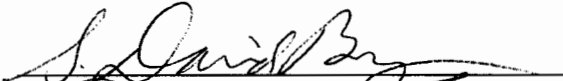


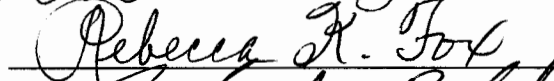
IN THEIR OWN VOICES: THE INFLUENCE OF GRADE RETENTION ON  
THE SELF-EFFICACY AND ASPIRATIONS OF ADOLESCENTS

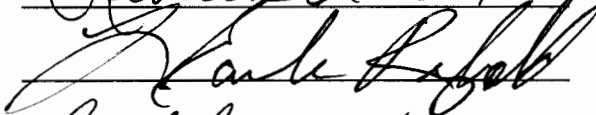
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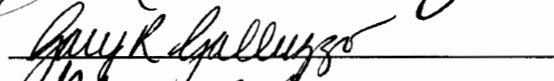
Veronica D. Montgomery  
A Dissertation  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Education and Human Development

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Date: May 21, 2013 Summer Semester 2013  
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In Their Own Voices: The Influence of Grade Retention on the Self-Efficacy and Aspirations of Adolescents

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated in loving memory of my son Hollie Montgomery III (CJ), my beautiful sister, Vashti Ivy, my father, Vernell Ivy Sr., my mother-in-law and father-in-law Francis and Hollie Montgomery Sr. And finally, to my mother, Vashti Ware, who passed away as I was finishing chapter 5. Her favorite saying when asked how she was doing was, "I'm kicking, but not high." She instilled in us the wonder of education. Thanks, Mom. All of you are missed and continue to fill our hearts with wonderful memories. I thank God for the time we had together.

To my fabulous, supportive husband, Hollie, thanks for the late night pep talks, and especially the laughter. I could not have made it without you. Thank you for our past and future wonderful years together. You never fail to make me smile. My son Ryan, what a blessing you have been. God danced the day you and your brother were born. Such joy you two brought me. And now you alone continue the joy. Thank you. To my wonderful supportive family of brothers and sisters, Charles, Junnie, Barbara, Vernell (Tiny), Vernon, Gloria, Vanessa, Alice and Kris, who never doubted that I would get this done.

## Acknowledgements

I am so thankful to all the many people who spent endless hours encouraging and gently pushing me toward the completion of this dissertation. To my husband, Hollie Montgomery, Jr. who spent numerous hours talking over my ideas, encouraging me, and reminding me daily of what it means to love unconditionally. To Dr. Marjorie Walsh, who first sparked the idea for my dissertation topic and Dr. Jay Grymes, who always took time to check on my progress and deliver timely words of encouragement. To the students at Pachecko High School, I sincerely, thank you for sharing your stories. Without you this study would not exist. I am most appreciative of your openness, time, and effort.

To Eva Bridget, who spent countless hours transcribing. You were a lifesaver! Thank you to Liz Simons, who understood my love of commas and patiently read and reread my writing, while graciously editing my work. To my colleagues at work, who no matter what, believed in me and always offered words of encouragement. Special words of thanks to Janelle, Lolita, Sonja, Quanda, Colleen, Rachael, Ann, Anne Marie, and Andrea. I could always count on you. Thank you to my family away from home, Regina, Sophia, Eugene, Celestine, Greg, Kyahnte, Ahkia, Carliss, Norma, and Jean. You have truly been a blessing. To Dr. Gregory Jones and Dr. Theresa Beasley the other part of the three amigos, without the two of you none of this would have been possible. I love you both dearly. Theresa, words cannot begin to express my gratitude to you for all that you have done to get me to this point. I thank you so very much.

To my Antioch Baptist Church family, your support has been unwavering. Thank you so much for your support, encouragement, and inspiration during this process. Thank you for instilling in me, “With God, all things are possible” Matthew 19:26 (King James Version).

To my committee members, Dr. David Brazer, Dr. Rebecca Fox, and Dr. Earle Reybold, thank you for your patience, guidance, and expert advice throughout my journey. Dr. Brazer, thank you for your words of encouragement, your willingness to answer any questions, and your faith in me. You have been an outstanding mentor and friend. To anyone that I failed to mention, please know you have my heartfelt thanks.

## Table of Contents

	Page
List of Tables .....	viii
List of Figures .....	ix
List of Abbreviations .....	x
Abstract .....	xi
1. The Problem of Grade Retention .....	1
Brief History of Retention .....	3
Statement of the Problem .....	5
Purpose .....	9
Significance .....	10
Personal Professional Significance .....	10
Research Significance .....	11
Practical Significance .....	13
Summary .....	14
Research Questions .....	15
2. Conceptual Framework and Literature Review .....	16
Introduction .....	16
Symbolic Interactionism .....	18
Human Beings Act on the Basis of their Experience .....	21
Meaning from Social Interaction with Others .....	23
Handling and Modifying Meaning .....	28
Future Aspirations .....	28
Summary .....	29
Self-Efficacy Theory .....	30
Resiliency .....	32
Summary .....	32
3. Methodology .....	34

Research Design.....	34
Rationale for Qualitative Method.....	36
Learning Retained Students’ Perspectives .....	38
Setting.....	39
Participants .....	41
Informed Consent .....	45
Data collection.....	46
Data Analysis.....	48
Validity .....	53
Limitations.....	55
4. Data Analysis and Findings .....	56
Academically Successful Students.....	58
Allison .....	58
Zoe.....	73
Academically Challenged Students.....	84
Gina .....	84
Robert .....	92
Academically Challenged Students with Environmental Distracters .....	99
Catherine.....	99
Matt.....	111
Cross Case Analysis.....	122
5. Discussion, Summary of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....	132
Discussion .....	132
Purpose .....	132
Significance Discussion .....	133
Conceptual Framework .....	134
Summary of Findings .....	136
Findings from Research Questions.....	136
Conclusions.....	141
Crisis.....	141
Interactions .....	143
Mobility.....	144

Transformation .....	145
Summary of Findings .....	146
Implications .....	148
Recommendations .....	150
Practical .....	150
Research.....	151
Appendix A.....	153
Appendix B.....	155
Appendix C.....	156
Appendix D.....	157
Appendix E.....	159
Appendix F.....	161
Appendix G.....	163
Appendix H.....	165
Appendix I.....	168
References.....	169



## List of Tables

Table	Page
Table 1 Pachecko High School Demographics.....	40
Table 2 Participants.....	45
Table 3 Descriptive Codes .....	50
Table 4 Major Themes .....	52
Table 5 Participants: Students and Teachers .....	57

## List of Figures

Figure	Page
Figure 1 Graphic Representation of Conceptual Framework .....	18

## List of Abbreviations

Elementary and Secondary Act.....	ESEA
English language learner.....	ELL
General Equivalency Diploma (General Educational Development).....	GED
Grade Point Average.....	GPA
Human Subjects Review Board.....	HSRB
Information Technology.....	IT
National Association of School Psychologist.....	NASP
No Child Left Behind.....	NCLB
Pachecko High School.....	PHS
Pachecko Public Schools.....	PPS
Self-Efficacy.....	SE
Symbolic interactionism.....	SI
Advanced Placement.....	AP

## **Abstract**

### **IN THEIR OWN VOICES: THE INFLUENCE OF GRADE RETENTION ON THE SELF-EFFICACY AND ASPIRATIONS OF ADOLESCENTS**

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George Mason University, 2013

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This multiple case study explores the self-constructed meaning derived from retention experiences through the perspective of adolescents 15 years of age and older. Using symbolic interactionism theory and self-efficacy as theoretical frameworks, it focuses on their attitudes, beliefs, goals, and aspirations. Six high school students and at least one teacher, associated with each student, participated in this qualitative study. Each participant experienced retention at least once in his or her formal school years. Retrospective educational life stories, elicited by in-depth interviews, describe the students' perspective concerning their experience(s) with retention. The dominant themes identified from students' interviews suggest that students perceive retention as a life changing event that none wanted to repeat. Most students used the experience as a catalyst to improve their academic progress. Students cited family issues among the most prevalent reasons for their retention, followed by a lack of preventative academic

measures for avoiding retention and failure to understand presented material. The findings from this study concur with (Grant; 1997 and Smink, 2001) who state, as educators, we need better support systems for students at risk of failure. This support system is in need of updating, rethinking, and strengthening. This study suggests that existing efforts to prevent and remediate retained students are not reaching every student. Most students in this study suggested more one-on-one time with caring adults within the school to interrupt grade failure cycles and reduce the number of students who give up on education.

## **1. The Problem of Grade Retention**

As our nation works to transform the education system beyond its perceived ineffectiveness brought on by frequently missing the mark of state mandated benchmarks and community outcries for highly qualified public school graduates, it simultaneously struggles with the utilization of grade retention as a means to address criticisms of weak standards. As a result, grade retention has received a great deal of attention by educators, researchers, and communities because of its potential for far reaching repercussions on society as a whole. Jimerson and Kaufman (2003) provide a contemporary definition of retention as “the practice of requiring a student who has been in a given grade for a full school year to remain at that same grade level in the subsequent school year” (p. 2). In this study “grade retention” and “retention” will reflect this definition.

Accountability mandates from public and political factions have increased the frequency of retention as a strategy for addressing student academic achievement. In 2001, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) signed by President George W. Bush as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB), stipulated that every child enrolled in Title I schools receiving federal money must meet proficiency targets on annual assessments in reading and math. The utilization of standardized testing as a response to this latest effort in reform and accountability designed to end social

promotion marks a return to similar reform efforts reported in early 1980's research (Holmes, 2006).

The use of grade retention as a means to improve students' academic achievement is a mainstay of American education history. However, the dearth of retention documentation in the literature makes it difficult to determine an exact rate of retention implementation. This limitation is due to the lack of standardized and reliable national longitudinal data about an area considered to be a local or state issue (Shepard & Smith, 1989). The United States Census Bureau provides an estimate of the percentage of school age children who enrolled in a grade below the modal grade level for their age. Approximately five to 10% of students are retained in the same grade each year (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 1999; American Federation of Teachers, 1997; Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003; Shepard & Smith, 1990). This translates to approximately 2.4 million students each year (Dawson, 1998). These statistics suggest an annual contribution to a growing body of retained students. Jimerson, Anderson, and Whipple (2002) maintain that this expanding group of retained students may experience continued academic difficulties, employability challenges, psychological problems, criminal activity, and/or substance abuse leading to additional burdens on an encumbered public school system and society as a whole.

In an effort to better understand the relationship between meanings students develop from retention and the role of these meanings in decisions they make about future aspirations, my study focuses on the perspective of adolescent students regarding the impact of grade level retention. In order to understand why it is important to study the

impact of retention, it is necessary to understand the historical progression of grade level retention in America's education system.

### **Brief History of Retention**

As early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, retaining students who lagged behind academically was an accepted practice in English schools (Niklason, 1984). By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the United States schools mirrored their British counterpart's educational practices. In the mid 1800's, compulsory education organized students into grades based on chronological ages with specific goals for each grade level. During the next 70 years, schools in rural areas also implemented grade assignment based on age. This organization of schools into grade levels magnified the fact that students mastered the curriculum at varying rates. As a result, the issue of grade level retention first emerged with graded schools. Retaining students became an often utilized solution for children who lagged behind the social and academic demands of the next grade level (Dill, 1993; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Shepard & Smith, 1989; Weeks, 1991).

Eventually, recognition of the problems associated with non-promotion came to the public's attention. In response to grade level retention rates reaching as high as 50% in some places, school districts began to focus on reducing the implementation of student retention (Holmes & Matthews, 1984). The practice of retaining students significantly lessened in the 1930s as social scientist began to fear the effects of retention on children's social and emotional development (Rose, Medway, Cantrell, & Marus, 1983).

A heightened awareness of the implications of grade level retention from 1940 through 1960 led educators to institute the practice of social promotions to reduce the



number of overage and low achieving students in the classrooms. Social promotion involved promoting students to the next grade, grouping them according to ability, and providing remedial instruction (Rose et al, 1983).

The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought forth reform which shifted the focus of education to achievement-based promotion policies. Politicians and education leaders began to demand more stringent and articulated standards in response to studies such as the Coleman report (1966), Jencks' study (1972), and A Nation at Risk from the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983). Critics of the American school system cited widening achievement gaps between students of various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds and the majority population and the lack of an organized set of academic standards to gauge student achievement as reasons to support reforms which addressed the implementation of standards and the resurgence of retention policies.

Rose et al. (1983) gathered information from 50 states including the District of Columbia. Only 15 states had documented retention statistics for the 1979-1980 school year or the preceding years. Although the retention data did not point to any dramatic trends, the authors noted the 15 states reported a percentage rate considerably higher than other developed countries. The practice of retention led the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) to pass a position statement titled, Student Grade Retention and Social Promotion (1998) which states, "Through many years of research, the practice of retaining children in grade has shown to be ineffective in meeting the needs of children who are academically delayed" (p.1).

In the late 1990s, President Clinton, in each State of the Union Address from 1997-1999, called for an end to social promotion (U.S. Department of Education 1999). A typical response to President Clinton's plea for a resolution was a return to retaining students as a means to address issues of underachievement (Dawson, 1998). Mandates from President George W. Bush's education reform policies incorporate yearly standardized testing components designed to measure student proficiency in targeted academic areas. These assessments have quickly taken on high stakes characteristics as they become gateways to determining the progression of students' academic paths.

Historically, the use of retention by educators has taken a pendulous swing over the decades, vacillating with various reform movements (Owings & Magliaro, 1998). Politicians, educators, and policy makers continue to struggle with decisions regarding student retention based on more rigorous standards. In response to this quandary, educators in the 21<sup>st</sup> century seek a better understanding of the effectiveness and implications of grade level retention.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Retention, transition, developmental acquisition, flunk, failure, held back; in our society these words evoke a sense of negativity, shame, and dread. The impact of retention can have far reaching consequences on students' academic, emotional, and social lives. One impact is retention channels students into a specific group which has retention as its inclusion factor. This group of students has a tendency to develop its own set of norms that set it apart from students who have not been retained. Within this group a different set of issues may adversely affect academic experiences. The development of

these issues may force students to develop coping or defense mechanisms to deal with issues such as being too old for their current placement, educational programs that include the same information packaged in a new container (different teacher, same instructional practices), and perceived feelings of belittlement.

These older students often engage in activities that are appropriate for their age but not for those with whom they are associating (Lane, Medford, & Knorr, 2005). For example, these students are often old enough to drive, stay out later, and/or introduce older friends into the lives of their younger classmates. Those who remain in school are often associated with behavioral problems. These behavior problems are sometimes the manifestation of the aforementioned defense mechanism designed to guard against hurtful and demeaning remarks by their schoolmates who may view them as “dumb” or too old (Penna & Tallerico, 2005).

Retained adolescent students are developmentally different from their classmates in that they are not facing the beginning of puberty but many, depending on when the retention occurred, are post-pubescent. They are dealing with issues not usually associated with students enrolled in their current grade. In many cases, retained students must choose between associating with younger students in their current grade and interacting with students in higher grades of their own age. Consequently, retained students who are of high school age and in middle school may associate with students who are two to three years behind them in age.

Administrators, policy makers, teachers, and parents reacting to accountability pressures from public outcry are more readily retaining students in an effort to meet

performance benchmarks (Jimerson, 2001; Nason, 1991). This strategy for improving the academic achievement of those deemed not ready for promotion to the next grade remains prevalent in spite of research that indicates the majority of retained students are negatively affected (Holmes, 1989 as cited in Shepard & Smith, 1989). In a meta-analysis study of grade retention over the past decade, Jimerson (2001), reports that evidence from these studies failed to show that grade retention provided greater benefits to students with academic or adjustment difficulties than promotion to the next grade. As further evidence of the negative repercussions of retention, research has identified it as the single strongest predictor for students dropping out (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Lillard & DeCicca, 2001). When questioned about their decision to drop out of school, many students report feelings of defeat, self-derision, classmates deemed as “too young,” and inappropriate education strategies as contributors to their decision (Gewertz, 2006).

Lane et al. (2005) report exacerbation of poor future learning opportunities, attendance problems, feelings of incompetence, and lack of self-esteem in over-aged students. Some students not only ever catch up to their grade level peers, but they are also academically behind their younger classmates. In some instances this failure to catch up leads to dropping out of school.

Nonetheless, some students are able to manage one or more retentions and still experience success in their educational program. Not all retained students drop out of school or experience negative repercussions; it appears likely that something occurs in the experiences of these students that allow them to adapt and meet the challenges placed before them. Understanding what enables these students to successfully rebound from

retention is important to establishing quality educational programs that address students' needs.

As a middle school educator of adolescent students just beginning to encounter the consequences of an earlier retention, I am in a position to see the effects of this phenomenon first hand. It is not uncommon for me to have a student enrolled in my class with a birth year two to three years prior to the majority of the other students in my class. These retained students face the realization that they will need to make vital decisions by the next school year pertaining to their immediate future. In this Mid-Atlantic state, at the age of 16, students along with their parents and school administrators are able to make decisions about continuing their education past their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, one of which may result in the decision to drop out. In addition, these students are faced with circumstances traditionally reserved for students in age appropriate grades such as becoming licensed drivers, deciding whether to associate with those who more closely match their age, or remain socially involved in the lives of those much younger.

As a response to the circumstances of being retained one or more times, the adjustments made by these students contribute to changes in their persona. A new system of interactions and decisions serves to mold and shape these students (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998). I believe the ways in which students with retention in their academic background contend with peer interactions, self-esteem, continuing their education, truancy, and social issues contribute to the shaping of their individual identities.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore, through the voices of previously retained adolescents 15 years of age old and older, the impact of retention on their attitudes, beliefs, goals, and aspirations. This research uncovers the perspective retained students bring away from retention experiences, and what are they able to do with it in respect to their present and future opportunities.

In reading grade level retention analysis by researchers such as Byrnes, (1989); Eide & Goldhaber, (2005); Heubert, (2002); Jimerson, ( 2001), it appears that educators presume to “know” how retention affects students’ academic, social, behavioral, and emotional development based upon the researchers’ own biases, assumptions, and beliefs. Seldom do the students for whom retention has impacted their lives have input into the decision regarding their retentions or the opportunity to describe or take an outside observer into their worlds (Phelan et al., 1998). In previous studies (e.g., Alexander, Entwisle & Dauber, 2003; Gottfredson, Fink, & Graham, 1994; and Jimerson, 1999), the researchers use quantitative data to interpret meaning and impact of retention and consequently retell this information from an adult’s perspective.

This study reveals through first person narratives a more authentic representation of what the experience of retention means to its participants. Documenting the experience of retention through the words of participants gives voice to these students whose reported stories have previously reached us through quantitative reports based on academic achievement, as well as through educators’, parents’, and statisticians’ perception.

## **Significance**

A study of the influence of retention on the social and emotional development of retained students and, consequently, its influence on academic and future aspiration is relevant for several personal professional, research based, and practical reasons. I will discuss a personal professional significance first, leading into research significance which explores previous methods that rely on quantitative data from younger students to gauge the impact of retention. The practical significance for the study presents information about behavioral consequences, policy making decisions, and fiscal responsibilities impacted by grade level retention. The term impact speaks to the long range effect retention may have on students. I conclude the significance discussion by exploring the impact of retention from the older adolescent's perspective.

### **Personal Professional Significance**

Once I was asked, "What do you feel is the most important issue for administrators to focus on today?" After some thought, I answered, "I believe, speaking from a teacher's perspective, the issue of 15 year old students being enrolled in classrooms with 12 year olds." Many students two or three years older than their classmates are products of at least two retentions. In the classroom, I observe, some students with retentions are the source of behavior issues, truancy, academic underachievement, and apparent apathy. As a teacher, I feel frustrated not understanding how to best educate these students and I experience puzzlement as to what is occurring within them to cause the previously mentioned issues. After identifying my source of frustration, my thoughts run to why these issues are common for retained students? Has

their situation created a subculture that we as outsiders do not understand? I want to know how these students make sense of grade retention and how their understanding of it influences their behavior and decision making.

### **Research Significance**

Retention research reveals educators', administrators', and policy makers' endorsement, non-support, or ambivalence toward retention as a means of eradicating poor achievement in school. Researchers and educators define and construct meanings thought to be critical in understanding the impact of retention on students. Although many of these findings center on the implications of retention for young adolescents, to date few studies are available that qualitatively investigate retention from the perspective of the adolescents experiencing the effect of retention.

Retention research typically utilizes statistical data from young children in kindergarten, grade one, two, or three. Stipek (1981) indicates that at this early age children critically assess their peers' performance more accurately than they are able to assess their own performance. Consequently, they may not be able to fully comprehend the consequences and/or justifications of repeating a grade. Adolescent students 15 years of age and older, however, are at a more complex level of cognitive development. These students comprehend and attach meaning to such life events and are able to articulate these meanings. They are essentially at the crossroads of their lives because they become eligible to leave school (at age 16 in this Mid-Atlantic state) while they are still in middle school or making the transition to high school. The need for more research that focuses on adolescents' understanding of the experience of retention is critical to understand how



the decision to retain results in long term consequences for the retained student. Using retained students' own voices to convey the perspective and understanding they internalize allows others to participate in the experience as a third party with first person vision. The perspective that these students lend to the body of knowledge on the impact of retention is essential to discerning whether retention has an adverse effect or no effect on students' attitudes, self-esteem, and future endeavors.

My research adds to the existing studies on retention, which focus primarily on the perspectives of teachers, administrators, parents, and researchers, by exploring the reflective perspective of older students who have experienced retention. It is important to explore the understanding of older students as opposed to younger students because when younger students are asked to explain how retention affects their social and future educational aspirations they lack the articulation and reflective skills available to older students. These skills are necessary from a research perspective to fully understand the meaning these students have assigned to what has occurred in their educational experience. And in turn, this study has a strong potential to play a role in the decisions that adolescents and their families make concerning their future, including whether to remain in school or to leave. In addition, this research is a direct approach to student reality rather than a translation of that reality into generalizations and theory (Penna & Tallerico, 2005; Phelan et al., 1998). Research that examines retention through students' voices makes it possible to move away from focusing on retention based solely on individual characteristics, i.e., gender, ethnicity, and/or socioeconomic barriers as causal factors of retention. This perspective will redirect the focus to what impact the experience

of retention actually means to students who have been retained. In addition, looking at the impact of retention through the voices of adolescent students allows the reader to analyze and reflect on the process, practice, and structure of the educational environment retention has created for students.

Although several studies assert the effects of grade retention, little qualitative data exist that explains what this effect looks like. In addition, these studies do not provide insight as to what retained students are able to do with the experience (Dawson, 1998; Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, 2001). My research begins to fill in this gap.

### **Practical Significance**

Increased discipline incidents, high rates of truancy, lack of substantial academic growth, diminished self-efficacy, predisposition toward dropping out, and diminished wage earning potential are all by-products of retention (Eide & Goldhaber, 2005). When retained students reach later adolescence and are older than grade level peers, the implications of these issues are often exacerbated (Lane et al., 2005). These students often participate in bullying behavior, disruption of instruction, substance abuse, and truancy. The data gathered from this study may assist educators in understanding why retained students are more apt to behave inappropriately.

Interviewing retained students and their educators can generate data that informs educators to make better policy and procedure decisions relevant to the practice of retention. Retention decisions based on this data will enable educators to achieve a higher success rate and positive outcomes for retained students by enabling them to fully

understand how retention based on standardized testing data, academic achievement, and maturity impacts students.

If teachers, administrators, and parents remain unaware of the educational, emotional, and social needs of this population of students, they will continue to instruct retained students under the same umbrella they we instruct on-grade level students. Without educational intervention, the cycle of failure becomes a recurring theme. This underscores the importance of appropriate remedial strategies and emphasizes the responsibility of educators to promote educational programs that encourages the social and academic success of all students (NCES, 1995). Inadequate educational programs may have significant economic repercussions for students who have experienced retentions, as employers are reluctant to hire those who fall short of entry level abilities. Retained students' success in their educational program consequently lowers their earning potential.

### **Summary**

This research provides an insider's view into retained students' lives (Phelen et al., 1998). I specifically selected this particular group of students to study because they are at the crossroads of their educational path. It is at this time that they must make important decisions about their future educational goals. These students are also able to reflect on previous experiences and present a clearer picture of the consequences retention has had for their personal and educational worlds. It is important to investigate students' interpretations of their retention experiences as a means of understanding the meaning students form as a result of interactions among school, home, and self.

## **Research Questions**

This study examines the end result of retention from older students' perspectives. It seeks to explore students' perspective regarding retention that these students developed through interactions with peers, parents, behavioral issues (i.e. truancy, substance abuse, and socioeconomic status) and school. From these perspectives, I want to understand the impact of retention on older students' social and emotional development, as well as future aspirations (i.e. graduation, college, employment, dropping out). The following question will guide my research:

How do adolescent students perceive their retention experience(s)?

From this overarching question, these sub-questions are explored:

- How do adolescent students who have previously been retained perceive events which they believe led to their retention?
- How do adolescent students who have previously been retained perceive their interactions with teachers, peers, parents, and administrators?
- What future aspirations do previously retained adolescent students express? How do they perceive their role in determining these goals?

Chapter two provides the conceptual framework that will be used to address the research questions. This chapter presents two theories, Symbolic interactionism and self-efficacy which are used to ground this study.

## **2. Conceptual Framework and Literature Review**

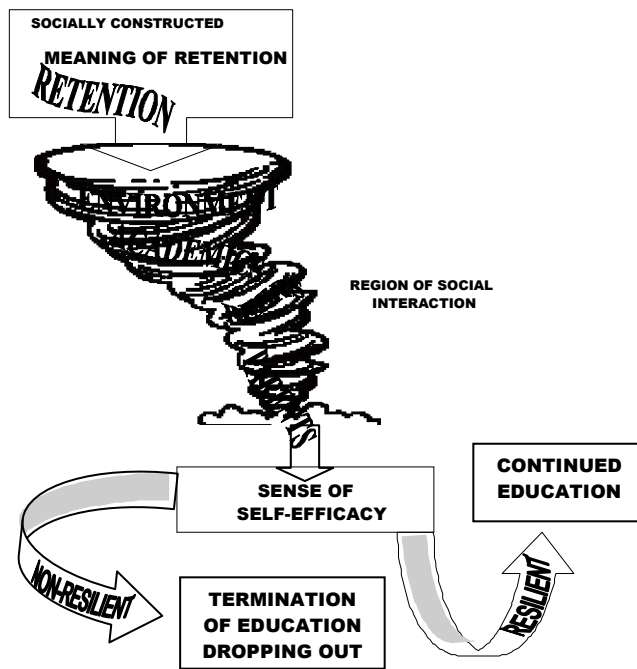
### **Introduction**

The practice of grade level retention impacts the social, emotional, and academic development of individuals based upon the meaning retained students attach to this experience, interactions within the experience, and students' sense of self-efficacy. Throughout life we may often hear people muse, "We are the sum total of our experiences" (author unknown). If this statement is true, then in education on a yearly basis we bestow upon many of our students one of the largest life changing experiences that some may face, that which we often refer to as a "gift of time," retention.

Current literature reporting the effectiveness of grade level retention, focuses on academic achievement (Chen, Liu, Zhang, Shi, & Rozelle, 2010; Greene & Winters, 2009; Lorence, 2006), including the likelihood of retained students dropping out of school (Allensworth, 2004; Ou & Reynolds, 2010; Temple, Reynolds, & Ou, 2001), and socio-emotional effects (Anderson, Jimerson, & Whipple, 2005; Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008). Most perceive retention as having a negative effect upon students. Earlier research concurs with the findings of these more recent studies (Holmes, 1994; Jimerson, 2001). In this study I delve into the retention experience of older adolescent students and examine the perspective they have developed as a result of interactions between home and school. By exploring these interactions, I hope to present a clearer

understanding of what impact retention actually has on students' social and academic progression

The graphic representation of my conceptual framework below (Figure 1) demonstrates how retained students' make meaning of the experience of retention. I begin to develop this conceptual framework by introducing the concept of retention into students' lives and examining the socially constructed meaning these students develop as a result of their experience. The meaning is filtered through the interactions these students have within home and school. The swirling effect represents the dynamic influence these components have on students' emotional, educational, and social development. The retention experience channels through the individual student's sense of self-efficacy. I visualize this area as unknown primarily because it is here that educators and policy-makers are familiar with the outcome, either graduation or dropping out, but are unfamiliar with what factors into students' decisions leading to the outcome. It is here that I believe students make decisions about either continuing their education through graduation (resiliency), or terminating their formal education process (non-resiliency).



*Figure 1. Graphic Representation of Conceptual Framework*

In this chapter, I examine the phenomenon of retention through the perspective of symbolic interactionism theory. This theory provides a theoretical foundation for socially constructed meaning of retention—or interactions that are important in the process of developing meaning for retained students. I concentrate on home, to include demographics and parental interactions; peers, to include environmental issues; and school, to include academics and educational stakeholders (i.e. principals, counselors, policy makers). Finally, I examine how students use their developed meaning and sense of self-efficacy as they decide whether or not and how to persist in their education.

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

The experiences of students who have been retained influence how they view themselves and the meaning they assign to their station in life. Symbolic interactionism

(SI) theory (Blumer, 1969; Blumer & Morrione, 2004; Mead 1934) provides a lens through which to examine students' experiences with retention. This theory views individuals as social products whose actions are influenced by their own interpretations and meaning making of the environment around them (Blumer, 1969).

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, two distinct branches of symbolic interactionism developed: The Chicago School under Herbert Blumer and the Iowa School under Manford Kuhn. Blumer coined the term, "symbolic interactionism" and maintains that the world can only be understood in the context of subjective experience. He suggests that the construction of meaning is micro-oriented or the construction of meaning is influenced by individual experiences. Kuhn believed individuals' place in the social structure of society must be considered when investigating social interaction. Behavior and meaning is interpreted by social class. Kuhn's perspective is macro-oriented; meaning the construction of meaning is influenced by institutional practices (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003).

SI is a social theory first envisioned by George Herbert Mead in the 1920s and 1930s, while teaching at the University of Chicago (Blumer, 1969). One of his students Herbert Blumer brought this theory back to the forefront by writing and interpreting key concepts. This succinct interpretation of the theory enables others to better understand and utilize the theory. Blumer outlines Mead's three basic premises of SI as follows:

1. Human beings act toward life experiences on the basis of the meaning that the experiences have for them.
2. Meaning derives from social interaction that one has with others.



3. Humans handle and modify meaning through an interpretive process of the experiences they encounter.

This study utilizes Blumer's approach to understanding individual behavior. He maintains that meaning arises out of social interactions people have with each other. The main assumption for his approach is that meaning is dynamic and changes over the course of relationships and interactions. These meanings are interpreted and refined by the individuals involved (Blumer, 1969). Through this theory, it is possible to examine the personal side of a student's feelings and emotions relevant to his or her educational experience. SI theory's approach to understanding the phenomena of social life focuses on the construction of reality developed by active and creative participants through their interaction with others (Blumer). According to Mead, as reported by Blumer, humans base their action and reaction on the actions of others. The interpretations of these actions become symbols stored in memory from which people make choices with respect to their behavior and/or future endeavors. Mead also believed that society is a reflection of one's reality, meaning people reflect or give back their perception of how society views them. Therefore, a logical approach to understanding human behavior is through an analysis of an act within a society.

SI helps explain how students who have been retained are able to navigate through the experience of being two or more years older than their peers as well as how they interpret and respond to the impact of this experience. By looking at the three basic premises listed above it is possible to visualize what retained students undergo,

understand the meaning students garner from experiencing retention, and finally gather a first-hand account of where they believe their future educational paths will develop.

### **Human Beings Act on the Basis of their Experience**

The first premise of SI states that people act toward life experiences based on the meaning the experiences have for them (Blumer, 1969). In a study of retained students, McCoy and Reynolds (1999) suggest that after repeating a grade, retained students have lower academic achievement than similar students who were not retained. Several statistical studies indicate that grade level retention is the single most influential event that is a powerful predictor of dropping out of school (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Lillard & DeCicca, 2001). Research has shown that retained students have a higher risk of leaving school earlier than their promoted counterparts (Jimerson, Anderson, et al., 2002; Jimerson, Ferguson, et al., 2002). These studies (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 1999) propose that low-achieving students who are promoted to the next grade are more likely to graduate from school than students who are retained. Other studies (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1985; Mantzicopoulos, 1997) suggest that retention in the early grades is harmful, both academically and emotionally. In addition, any positive academic outcomes are relatively short term and students eventually fall behind again in their academic achievement (Johnson, 2001). Reviewing meta-analyses and the original research cited therein, I note the analyses include criticism of the prevalence of conflicting reports on the impact of retention on students' academic and social development without considering individual student's experiences (Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, 2001). Earlier studies were quantitative and therefore did not bring out

students' perspectives. The preponderance of the literature states that retention is detrimental to students' emotional well-being and academic achievement. This study reveals exactly what the negative effects appear to be. Research indicates that retained students are agents who develop strategies to cope with their situation (Jimerson, 2001). One situation that educators often place them in is enrolling them in the same grade with a different teacher while continuing to teach them in the same way (Shepard & Smith, 1990). Students' meanings are processed and modified according to the situations they encounter. These modifications can include negative techniques such as misbehavior and avoidance as well as modifications that lead to success. In addition, some educational programs for these retained students include encounters with those who are academically successful, thus creating a mismatch of academic ability and socio-emotional positions. Some argue that this mismatch provides positive peer role models (Sandoval & Fitzgerald, 1985). However, Byrd, Weitzman, and Auinger (1997), argue that placing older students in the same classroom as younger students often leads to increased rates of behavior problems and higher levels of risky-behavior, such as drug and substance abuse. This interaction factors into the sum total of who the student becomes (persona) as well as how he or she interacts with others (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000). These experiences or interactions may also determine whether a path of resilience or non-resilience (graduation or GED or dropping out or expulsion) is undertaken.

At first glance it appears impossible to enter the mind of another to see interpretive acts. One method of accomplishing this task is to utilize a qualitative study which enables participants to describe the meaning of the lived experience of retention.

How a person builds self-consciousness and self-concept from social interaction is a challenging question. Kronick (1974) suggests that what one says defines one's personal reality of what has occurred in the past. Blumer's interpretation of Mead's theory is a helpful tool to support this type of research, as the participants are the describers of their past events.

### **Meaning from Social Interaction with Others**

The second premise of SI suggests meaning derives from or arises out of the social interaction that one has with one's fellow human beings (Blumer, 1969). A person must acknowledge the action of another, analyze and interpret that action, and then make a choice about future actions based on that interpretation. This perspective provides a way of interpreting what students express as the impact of retention on their lives.

SI views meaning as social products, as creations developed through the defining activities of people as they interact. We define who we are from the reflections we get from other people, especially those in key positions within our lives. As a classroom teacher, I often encounter students who attribute their reaction and meaning regarding retention to teasing and negative interaction with their younger classmates. The meaning students derive from this experience directly affects their interactions within the experience and with others (Byrnes, 1989; Shepard & Smith, 1990).

**Parents/Guardians.** In this study, the term parents refer both to the adolescents' biological mothers and fathers as well as their legal guardians. The attitudes of students and parents, in regard to retention, are critical components in retention outcomes. When all involved have a positive attitude toward retention, taking another year to complete a

grade level is more likely to be a positive experience. In contrast, a negative attitude is more likely to generate a self-fulfilling prophecy of continued failure or lack of success (Grant & Richardson, 1999; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Consulting parents prior to the decision to retain is rare. Parents validate this claim in reports of lacking a voice in the decision making process and often feeling that the decision to retain is an accomplished fact prior to their notification (Akmal & Larsen, 2004; Grant & Richardson, 1999). Parental perspective regarding retention varies. Many parents feel that retention gave their children an opportunity to grow developmentally, academically, socially, and emotionally; while others believe retention has hindered their child and created an academic, social, and emotional deficit (Jimerson et al., 1997). Parental involvement and attitude toward retention are important factors in the interactions these parents have with their children who are facing and/or have faced retention. Parental responses to retention affect the meaning students attach to retention. Parents, who express disappointment and contribute negatively to the experience, often increase students' feelings of failure, rebellion, and hopelessness (Akmal & Larsen; Grant & Richardson).

**Peers.** In addition to how retained students perceive retention, they must also deal with the perceptions of their peers. Research indicates that many retained students have difficulties with their peers. In some instances, they are judged and labeled as failures and not as valuable as their academically successful peers (Byrnes, 1989; Shepard & Smith, 1990). Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, & Sroufe (1997) maintain that retained students must deal with how they appear before their peers. This seeking of approval

from peers often leads to behavioral problems, immaturity, and other socially unacceptable characteristics. He maintains that these issues will in most cases exacerbate rather than diminish over time. SI theory suggests that retained students take this interaction with their peers and begin to make choices about future actions.

Alexander et al. (2003) and Jimerson, Ferguson, et al. (2002) address the psychological costs of separating students from their peers. They assert that when retained students compare themselves with their on-grade level academic peers, they associate grade level retaining or “flunking” as detrimental to their self-esteem and how they view themselves. They often view their classmates as more popular and/or smarter than they view themselves. As a result of the daily contact that retained students have with their peers who have moved ahead, they continuously encounter numerous reminders of perceived failure.

Smalls (1997) reports the taunting and teasing of retained students by their classmates often creates a combative environment. In some cases, in order to avoid such repercussions, many retained students rarely admit to having retention in their academic background. This perceived sense of shame occurs in spite of the euphemisms employed by teachers, parents, and/or principals. Retained students perceive retention negatively and in most cases simply view it as “flunking.” SI theory maintains that this perception that retained students form develops as a result of the activities and interactions they encounter.

**Environment.** Often the decision to retain depends on environmental issues, which may overlap with peer and school interactions. Several environmental factors such

as family structure and poverty may cause these students to be unsuccessful in traditional classrooms. Retention can often lead to negative emotions such as frustration, self-doubt, and shame which can lead to alienation, an increased risk for dropping out, involvement in the criminal justice system, and other deleterious outcomes (Jimerson, Anderson, et al, 2002). For many students, life events such as having to work, becoming a parent, truancy as a result of working or having to care for family members, contributed to retention and/or dropping out (Gewertz, 2006). Children exposed to multiple risk factors, including retention, are more likely to experience difficulties later on, including both criminal and violent behaviors (Cairns & Cairns, 1984). Typically, adolescent students have reached a level of maturity where they are able to reflect back on past experiences and to give voice to the impact these adverse factors have on their meaning and consequently their decision making processes.

**School.** Some educators and policy makers maintain that holding students back a year gives them an opportunity to catch up or master the concepts they were previously unsuccessful in mastering (Stone, Engle, Nagaoka, & Roderick, 2005). This positive perspective on retention seems to be atypical of the meaning retained students derive from the experience. Many report feelings of frustration and failure despite the positive connotation educators present to students and parents (Holmes, 2006). It appears to be virtually impossible to predict which students would benefit from retention and/or use the experience as a catalyst for higher achievement (Dawson, 1998).

Teacher recommendations are often instrumental in the decision to retain a student or not (Bowman, 2005; Range, Pijanowski, Holt, & Young, 2012). Teachers'

beliefs about retention often affect whether they refer a child for retention. Beliefs about how children develop, school readiness, and how teachers influence this development shape how teachers view the application and value of retention (Shepard & Smith, 1989). Usually, the teacher's judgment pertaining to his or her perception of whether a student has mastered grade level work and/or is immature in the development of social and readiness skills plays a large role in the final decision to retain or promote a student (Tomchin & Impara, 1992). Many educational stakeholders struggle with retention decisions. How educators address this dilemma greatly affects how students perceive the experience of retention.

Educational stakeholders are those who have a stake in the progression of students through an educational program. These stakeholders include teachers, principals, and other education personnel. Some studies maintain if retention is to be a positive intervention, it must be a result of collaborative efforts among the student's teachers, appropriate specialists or members of the support staff, the child's parents, and an appropriate administrator (Jimerson et al., 1997).

With the increased dependency on high-stakes testing (tests which are gateways to educational progression) serving as indicators of academic achievement, educational stakeholders are more apt to view retention as a solution to poor performance on standardized testing. Since the 1990s, promotion policies have historically retained students who perform poorly on standardized tests as a central component of standards-based reform agendas enacted by school districts and state legislatures nationwide (Bali, Anagnostopoulos, & Roberts, 2005). Placing emphasis on standardized testing to



measure student and school performances may put additional pressure on states and districts to retain low achieving students (Haney, 2000). The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 returned this issue to the forefront by requiring standardized testing at each grade level (Bali et al., 2005). Just as there were pre-NCLB concerns about retention leading to dropping out, in an era of standards based assessments and stepped up accountability (i.e., post-NCLB), the tendency for more retentions and dropouts is likely increasing (Guilfoyle, 2006; Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, 2001).

### **Handling and Modifying Meaning**

The third premise of SI states the handling and modification of meaning through interpretive processes used by people dealing with situations they encounter provides a foundation for how students construct meaning about retention. Interpretation is a formative process in which meanings are developed and revised for the guidance and formulation of action. Through these interactions, students carry on an inner dialogue about these interactions. They then react as a result of meanings that come through due to self-talk. The actions of others are assessed, noted, interpreted, and meaning begins to form from this data. Interpretation of interactions is more important than simply applying previously integrated meanings. It is an active process of formulation, reconsiderations, and revisions.

### **Future Aspirations**

Retained students are at or approaching an age where they often make a critical decision about their future educational endeavors. They must decide if they are to remain in school and/or continue on to higher education, or dropout. Lillard and DeCicca (2001)

maintain that grade level retention is the single strongest predictor of which students will drop out. This predictor is even stronger than those of parental income or mother's education level. Consistent with Blumer's (1969) model of SI, Jimerson et al. (2000) concludes that dropping out is a developmental process, not an event. The decision to drop out is a process that students migrate toward as a result of educational experiences. In fact, dropping out is the confluence of one's developmental history (e.g., early family experience, home environment, individual characteristics), educational experiences, and current circumstances.

In light of the obstacles that retained students face, some are able to improve their academic performances, graduate from high school, and in some instances continue on to college. Others who remain academically behind are involuntarily dismissed from high school because of age, or drop out. The meanings these students develop as a result of retention explain the decision by some to pursue education, while others do not.

### **Summary**

In line with SI theory, interactions with parents, peers, environment, teachers, and principals enable students to actively reconstruct and modify the meaning that retention holds for them. Meaning arises out of interactions and is reinterpreted within the context of the experience. SI provides a useful framework for understanding students' decisions to complete school or not. Assuming students assign meaning to every aspect of the retention experience and that assigned meanings guide behavior, then these meanings influence their actions. A student's social and personal interactions are useful in understanding their educational decisions.

In addition to understanding what students make of their situations, it is necessary to understand the cognitive processes which Bandura (1986) considers instrumental in guiding and shaping learning and human behavior. Symbolic interactionism necessitates adaptations in order to further navigate through an academic program that includes retention. These adaptations involve students' self-efficacy. As stated earlier, self-efficacy (SE) is the belief in one's capability to navigate through situations or experiences. These beliefs determine how people feel, think, and behave (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006). The application of symbolic interactionism theory brings out the meaning adolescent students derive from the experience of retention. Self-efficacy theory supports this meaning and explains how adolescent students engage in some type of action, such as graduating from high school or dropping out. In this study, students' increased sense of self-efficacy reinforces the interpretation of retention that enables adolescents to move on. The use of symbolic interactionism along with self-efficacy provides a balanced approach to understanding adolescent students' perception of the impact of retention.

### **Self-Efficacy Theory**

Students' sense of self-efficacy factor into decisions that retained students make about their future education. "To understand what students believe they are capable of accomplishing, it is necessary to explore students' beliefs about their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). Bandura (1997) considers self-efficacy to be the most influential self-perception in the mediation of human behavior and learning. The

role of self-efficacy is a cognitive regulator in addition to being a juncture through which other regulators proceed.

Self-efficacy affects the activities students choose to avail themselves of and the amount of persistence they are willing to expend (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). These decisions greatly affect students' academic progress as well as social interactions. Self-efficacy theory helps me understand why these students make the decisions they make as well as how their social, emotional, and academic performances are affected.

Students who have high sense of efficacy and high outcome expectations are often confident. They put forth high levels of effort, persistence, and cognitive engagement in academic tasks. A student whose statistical data show an aptitude to succeed, yet consistently does poorly in school, may have high efficacy coupled with low outcome expectations. These students may drop out of school because they perceive no connection between their learning and the grades or outcomes they earn. Students low in self-efficacy and outcome expectations may display behavior and academic responses characterized by resignation, apathy, and diminished effort (Bandura, as cited by Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

Pajares (2006) puts forth the following assumption, "The beliefs that young people hold about their capability to succeed in their endeavors are vital forces in the subsequent successes or failures they attain in these endeavors" (p. 339). Unless adolescents believe their actions will enable them to reach their goals, they have little incentive to persevere in the face of adversity (Pajares).

## **Resiliency**

Not all students who are retained end up dropping out of school; some graduate from high school and continue their education in post-secondary institutions. These students would be considered successes or academically resilient. Academic resilience refers to the ability of a student to recover from low academic performances or grade retention. These two paths, continuing school or dropping out of school, are directly influenced by students' sense of self-efficacy and level of resiliency.

A study by Catterall (1998) reveals several factors that influence academic resilience: one factor being the teacher's responsiveness as measured in his or her ability and willingness to listen and take interest in students. Another factor is student engagement in school based activities. A third factor is supportive family behaviors such as parental involvement in school organizations, establishing homework routines, limiting the amount of television viewing, as well as monitoring and encouraging good work habits and behavior. Such behavior and structure contributes to the academic resilience of the student who has experienced retention. Catterall suggests that the process of experiencing academic resilience or academic non-resilience may be within the influence of educators.

## **Summary**

Retention impacts the social, emotional, and academic development of individuals based on their interaction with others. I apply the social constructionist theory symbolic interactionism developed by Herbert Blumer (1969) to explore students' perceptions of their experiences with retention. Encased in these interactions are adaptations and

alterations to an individual's sense of his or her ability to navigate through this experience. I employ Albert Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory of self-efficacy to understand students' perceptions of what they can do with these adaptations and alterations to their socially constructed meaning of retention. This theoretical framework allows me to explore the retention experience of adolescent students and give voice to how they believe their experiences have shaped interpretation of retention as well as formed their perceptions of the impact it has had on their educational lives. Understanding students' perspective regarding retention requires the consideration of academic, social, and environmental factors. Symbolic interactionism and self-efficacy theory provide a means of retrieving and understanding a first-hand account of this experience.

### **3. Methodology**

This chapter describes the methodology for collecting and analyzing data to address the research question focused on how retained adolescent students perceive their retention experiences. It describes the study's focus and setting, establishes the criteria for participation, addresses the gathering of data, and describes the process used to analyze data. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations and validity issues.

#### **Research Design**

The research design for this investigation began with a graphic representation of my conceptual framework map presented in chapter two. Grounded in two major theory bases, my conceptual framework refined and honed the research questions and displays the parameters for the study. Maxwell (2005) describes this process as concept mapping. He states that this process provides a visual of what the theory says is going on with the phenomenon being studied. Maxwell maintains that a creating a concept map allows the researcher to make visible implicit theory so that implications, limitations, and relevance to the study can be better understood. Working with the concept map showed me how I might approach investigating adolescent students' perspectives of retention experiences. In this study, I want to understand through adolescent students' voices their perspectives

on the influences they believe the experience has on their academic progress, social and emotional well-being, and future aspirations.

The nature of this study lends itself to a case study design. This design allows me to analyze within each setting and across settings. It enables me to address how retained students perceive their experiences, while taking into consideration how the retention phenomenon is influenced by the context within which it is situated (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Using a case study is appropriate when little is known about the population or situation (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman define case as “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context. The case is, in effect, your unit of analysis” (p.25). A case must exist within a bounded system that focuses on the specifics of the case. In this study, the bounded system involved understanding adolescent students’ perspectives of grade level retention. Stake (2006) states, “Qualitative understanding of cases requires experiencing the activity of the case as it occurs in its contexts and in its particular situation” (p.2).

In multiple case study research, the single case is of interest to the researcher because it belongs to a particular set of cases (Stake, 2006). Multiple case studies share common characteristic or condition, and are bound together by category (Merriam, 1998). In this study, I am interested in looking at the impact of retention through the perspective of adolescent students. The individual cases of the adolescents are nested in the experience of retention. Thus, I employed a multiple case study nested in the context of their families and schools in an effort to achieve a thorough and in-depth understanding of adolescent students’ perspectives on the influence of grade level retention on their



sense of self-efficacy and future aspirations. A multiple case study was chosen to give voice to six retained students and allow them to tell others about their experience with retention.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Method**

A qualitative approach allows me to study several individuals who have shared an experience. In this approach, research focuses on a concept or phenomenon and seeks to understand the meaning of experiences of individuals who are a part of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). This method provides experiential data about the interaction between home and school and the meaning students develop as a result of these interactions. This method contrasts with a quantitative approach which concludes with statements developed from statistics. I move away from empirical conclusions about the impact of retention and focus on the retained students' socially constructed meaning of retention as a result of interaction with peers, parental and environmental elements, and educational stakeholders.

In contrast to previous quantitative research such as Dawson, 1998; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jimerson et al., 2000, this study explores retention qualitatively. The aforementioned studies primarily measure the achievement progress of students previously retained. In addition, most of these studies typically take place during the primary years of education and capture quantitatively what occurs after an initial retention.

Qualitative research from the student's perspective is limited. One qualitative study explored retention from the perspective of the student. In this research, Yamamoto

and Byrnes (1987) conducted a study in which students rated 20 stressful life events that included losing a parent, going to the dentist, and getting a bad report card. The results showed that by the time students reached sixth grade they reported only the loss of a parent and going blind as more stressful than grade retention. A similar study was conducted in 2001. In this research, sixth grade students rated grade retention as the single most stressful life event (Anderson et al., 2005). A limited amount of empirical data is available from this point (grade six and beyond) through subsequent retentions (Jimerson, 2002; Rumberger, 1995). These subsequent retentions accompany a new set of consequences that affect students' academic, social, and emotional experiences altered by retention.

Qualitative research strives to capture participants' personal perspectives and experiences in relationship to a particular life occurrence. This method of research is well suited for understanding the meaning study participants derive from events, situations, and experiences they are involved with and the account that they give their lives (Maxwell, 2005). I believe adolescent students are able to articulate a retrospective account of past experiences more readily than a typical elementary age student because it is in later years that the implications of retention become apparent. This study taps into how these students interpret the implications of retention in their world.

Through this study, I analyze the influence of interactions among students, parents, peers, and other educational stake holders with respect to their experience and its repercussions. This approach emphasizes the subjective aspects of the students behavior, which allows me to gain entry into the conceptual world of the students in order to

understand how and what constructed meaning develops around events in daily living (Phelan et al, 1998). In addition, looking at this phenomenon qualitatively allows educators to see beyond a description of what has happened, to understanding how adolescents perceive their experiences.

Students' words and descriptions are used to give voice to the meaning they construct with respect to retention and provide an understanding of what future opportunities they believe are available to them. This study provides an opportunity for the reader to experience what it is like to be a person who had been retained (Weiss, 1994). Qualitative research enables me to collect data specific to retention, thus allowing me to describe and understand how students perceive the reality of retention in their lives. Miles and Huberman (1994) state that a qualitative approach helps to "explicate the way in which people in particular settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage day-to-day situations." (p.86).

### **Learning Retained Students' Perspectives**

I use the voices of retained students to reveal their perspectives about how they process their retention experience, how it really affects their lives, and what a retention experience actually feels like. I gathered data to address these queries through interviews. These revelations will enable educators to compare the assumptions that we make about retained students' experiences, with participants' actual recollections. McMillan and Schumacher (2001), suggest that qualitative inquiry is most useful when the researcher wants to present data through authentic and representative remarks of the participants rather than those of the researcher. Miles and Huberman (1994), maintain that this

approach allows the researcher to study elements of life through the perceptions of the participants in a study. Using participants' words and descriptions to examine their perceptions of retention allows the researcher to understand how it influences their understanding, decisions, and actions. Teachers' words are used as additional data to help understand the influence interactions with educators have in shaping and developing adolescents' meaning making and processing of the retention experience. When I first conceptualized this investigation, in addition to interviewing students, I wanted to interview teachers and principals. After meeting with the students, the majority report their interactions with past and present principals as minimal. Therefore, this study includes retained students and only their past and present teachers.

### **Setting**

This study takes place in Pachecko Public Schools (PPS), (this and all subsequent proper nouns are pseudonyms), a small diverse school system comprised of 13 elementary schools, five middle schools, and one high school<sup>1</sup>. Statistically, the district's student population is 13,222 students. The ethnic breakdown is 32.5% Black, 32.4% Hispanic, 27.2% Caucasian, 4.91% Asian Pacific, and 0.57% Native American, and 2.25% unspecified. The student population represents 128 countries of birth and 80 different native languages. Fifty-nine percent of the students receive free or reduced price meals, 12.5% percent receive special education services, 25% require English Language

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<sup>1</sup> To protect participants' anonymity, I am withholding all demographic information related to Pachecko Public Schools. All descriptive information is of public record and gathered from the official website of Pachecko Public Schools.

Learners (ELL) services, and 12.9% receive talented and gifted services. Table 1 provides the ethnic statistics for Pachecko High School (PHS).

Table 1

*Pachecko High School Demographics*

Students	Pachecko High School
Total Enrollment	3,133
African American	37%
Hispanic	33%
White	22%
Asian/Pacific Islander and Native American	6%
Unspecified	2%
Free/Reduced Price Meals	51%

I chose this setting because an average of nearly 9% of the students in the class of 2008 dropped out of school in the Mid-Atlantic state where PPS is located. Pachecko Public Schools had a dropout rate of 11.9% (Pachecko Public School Website). It was reported that these students' backgrounds showed warning signs of missing classes and repeating grades (Pachecko District News, 2010). In my math classes, I often had up to

six students who were over age enrolled. As a result of these statistics, Pachecko Public Schools appears to be an optimal setting for conducting this study.

### **Participants**

Initially, I used criterion-based selection to identify participants from PHS. Criterion-based selection involves selecting individuals who meet an established criterion for participation in a study (LeCompte, Preissle, & Tesch, 1993). This investigation has the following criteria for inclusion: (a) retained one or more times; and (b) 15 years of age or older. When possible, the teachers who are a part of the students' high school education and/or were a part of their retention experience were recruited to add an additional source of data to corroborate, elaborate, and enrich these students' stories. This additional group of people contributed to the study through an interview. This process enabled me to discern similarities and differences in perspectives.

After a group of students who met the established criteria was compiled, purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002), or the extraction of individuals who can provide information needed to answer the research questions, fit the purpose of the study, and situate inside the constraints being faced was implemented. This strategy selected settings, persons, or events deliberately in order to provide information that would otherwise be difficult to obtain (Maxwell, 2005).

A participant search for this research project began in the spring of 2011. Permission to conduct research was obtained from the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) (See Appendix A). Permission to conduct research at PHS was granted from the district's accountability office located in Central Office (see Appendix B). The Pachecko

Public Schools' Information Technology Department (IT) supervisor was contacted to obtain a list of students whose records identify them as being previously retained. The supervisor assigned me to a technician to develop the data bank. Upon scheduling a meeting with the technician, my initial request was met with enthusiasm, but also caution concerning the contentious and sensitive topic of retention in PPS. Subsequent checks on the completion of the data bank were met with several different requests for my approval letters and an outline of the requested data. Each time these requests were fulfilled. In August of 2011, I visited the IT office daily for two weeks culminating in my remaining in the office for an entire workday. At this point, I was informed that the technician was directed to withhold the data. Upon meeting with the IT supervisor and accountability office, and resubmitting my letter of approval from them authorizing me to conduct my study in PPS, the data bank was provided. This data bank was examined with the school counselors and found not to contain the names of all students who had been previously retained because most students were placed in their age appropriate grade at the end of eighth grade.

The importance of identifying a sampling strategy for this group of students became evident because the data bank provided by the IT department did not contain the names of all students with retention in their educational backgrounds. Counselors and teachers from the high school and middle schools who were familiar with previously retained students, who had been extracted from the IT data bank, assisted me in compiling a more usable data bank. Twenty potential participants were included in the

new data bank. Recruitment letters were mailed out to all qualifying participants and their parents (see Appendix C).

Students interested in participating in the study either contacted me directly or indirectly through their counselor. All interested students were considered and matched against the criteria of 15 years of age or older and retained at least once. Stratified purposeful sampling determined the final participants. Stratified purposeful samplings are samples within samples. Purposeful sampling is accomplished by nesting or combining types of purposeful sampling. In this study, criterion sampling was combined with maximum variation (heterogeneity) sampling by taking a stratified purposeful sample of above average, average, and below average cases (Patton, 2002). Initially ten students responded to my recruitment letter. This number of students allows for the possibility that two or more participants might withdrawal from the study. This safeguard ensured a base of at least six active participants. Patton maintains sample size depends on what you want to know, purpose, usefulness, credibility, and what can be done within the constraints of time and resources. Maxwell (2005) states that systematically selecting for typicality and relative homogeneity of a small sample provides more confidence that conclusions formed represent typical members of the general population than those of a same sized sample that utilizes random or accidental variations.

Reybold, Lammert, & Stribling (2012) suggest that participants' stories are embedded within researcher's choices such as research questions, selection criteria, interview style, and analysis technique among other choices. In their opinion, selection of participants is one of the most important aspects of qualitative research because who is



selected and who is excluded shapes the told story. From the initial 10 students, six students who met the criteria for inclusion were selected. Limited time and resources prevented me from working with all 10 participants and six gave me two perspectives from each of the three categories listed below. Six participants was a sufficient number for my purposes. The other potential participants were notified that although they had not been selected at this time, their interest was appreciated and permission was obtained to contact them again should more participants be needed to complete the study. The selected students fit into the following categories:

1. Previously retained students who are deemed “successful” earning at least a “C” (2.0) average; (In this school district, “C” is considered a passing mark).
2. Previously retained students labeled as unsuccessful as a result of their earning below a 2.0 average.
3. Students whose statistical data indicate they should be successful but external factors (i.e. truancy, drugs, family, and/or poverty) prevent their success.

I chose these categories after a discussion with a group of high school counselors about the characteristics of typical high school students. It was agreed upon that these three categories would capture a wide spectrum of retained students. I believe that by taking students from each of these categories, I reduce the likelihood of my selecting only students who have had a “good” experience with retention or only selecting students who have had a “bad” experience with retention. The selection of students from these three categories was done strictly to obtain a more heterogeneous sample. In addition, eight teachers were selected to participate in this study based on their interaction with the

students and/or their presences during the retention process. Table 2 presents each student's gender, age, grade at the time of the interviews, grade they were retained, grade point average, and the teachers that were involved in the students' educational decisions.

Table 2

*Participants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Current Grade</b>	<b>Grade(s) Retained</b>	<b>GPA</b>	<b>Teachers</b>
Allison	F	19	11/12th	1st, 10th	3.0	Mr. Crestwood
Zoe	F	16	10th	3rd	3.0	Mr. Davis
Gina	F	17	10 <sup>th</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup> , 10 <sup>th</sup>	2.4	Mr. Howard
Robert	M	16	9/10 <sup>th</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	0.8	Ms. Crayber Ms. Brantley
Catherine	F	17	11th	10th	1.3	Ms. Lysel Ms. Basil
Matt	M	16	10/11th	9th, 10th	1.1	Ms. Bailey

**Informed Consent**

A consent letter to the parents of these potential participants explained the study and sought permission to solicit these students' for participation (See Appendix D). An assent letter explaining the study and affirming the students' desire to participate in the study was given to each participant (See Appendix E). Since this study takes place in the

high school, I anticipated that some of the participants may be 18 years of age and older; these students were able to provide their own signature of informed consent (See Appendix F). An informed consent letter was also provided and signed by teachers agreeing to participate in the study (see Appendix G).

### **Data collection**

Patton (2002) states the purpose of interviewing is to allow others to enter into other person's perspective (p. 341). Interview protocols were developed from the research questions and the conceptual framework. Interview questions for the students were divided into two parts designed to address the overarching research question and three sub-questions. The first section consisted of questions designed to elicit data about the retention experience. These questions focused on the retention experience, events that led to retention, and interaction with parents, peers, and teachers. These questions addressed the overarching research question, the first two sub-questions, the first and second section of the conceptual framework, and Mead's (1934) first and second premise of SI. The second section collected data on adolescent students' perception of retention, students' sense of self-efficacy, and resiliency or non-resiliency. These questions addressed the third sub-question, the last section of the conceptual framework, and the third premise of SI. Teacher questions focused on perceptions of students and interactions with students.

I conducted two in-depth interviews with the participants in this study (see Appendix H for interview protocol). These interviews centered on open-ended questions to allow the participants to respond in their own words. Patton (2002) maintains that "The

truly open-ended question permits those being interviewed to take whatever direction and use whatever words they want to express what they have to say” (p.354). One interview was conducted in the fall and the second interview was conducted in the spring of the same school year. To accurately capture participants’ thoughts, reflections, and insights, interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. In the five to six months between interviews and after the completion of the interviews, participants and I maintained contact through a free on-line discussion board, a medium that allows asynchronous communication (threaded discussions) and synchronous communication (real-time chat). Participants were able to talk with me privately and/or talk to each other as a group while maintaining anonymity. Students talked specifically about their retention experience and talked to each other about how it felt to be retained. This forum provided an opportunity to further compare the experience between participants. Data from this communication was used to further develop questions and topics to expand and uncover themes and patterns. The on-line discussion board was also used to give students time to further reflect on their experiences. At the end of the data collection, this discussion board was deactivated and deleted. Additional interviews included available teachers familiar with the students and/or their retention experience (See Appendix I for interview protocol). Parents (parents refer to any adult responsible for the student’s well-being during their enrollment in school) were also offered the opportunity to participate in the study. At the request of the child, one parent sat in on her child’s interview and offered insight as we went along. I believe that the adults present in the lives of the students contribute a multi-dimensional view of the retention experience. Permission to review

student records was granted in the informed consent. I was able to gather demographic data as well compare academic data provided by the participants to recorded data (i.e. grade transcripts). In some cases, discrepancies between students reported academic progress and actual transcripts were noted.

### **Data Analysis**

The stories of these individuals' experiences were collected, their perceptions recorded, and emerging themes were analyzed and cataloged to find common and dissimilar threads among their collective experiences. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed to ensure the accuracy of data. Researcher memos describing any attitudes, feelings, non-verbal interactions, and general impressions were completed after each interview. These memos helped me form secondary questions for subsequent interviews, as well as facilitated reflections on what I heard (Delamont, 2001; Maxwell, 2005). Etic and emic perspectives were critical in processing the interpretation of patterns in the data and formulating the findings of the study. The emic perspective consisted of sharing in the retention experiences of the students through interviews and document reviews. The etic perspective or "outsiders" view was grounded in the theoretical framework and research questions for this study.

All interview transcripts and field notes were coded utilizing Miles and Huberman's (1994) definition of codes as labels for assigning meaning to descriptive information gathered during the study. Merriam (1998) and Saldana (2013) propose that interview transcripts, documents, and field notes are coded with words or short phrases that summarize and compact the data and assigns each unit of data its own code.

I began the coding process by using the conceptual framework presented in chapter two to develop etic codes related to the potential perception I believe retained adolescent students generate as they experience retention. Initially, I coded my data utilizing descriptive codes written directly on the paper transcripts. The data was color coded to more readily identify the codes. I used emic coding, the inductive assignment of codes based on patterns in the actual data. I reread the data and listened to the audio recording of the students' data multiple times adding, deleting, and renaming codes as needed. Reading the data several times enabled me to focus and continually reshape the codes and my interpretations as I proceeded. Table 3 identifies the descriptive codes developed during the initial coding and from the guidelines of my conceptual framework. These codes were applied when they fit specific sections of data. New codes were developed when data did not clearly fit into existing codes.

Table 3

*Descriptive Codes*

<b>CODE</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>CODE</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
AS	Apathy toward school	AT	Action taken
BI	Behavior issues	BR	Blindsided by retention
CH	Counselor help	DC	Deceptive (secrecy)
DR	Denial (retention)	DO	Dropping out thoughts
EF	End of friendship	FI	Family issues
FR	Family relationships	FO	Feeling older
GI	Guardian/Parent interaction	GS	Guardian/Parent support
IA	Improved academics	IR	Initial reaction
MO	Moves (transient)	MT	Mentors
NC	No change (friendships)	NH	Needed help
NR	Negative attitude (retention)	NS	Negative attitude (school)
NGS	No guardian/parent support	NN	Non-resiliency
PI	Peer influence	PA	Positive about abilities
PR	Positive toward retention	RP	perception of self
RR	Resiliency	SH	Sought help
TI	Teacher interaction	TP	Teased by peers
UP	Unrealistic perception self		

The next level of coding involved determining where the descriptive codes showed patterns of recurring within each of the six adolescent students' transcripts. Merriam (1998) states constructing themes that represent recurring patterns reveal a deeper meaning. This process involved determining where the descriptive codes emerged within each individual student's transcripts and which codes if any were shared by the participants. In addition, the locations of segments of data that the codes represent were identified (Stake, 2006). A poster was printed from an enlarged spreadsheet to represent codes which emerged from the data as well as common codes throughout the cases. Codes that appear in all six participants' data were color coded green. Codes that appear in the data for at least half of the participants were underlined. Codes that appear for one or two participants were colored yellow. Teachers' words that supported or addressed the codes were cut out and taped in their appropriate spaces.

As part of the analysis of the data, I continued to review literature for ideas and clarification of issues arising from the data. I used analytical memos to help me review what the respondents were saying, what direction the study was going, and to help me reflect on gathered data (Maxwell, 2005). Additional wall charts to assist with coding and data linking, the connecting of relevant data segments to each other in order to form categories and not lose the original context from which they were developed (Maxwell, 2005; Stake, 2010). Stake defines a theme as a central idea having importance to its situation (p.64). Table 4 I represents an outline of the emerging themes from the data. This information was placed on a large wall chart in which specific segments from each



participant's data was placed in their appropriate place. Placing the major themes and categories in a chart allowed for comparison among the participants (Stake).

Table 4

*Major Themes*

Major Themes	Characteristics
Crisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial reaction: Onset of crisis</li> <li>• Feelings</li> <li>• Changes to life in response retention</li> <li>• Denial</li> <li>• Deception</li> </ul>
Interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family (including structure, issues, support)</li> <li>• Peers</li> <li>• School (including mentors, support, achievement)</li> </ul>
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family support</li> <li>• Mentors</li> </ul>
Mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequent changing of schools</li> </ul>
Transformations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer perception of retention</li> <li>• Boundaries of retention</li> <li>• Participants' perception of retention</li> <li>• Goals</li> </ul>

Data such as GPAs, discipline records, elementary teachers' report card narratives, and transcripts were also coded using developed codes. Data from these sources were also

written on post-it notes and placed under appropriate themes on the wall chart. This data was used to confirm or illuminate discrepancies in students' perception of their academic progress and events that contributed to their retention. Records from elementary grades were particularly helpful as most require written narratives of students' academic achievement and citizenship.

### **Validity**

Maxwell (2005) states one of the main threats to validity in qualitative studies is the inaccuracy or incompleteness of reporting gathered data. To address this problem, I audio taped interviews and transcribed each interview verbatim. I gathered "rich" data that is detailed and complete enough to provide an in depth picture of what was going on. Each participant was provided a printed transcript of their interview to member check the data after each interview was transcribed to ensure that I had recorded their ideas accurately and interpreted the messages clearly as they intended (Glesne, 1999; Patton, 2002).

Data gathered from the participants were self-reports. These self-reports were retrospective in nature, which leaves room for error in accuracy of recalling events that may have happened many years prior to reporting time. With self-reports there is a heavy reliance on honesty from participants to report true feelings and thoughts. I assume that students have a personal lens which allows them to interpret their school experience in a very different manner from a teacher, a school administrator, or a parent. By allowing participants to relay what they believe is "going on," their own interpretation of in-school interactions will reveal how their perception of retention was derived. I am not interested

in whether each story told is the absolute truth; rather I am interested in the student's perception of the issue at hand. I assume that the way in which a student interprets and stores a social action in memory is a result of interactive experiences. In interpreting my data I listened carefully, avoided asking leading, closed, or short-answer questions that inhibited participants from revealing their own perspective. During the interview process, to gain clarity and a deeper understanding of their accounts and the meaning they attached to them, I continually probed participants to explain their meaning regarding statements made during the interviews and to elaborate on events or thinking that required more details. I used respondents' words as often as possible to stay true to my purpose of giving voice to the participants and allowing them to share their perception of the retention experience. I utilized the strategy of member-checking to encourage feedback from the participants as a means to ensure that I did not misinterpret what was being said (Maxwell, 2005).

I am cognizant of my bias and beliefs with respect to retention. I believe that in some cases, retention is a necessary strategy for improving academic performance. A caveat to this belief is retention coupled with a well-developed intervention plan ensures its effectiveness and success. To guard against my own personal bias and beliefs influencing my interpretations, I used frequent reflection through memo writing. I also solicited feedback from others, both those familiar with education practices as well as those not connected to education. This practice helped me identify any biases, assumptions, or mistakes I made in "hearing" the story. In addition, this helped me look for alternative plausible explanations or interpretations that needed consideration (Miles

& Huberman, 1994). I shared my purpose and understanding with my participants on a continuous basis to make sure I heard and interpreted their perspective on the impact of retention as they intended.

### **Limitations**

As a teacher within the PPS, I realize it is impossible to eliminate reactivity, my influence on the setting or individuals studied, completely. However, as Maxwell (2005) and Stake (2006) state, it is important for me to understand my possible influence while knowing that reactivity cannot be completely eliminated. I am aware that my having taught some of the participants and/or being known by the participants could impact the teacher/student/researcher relationship that I have with the participants. I used this familiarity to establish trust and openness between myself and the participants. To mitigate anxiety or suspicions on the part of the participants, I only included students for whom I had no involvement in their retention experience.

This study has a small group of participants that share a common experience, retention. The findings and conclusions of this study are not readily extrapolated, or assigned to other groups or populations. It is not intended to generalize the retention experience for all students. The goal is to analyze in depth these six students' perceptions of their retention experience. This study may have transferability, a parallel concept to generalization (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). Krueger and Casey (2000) suggest those wishing to use information from this study must decide if the conditions, situations, and/or procedures from the research fit his/her situation.

#### **4. Data Analysis and Findings**

The purpose of this study is to investigate adolescent students' perception of the experience of grade level retention and their beliefs about future aspirations. This study builds on and contributes to earlier studies on the impact of retention on students and broadens the utility of the data by including the students' voice in the study of this phenomenon. The goal of this study is to share the voices and stories of adolescent students as they report their experience with retention. In-depth interviews, on-line discussion boards, and academic artifacts (i.e. cumulative records, academic samples) were used to gather data.

In developing research themes, I referred to the following overarching research question and sub-questions: How do retained adolescent students perceive their retention experience(s)? The sub-questions are: (1) How do adolescent students who have previously been retained perceive events which they believe led to their retention? (2) How do adolescent students who have previously been retained perceive their interactions with teachers, peers, parents, and administrators? (3) What future aspirations do previously retained adolescent students express? How do they perceive their role in determining these goals? These questions guided and focused the collection and analysis of the data. This chapter presents those findings.

Each adolescent student participant and the teachers that were involved in the students' educational decisions are presented below in Table 5.

Table 5

*Participants: Students and Teachers*

<b>Students</b>	<b>Teachers</b>
Allison	Mr. Crestwood
Zoe	Mr. Davis
Gina	Mr. Howard
Robert	Ms. Crayber
	Ms. Brantley
Catherine	Ms. Basil
	Ms. Lysel
Matt	Ms. Bailey

The analysis of data is reported using categories of (1) Academically Successful Students (2) Academically Challenged Students (3) Academically Challenged Students with Environmental Distracters. Each section will begin with a brief profile of the participants, followed by a parallel examination of initial reactions to retention, and interactions with parents, peers, and school (i.e. educational stakeholders such as teachers, counselors, and administrators). An examination of the resilience or non-

resilience pathways of each student and student reported self-efficacy beliefs about their future endeavors conclude the presentation of findings.

### **Academically Successful Students**

#### **Allison**

Allison was retained in the first grade and in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. At the time of the interview, Allison was a 19 year old classified as an eleventh grader taking eleventh and twelfth grade courses. Allison was born in Ethiopia and moved to the United States when she was fourteen years old. She can be described as petite and youthful in appearance. She is quiet and soft spoken. Because Allison is over the age of 18, I read and explained to her the informed consent adult student form, which she signed prior to beginning the interview.

Allison describes her family as low income and not close knit. She receives free/reduced price lunch. Both her mother and father graduated from high school. At the time of our first interview, Allison did not work after school. After three attempts, Allison's interview took place in an available conference room of the school library. When speaking to Allison prior to the interview, she began our conversation by saying, "I want to tell other people what being retained felt like. I don't think they know."

My purpose in interviewing Allison was twofold. Allison fits into my first category of academically successful students and she had a long-term goal of graduating high school and attending college. I wanted to understand if the meaning this dynamic young lady developed from her retention experience led her to pursue her education with

determined persistence. She appeared to want to reach her goals in life in spite of her retention.

**Initial reaction.** Allison was first retained in the first grade. She recalls her mother telling her on the first day of the new school year.

I can remember crying and crying. I couldn't stop crying. All of my friends were dressed up getting ready to go to second grade. I knew I was going to a new school, but I thought I was going to the second grade; instead, I had to line up with the babies. My mother said I had to do first grade again because I did not do... (Allison tears up and takes a few minutes to continue) what I was supposed to do in first grade. I didn't know. I did not know why I had to stay in the first grade.

Allison was enrolled in public school as opposed to the private school that her mother wanted her to attend. Her mother felt that if she went to the private school, she would do better. At the end of Allison's first grade year, her mother enrolled her in a private school that specialized in English. Upon enrollment, it was felt that Allison's command of the Amharic language was not strong enough for advancement to second grade where English language courses would begin. However, the school was willing to place Allison in the second grade with support. Her mother felt that Allison would do better if she repeated the first grade. She encouraged Allison to work harder in school.

When asked to describe how she felt after learning about her mother's decision to keep her in first grade, Allison recalls feeling like she had no control. She states:



I had no saying in what she was doing. I told her I wanted to be in the second grade, not first, and she said it's what she thinks was right for me. And I took it.

The key event which appears to be the catalyst of Allison's drive is her mother's decision to retain her the first time. This represented for Allison a lack of control. The disappointment and anger in her voice as she discusses this first retention are obvious. Lack of control was a symbol that aroused great emotion in Allison. When listening to Allison's description of her education, one gets a sense of her inner feelings that she was not in charge of her destiny. When Allison begins to discuss her initial reaction to retention, the meanings of anger, resentment, and betrayal she ascribes to retention is evident.

Allison's perception of her first retention was greatly influenced by her feelings of betrayal, resentment, and anger towards her mother for deciding to retain her. Her retention was always forefront in her mind and fueled her desire to overcome what she viewed as a setback. The emotions associated with this retention lay at the backbone of the meaning she developed from retention. From an early age, she became relentless in her desire to complete her education no matter how long it took. When speaking of this first retention, she is visibly emotional. She talks about the embarrassment and shame that she associates with retention. Her voice echoes the strong anger she harbors as a result of her retention. She does not feel any connection to the decision to retain her nor does she believe the retention had merit. She was unable to equate any action on her part that would necessitate retention in the first grade.

**Interaction with parents.** Allison's mother was young and unemployed when she was born. Consequently, she was initially raised by her grandparent in Ethiopia. When she was four years old, her mother and father married but she continued to live with her grandparents. During this time, two other siblings were born and they also came to live with her grandparents. When she was six years old, her mother came to the United States to earn enough money to pay for her children's education in Ethiopia and ultimately to have her family join her in the United States. Allison's mother was in the United States without her children for seven years until she earned enough money to send for them for her children'. Allison moved to the United States when she was in the eighth grade.

Allison adamantly declined to have her parents involved in her interview, citing personal reasons as an explanation of her refusal to involve them. During her second interview, she elaborated on this and stated that she did not want to bring up her retentions to her parents as she had worked hard to "catch up" and felt dwelling on it would make her mother sad.

She resides with her mother, father, and two younger sisters. Her mother completed high school in her country and completed courses to become a typist. She does not speak English beyond rudimentary phrases. She, however, understands more than she can speak. She works as a cashier to help support her family. Her mother does not return home from work until after 11 o'clock each day. Allison's father completed high school and also works as a cashier. He joined the family in the United States two years after

Allison and her sisters immigrated here. She reports that she seldom spends time with him as he is always working.

When speaking about the work schedule of her parents, it is clear that Allison resents the time her parents have to spend away from the family unit. She appears to have little patience with her mother's lack of English. When she relates tales of her mother's profession and daily existence, she clearly believes that her mother's life is a blueprint of where she does not want to go.

At the time of Allison's first interview, she did not feel especially close to her mother. Although she reported that her mother was more involved in her life than her father, neither she nor Allison's father attend parent-teacher conferences. Nevertheless, both parents support her and encourage her to do well in school. Allison responds "She does check my grades. When she sees them she says, 'Yeah.' She wants me to do well in school. She does what she can." She reports that she does not talk to her parents about her educational decisions. When asked about her decision to continue her education, she states, "I never talked to anyone at home, I just went for it." She feels as though she does not have an open relationship with her parents and believes that it was better to take care of her education on her own.

Allison describes her relationship with her parents as very distant and hands-off. She relays that the only time her mother was very involved in her education was when she was in Ethiopia. She gives her frequent school changes as an indicator of this involvement. Allison attended five different schools from kindergarten through eighth grade. She reports that her mother was searching for the best English language based

private school and therefore changed her school until she found the one that she believed would give her the best education. She reports that her youngest sister did not have the disadvantage of changing schools several times because by moving Allison around to find the best school, her sister was able to begin her education by enrolling in a better school first.

When asked if her mother was proud of her, she responded, “I—I don’t have an answer to that, because –we don’t talk like that.” To further understand her relationship with her mother, she was asked to imagine trading places with her mother and she was the parent and her parent was the child, “How do you think you would feel about your child?” Upon clarification, she responds:

If I was my mom, I would feel that I don’t have time to spend time with my children and attend school conferences, not close to my—my children. Yeah, and not open up, and I will probably stop giving the speech.

When asked to clarify, “the speech,” she said her mother gives a lot of speeches. She felt it was fine when she was younger but now that she is older it is not a good idea. She also stated: “Never tell your kids what happened in the past to give them a lesson. Never.” She declines to elaborate on this point stating only that it is not a good thing to do and that she planned to never do that if she should have children. She felt she would become closer to her children and open up the relationship by being a girl and discuss more girl stuff with them. She believes she would find time to spend with her children.

Allison is the oldest of three children. She has two younger sisters. Her middle sister was retained in the third grade and is presently in the eighth grade. The sisters did not talk about retention because Allison felt they were too young. She states:

She didn't know anything either. It's pretty much like me in her position except I was in first grade and she was in third. Another reason we did not talk about retention is I think that's a parent's job. I should not be the one to talk to my sister about her education. Even though I have been through it. I'm not the mother.

What can I tell her? Mother's should like be there to tell children what to do, what to like look for.

Allison's anger toward her mother surfaces again as she speaks about her perception of what her mother should do in preventing her sister's retention and her views on ideal mother daughter relationships. For her, the symbol of guidance has shaped her meaning of strong parenting which she feels is necessary for raising successful children. Now that she is older, she tells her sister that she must remember that nothing else matters except getting your education. She believes her sister will finish school.

Allison views her mother as a guide to what to do with her life. Her mother's difficult life has shown her that she does not want to work as hard as her mother and not have time for her family. She talks about her mother's job and how she wants better for herself. She believes watching her mother over the years has strengthened her determination to get a quality education. She believes that her mother's struggle has defined their relationship and prevented them from being a close knit family.

**Interaction with peers and environment.** Allison reports that it was difficult in the beginning to make friends, but she just went along with her life. She speaks of the emotional hardship of repeating the first grade. Allison recalls always having a feeling of being left behind because she would think about her friends who were ahead of her in school. After a while, she began to care less and less about being retained, until she reached the fifth grade. At that time her classmates began to tease her about repeating a grade. She relays her cultural beliefs about education by stating, “In Africa, education is very important and to do less than your best brings shame on you and your family.” Allison states that she realized that she would begin to hide her age while in the fifth grade.

Actually how I found out I would hide my age is like my friend asked my age and I told her the truth, and she was out with her friends and told, like, how old I was. And they were like, why are you still in this class? And I had to explain everything. So from then on I would hide my age. Like, I was one more year older than most of the kids. I usually would hide my age and like pretend I’m the same age that they were because they would make fun of me as an African.

Friendships were greatly affected by Allison’s retention. She seldom had contact with many of her former friends. These friendships were further impacted by the constant change of schools that Allison experienced through the eighth grade. Allison blames her mother for this lack of stability in her early years. She believes her mother’s search for the perfect school was detrimental to her establishing lasting friendships.

During the last part of her eighth grade year, Allison moved to the United States. She recalls being nervous about the move because she believed everyone would tease her about being older than her classmates. It was difficult for her in the beginning to learn American English, but she did not ask for help. To get her work done, she would spend hours reading her assignments over and over again until she believed she knew what was being asked of her. She then would write, "Sometimes too much," she joked. After being in the United States for her ninth grade year, she discovered that her classmates' attitude about her retention was different than that of her peers in Africa.

When I got to the ninth grade here, like no one cared what your age, just what you do. I don't know if it was because I look younger. I don't know exactly, but people seemed, like [they] were telling everything, opened up. So why would I hide my age? People don't like believe, like when I tell them I'm this age.

They're like, "Really? No you're not. Are you serious?" I say, yeah, I'm 19.

When asked if she looked older, did she think people would tease her? She stated, "No, they wouldn't because some of my friends are the same age as I am and no one tease them. No one really cares." She believes that it is because in Africa education is really necessary.

It is a huge deal. If you are retained a grade there is negative stuff. People feel that if you fail a grade in Africa, you are 'dumb and stupid.' No one wants people to think that about them.

Allison's close friend, who was a year ahead of her in school, went over her classes with her and told her what she needed to do in order to graduate. She encouraged

Allison to talk to her counselor. Through her friend, she found out that she may be further away from graduation than she believed. She found out she needed certain credits that she did not have in order to graduate. Allison attributes part of her decision to continue her education to her friend. She describes her relationship with her friend in this manner:

I saw everything through my friend. When I came to Pachecko High School, she showed me everything. She took time to look at my grades and showed me what I needed to do, go talk my counselor and that gave me the idea to work hard, work harder.

Another symbol for Allison is friendship. Once Allison made the decision to identify with her small group of friends, she had to change her perspective of total control. In order to function in this group, she had to hand over a little bit of control in her life to her friends. The meaning she took from these interactions was the feeling that these people had her best interest at heart. They were as close as family and therefore were to be entrusted with helping her navigate through high school.

**School.** A search of Allison's elementary school records did not show any indication that there was ever any concern about her academic ability. All schools expressed their disappointment in her leaving their school. She received comments from her former teachers praising her work ethic and citizenship. Allison reports that it was as she had stated earlier, her mother's desire to find a school with a good track record in English instruction caused her to frequently change schools.

When Allison enrolled in public school in the United States, she brought with her the symbolism of shame and anger in the form of a quiet and reserved demeanor. She



soon discovered the relaxed attitude American students held toward retention, allowing her to reshape her perception of retention. She no longer felt that she had to hide her retention but could set about figuring out a way to make it work on her behalf.

The second time Allison repeated a grade was in the tenth grade. This time the decision was hers. Because her meaning about retention had transformed, she was open to voluntarily repeating the tenth grade. She does harbor resentment toward the educational stakeholders in the high school as she perceives them as being uninvolved in helping her navigate through high school. She credits her friend as her advocate and motivation to get her needs met in high school. Retention in the high school setting was different for Allison than in elementary school because instead of repeating the entire tenth grade year, she was classified as an eleventh grader taking tenth grade courses.

This retention held a different meaning for Allison than her first retention because she had control of this event. Allison made the decision to repeat 10<sup>th</sup> grade without input from her mother because she felt that she could not trust her mother to make a decision that included her and worked best for her based on her mother's one sided decision to retain her in the first grade. Allison learned to deal with educational dilemmas quickly and directly to regain stability and control. She could have taken a different path, i.e. night school, summer school, and/or online courses, yet she chose retention, because for her, the timing of her completion was not as important as the education she believed she could obtain by staying in school past the age of 18.

She reports that no one talked to her about her low grade in English. She did not know that she needed a passing grade to receive credit for this course; no adults initially

helped her with the process. She did not know what credits she needed to graduate, or how to prepare for college. She believes the conversations she had with her friend helped her decide to take on an additional year to graduate. With this decision, she was targeted to graduate after her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. She made an appointment with her counselor and explained what she wanted to do. Her counselor encouraged her to enroll in night classes and summer school to take the courses she needed to graduate. Allison felt that taking eleventh grade classes as well as three tenth grade classes in night school would be too much pressure. This time she did not care about her friends moving on because she felt she needed to do more.

When asked if she talked to any of her teachers prior to her decision to repeat tenth grade, she says she never talked to anyone besides her counselor. She believes no one cared. She reports that teachers did not approach her when she was struggling in class. Most of her teachers never even heard her voice. After making the decision to repeat her tenth grade classes, her friend advised her to ask for help. This time she found her teachers were willing to help once she sought assistance. Her math teacher told her about an after school club which offers tutoring and homework help.

Allison found it hard to accept that no one talked to her about her academics. She recalls feeling invisible in high school:

No one cares what year you will graduate; no one cares, you know, what age you are at the time. They just keep putting you in classes until you learn whatever they want you to learn. I wish someone would have told me what to do before. It was like nobody knew I was there.

Allison's English teacher and mentor, Mr. Crestwood, spoke to me about her classroom participation and education path. He was her 10<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher the first time she took his course as well as when she repeated the course. Mr. Crestwood was able to see Allison's growth and progress as she completed the course for the second time. He says that he is not confident that he would have seen the growth in her had she not chosen to repeat the course. At the end of her second time in 10<sup>th</sup> grade English, Mr. Crestwood recommended that Allison enroll in Advanced Placement (AP) English for the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. He echoes Allison's self-evaluation as, "invisible." He offers the following explanation of how she was overlooked in the classroom.

Allison is what I refer to as an often overlooked student. She tends to blend in because she is not a discipline problem and her grades are okay. She struggled with English in the beginning, partly because English is not her native language and she is reluctant to actively participate in class. Students like Allison are often overlooked because they are so quiet. After Allison came to me and told me that she had been retained in elementary school, and that her friend had told her that she was several credits away from graduation, we met with her counselor to develop a plan for Allison to graduate from high school. She did not want to attend night school or take on additional classes along with her regular classes. As a result of the path that Allison has chosen, she will graduate at the age of 20. Not on time, but I know she will graduate. She has that kind of drive.

Allison believes having the same teacher the second time in 10th grade English helped her because the teacher was familiar with her and she believes he liked the fact

that she was taking the course again and not enrolling in night school. She did well in the course the second time around. Following Mr. Crestwood's recommendation that she enroll in the AP English, Allison reports that the first semester was a struggle for her but as she began to improve her study skills, she was able to complete the course with a "B" average. She is extremely proud of this class. She says that this was the first time a teacher had believed in her and pushed her further than she believed she was capable of going.

Allison participates in several extracurricular activities. She is a member of Project Destiny, which helps students navigate through the college application processes, Knitting Club, Red Cross Club, and United Promise, a club for students not born in the United States. In sports, she tried out for the softball team and was disappointed not to make the team. Last year she ran track and field, but this year she is over the age limit to compete interscholastically.

Acutely aware of how difficult it was for her to navigate through high school; she offers her assistance to other students who are struggling and gives them advice based on her own experience. She wants to prevent as many students as she possibly can from giving up on education. She is able to accomplish this by drawing on her experience with retention and sharing it with others students who appear to lag behind their peers.

**Self-efficacy.** When Allison and I first met, she wanted to complete high school and attend college. She wanted to major in International Business with an art connection. Allison also wanted to be an artist. She describes it as an "old fashion artist," one that paints pictures. She believes she will be successful in college because she is a hard

worker. She is confident that she will be able to obtain scholarships to attend college because of her grades in high school. She has used her story about her journey through school as the topic in her admission essays. She believes that anyone seeing her dedication and work habits will be happy to give her a scholarship. She is aware that it took her longer than others, but for her, the final outcome was worth it and shows her dedication and passion for learning.

Allison exhibits a strong sense of self-efficacy because she does not waiver in her belief that she will attend college and have a successful career in art (Bandura, 1997). Her biggest motivation is her desire to do everything better. This need to have everything perfect threatens Allison's resiliency and pushes her to pursue perfection relentlessly. She believes her constant need to have everything done correctly is a result of feeling inadequate brought on by the meaning she developed from her first retention. She strives to banish this feeling of having to be perfect, by overachieving in an attempt to gain her mother's approval and simultaneously prove the error in her mother's decision to retain her in first grade.

**Resilience/non-resilience.** Allison's defining moment that helped her make the decision to continue with her education came when she was in the tenth grade and really was able to understand her mother's life. She realized that she did not want to repeat her mother's life story. She understood that a good education would enable her to redirect her path. From the moment she realized that she wanted a different life for herself, decisions about her life became easier. She developed a road map of what she did not want in life, choosing the things that would enable her to move forward.

Allison never considered dropping out of school. It was difficult for her to understand why anyone would want to dropout. She has strong beliefs about dropping out of school.

I don't know. I don't see the point of dropping out of school because I got retained in school. So what, I am older, and I'm getting older blah, blah, blah. That's not an excuse to me; you can make it through anything. To never do anything, to not finish, to me that's not right. I'd rather be old and finish school than to drop out and have nothing.

Allison has taken her experience with retention and made it her motivation for obtaining her future goals. She believes that education is very important and that you cannot achieve anything without it. For her, education represents the pathway to success. She strongly believes that without education you are sentencing yourself to a difficult life.

### **Zoe**

Zoe is a 16 year old 10<sup>th</sup> grade student enrolled at Pachecko High School. She was retained in the third grade. At the time of her retention, Zoe resided with her aunt in a neighboring state. She can be described as quiet and extremely polite. She has a small and diverse group of friends. She presented herself as eager and willing to contribute to this study. My purpose in including Zoe in my study was her eagerness to participate, her sense of purpose, and her academic success. I wanted to understand if the meaning that Zoe developed as a result of her retention was the reason she was determined to graduate from high school or if there were other factors that were equally motivating for her. Zoe

was also a member of my eighth grade math class. I remember Zoe as a shy 14 year old who was eager to please.

At the time of our first interview, Zoe worked 10 hours per week after school. She resides with her mother and one younger brother. Her mother and father have been separated for several years, but are not divorced. Both her mother and father graduated from high school. She describes her household as middle income because, “Everyone who is able, pitches in to help.” Her mother works for the Area Transportation Authority. Zoe receives free/reduced price lunch at school.

**Initial reaction.** Zoe lived with her aunt during the year she was retained. Her parents were in the process of separating and her mother needed to find a place for them to live. She lived with her aunt the entire third grade year and visited with her mother on the weekend. Although Zoe was living with her aunt at the time of her retention, her aunt thought it would be best if her mother told her that she was to be retained. Zoe recalls her mother telling her she would repeat the third grade during one of their weekly visits.

She sat me down and she just told me. She just told me. Nothing else, I can still feel the silence in the room. After a while, she kept saying, “It’s okay, it’s okay.” I think she saw me crying and she didn’t want me to feel bad. I felt so sad. I really don’t think I understood everything. I just knew it was not okay. I remember thinking I wasn’t going to be with my friends.

Zoe believes her retention in the third grade was particularly difficult because it occurred while she was living away from her mother. Zoe’s perception of her retention experience was closely tied in with her feelings of abandonment and turmoil. She felt

lonesome as she went through third grade the first time and was extremely sad to see it end in retention. She expresses feeling as if nothing was going right for her as well as confusion about the reasoning behind her retention. After reflecting back over her experience for this study, she concedes that the issues she was facing greatly affected her ability to concentrate on her schoolwork. She never thought about her living situation contributing to her retention until she began to speak about it during this study.

**Interaction with parents.** Her relationship with her mother was affected by her living arrangements.

I wasn't able to see my mother every day, only on the weekends. When you are little that feels like...you know, bad. Even though I knew she had to find a place. So, I think the relationship with me and my mom. Yeah, it was hard between us.

During the school year that Zoe was retained, she reports a difference in parenting skills between her mother and her aunt. She describes her aunt as, "not so strict, not strict at all." She says her aunt seldom checked on her homework or attended parent conferences. She was allowed to do whatever she wanted to do. Her home life was very different than the life she had lived with her mother. She no longer was in charge of herself as she had been with her aunt. She describes her mother as very strict but fair. Her mother and she were not particularly close during her early teen-age years. She believes that this is typical of teenagers and parents. Her relationship with her mother has improved as she has become older. Her mother frequently checks to make sure she is doing her homework. She admits that she does not voluntarily tell her mother when she is



having difficulty in class. When asked if her mother is surprised when her grades are posted on interims and reports cards, she states:

Well, no and then yeah. Well, it's really not a surprise with math because both my mother and father know; I'm not good with math. But interims they act surprised sometimes. The school does not contact them before interims come out. If I wanted to, I don't have to show them my grades. But I do.

Presently, Zoe lives with her mother and younger brother. Her father resides close by in a neighboring state. He visits her frequently at her home or takes her on day trips in the area. Zoe's father is very involved in her life even though she does not physically reside with him. Within her family structure she has a strong support system in place. Her parents are in agreement about the importance of her education and frequently talk to her about her goals. Family gatherings with extended family often involve conversations about education and careers.

**Interaction with peers and environment.** Zoe's interaction with peers was greatly influenced by the fact that she attended three different elementary schools by the end of the third grade. This frequent moving around enabled her to develop a positive attitude about being the new girl in the class. In typical circumstances, students who are retained attend the same school and consequently lose friends along the way. By changing schools the year she was to repeat, Zoe did not feel the effects of changing friendships. She was able to treat her repeat year as a normal move and begin new friendships as she had in the past. She also appreciated the fact that no one in her new school knew that she had been retained. Zoe symbolized her transient lifestyle in

elementary school as new beginnings. Having experienced her peers teasing her about being retained in the school she left, she was glad to keep this part of her life to herself. She talks about the few times that retention came up in conversations with her friends. During these times, the symbols that Zoe associated with retention were shame, embarrassment, and feelings of being stupid.

Zoe recalls a conversation with two other friends who had been retained in different grades. One friend repeated the first grade and the other the second grade. The conversation took place when all three friends were in the sixth grade. Zoe tells me about a comment made by one of her friends. "I remember her saying, 'It's okay. At least we are together now.'" This allegiance helped her cope with other students who found out she had been retained and teased her about "failing" a grade.

It was hard in the beginning for Zoe to deal with other students, but she soon learned to take a "whatever" attitude. She does not feel that her retention ever affected any real relationships that she had with her peers. She believes that moving around helped because she naturally lost touch with many of her former classmates. She did not tell people about her retention unless they asked or she and her friends happened to be talking about retention. This type of conversation rarely happened and she remembers making sure that she never brought up the topic when she was with her friends. When it did happen, she says:

It wasn't like nothing mean or harsh, it was like, you know, I guess we were kids and just like to play or whatever. So, you know. I think the reaction that my classmates had made me think something was wrong with me. I know I did not do

well in things like math but I didn't feel stupid. Nothing like that, but I didn't want others to know. No I didn't go around telling everybody.

**School.** Zoe attended PPS from kindergarten through the first semester of 3rd grade. She attended the second semester of 3rd grade at a private school in North Carolina, where she was retained. At this time, she resided with her aunt until her mother was able to obtain housing. She attended fourth grade through seventh grade in Maryland. She returned to PPS in the eighth grade and has remained in the district for the subsequent three years. Zoe reports that she did not have an opportunity to talk to her teacher prior to her retention in the third grade. However, given the opportunity she would have asked,

What can I do, you know, to pass, for me to be in my right grade to go along with my class and some of my classmates. I really don't know what the conversation would sound like. I guess if she tells me, this is what I...like, if it's too far gone, that I couldn't do nothing, then I would just have to deal with it. But if they would have caught it at first and told me, this is what you need to do because you're in danger of failing, I would have tried harder and had better study habits. My problem is well; I don't know what I was retained for. What subjects? So I really don't know what I could do about it.

It was difficult for her to complete her assignments in school because she was always afraid to ask for help. She was afraid of what others would think. "So I would just sometimes never ask for help." Her relationship with her teachers greatly affected her performance in the class. If she felt that the teacher did not care or she did not like the

teacher, she would leave the work alone or wouldn't ask for help. She remembers her second third grade teacher being calmer, and friendlier than her first teacher. "She knew I was doing third grade over, so I think she wanted me to do better so she helped me a lot without my asking for help."

Zoe's first interview took place during her 10<sup>th</sup> grade year. Upon examining her school records, it appears that Zoe did reasonably well in all subjects prior to the third grade. Presently she does well in most of her classes with the exception of mathematics and science. She is currently enrolled in Geometry. She says,

Like math, now I'm taking Geometry. It's not going good. They have help available for it, I just don't go. I don't know, I just don't. It's not like I don't want to go – well, it is that I don't want to go. But I don't know I just don't go."

Zoe contacted me at the end of her sophomore year. She wanted me to know what directions she was currently contemplating. She did not attend night school during her 10<sup>th</sup> grade year. Her plan for her 11<sup>th</sup> grade school year is to stay after school with her teacher, talk to her teachers when she needs help, and complete test corrections with her teacher. In addition, she is considering night school and summer school as well as taking courses that she failed instead of electives. Following this plan would allow her to graduate on time.

At the end of Zoe's sophomore year, she decided that she needed help in developing a plan to graduate on time. Up until this time, she had not utilized the counseling system to actively plan what was needed in order for her to graduate. Zoe's quiet, reticent personality held her back from aggressively seeking out guidance. Zoe was

not a discipline problem or a student who appeared to struggle. These characteristics caused her teachers to unintentionally overlook her and not notice that she needed help and/or guidance. The meaning Zoe took away from her situation in the classroom influenced her actions and interactions. Each year that she experienced a sense of invisibility, she became increasingly voiceless. Once she began to acknowledge and reflect upon the meanings she had formed out of her experience, she was able to move forward and develop a workable plan for her graduation on time from high school.

Zoe's second interview found her enrolled in Pachecko High School's Satellite Campus in her junior year. This is a nontraditional branch of the high school that enables students to attend high school by utilizing a hybrid online/on-site course curriculum, flexible hours, one-on-one student-centered support, and a different pathway to graduation. The school is open during the daytime, evenings, and weekends. Transportation and meals are provided. Students remain a part of the main campus and may participate in all main campus activities. Enrollment is voluntary and instruction is delivered by certified instructors. Students who have recently dropped out of school, require credit recovery, or are seeking acceleration are eligible to attend. Zoe describes her education program as follows:

Now I'm in a school where you have flexible hours, you know, when you can come basically any time you want as long as you do a minimum of 20 hours a week. So, say, if you don't want to come to school Monday but you come to school Tuesday, and you come from like 12 to 4 or 12 to 8, then, you know, as long as you get those 8 hours, then that's good. It's like a flexible schedule.

While enrolled in the satellite school, Zoe will have the opportunity to graduate at the end of this school year which is technically her eleventh grade year. Her enrollment in this school will allow her to make up the year she was retained and graduate with her original class. Her enrollment was voluntary and based on her desire to graduate on time.

One of her teachers, Mr. Davis, reports that Zoe is highly motivated and well on her way to graduating in June of this school year. She attends classes regularly and has shown growth in math and science.

Zoe is a quiet and motivated student. She is willing to work hard to graduate on time. She has available to her, tutors in all subjects. We have been working on strengthening her mathematics skills. I believe that this is the right environment for her as it is a small community and we can provide the one-on-one instruction that she needs to be successful.

**Self-efficacy.** For Zoe, family became an important symbol from which she was able to formulate meaning toward the possibility of graduating on time. The interactions that she had with her immediate family as well as her extended family bolstered her self-efficacy. When adolescents continually hear from external sources that they are capable of achieving a task or goal, self-efficacy increases positively (Bandura, 1997).

Zoe's life goal is to be a chef. She would like to go to college and study culinary arts. She is anxious to go to college to train for the career that she wants. She believes she will be successful in college because of the hard work she had to do in order to graduate on time from high school. Adolescents with high levels of self-efficacy tend to engage in

activities geared toward their goals and work harder toward those goals even when they are faced with obstacles (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006).

In anticipation of her chosen career, Zoe recently planned and prepared her family's entire thanksgiving dinner. It was hard work but she thought it was good preparation for her future. She plans to market herself better by training to be a master chef as well as a secondary specialization of pastry chef. She spoke knowledgeably about the requirements and education needed to obtain her goals. Zoe's actions, as a result of her increased self-efficacy, enabled her to achieve at a higher level and move toward resiliency (Schunk & Meese 2005).

**Resilience/non-resilience.** Zoe's quiet demeanor and struggles with mathematics represented threats to her resiliency. Once she understood and, more importantly, believed that she wanted to graduate on time, she was able to seek the help that she needed from her guidance counselor. This realization helped propel her toward the path to resiliency. Zoe is only a junior but as she gets older, she realizes that she wants to graduate with her class.

I want to do it for myself, not them. 'Cause I already know, like now I'm about to turn 17. I want to get done with school, you know, go to college. I just want to graduate on time like I was supposed to. I guess I had to want it. It didn't matter so much that I wasn't raised to quit. I guess it didn't matter much until it was what I want. I would never want anybody to be retained because I've been in that position and know how it feels once you get older. It doesn't really kick in until you get older.

When asked what contributed to her decision to stay in school and complete the extra work needed to graduate on time, Zoe responded:

As I get older, I start to see my friends, you know, talking about college, you know, about this and that. Actually, I kind of feel my age, you know. Like when I graduate, if I graduate and wait it out, I'll be 19, but if I graduate on time, I'll be 18. So that makes me really think about it and what I want to do. My family, my aunts, uncles, grandmother, my parents, they all give me advice. They say if you drop out, you won't have much, but if you go to college and get a job, then either the – what do you call that. Say like, if you go to college, the outcome is you will have something in return, something good. Other people also tell me how hard life is, you know if you don't get an education, you'll be working hard and you'll be working different low paying jobs because you didn't get an education. Every day I tell myself, these are the things I want in life, and if I want these things then, you know, I need to go to school, I need to go to college to get my education in order to be what I want.

Turning 17 was the catalyst that forced her to choose her path of resilience. When she turned seventeen, it really began to matter that had she not been retained in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, she would be looking forward to graduation the next year. This realization, coupled with the influence of her family, fueled her resolve to complete high school. Her mother and the rest of her family would not allow her to drop out. Zoe does not want to be like every ordinary person, she wants to be more than what she is today. “You know more than what I am, more than what I have. So I strive for my goal every day.” Zoe is



scheduled to graduate on-time with her class this school year. She is confident that she will have all of her classes completed by the spring and has only allowed herself the remote possibility of graduating in the summer.

### **Academically Challenged Students**

#### **Gina**

At the time of Gina's first interview, she was an outgoing 16 year old student at PHS. Gina was retained in the third grade. She was enrolled in a private school at the time of her retention. At the end of Gina's eighth grade year, she was placed in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade to better match her grade level to her age.

Gina was born in Ghana and immigrated to the United States prior to entering school. Gina cancelled her initial interview four times before attending the session. Her father signed an informed consent prior to our meeting. After reading the Minor Student Assent form, Gina's initial interview took place in an available conference room of the high school library.

Gina became a part of this study because she faces academic challenges in her education. As I spoke with Gina and she began to tell me of her continual struggle with her academics, it became clear that she did not accept that there was anything that she could take away from her retention experience. She has compartmentalized this experience and as she tells her story, it is as if it happened to someone else.

Her story intrigued me because of an email she sent seeking more information on the study. Gina was adamant about not including her parents in her interviews. She tells me that her parents do not know the real reason she was retained and if this secrecy could

be maintained, she would be willing to tell me the truth of her retention. This revelation was a window into the meaning that Gina had formed through interactions she had with her parents and peers. It was very evident that it was important for her to keep the reason she was retained from her parents and to hide her background from her peers.

**Initial reaction.** Gina describes finding out that she was to be retained the following year as horrific. In Gina's school, a list was posted outside of the classroom door of all students not advancing to the next grade level. She explains that because she was enrolled in a private school, the procedure for notifying students of retention was different than in public school.

My heart was thudding in my chest as I approached the list. I knew that I had not passed all of my exams and my work was not as good as it should be but I did not want to see my name on the list to be held back. When I got to the front of the line my name was first as my last name is at the beginning of the alphabet. I thought I was going to die of embarrassment. The list was up there for everyone to see, even those students who were not retained. I was ashamed. I remember going into the bathroom and crying my eyes out. My friends asked me what was wrong and one of them said, "She's not going to the fourth grade." It was hard. I had to go home and tell my Auntie. She was so disappointed in me. I cried myself to sleep.

At the time of Gina's retention, she resided with her paternal aunt. She did not live with her father until she was 16 years old. Her father, however, paid her tuition to attend private school. Gina did not tell her father that she had been retained. She was afraid that he would not pay for her school if he knew that she had not passed to the next

grade. After contacting me to tell me that she was interested in participating in the study, Gina mentioned that she did not want her father to be a part of the interview process because he did not know that she had been retained. I informed her that I would have to meet with her father to explain the study and answer any questions that he may have about the study. She agreed to tell him about her retention. Soon after her telling him about her retention, I met with her father and obtained his signature on the informed consent prior to our first interview. Her father was upset that she had lied to him about her education for several years. She describes this interaction as devastating and almost as bad as when she was originally retained.

**Interaction with parents.** Gina currently resides with her father. Her mother and father were divorced when she was two years old. Her father has maintained custody of her since birth. They lived in a small town in Ghana. When Gina was three years old, her father immigrated to the United States, leaving her in the care of his sister. At the age of four, she and her aunt came to the United States. Her native language is Twi, though she says she began using English shortly after arriving in the United States. Gina was not enrolled in English Language Learner classes because she spoke English when she entered kindergarten. In the United States, she lived with her father until she began school. When Gina was five, she went to live with her aunt who lived closer to the private school she would attend until the end of fifth grade. She describes her relationship with her aunt as close. Her father paid for her care while she lived with her aunt. He also paid the tuition for her education. She always wanted to please her aunt so that she would

give a good report to her father. This is the reason she was never truthful about how she was doing in school.

In the third grade, I was good at hiding my papers. I would never let my aunt know I was having a hard time in school. I did not bring home the notice about teacher conferences, so she believed me when I said that we did not have them. I knew she was busy, so it became easy for me to get away with a lot of stuff. My aunt was not real strict, she just treated me nice and told me to always do my best. She was sad when she found out that I would not go to the fourth grade. She was afraid to tell my father. I think she thought he would think she did not do a good job raising me. She did not tell my father and I did not tell my father.

Her father remarried when she was 14 years old, but has since divorced. She did not live with her father while he was remarried but visited them often. She says her father expects a lot out of her and is saddened by her school record. She says he does not understand why she lied to him about her schooling when she was in elementary school. She moved back with her father when she was 16 years old. Currently, he frequently checks on her school work and often comes to the school to meet with her teachers. Gina respects her father and wants to do better for him.

**Interactions with peers and environment.** In the third grade, when Gina was retained, she remembers crying with her friends about being held back. Talking on the phone and playing with her friends was one of the reasons she did not get her work done. Two of her friends were also held back.

Some of my friends were also held back. Two others I think. I called my friends and talked to them a lot. That is what I mostly did. I talked on the phone and played with my friends. When it was time to go back to school, I did not sit with the others who had been retained. I separated myself from them. I did not want anyone to remember that my name was on the list. I tried to hide and be quiet. I did not have many friends that year.

Other students would tease the students who had been retained. She recalls feeling stupid and left out. At first, she said she tried to stay friends with the ones that had gone on to the fourth grade, but soon they stopped wanting to be around a third grader.

It was easier to try to get along with the other kids in my class. I would just pretend that I was supposed to be in the third grade. When other people remembered and began to tease me, I just walked away. A lot of times I cried but that just made it worse. So I just stayed by myself. I lost a lot of friends that year.

Gina quickly distanced herself from others who had been retained. She was careful not to be associated with anyone that either knew that she had been retained or had themselves been retained. She actively concealed her identity through disassociation. She was very cognizant of how others viewed retained students. She endured constant pressure to blend into the crowd and to maintain her secret. The symbolism that contributed to the meaning she developed about her experience was shame, embarrassment, and secrecy. Gina believed that if no one knew about her retention it would make it less of a reality.

**School.** Gina did well her second time in third grade. It was difficult because the teachers would talk about her being retained in class. She recalls being embarrassed on a number of occasions when the teacher would say, “I know you know this since you did it last year.” When she reached the fourth grade she began to have difficulties again. She found the work to be hard and she did not understand what she was to do most of the time. She did not turn in many of her assignments and she soon discovered that turning in late work was not an option in private school.

In the fifth grade, Gina’s father decided to put her in public schools because the tuition was increasing each year. She remembers her aunt enrolling her in school and she felt good about school again because no one knew that she was held back in the third grade. Gina’s grades in the fifth through eighth grade were mostly C’s and D’s. She was confused as to why she struggled in school as she did not see herself as lagging behind other students academically. Zoe was unable to see this deficiency; therefore, she neglected to seek help because she did not believe that she needed help.

At the end of her eighth grade year, Gina was called into her counselor’s office and told that she would go on to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. She says that she was given a letter to give to her aunt explaining that she would be in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade next year. She did not give the letter to her aunt because she was afraid she would give it to her father. She reports feeling happy that she would have an opportunity to graduate on time. However, when she arrived at the high school she found herself to be further behind. She had to take 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade English and 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade math class. She was not permitted to take an elective but had to use that allotted time to catch up her courses.

English classes are difficult for Gina. Her English teacher, Mr. Howard, believes ELL classes would have been beneficial to her in elementary school. She finds sentence structures confusing and does not do a lot of outside reading. He believes there are significant gaps in her language acquisition skills. When conferencing with Gina, he learns that she often tries to translate from English to Twi and vice versa. She is reluctant to speak in class and does not volunteer to read aloud.

Since living with her father, he has been more involved in her education. He insists that she work with her counselor to find out what she needs to do in order to be successful in school. Gina's cumulative record does not agree with her perception of her progress. When asked to describe her progress in high school, Gina reported that her grade point average is 3.2. A review of her records indicates that she currently has a 2.4 average. GPA's in previous school years fall below her current average. She believes she is doing well in school and quickly dismisses the failing grades in English and mathematics as temporary. Gina was unsuccessful in her 10<sup>th</sup> grade year at PHS and was required to go to summer school and repeat 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade English and Algebra. Her transcript lists her 10<sup>th</sup> grade year as retention, but Gina is reluctant to associate her 10<sup>th</sup> grade year as a failure. She believes she was not prepared to move from the eighth grade to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. As with her report card grades, Gina dismisses her tenth grade year. She expected to do better and was disappointed when her grades did not match her expectations (Stinson & Zhao, 2008).

**Self-efficacy.** Gina wants to be a nurse. She plans to go to a four year college after high school. She does not believe that her grade point average will allow her to

attend the college of her choice right away. Her counselor has recommended that she attend community college for one year and then transfer to a four year college. She plans to apply to several four year colleges and hopes that she can get into one of them. She knows that she will need to take some remedial classes but believes that she can do well in college if she is given the chance.

Her self-efficacy with respect to what she believes she can do with her life after high school is high. She has plans to attend college with scholarships and is anticipating applying to several close-by universities and colleges. Zoe's words reveal a pattern of denial and hiding from reality. It appears that she spent so many years misleading her father that she has convinced herself of a false reality. Stinson and Zhao (2008) state, most people see themselves as better than the average person. They go on to label this phenomenon as "better-than-average-effect." In a study conducted by Kennedy, Lawton, and Plumlee (2002) on student self-assessment, they found that most students overestimate their academic ability. They maintain that the skills that develop competence in an area are the same skills needed to evaluate competence in that area. Students lacking the ability to accurately evaluate their skills and ability on a task lead to frustration and disappointment. Kruger and Dunning's study (as cited in Kennedy, Lawton, & Plumlee, 2002) revealed when a student is unable to judge their own competence, they also lack the ability to know that they are incompetent. In general, Gina tends to overestimate her ability and does not have a clear picture of what her future options are in terms of college. She speaks of remedial courses in college, but at the same time she does not believe she will actually need to enroll in these courses.



**Resilience/non-resilience.** Gina has never considered dropping out. She knows that her father would not tolerate her leaving school. He tells her, “If you don’t do your school work you cannot move forward.” She believes that you have to stay in school and learn, and if you have to do it again, you have to try that much harder.

By placing Gina in her correct grade, she was in essence forced into resiliency. This action enabled her to further conceal her retention. If Gina is able to maintain at least a 1.0 GPA she will graduate with her class.

### **Robert**

Robert is a 15 year old ninth grade student at Pachecko High School. He will turn 16 in September. He lives with his maternal great-grandmother, great-grandfather, and younger sister. He refers to great-grandmother as his grandmother but explains that she is actually his great-grandmother. He lives with his great-grandparents because his mother is incarcerated and has been for the past five years. His mother did not graduate from high school. He visits his mother during the summer months while staying with his aunts. He did not know when she would be released from prison and declined to comment on her incarceration. Both of his great-grandparents are retired and in their 70’s. His great-grandmother often comes to the school for conferences for both him and his sister.

Robert is somewhat evasive in his answers. He did not reveal his living circumstances until later in his interview. He would often contradict his answers. In some cases, it appeared as if he were giving answers that he felt were the right answers. At first he reported that his mother worked in a different state, but later spoke of prison. He was

very guarded in his answers and had a tendency to answer with one word answers. He had to be reminded to elaborate on most answers.

Robert attended kindergarten through first grade in a neighboring state. He moved to PPS in the second grade. He was retained in the third grade. He attended the same school for his second time in third grade. He reports that he had the same teacher both times. He receives free/reduced price lunch. Currently, Robert does not hold a job outside of the home. He reports that he spends the majority of his time watching television or playing video games.

My purpose in including Robert in my study was his perception of his academic success. When Robert answered the advertisement for participants he described himself as a successful ninth grader who happened to have retention in his background. I wanted to understand if the meaning that Robert developed as a result of his retention was the reason he was so successful in school. It was not until after I obtained Robert's guardian's permission to include him in the study that I discovered several discrepancies in Robert's perception of his success. His reality did not coincide with his documented evidence of school achievement.

**Initial reaction.** At the time of Robert's retention, he was living with his mother. Robert's mother was contacted prior to his retention. She checked with him frequently after receiving the first phone calls about his lack of work and behavior in class. She was contacted for a conference concerning Robert's academic progress. His mother did not discuss the conversation she had with his teachers. He expressed a feeling of surprise

when his report card came home indicating that he was to be retained for the next school year.

I knew it was coming because my mother told me. Still, when I saw it in writing, I still began to cry because I wanted to go on. I can remember feeling so angry. I was angry at my grades. I was not angry about anything else. I stayed angry the entire next school year. My mother told me I had to do better. If I were to describe how I felt I would say sad and awful. I hated doing the third grade again. I did not think it was fair. I just didn't do my homework that was all.

Robert has a difficult time reconciling his retention with any action on his part. Like Gina, he appears to have distanced himself from any repercussions relating to his experience. He does, however, acknowledge feeling angry about his retention. He expresses confusion on exactly who or what he is angry with; he finally settles on his grades as a source of anger.

**Interaction with guardians.** Robert has a close relationship with his great-grandmother. He feels that she is often disappointed in his academics and often discusses his school with him.

Well my grandmother said, "Don't drop out. Because if you drop out you won't be able to get a job and you won't be able to go to college and make it in life."

She checks with me every day to make sure I am doing my homework.

Sometimes, well most of the time, I tell her that I did it at school, but mostly I don't.

Although I did not teach Robert when he attended the middle school, I taught his younger sister during the first part of her seventh grade year. I often met with Robert's great-grandmother who frequently admonished both siblings about their schoolwork during parent-teacher conferences that both children attended. She appeared to be a concerned guardian and stated she was able to help them with their homework when they brought it home. She frequently contacted the school about Robert's sister's academics and reported that she did the same for Robert.

Robert is very protective of his great-grandmother and wants to do well for her. He expresses a fondness for her and believes that she believes in him. He begins each school year with the goal of doing better than his previous year. He admits that he has not been able to have a good year academically since elementary school. Both his mother and great-grandmother agreed that he should repeat the third grade.

**Interactions with peers and environment.** Robert believes his friends are not bothered about his retention. His friends did not react to his retention and he does not report any teasing from his classmates.

My friends and I do not talk about retention. When they find out how old I am, nobody says anything. At least I haven't heard them say anything. I do not try to hide it, it just never comes up. Even the friends I had the first time I was like in the third grade, nothing. I have to say no, no reaction. If it doesn't come up, I don't say nothing. I don't think I would talk about it. I don't talk about it.

Robert has a very small circle of friends. He has some people that he classifies as associates, but for the most part he only has a few friends that he hangs out with or

considers to be his friends. He is comfortable knowing that not many people know that he has been retained. He admits to being afraid that if more people knew they would tease him about failing. His way of coping with this is to ensure that very few people know about his retention outside of educational stakeholders.

**School.** Robert's third grade teacher, Ms. Crayber, is presently a principal at another school in the district. She describes him as very playful and reluctant to complete his assignments. She reports that he was very active and had a hard time focusing in class. She remembers having him in her class for his second time in third grade.

I had to look Robert up because it has been a few years since I had him in my class. I remember that Robert liked to play around in class. He was very immature for a third grade student. He rarely did his homework or completed his class work. He liked to read and write. Language was his favorite subject. I met with his mother a lot during the first time in third grade. He worked harder the second time and was able to get mostly C's. I believed retention would help Robert to be successful in school. I am not certain if he continued to improve after third grade.

Robert's third grade teacher's reasoning behind his retention concurred with research which states the most frequent reasons given for retaining students include poor academic performance and lack of maturity (Range, Dougan, & Pijanowski, 2011). Robert hated doing third grade again. He reported having to learn most of the same things that he had done the previous year. Recycling students through the same curriculum, practices, and instruction greatly diminishes the effectiveness of retention (Range et al., 2012).

Robert's high school mathematics teacher, Ms. Brantley, is a veteran teacher with 40 years of experience. Prior to my contacting her about Robert, she was not aware of him having a retention in his background. Currently, Robert is in danger of failing Algebra I. She has held conferences with his great-grandmother and Robert. He often comes to class unprepared and unfocused.

He is unmotivated in a classroom setting. He lacks mathematical confidence. I often have to remind him to take out his materials. He does not talk voluntarily in class. I believe that he did not want me or anyone to know that he had been retained. He talked a little bit about being retained when he asked me to meet with you to talk about his class experience. When I asked him, did the retention help him to do better in school, he was very adamant in telling me, no. He does not feel that it helped him at all. He just doesn't talk about it. He has the potential to be an outstanding student but he requires constant prodding and reminding to bring materials to class and to complete his assignments. He does not act older than his classmates.

Robert's math teacher, Ms. Brantley, wonders if he will experience retention in future years. When she spoke to him about his earlier retention, she saw little change in his academic achievement.

When Robert talks of his progress in school, he states that he has a 2.0 average and believes his average would be higher at the end of the school year as a result of his English class. Robert's cumulative record indicates that he completed his ninth grade year with a grade point average of 0.8. His actual GPA differs drastically from his self-

reported GPA. He believed that he was doing well in most classes, when in actuality he received a passing grade in only one of his courses. Robert occasionally attends after school tutoring, but he rather go home and watch television or play video games. He was recommended for evaluation to determine whether he has a learning disability but nothing in his records indicate that this evaluation was completed.

**Self-efficacy.** Robert wants to be a language arts teacher. He enjoys writing and believes this will make him a good teacher. He says that he has received many good grades on his writing assignments. After talking with his counselor, he says that he knows he will need to finish high school, go to a college for four years, and then he can be a language arts teacher in the middle school.

When speaking to Robert, I came away with a feeling that he has not fully understood the role of his present education in his future plans. Robert readily spoke of his poor grades in most subjects but continued to say that he did not think his grades in high school would keep him from being a teacher. There appeared to be a disconnection between a realistic image of Robert's academic progress and Robert's perception of his progress. Symbolically, poor grades did not elicit in Robert a sense of failure. He has not assigned meaning between his grades and his future endeavors. Stinson and Zhao (2008) maintain that on the average, students tend to overestimate their ability due to their incompetence to judge their own performance. Robert believes he will get serious about his grades once he is enrolled in college. He absolutely believes that he is successfully working toward graduation and his desired career.

**Resilience/non-resilience.** Robert has never considered dropping out of school. He believes that everyone needs an education to be successful in life. He attributes his dedication to school to his great-grandmother. He talks about the effort that she puts in daily to make sure that he and his sister attend school regularly. He recalls several conversations he has had with his great-grandmother. In one such conversation she says, “If you drop out, you won’t get no job and you won’t be able to go to college and make it in life.” Robert states that his great-grandmother is the reason he continues to come to school each day.

### **Academically Challenged Students with Environmental Distracters**

#### **Catherine**

At the time of Catherine’s first interview, she was a 17 year old soon to be 18 year old 11<sup>th</sup> grader. Catherine was retained in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Unlike most high school students who fail to earn enough credits in one or more courses, Catherine was classified as retained because she failed to earn any credits.

She describes herself as “big and loud.” She has always been bigger than her classmates. She began school taller than most students, but began to gain weight as she grew older. She believes that most people view her as outspoken and willing to “tell it like it is.”

Catherine currently resides with her mother, 21 year old brother, and five year old sister. At some points in her life, her cousins and mother’s boyfriend resided with them. She describes her family as middle income. She receives free/reduced price lunch. In the summer after her 10<sup>th</sup> grade year, she began working at a cleaner for money to sustain



herself. She reports that she is independent and does not receive any financial support from her family other than shelter. Catherine's mother is a single parent. Her mother and father were never married. Her mother works as a teacher's assistant. Catherine's mother did not graduate from high school, but earned her GED.

Catherine and I have a prior relationship as I was her seventh grade teacher in middle school. She was very eager and pleased to help me with my study. In our student-teacher relationship, she was always respectful and hardworking. In middle school, she experienced some difficulty with her behavior and outspokenness in other classes and in the hallways.

My reasons for including Catherine in my study were her eagerness to participate in the study and her sense of purpose. I wanted to look beyond the façade of her persona and discover if inside lived a totally different person than she portrayed publically. I wanted to understand if the meaning that Catherine developed as a result of her retention would motivate her to make changes in her life and move toward resiliency and graduation.

**Initial reaction.** Catherine describes her initial reaction as, “total and utter shock.” She “kind of knew” before her final report card, but she ignored the signs and felt that she would simply go on to the next grade in spite of her grades and attendance. Catherine's grade transcript for 10th grade reveals that she missed a total of 78 days, not including skipped classes. School is in session for students a total of 185 days.

When the last report card came to my house in June, it was weird to see a report card with nothing but “F's”. I did not receive any grade besides “F” in any course

for four quarters. Every single quarter said the same thing. That's when it hit me, my report card said classified as a sophomore enrolled in sophomore classes. I had to do the entire tenth grade again. I just couldn't believe it when it happened. It didn't hit me until the end, and I was like, ugh, could I just get it back, can I just turn back the time.

After receiving notice that she was to repeat the tenth grade, she spent many hours crying and feeling sorry for her situation. Afterwards she went to the high school to try to enroll in summer school hoping that she would be able to make up the courses that she had failed. She was told that she had failed all of her courses and would not be able to attend summer school which carried a maximum of two retake courses. At this point, she decided that she would drop out of school rather than repeat the tenth grade. She spent the summer looking for employment with the expectation that she would not return to school in the fall.

Studies have shown that grade level retention is a powerful predictor of dropping out of school (Lillard & DeCicca, 2001). Students who repeat one grade are found to have a 35% chance of dropping out, and students who repeat two or more grades have nearly a 100% chance of dropping out (Smith & Shepard, 1989). When faced with retention, Catherine quickly turned to dropping out as a solution to her dilemma.

**Interaction with parents.** Catherine describes her relationship with her mother as difficult. She says to say she doesn't have a good relationship with her parent is an understatement. She tells me that everything that involves her care is done by her.

Like literally, I am my own parent. Everything that I have from clothes, food, soap, deodorant, everything, I am responsible for providing that. I have to take care of it all. So, I have to work if I am going to eat. Nobody at home cares. When the messages came home about my failing, no one said a word to me. They just don't care.

For Catherine, family dynamics was a substantial issue. "Family problems was a big one, because I couldn't like, change the channel basically. Like whatever was going on at home, I brought to school, and that was horrible." Catherine was removed from the home on two occasions and placed in shelter care. The first time she was placed in shelter care was in the spring of her first year as a 10th grader. This placement was a result of her truancy from school. The courts ordered her returned to shelter care in late September of her 11<sup>th</sup> grade year citing family issues. She believes that this was the best thing for her because there were a lot of fights at home between her and her mother and other people staying at her home. She feels that had she not been removed, the situation would have escalated to something serious and criminal.

She talked about her initial reaction to shelter care, or group home, as scary. She experienced a panic attack her first night. She attributed the attack to nervousness.

The bed was horrible. It was a blue room. There's something about blue, just like a whole blue room. And you know there were just other kids. And they had some staff that, you know treated you like crap, like, you know, you weren't a child, no matter what you were going through. But then you had some staff that actually

cared. So it was half and half, you know. You never knew from day to day which staff you were going to get.

After three weeks in shelter care, Catherine began to think of the shelter as her home and the people in it as her family. She felt the atmosphere at the shelter was much better than that at her home. When she was returned to her home, she made sure that she was never at home. She only slept and showered at home. She would stay at school until six or seven o'clock. She established a relationship with her 10<sup>th</sup> grade principal, Ms. Basil, who allowed her to stay and help her or the night custodian complete odd jobs. Ms. Basil agrees to speak with me about Catherine. Her interview is compiled into one narrative using her exact words.

I have known Catherine for three years. I am going to speak to you from the perspective of a classroom teacher. I was Catherine's biology teacher before becoming a tenth grade principal here at Pachecko High School. I had Catherine in my class the year she was retained in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Catherine was retained because of her attendance. She rarely attended school for an entire day in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Professionally, I believe retention serves its purpose when done correctly. Students need to have an intervention plan developed so they do not spend an entire year making the same mistakes they made the first time. When Catherine learned of her retention, she was very unhappy and sought to change it. In class, Catherine was often off-task and tended to be confrontational with adults and other students. She was a difficult student to have in your class. When Catherine was focused in class, she was able to do her assignments. When she had other

things on her mind or was angry when she entered class, she was very disruptive. From the ninth grade to now, Catherine has 29 referrals and 14 suspensions, ranging from tardiness, profanity, and disruptive behavior. She and I often talked when she was in school. From our conversations, I learned of Catherine's difficult home life. This is the reason that after I became a principal, I allowed her to stay after school with me to get homework done and complete different small jobs around the school with the night custodians. Catherine has a lot of potential, we as educators have to find out how to get her to be successful in a high school setting. After staying late at school, Catherine would go home, go into her room, and shut the door. She did not interact with her family. This worked for her for a while, but this school year from September through December she went back to the group home. She reports that presently she still feels pushed back and detached from the people at home.

At first it was my mom's boyfriend, he was just really disrespectful. Like, he would say things to me or my brother, my cousin, and you know, my mom. And I would always have to stand up for my mom, but she would never stand up for me. I mean, I remember, like, New Year's Eve, like everyone is happy and having a good time. But not my family, we were arguing and having a brawl instead of celebrating the New Year. Some New Year's celebration!

Her family situation has shown her what she does not want in her home. She believes that she will be better than her present family.

Catherine believes her mother does not believe in her. She cannot remember a time when her mother praised her or encouraged her. She feels that her mother failed her

in advocating for her at school. She feels that she would have been allowed to attend summer school if her mother would have come up to the school and asked them to let her attend. When she asked her mother to come up to the school she said simply, “no.”

Catherine’s school has a system in place where the parents are given a computer generated phone call to notify parents when their children have missed school or part of the school day. The school called her home almost daily during her tenth grade year. Her mother never talked to her about her truancy. She says her mother would delete the message shortly after it began to playback. She felt that her mother did not care, so she did not worry about missing school. “So there was no one, like to try to save me. So I kind of just had to deal with it.”

**Interaction with peers and environment.** Catherine is a friendly young lady whose personality at times can be described as abrasive. She is very outspoken and opinionated which often pushes others away from her. She, however, has a large circle of friends who appear to accept her and enjoy being around her. She has lost and gained friends as a result of her 10<sup>th</sup> grade year. She believes there are friendships that you are better off without. It was with these friends that Catherine spent her 10<sup>th</sup> grade year truant.

She spent more days away from school than in school, which is why she couldn’t understand, why she was somewhat surprised when she had to repeat the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. She talks about leaving school almost daily or in some cases not reporting to school at all in the morning. Sometimes she would go to school during lunchtime, have lunch and then leave.

I don't know. I guess I'm not going to say I was trying to be cool, but my friends were doing it. And you know, I didn't want to be the one who was, like, oh, I'm going to stay in school. Sometimes I wanted to leave, sometimes I didn't. We would just hang out. Go to different houses where the parents were not home. We would drink, smoke weed, other stuff. None of it good.

Catherine started using alcohol and drugs because she wanted to belong and she was tired of her situation at home. Being with her friends and getting high allowed her to escape for a while and not think about what she was doing. One of the biggest threats to adolescents' success in schools is involvement in risky behavior (Resnick, Bearman & Blum, 1997). The distracters for Catherine were truancy, drugs, alcohol, and eventually the need to work to provide for her. Without these distracters, Catherine's standardized testing and past academic records indicate that she is an academically average student capable of passing state assessments.

As a result of her behavior, she and all of her friends were retained. Once Catherine was retained, she realized that she could not be with her same friends anymore. Their attitude was, "you failed, we failed, we all failed." When her friends did not appear to want to change, she told them she could not be with them anymore because, "this is serious. It's not being playful or anything. I took it completely serious."

Catherine found it easy not to talk about her failure to others for the most part because of the high school setting. Eventually, others began to notice that she was not in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade courses with them. As others began to question her about her situation, she began to use it to her advantage. She went back to the shelter to volunteer and lead group

sessions on making good choices. She says sometimes it would be girls from her high school, or someone's sister that she knew. She would sometimes receive email saying they had a girl that reminded them of her and they felt she would benefit from talking to her. She says, "It's hard sometimes to hear from other people, you know, but when it's like somebody close to your age and kind of, did things like that but got over it. Sometimes that helps." She says she got over her embarrassment about being retained and now she goes out of her way to talk to her friends and others about her life.

**School.** Catherine believes that she set herself up for failure in school. Her argument is that her transcripts support the fact that she has never come close to failing before her 10<sup>th</sup> grade year. She had some trouble with science, but by skipping school she had no hope of passing.

When talking about her school, Catherine felt no one really cared. She believes people looked at her and stereotyped her, thinking "She doesn't want to learn. So, oh well, let's just write her up." Catherine carried a lot of anger in her and would often lash out at her peers and teachers. In her repeat of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, she talks about being in classes with 10<sup>th</sup> graders who she felt were not focused. This disconnect often led to her shout out things like, "Shut up," or, "Be quiet," or sometimes getting so angry that she had to walk out. She felt that these students were getting her out of her "comfort zone." She did not realize that she was causing more of a disturbance than the students who were not focused. She said that once she became angry, she became channeled and consumed with that anger.



In her second school year in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, she was given one of the same teachers she had previously. She went to her counselor and had her class changed. She believes that having different teachers than she had before helped because the new teachers did not have a preconceived opinion about her. She felt that most adults did not believe that she had turned her life around and she had to prove to everyone that she had changed.

Catherine felt responsible for her retention; however, she believes the school did not try to help her.

I think there should have been resources to help me out, especially with, you know, stuff like summer school. I mean, I did a whole life change, and people saw that but they didn't want to help, down from the teachers to school officials. Even after the first quarter when I started going downhill, not one person said, "What's going on?" Everyone just ignored me. I don't think anyone cared. Maybe they thought I was too loud and so they were happy I wasn't there. No one said you are not going to graduate. No one fully explained to me how hard it would be to catch up. I literally had to find out everything by myself. No one said, okay, it's going too far; no one sat down and said, okay, what can you do—this is what you can do to get to this point, to at least pass that English class. Nobody even gave me those options.

Ms. Lysel, a science teacher at the high school, became Catherine's mentor at the end of her second year as a 10<sup>th</sup> grader. Catherine speaks fondly of Ms. Lysel and her willingness to help her both inside and outside of school. Ms. Lysel has known Catherine

since she was in elementary school. She was an elementary school teacher before joining the high school.

I have known Catherine for at least 10 years. In elementary school, she was somewhat different academically. She was never in danger of failing and worked hard in school. I lost touch with her while she was in middle school but I did hear that she was causing trouble there. I see in Catherine a compassion for what most would call “underdogs”. She is willing to help anyone, but does not understand when others do not want her help. She can be abrasive and in some cases force help upon others. Here at the high school, Catherine is a “push-out”. Her teachers are trying to get her to graduate at the end of this year, her 11<sup>th</sup> grade year. They don’t want her here any longer. Her classroom teachers say she is very disruptive in class. She is enrolled full time at the high school and goes to night school four nights out of the week. She works a full schedule at her job during the weekend and holidays. At the end of this school year, she will take more than the average end of the year assessments. I have no doubt she will pass them, but I think it is too much...but this is what she wants. She wants to graduate. So I help her, I give her a quiet place to study and I make sure she has something to eat.

Ms. Lysel’s mentoring has helped Catherine navigate her way through high school. Her belief in Catherine’s ability to be successful bolsters her sense of self-efficacy.

**Self-efficacy.** Catherine wants to be a social worker. She believes that she will be able to help others, especially teenagers. She wants to work in the schools and feels that she can make a difference. Zimmerman & Cleary (2006) state students who have a high

sense of self-efficacy about their ability to accomplish a task under difficult circumstances have a higher probability of succeeding. The difficulties Catherine faced on her path to graduation required her to believe in her ability to accomplish them. She continually took cues from her teachers and used her perception of how teachers saw her to push her toward accomplishing her goals. Adolescents are sensitive to their surroundings and to the covert messages that they receive from their teachers (Weinstein, 2002).

Catherine contacted me through the on-line discussion board to inform me about her impending graduation and again during the summer after graduation. When Catherine graduated from high school, she immediately began to look for a job that would allow her to work with people. She was able to get an unpaid internship with Pachecko Public Schools during the summer. She remembers giving up and saying she had to find a job that would allow her to go to the community college. She says, “Yes, I had just about given up, when somebody remembered me, when an opportunity came up, they called me.” The job is part-time and to supplement her income she proctors the SAT examinations twice a month. She plans to enroll in college in the spring. When asked if there was anything else she wanted to share, she said, “It wasn’t fun, it wasn’t easy, but if you really want it, you can be a better person.”

Adolescents with high self-efficacy have a strong belief in their capabilities and meet the challenge of difficulties with strength (Bandura, 1997). Despite Catherine’s rough exterior, she has compassion for others. She often goes out of her way to help those in need. Her sense of character is clearly evident considering her career choice and the

youth group she participates in to help troubled adolescents navigate their way through high school.

**Resilience/non-resilience.** At the end of the summer of her 10<sup>th</sup> grade year, Catherine decided to go back to school. She decided dropping out would not help her reach her goals. When she returned to school, she began to seek out mentors and others who would advocate on her behalf. She received a new counselor whom she felt did not believe that she could accomplish the difficult schedule that she had to complete in order to graduate. She reports that this inspired her to work harder to prove to her counselor that she could graduate.

She decided that she would graduate on time and consequently enrolled in night class. During the day she took 11<sup>th</sup> grade courses and in night school she took her 12<sup>th</sup> grade courses. Her defining moment, when she knew that she would return to school and do everything she needed to do to graduate, was when she had time on her hands during the summer of her first 10<sup>th</sup> grade year to reflect on what type of future she would have if she did not complete school. Catherine did not find out until the Monday before her Saturday graduation that she had passed her state exams and had enough credits to graduate with her class.

### **Matt**

Matt is a 16 year old 10th/11th grader at Pachecko High School. He will soon turn 17. He repeated the ninth grade and repeated two courses in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. In both instances, he failed the grade or courses but passed the state examinations well above basic scores. My purpose in including Matt in my study was his mother contacted me

expressing her interest in having Matt participate in the study. The initial data she provided during our conversation intrigued me and left me wanting to know Matt's story.

Matt's interview took place in the recreational room of his apartment complex. Matt preferred his mother's presence during his interview. The two appeared to share a close relationship. The informed consent form had previously been completed by Matt's mother. After reading the minor child assent form, Matt again verbally agreed to participate in the study and signed the form. He filled out the data collection form for students. After completing the form, we began our first interview.

**Initial reaction.** When Matt was first told he would repeat the ninth grade by his counselor, he worried about how he would tell his mother.

My counselor called me in April of my ninth grade year. He told me that I could not go to the 10th grade. I asked about summer school but he was like, you failed too many classes. You can only take two classes in summer school. He also said I did not pass summer school last summer. I was shocked at first, but then I just left his office. I knew my repeating the ninth grade was not going to make my mother happy, but I couldn't do anything at this point, so I just got high.

Matt doesn't remember being sad or feeling any way about repeating the ninth grade. He believes he just didn't care. But he wonders if getting high prevented him from reacting at all. His mother was disappointed in him and she did not understand why he was failing his classes.

**Interaction with parents.** Matt is the only child of a single parent. His mother is an office manager for a small firm. She has several health issues that require frequent

medical attention. Matt's mother and father divorced when he was two years old. His father resides in the Virgin Islands. Matt has not had physical contact with his father for several years. He has easy access to his father by telephone and says he can call his father whenever he wants. His father calls him often. His mother has planned a trip to the Virgin Islands for Matt. He will travel on his own this summer. He is looking forward to his trip.

Matt and his mother, as a result of their being the only immediate family in the home, enjoy a close relationship. He says it has always been just him and his mom. He mentions family that live just down the street, but reports they never treated him properly so he doesn't have any contact with them. In the early years of Matt's life, he spoke of an open relationship with his mother and felt that at that time he could talk to her about anything. In his eighth grade year, his relationship with his mother began to change. It was at this time that Matt began to experiment with marijuana.

Marijuana. I actually started in the eighth grade and I stopped for a bit and then started back up when I hit the ninth grade. It was off the chain in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Things got crazy. In the eighth grade, I began to pull away from my mother and be more like, you know, secretive. I would hide a lot from my mom. She didn't find out that I was using until the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. She suspected something but she didn't know for sure until I was in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

Matt continued with the drug use periodically from the eighth grade through the tenth grade. His use of marijuana greatly affected his relationship with his mother. He talks about trying to rebuild her trust in him. He appears anxious to please his mother and talks about the sacrifices that she has made for him. He believes that the incident he

describes below played a large role in his wanting to change his life around and salvage his relationship with his mother. (Matt asked his mother to leave for this portion of the interview.)

One day I was out—I was smoking and—well, I already had a PO [Probation Officer], but I wasn't taking it seriously, and so I smoked again. But I was getting pee tested in three weeks, so I'm like, oh, I'll be fine, you know. So I smoked that one time and she (my mom) texted me and she's like, hey I need help, I need you to come home. I'm like an hour away from home walking distance. She's like I'm really sick. I'm lying on the bed and I can't move at all. I'm dehydrated, I need some water and I'm like, aren't there any waters in the fridge. She's like no. I'm like, oh. I'm getting mad at my – at her, but really I'm not seeing what she's feeling, she's in pain and she can't move. When I finally got home she was so sick. That's what made me decide to let it go and fix things between my mother and me. I was, like, oh, no, if this had been worse—If I'm going to be out in the streets, things like this is going to keep happening to her, then I got to stop smoking because I got to be there for my mom, you know.

Today, Matt's mother tries to stay involved in his education and well-being. At the time of Matt's initial retention and his subsequent failure to pass high school courses, his mother was not notified of his struggles until close to the end of the school year. This lack of communication changes after he attends truancy court. His PO visits the school frequently and contacts his mother regularly with a report of his progress.

Up until recently when the courts like, they got involved, now my mother is informed about every single thing, you know; if I missed a class and everything else. She is very involved with school now. By the courts stepping in because I was like missing so much school, it helped things between me and my mom. My mom began to suspect that I was smoking cigarettes and then she began to question whether she smelled marijuana. She kept asking me if I, about the smoking because I smelled like smoke. I kept saying no, but when we went to court she told them, “He smokes weed.” That’s when it all came out. In addition to monitoring my school attendance, I was regularly pee tested. This will be good because if I get like, pee tested at all and I show up positive, then I would have to go back to court and then I would probably have to, like, go to shelter care and foster home or where I won’t see her till I’m like 21 or something, and I wouldn’t want that.

**Interaction with peers and environment.** Matt has a small circle of friends. He says that although he has many people in his classes and around school that he talks to, he wouldn’t really call them friends. He settles on the word “acquaintances,” to describe his relationship with his classmates. In the eighth grade, he began to hang around others who were not doing well in school. He would often spend time with these friends until it was time for his mother to come home from work. It was with these friends that he began to smoke marijuana. Throughout his eighth grade year, he would smoke steadily for two to three weeks and then vow to quit. His resolve to quit lasted for a short period and then he



would find himself hanging out with his friends and spending any money that he had on marijuana.

He describes the high school as having a separate section for ninth graders. He says this made it pretty evident for others to know that he had not passed on to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. When the subject came up about his repeating ninth grade, most of his friends were sympathetic. His friends did not tease him about being retained. He believes that those he discussed his retention with took their cue from him. He would often preface his admittance of failing ninth grade with such words as “sadly,” or “sad to say.” Matt was not the only one back in the ninth grade. He took solace in this fact and it was with these students that he frequently associated or considered to be his friend. In the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, he missed a lot of days of school to hang out with his friends. He would get on the city bus and “go around my old way and got carried away smoking and stuff.”

Matt has a best friend who does not use drugs or struggle in school. He maintains his friendship with this student even though his friend left him behind in the ninth grade. Matt enjoys spending a great deal of time with his best friend’s family, because they are a traditional family. He speaks fondly of the make-up of their family—mother, father, children. They accept him as part of their family. In fact, this family hosted an intervention on his behalf when they learned of his involvement with drugs.

Matt's distracters are poverty, truancy, drugs, deviant behavior, and responsibility for his mother’s care. Without these distracters, Matt records, much like Catherine’s, indicate that he is able to do the course work and pass state assessments.

**School.** Matt's accumulative records indicate that his elementary teachers often commented on his good manners and sense of responsibility. He was often described as hard working. Things began to change for Matt when he reached the eighth grade. Matt's grades began to fall and his discipline folder became thick. In middle school, he accumulated 35 referrals. These referrals ranged from being tardy to insubordination. He was suspended 10 times and spent several days within the In School Suspension program.

He attended summer school for math and language arts, earning D's in both. However, he passed the state examination in both courses with above average scores. He moved on to the ninth grade where his drug use continued. In the ninth grade, Matt accumulated 30 additional referrals and 15 suspensions. He had a few teachers who tried to help him make up his missing assignments. Most times Matt would not stay after school for help. Matt failed two courses and was required to attend summer school. He failed both courses and consequently remained in the ninth grade. The second time Matt was enrolled in the ninth grade; he continued to struggle with his academics. This time however, he was able to earn a "C" in language arts and a "D" in math. Again he passed his state exams for both classes allowing him to progress to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. He says the work wasn't hard because he had done it all before; however, he says, "I just got lazy, and that's why I passed the state exam."

In the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, Matt's drug use became a daily occurrence.

It's just when I do it in the morning—like, sometimes I did it in the morning before I got on the bus. And then I'd have this good feeling, but then when I got to school I'm all tired and dragging myself and just trying to focus and I can't

focus that much. The words get—you know, the numbers get jumbled up and I'm like hearing the teachers but it is going in my ear and out. I mean, like I heard what they said and then it's just like – it, just ran away. It just ran out of my ear and I completely forgot what just happened. I feel like the smoking did not affect my others classes like it did math. I really don't know, I mean, I think I do better when I'm not smoking. I at least hold a "D" or "C" if I wasn't smoking. But when I do, it would be horrible, like, "F".

It was in the 10th grade that Matt's skipping school came to the attention of the truancy officer. He was absent from school more days than he attended. He would erase the messages the school left on his home answering machine before his mother came home from work. His mother did not become aware of the enormity of his problems until she was contacted at work with a summons to truancy court.

With the involvement of the court system, Matt began to improve his class performance. He was able to bring his Algebra grade up to a "D," and continued his practice of passing the state end course examination. However, his earned grade did not qualify for course credit; therefore, he was required to enroll in credit recovery. This program allowed him to retake the course online. The course work is self-paced in units of study. Each unit consists of a recorded lesson that can be reviewed as well as notes. At the end of each unit, a quiz is administered. Students are given unlimited retakes of each quiz until a passing score is achieved. Matt discovered he preferred this method of instruction.

It's really helpful. Because, like, they—there's like, actually a voice—a voice speaking and when – you just listen to it with earphones, it's like, so relaxing and makes me understand more and I'm okay, okay. And then they go through the steps, they just show you everything. You click solution and it pops up, shows you how it's supposed to be and I just stay there and write it down and it's in my head. It's a period during school, or I could do it after school. Sometimes I get after-school help from the tutoring program.

Matt begins to tell me about the subjects he enjoys in school. He excels in World Civilizations, Algebra, Spanish, and most definitely Choir. His face lights up when he talks about Choir. He had to petition to take Choir because his academic record was so poor. His music teacher is Ms. Bailey. She spoke candidly about Matt's involvement in Choir.

I have known Matt for two years. He was enrolled in my class in the ninth grade. Quite frankly, Matt would come to class high on something. He would often fall asleep during class and would not actively participate. At the end of the first quarter, I recommended that Matt be dropped from the program. I did not hear about him or from him until he came to speak with me about enrolling in my class again. When I checked his academic transcripts, Matt was not eligible for enrollment. I talked with Matt about his grades, and basically what did he want to do with his life. I came away from the meeting believing that Matt wanted to change. I signed the exception to policy enrollment form and allowed Matt to re-enroll in the class. In the beginning, he [was] better than before but I have been

noticing some instances of his not being focused in the class. I try to talk to Matt often to see where his head is, but truthfully, I am concerned about him.

Matt is involved in Choir, Show Choir, poetry slam, and the tutoring center. Matt reports that his teachers are seeing a difference in him. He perceives himself to be more focused and willing to do the work required to pass his courses. His mother checks his homework every day. He often reads her his writing and she offers suggestions and helps him with his math.

**Self-efficacy.** When I contacted Matt to complete a member check, I found Matt anticipating his senior year in a year's time. He wants to go to college to be a musician. He has a definite spark in his eye when he talks about choir or music in general. He has not decided what he wants to do in the field of music, but he knows that is where his heart lies. In order to graduate on time, he must attend summer school, night school, and take several credit recovery courses. He says:

Next year is senior year. I can't screw that up. I have to take all of these courses again, because I can't just, like, drop it and leave it. That would mess up my, like, whole application and transcript or whatever. I know I can do this.

Matt has a difficult time ahead of him, but he feels confident that he can accomplish his goals. He receives positive reinforcement from his teachers who have begun to praise his effort in class. This bolstering of his self-efficacy increases his likelihood of being successful in school (Bandura, 1997).

**Resilience/non-resilience.** Matt admits considering dropping out when he turned 16. He believed that he would be better off getting a job to help his mother out financially. Looking back, he attributes this desire to drop out of school to drug use.

When I was smoking weed, I told my mom forget school, I can just start working full time. My mom was not happy with this. She really let me have it. But I think it was just the marijuana talking. I don't talk back to my mom or anything like that, but things were different then. Like, I wouldn't be, like right now I'd be talking to you differently. I wouldn't even, like, remember half my teachers' names. I would have been, duh. I would have missed my bus more. I wouldn't have been staying after school as much as I do and my grades would have looked different, way different. Three things made me want to change, not being there for my mom, going through retention the first time, and then facing it a second time turned me around. It made me see that I couldn't do it and drugs too.

In the spring of Matt's junior year, I went to the high school to check on Matt and to have him complete his final member check. I attempted to set up a meeting time with Matt by telephone but was unable to reach him. After arriving at the high school, I was informed that Matt was no longer enrolled at Pachecko High School. I called his mother and learned that Matt had a relapse and was sent to the state treatment center for adolescents for detoxification and counseling. His mother reports that he will be reevaluated in six months and if all goes well he will re-enroll in Pachecko High School in the fall.

## **Cross Case Analysis**

Historically, the use of retention by educators has taken a pendulous swing over the decades, vacillating with various reform movements (Owings & Magliaro, 1998). Politicians, educators, and policy makers continue to struggle with decisions regarding student retention based on more rigorous standards. In response to this quandary, educators in the 21<sup>st</sup> century seek a better understanding of the effectiveness and implications of grade level retention.

Students act in a manner influenced by their experience with retention and their interpretation of the world in which they exist. The interaction adolescents have with their environment, family, peers, academics, and educational stakeholders greatly influence their perspective. I examine adolescent students' perspectives of grade level retention through the lens of symbolic interactionism theory (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934) and self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997). Gaining an understanding of the student's meaning system provide a basis for understanding the rationale for choosing resiliency (the continuation of education to diploma) or non-resiliency (dropping out or interruption of education). Adolescents' perception of their ability to master academic tasks may predict their motivation and academic achievement (Pajares, 2006). Bandura maintains that this implies that self-efficacy, the belief in one's own ability to do well on tasks, may play a role in academic success.

The following analysis of the data explores emerging themes, how these themes coupled with the student's interaction with environment, family, peers, and academics shaped the meaning students constructed about their experience, and how these meanings

play out in the student's academic world. In developing research themes, I referred to the following overarching research question: How do retained adolescent students perceive their retention experience(s)? Four major themes emerged from the data. They are crisis, interactions (to include family, peers, and school) mobility, and transformations.

**Crisis.** When questioned about their perception of the retention experience, all six reported feelings of anger, denial, shame, humiliation, and blame (Heubert, 2002).

Blumer's (1969) first premise of SI states that human beings act toward life experiences on the basis of the meaning that the experiences have for them. For all six participants, the retention experience represents a crisis in their lives. In conveying her initial reaction to retention, Allison describes her experience as one encased in anger and shame. She feels strongly that this retention was unwarranted. Zoe equates sadness, disappointment, and embarrassment with retention. She reports that she thinks about her retention on a daily basis. She believes that the experience increased her feelings of always being behind academically in school. When Catherine reflects back on her retention experience, she expresses feeling of shame and disappointment in herself. Matt also relays feeling of embarrassment and shame in being retained. SI explains the shaping of these adolescents' perception of retention. Each student took cues from those around them and began to form and understand their perception of the influence retention has on their sense of self-efficacy and aspirations.

Adolescents often encounter obstacles in their educational careers (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006). Students who have a higher sense of self-efficacy about being able to manage the task of being successful academically under the difficult circumstances of



retention are expected to have a higher probability of success (Zimmerman & Cleary). How adolescents interpret the results of their performance in the year they were retained informs and alters their environment and their self-belief which consequently informs and alters their subsequent performances (Pajares, 2006). This belief is especially true for Allison, Zoe, Catherine, Gina, and Matt, all of which spoke about the year they were retained as not having much value in their academic growth. However, for each, the experience became a motivator for them to either make up the time or seek help to prevent them from repeating the experience.

Each student to some degree hid or engaged in a form of denial in respect to retention. None voluntarily spoke about their experience to their teachers or their peers. Gina's and Robert's need to hide the fact that they had retention in their background was slightly more profound than the others. Their reaction to this crisis in their life was to attempt to completely hide away from the experience. Gina began her experience under a shroud of secrecy and an active intent to separate herself from any other student who had also been retained. Her need to hide the fact that she had been retained carried over into her everyday life. It was important for her to separate herself from others who had been retained. For Gina, the stigma of retention was and remains an experience to be denied. She was eager to tell her story because of the promise of anonymity. Consequently, Gina has a difficult time accessing her academic ability and therefore, her behavior is not geared toward her improving her academic performance. She steps away from the experience, believing that this distancing negates her experience. Robert, much like Gina, has an element of secrecy in his perception of retention. He volunteers to share his story,

but he is selective about what he wants to share. He is deceptive when sharing with his great grandmother his academic achievement. Robert has diminished his experience with retention to a distant memory. He does not acknowledge a significant impact to his life. According to Blumer (1969), it can be said that Gina and Roberts reaction to retention is based on their meaning they have assigned to retention. Their self-efficacy is threatened because they are unable to access a source to build their sense of self-efficacy. This is largely because they both treat the experience as if it never happened (Bandura, 1997).

**Interactions.** Meaning is derived from or arises out of the social interaction that one has with one's fellow human beings (Blumer, 1969). The socially constructed meaning section of my conceptual framework presented in chapter two illustrates the changes and adaptations adolescents undergo as they react to interactions with their environment, family, peers, and school. Allison believes her mother's decision to retain her instilled in her feelings of distrust, betrayal, and anger. She believes her first retention affected her relationship with her mother and prevented her from sharing what she calls a normal mother-daughter relationship.

When Mr. Crestwood demonstrated belief in Allison's ability, she was able to increase her sense of self efficacy through verbal persuasion (Bandura, 1997). Bandura maintains that verbal persuasion can be effective and impact efficacy when the feedback is realistic and relevant. Allison's academic achievement is reflective of her positive interaction with her teacher and mentor.

Allison's beliefs support the work of Blumer (1969) who states a person must acknowledge the action of another, analyze and interpret that action, and then make a

choice about future actions based on that interpretation. Allison's interaction with her mother eventually shapes her beliefs about her academic abilities. Adolescents obtain much of their self-efficacy beliefs from their families and home environments (Schunk & Miller, 2002).

Zoe's shyness prevents her from being her own advocate. A shyness she believes she developed in response to her retention. Being retained diminished her confidence and caused her to view herself as a passive learner. Once Zoe received the message that she was academically behind her peers, it became difficult for her to view herself as capable and intelligent, therefore she began to feel powerless to change the direction of her fate. Zoe's concept of self is both constructed and redefined through interactions that shape her perspective on the retention experience (Mead, 1934). Zoe was unable to move forward and improve her likelihood of graduating on time until her family became involved in her education.

Mr. Davis interest and belief in Zoe has provided her an opportunity to increase her sense of competence and belonging, as well as promoting positive interactions with supportive adults (Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). Cooper & Good (1983) maintain that teacher expectations have an impact on students. Teachers tend to control the environment and possible student outcomes by sharing their expectations with students.

Both Robert's and Gina's interaction with adults increased their tendency to hide behind secrecy and deception. Gina's interaction with her father caused her to infuse secrecy into all areas of her education. Although her father tries to take a more active role in her education, she continues to give him partial truths which prevent him from

giving her the support that he wants to give. Robert has as little contact as possible with counselors, teachers, and principals. He worries that others will discover his secrets and treat him differently. In SI, the continuous interaction between the individual's behavior and the responses of others dictates how a person feels about themselves and their experiences (Blumer, 1969). Schunk & Meece (2005) suggest that family influences that promote effective interactions enhance self-efficacy.

Gina and Robert are products of splintered families. Robert is being raised by his great-grandmother who attempts to increase his self-efficacy through verbal persuasion. However, in his case, the verbal persuasion is unrealistic when matched with his in school performance and ability. Bandura (1997) maintains that when unrealistic beliefs of personal capabilities are communicated, it invites failure and discredits the persuaders and further undermines the recipient's belief about their capabilities. Gina did not live with her father exclusively until she was 16 years old. By this time she had developed a system of subterfuge to hide her academic deficiencies. Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy (2004) suggest that the stress of hiding what is actually going on in student's academic life can in turn debilitate her academic performance. SI explains what Gina has taken away from her interactions with others and her belief of who she is in life.

Catherine reports she receives the message every day that no one cares about her. She has erected a wall around her to protect herself from being hurt. She believes her mother loves her but does not like her. She also proposes that others have a preconceived opinion about her and she sometimes acts out to give them what she feels they want from her (Blumer, 1969). She says that inside she is quiet and smart but very few people know

this about her. The addition of Ms. Lysel and Ms. Basil in Catherine's life offset what she was unable to get at home. Collins, Maccoby, Steinbeg, Hetherington, & Bornstein (2000) suggest that adolescents are able to achieve at a higher level when parental involvement is prevalent in their life. Catherine spoke extensively about the lack of parental involvement in her personal and school life. Ms. Lysel and Ms. Basil are able to help Catherine redefine her beliefs about herself and consequently raise her expectations about what she can accomplish. The construct of the self is a significant piece of SI because it is the definition people create of who they are through their interactions with others (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003).

Matt reports that he has had to be head of his family for as long as he can remember. He feels pressure to uphold his adult role and as a release he turns to substance abuse and friends whom he acknowledges may not have his best interest at heart. His quest to escape his responsibilities causes him to react negatively toward adults as he views them as another source of pressure. He is able to relax and be a child when he is with his friend's family. He calls them his regular family.

Adolescents are at a place in their life when peers increase in importance in their lives (Bokhorst, Sumter, & Westenberg, 2009). Allison was able to increase her sense of self and self-efficacy through her friend. Her friend assumed the role of mentor and helps guide her through high school. Catherine talks about knowing what she should be doing and giving in to be with her peers. She was able to leave these friends behind and cultivate other friendships that she used to increase her belief in her ability to successfully complete school. Bandura (1997) maintains that people are influenced by vicarious

experiences through modeled attainments. Observing other people similar to themselves successfully complete a task or an activity provides a vicarious experience (Goddard et al., 2004; Pearson, 2008). Matt, on the other hand, continues to associate with peers that engage in risky behavior. Therefore, he is unable to benefit from emulating successful peers. His friendship with the young man that does not participate in substance abuse has not been enough to offset what he engages with his other friends.

**Mobility.** Mobility or changing schools was a factor that most adolescents in this investigation shared. Allison changed schools five times before she reached eighth grade. Zoe changed schools three times in elementary school, including the year she was retained. Gina changed schools to move from private school to public school and to immigrate to the United States. Matt changed schools in the sixth grade and again in the seventh grade. Most students report that they were retained in the midst of one of their moves. Student mobility appears to be detrimental to students' academic and social growth. Engec (2006) notes that as the rate of mobility or school changes increase, so did the effect on academic achievement.

**Transformations.** In contrast to previous studies (Byrnes, 1989; Jimerson et al., 1997; Jimerson et al., 2006; Shepard & Smith, 1990) students did not believe their peers were much bothered by their retention. Two participants spoke of the teasing they received from their peers, however, both made light of it and were able to move from this experience relatively unscathed. Allison and Gina spoke about the difference culturally in peers' perception of retention. It appears that students today are not as concerned with their classmates being overage in the classroom. This shift is supported by Blumer's

(1969) third premise, perspectives are recreated through the interactions that individuals create as they self-reflect on the interactions they have with one another.

The participants in this study did not report that retention placed boundaries on what they could or could not achieve with retention in their backgrounds. Most spoke on the availability of programs such as credit recovery, night school, and satellite schools as options to make-up years lost through retention. Those who chose not to avail themselves of these programs did not appear to mind graduating at an advanced age.

All participants in this study believe they have control over their future goals. Even the three students who had less than 2.0 grade point averages did not foresee any obstacles that they could not circumvent to reach their goal of enrolling in college and participating in their career of choice. Allison, Zoe, and Catherine each has put into action a workable plan for obtaining their goals.

This study suggests adolescent students' perspective on retention is complex and varies from student to student. There are some commonalities and differences in the data presented by the students. It appears that adolescents with a strong family support system were able to successfully rebound back from retention. Students were also able to experience success if they had a strong support system in the form of teachers or peers.

Although most students report feelings of embarrassment, humiliation, and disappointment initially, most were able to use the experience as motivation to improve their academic achievement by seeking help from teachers, parents, and friends. Retention represented a temporary threat to their sense of self-efficacy and view of

themselves. Most were able to rebuild their self-efficacy through their interactions with others.



## **5. Discussion, Summary of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

### **Discussion**

This section revisits the purpose and significance presented in chapter 1 of this study. It reexamines the theoretical and conceptual framework used to exemplify how previously retained adolescent students perceive their retention experience. I also present a summary of the major findings, conclusions that were drawn, and implications for educators and policy makers based on the results of the study. Additionally, I offer recommendations for practice and future research.

### **Purpose**

Little is known about adolescents' perspectives in regards to life experiences that have an impact on their lives (Phelen et al, 1998). The overall purpose of this study is to fill in that gap and explore through the perspective of previously retained adolescents 15 years of age and older, the influence of grade level retention on their attitudes, beliefs, goals, and future academic aspirations. Adolescents express their thoughts on the impact of retention by sharing their retention experience. By analyzing the students' recollection of retention, insight into the meaning or perceived impact of retention and the resulting academic experience of each student emerges.

## **Significance Discussion**

Chapter one presents the definition of retention as the practice of requiring students to repeat a grade in the subsequent school year. Previous retention research quantitatively report the impact of retention in the form of grade achievement, socio-economic status, dropout rates, standardized test pass rates, and other statistical variables (Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, 2001). Analyzing data through quantitative methods are helpful in developing curriculum to increase student achievement. However, statistics rarely reveal participants' whole stories. Miles and Huberman (1994) maintain that qualitative data provide a means of giving the reader well-grounded rich descriptive explanations of processes within an identifiable local context, in essence, verbally taking the reader into the world of the participants. In keeping with Miles and Huberman's merits of qualitative research, my study utilizes retained students' narratives to contribute to the overall understanding of what students believe the influence of retention has on their achievement and realization of future academic goals. The data presented in this study give "voice" to an otherwise unheard from population and offers these students' input into what they believe has taken place as a result of their retention and exactly what they can do in the future.

Grade level retention was popular in the early 1800's, but decreased during the Great Depression because of perceptions that it harms students' self-esteem (Allen, Chen, Wilson, & Hughes, 2009). In the long-term, when students are retained they often face behavioral, school engagement, and self-esteem issues (Byrd et al., 1997; Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Martin, 2009). The effects of retention are often not realized for many

years (Ferguson, Jimerson, & Dalton, 2001). The increased occurrence of such issues as discipline infractions, truancy, academic deficiencies, diminished sense of self-efficacy, and the predisposition toward dropping out, which carries a lower wage earning potential, are all practical significance reasons for understanding the impact of retention on adolescents.

As educators, we see the outside layers of students. We take note of their academic achievement, behavior, and effort. Reverend Allan Harris (personal communication, April 17, 2013) in his sermon on Sunday morning said,

We as people only see the outside of others. We may see fine clothing, happy faces, and a picture perfect exterior, but this is only part of the story. Knowing how they got there, what they went through, or even what they are going through, would provide a much clearer picture.

These statements make me think of my participants. When research is compiled from students' words, we begin to see their story. Their words present a clear and transparent picture of who the students are as well as give insight into why they make the choices and decisions that they do.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In chapter two of this study, I present my conceptual framework. I use the lens of symbolic interactionism and self-efficacy to understand the meaning retained students construct about their experience. Taken together, these two perspectives offer explanations as to why some students are able to experience one or more retentions and still successfully navigate through school and develop a plan towards graduation from

high school and enrollment in post-secondary institutions. Research has shown retention to be a major influence in students' decision to leave school (Jimerson, 1999; Jimerson, Ferguson, et al., 2002; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). In agreement with these studies, Catherine immediately considers dropping out as a solution to her dilemma of returning to school to repeat 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Matt also wrestles with the same decisions as he considers dropping out as a means to provide extra income for his family. What happens between retention and graduation that allows some students to complete high school and go on to other endeavors such as college and/or trade school? Understanding the role these variables play in resiliency or non-resiliency decisions is one we as a profession need in our information repertoires to promote students' school completion and preparation for future endeavors. This conceptual framework focuses on these variables in the form of interactions between home, peers, and school which students use to socially construct their meaning and perspective of retention and its influence.

This conceptual framework enables me to see how the interactions students experience shape their meaning. Because these students are able to articulate how they interpret others' actions and what actions they initiated in response to these interactions, I was able to understand why they made the decisions they made concerning their education. In creating my conceptual framework, I did not consider social promotions and how it would fit into the framework. Any future research using this framework may require consideration of this additional component to more thoroughly examine the retention experience.

## Summary of Findings

Retention was implemented as a strategy to improve all six adolescent students' academic achievement. For half of the participants, six to seven years have passed between the time they were initially retained and their present grade placement. This study sought to understand the perceived influence retention had on the students socially, academically, and emotionally. The findings of this study will be discussed through the research questions that guide this investigation.

### Findings from Research Questions

How do retained students' perceive their retention experience(s)? This overarching research question of this study brings to the forefront several sub-questions: How do students who have previously been retained perceive events which they believe led to their retention? How do students who have previously been retained perceive their interaction with teachers, peers, parents, and administrators? What future aspirations do previously retained students express? How do they perceive the control they have over these goals? The following paragraphs take a look at the findings from this study to answer these questions.

**Overarching question.** How do retained students' perceive their retention experience? Allison, Zoe, and Gina describe their experience as humiliating, embarrassing, and life changing. However, they did not believe it to be devastatingly insurmountable. Zoe and Catherine acknowledge the experience as negative, but at the same time they recognize the merit of their retention. Catherine states, "Retention was a wake-up call me, I knew I had to do something in order to graduate." The third student to

recognize the positive in her retention experience is Allison. Allison is unique in that she has two retentions from which to draw conclusions. She perceives her second retention in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade as positive because it allows her an opportunity to really understand and prepare for college.

When asked during the interview if retention had improved their academic achievement, students retained in their early years report they did better the next year, but school became increasingly harder as the years progressed. Researchers note that academic gains typically disappear several years later and retained students eventually fall behind in their academics again (Dawson, 1998; Jimerson et al., 1997; Johnson, 2001; Shephard & Smith, 1990). Students in this study who were retained in their high school years typically showed improvement, but their retention occurred in the not too distant past, well within the range of time that academic improvement is expected.

Allison, Zoe, and Catherine are able to rebound from retention. However, their increased academic achievement does not appear to be the result of their retention. Each of these three students actively made decisions about what goals they wanted to accomplish, contacted key people to assist them, and took on added responsibilities and classes to ensure their success. Fager and Richen (1999) maintains that educators find it difficult to discern between the effect of targeted interventions, summer school, tutoring programs, and retention and the effect of retention. It is unclear whether the positive outcomes are the result of retention or the other supportive components. Gina, Robert, and Matt's academic transcripts show no clear improvements. None of these students have an intervention plan in place to address their academic needs. Jimerson and

Kaufman (2003) maintain that when left to repeat the same mistakes, the results are often the same.

**Sub-question number one.** How do students who have previously been retained perceive events which they believe led to their retention? Several years after the initial retention, most students have no specific understanding of why they were retained. Allison believes her mother's recommendation initiates her first retention. For Zoe, a preoccupation with the separation from her mother diminishes her ability to focus on her education. Gina reports her retention occurs as a result of missing final exams. Robert believes his retention is a result of failing to complete homework. Catherine understands that retention was a direct result of her truancy from school, preventing her from earning any credits in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Matt attributes his retention to his increasing use of marijuana, impacting his ability to focus in school (Byrd et al., 1997). Alexander et al. (1999) recommends that in order for retention to be effective, at the very least, students should be aware of the reasoning behind their retention and an intervention plan be developed to address student academic deficiencies. The various reasons students attribute to their retention shape their attitudes and responses to retention. This finding is consistent with Roderick's (1995) research on retention in which she found grade level retention to have a harmful effect on student adjustment, including a negative influence on motivation.

Allison, Zoe, Gina, Robert, and Matt all report changing schools at pivotal times in their academic careers. Student mobility can be detrimental to students' academic and social growth (Rumberger, 2003). Students change schools for academic, personal, and

family related concerns (Engec, 2006). Students who change schools frequently face disruptions in their home lives as well as at school (Isernhagen & Bulkin, 2011).

Research on student mobility and achievement concludes that mobility threatens academic achievement (Reynolds, 1991). Frequently changing schools affected the ability of the students in this study to develop a sense of belonging. They report that in most cases they were behind their new classmates in course work, in addition to already being behind in academic achievement from their retention. Reynolds suggests that students are unlikely to compensate for their achievement gap because their knowledge deficiency increases every consecutive year.

**Sub-question number two.** How do students who have previously been retained perceive their interaction with teachers, peers, parents, and administrators? Some literature suggests retention contributes to an increase in negative classroom behaviors and suspensions (Crothers et al., 2010; Rodney, Crafer, & Rodney, 1999; Safer, 1986). Catherine and Matt both report negative interactions with their teachers. Catherine believes adults' perception of her greatly determines who she is. Her interaction with adults has a negative effect on her academic performance. She explains that she often gives adults what they expect from her. Thus, she frequently disrupts class and fails to turn in assignments. Matt is often confrontational when under the influence of drugs. He says, "I talked back. I had a problem with teachers, principals, and the police officer in the school." For Matt, inconsistency in his behavior at school and home continue to plague him. His mother describes him as a "good boy" and at school his multitude of referrals causes his teachers to describe him as challenging. Matt expressed a desire to



stop doing drugs; however, he suffers a relapse and is placed in a treatment center for adolescents. He apparently, has not resolved his issues that push him to take drugs. This setback puts Matt further behind in his academics.

Bandura (1997) reports that when interactions with adults who are important in students' lives continually offer encouragement, affirmation, and belief in students' ability, self-efficacy substantially rises. This statement is particularly true in Zoe's experience. The involvement of Zoe's parents and family, offering her support and encouragement, motivates her to seek assistance in improving her academic achievement. A study by Akmal and Larsen (2004) corroborates Zoe's perception by stating, some parents can and do intervene on behalf of their children, providing they have the ability and knowledge to do so. For Catherine, the addition of Ms. Lyles as her mentor improved her interactions with other adults in her school.

**Sub-question number three.** What future aspirations do previously retained students express? How do they perceive the control they believe they have over these goals? Research has shown grade retention to have negative long-term effects. Studies have consistently found that retained students are at a higher risk of dropping out of school (Dawson, 1998; Jimerson, 1999; Jimerson, Ferguson, et al., 2002). Catherine and Matt both consider dropping out as solution to their academic struggles. Both students abandon this option as a result of adult intervention. None of the other participants acknowledge dropping out as an option.

All of the participants in this study have high school graduation and post-secondary goals in place. Four of the participants are motivated by their retention to

actively put things in place to realize their goals. Catherine's and Matt's plans include attending night school, credit recovery courses, and added course loads. Matt will need to modify his goals, in light of his relapse. Zoe enrolls in the Satellite school to accelerate her progress through high school and graduate on time. Allison voluntarily repeats 10<sup>th</sup> grade in order to give her a better understanding of coursework, thereby ensuring her chances for success in college. Gina and Robert both have career goals in mind but neither student has taken any action toward making their goals a reality. More one-on-one attention from caring adults may provide a connection for these students which could prevent their further decline in academic achievement (Ferguson et al., 2001).

### **Conclusions**

The findings from this study suggest students' perception of the retention experience varies. Many factors could contribute to this finding. These results could be due to factors other than just having been retained, such as how and when retention occurs, family structure, parent education, and student academic capabilities. What students are able to accomplish with retention in their background appears to be tied to four major themes: Crisis, interactions, mobility, and transformation.

#### **Crisis**

Students readily recall where they were and what was happening around them when they first learned of their impending retention. Each student describes the experience as a crisis in his or her life. Gina reports public humiliation as a result of her school's policy of posting retained students' names on the wall outside of the classroom. All other students receive their notification through a family member. Upon receiving the

news of retention, students report a wide spectrum emotions ranging from anger, frustration, denial, disbelief, humiliation, and apathy. In all but one case, these emotions are directed towards self and school. Allison is the one exception; she focuses her feelings of anger and betrayal towards her mother. Her emotions stem from her belief that her retention was unjust (Jimerson, 2001).

None of the six participants believes they had any input in their retention decision. Students' cumulative records gave specific factors contributing to their retention. However, most students only have a vague idea of why they were retained. Each student, with the exception of Robert, acknowledges that poor grades, work habits, and/or behavior had something to do with their retention. All but Catherine is in agreement that their deficiencies are not severe enough for retention. "I just did not turn in my homework, that's it. They just held me back in third grade," Robert protests. He fails to connect to his teacher's assessment of his immaturity and lack of third grade skills. Catherine admits the school had no choice but to retain her as a result of her 0.0 grade point average in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Even though her expectation is retention, she cautiously opens her final report card hoping she is an exception to the rule. School systems generally employ retention to remediate academic failure followed by maturation issues (Jimerson et al, 1997; Roderick, 1994).

The collective perspective from the adolescents in this study was retention represented a crisis in their lives that is not easily overcome. Each student expressed a desire for teachers and administrators to talk to them prior to retention. Allison, Zoe, and Catherine were motivated by the experience to explore strategies to improve their

academic struggles. Robert and Gina appear to remain complacent and have not yet definitively moved forward. Blumer (1969) explains their reaction by stating humans act on the basis of their experience.

### **Interactions**

The interactions adolescents had with parents, peers, and teachers in this study, shaped and developed their perspective on retention. Research indicates parent and family involvement influences students' academic achievement (Akmal & Larsen, 2004). Zoe's mother involves herself from her child's first year of repeating a grade. Although her involvement was more active in her elementary grades, this foundation ensured the effectiveness of her mother's intervention. Parent involvement in education tends to decline as students rise in grade level (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). For example, in high school the number of parents attending parent teacher conferences is lower than those of elementary age students. In addition, high-schools experience a drop in parents volunteering to assist in the school. All students involved in this study are in high school and the degree of parental involvement reflects this decline.

When Zoe's family insists on a return to their involvement in her education, she begins to show improvement in her academic performance. When Catherine realizes retention is imminent in her future, she reaches out to her mother as her savior. Her mother's failing to fulfill this role causes Catherine to reach out for a mentor to advocate on her behalf and meet her needs. Students perceive social support as the availability of one or more person to listen sympathetically to their problems and provide indications of support, caring, and acceptance (Wills & Shinar, 2000).

Social behavior changes occur rapidly in adolescence. Students move toward independence from parents and move toward an increasing reliance on friends for support (Collins & Laursen, 2004). Allison heavily relies on her friend to help her successfully navigate through high school. Matt speaks of the changing relationship between his mother and himself in eighth grade. He depends on his friends for affirmation and escape from his responsibilities (Arnett, 2003).

Positive interactions with teachers play an important role in increasing students' academic success. Most students express a lack of teacher involvement in their academic progress. Catherine's volatile relationship with her teachers prevents her from getting the support that she needs in order to be successful. She senses that teachers do not want her in their classes. Robert believes most teachers do not treat him fairly. He believes that they are the cause of his low grades. He does not take ownership of his grades and adamantly insists that teachers give grades not based on his performance, but on whether they like him or not. Allison and Zoe work closely with their teachers in order to earn passing grades.

### **Mobility**

When students change schools frequently, they often fall behind their peers (Rumberger, 2003). Researchers propose that students learn and retain more information when they are engaged and have a sense of belonging in school (Dowson & McInerney, 2001; Hancock & Betts, 2002). Most students in this study report a history of frequently changing schools. Those who became involved in school through after school activities, such as clubs, sports, and tutoring groups appeared to be better adjusted and developed a

more positive attitude toward school. Students not engaged in activities at school report difficulties adjusting and improving their academic achievement.

The role schools play in promoting academic success in students who have retention in their background is substantial. Schools that provide a context within which students who are at risk of failure receive early recognition and appropriate intervention have shown promise in supporting and promoting student academic achievement. In addition, involving parents in students' academic programs is effective in raising student achievement (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

### **Transformation**

Transformations or changes in student outlooks are essential to their successfully overcoming the academic setback of retention. When Allison was able to look at retention differently as a result of her friends mentoring, she began to use retention as a strategy to improve her academic achievement. Zoe's transformation in her beliefs about her ability to rebound back from her retention occurred when she realized that she could bolster her chances of graduating with her class by actively seeking out an alternative to the traditional high school in order to earn her diploma in a shorten period of time. Catherine, upon discovering, with the help of her mentor, that she did not need to conform to the image that others had of her and could in fact positively contribute to her school and community, was able to move forward to graduation. Matt initially went through a transformation in his beliefs when he began to realize that marijuana was holding him back from realizing his goals. Each student's success and transformation appears to be dependent on developing a sense of self-efficacy and confidence. Once

students are confident about their ability to succeed, they become engaged learners. Teachers whom students perceive to be supportive and set clear expectations create an environment where students feel confident about their ability to succeed (Phillips, 1997). Most students in this study are successful in classes where they feel confident about their ability. Math is the one area that students consistently report diminishing efficacy. Pajares (2006) found that students' perception of their ability to be successful in school could predict their academic achievement.

Most students in this study are able to rebound back from retention and set forth long-term goals for their future. Dropping out of school is a consideration for two of the participants. Neither student carries through with this solution to academic struggles. Family and other support systems prevent them from actually leaving school (Nickerson & Nagle, 2005). Most students are able to use their retention as a means for self-improvement. Each expresses a desire to do better in school. Each student talks about the need to have someone talk to them about their academic program. In chapter 3, I describe an on-line discussion board as part of my data gathering. Allison posted on this board what she believes contributes to her success: "I just needed someone to say they believe in me. They let me know I could do this. Once I understood that I could do it, the rest was easy."

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings from this study support earlier research conclusions (Dawson, 1998; Jimerson et al., 1997; Mantzicopoulos, 1997; Meisels & Liaw; 1993; Owings & Magliaro, 1998; Temple, Reynolds, & Ou, 2001; Walters & Borgers, 1985; Yamamoto &

Byrnes, 1987) indicating that retention fails to improve long-term student achievement. Retention does not necessarily lead to increased work effort among students. Retention without intervention during subsequent years renders retention as ineffective. Students affected by retention need to understand why they are being retained, participate in the decision making discussion, and be apprised of the revised education plan. Lastly, this study indicates that retained students require parents or another caring adult supporting their academic progress. Students with this support in place showed significant growth in their academic achievement (Zellmann & Waterman, 1998).

Symbolic interactionism perspective proved especially relevant for this study because it highlights two important levels for understanding the influence of retention on adolescents' self-efficacy and aspirations, the individual and relationships. This perspective means that both the individual and the relationships he/she has with others is critical in the development of adolescents' perspective concerning retention. Individuals form symbols based on their perceptions of, and interactions with others. Individuals then use these symbols for organizing and motivating the individual's behavior based on the perceived meaning of the experience. Adolescents modify, transform, and react to retention based on the meaning the experience has for them. This meaning is developed by interactions they have with family members, peers, and teachers. Adolescents who received interventions in the form of family support and/or teacher support were able to more positively navigate past retention. In addition, students who developed an increased sense of self-efficacy as a result of positive interactions with others were found to be motivated and determined to successfully complete high school.



## **Implications**

The findings of this study have considerable implications for teachers, administrators, and parents. The interactions students have with key people in their lives contribute to the meaning they develop. The meaning participants formulate from their experience varies. Awareness of the meaning students formulate about the retention experience is critical for understanding the impact of retention prior to its utilization as an educational intervention. Probing deeper into the impact of retention may reveal alternative interventions, such as personalized education plans, classes with low student-to-teacher ratios, tutoring, and/or summer school (Tanner & Combs, 1993).

An implication for school systems is the consideration of the strategy that some schools employ to promote student achievement and increase graduation rates is social promotions. Doyle (2004) reports students who are socially promoted continue to struggle with academics. Critics of social promotion argue that this practice frustrates students by placing them in a grade where they cannot do the work. Socially promoting Gina from eighth grade to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade enables Gina to further distance herself from her experience with retention and strengthens her belief that she does not require assistance. Social promotion in Gina's case did her a disservice by placing her in classes that she was ill prepared to find success (Burkam, LoGerfo, Ready, & Lee, 2007). Gina's situation and possibly others like her indicate a need to further discuss the implications of this strategy.

Teachers would benefit from training in research evidence about the academic and socio-economic effects of retention. This training would help teachers make informed decisions about retaining students. Students who are retained can easily become

lost inside classrooms that house many needy students. These students often lack the ability and the willingness to seek help in improving their academic achievement.

Retained students would benefit from an intervention plan designed around their particular needs. Students benefit when teachers develop a caring relationship with them. Students who believe their teacher wants them to succeed are more successful (Ryan & Patrick, 2001).

An implication for administrators is retention alone rarely achieves the results it was designed to correct. Growth in retained student achievement is often compared to student's achievement the second time it that grade. This gives a false conclusion that students have made progress from one year to the next. This comparison misleads educators to believe that retention is effective (Natale, 1991). If students truly have made-up the year they stayed behind, their achievement level should be equal or better than that of their peers who went on to the next grade (Fager & Richen, 1999; Holmes & Saturday, 2000; Shepard & Smith, 1990). Data from the students in this study show that retention as a blanket solution is not a viable solution. Each student responded to retention in a different way, indicating that they needed different intervention strategies to improve their academic performance. Further exploration of the reasons students are academically unsuccessful bears closer scrutiny prior to prescribing retention. Students in this study indicated that for some there were home issues that impacted their ability to focus and learn at the expected rate. Early communications with parents are important in gaining parental support for improving student achievement. Involving parents at the first sign of difficulties could reduce the need to retain students. Students need a strong support

system in place to help them improve their academics. Most students in this study spoke about the need for a strong mentoring program to help students develop their strengths and abilities.

Students perform better in school when their parents are involved in their education. The effect of this involvement holds true for families of all economic and racial/ethnic ranges and for students of all ages. Students with involved parents are more likely to earn higher grades, attend school regularly, have better social skills, graduate, and go on to postsecondary education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

### **Recommendations**

Research continues to vacillate between the positive and negative issues surrounding retention. Students are also divided on their perception of its effectiveness. However, most echoed the sentiment, “I wish it didn’t have to happen.” Whatever the stance, retention remains a part of our education system. Therefore, the following practical and research recommendations are presented.

#### **Practical**

Initiate a discussion with students in danger of repeating a grade while there is still time to address the problem. Clearly establish with the students what actions are necessary to prevent retention. Dialogs should be one-on-one to encourage students to express concerns or ask for clarification.

Establish a strong mentoring program where each student who has been retained is assigned a teacher/mentor who meets with that student and listens to problems, provides guidance, monitors attendance and progress, and helps set goals. In this study,

the academic achievement of Catherine, Zoe, and Allison's showed significant gains once a mentor was in place. In contrast, Gina, Robert, and Matt, who did not speak of a mentor figure, showed little growth. If a student is retained in elementary school, a mentor should be assigned throughout their elementary years, and another assigned in the middle school and high school. Students should have an adult with whom they have a connection or bond to help them navigate through school.

Involve parents early in students' academic plans. Catherine was unable to get assistance from the people in her home because she reports that her family lacked the ability to help her. Support should be provided to assist parents in helping their children academically. This support can be in the form of workshops designed to help parents develop strategies for helping students with their homework and preparing for class.

Although schools cannot control mobility, educators need to be aware of the gaps in learning that probably occur and methods that retained students use to conceal these gaps. Schools should look closely at the records of incoming students and monitor the student's progress to determine what help the student may need to catch up.

## **Research**

Further research is needed in longitudinal studies regarding the impact of retention on adolescents. These studies should be conducted throughout retained students' academic careers. Initiating the studies at the beginning of the year students are retained and continuing through middle and high school years until the age of legal consent for leaving or dropping out of school will give educators a clearer picture of the

long-term impact of retention (Allen et al., 2009). Findings in this study suggest that retained students believe educators are unaware of the impact of retention.

This study brings to the forefront other studies that may be beneficial to understanding the impact of retention on adolescents such as an investigation of the impact of social promotion, or whether or not certain types of students, such as academically successful, academically unsuccessful, or academically unsuccessful with distracters are more successful in rebounding from retention

Additional research is needed to develop alternatives to retention. What type of program would benefit students and prevent subsequent retentions and/or dropping out? Research is needed to identify and develop workable, viable intervention programs.

Today, retention remains a critical time for adolescents resulting in long-term consequences. Students who received intervention and mentoring, from either home or school, to address their academic concerns were more successful. Retention without adequate interventions reduces its effectiveness and practicality.

The adolescents in this study were unanimous in their desire to have those making retention decisions to find out if there were extenuating circumstances, such as divorce, homelessness, abuse or other life crisis, at the root of their lack of academic success prior to recommending retention. It is hoped that these collective voices will raise questions and initiate further discussions on the influence of retention.

## Appendix A

### HSRB APPROVAL LETTER

TO: S. David Brazer, college of Education and Human Development

FROM: Sandra M. Sanford, RN, MSN, CIP  
Director, Office of Research Subject Protections

PROTOCOL NO.: 7348 Research Category: Doctoral Dissertation

TITLE: In Their Own Voices: The Influence of Grade Retention on the  
Self-Efficacy and Aspirations of Adolescents

DATE: March 30, 2011

Cc: Veronica Montgomery

On 3/29/2011, the George Mason University Human Subjects Review Board (GMU HSRB) reviewed and approved the above-cited protocol following expedited review procedures.

Please note the following:

1. A copy of the final approved consent document is attached. You must use this copy with the HSRB stamp of approval for your research. Please keep copies of the signed consent forms used for this research for three years after the completion of the research.
2. **Any modification to your research (including the protocol, consent, advertisements, instruments, funding, etc.) must be submitted to the Office of Research Subject Protections for review and approval prior to implementation.**
3. Any adverse events or unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects including problems involving confidentiality of data identifying the participants must be reported to the Office of Research Subject Protections and reviewed by the HSRB.

The anniversary date of this study is 3/28/2012. **You may not collect data beyond that date without GMU HSRB approval.** A continuing review form must be completed and submitted to the Office of Research Subject Protections 30 days prior to the anniversary date or upon completion of the project. A copy of the continuing review form is attached. In addition, prior to that date, the Office of Research Subject Protections will send you a reminder regarding continuing review procedures.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at 703-993-4015.

## Appendix B

### PACHECKO PUBLIC SCHOOLS APPROVAL LETTER

February 3, 2011

Dear Ms. Montgomery

I am pleased to inform you that permission has been granted to conduct your research, *“In Their Own Voices: The Influence of Grade Retention on the Self-Efficacy and Aspirations of Adolescents.”*

Any additional changes in your design or instruments must be approved prior to beginning your research. You are expected to implement your research in accordance with the starting and ending dates indicated in your application. Significant departure (more than thirty days) from these dates may result in withdrawal of this approval.

Sincerely,

Executive Directory

Department of Accountability



## Appendix C

### STUDENT RECRUITMENT LETTER

# Research Study

Dear Student

I am a doctoral student at George Mason University and a middle school teacher at Pachecko Middle School. I need your help in conducting a research project about the experience of grade retention or being “held back” in school. Through this research I want to give you an opportunity to tell teachers, administrators, parents and others what being retained has meant to you. In addition, this opportunity will allow you the chance to tell educators and others what you believe you can accomplish after retention, your hopes, your dreams, your frustrations, and your successes in a completely anonymous format. In the published form of this study, no one but I will know your real identity.

If you are interested or need more information, I can be contacted at Pachecko Middle School. If you are under the age of 18, I will need your parents/guardians’ consent as well as your own assent.

If your parent s/guardians need translation of the study, and/or an explanation of the consent forms, please contact me and I will make arrangements for a translator to assist in the explanation of this study and forms.

I look forward to hearing from you and thank you in advance for your time.

Sincerely,  
Mrs. Montgomery

**Your help is needed.  
Please consider being a part of this important study!**

## Appendix D

### PARENT/GUARDIAN INFORMED CONSENT

#### *In Their Own Voices: The Influence of Grade Retention on the Self-Efficacy and Aspirations of Adolescents*

#### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

##### **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

This research is being conducted to look at the impact on students from repeating a grade. This study seeks to understand this impact from the view point of the student. If you agree to allow your child to participate, he/she will be asked questions in two interviews. Each interview will be one hour. You will also be asked to participate in one interview, lasting no more than one hour. Interviews will occur at a time and place of your choosing. Interviews will be recorded using a tape recorder. You will be told when recording begins. In addition, school records will be reviewed to gather information about grades, attendance, repeating a grade, and other school related information.

##### **RISKS**

There are no known risks involved to you or your child from taking part in this research project. However, students may be asked to recall pleasant or unpleasant past experiences.

##### **BENEFITS**

There are no benefits to your taking part in this study other than having the opportunity to speak about the experience of repeating a grade and its influence on your beliefs about future goals. In addition, this study will provide input to educators to better meet the needs of students who have been retained.

##### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The data in this study will be confidential. At the end of the study, all gathered data will be destroyed. Your name and the name of your child will not be used in the gathering and reporting of information.

##### **PARTICIPATION**

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no

penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

**CONTACT**

This research is being conducted by Veronica Montgomery, a doctoral student at George Mason University. For questions or to report a research-related problem, you may contact her faculty advisor, Dr. S. David Brazer at 703-993-3634. In addition you may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Subject Protections at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in this research. This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

**CONSENT**

I have read this form and agree to allow my child to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name                                  Signature                                  Date of signature

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name                                  Signature                                  Date of signature

All interviews will be recorded. My child will be participating in two recorded interviews to answer questions about what it was like to be retained. Each interview will last no more than one hour each. I will participate in one recorded interview lasting no more than one hour to answer questions about what it was like for my child to be retained in school. I give my permission for all interviews to be audio recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name                                  Signature                                  Date of signature

I give my permission for my child's school records to be reviewed for gathering additional information about my child's school experience.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name                                  Signature                                  Date of signature

## **Appendix E**

### **STUDENT INFORMED ASSENT**

#### ***In Their Own Voices: The Influence of Grade Retention on the Self-Efficacy and Aspirations of Adolescents***

#### **INFORMED ASSENT FORM**

##### **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

This research is being conducted to look at the impact on students from repeating a grade. This study seeks to understand this impact from your point of view. If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked questions in two interviews. Each interview will be one hour or less in length. Interviews will occur at a time and place of your choosing. Interviews will be recorded using a tape recorder. You will be told when recording begins. School records will be reviewed to gather information about your school experience. In addition, your parent/guardian will be asked to participate in an interview about your experience.

##### **RISKS**

There are no known risks involved to you from taking part in this research project. However, you may be asked to recall pleasant or unpleasant past experiences.

##### **BENEFITS**

There are no benefits to your taking part in this study other than having the opportunity to speak about the experience of repeating a grade and its influence on what you believe you can do in the future. In addition, this study will provide input to teachers and principals on how to better meet your needs and students like you who have been retained.

##### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The data in this study will be confidential. At the end of the study, all gathered data will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in the gathering and reporting of information.

##### **PARTICIPATION**

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

**CONTACT**

This research is being conducted by Mrs. Montgomery, a doctoral student at George Mason University. For questions or to report a research-related problem, you may contact her faculty advisor, Dr. S. David Brazer at 703-993-3634. In addition you may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Subject Protections at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in this research. This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

**ASSENT**

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

_____	_____	_____
Printed Name	Signature	Date of signature

I give my permission for all interviews to be tape recorded.

_____	_____	_____
Printed Name	Signature	Date of signature

## **Appendix F**

### ***In Their Own Voices: The Influence of Grade Retention on the Self-Efficacy and Aspirations of Adolescents***

#### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

##### **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

This research is being conducted to look at the impact on students from repeating a grade. This study seeks to understand this impact from your view point. If you agree to participate you will be asked questions in two interviews. Each interview will be one hour or less in length. Interviews will occur at a time and place of your choosing. Interviews will be recorded using a tape recorder. You will be told when recording begins. School records will be reviewed to gather information about your school experience.

##### **RISKS**

There are no known risks involved to you from taking part in this research project. However, you may be asked to recall pleasant or unpleasant past experiences.

##### **BENEFITS**

There are no benefits to your taking part in this study other than having the opportunity to speak about the experience of repeating a grade and its influence on your beliefs about future goals. In addition, this study will provide input to educators to better meet the needs of students who have been retained.

##### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The data in this study will be confidential. At the end of the study, all gathered data will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in the gathering and reporting of information.

##### **PARTICIPATION**

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

**CONTACT**

This research is being conducted by Veronica Montgomery, a doctoral student at George Mason University. For questions or to report a research-related problem, you may contact her faculty advisor, Dr. S. David Brazer at 703-993-3634. In addition you may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Subject Protections at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in this research. This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

**CONSENT**

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name                      Signature                      Date of signature

I give my permission for all interviews to be audio taped.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name                      Signature                      Date of signature

I give my permission for my school records to be reviewed for gathering additional information about my school experience.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name                      Signature                      Date of signature

## Appendix G

### TEACHER INFORMED CONSENT

#### *In Their Own Voices: The Influence of Grade Retention on the Self-Efficacy and Aspirations of Adolescents*

#### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Teacher:

I am a doctoral student at George Mason University in the Education Leadership Program. I am conducting a study to examine the influence of grade retention on adolescent students. This study seeks to understand these influences from the perspective, or view point of the student. In addition this study will contribute, or add to the body of research about the meaning and influences of retention from a first person perspective (the student) as well as generate conversation among educators about how best to meet the needs of retained students.

#### RESEARCH PROCEDURES

As the classroom teacher during the retention of one or more of the participants, I am interested in learning about your views regarding this experience. If you are willing to assist in this study, you will be asked to participate in one interview lasting no more than one-hour. Interviews will occur at a time and place convenient to you and the researcher. Interviews will be recorded. You will be told when recording begins.

#### RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks involved in your participation in this research project.

#### BENEFITS

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than collaborating, contrasting, and or providing additional data to the students' experience with retention.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be confidential. At the end of the study, all gathered data will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in the gathering and reporting of information.



**PARTICIPATION**

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

**CONTACT**

This research is being conducted by Veronica Montgomery, a doctoral student at George Mason University. For questions or to report a research-related problem, you may contact her faculty advisor Dr. S. David Brazer at 703-993-3634. In addition you may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Subject Protections at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

Sincerely,  
Veronica Montgomery  
Doctoral Student, George Mason University

**CONSENT**

I have read this form and agree to participate in the study. I have been given a copy of this form to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name                      Signature                      Date of Signature

I give my permission for all interviews to be audio-taped.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name                      Signature                      Date of Signature

## Appendix H

### STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### Retention experience:

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. How many times have you been retained?
3. In which grade(s) were you retained?
4. Describe how you found out you were going to be retained?
5. Describe what you believe caused your retention? Describe how you did academically the year you were retained.
6. Did you believe that you should have been retained? Why or Why not?
7. Describe how did you felt about retention at first? Later?
8. Describe the year you were retained. Describe your feelings during that year.
9. What interventions or what things did your teacher or others in your school do to help during that year? What was the result of this intervention or support?
10. Are there any specific outside of school influences that you believe have hurt your school work?
11. Are you involved in any extra-curricular activities? (Clubs, after school activities)
12. Describe your parent/guardians relationship with you and your academics.
13. Is there anything that I neglected to ask, or do you have anything you would like to add?

## **Interview 2: Perception of retention:**

1. How do you feel about school? How did you feel when you were younger? When did it change? What made it change?
2. If you had \_\_\_\_\_ grade(s) to do over again what would you do differently?
3. What are some negative experiences that you can attribute to being retained? What are some positive experiences?
4. If you were asked to sit in on a conference to help make a decision about retaining a student, what recommendations would you make?
5. What is your perception of the effectiveness of retention? Do you believe retention is effective (does it help?)
6. Describe what type of programs or help do you believe should be made available for students who are retained.
7. If you were in charge of a school system, would you retain students? If yes, describe what this process would look like? If no, describe what you would do instead.

## **Academic resilience:**

8. Describe where you see yourself in \_\_\_\_\_ years? (One year after expected graduation)
9. Have you spoken to anyone about your future? (parent, teacher, counselor) If so describe this conversation.
10. Describe your education/career plans. (after graduation or after leaving public school)
11. What factors do you feel contribute to your decisions about continuing or not continuing your education? (Have you ever considered dropping out? Describe the influences that shaped this decision.)
12. Describe how you would define a successful student?
13. How do you describe yourself? How do you know if you are successful or not successful?

14. Think about the decisions you made about your future. What did you need to help you make these decisions? Describe any changes you may need to make to your future plans?
15. Is there anything else you want to share with me regarding your experience?

## **Appendix I**

### **TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

#### **Background Information**

1. How many years have you been a classroom teacher? What grades have you taught?
2. Describe your professional views about grade level retention.
3. Describe your personal views about grade level retention.
4. Describe some of the factors that contributed to your decision to retain a student.
5. Describe how you believe students who are retained do educationally in the repeated year (Socially and emotionally).
6. Describe how parents or guardians were informed of the pending retention.
7. Describe the parents' and students' reactions.
8. Did the student remain with you for his/her repeated year? Describe your beliefs about student placement during the repeated school year.
9. Describe your knowledge about research pertaining to retention?

#### **Interaction with Retained Students**

10. Describe your relationship and interaction in the classroom with \_\_\_\_\_.
11. Describe your perception of this student academically.
12. Describe, if applicable, your role as mentor to this student.
13. Is there anything else you would like to add about your interactions and perceptions of this student?

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## Curriculum Vitae

Veronica Montgomery was born in Cleveland, Ohio. She received her Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education from Malone University in Canton, Ohio, and her Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction from National Louis University, Heidelberg, Germany Campus.

After earning her undergraduate degree, Ms. Montgomery worked as an elementary school teacher in Canton, Ohio for five years. As a result of her husband's military tour of duty in Germany, she spent the following eight years teaching for the Department of Defense Dependent Schools in Kaiserslautern, Babenhausen, Mannheim, and Karlsruhe. In 1992 she returned to the United States as a sixth grade teacher, joining the middle school upon the junior high schools' reorganization in 1993, where she serves as math department chair and classroom teacher. Ms. Montgomery is a member of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).