to participate in the study, he may withdraw his consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which he is otherwise entitled.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE? I will keep private all research records that identify him, to the extent allowed by law.

For this study, we will assign an (alias name) to your child's data so that the only place his real name will appear in our records is on the consent and in our data spreadsheet which links him to the alias name. I am the only person that will have access to the link between him, his alias, and his data. The only exceptions to this are if we are asked to share the research files for audit purposes with the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee, if necessary. When we write about the study to share with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. Only his pseudonym name will appear on any written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your child's name and other identifying information private. All of the information he shares will be kept confidential. However, if at any point during the study he (youth) shares information that could cause harm to himself, or individuals within the facility, I am obligated to report.

CAN MY TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY? If he says "yes" now but later changes his mind, he can stop being in the research any time by just telling me.

WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?
Your child will not receive any compensation for taking part in this study.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS? *Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to approve your child taking part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Everett Singleton at 615-566-4264. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator at 970-491-1655. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.*

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 2 pages.

PARENTAL SIGNATURE FOR MINOR

As parent or guardian I authorize _____ (print name) to become a participant for the described research. The nature and general purpose of the project have been satisfactorily explained to me by _____ and I am satisfied that proper precautions will be observed.

Parent/Guardian name (printed)

Parent/Guardian signature

Date

APPENDIX III: Guiding Questions

- 1) Tell me about yourself and your earliest school experiences.
- 2) How did you view yourself as a learner in school?
- 3) How were you viewed as a student by your teachers?
- 4) What did you like about your educational experience? Dislike?
- 5) What about your school experience worked for you? What did not?
- 6) What educational programs did you participate in that supported you with your:
 - a) Academics,
 - b) Personal/social behaviors, and/or;
 - c) Career education?
- 7) How did your education help you grow with your:
 - a) Academics,
 - b) Personal/social behaviors, and/or;
- 8) Did you attend school regularly? Are there experiences that interfered with school?
- 9) What, if anything, would you change about your educational experience?
- 10) What is it that you needed from your teachers?
- 11) How could teachers better support students in the areas of:
 - a) Academics,
 - b) Personal/social behaviors, and;
- 12) Are you on track to graduate with your class? If no, Why not?
- 13) What are your goals for the future?
- 14) Is there anything else you would like to say about your educational experiences that was not covered in this interview?