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Examining One Traditional Classroom and One Progressive Classroom for the At-Risk Middle School Student: A Case Study of Two Rural Redesign Programs

Alvin Centrell Taylor

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EXAMINING ONE TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM AND ONE PROGRESSIVE
CLASSROOM FOR THE AT-RISK MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT:
A CASE STUDY OF TWO RURAL REDESIGN PROGRAMS

By

Alvin Centrell Taylor, Sr.

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Secondary Education in Curriculum and Instruction
in the Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Special Education

Mississippi State, Mississippi

April 2011

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AT-RISK MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT: A CASE
STUDY OF TWO RURAL REDESIGN PROGRAMS

Pages in Study: 186

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The purpose of this study is to examine the impact that the creation of programs or instructional strategies that were devised and designed solely for the purpose of improving academic achievement among at-risk students has on the at-risk middle school student.

In this case study, educational success from school redesign programs was qualitatively measured based upon an oriental inquiry-based qualitative research design. The data obtained for this study were derived from interviews, observations, and archival documents. The data collected for this study were intended to address the following questions: (a) How do redesign programs support teachers? (b) How does the redesign program benefit middle school, at-risk students? (d) What challenges, at the school level, do teachers face in regard to redesign programs?

The observations in this study revealed that the students' perceptions of the program were positive. The teacher inquiries in this study revealed that the vast majority of the students (after being in the program for at least a semester) stated that they would like to remain in the program and they also stressed concerns about whether they would have access to a similar program once they were promoted to high school.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On any given day whether a person is driving in their car or at home watching television, sooner or later, they are likely to hear a public weather service announcement such as this: “Do not be alarmed; this is only a test....” Public weather service announcement tests such as this are issued by local television stations with authority from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), designed to make sure that we, as a region or nation, are capable of dealing with any type of severe storms that may occur (Dessart, 2009).

Much like the FCC, public education must also administer tests to its citizenry—in this case students—to ensure that they are capable of weathering storms that may develop in their journey to adulthood. However, unlike the FCC, which announces “this is only a test,” in public education, the announcement may be more appropriate in stating that this is THE test.

Just as other organizations may use tests to gauge the skill level of their employees, the public education system also uses numerous tests to measure not only the effectiveness of the system’s curriculum and instructional delivery but also to measure the ability of students to (a) graduate from high school, (b) succeed at the postsecondary level, and (c) compete in a global economy (Milakovich, 2005). In the state of

Mississippi, these tests include the MCT2 (Mississippi Curriculum Tests, 2nd Edition), which is administered to students in grades 3–8. Although earning a passing score on the MCT2 is not a requirement for students to be promoted to the next grade, the test is crucial when determining what subjects and services students may be eligible for in the next grade. A study by Hebbler (2009) shows that there is a strong correlation between middle school students' scores on the MCT2 and their future performance on high school exit examinations. Tests such as the MCT2 are also used to determine if school districts provide their students with an adequate education. This is done through accountability by using standardized test scores, such as the MCT2, to rate schools, districts, states, and even nations (Deubel, 2008).

The Mississippi State Board of Education has devised an accountability labeling system for the MCT2. Based on their performance, schools receive one of the following labels: (a) failing, (b) at risk of failing, (c) low performing, (d) academic watch, (e) successful, (f) high performing, and (g) star school (Mississippi Department of Education, 2008). It is quite possible that these labels can prove to be a public relations nightmare for any school that has the unfortunate distinction of receiving a low accreditation level such as being labeled a failing school.

In addition to tests such as the MCT2 that measure the performance of elementary and middle school students, there are also other rigorous tests that measure the abilities of high school students. High school students in the state of Mississippi are required to take and pass tests used in the Subject Area Testing Program (SATP). These tests are administered to students in the subject areas of Algebra I, English II, Biology I, and U.S. History. These tests are crucial for both the students and their teachers because passing

these tests is a graduation requirement for high school students in the state of Mississippi, and administrators use these test results to measure the teachers' instructional effectiveness (Mississippi Department of Education, 2008).

Once students make it to their junior or senior year in high school, they must take a college entrance examination if they plan to attend college. In the state of Mississippi, the examination of choice is usually the American College Testing exam (ACT). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2006), the national average composite score for the ACT is 21.1; the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning reports that the average ACT score for students in the state of Mississippi is around 18.9 (2007).

The average person may believe that too much emphasis is placed on standardized tests. Scholars such as Deubel (2008) assert that because of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), many teachers believe that they must teach to the test instead of focusing on the instructional content that the students will need. However, there are many instances in which some form of standardized testing is being used as one criterion for the following conditions: (a) employment, (b) entrance into college, and (c) to measure the global competitiveness of U.S. students. In fact, there are government agencies, such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2006), that are now conducting international comparisons of students to ascertain the effectiveness of their respective educational systems (Schleicher & Stewart, 2008). Another movement in education that is quickly emerging is the practice of national common assessments. With this practice, instead of having state-by-state comparisons by using varying assessments,

states throughout the United States would give common examinations to measure the effectiveness of instruction in each state (Parker-Burgard, 2009).

To see the importance of standardized testing in public education as it relates to secondary students who will immediately enter the workforce, the area of employment was examined first. One can take into consideration the number of businesses that are now administering rigorous tests to applicants as a vital component for being accepted for employment. An example is the Nissan Corporation, which produces automobiles in the United States. Nissan recently constructed a plant in Canton, MS, where there are several career opportunities for employment, including many jobs that do not require a college degree. However, even for the person applying for a non-college-degree position, the employment process can still be rigorous. First, there is an extensive application that must be completed without error. For those applicants who make it through the application screening, the second phase consists of three aptitude tests that include the subjects of English, math, and basic engineering. Applicants who make it this far are then subjected to a series of interviews with the more successful applicants being offered a position with the company. Again, this process is for the positions that do not require a college degree (Nissan USA, 2009). Therefore, it should be apparent why standardized testing is so crucial. If students fail to acquire the knowledge needed to pass standardized tests in the public school setting, they will undoubtedly experience difficulty in passing rigorous employment examinations.

Students' ability to perform well on standardized tests is crucial for the college-bound student as well. As previously mentioned, the national average score on the ACT is 21.1, but the average score for students in Mississippi is only 18.9 with many students

in the state scoring well below that mark. Universities in the state of Mississippi require that students score a minimum of 18 on the ACT in order to be accepted into college (Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning, 2007). Students who do not perform well on standardized tests such as the MCT2 and the SATP may find achieving the ACT entrance requirements of Mississippi universities difficult.

Another factor that illustrates the importance of schools to improve student performance is the rapidly emerging global economy. Millet (2006) categorizes the plight of public education in America in terms of the emerging global economy as high globalization and low expectations. This scholar further identifies the situation as “the world passing us by” (p. 45). In his description, the world continues to evolve toward a highly interconnected global economy, but the net impacts for the U.S. educational system, if left unchanged, will likely be largely negative. According to Millet, if the country’s educational system does not become more competitive on a global scale, the nation’s economic system will endure further declines in manufacturing due to increased outsourcing to other countries with lower labor costs. Increasingly, services (such as service centers, databases, financial, and major medical care, etc.) will also be outsourced abroad due to more competitive values. Agriculture will likely survive as a major industry, but agricultural employment will continue to decline. Millet argues that if significant reform is not implemented into the current educational system, a general economic decline that began in the early 21st century will continue and, as a result, jobs will be lost, unemployment will increase, and tax revenues and government services will decline. Millet implies that major industries and businesses will likely be owned by foreign companies and investors.

As the United States proceeds into the 21st century, it is imperative that the United States continues to improve in the area of academic achievement in order to maintain global competitiveness (Ohio Department of Education, 2007). The OECD (2006) conducted a study that focused on how businesses, in order to meet the changes due to the new global economy, have revised what they need from the 21st-century student. In the book *The World is Flat*, Friedman (2005) suggests that people now live in a global economy where companies can select employees from across the world. It is clear that America's economic competitiveness depends on how well the public education system can adapt to producing students who can compete on a global scale. One of the major obstacles that public education faces when it comes to producing globally competitive students is how to meet the needs of the at-risk student (Berkins & Kritsonis, 2007).

Because there are so many definitions and theories concerning at-risk students, it is important to clarify how the at-risk student is to be defined in this research study. For the purpose of this study, an at-risk student was considered to be a middle school student in the seventh or eighth grade that had been retained at least once in his or her academic career. The at-risk student typically experiences challenges with behavior and/or social and emotional difficulties. There are several reasons for students to be identified as at-risk. For some students, challenges derive from their socioeconomic background. Druian and Butler (1987) examined the characteristics of effective schools and at-risk youth, using indicators to determine if a student was in danger of being labeled an at-risk student. Some indicators that seem to be related to students being at risk are as follows: (a) living in high-growth states, (b) living in unstable school districts, (c) being a member

of a low-income family, (d) performing poorly in their academics, (e) having parents that did not graduate from high school, (f) speaking English as a second language, (g) coming from a single-parent home, (h) exhibiting low self-esteem, (i) and pursuing alternative routes—such as males who tend to seek employment (either legally or illegally) or females who tend to leave school in order to have children or get married.

Rozycki (2004) discusses the damage that at-risk students do to themselves, the school, the community, and the country. According to Khatiwada, McLaughlin, Sum, and Palma (2007), the effects of students dropping out of American schools and educators not correctly addressing the problem of at-risk students within the United States can have a profound effect upon society. At-risk students are twice as likely to drop out of school prior to graduation. Students who drop out of school are more likely to suffer from economic hardship, unemployment, and, in some cases, incarceration. Finally, if the U.S. public educational system does not find a way to meet the needs of at-risk students, these students can and will have a profound effect on the nation's standing in the global economy (OECD, 2006). When considering the ripple effect that low academic achievement of at-risk students has on schools and the country at large, it should be apparent that the United States cannot afford to stand idly by while this problem continues to escalate.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to analyze the emergence of school redesign in public education as it relates to addressing the needs of at-risk middle school students. After conducting an intensive investigation the related literature has shown that there are

some fundamental gaps in the research. These gaps occur specifically in regard to using school redesign to meet the needs of at-risk students, particularly at the middle school level.

There is a vast amount of related literature that focuses on the at-risk student, but it is usually in the arena of identifying the at-risk student or illustrating how the at-risk student adversely affects the overall performance of U.S. public education (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2006). There is not an abundance of research that evaluates the impact of programs or instructional strategies that are devised and designed solely for the purpose of improving the educational well-being of at-risk students; most studies merely state the need for such programs or strategies.

Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to identify and observe school redesign programs that were designed solely for the purpose of improving the social, emotional, and motivational attitudes of at-risk students at the middle school level.

Research Questions

The questions that this research study intends to address are as follows:

1. How do redesign programs support teachers?
2. How does the school redesign program benefit middle school at-risk students?
3. What challenges, at the school level, do teachers face in regard to redesign programs?

Need for the Study

There is a myriad of research in the area of at-risk students. Since the release of the report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, educators have been

scrambling to halt the downward spiral that U.S. public education has experienced in relation to academic competitiveness among industrialized countries (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Years since the release of this report, public education in the United States has seen the global rankings plummet in the areas of mathematics and sciences (OECD, 2006). The United States, once ranked number one among industrialized nations, now ranks 15th among industrialized nations in regard to fourth- and eighth-grade mathematics achievement (OECD, 2006). According to Rothstein (2008), one of the major reasons for this plummet is the country's educational system's inability to address the needs of at-risk students.

Fortunately, research in this area has grown tremendously since the release of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. Payne (2008) discusses how secondary education teachers must make adjustments in their instructional strategies if they are to improve academic achievement among the at-risk student population and address the challenges that at-risk students face. According to Payne, one of the major problems in secondary education today is that the public educational system is designed to meet the needs of the middle-class citizenry. This is, of course, understandable because the majority of Americans fall into the middle-class category. The majority of at-risk students do not come from middle-class backgrounds and therefore find great difficulty in attempting to connect with, and adapt to, this system of education. According to Payne, teachers often fail to meet the needs of at-risk students when it comes to student academic success. Because most educators are from middle-class backgrounds, they tend to be critical of the at-risk students' culture, which often derives from an environment of

poverty. Instead of making students from low socioeconomic backgrounds feel alienated, educators should teach these students how to code-switch.

Code-switching, as defined by Payne (2008), refers to the strategy of teaching at-risk students, who typically come from a culture of survival, that there is nothing wrong with the culture in which they live but simply that their culture, which is needed in their home environment, is not appropriate in a school setting. For example, in an impoverished neighborhood, it would be unacceptable behavior to let anyone tell an at-risk youth what to do. In a street mentality setting, this type of behavior would be seen as a sign of weakness; so many at-risk students tend to bring this mentality to school, which is usually met with disastrous results (Jackson, 2000). Therefore, educators must show at-risk students that changing behavior to fit in with a current environment is a skill they must master in order to be successful in life (Payne, 2008).

One obstacle faced by at-risk students is that secondary schools often fail at identifying the factors that contribute to a student's being or becoming an at-risk student. According to Thompson (2008), who studied the perceptions of at-risk students in low-achieving schools, some of the factors that should serve as red flags for identifying the at-risk student include the following: (a) single-parent household, (b) low socioeconomic background, (c) at least one parent who is not a high school graduate, (d) English as a second language, (e) social or behavioral problems in school, (f) the student's being at least one grade-level behind, and (g) the student's having at least one parent currently incarcerated in prison. Thompson (2008) reports that because most schools neglect to identify these warning signs in their students, they usually tend to fail these students when it comes to providing academic, social, or emotional interventions.

An obstacle that educators face is a high concentration of student apathy among at-risk students (Hwang, 1995). Hwang's study (1995), which examines student apathy and the academic attitudes of American students, shows that many at-risk students do not see how the courses they are required to take in school are relevant to their current lives. As mentioned previously, many at-risk students come from impoverished backgrounds and thus have never seen the benefits that a quality education can afford. Therefore, many at-risk students see no value in getting an education. A study conducted by Rothstein (2008), which discusses how school improvement and educational reforms that counter socioeconomic factors can reduce the achievement gap in U.S. schools, finds that many educators consider the at-risk student as lazy, incompetent, or exhibiting behavioral problems. When these types of teacher perceptions are taken into consideration, it would be almost impossible for an at-risk student to succeed in such an environment (Payne, 2008).

As previously stated in the introduction, there is a vast amount of material that focuses on the at-risk student, but it is usually in the arena of identifying the at-risk student or illustrating how the at-risk student adversely affects the overall performance of U.S. public education (NAEP, 2006). There is not an abundance of research that specifically illustrates the creation of programs or instructional strategies that are devised and designed solely for the purpose of improving academic achievement among at-risk students. Most studies merely state the need for such programs or strategies.

The other factor in this study concerned school redesign, a relatively new concept in public education that was initially termed 21st Century School Redesign (Mississippi Department of Education, 2008). The concept was initiated, in regard to Mississippi, by

Dr. H. Bounds, former State Superintendent and current Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL) Commissioner for the State of Mississippi. The initial intent for 21st Century School Redesign was to fill an instructional void for secondary students, particularly in the vocational and technological subjects. This was accomplished by creating such courses as Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Career Pathways, which address the need of incorporating modern technology into the secondary school setting (Mississippi Department of Education, 2008). However, as the initiative grew, many other ideas for redesigning schools in Mississippi emerged, and as a result the term was changed from 21st Century School Redesign to simply School Redesign (Mississippi Department of Education, 2008). Although technology still serves as a major component of school redesign for Mississippi, many other aspects of school redesign are currently emerging to address topics such as the following: (a) career development, (b) alternate diploma tracks for the high school student, and (c) meeting the needs of the at-risk student. One such program that serves the at-risk student is Studio Schools (Mississippi Department of Education, 2008).

Research in the area of school redesign is relatively new. In fact, the Associate Director for the Research and Curriculum Unit for Workforce Development had to explain school redesign to the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) so that the IRB application for this study could be accepted (Mississippi Department of Education, 2008).¹

¹ The Research and Curriculum Unit (RCU) at Mississippi State University is currently doing research in the area of school redesign in the state of Mississippi. This study, however, is not affiliated with any research being conducted by the RCU.

In conclusion, this study focused on two different school redesign programs that are addressing the needs of at-risk students: (a) a redesign program at a junior high school in East Circle, MS, and (b) a studio learning program at a middle school in South Square, MS. Both programs have been implemented to address the needs of at-risk students in regard to academic achievement and dropout prevention. Considering that a study of this type is relatively new in the state of Mississippi, the implications of this study could be tremendous for practitioners as well as policymakers, especially if the programs are found to have a significantly positive (or negative) impact on the at-risk student. In addition, there was adequate literature on the at-risk student in grades 9–12 but very little literature on the at-risk middle school student, which, according to Thompson (2008), is the age at which most at-risk students begin to mentally drop out. In fact, many organizations that measure assessment are beginning to look more closely at the middle school years, particularly the eighth grade (NAEP, 2006).

Limitations of Study

This study has been limited to four components: (a) elements of 21st-century school redesign programs in Mississippi, (b) educational attitudes of at-risk students, (c) teacher perceptions of at-risk students, and (d) perceptions of at-risk middle school students enrolled in two types of school redesign programs. This study was limited to these four components contributed to the following limitations:

1. All students and schools included in this research came from Mississippi.

Research tends to show that, in regard to academic achievement, Mississippi tends to fall in the bottom 10% in national rankings (NAEP, 2006). Thus, the findings of this study may not relate to other regions of the country.

2. The test scores used in this study were derived from, and administered by, the Mississippi Department of Education. The purpose of these standardized exams is to evaluate the effectiveness of the Mississippi curriculum, not the needs of the at-risk student.
3. Concerning all the students and schools included in this research, this study may not have included every student in these schools who may have met the criteria for being identified as an at-risk student.
4. Data collected for this study are limited to 2 academic school years: the 2008–2009 school year and the 2009–2010 school year.
5. All the at-risk students included in this study attended Title I schools that, for the most part, educated students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.
6. Data were not collected from non-Title I schools.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined:

1. At-Risk Middle School Students – Students in grades 7 and 8 who may be exposed to external factors that may directly or indirectly cause them to become high school dropouts. These external factors include, but are not limited to the following: (a) failing one or more grade levels in school, (b)

being a member of a low-income family, (c) being single-parent children, or (d) speaking English as a second language (Rozycki, 2004).

2. Banking Education Concept – A term created by Freire (2006) that describes an instructional philosophy in which the teacher is viewed in a dictatorship role in the classroom who delivers information to the student without the opportunity for student feedback, reflection, or thought.
3. Conservatism – An attitude that indicates support for tradition and traditional values
4. Content Literacy – The ability for students to read, write, and comprehend text in subject areas such as mathematics, science, and history (Webb, 2005)
5. Depth of Knowledge (DOK) – A scale of cognitive demand developed by Webb to align standards with assessments. Webb’s DOK focuses on content standard in order to successfully complete an assessment/standard task. The DOK consists of four levels: (a) Level I (DOK1) – Recall and Reproduction, (b) Level 2 (DOK2) – Skills and Concepts, (c) Level 3 (DOK3) – Strategic Thinking, and (d) Level 4 (DOK4) – Extended Thinking (Webb, 2005).
6. Dropout Prevention Plan – This is an intervention plan designed to identify factors that may contribute to students’ dropping out of school for the purpose of developing a plan to decrease the national rate (Anderson, Jimerson, & Whipple, 2005).
7. Dropout Rate – The percentage of young adults aged 16–24 who either are not enrolled in a high school program or who had not received a high school

diploma or obtained a general educational development (GED) diploma (Laird, Lew, Debell, & Chapman, 2006).

8. Essentialism – The belief that there is essential knowledge to which everyone in a given culture should be exposed.
9. Flat World – A term meant to define the globalization of the world where ideas, money, and people can move around the planet faster than ever before (Friedman, 2005).
10. Global Economy – A 21st-century system in which all the independent economies of the world are regarded as a single economic system (Schleicher & Stewart, 2008).
11. Oppressed Group – A certain group that is being subjected to authority or power in an unjust manner.
12. Oriental Qualitative Inquiry – A qualitative research study that taps into groups marginal to the dominant culture and forces that cause and sustain oppression. This type of study includes critical race theory and feminism. I used this design to apply to the situation that at-risk students face in U.S. public schools (Xu, 2006).
13. Problem-Posing Concept – An instructional strategy created by Freire (2006) that states that in order for the student to be able to think critically, he or she must be allowed to engage in dialogue with the teacher.
14. Progressivism – An attitude that favors or advocates change or reform. Progressivism is often viewed in opposition to conservative ideologies.

15. School Reform – This is a plan to bring a systematic change in the educational practices or theories of a community or nation. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* developed by President Reagan in the early 1980s is an example of a school reform movement (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).
16. Student Achievement – For the purpose of this study, student achievement is the level of performance a student achieves on standardized tests such as the MCT2 or the National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP] (Mississippi Department of Education, 2008).
17. Studio – A dedicated, collaborative work space in which novices collaborate with experts (Schon, 1985).
18. Studio-Based Learning – A shared learning environment in which ambiguous problems are addressed through multi-modal analysis, proposition, and critique (Schon, 1985).
19. Title I School – A high-poverty school in which more than 40% of the students who attend the said school come from low-income families (Masters in Fashion, Experience & Design Management [MAFED] Conference, 2008).
20. Transformative Learning – Becoming critically aware of one's own tacit assumptions and expectations and those of others and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation (Deubel, 2008).
21. 21st Century School Redesign – A school reform effort initiated in the state of Mississippi for the purpose of preparing students for the 21st-century workforce. This initiative is accomplished by enabling students to gain a

practical understanding of the broad range of career, occupational, and educational opportunities that are open to them (Mississippi Department of Education, 2008).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A review of the related literature provided an abundance of information concerning at-risk students and their impact on public education in the United States as it relates to the county's global standing. Reviewed literature also provided information about school reform and redesign and how these movements in education can have a positive impact on the overall well-being of at-risk students. Several arguments were presented in the literature concerning at-risk students, with the common theme being that public education must do a better job of identifying at-risk students and meeting the needs of these students in regard to improving academic success in U.S. schools.

Public education in the 21st century continues to face a myriad of challenges in the United States. Less than 30% of rising ninth-grade students are reading at grade level (Wise, 2008). The statistics on high school dropouts in America are just as staggering: dropouts will earn nearly \$300,000 less than high school graduates and nearly \$1 million less than college graduates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Yet despite these stark figures, according to the OECD (2006), when it comes to the percentage of adults who have obtained a high school diploma, the United States, within a 40-year period, has fallen from 1st to 13th place (OECD, 2006). For the 2005–2006 school year, more seniors dropped out of school than students in any other grade. In fact, of all

dropouts, 24.9% were 9th-graders, 25.3% were 10th-graders, 23.8% were 11th- graders, and 26.1% were 12th-graders (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, in the area of reading literacy, American 15-year-olds rank 15th out of 29 OECD countries, and Thompson (2008) states that nearly 56% of at-risk students said they wanted to be taught by better teachers.

Many of the challenges that high school students face are noticed in their freshman year. Students fail the ninth grade more than any other grade (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008). This is most disconcerting when considering that nearly 80% of students who fail their freshman year of high school will not graduate at all (Alspaugh, 2000). It is apparent that many high schools across the country face a daunting task of preparing youth for the rigors of graduation. A qualitative study conducted by McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, and Heilig (2008), which illustrates this dilemma, reported the effects of high-stakes testing and its effect on the high school dropout rate. This study reported that, like Mississippi, many states experience a large number of high school dropouts every year.

However, Americans would be amiss to assume that the problems that U.S. high schools face today actually originated solely in the high school setting. In most cases concerning high school dropouts, the high school is merely the end result of the at-risk student's receiving years of inadequate education. Indeed, most at-risk high school students started as at-risk middle school students (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008).

Research conducted by Collins and Onwuegbuzie (2001) examined the effects that afterschool tutoring had on 89 at-risk middle school students enrolled in the program for one semester. This study did not purport that the middle school is the cause of high

school dropouts in this country but merely illustrates how the middle school contributes to the problem. Middle schools can assist in correcting the dilemma. In some urban areas, 78% of students are reading below proficiency levels by the end of their eighth-grade year (NAEP, 2007). On a national level, middle school students are not faring much better. Nearly 66% of the country's middle school students are reading below proficiency levels; 71% of eighth-graders are performing below proficient levels in the subject of science, and 70% of eighth-graders are performing below proficiency in mathematics (NAEP, 2007).

These disconcerting numbers regarding the middle school student in the United States are also reflected in middle school students in Mississippi. One report by Bounds (2008), which introduces Mississippi's new and more rigorous assessment instrument—the MCT2—showed test results on the Mississippi Curriculum Test's (MCT's) first edition drop dramatically in the seventh and eighth grade, specifically in the areas of Reading and Mathematics. These figures were illustrated by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2007), which showed that 26% of eighth-graders scored below basic level on the reading examination and that national reading scores for eighth-graders in 2007 are not significantly different than eighth-grade scores. One qualitative study conducted by Rieg (2007), which investigated the perceptions of junior high school teachers and students at risk of school failure on the effectiveness and level of use of various classroom assessments and assessment-related strategies, stated that many students in the middle school grades experience a "downward spiral in school-related behaviors and motivation that often lead to academic failure and dropping out of school" (p. 23). Veritably, one study found that 25% of students attending middle school in the

United States do not complete their high school education (Rothstein, 2008). Based upon these studies, it should be apparent that secondary education, specifically at the middle school level, is in need of some type of reform in order to meet the needs of the 21st century.

School Reform and Redesign

Considering that the secondary system currently being used by most school districts was created in the early 1900s when most teenagers did not even attend school, it should be obvious why the current system is not meeting the needs of adolescent students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). In fact, obtaining a high school diploma was not even a requirement during that time to acquire a well-paying job (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006). When the current secondary system was created in the early 20th century, only 10% of adolescents attended high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Now in the 21st century, nearly 90% of well-paying jobs require some type of postsecondary education or training (U.S. Department of Labor, 2006). Even more alarming, in the new global economy, is that most jobs which require automation or digitization can be outsourced to other countries, placing any person with less than a secondary education in dire straits (Friedman, 2005).

The current data showed that the secondary school system in the United States, which is based upon a predominately college-preparatory curriculum design, is meeting the needs of less than 30% of the country's population. Coincidentally, 70% of high school freshmen start their high school careers reading at least one grade level behind the college-preparatory requirements, which explains why nearly 3 out of 10 high school

students drop out of school from sheer frustration and a feeling of being abandoned by the very system that vowed to serve and educate them (Wise, 2008).

There are trend-setting theorists in the field of secondary public education who are making substantial contributions to the modernistic movement of school redesign and school reform aimed at improving the state of public secondary education. One such theorist is Gardner (1993), whose research on multiple intelligences has received national attention. Gardner exhorts a need to look at education and how students learn in a much different light. Gardner's (1993) term *multiple intelligence* refers to what he describes as the seven areas of intelligence, which are as follows:

- (a) Linguistic Intelligence – both written and spoken intelligence, (b) Logical Intelligence – mathematical and scientific aptitude, (c) Musical Intelligence – ability in performance and/or composition, (d) Spatial Intelligence – visual perception and/or the ability to create images, (e) Bodily/Kinesthetic Intelligence – physical coordination and dexterity, (f) Interpersonal Intelligence – the ability to communicate effectively and work collaboratively, and (g) Intrapersonal Intelligence – having an aptitude for controlling and understanding one's emotions and thoughts (p. 54).

By offering multiple intelligence as an alternative form of education for some students, educators provide students with different pathways to learn and, as a result, more chances to be successful (Rozycki, 2004).

Another theorist who has perceived the need for reform in secondary education, particularly in the areas of mathematics and science, is Webb (2005), who has created an instructional strategy known as Depth of Knowledge (DOK). This instructional strategy

aligns assessments and expectations in a manner in which to ensure that improvements in student achievement are accomplished by improving the rigor and effectiveness of instruction delivery (Webb, 2005). In essence, DOK converges on content standards with the purpose of students' being capable of completing assessment tasks. The DOK assessment strategy was created partly to satisfy the educational requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Webb's DOK consists of four levels of rigor: (a) Level 1 (or DOK1) – Recall and Reproduction, (b) Level 2 (or DOK2) – Skills and Concepts, (c) Level 3 (or DOK3) – Strategic Thinking, and (d) Level 4 (or DOK4) – Extended Thinking.

The first level, DOK1, which is known as recall and reproduction, requires that the student be able to recall information. DOK2, skills and concepts, requires that the student be able to go one step beyond just recalling facts and obligates the student to make decisions about how to approach a problem. DOK3, strategic thinking, challenges the student to be able to exhibit evidence of more demanding cognitive reasoning. For example, an assessment item that has the potential for having more than one answer and challenges the student to be able to rationalize his or her response would be an illustration of a DOK3 assessment. The final and most complex level, DOK4, is more cognitively demanding. This level requires the student to be able to relate ideas within the content or among content areas. The DOK4 level requires that the student be able to analyze the assessment and create works that would be an example of the assessment. This scale of cognitive demands created by Webb is another example of a school reform strategy designed to improve student achievement (Webb, 2005).

Another educator who has made great strides in educational reform is Darling-Hammond, who was named as one of the 10 most influential people affecting education within the last 10 years (Viadero, 2009). Darling-Hammond has contributed to the development of schools and programs such as the Stanford Teacher Education Program (STEP), a professional development program aimed at training teachers for leadership roles in critical shortage school districts (Viadero, 2009). Darling-Hammond has also been an outspoken advocate for the need to make changes to the NCLB policies, specifically in regard to the growing achievement gap between U.S. students and students from other educational systems in industrialized countries (Brown & Darling-Hammond, 2008).

In regard to this case study, the effects of school redesign programs on the at-risk student are examined. After reading the work of Freire I started taking a closer look at not who is teaching or who is getting taught, but rather, what is being taught and what effects did this type of instructional delivery had on the at-risk student (Freire, 2006). According to Meier (2009), it is this type of government intervention into curriculum planning and development that is preventing critical-level thinking and learning to take place in U.S. schools and causing the at-risk student to lose interest.

According to Dewey (1938), it is time to rethink curriculum for the alienated group, which in this case is the at-risk student. Dewey may not have had much experience with at-risk or impoverished students, but his creation of the laboratory school (1896–1904) is right in line with what is needed for the non-traditional student of today. Programs that embrace these teachings are emerging, such as the development of the studio school and other laboratory-based schools within schools (Mississippi Department

of Education, 2008). Meier (1995) conducted a study on the school-within-a-school concept to address the needs of at-risk students, who are in high-poverty, all-minority, urban school settings such as Harlem, NY. In this study, Meier concluded that these types of programs had a positive effect on at-risk student (1995).

These laboratory-based schools, like ones created by Meier (2009) or Sizer (2004), incorporate project-based learning into their curriculum which is more relevant to the at-risk student. By incorporating this type of curriculum into secondary school systems, the United States can, as Freire (2006) states, transform alienated students from “beings for others” to “beings for themselves” (p. 74).

Many other educators have contributed literature to the topic of school redesign and reform. In fact, veteran educators are sure to be able to recite all the alarming statistics concerning secondary students in the United States, particularly in the areas of poor academic achievement, behavioral problems, and school dropout (Rieg, 2007). Student apathy is cited as one of the major problems in public education and anti-academic student attitudes are the most exorbitant challenge to student achievement (Hwang, 1995). Large class sizes can also prove to be too much of a challenge for even the most highly qualified teachers, especially in core academic areas such as mathematics, reading, and language arts (Duke, 2008).

The problem, according to Thompson (2008), is that data are not being used effectively to meet the needs of students and the country’s economic needs. The educational needs of the country have drastically changed over the last century, and yet secondary school systems are “virtually unchanged” (Wise, 2008, p. 42). To look at this in another perspective, in China, the top 25% of the population with the highest IQ is

more than the entire student population in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). In other words, China has more honor students than the United States has students. This will have a profound effect on global workforce competitiveness for the next generation of U.S. students. According to Friedman (2005), the United States is currently experiencing the globalization of the world, meaning that the world is now wired and information, ideas, money, and people can move around the planet faster than ever before.

It is apparent that the world, the economy, and, thus, the needs of the workforce are changing, yet the U.S. educational system continues to struggle with the same challenges it faced nearly 30 years ago (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Less than 30% of entering high school freshmen can read at grade level, with far too many students reading at two grades below level or more (Wise, 2008). The high school graduation rate in the United States is at an average of 68.8% (Ohio Department of Education, 2007). Meanwhile, the average number of Americans who are actually college graduates is under 30% (U.S. Department of Labor, 2006). This low percentage of college graduates may stem from the fact that only 25% of graduating high school students are well prepared for college (Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning, 2007).

Essentially, public education is finding different ways to examine the problems without using enough effective and differentiated approaches to address the problems (Wise, 2008). Instead, what is happening is that researchers continue to reveal alarming data that illustrate that public education is continually failing to meet the needs of a large portion of students in the country, yet the K–12 school system is basically the same

system that has been in place for the last 50 years (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This study looked at different school redesign models that may be beneficial to the current needs of secondary students.

The Principles of 21st Century School Redesign

The first topic that needs to be addressed in regard to school redesign is to determine what school redesign is. I chose a simplistic approach to defining school redesign by citing Silberman, an American journalist who, in 1971 published *Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education*. Simply put, school redesign is the remaking of American education in order to meet the needs of an ever-changing world (Silberman, 1971). Several researchers in the field of education have taken contrasting approaches to developing an effective school redesign theory or system. This study attempted to acknowledge a few of these stratagems.

One educational theory that has become a part of the school redesign movement is Multiple Intelligence (MI). Many educators, such as Gardner, feel that incorporating the philosophies of MI into the classroom specifically provides instruction that addresses the inherent talents of Linguistic, Logical, Musical, Spatial, Bodily, Interpersonal, and Intrapersonal skills (Gardner, 1993). Many theorists feel that students would greatly benefit from this type of differentiated instruction (Armstrong, 1994).

Another area of school reform and redesign that has garnered attention is the movement to address the needs of secondary schools with high concentrations of poverty. Overwhelming data support the theory that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds fare far worse than students from more affluent settings when it comes to

academic achievement (Borman, 2009). Students from impoverished backgrounds, particularly minorities, have lagged behind their more affluent peers for decades. Furthermore, the achievement gap between poor students and other students has not improved since 1990 (NAEP, 2007). In fact, by the eighth grade many impoverished students have fallen 3 years behind, and by the 12th grade, they have fallen 4 years behind (Green, 2008).

One leading theorist in the area of public education and low socioeconomic students is Payne, who has done extensive research concerning how students living in poverty may experience difficulty conforming to the culture of formal schooling (Payne, 2008). Payne states that many students living in poverty usually come from backgrounds where the student has learned rules of speech, behavior, and general knowledge that often differ from rules of engagement in most formal school settings (Payne, 2008). In order to overcome the vast cultural differences between schools and students who live in poverty, Payne has developed an intervention plan that is deemed helpful in raising academic achievement for the poverty-stricken student. Some of the intervention steps include the following:

Building Relationships of Respect – Creating an environment in which the student feels respected goes a long way in fostering a positive relationship between students and teachers. As one scholar states, “No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship” (Comer, 1995, p. 36).

1. Making Beginning Learning Relational – Payne (2008) states that schools should work diligently to ensure that all students feel part of a collaborative culture.

2. Teach Students to Speak in Formal Register – One linguist found that most cultures and organizations use language that employs five registers: frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate (Joos, 1972). Schools and the workplace usually use the consultative and formal levels. Students living in poverty who may come from families with limited formal education are not usually familiar with the formal and consultative register and, as a result, are only accustomed to the casual or intimate register. This language barrier within the school system can cause many obstacles for the poverty-stricken student (Payne, 2008). Payne suggests that schools work with these students so that they become comfortable with speaking and functioning in settings that use the formal and consultative registers.
3. Assessing Each Student’s Resources – One crucial result of students living in poverty is that they usually do not have the support systems, or resources, that their more affluent peers possess. Therefore, educators should focus on the resources they do have instead of looking at what they do not have.
4. Teach the Hidden Rules of School – Payne details how the behaviors that students need to survive and thrive in a low-socioeconomic neighborhood often conflict with the skill sets needed to thrive in a formal school setting. Educators must teach these students the value of the school culture while, at the same time, not condemning the culture of their community. If educators can successfully implement some of these strategies, they may be helpful in improving student achievement among the poor.

Student Apathy

Many other philosophies are aimed at improving the achievement of the at-risk student, specifically in the middle school setting. In order for secondary schools to meet the challenge of providing an enriching, equitable education to all of America's youth, they must first find a way to overcome one of their most persistent and perplexing obstacles: reaching the at-risk student (Emeagwali, 2008). Although many factors contribute to the challenges faced by secondary schools, the academic performance of the at-risk student is arguably a key component to improving some of these problems. This section of the literature review focuses on at-risk students as it applies to student apathy, the causes and characteristics of student apathy, and suggested practices that may improve the lot of the apathetic student, particularly with regard to improving achievement in reading.

The Greek word *apathia* means "without suffering or feeling" (Lertzman, 2006). Another definition describes apathy as "freedom from, or insensibility to passion or feeling" (Lertzman, 2006, p. 16). These definitions appear to apply to a large portion of at-risk students in the form of student apathy. With so many at-risk students displaying these types of attitudes, many secondary educators feel that the responsibility of student apathy rests solely with the students and their families. In fact, many educators feel that when certain students perform poorly on tests and earn low grades it is because they have a poor work ethic, do not value education, and/or have apathetic parents (Thompson, 2008). As educators, this is a dangerous way of thinking about student apathy. If all educators agree with the perception that the responsibility of improving student apathy is the problem of the students and their families, then educators will never truly improve

academic achievement with the at-risk student (Lertzman, 2006). With this in mind, it should be evident that secondary schools must improve academic achievement specifically in the subject areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. One study showed that educators must improve the nation's high school graduation rate in order to maintain the U.S.'s competitive edge in the global economy (Schleicher & Stewart, 2008).

In order to accomplish these goals, secondary education must focus on the plight of the at-risk student, not in terms of placing the blame of student apathy solely on the student, but to also look at schools and what can be done to improve the situation. Yes, the student and parent must take personal responsibility for the student's low performance (Hwang, 1995), but schools must also accept their portion of the responsibility as well. No matter how serious the problems of the apathetic student, most disadvantaged students can expect to have higher achievement if they attend higher performing schools (Rothstein, 2008). Furthermore, many factors that contribute to creating the at-risk student (poverty, poor health care, single-parent households, and unsafe neighborhoods) are not problems that schools are equipped to address (Rothstein, 2008). Other factors within the school setting may also contribute to students' becoming at-risk. Berkins and Kritsonis (2007) found a strong correlation between the following factors and educational risk: school continuation rates, academic performance, involvement in school activities, student behavior, attitudes toward school, involvement in out-of-school activities, and involvement with the juvenile justice system.

Therefore, secondary schools must focus their efforts and resources on those in-school factors for which schools can and should be accountable (Payne, 2008). Because research has clearly shown that the most important factor affecting student achievement

is the quality of instruction received (Darling-Hammond, 2007), the remainder of this literature review focuses on effective educational instruction and assessment.

Effective Instructional Strategies

There have long been arguments for the benefits of acquiring adequate reading skills, but recent findings have now found that health and long life can also be tied to level of literacy. According to a report from *The New York Times*, patients who were found to have adequate reading skills had a cardiovascular death rate of 8% while patients who were determined to be illiterate had a cardiovascular death rate of 19% (Rothman, 2007). Reading takes on an even more serious position. Not only will a person's reading level play a crucial role in determining that person's future station in life, but it may also help determine a person's life span. Based upon this knowledge, it should be apparent that improving the quality of reading instruction in secondary schools is crucial, especially at the middle school grade levels, because illiteracy is probably one of the greatest factors that contribute to the alienation of the at-risk student (Berkins & Kritsonsis, 2007).

One scholar who has contributed to the conversation of rethinking instructional strategies, particularly concerning at-risk or alienated populations, is Freire (2006). In his discussions, Freire addresses the following topics: (a) Freire's theories in relation to leading contemporaries, (b) Freire's impact on progressive education, and (c) Freire's theories concerning secondary curriculum.

Freire's Theories in Relation to Leading Contemporaries

Freire's educational background was in law, but he will undoubtedly be remembered for his contributions to education. Freire's educational philosophies stemmed from his work as an educator. Freire served as superintendent for the Sao Paulo school district in Sao Paulo, Brazil, from 1989 to 1991. He also served as Secretary of Education for Sao Paulo, Brazil. During his tenure as an educational administrator, Freire began to observe what he termed as the systematic oppression of the Sao Paulo citizenry. Freire also stated that he noticed that the educational system itself played a major role in the perpetuation of this oppressive system. From these observations and his experiences was born his progressive ideology concerning one group of humanity striving for the inalienable right to strive for self-consciousness and yet another group striving for domination.

In line with other progressive scholars such as Dewey, Freire supports a curriculum that is more child centered and rejects the ideologies of essentialists like Bagely, who feel that learning should be centered on the teacher. As Freire (1995) explains in his writings, education should be a liberating instead of an oppressive force. The teacher and student should be in more of a partnership in which dialogue is not condemned but rather encouraged. Freire believes that communication is vital for a student to become a critical thinker.

In his writings, Freire (2006) divides instructional strategies into two categories: (a) the banking education concept and (b) the problem-posing concept. Freire describes the banking education concept as a form of dictatorship with the teacher being the dictator and the student being the subject: ~~In~~ the banking education concept, the student

is viewed as knowing nothing and having nothing to contribute to the discussion. The student is merely a container, a vessel, a...thing in which the teacher must fill with knowledge” (p. 86).

According to Freire, the intention of the banking education concept is not to free the student from the constraints of ignorance. The intention of the banking education concept is not to use education to transform the student into a free thinker who can contribute and transform the world. Freire states that the purpose of the banking education concept is to fill the student with a pre-determined amount of knowledge that will not liberate him or her from his or her station in life but, rather, would assimilate the student into the world as it currently is. The banking system is not designed to create thinkers who could change the world for the better; the banking system is designed to ensure that the student conforms to the traditions and ideologies of the pre-existing world.

This type of educational philosophy ties in closely with essentialism, which was founded by Bagely (1917). Many philosophies and ideologies have manifested from essentialism. One of these ideals is the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, which stresses the need to “get back to basics” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). From this report later rose NCLB, which, through its over emphasis on testing, is diminishing the importance of subjects like literature, social studies, and the fine arts (Gardner, 1993). Freire (2006) stated, “Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence” (p. 85). By stifling the educational process for learners or confining them to a limited amount of knowledge, educators hinder the learners’ intellectual growth. In other words, the current educational system is preventing people

from exercising the inherent ability that has made it possible for mankind to be the dominant species on this planet— the ability to change and adapt to an ever-changing environment.

On the other side of the spectrum, Freire discusses the problem-posing concept of education. According to Freire, the intent of this philosophy of education is to liberate the student. Problem-posing education is meant to be transformative for the student. This instructional strategy states that in order for the student to be able to think critically, he or she must be allowed to engage in substantive dialogue with the teacher and also be allowed to learn through interaction. This line of thought is similar to the philosophies of contemporary theorists such as Sizer, who states that learning cannot take place without interaction (Sizer, 2004). Theorists such as Piaget also assert that students must interact not only with the teacher but also with their peers as well if true cognitive development is to take place (Viadero, 2009).

Freire's Impact on Progressive Education

Educational theorist Freire has had an influential impact on progressive education in America. His reports on the banking education concept and the problem-posing concept in education have contributed to the works of other progressive educators such as Sizer and Meier. From this point on, this study began to look more closely at how the banking-concept approach affects the at-risk student. According to Freire (2006), this type of curriculum is seen as irrelevant to the oppressed group who see this type of curriculum for what it is: an effort to subject the will and culture of the dominant group over the oppressed group. In terms of this case study, the oppressed group is the at-risk

students, and the dominant group is the middle-class-based hegemonic educational system.

Like Dewey, (1938) who is arguably the founder of progressive education in the United States, it is time to rethink curriculum for the alienated group. Dewey's creation of the laboratory school (1896–1904) coincides with what is needed for the non-traditional student of today. Programs that embrace the teachings of Dewey and Freire are emerging, such as the studio school and other laboratory-based schools within schools (Mississippi Department of Education, 2008). These schools, like those established by Meier (2009) or Sizer (2004), incorporate project-based learning into their curriculum, which is more relevant to the at-risk student. By incorporating this type of curriculum into U.S. secondary school systems, educators can, as Freire (2006) states, transform alienated students from “beings for others” to “beings for themselves” (p. 74).

Freire's Impact on Secondary Curriculum

This section refers to how curriculum assessment in public education, over the years, has drastically been altered. Many educators are fans of progressive thinking in regard to curriculum; however, there are many like Stover (2009), who conducted studies on the benefits of scientific assessments that are torn (Kral, 2008). Like Stover, many educators do believe in scientific assessment of student learning, so, in that aspect, they do feel like standardized testing is an important component for assessing student learning and evaluating best teaching practices. However, some educators feel that subjecting students to a cookie-cutter curriculum is, at best, primitive thinking (Payne, 2008).

Culican (2007) investigated mainstream and intervention literacy pedagogy designed to improve the outcomes of disadvantaged learners while at that same time accelerating the progress of all students in the middle years. The investigation has shown that the middle school years are a crucial time in the academic development of students. In the middle school years, student achievement gaps widen and many students experience a significant decrease in student learning during these years (Culican, 2007). This study also discussed an instructional literacy strategy known as Reading to Learn, (Rose, 2008) which pays attention to the interactions that take place around written texts in classrooms and proposes a new pattern of classroom talk. Potts and Shultz (2008) argue that it is this discourse between teacher and student concerning literacy that is crucial to the academic improvement of the at-risk student.

In regard to reaching achievement, when compared to other industrialized countries, American fourth-graders ranked second only to Finland in reading comprehension (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006). However, by the time American students enter the ninth grade, the United States falls from second place to ninth place. As a result of these alarming data, many educators have called for more effective literacy intervention programs targeted at improving reading comprehension in the adolescent learner (Culican, 2007).

One study suggests strategies that can improve reading achievement in U.S. students, particularly in the middle school years. According to this study, increasing the quantity of time that students spend reading is the single-most important aspect of improving the reading skills of students (Alspaugh, 2000). High-achieving students usually spend 70% of their instructional time reading required material as opposed to

lower-achieving students only spending 37% of their instructional time engaged in reading activities (Alspaugh, 2000). Another study showed a substantial correlation between the time that is spent reading and achievement among middle school students (NAEP, 2007). In fact, exceptional middle-grade students read about 10,000,000 words per year, average middle-grade students read 1,000,000 words a year, and low-performing middle-grade students only read about 100,000 words a year (Alspaugh, 2000).

A program developed by Rose (2008) called Reading to Learn (RTL) focuses on three major components: (a) model of learning, (b) functional grammar, and (c) the structuring of pedagogic discourse. This program was designed for the underachieving middle school student, and it focuses its attention on developing print-based literacy that can assist the at-risk student in being able to assess the differences and similarities between language and literacy in the academic setting as opposed to the language and culture of the students' socio-cultural setting (Rose, 2008).

The U.S. Department of Labor (2006) has found that literacy programs such as RTL have proven to be effective in improving the academic performance of many at-risk students particularly on standardized assessments, which have become a major component in assessing the capabilities of students on a global scale.

Assessing Student Achievement

Leading educational scholars tend to agree that one of the most crucial components of improving student achievement among at-risk, middle-grade students is the effective implementation of a student assessment system (Weaver, 2006). This

literature review focuses on what some studies cite as traditional informal and authentic assessments (Weaver, 2006). Traditional, informal assessments usually consist of the following components: (a) performance assessments, (b) observations used as an assessment tool, (c) the developmental inventory, (d) interviews and student self-reports, and (e) portfolio assessments (Weaver, 2006).

Performance assessments usually referred to as authentic evaluations, come in the form of exams, tasks, and projects. Another key component to implementing effective performance assessments is to use rubrics. Duke (2008), a rubrics expert, defines a rubric as “a scoring tool that lists the criteria for a piece of work or ‘what counts’” (p. 669). For example, a rubric for a multimedia project will list the things the student must have including receiving a certain score or rating. Rubrics help the student figure out how his or her project will be evaluated (Duke, 2008). In addition to examining rubrics, this study focused a majority of its attention concerning performance assessments on standardized assessments and data analysis. In regard to performance assessments, the most successful schools tend to set detailed academic goals that challenge the student while simultaneously providing a support system that the at-risk student is in great need of (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008).

Observation, according to Ruddell and Shearer (2002), is the single-most useful means for getting information about students’ reading and writing abilities. This scholar points out two types of observations: (a) Unstructured Observation – taking note of important information as it is revealed without looking for specific items or particular areas of learning and (b) Structured Observation – observations with a specific purpose in mind, as in how well students can make predictions while reading text.

The Developmental Inventory (DI; Ruddell & Haggard, 1991), is an observational instrument that can be used to evaluate all aspects of language, reading/listening, and writing/speaking. The DI consist of four categories of observation: (a) guides self or audience through text, (b) knows how text works, (c) understands social aspects of meaning construction, and (d) uses range of strategies while listening, reading, speaking, or writing.

The other major components of assessments that are frequently mentioned are interviews and portfolio assessments. The key points of interviews and student self-reports are that this kind of questioning deliberately and systematically writes down students' responses. However, because interviewing 150 or more students (the typical workload for a middle school teacher) can be a little daunting, very few teachers use this form of assessment (Weaver, 2006). A portfolio is usually defined as a selective collection of student work and records of progress gathered across diverse contexts over time. These portfolios are framed by reflection and enriched through collaboration that has as its aim for the advancement of student learning (Weaver, 2006). The three most common types of portfolios are (a) Ownership – students select contents for the purpose of promoting independent learning, (b) Feedback – students and teachers collaborate to determine contents for student learning, and (c) Accountability – contents are selected by students, teachers, and test directors for the purpose of evaluating achievement (Weaver, 2006).

Another form of assessment that is garnering attention is data analysis. School systems can use data, among other uses, to identify at-risk students and guide instruction (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008). Data have many purposes in secondary education. Some of

these purposes include (a) discovering issues – data can reveal issues and problems that may otherwise remain hidden; data can also identify grade-level and school-wide strengths and weaknesses; (b) diagnosing situations – data can help educators understand the root causes of problems and provide criteria for focusing on high-priority goals; (c) forecasting future conditions – data can also assist in predicting future needs of students, educators, parents, and community members; data can also suggest possible local, regional, state, or national trends that will affect the school and programs offered; and (d) improving policies and practices – data can also reform teaching and learning, enhance instruction and assessment, and build a culture of inquiry and continuous improvement (Berkins & Kritsonis, 2007).

A study conducted by Deubal (2008) has shown that secondary school systems can use data analysis methodologies to create and implement early warning systems that can track behavioral patterns and reveal vital information about at-risk students. Data analysis systems can also be used to diagnose student needs so that educational leaders can devise effective intervention programs for the at-risk, middle-grade student.

Middle schools can dramatically improve student learning through the use of effective assessment techniques. Whether it be standardized testing such as the MCT2 or classroom assessments such as teacher evaluations, or by implementing effective data analysis systems, public secondary schools, particularly middle schools, can target and effectively improve student achievement among at-risk, middle school students (Rieg, 2007).

Other instructional strategies and programs are also noteworthy. After-school tutoring programs have been effective in improving student achievement among at-risk

middle school students (Collins & Onwuegbuzie, 2001). Results show that after-school programs have little effect on at-risk behavioral students. Furthermore, after-school programs have the greatest impact on sixth-graders and the least amount of influence on eighth-graders (Collins & Onwuegbuzie, 2001).

Another tactic that is emerging in the school redesign movement is the strategy of motivating students with monetary incentives. School systems such as the 1.1 million-student New York City School system are implementing cash-incentive programs for the purpose of increasing student performance and decreasing student dropout rates (Ash, 2008). These types of incentive programs have shown promises of increasing student performance and school attendance (Druian & Butler, 1987).

According to Gardner (1993), who conducted a study on the different areas of intelligence, there are seven areas of intelligence: (a) mathematical, (b) musical, (c) physical, (d) inter-personal, (e) intrapersonal, (f) verbal, and (g) leadership ability. Many educators dispel Gardner's theory as unfounded, but many also believe that Gardner's theories are in accord with the philosophies of Freire, Dewey, Meier,Sizer, and Piaget—if teachers are to use education to transform students into free thinkers capable of solving the problems of tomorrow, then they need to revise their conformist-style curriculum into a curriculum that will best meet the needs of the individual instead of holding onto a curriculum that was designed for the dominant culture.

Other important factors that contributed to this literature review are the current events affecting secondary education. Three issues that this study discussed as related to school workers in their roles as educators are (a) state-mandated standardized test, (b) the push to reform secondary education, and (c) increased emphasis on school choice.

Standardized testing has always played a key role in student assessment in modern public education. However, since the creation of NCLB by the Bush administration in 2000, an increased emphasis has been placed on standardized testing. Not only are these tests used to assess student learning, but they are also now used to evaluate the performance of both teachers and schools. Now in 2009, NCLB is not only still in place but is gaining momentum in its goal for increased accountability. Mississippi, in compliance with NCLB mandates, created a new, more rigorous test for students called the MCT2. In addition to the MCT2, new labels were also created for schools based upon their performance on the test. These labels range from high-performing for the highest scores down to failing for the lowest-scoring schools (Mississippi Department of Education, 2008). This puts tremendous pressure on schools to perform their best. Schools that are labeled failing or low-performing will meet severe scrutiny from the Department of Education as well as their communities.

Another major issue facing public education today is the plight of secondary education. According to Sizer (2004), the greatest obstacle to improving public education today comes from the need to reform the nation's high schools. The greatest problem that faces high schools today is the number of high school students who are dropping out and, as a result, increasing plummeting graduation rates (Horwitz & Snipes, 2008). In fact, in some parts of the country, some high schools are graduating less than 50% of their students who started in the ninth grade (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006). This dilemma also has caused tremendous stress for not only high school educators but also middle school educators as well because, according to Wise (2008), many

researchers now feel that students may physically drop out of school in the 9th–12th grades but they mentally drop out during the middle school years.

The increased emphasis and rigor of standardized testing, as well as the alarming numbers of secondary students dropping out of high school and not receiving diplomas, and the U.S. educational system's apparent difficulty with dealing with these issues brings attention to this study's final issue facing educators today: the increased emphasis on school choice.

During the Bush administration, it was no surprise for most educators to see a Republican administration push for more school choice, and this is exactly what the Bush administration did through school vouchers and bussing students to neighboring districts. However, what is surprising to many is that the new Democratic administration also endorses school choice, mainly in the form of Charter Schools (Stover, 2009). As stated in an article from *Education Week* (Ash, 2008), the new Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, made a name for himself when he founded a charter school in Chicago. As a result of his school's success, he was appointed City Superintendent by the governor and later appointed Secretary of Education.

Now the Obama administration is making a push for more charter schools, especially in areas where there are low-performing schools. The administration purports that this kind of competition for students and parents among schools will serve as a motivator for schools to improve student academic performance, and many moderate educational scholars support this movement (Stover, 2009).

Many teachers and principals personally see the ramifications of these issues on a daily basis—for example, state testing mandates. In the early part of 2009, the

Mississippi Department of Education officially released the test scores and school labels for schools and districts across the state. Many schools and districts that failed to meet the minimum requirements for testing will either be placed on improvement plans by the state or be taken over by the state if they continue to perform poorly on the assessment (Mississippi Department of Education, 2008). Many educators, mainly administrators, will lose their jobs if they fail to improve their test scores. As a result of administrators feeling the pressure of accountability, many school leaders will pass this stress on to teachers. Schools that performed well on the assessments will be recognized and rewarded by the state. Many other schools will not be so fortunate and will face dire consequences.

In the area of dropout prevention, many middle school teachers also feel the same pressure as high school educators. Research has shown that when students do poorly in the middle school years, there is a strong correlation to these students' becoming high school dropouts (NAEP, 2007). As a result of research such as this, the state of Mississippi has required that high schools and junior high schools work closely together, especially in regard to eighth-grade students. So now in many districts, the superintendents are scheduling professional development days each month for the high school and junior high staff to work together to try and find solutions for dropout prevention (Mississippi Department of Education, 2008).

Finally, many school districts also face the problem of competing for students when it comes to school choice. Like many districts in Mississippi, there is an abundance of private schools in the state. Many school districts lose a significant number of students to the private schools. In one of the districts that is being observed in this study, as many

as 30% of the students in the county attend a private school. It is stated by scholars such as Sizer (2004) that many parents choose private or charter schools for reasons such as safety and academic achievement. These three issues—standardized testing, high school dropout rates, and school choice—are some of the major issues that public educators face today.

Regardless of what school redesign strategies and/or techniques secondary school systems choose to use, the most important aspect to distinguish is that the secondary school systems within the United States use something. Einstein once stated that “the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results” (Brainy Quote, 2001), or as one other researcher so eloquently stated, “The United States faces a choice: Do nothing to fix a broken...school system and watch our competitiveness further decline, or summon the...will to demand change” (Wise, 2008, p. 10).

Summary

Research is available in the areas of identifying at-risk students and effective strategies of effectively communicating, and developing meaningful relationships, with the at-risk student. Scholars such as Payne (2009) have discussed, in depth, specific strategies on how to meet the at-risk student on common grounds in order to effectively instruct the at-risk student on the proper protocol of the typical middle-class, European-based school culture that most U.S. public schools endorse.

Scholars such as Jackson (2000) have also discussed, in detail, how to use specific instructional and school procedure strategies to address the needs of urban middle school students as well as middle school students on a global, or international, scale.

The review of literature also showed that an effective literacy program should be a substantive component of any program that wishes to improve the academic performance of traditionally low-performing students. However, after extensive review of all related research-based literature involving at-risk students and meeting those students' needs, I found an insufficient amount of research that involves designing, researching, or observing a program, or programs, that meet the needs of low-income, minority students in a rural school setting and which also includes literacy as a vital component of program and process. In fact, according to Jackson (2000), there are many programs available that meet the needs of at-risk students in urban school districts, but very little attention is given to the rural at-risk student in regard to providing instruction in the areas of globalization, diversification, and instruction based on the rich culture of the United States as well as other countries. Johnson and Strange (2007) also state that rural secondary schools receive a disproportionately lower amount of federal funds from the government than urban secondary schools. Provasnik (2009) also states that rural schools experience more difficulty with teacher shortages than urban school districts. Issues such as these put at-risk rural students at a greater disadvantage than their urban counterparts. This gap in the research is discussed in greater detail in the discussion section of this case study, which is the foundation and premise of the case study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The reviewed literature focuses on at-risk students at the secondary level, the factors that contribute to students being labeled at risk, how schools identify these students, and the impact that at-risk students have on public education in the United States. The literature also addressed the efforts of school redesign and school reform in secondary schools and how these efforts can be used to improve the overall global standing of U.S. schools with other industrialized nations. This study attempted to contribute to the current literature that seeks to improve the social, emotional, and motivational attitudes of at-risk students in public education, particularly at the middle school level. The purpose of this chapter was to describe the methods and procedures I followed to conduct the study. This chapter provides a description of the research design, the population, the data collection procedure, the data analysis, and the rationale for validity and reliability.

Research Design

This study employed qualitative research to include formal and informal interviews, observations, and collection of documents. This study was based on an oriental qualitative inquiry design. An oriental qualitative inquiry design is used to tap

into groups marginal to the dominant culture and forces that cause and sustain oppression (Xu, 2006). This type of design was chosen because it is typically used when studying groups that are oppressed or alienated from general norms of society (Weaver, 2006). In that regard, there is little difference between at-risk students and the plight of any oppressed or alienated group in a social setting. The justification for this presumption is that all students who are retained or drop out of high school are entirely comprised of at-risk students (Rothstein, 2008).

Because school redesign in public education is still a relatively new concept, there was very little literature in this area other than the work that is currently being done at the Mississippi Department of Education (2008) and at the RCU at Mississippi State University. There are some programs that address the needs of at-risk middle school students such as the work of Jackson (2000) and his works with *Turning Points 2000*. *Turning Points 2000* is a program designed to meet the needs of middle school students who are in an urban, international, or global setting. However, this study has found a substantial gap in the research in regard to incorporating aspects of school redesign into a program designed to meet the needs of middle school, at-risk students who are going to school in rural and impoverished areas of the country.

For this reason, I observed two different school redesign programs that are addressing the needs of rural, at-risk students: (a) a redesign program at a junior high school in East Circle, MS, and (b) a studio learning program at a middle school in South Square, MS. Both programs have been implemented to address the needs of rural, at-risk students in regard to academic and social motivation as well as improving dropout prevention. Considering that a study of this type is relatively new in the state of

Mississippi, the implications of this study could be tremendous for practitioners as well as policymakers, especially if the programs are found to have an impact on the at-risk student.

Instrumentation

A major characteristic in any qualitative research is that the main instrument for data collection and analysis is the researcher. Merriam (1998) referred to this as the “human instrument” (p. 7). I have worked in the public school system for 19 years. This includes 7 years as a classroom teacher, 4 years as a high school assistant principal, 4 years as a junior high principal, and for 4 years to this date as a high school principal.

Participants

To evaluate the effectiveness of school redesign programs aimed at addressing the needs of the middle school at-risk student, this study included the participation of two schools in Mississippi: (a) East Circle Junior High School in the East Circle School District and (b) South Square Middle School in the South Square County School District. Each of these school districts has incorporated some type of program designed to address at-risk students in their respective middle schools.

The first research site in the study was East Circle Junior High School in the East Circle School District. The East Circle School District had a total enrollment of 3,451 students with a racial makeup of 80% Black, 19% White, and 1% Hispanic. The junior high school had a student enrollment of 520 students with 270 students in the seventh grade, 264 students in the eighth grade, and 8 students who are in special services. The school is labeled a Title I school with 85% of the students receiving free or reduced

lunch. The school includes two grade levels, seventh and eighth. Within the eighth grade, there is the transition program. For a student to be accepted into the transition program, they must meet at least one of the following criteria: (a) has been retained at least once during their K–8 school years, (b) has been retained the previous school year, (c) exhibit severe social and/or emotional challenges, and (d) has scored significantly lower than their peers on the state standardized examination. This school redesign project at East Circle Junior High School was designed to provide the at-risk students an intense concentration of the core subjects, such as reading, English, and mathematics, for the purpose of successfully transitioning the students to the ninth grade.

The transition program consisted of six teachers who provided instruction to approximately 40 students. The pupil-per-teacher ratio was around 13 teachers for each pupil, and their classes consist of 2 hours of instruction in reading, English, and mathematics and 1 hour of instruction in science and/or mathematics tutorial. Each subject area taught in this program is evaluated by the State of Mississippi through the MCT2, which tests language arts, mathematics, and eighth-grade science.

The Mississippi Department of Education has devised four labels to categorize the performance of all students who take the MCT2. The minimal level means a student has achieved a numerical score of 137 or below, and students at this level are not able to perform any of the content standards as specified by the grade-level content standards. The basic level has a score range of 138–149, and students at this level are able to perform some of the content standards at a low level of difficulty or fluency as specified by the grade-level content standards. The proficient level has a score range of 150–166, and this score range is interpreted to mean that the student is able to perform at the level

of difficulty specified by the grade-level content standards. The advanced level has a score range of 167 and above, and the advanced-level student is considered to be able to perform at a high level of difficulty as specified by the grade-level content standards (Bounds, 2008). The vast majority of the students who are selected for the transition program have scored minimal on all of the state standardized examinations.

The teachers for East Circle Junior High School separated the 40 students in their program into three groups based on their performance on the standardized tests. The first group primarily consisted of those students who scored minimal on all three portions of the state test. The second group consisted of students who scored basic or better on at least one portion of the state tests but may have scored minimal in another area of the tests. The third group included those students who scored basic or higher on all portions of the state tests. Students in the transition program at South Square Middle School who have scored basic or above on all portions of the state standardized tests usually experience difficulties in areas other than academics, such as behavioral or emotional challenges.

Although the transition program had three teachers who made up the core of the program (these three teachers teach mathematics, English, and reading), there were three other teachers who provided instruction to the at-risk students in the program; there were two science teachers and one mathematics tutorial instructor. The students received one hour of instruction daily in science or mathematics tutorial.

The second research site included in the study was the South Square Middle School in the South Square County School District. The South Square County district had a total student enrollment of 2,070 students with a racial makeup of 99% Black and 1%

White. The middle school consists of grades 5–8 and had a total student enrollment of 520 students. There were 94 students in the fifth grade, 85 students in the sixth grade, 154 in the seventh grade, and 184 students in the eighth grade. South Square Middle School is considered a Title I school with 100% of its student body receiving free lunch. There were 16 at-risk students in the eighth grade who have been enrolled in the program and were observed in this research study. The at-risk program for South Square consisted of one certified teacher, one assistant teacher who was a senior engineering student at a local university, and one assistant teacher employed by the South Square County School District.

The program initiated at South Square uses an instructional strategy based on project-based learning. The program that the school uses is known as studio-based learning (SBL). This is a new method of school redesign developed by Brocato (2009) that focuses on child-centered, project-based learning where the educator rejects the traditions of book instruction and does not place a heavy emphasis on report cards and grades. Instead, this method focuses on developing a product or creation that illustrates the relevance of the academic subject to the at-risk student. This innovative approach to improving instructional strategies in the modern school environment is an instructional inquiry model approach that closely follows the problem-based learning model but allows a more pervasive person-centered approach (Brocato, 2009). According to Schon (1985) the term *studio* means that there is a collaborative work space where the novice can work with the experts.

According to Monson (2007), a major characteristic of studio-based learning is that a problem may be experienced and studied and subsequently communicated through

different forms of representation. According to Brocato (2009), some of the major features of this instructional model include field trips, shared physical space, and access to experts. Studio-based learning also uses an innovative assessment system known as concept mapping to assess the learning effectiveness of the students (Walker & Fulford, 2009).

Data Collection

Data for this qualitative study were collected from the following sources: (a) interviews with the teachers and students in the respective programs; (b) observations of classroom instruction, group projects, staff meetings, and classroom interactions; and (c) documents and artifacts relevant to the study.

Interviews

I conducted two formal interviews with each of the teachers from the East Circle School District program and two formal interviews with each of the teachers from the South Square County program. The first step was to create a standard set of interview questions that I would use at each site. This standard set of interview questions derived from the following research questions:

1. How do redesign programs support teachers?
2. How does the school redesign program benefit middle school at-risk students?
3. What challenges, at the school level, do teachers face in regard to redesign programs?

From these research questions, I created 20 questions for the interviews (see Appendix D). These interviews were conducted between August 2009 and May 2010.

I also conducted 4 formal interviews with each participant from South Square and approximately 15 informal interviews with the participants from the South Square program. Each of the formal interviews lasted approximately 40 to 50 minutes and was taped using an audiocassette recorder. The informal interviews were performed in a more casual manner either before or after I conducted a classroom observation, after a staff meeting, or while the teachers were on lunch or office duty. All of these interviews produced about 106 pages of transcripts.

In addition to interviewing the staff, I interviewed 12 students in the program—six students from the East Circle program and six students from the South Square Program. These students were interviewed using the same research questions, which were slightly revised for better student comprehension. From these research questions, eight interview questions were constructed for the students, which are listed in Appendix E and Appendix F.

Observations

At South Square Middle School, I conducted a total of 12 observations of classroom interactions; staff team meetings, which were conducted weekly; and special projects such as field experiences or computer lab work. At East Circle, I conducted a total of 13 observations of classroom interactions, project-based learning activities, and staff meetings concerning the development and implementation process of the SBL program.

The observations were conducted during a 12-month period, and the data from these observations were collected from condensed field notes. Once the initial

observations were completed, follow-up observations were conducted, typically about a week or two later. The follow-up observations were more detailed and included expanded field notes that documented precisely what was occurring in the classroom in regard to school redesign programs as they relate to middle school at-risk students. These observations were based upon the following research questions:

1. How do redesign programs support teachers?
2. How does the school redesign program benefit middle school at-risk students?
3. What challenges, at the school level, do teachers face in regard to redesign programs?

South Square's SBL program focused solely on mathematics and how the at-risk student can learn about mathematics through working on subject-related projects. The SLB program at South Square met three times a week for 90 minutes of instruction in mathematics. The teacher rotates the class time between traditional mathematical instruction on one day and project-based learning the next day. This study also included interviewing six students from the South Square program to identify and record their thoughts and views concerning the implementation of a school redesign program into their school.

Documents

Two types of documentation were collected for this case study. The first type of documentation consisted of procedures and practices from each program such as newsletters, memos, student handbooks, lesson plans, and other instructional material. The second type of documentation was more numerical data such as growth reports from

student assessment data, homework grades, report cards, and standardized test scores.

These documents were based upon the following research questions:

1. How do redesign programs support teachers?
2. How does the school redesign program benefit middle school at-risk students?
3. What challenges, at the school level, do teachers face in regard to redesign programs?

Data Analysis

During the final stage of the research design, I constructed a matrix designed to combine all of the data and information that were collected for the purpose of analyzing the total collection of data. This matrix was constructed to determine if the school redesign programs studied had any impact on at-risk middle school students in regard to meeting their social, emotional, or motivational needs in order to be successful in school. This process is known as cross-case analysis. Yin (as cited in Merriam, 1998) noted that this type of analysis is needed when a “general explanation” (p. 195) is sought that is evident in each of the individual cases. The final matrix that was constructed focuses on interviews, observations, and documents. It served as a compilation of participants’ responses and documents collected as common themes and patterns emerged, which are illustrated in appendices H, I, and J. If there was an indicated need for follow-up questioning resulting from the final matrix, I posed those questions through phone contact or through electronic mail with those responses added to the final matrix for analysis. Each participant was allowed to review his or her final case study for accuracy.

Validity and Reliability

Merriam (1998) stated, "Ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research involves conducting the investigation in an ethical manner" (p. 198). According to Merriam (1998), internal validity relates to how well the study's findings correspond to the real world. Triangulation is a strategy that enhances internal validity through interviews, observations, and collection of documents. This was achieved as multiple sources of data were gathered from the participants. These data were in the form of interviews, observations, and documents collected.

External validity is the degree to which one study's findings are relevant to other circumstances (Merriam, 1998). This generalization of research findings is not the intent of qualitative research. In studies such as this one, those who are most affected by similar situations, the practitioners, are the ones who are more likely to make generalizations from the study. Merriam (1998) described this as "reader or user generalizability" (p. 211).

Merriam (1998) noted that reliability "refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated" (p. 205). To enhance reliability of this study, protocol was followed with each participant as data were collected. As with internal validity, reliability can be strengthened when I uses triangulation. I used triangulation during this study through interviews and observations and in the analyses of documents collected.

From the data analysis matrix, I was able to determine what the combined data do, and do not, support. I was able to construct a data analysis matrix for each area of data collection (interviews, observations, and documents) from the following research questions that guided this study:

1. How do redesign program support teachers?
2. How does the school redesign program benefit middle school at-risk students?
3. How challenges, at the school level, do teachers face in regard to redesign programs?

The matrix consisted of (a) domains that were created from the research questions—Teacher Support, Student Benefits, and Program Challenges; (b) dimensions that were factors which contributed to the research study—for the domain of Teacher Support: Professional Development, Administrative Support, Accountability, and Other Support; for the domain of Student Benefits: Motivation, Student Outcomes, Academic Performance, and Other Benefits; and for the domain of Program Challenges: Funding, Class Sizes, Administrative Support, and Instruction; (c) supporting details—materials derived from the collection of data; and (d) research notes.

From the combined interviews, observations, and documents, it should be apparent that the teachers observed and studied by I had an overall positive outlook on using school redesign to improve student learning among at-risk middle school students. The teachers from each program believed that their respective programs have both positives and negatives regarding finding a balance between project-based learning and instruction that is based on essentialism philosophy. Finally, the teachers believed that the most profound impact that the program had on at-risk students depends on the support that they receive from the administration as well as the overall culture and climate of the school as a whole (Rieg, 2007).

In order to ensure the research methodology was both valid and reliable, I adapted the three-lens strategy addressed by Child Trends DataBank (2005). The three-lens

strategy includes the lens of participants, the lens of the researcher, and the lens of people external to the study.

Lens of Participants

I worked very closely with the participants to build a high level of trustworthiness. I felt that building rapport with the participants would assist in having the participants speak openly and honestly about the issues concerning their redesign programs and the at-risk students. I accomplished this by working to show the teachers that I was not there to evaluate or judge their performance. I let them know, through informal conversations, that I was there merely to observe and record the activities. I also let them know that this type of research of their unique programs was necessary to gain support for programs that dealt with middle school at-risk rural students. Once the participants started to believe that the research could play a role in helping their situation, they began to open up and have earnest conversations about their programs. I often gained their trust by making statements such as the following: “Research such as this might bring more attention to your program and, ultimately, garner support for what you guys are doing.”

Lens of the Researcher

I used triangulation to ensure that the collection of all data was valid and trustworthy. I used documents to support what was observed in the classroom in regard to the activities that were examined. For example, I collected documentation of the National Toy Challenge, an engineering design competition for students. This documentation was consistent with the project-based activities that I observed in the classroom of the South

Square middle school redesign program. I was also able to use the documents collected to verify the mathematics teacher's statements in the interviews concerning the project-based activities as well as the National Toy Challenge project. In addition, I collected information using a multi-site design in which two cases were conducted and observations were completed with different times and locations in regard to the two redesign programs (Merriam, 1998). Finally, I acquired validity and reliability for this case study through interviewing the participants, observing the teachers and students, and collecting and analyzing all related documents. From these strategies, I was able to gain insight through observations and data collection to address the research questions.

Lens of People External to the Study

To eliminate the potential for conducting a biased study, I gained the assistance of his dissertation chair and committee members to ensure that I conducted a valid and reliable case study. This was done through critical and constructive analysis of the dissertation from dissertation committee members.

Summary

The intent of this chapter was to present the methodology that was used in this study to determine if the school redesign programs observed in this study, which were designed to meet the needs of at-risk middle-school students, have any positive impact on the emotional, social, and motivational attitudes of the at-risk student in regard to the school setting. The research questions, population, data collection methods, and analysis methods were discussed.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

This study was based on two different types of school redesign programs that were created to meet the needs of at-risk rural middle school students. The main difference in these two programs was that they were based on two totally different educational ideologies: the South Square program, which had adopted the educational philosophies of child-centered, or project-based learning, and the East Circle program, which had adopted the educational philosophies of essentialism.

Project-based learning, which the South Square program had adopted, is an educational philosophy loosely based upon the teachings of Dewey (1938), who thought that learning took place through four steps: (a) thought, (b) action, (c) experience, and (d) knowledge. In the area of thought, Dewey (1938) identified this as the Complete Act of Thought, which consisted of the problematic situation, defining the problem, classification of the problem by constructing tentative hypotheses, and finally, testing the preferred hypothesis by acting on it. In this school of thought, Dewey (1938) claimed that the school's function is to simplify, purify, and balance the cultural heritage as well as schools creating a problem-created discipline or self-discipline very similar to naturalism. In the area of educational growth, this school of thought views the reconstruction of

experience that leads to the direction and control of subsequent experience. It is from this school of thought that the school's project-based learning model was created, and from this model, the South Square School District chose to adopt this philosophy to address the needs of middle school at-risk students.

In the area of essentialism, which was adopted by the East Circle School District, this uniquely American philosophy of education was begun in the 1930s and 1940s by Bagley as a reaction to what was seen as an over emphasis on the child-centered approach to student learning and a concern that students were not gaining appropriate knowledge in schools. The purpose of this school of thought is to prepare students to be productive, contributing members of society and to teach students the essentials they need to live well in the modern world (Wesley, 2007). Also with this philosophy, the teacher's role is to be an expert of content knowledge, to teach essential knowledge, and to maintain task-oriented focus for the student. The basis of this philosophy is to teach students the essential, or the basic, subjects of mathematics, reading, English, writing, and respect for authority in school with little to no electives. This theory also places emphasis on teacher-centered authority where the teacher acts as the dictator and primary ruler of the class (Wesley, 2007). This back-to-the-basics approach is the core value system of the East Circle program.

Case Study: South Square

The first research site included in the study was the South Square Middle School in the South Square County School District. The South Square district had a total student

enrollment of 2,070 students with a racial makeup of 99% Black and 1% White. The middle school consists of grades 5–8 and had a total student enrollment of 520 students. There are 94 students in the fifth grade, 85 students in the sixth grade, 154 in the seventh grade, and 184 students in the eighth grade. South Square is considered a Title I school with 100% of its student body receiving free lunch. There are 16 at-risk students in the eighth grade who have been enrolled in the program and were observed in this research study. The at-risk program for South Square consisted of one certified teacher, one assistant teacher who was a senior engineering student at a local university, and one assistant teacher employed by the South Square County School District.

The program initiated at South Square uses an instructional strategy based on project-based learning. This program is known as studio learning. This is a new method of school redesign that focuses on child-centered, project-based learning where the educator rejects the traditions of book instruction and does not place a heavy emphasis on report cards and grades (Meier, 2009). Instead of report cards and grades, this method focuses on developing a product or creation that illustrates the relevance of the academic subject to at-risk students. South Square’s SBL program focused solely on mathematics and how the at-risk student can learn about mathematics through working on subject-related projects. The SBL program at South Square met three times a week for 90 minutes of instruction each time. The teacher rotates the class time between traditional mathematical instruction on one day and project-based learning during the next class meeting. This study also included interviewing six students from the South Square program to identify and record their thoughts and views concerning the implementation of a school redesign program into their school.

The South Square program for at-risk students was designed to address the needs of at-risk middle school students in a rural setting, specifically African-American students in the eighth grade. The primary focus in regard to curriculum was mathematics. This program's philosophy is based on project-based learning, which, according to Sizer (2004), is a child-centered strategy that focuses on the student learning through completing projects. This type of program also views the teacher as more of a facilitator than an instructional leader. With this philosophy, the teacher or facilitator acts as a guide for the students, letting the students learn through experience more so than the teacher leading them. In other words, project-based learning adopts the philosophy of the teacher or facilitator guiding the students to the answer or solution as opposed to the teacher leading the student to the answer or solution (Meier, 2009). The remainder of this section attempts to give a clear and concise picture of the South Square program; how it was created; and what the program, teachers, and students look like on a typical day of operation.

The South Square program first opened in the spring of 2009 and was created to be an SBL program. South Square Middle School and its district committed to instituting pilot SBL classrooms in their middle school. South Square committed to creating one classroom made up of approximately 16 students, and the school selectively offered the program to middle school students who could benefit from the engaging hands-on design work and collaborative atmosphere that studio-based (or project-based) learning provides. A teacher and an assistant teacher from South Square Middle School participated in 4 days of professional development activities during the summer of 2008 to prepare for the opening of the project-based classroom in spring of 2009. According to Stover (2009), in

studio environments, learners propose solutions to ambiguous questions, critique those propositions through judgment from self and others, and iterate their proposals in ever more effective designs. This was the approach that the South Square Middle School had adopted and used as its instructional strategy to design, create, and implement the program.

In the South Square program, all of the normal academic content of the middle school curriculum was covered in the studio classroom. The only change that South Square made that was different from the SBL program the school modeling was that South Square made the decision to limit its program to project-based activities solely in the area of mathematics. Other than focusing on mathematics, the South Square program closely resembles the SLB program, which was the intent. In the area of delivery of instructional content, the difference in this program and the traditional school classroom was in how that content was introduced to students. In the South Square program, students find that they need to know particular elements of mathematics to propose solutions to the design problems and thus be more interested in learning content. According to Meier (2009), because academic content is embedded in the design problems, the studio school classroom has become a more interesting and motivating environment for students. The method of instruction proves to be better at getting students to retain what they have learned. The cycle of repetitive thinking and learning also provides students the important skills of higher-order thinking and self-reflection.

In the South Square program, the class met during two consecutive class periods every day. The class was taught by an eighth-grade math teacher and an assistant teacher. The program had also recruited the assistance of a senior engineering student from a local

university to assist in the SBL activities. These educators guided the students as they worked through design problems. This work involved individual and collaborative efforts in research, collecting resources, creating solution proposals, building and assembling mockups of ideas, critiquing proposals with teachers and peers, and refining solutions through iteration. The teachers developed design problems so that all regular middle school math curricula were covered. This was extremely crucial considering that the students in this program would still be required to complete the end-of-year, state-mandated examination.

In regard to the researchers own research and observation of the South Square program, the researcher began observing the program at the beginning of the 2009 school year. During this time, I was fortunate to be invited to meet with the redesign team for South Square when the team met to discuss plans for the upcoming school year. The redesign team for South Square consisted of the superintendent, the assistant superintendent, the middle school principal, the engineering student from the local university, the teacher, the assistant teacher, a local university professor, and I. The team met periodically during the early phases of the year and pinpointed what it felt would be the focus of attention for the 2009–2010 school year. Some of the key goals the team wanted to accomplish for the year were (a) to create two dropout prevention programs, (b) to acquire \$50k for the at-risk program, (c) to develop a partnership with the local university in the area of mathematics/project-based learning activities, and (d) to develop an in-school tutorial program. During this initial meeting, the university professor committed to working with the teachers and students in the program with the ultimate goal (from the university's prospective) of getting the students able to, eventually, qualify

for technical jobs by being able to receive a 2- to 4-year college education. The university committed that it would have its College of Education, College of Engineering, and College of Architecture work with the South Square program specifically in the areas of mathematics and working with robotics. The professor also committed to getting a mathematics methods professor on board with the program as well as doing work with curriculum design that would also serve to cover the required benchmarks put in place for the state-mandated examination.

The redesign team agreed that the program would have a staff of one certified teacher, one assistant teacher, and one engineering student from the local university. The program would consist of 16 students who would be selected based upon the criteria of behavioral challenges and academic performance. The engineering instructor, who was also present at the initial meeting, agreed to do electrical projects with the students (the engineering student was majoring in electrical engineering). These electrical projects would consist of working with stereos, speakers, and so forth, with the sole purpose of using this strategy as a way to get students to learn mathematics. The teacher stated that she would use pacing guides and benchmarks or objectives to help design the curriculum for the program. The teacher also stated that she had three computers in her classroom and access to one other computer in an adjoining room. The redesign team allowed I to feel free to interview, observe, and collect data throughout the course of the 2009–2010 school year for this case study.

Once the redesign team made all the necessary arrangements to begin the program, I began to frequently visit and observe the program and its participants. Upon initial observation of the program, I saw that, as stated by the design team during the

design phase, the class consisted of 16 students: 10 males and 6 females, all African American. The first observation was conducted October 4, 2009, starting at 8:34 a.m., with the 16 students present, along with the lead teacher, the assistant teacher, and the engineering instructor. The educators were attempting to get the students to complete worksheets. At 9:00 a.m., the lead teacher began a class lecture. During the mathematics lecture, I began observing the postings on the two white boards that were in the classroom. The front board had equations and 10 mathematics problems to be solved. The side board had a bell ringer, which is an activity that teachers typically get students to do to at the beginning of the class. The side board also displayed Objective 2h: Determine slope, x -intercept, y -intercept. The teacher posted on the board that the day's objective had an instructional rigor of DOK2.

During initial observation, I noticed that many of the male students would often disrupt the class. The students would periodically settle down and focus as the teacher lectured on x - and y -intercept slope while the assistant teacher and engineering instructor looked on. As with most child-centered learning strategies, when the students would cause a disruption, the teacher would get silent until they finished and, once they would quiet down, she would begin lecturing again. The female students tended to be more focused and were taking notes. Between two and three of the male students were constant disruptions during the entire class. I also noticed that all of the students were provided graphing calculators by the redesign program.

The classroom was rather spacious with two white boards and a bulletin board, which was yellow with blue trimming with a big pink flamingo. There was plenty of sunlight in the room with eight bay-size windows. The front classroom door appears

brand new with a large window in the center of it. The room was painted sky blue, and the windows were covered with sky-blue curtains. There was plenty of room in the class for the students, and they were provided with three computers and a workstation to do their studies. The students' desks were blue plastic with wooden desktops.

After this initial observation, I was able to talk with the lead teacher. At that point she was not happy with how the program was beginning for the 2009–2010 school year. The teacher stated that she felt that the program placed too much emphasis on project-based learning and that no interventions, specifically in regard to enforcing disciplinary actions toward disruptive students, were in place for apathetic students. When I further pushed the subject of getting disciplinary support from the administration, the teacher spoke of a student who was completely apathetic. When I asked what had been done about that student, she stated that her school has a 100 policy. When I asked her to elaborate, she explained that the school's focus was to maintain 100% average daily attendance (ADA) no matter the cost in terms of disciplinary problems.

The teacher also stated that the project director (who was the local professor) typically visits on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays but would be out of state that week. The teacher was disappointed because she wanted to talk to the project director about changing the curriculum from 50% instruction and 50% project-based learning to 70% instruction and 30% project-based learning. The teacher also stated that she would like to observe other redesign programs to get a better sense of direction for what she should be doing.

After speaking with the lead teacher, I spoke with the engineering instructor who stated what he felt were the reasons for the disruptions in class that were being made by

some of the students. The engineering instructor felt that they were experiencing these disciplinary problems because (a) SBL was more geared toward advanced students and, thus, at-risk students tended to lose focus; (b) at-risk students needed more time on the basics of mathematics; he felt they needed to get skilled in the basics; and (c) he felt that the project side of the program had not really started yet. He felt that the students would see more relevance once they started the projects. The engineering instructor also stated that he was thinking about either doing a cell phone project or robotics. He said that he was leaning toward robotics because the cell phone project was more geared toward the advanced student. With the robotics project, the instructor stated, students would build simple mobile robotic units. The instructors would then show them how mathematics is used in this real-life project.

As of the initial visit, the project side had not started yet because the program had not yet received the funds it needed. For example, the robotics project needed \$200.00 to be fully funded, but no funds were yet available. The members of the redesign team stated that the program was awarded \$50,000, but the school had not yet received it. At this point, the program had been in place for about 1 month.

November 9, 2009

The project director called a meeting to celebrate the progress being made with the program thus far. The director felt good about the program because (a) the team had made plans to add power outlets and ethernet jacks to the classroom and purchase design station equipment, (b) the team found Algebra I software to install on the design station machines in the classroom, and (c) the director felt that the program had a flexible weekly

schedule that provided for hands-on, minds-on design work and some skill-and-drill Algebra I practice. The program director also stated that she had hoped that the team could land on a long-term design project upon which all of the redesign team members could agree. One thing that she had planned was to bring in a person from Camgian Microsystems to explain the Sally Ride National Toy Challenge that she had hoped the team would wish to enlist as its long-term project for the first quarter of work for the students.

December 3, 2009

On this observation date, I noticed that the class had grown from 16 students to 19 students: 10 females and 9 males, all African American. The students were working on graphing plots using graphing calculators. All three educational facilitators were present. The board postings included Objective 2e: Graph linear and nonlinear equations using multiple methods including T-charts and slopes. This lesson was also listed as a DOK2-level assignment. The second board displayed the bell ringer, which was to answer the equation $25 + 2y = 55$. Other activities included graphing plots such as (9,1) and (6,3).

The lead teacher explained that extra students were being pulled from their physical education classes for extra remedial instruction. I also observed that the facilitators were doing more one-on-one instruction with the students. The teacher also added more decorations to the class to make an environment more conducive to learning. I noticed that students who did little to no work during the previous observation were a little more active and participative in class during this observation. The class had improved in behavior with far fewer outbursts from the students this time. The students

were asking questions and seemed to be more comfortable with the instructors. In one situation during the class, the lead teacher talked to a student about why he had been missing so much class time. The student stated that he was suspended for insubordination toward one of his other teachers. The student then goes to play an educational videogame on the class computer while the engineering instructor talks to him about the importance of staying out of trouble and working hard in class. The lead teacher asks the class to construct five questions that they need to have ready for their planned field experience the following day.

April 29, 2010

In this visit, the lead teacher was facilitating group work with the students, and the members of each group were going to the board to work problems. During this visit, the class was comprised of 11 students: three girls and eight boys, all African American. The class was doing pre-algebra work using Buckle Down material. The students were active and engaged, asking questions and participating in group discussions. The lead teacher did individual instruction with a male student doing a problem at the board who appeared very engaged and knowledgeable about the problem. The students appeared to be much more engaged and motivated about school work than during the previous visit, although five of the original students were not present for class today.

At this point, the instructors had taken the class on two field experiences. One field experience was to the local university to view a robotics demonstration put on by the College of Engineering at the local university, and the other field trip was to view a another SBL school in a neighboring state. The program also implemented several

projects, including a car seat project for babies, entering the students in a national toy design competition, and completing a videogame production project.

After the observation, I was able to talk with the lead teacher who stated that training was needed for her as far as meeting the needs of rural, middle school at-risk students. The teacher also stated that she had started ability grouping within the program, which explained why five of the students were not present. The teacher stated that they were pulled to do pre-algebra work in a regular mathematics class. The teacher stated that this strategy had helped tremendously with classroom management and improving student academic performance. The teacher also stated that the students were much more motivated and really geared up to take the MCT2. The teacher also stated that she regretted that the program was only able to complete two field trips the first year year. She also stated that she would definitely give more student work to next year's group.

I was also able to talk with members of the administration as they discussed their concerns and issues. Some of the concerns they stressed were (a) they had difficulties finding at-risk professional development for teachers, (b) finding funding for the program had proven to be a serious challenge for the program, (c) being able to recruit and retain quality teachers, and (d) the pressures of performing on the state-mandated examination becoming a challenge to maintaining project-based learning strategies for the at-risk program when there was so much pressure for the students to perform well on the standardized examinations.

Major Factors

The major factors that were used as focus points for this case study were (a) teacher support, (b) student benefits, and (c) program challenges. The remainder of this section was used to elaborate upon each of these topics as they relate to the South Square redesign program for rural, middle school, at-risk students. Two other areas that were addressed first with the South Square program are (a) curriculum and (b) instructional strategies.

Curriculum

With the South Square program, only mathematics was covered in this class, but all of the normal academic content of the state-mandated middle school mathematics curriculum was covered in this program. The difference was in how that content was introduced to the students. In the South Square program, the mathematics academic content was embedded in design problems. The students are tasked to know particular elements of mathematics in order to propose solutions to the design problems that the instructional leaders create for them for the sole purpose of getting the students to be more interested in learning the content.

The specifics of the mathematics curriculum for this program are centered around eighth-grade mathematics. As previously mentioned, the teachers in the redesign program are still responsible for making sure their students receive the same mathematical academic content as other traditional eighth-grade students within the school. This was evidenced by the lessons and objectives that were covered in the project-based classroom during my visits. Some of the objectives and benchmarks covered in the class included

solving equations and being able to determine slope as well as x - and y -intercept. This was listed in the classroom as Objective 2h with a DOK2 level. Other topics observed in the class included students being required to graph linear and nonlinear equations using multiple methods including T-charts and slopes. This lesson was listed in the classroom as Objective 2e with a DOK2 level. The students were also asked to be able to solve equations that derived from the 2e objective/lesson. Other lessons covered in the class included using instructional resources such as Buckle Down so the students could do practice tests on pre-algebra equations, listed as Objective 4c. This lesson was designed purely to get the students ready for the state-mandated, end-of-year MCT2, which is extremely crucial for students, and schools, to perform well on. Many school districts and communities measure the success of their local schools and school personnel purely on how well the students perform on this particular examination.

Instructional Strategies

Because academic content was embedded in the design problems, the South Square Middle School classroom had proven to be a more interesting and motivating environment for students. This method of instructional delivery proved to be better at getting students to retain what they have learned. The “propose, critique, iterate” cycle of repetitive thinking and learning also provided students the important skills of higher-order thinking and self-reflection.

The most important strategy that the South Square redesign program used to retain the attention and interest of the students was through the project-based instructional philosophy. With this educational method, South Square used design projects that would

garner the attention of the students. Some of these projects included a mobile robotics project, during which students were able to go on a field experience to the local university to observe and study remote-controlled robotic units that were designed and created by the university's College of Engineering. The students were then required to work in groups as they used elements of mathematics to put together their own remote-controlled robotic units. Another project they completed was designing a car seat that would cause the least amount of damage to a baby were the infant thrown out of the car. The engineering instructor also required that the students use elements of mathematics to create, design, and implement their car seat design. The students were also required to present their project and to do an oral and written presentation on the project and findings. One other project the students found particularly interesting was a videogame production project during which the students had to create a videogame that would serve as an educational game in mathematics. The engineering instructor used a videogame called "math asteroids" as an example for the class. With this game, the player is a space fighter who has to shoot down asteroids, but before the player can shoot the asteroid, the player must solve the mathematics equation that is written across the asteroid. Once the player solves the problem, then he or she is allowed to shoot the asteroid. These types of project-based learning strategies coupled with a child-centered educational philosophy is the core value system of the South Square school redesign program in relation to instructional strategies.

Teacher Support

In regard to teacher support for the South Square Middle School redesign program, this study showed four areas of interest: (a) administrative support, (b) student benefits, and (c) program challenges.

Administrative Support

The teachers in the project-based SBL program at South Square Middle School seemed to be more tense and frustrated about the child-centered learning strategy, especially in the beginning of the school year. Through formal and informal interviews, I learned that the lead teacher for the South Square program desperately wanted to have an in-depth discussion with the redesign program's project director, who is a professor at a local university. The teacher wanted to discuss changing the curriculum from 50% instruction and 50% project-based instruction to 70% instruction and 30% project-based. As stated in one of the informal interviews with her: "At-risk students need more time on the basics of mathematics. They need to get skilled in the basics. Studio-based learning is more geared toward the advanced student. At-risk students tend to lose focus."

In one conversation I had with the project director during the month of November 2009, it was stated that the program had initially started off providing 100% project-based instruction to the students. However, the project director said that this strategy had to be quickly dropped because it was learned that 100% project-based instruction did not work well at all with at-risk students.

In regard to Research Question 1 (How do redesign programs support teachers?), the data show that the teachers at South Square did receive adequate administrative

support for instruction, but the staff did stress that they wished the administration would allow them to have more input into the program when it came to creating and developing the curriculum for the redesign program.

My interviews, observations, and collection of data showed that the staff at South Square Middle School also wanted to get more administrative support in the area of student discipline; the current administration seemed to make attendance a more important priority. Through interviews and observations, I learned of an unwritten policy for the South Square Middle School, which was known as the 100 rule. Under this procedure, the administration takes into consideration that, because South Square is a Title I school, it receives a significant amount of federal funds based on the number or percentage of free and reduced lunch students that attend school on a daily basis.

According to the Mississippi Department of Education (2008), the State of Mississippi measures poverty based on the percentage of free and reduced lunch students who attend a school or school district. Because South Square had a student enrollment that consisted of 100% free and reduced lunch students, this school receives a large amount of federal funds based upon the average daily attendance of their students. Therefore, the administration had taken the stance that it is more important to keep the students in school rather than to suspend them and lose federal funds (no matter what behavior the student may have displayed).

The staff members also stated that they enjoyed the project-based concept, but that it was a very slow process in getting many of the projects implemented due to the fact that funding for the program was very slow in reaching the classroom. In initial observations of the South Square program at the beginning of the 2009–2010 school year,

I attended the initial development meeting that included the superintendent and other lead administrators. At this meeting, the creative team stated that once the program was up and running it would include two dropout prevention programs, \$50,000 in grant money, a partnership with the local university, and an in-school tutorial program. However, as the school year progressed, my observations and interviews showed that most of the grant money never came to fruition, and thus many of the pre-planned project-based activities were never put into action. In regard to Research Question 1 (How do redesign programs support teachers?), the administration was unable to financially support the program as initially hoped. This lack of funding also linked the issue to Research Question 3 (What challenges, at the school level, do teachers face in regard to redesign programs?). The teachers and administrators faced numerous challenges in regard to funding because many of the grants never came through.

In the area of professional development, observations and documents collected show that the teachers did receive adequate training during the initial phase of the program. However, as the program progressed, the teachers received little to no professional development to address issues such as dealing with the at-risk middle school student or training to deal with the at-risk rural student. Through informal interviews with the administration, I learned that the teachers never received follow-up training because of two reasons: (a) the administration found it extremely difficult to find professional development that specifically dealt with rural at-risk students in the middle school setting, and (b) even in instances in which the administration did find professional development training, the training was usually located in the northern region of the country and the administration did not have the funds or resources to send the staff to

these expensive training sites. Therefore, it was my findings that the administration was more than willing to support the staff and the program, but the challenges that almost always arose were directly tied to funding (or the lack thereof). In one phone conversation with the project director, who was a professor at the local university, it was stated that plans were in place for the creative team to seek additional earmarks to fund the program for an additional 5 years.

As the year progressed, the teachers stated that they could feel the pressures of accountability escalating, especially in the area of state-mandated tests. Specifically, the teachers felt a tremendous amount of pressure for the students to perform well on the MCT2, especially because all schools in Mississippi receive labels and rankings based on their MCT2 performance. The teachers in the South Square program stated that they felt supported in regard to preparing their students for the rigors of the MCT2 exam. Through observations, I noticed that the redesign classroom was outfitted with computers for the students as well as modern graphing calculators to prepare the students for the algebra portion of the mathematics exam. The lead teacher was even issued a laptop computer for the class. I observed that the teacher would let the students do some of their class work on the laptop computer that she was issued.

Another area in which the teachers wanted to receive more support was providing a follow-up at-risk program for the students at the high school. The staff was not satisfied with the fact that once the students left their school and program at the middle school level, they were basically put right back into the system from which they initially came.

In relation to Research Question 2 (How does the redesign program benefit middle school, at-risk students?), the study found that the South Square program was

very much in line with the philosophies of Sizer (2004), who believed in problem-posing instruction as well as project-based learning. The administration for the program was very supportive of the teachers, and they also had a very close relationship with the local university. As a result, the students in the program were exposed to college professors and college programs such as a remote-controlled, mobile robotics program in the chemistry department of the local university. The students were also exposed to different types of field experiences and projects that were implemented by their teachers, such as a national toy competition for eighth-graders. This type of learning-based instruction benefited the students in ways that would help them to compete globally, which is especially pertinent to the rural student who, otherwise, does not usually get exposed to this type of modern, technology-based instruction (Jackson, 2000).

In regard to Research Question 3 (What challenges, at the school level, do teachers face in regard to the redesign program?), the teachers of South Square experienced problems with discipline. If there was an area where they received little support, it was in the area of maintaining appropriate student behavior. The administration had an unwritten policy that it made attendance (not suspending the student and keeping him or her at school) a priority over student discipline. Instruction was another area that the teachers found challenging. Through numerous interviews, the teachers repeatedly stated that they felt their students were too far behind academically to truly enjoy the full benefits of project-based learning activities (which took up a major portion of the instructional time). In fact, the teachers at South Square felt that project-based learning was more for the advanced student than for the at-risk student who is struggling academically. The teachers stated that when the program first started, they

used 100% project-based learning and they felt that the program should move to 70% instruction and only 30% project-based learning, at least until the students improved their basic skills in mathematics.

In the area of instruction, I observed that the redesign program at South Square experienced challenges with curriculum because the program was only meant for mathematics. The redesign program at South Square did not address English, reading, or science. Of course, another area in which the school experienced challenges was finding adequate training for the staff. The administration stated that it was extremely difficult to find training that would assist the teachers in addressing the needs of low-income, rural at-risk students.

Student Benefits

Based upon my interviews and observations, the students in the South Square redesign program seemed to benefit from the program in the following areas: social, emotional, and motivational. This child-centered program offered small class sizes (only 16 students were enrolled in the beginning of the program, and after an ability-grouping pull-out strategy was implemented, the class size went down to 11). The students were taken on at least two field experiences—to the local university to observe a robotics demonstration and to visit another SBL-based program. The students were also given the opportunity to work on several project-based learning activities that included working on a videogame production project for a math-based computer game, a car seat project to minimize injury to an infant, and a project to build a remote-controlled, mobile robotic unit. All of these projects were put in place for the purpose of giving the students real-life

examples of how mathematics can be used in the real world and how mathematics can be fun.

As a result of the small-group setting, the practical field experiences, and the project-based learning activities that were based on mathematics, the students in this program went from being disciplinary problems to being attentive, motivated students.

This case study breaks the area of student benefits down into four components: (a) motivation, (b) student outcomes, (c) academic performance, and (d) other benefits. In the area of student motivation, I observed a transformation of the students in the program from the beginning of the year to the end of the school year. At the beginning of the year, I observed 16 students: 10 males and 6 females, all African American. The males were very disruptive and disrespectful, and the female students were most apathetic. There was little administrative support in the area of discipline, and the lead teacher often looked overwhelmed. I often thought that the teacher would get discouraged because the class was acting out so badly and that she may feel uncomfortable with me being in the classroom observing her and the students. As the year progressed, I felt the teacher became more comfortable with my presence. I constantly tried to assure the teacher that he was not there to judge but merely to observe and, through his research, bring more attention and support to redesign programs in Mississippi.

The students also improved as the year progressed. The teacher stated that the program also incorporated a pull-out program for the at-risk students who were performing on grade level. The teacher felt that this was a big help in getting the students motivated about their school work. Earlier in the year, I observed how some of the students were grasping the mathematics concepts while others were acting out and not

participating with the class. The teacher later learned that most of the behavioral outbursts came because some of the students were so far behind that they lost hope. After the teacher initiated the pull-out program (with the support of the administration), the students who were behind were able to get the one-on-one instruction that they desperately needed, and the students who were on grade level were able to get instruction at their own pace and still stay with the redesign program. As a result, the students' behavior and attitude toward the program improved tremendously as they continued to stay in the redesign program.

Based upon the findings, the students in the South Square program directly benefited from the support that the teachers received from the administration, as this relates to Research Question 1. The teachers did receive support in patterning their program after the problem-based programs such as the types of programs that Meier (2009) supports and endorses. The teachers also received some financial support when it came to receiving instructional equipment such as computers and graphing calculators. This is in direct opposition to the findings of Provasnik (2009), which state that most rural students receive inadequate financial support from their schools and the government.

As for Research Question 2, this program greatly benefits the rural at-risk student because of the exposure to projects such as the baby chair project (discussed earlier) or the toy challenge competition (also discussed earlier). The students in this program also benefited from having their own personal college engineering student to instruct them in mathematics. Many gaps in related research were found concerning the South Square program, because contrary to most literature out there concerning the rural at-risk student,

the South Square program actually had the staff, initial funding, and relevant instructional material to motivate at-risk students as well as to improve their perceptions of public education.

The challenges that the program experienced in regard to student benefits (Research Question 3) were in the area of correcting student discipline. The study showed that overall student performance was hurt by the fact that many students would constantly disrupt the class or they would not do the school work. This was especially prevalent in the beginning of the school year. The teachers stated that they felt that they could get the students more focused if the administration would enforce more discipline on the students.

Program Challenges

Some of the issues that present challenges for the South Square redesign program include class size, administrative support, and lack of funding. Regarding class size, as mandatory budget cuts continue to trickle down, more districts are forced to accommodate these cuts through teacher layoffs. As teachers are forced out of the classrooms, the remaining teachers' classroom sizes continue to increase. This phenomenon would be devastating to the at-risk program considering that, according to Payne (2008), these students desperately need the one-on-one time with teachers to develop socially and emotionally.

Another challenge for these programs came in the area of administrative support. The teachers in the South Square program felt that their administrators did support them. However, they also felt that the administration was not doing enough to provide follow-

up programs for the at-risk student once they left their programs and moved on to high school. The teachers were also concerned about the slow pace at which their program was receiving funds, funds that were promised to them at the beginning of the school year.

In regard to teacher support (Research Question 1), the program experienced challenges in providing the necessary training for the teachers. The teachers also felt that student discipline was an area upon which the administration could greatly improve. The area of instruction was also a category of concern because the teachers of the South Square program felt that, at times, the project-based learning method was not what their students needed in order to improve their mastery over the basic skills of mathematics.

The challenges that the programs face in regard to benefiting the students are in relation to improving student behavior, which, according to Thompson (2008), is a major factor in improving the condition of the at-risk student. The program also was experiencing challenges in finding sufficient funds to keep the program going. With the amount of projects and field trips that the program had put in place, South Square needed a sizable amount of funding to keep the program at its current level. The creative team for the program was successful in finding grants to fund the program for 2009–2010, but this proved to be even more difficult to do for the next school year as the economy for Mississippi (as well as the rest of the nation) continues to struggle.

Case Study: East Circle

The second research site in the study was East Circle Junior High School in the East Circle School District, which had a total enrollment of 3,451 students with a racial makeup of 80% Black, 19% White, and 1% Hispanic. The junior high school had a

student enrollment of 520 students with 270 students in the seventh grade, 264 students in the eighth grade, and 8 students who are in special services. The school is labeled a Title I school with 85% of the students receiving free or reduced lunch. The school includes two grade levels, seventh and eighth; within the eighth grade, the school had the Transition program. For students to be accepted into the Transition program, they must meet at least one of the following criteria: (a) have been retained at least once during their K–8 school years, (b) have been retained the previous school year, (c) exhibit severe social and/or emotional challenges, and (d) have scored significantly lower than their peers on the state standardized examination. This school redesign project at East Circle Junior High School was designed to provide the at-risk student an intense concentration of the core subjects—reading, English, and mathematics—for the purpose of successfully transitioning the student to the ninth grade.

The Transition program consisted of six teachers who provided instruction to approximately 40 students. The pupil-per-teacher ratio was around 13:1, and classes consist of 2 hours of instruction in reading, English, and mathematics and 1 hour of instruction in science and/or mathematics tutorial. Each subject area taught in this program is evaluated by the state through the MCT2, which tests language arts and mathematics, and the SATP, which tests eighth-grade science. The Mississippi Department of Education has devised four labels to categorize the performance of all students who take the MCT2. The minimal level means a student has achieved a numerical score of 137 or below and students at this level are not able to perform any of the content standards as specified by the grade-level content standards.

The teachers for East Circle Junior High School separate the 40 students in their program into three groups based on their performance on the standardized tests. The first group primarily consisted of those students who scored minimal on all three portions of the test. The second group consisted of students who scored basic or better on at least one portion of the state tests but may have scored minimal in another area of the test, and the third group includes those students who scored basic or higher on all portions of the state examination. Students in the Transition program at South Square Middle School who had scored basic or above on all portions of the standardized tests usually experience difficulties in areas other than academics such as behavioral or emotional challenges.

Although the Transition program had three teachers who made up the core of the program (these three teachers teach mathematics, English, and reading), there were three other teachers who provided instruction to the at-risk students in the program: two science teachers and one mathematics tutorial instructor. The students received 1 hour of instruction in science or mathematics tutorial.

The East Circle at-risk program was designed to address the needs of at-risk, middle school students in a rural setting; specifically African-American students in the eighth grade. However, the East Circle program did include students who were of Hispanic or Caucasian descent. In fact, the program is about 80% African American and 20% other races. The primary focus in regard to curriculum was mathematics, reading, English, and science. This program's philosophy is based on the essentialist views of Bagely, which, according to Stover (2009), describe a style of learning in which the basics are emphasized and the teacher is the primary authority for the classroom. This type of program also views the teacher as more of an instructional leader than an

instructional facilitator. With this educational philosophy, the teacher, or leader, leads the students and instructs them in the basics of reading, mathematics, English, and science. The teacher also focused on teaching the students the value of following rules and having respect for authority. In other words, the essentialist learning method adopts the philosophy of the teacher, or authority figure, leading the students to the answer or solution as opposed to the teacher guiding the student to the answer or solution. The remainder of this section attempts to give a clear and concise picture of the East Circle program; how it was created; and what the program, teachers, and students look like on a typical day of operation.

The East Circle program first opened in the spring of 2007 with one teacher and two assistant teachers and was created to be a remedial program for at-risk students in the core subjects of mathematics, reading, and English. East Circle Junior High School and its district committed to instituting a pilot program that was based upon the essentialist views of Bagley in their middle school. East Circle committed to creating three classrooms made up of approximately 15 students per class, and the school selectively offers the program to middle school students who can benefit from the highly structured, small-class environment that this learning style provides. The East Circle School District later committed to replace the two assistant teachers with certified teachers, which was done at the beginning of the 2008–2009 school year. This made it possible for the East Circle redesign program to have a teacher certified in reading, English, social studies, and mathematics (one of the teachers had a double certification). In the 2009–2010 school year, the East Circle program made it possible, through creative scheduling, for the

students in the at-risk program to attend regular science classes during the school day because the redesign program did not have a certified science teacher of its own.

The three teachers from East Circle Junior High School participated in 4 days of professional development activities during the summer of 2008 to prepare for the program's having an all-certified staff. According to Stover (2009), students in essentialist programs learn through structure and organization. In highly structured programs such as this one, students learn by accepting the structure and discipline of the program, focusing on the basic core curriculum, being taught the remedial skills they need to get to grade level and by taking advantage of the close-knit relationships with their teachers that they develop from the redesign program. This was the approach that the East Circle Junior High School adopted and used as its instructional strategy to design, create, and implement the program.

In the East Circle program, all of the normal academic content of the middle school curriculum was covered in the school redesign classrooms. The only change that East Circle made that was different from its traditional school program was that East Circle made the decision to limit its program to subject areas that were slated for state-mandated tests only. This included the subjects of reading, mathematics, English, and science because, according to the Mississippi Department of Education (2008), all eighth-graders in the state of Mississippi are required to take the MCT2, which covers reading, English, and mathematics; the students are also required to take the eighth-grade science test. In the area of delivery of instructional content, the difference in this program and the traditional school classroom was in how that content was introduced to students. In the East Circle program, students were given 2 hours of instruction daily in reading, English,

and mathematics, and they receive 1 hour of daily instruction in science. This allows the at-risk student time to grasp the content, which typically is a reason many at-risk students give for falling behind in their regular classes (Thompson, 2008). According to Meier (2009), because academic content was embedded in the redesign programs, the East Circle classroom had become a more interesting and motivating environment for students. The method of instruction proves to be better at getting students to retain what they have learned. The cycle of repetitive thinking and learning also provides students the important skills of higher-order thinking and self-reflection.

In the East Circle program, the class met during two consecutive class periods every day and was instructed in 2 hours of reading by a certified language arts teacher; 2 hours of English by a teacher who is certified in language arts, mathematics, and social studies; 2 hours of mathematics by a teacher who was certified in 7–12 mathematics and also had a master's degree in secondary mathematics. The program had also recruited the assistance of an eighth-grade certified science teacher to instruct the students in 1 hour of instruction in science. These educators guide the students as they worked through remedial work, basic skills, and higher-level cognitive problems. This work involved individual and collaborative efforts in research, collecting resources, creating solution proposals, building and assembling mockups of ideas, critiquing proposals with teachers and peers, and refining solutions through iteration. The teachers developed essentialist-based problems so that all regular middle school curricula in the areas of mathematics, science, reading, and English were covered. This was extremely crucial considering that the students in this program would still be required to complete the end-of-year state-mandated examinations.

In regard to research and observation of the East Circle program, I began observing the program at the beginning of the 2008–2009 school year. During this time, I was invited to meet with the redesign team for East Circle as the team met to discuss plans for the upcoming school year. The redesign team for East Circle consisted of the superintendent, the assistant superintendent, the middle school principal, the eighth-grade assistant principal, and the first certified language arts teacher who started with the program. The team met periodically during the early phases of the year and pinpointed what it felt would be the focus of attention for the 2008–2009 school year. Some of the key goals the team wanted to accomplish for the year were as follows: (a) to create two dropout prevention programs, (b) to acquire additional certified staff for the at-risk program, (c) to develop a partnership with the local university in the area of field-based experiences, (d) to develop an in-school tutorial program, and (e) to develop a mentoring program to foster more positive relationships between educators, community leaders, and the at-risk students.

January–May 2009 School Year

I began observing the program in August of 2009, but the program had been in place since January of 2009. Although the primary objective was to conduct research on the program based on the 2009–2010 school year, I was extremely inquisitive about how the program was initially created. Thus, I conducted numerous interviews with the first certified teacher and the principal concerning the background of the East Circle redesign program for rural at-risk middle school students.

At the initial time the program began in January of 2009, it consisted of around 50 students who were selected based on past behavioral problems and academic challenges from the previous year (to include being retained from the previous year). Other selection criteria included students who were 2 or more years behind in school and/or students who had scored minimal on the MCT2 in multiple areas. The program first was created in January 2009; at that time the program's staff included one certified language arts teacher and two assistant teachers. One assistant teacher taught a class for reading, and the other assistant teacher taught mathematics. The certified teacher taught English during this school year. The program received administrative support from the principal and the eighth-grade assistant principal.

The program was still in its infancy phase during this period. Based upon interviews with the first certified teacher, the program began when she was first hired, which was January 2009. This was the teacher's (who will be identified as Emily) first job, and it was the administration's first attempt at creating the program. Emily stated that during her interview with the principal, she made it clear that she had a passion for working with at-risk students, which prompted the principal to place her in the program. During this initial phase, there were many problems in both discipline and academics. The certified teacher was new, and the two assistant teachers were inadequately trained; therefore, the program seemed to struggle during this initial phase.

As a result of the disciplinary issues that the students in the program were displaying, many of the at-risk students were placed in an alternative school, which resulted in the total numbers in the program going from 50 in January 2009 to around 38 by May of that school year. This brought the overall average class size from about 17 per

class in January to around 12 per class in May of that year. Through interviews, the certified teacher and principal revealed that their primary focus for the spring of 2009 was just to get the program up and running. They said that, although the at-risk students may not have received many benefits that first semester, the majority of the student body for the rest of the school did benefit from the creation of the program because the at-risk students, with their social and behavioral challenges, were removed from the traditional classroom, thus allowing the traditional students to operate in a classroom environment that was less disruptive. The principal stated that it was the school's intention to make the program more beneficial to the at-risk student in the 2009–2010 school year by adding additional certified staff.

2009–2010

Once the 2009–2010 school year began, I could quickly see, through interviews, observations, and data collection, that the East Circle redesign program had improved tremendously. The classrooms were much more organized with new computers and new desks. Each of the three classrooms also had a smart board. In the beginning, the program only had one certified teacher; now the program had a certified teacher in each of the four subjects of reading, English, mathematics, and science. Through extensive interviews with the teachers and administrators, I was able to get a clear, concise picture of what their philosophy was in regard to 21st-century school redesign. According to the staff members' philosophy, school redesign means that they are creating a nontraditional school setting that is designed to teach and motivate their at-risk students, not just the students who are having problems in academics, because, according to the East Circle

staff, with 80% of the students being at-risk, the problems are not originating from academics but from other areas like, according to Payne (2008), single-parent homes, poverty, or an incarcerated parent.

The East Circle redesign program members shared their knowledge of what they thought should be the different components that should make up a school redesign program. The staff members felt that the way they would make their program different than a traditional class setting would be to make the class sizes smaller than the regular classroom setting and by giving the students more field experiences that expose them to the reasons they were learning material and also to focus on other social areas in which they may need motivation. Their teaching methods were also different. Instead of doing the usual 70% lecture and 30% group work, the teachers tried to create an environment in which the students understood how the lesson connects to real life. For instance, Emily, who teaches English, also tries to give students specific problems that show them how they are going to use English in the real world, and then the at-risk students are able to work their way through the English problems in their writing.

The typical class size for the East Circle redesign program for the 2009–2010 school year was somewhere between 10 and 13 students per class. According to the staff members of the East Circle Junior High School, the primary objective of the program was to target at-risk students so that dropout numbers would decline within the district. In the previous school year, the superintendent of the East Circle School District announced that the high school dropout rate was around 40%, which was one of the highest dropout rates in the state. The East Circle district agreed with the philosophies of Thompson (2008), who stated that students do not wait to drop out during high school; he stated that most

students mentally drop out in the seventh grade, or earlier. This is the core reason that the redesign program was placed at the middle school.

Through interviews, observations, and collection of data, I was able to obtain the following information concerning the implementation of the revisions for the East Circle program for the 2009–2010 school year. Emily expressed that she was the first teacher hired on the team and that the first year they basically had students in the program who were 15 and turning 16 years of age. Emily stated that in the beginning, they had really small class sizes but the students were a challenge because many of them had already mentally dropped out before they began, and so they began the program with students who were 2 or more years behind. The students were given double doses in the subject areas in which they were weak. Thus, if they were weak in mathematics, they got two periods of math and so forth with their other subject areas.

As the redesign progressed into the 2009–2010 school year, the school began implementing field experiences to motivate the rural at-risk student. For example, in fall 2009 the East Circle staff took the students to visit a local university to expose them to the college experience. Later that year the staff had a group of at-risk students who were getting into a lot of disciplinary problems, so the redesign program took that group on a field experience to the Mississippi Department of Corrections so that they could get first-hand experience with people who had made bad choices in life. The redesign program had also experienced success with meeting the needs of rural, middle school at-risk students. For example, at the beginning of the year, the reading teacher, through informal interviews, discussed how her students would refuse to pick up a novel and read, and when they would read, they were reading third-grade-level books. She also relayed how

much the students hated reading and how she was overjoyed when, at the end of the year, she had several students who had read over 15 novels. The reading teacher also discussed how two of her students increased their reading levels by three grades over the course of the school year.

In addition to the information retrieved from formal and informal interviews and discussions with the staff members of the East Circle Junior High School, I was able to take condensed field notes, through observations, in order to illustrate what would transpire in an East Circle redesign class on a typical day.

September 4, 2009

I observed a class of Emily, who teaches English to eighth-grade at-risk students, on the Friday before Labor Day weekend. Even though it was close to the holidays, the students were well behaved. It was 10:05 a.m., and the school classroom had 15 desks and one large table filled with newspapers from *The Commercial Dispatch*, *Daily Journal*, and *The Daily Times Leader*. The table also had two computers. The classroom was painted green and white. There was a green wave (the school mascot) painted green around the entire bottom half of the room. The top half of the classroom walls were painted white. There was a red bookcase in the back of the class. The bookcase was filled with workbooks, reading books, dictionaries, and journals. The class was filled with posters and pictures. There were two bulletin boards in the class. One bulletin board was purple with light purple trimming. The board was titled "Writing" with the topics Pre-Write, Draft, Edit and Revise, Publish, Proofread, and Share and Reflect. The other bulletin board was red with blue trimming, but that board was blank. In the left corner of

the white board, the teacher had (a) Teacher's name – Ms. Emily; (b) Date – September 4, 2009; and (c) –Reminders”: Friday – September 8th – Parts of Speech Pre-Test, Wednesday – September 9th – Progress Reports, and Friday – September 18th – Typed Narratives. This English class in the school redesign setting lasted 2 hours and had 10 students present in class. The students were going to the board analyzing sentences by overhead projector under the direction of the teacher. Each student went to the board one at a time to diagram a sentence. The rest of the students participated in the assignment. The class consisted of seven boys and three girls. There were two white males and five black males. There was also one white female and two black females.

At 10:14 a.m. the teacher instructed the students to turn in the bell-ringer activity. The bell ringer is an activity that the teacher had the class do at the beginning of the class. The teacher began chapter review of Chapter 11, page 367. The teacher noticed that one student, Shaqweta, was sick. I observed that the majority of the class was very participative. The class had a very good learning environment. At 10:16 the teacher conducted group discussion concerning parts of speech. The teacher then had each student read a sentence and identify or describe parts of speech such as nouns, pronouns, concrete, abstract, and so forth. As one student read the next sentence, the class followed attentively in their textbooks. The class was actively involved in the discussion concerning concrete and abstract thought. I was especially impressed that the teacher noticed that the student (Shaqweta) was sick and acknowledged it in front of the class so that the rest of the class would know why Shaqweta was not participating in class. It was apparent that the class had become a very tight-knit group.

Other topics covered in the class included relative pronouns and demonstrative pronouns. The teacher was able to have one-on-one interactions with each student. The teacher demonstrated lessons on the white board and addressed three students who were not staying focused. The teacher later tried to get the sick student involved in the group discussion. The teacher then stated that she wanted everyone ready for the test, which was to be given Tuesday, September 8.

October 11, 2009

I observed the reading class of the redesign program as, at 9:12 a.m., they left the library, after checking out books to read, to go back to their class. While the class was in the library, the students were doing silent reading while eight students were at the computer taking an Accelerated Reader computer assessment program test. The class left the library at 9:12 and arrived at the class at 9:14. Upon entering the class, the students were immediately given a quiz by the teacher. At 9:26 the teacher took up the quizzes and started a group discussion concerning the answers to the quiz.

The class consisted of 14 students, 9 males and 5 females. The male students consisted of three Whites and six Blacks. The female students consisted of one White and four Blacks. At 9:30 the teacher got the students started on a pre-reading exercise while she did one-on-one instruction with the classes. After completing one-on-one instruction, the teacher then went over a reading comprehension exercise with the students. At 9:43 the teacher had individual students come to her desk to give them individual instruction while the rest of the class worked on the reading exercises.

The classroom environment was very conducive to learning; the room was painted sky blue. At the top front of the room was a television mounted to the top of the wall. In the far left corner of the room was a cabinet, and toward the right of the room were a television and television stand, a large white board, and an orange bulletin board. On the bulletin board was information concerning the MCT2 starting with “goals from MCT2 practice test 1,” which stated that their goal was to get 25% of the items correct during the month of October. Then there were the “goals for the 2nd MCT2 practice test,” which stated that the students were to get 50% of the test items correct by December. At the far right of the class was an easel decorated like a drama stage. It had red curtains and vocabulary words that included *justice*, *examine*, *evidence*, *convict*, and *unique*. On the east side of the room was a table with reading material that included “Voyager, Journeys I,” “Muse,” “Language,” and “Climate”. The teacher also had the classroom rules posted on the wall. At 9:53, the bell rang and the teacher reminded the class of the vocabulary assignment as they moved to their next class.

December 3, 2009

On this particular day, I observed the mathematics class, which on this day was being conducted in what the school called the Power-Pals laboratory. This was a computer lab set up with all different types of mathematics software for all the mathematics students in the school. The mathematics teachers for the school had set up a schedule for each mathematics teacher to have the lab 1 day out of the week. Tuesday happened to be the day that the mathematics teacher for the redesign program had access to the lab.

The class, which I began observing at 11:07, was in the Power-Pals lab, which consisted of 13 students, seven boys and six girls. Of the seven boys, one was White and six were Black. Of the girls, all six were Black. The students seemed to be working on mathematics programs on the computer. The teacher, sitting at the teacher workstation, called a student to the desk to do one-on-one instruction. There was a group of three female students who, periodically, burst into laughter; all other students were quiet and working on their computers. The students were using a computer program called My Skills Tutor. The computer program was a mathematics program that uses DOK1- and DOK2-level work. At 11:11 the teacher called another student to the desk, but the one-on-one interaction with this student lasted for less than a minute. The teacher then got up from the desk and checked on students' work. According to the instructions that the teacher gave the class, the students must pass each program assessment with 80% accuracy in order to move on to the next computer assignment.

In an informal interview with the mathematics teacher, he stated that this class was what they call the "middle group." East Circle had three student groups that are grouped by ability based upon their performance on the previous year's MCT2 scores. Students who scored proficient or advanced on the exam were placed in the "high" group. Students who scored high basic were placed in the "middle group," and students who scored minimal or low basic were placed in the "low group." (The staff never referred to these groups as low, middle, or high in front of the students or parents.)

In this middle group, the teacher explained, that three to four of the students were failing the course. He also stated that three students were not present for the class that day. When I asked why they were not in class, he said that one student was permanently

placed at the district's alternative school, another student was placed on a 5-day suspension, and the third student was absent. The teacher also stated that student apathy was a big problem in the program and that student apathy was more prevalent in the high-performing group. The teacher also stated that the low-performing group was the hardest working group and the high-performing group did the least amount of work. The teacher also felt that if the students were able to do more project-based activities, the high group would be more motivated. The teacher also stated that the East Circle staff members wanted to work more closely with the high school so that they could do follow-ups with former at-risk students. The teacher stated that soon some of the program's first at-risk students would be seniors and that the staff was very interested in seeing how many of the original at-risk students would make it to the 12th grade.

Major Factors

The major factors that were used as focus points for this case study were as follows: (a) curriculum, (b) instructional strategies, (c) teacher support, (d) student benefits, and (e) program challenges. The remainder of this section was used to elaborate upon each of these topics as they relate to the East Circle redesign program for rural, middle school at-risk students.

Curriculum

With the East Circle program, only mathematics, reading, English, and science were covered in these classes. However, the program placed a high priority on making sure that all of the normal academic content of the state-mandated middle school curriculum was covered in this program. The difference was in how that content was

introduced to the students. In the East Circle program, the academic content was embedded in lectures, group work, discussions, and design problems. The students are tasked to know particular elements of each of the subject areas in order to propose solutions to the problems that the instructional leaders create for them for the sole purpose of getting the students to be more interested in learning the content.

The specifics of the core curriculum for this program are centered on eighth-grade state-mandated examinations. As previously mentioned, the teachers in the redesign program are still responsible for making sure that their students receive the same academic content as other traditional eighth-grade students within the school. This was evidenced by the lessons and objectives that were covered in the essentialist-based classrooms during my visits. Some of the objectives and benchmarks covered in the language arts classes included diagramming and identifying parts of speech, vocabulary, and reading and comprehension. This was listed in the classroom as Objective 2h with a DOK2 level. Other topics observed in the mathematics class included students' being required to graph linear and nonlinear equations by using multiple methods including T-charts and slopes. This lesson was listed in the classroom as Objective 2e with a DOK2 level. The students were also asked to be able to solve equations that derived from the 2e objective/lesson.

Other lessons covered in the class included using instructional resources such as Buckle Down, Voyager, and Accelerated Reader so the students could do practice tests in the core subject areas. These lessons were designed purely to get the students ready for the state-mandated end-of-year MCT2, which is extremely crucial for students, and schools, to perform well on. Many school districts and communities measure the success

of their local schools and school personnel purely on how well the students perform on this particular examination.

Instructional Strategies

The East Circle School classrooms had proven to be a much better environment for motivating students due to the academic content of the redesign program. Due to the instructional delivery method, students became better at retaining what they had learned. The “propose, critique, iterate” cycle of repetitive thinking and learning provided students the skills of self-reflection and higher-order thinking.

The most important strategy that the East Circle redesign program used to retain the attention and interest of the students was through its mentoring and relationship-building philosophy. With this educational method, the East Circle used motivational talks, speeches, and projects that garnered the attention of the students. Some of these projects included a scared-straight type of experience where the students were able to go on a field experience to the Mississippi Department of Corrections facility to observe and listen to inmates who, through making wrong choices in life, ended up in prison. The students were then required to work in groups as they used elements of the talks to look at their own situations and the life choices they were making. Another project was to take all of the students to visit a local university for the purpose of exposing them to the opportunities of going to college.

One other project that the students found particularly interesting was the use of game-like mathematics assessments on the computer that used videogame-style programs to provide instruction to students. One game in particular involved the students playing a

videogame that served as an educational game in mathematics. The videogame called “Math Asteroids” was used for the class. With this game, the player is a space fighter who has to shoot down asteroids, but before the player can shoot the asteroid, the player must solve the mathematics equation that is written across the asteroid. Once the player solves the mathematics problem, then he or she is allowed to shoot the asteroid. These types of projects and strategies coupled with an authoritarian-centered educational philosophy are the core value system of the East Circle school redesign program in relation to instructional strategies.

Teacher Support

In regard to teacher support for the East Circle school redesign program, this study showed four areas of interest: (a) administrative support, (b) professional development, (c) accountability, and (d) other related issues.

The teachers in the essentialist-based school program at East Circle Junior High School seemed to be more tense and frustrated about student apathy and not using the child-centered learning strategy. My interviews, observations, and collection of data showed that the staff at East Circle Junior High School wanted to get more administrative support in the area of doing more projects and exposing the students to more field experiences. The staff members also stated that they enjoyed the strict discipline of the administration but that it was a very difficult in keeping some of the students in school due to the number of suspensions some of the students were receiving.

In the area of professional development, observations and documents collected show that the teachers did receive adequate training during the initial phase of the

program. However, as the program progressed, the teachers received little to no professional development to address issues such as dealing with the at-risk middle school student or training to deal with the at-risk, rural student.

As the year progressed, the teachers stated that they could feel the pressures of accountability escalating, especially in the area of state-mandated tests. Specifically, the teachers felt a tremendous amount of pressure to perform well on the MCT2, especially because all schools in Mississippi receive labels and rankings based on their MCT2 performance.

Another area in which the teachers wanted to receive more support was in providing a follow-up at-risk program for the students at the high school. The staff was not satisfied with the fact that, once the students left their school and program at the middle school level, they were basically put right back into the system from which they initially came.

In regard to Research Question 1 (How do redesign programs support teachers?), the data show that the teachers did receive support from the administration, especially in the area of student discipline. My interviews, observations, and collection of data show that the teachers of East Circle wanted to get more support in the area of project-based activities. The staff members felt that too much emphasis was placed on standardized instruction and assessments, and they felt that the program was not doing enough to make the instructional material more relevant to the at-risk student. The teachers also wanted the administration to do more in the area of following up the progress of their students once they left the program and were promoted to the high school.

The staff members enjoyed the support that they received from the administration in regard to developing relationships with their students. Through interviews and observations, it was found that the teachers, with the support of the administration, were able to bring in motivational speakers for their groups. They were also able to get mentors to come in and give one-on-one mentoring to their students, especially the African-American males. According to Payne (2008), it is this type of relationship building that is crucial to the emotional and social development of the low-income at-risk student.

In the area of funding, the teachers received some support, but East Circle, like the South Square program, suffered from lack of funding. In regard to staffing, the East Circle program received more financial support; the program was able to be staffed with three full-time certified teachers. The school was also able to get two science teachers from the traditional school setting to teach the students 1 hour of science each day. Though interviews, it was shown that the administration did not know how long it would be able to keep the number of staff in place for the redesign program. The administrators stated that budget cuts for the district (and the school) were eminent.

When it came to teacher support in the area of professional development, observations and documents collected showed that the teachers received training when the program was initiated. However, as the program progressed through the years (the East Circle program is in its 3rd year), the teachers received training, but it was usually the same training that the rest of the staff received. The teachers of the redesign program, however, received little to no professional development to address issues such as dealing with the at-risk middle school. Through informal interviews with the administration, I

learned that the teachers never received follow-up training because of two reasons: (a) the administration found it extremely difficult to find professional development that specifically dealt with rural at-risk students in the middle school setting, and (b) even in instances in which the administration did find professional development training, the training was usually located in the northern region of the country and the administration did not have the funds or resources to send the staff to these expensive training sites. Therefore, it was the researchers findings that the administration, much like the administration for South Square, was more than willing to support the staff and the program, but the lack of funding and looming budget cuts for the next year made the administration extremely reluctant to fund any expensive training for the redesign staff of East Circle.

Regarding Research Question 2 (How does the school redesign programs benefit middle school, at-risk students?), I found that the East Circle program received support in the areas of motivation and other benefits. The East Circle program received administrative support when it came to implementing structure and discipline for the students. The administration also implemented an academic intervention policy to combat student apathy among at-risk students. If a teacher reported a student refusing to do school work, then the administration would apply discipline to that student and strongly encourage that student to do his or her work. This was very apparent, through observations, when it came to literacy. As a result of the academic intervention policies, documents collected show how some students' reading levels increased by as much as two grade levels over the course of the year.

As for Research Question 3 (What challenges, at the school level, do teachers face in regard to the redesign programs?), the study found that the teachers of East Circle stated that they wished they could receive more support when it came to making the instructional material more relevant to the at-risk student. They particularly wanted to see more project-based activities incorporated into the program. The teachers also stated that they would like to be able to take their students on more field experiences in order to expose their students to the practical side of education.

When comparing the two programs as far as the similarities and differences in the category of teacher support, I found that both programs seemed to have an administration that wanted to see the programs flourish. The administrations for both programs stated that funding and professional development were the areas for which their teachers support was most difficult.

Student Benefits

Based upon my interviews and observations, the students in the East Circle redesign program seemed to benefit from the program in the following areas: social, emotional, and motivational. This authoritative-centered program offered small class sizes, and the students were taken on at least two field experiences—one to the local university and the other to a correctional facility. The students also received motivational talks from community leaders such as pastors, nurses, and so forth. All of these activities were put in place for the purpose of giving the student real-life examples of how life choices and core subject-area courses could be used in the real world and how school could be fun.

As a result of the small-group setting, the practical field experiences, and the project-based learning activities that were based on the core subjects, the students in this program went from being disciplinary problems to becoming more engaged in class discussions and group activities.

In regard to Research Question 1 (How do redesign programs support teachers?), this case study did show that, by the teachers getting the support they needed, the at-risk student did indeed benefit from the East Circle program. The most vital area that I saw where the students benefit from teacher support was in the fact that the East Circle program had been able to retain its three full-time teachers for more than 2 years. Many teachers either have a negative view of at-risk students or do not want to teach them; or if they do teach at-risk students, they usually leave to find other employment in a year or less (Rieg, 2007). With the implementation of the academic intervention policy, the students in the program also get the benefit of improving their student outcomes in the program. Observations show that the program went from about 25% of the students working consistently in the class at the beginning of the year to over 75% of the students working consistently in the class by the end of the year.

Concerning Research Question 2 (How does the redesign program benefit middle school, at-risk students?), the findings show that the program had a direct impact on the rural at-risk student in terms of establishing relationships and providing the necessary instructional resources that most rural at-risk students do not receive (Provasnik, 2009). One finding of this case study that was different from recent literature was that the redesign program improves the academic performance of the at-risk student tremendously. The problem with the program is that most state and federal agencies do

not recognize the growth (and benefits) that these programs provide. Because many of the students in this program start off with third- or fourth-grade mathematics and reading levels, if the program improves their performance to a sixth-grade mathematics or reading level, this may seem like significant growth, but according to the Mississippi Department of Education (2008), this performance for an eighth-grader would still be considered minimal.

The challenges that the program presents in relation to student benefits (Research Question 3) also relate to the specific needs of the rural at-risk student. When it comes to funding, the program was finding it difficult to maintain current staff numbers for the redesign program, which ties in with the findings of Johnson and Strange (2007) that state that rural schools find it extremely difficult to recruit and retain certified staff. As a result of the lack of funding and dwindling staffing, the class sizes, which are so crucial to the development of the at-risk student (Payne, 2008), will increase and, ultimately, have a negative impact on student benefits.

In regard to similarities and differences, the study showed, through interviews, observations, and documents collected, that both programs have a significant impact on the at-risk student. The study also showed that both programs are experiencing great difficulty with getting sufficient funding, which is in line with what Provasnik (2009) states about how rural schools receive the least amount of funding from the federal government. Both programs are also struggling to find the most efficient way to balance instruction and project-based learning.

Program Challenges

Some of the issues that presented challenges for the East Circle redesign program include class size, administrative support, and lack of funding. In regard to class size, as mandatory budget cuts continue to trickle down, more districts are forced to accommodate these cuts through teacher layoffs. As teachers are forced out of the classrooms, the remaining classroom sizes increase. This phenomenon would be devastating to the at-risk program considering that, according to Payne (2008), these students desperately need the one-on-one time with teachers to develop socially and emotionally. The budget cuts also made it difficult for the administration to hold onto three full-time certified staff members for only 30 to 45 students. There was talk among the redesign staff that one or more of the teachers in the program would be cut or removed for the next school year.

Another challenge for these programs comes in the area of administrative support. The teachers in the East Circle program felt that their administrators supported them. However, they also felt that the administration was not doing enough to provide follow-up programs for at-risk students once they left their programs and moved on to the high school. The teachers were also concerned about the slow pace in which their program was receiving funds, funds that were promised to them at the beginning of the school year.

In regard to Research Question 1 (How do redesign programs support teachers?), the East Circle program had experienced challenges with finding specific professional development training that will address the needs of rural at-risk secondary students. The teachers also stated that they would like to see more project-based activities for their

students. Another area in which the program had experienced challenges was in finding a more efficient instructional balance of the curriculum. The teachers stated that they would like to see the curriculum move to 50% instruction and 50% project-based learning. The teachers of East Circle were also very concerned about the pressure they felt in the area of accountability as far as standardized test scores were concerned. The teachers stated that their evaluations from the administration were closely tied to how well their students performed on the MCT2, and they felt that they were often put at a disadvantage because their students were two or more grade levels behind when they first received the students. The teachers did, however, state that the administrators told them that they took the students' initial academic performance into consideration and that most of their evaluations would come from how much growth they got out of the students.

One other area in which the teachers felt the program had challenges was with the administration's implementing some type of follow-up program for the students once they left the redesign program. The teachers felt that the students desperately needed the same attention and support at the high school level that they had been receiving at the middle school level, which is consistent with the research conducted by Payne (2008).

Within-Case Analysis

This section includes the within-case analysis for both of the middle school redesign programs. The analysis was organized according to the following research questions. First was an analysis of how redesign programs support teachers, second was an analysis of how redesign programs benefit at-risk students, third was an analysis of what challenges, at the school level, students and teachers face in regard to redesign

programs, and finally an analysis of the similarities and differences that exist between the two school redesign programs.

South Square Middle School

How Do Redesign Programs Support Teachers?

In regard to how redesign programs support teachers, this study showed some interesting issues. These issues seemed to focus on four main areas: (a) administrative support, (b) professional development, (c) accountability, and (d) other related issues.

The teachers in the SLB program at South Square seemed to be more tense and frustrated about the child-centered learning strategy. Through interviews and observations, I found that the staff at South Square wanted to get more administrative support in the area of student discipline. The teachers also stated that they enjoyed the project-based concept but that the purchasing of equipment and scheduling of activities was slow going and that this slow implementation of the project-based learning strategy was extremely damaging to getting and keeping the attention of the at-risk students. It also must be noted that the program at South Square did not become fully operational until late September 2009.

In the area of professional development, the data show that during the initial phases of the South Square program the teachers did receive adequate training. This was evidenced in one of the SBL school's earlier newsletters, which describes a 4-day professional development training for its teachers. However, as the programs developed, the teachers received little to no professional development to address issues such as

dealing with the at-risk student or providing differentiated learning strategies to meet the needs of at-risk students.

There were little data to support the level of accountability to which the teachers and the program were held. The teachers did, however, stress their concerns about whether their students would perform well on the state-mandated tests.

An area in which some of the teachers stressed that they would like to see more support was in the area of providing a follow-up at-risk program for the students at the high school. Many of the teachers were not satisfied with the fact that, once the students left their program at the middle school level, they were basically put right back into the same general school system with which they initially struggled once they got to the high school.

How Do Redesign Programs Benefit At-Risk Students?

In regard to how redesign programs benefit at-risk students, this study showed some interesting issues. These issues seemed to focus on four main areas: (a) motivation, (b) student outcomes, (c) academic performance, and (d) other related issues.

This study showed that the school redesign programs' effect on the students in regard to academic performance had a lot to do with the initial academic level at which the student was performing when the student first entered the program. Because of this dilemma, I observed that many of the low-performing students became frustrated because, even though they did show growth, it was not enough to get them a higher score on many of their test grades. This type of frustration seemed to perpetuate their already existing apathy. As stated by Thompson (2008), low-performing students are the most

likely to suffer from apathy. Thompson (2008) also stated that these students tend to have a higher percentage of apathetic parents. I also found evidence of this finding in one of the observations at South Square. When one of the teachers was trying to get one of the low-performing students (who also had behavioral problems) to do his work, the student stated that it did not matter whether he did the work or not because the school would still socially promote him to the next grade just like it had done in previous years.

Concerning the SBL program, my interviews showed that the design team, a team comprised of the superintendent, principal, and teachers of the South Square team as well as the partnering professor from the local university, felt that there was a need to revise the balance between project-based learning and problem-based learning. Team members discussed, in detail, about changing the current instructional delivery from 50% instruction and 50% project-based to 70% instruction and 30% project-based. The staff felt that this change would benefit the students in regard to getting them ready to pass the state tests. Based on the evidence from these interviews, if the leadership of the South Square program revised the instructional strategy of the program, the areas of climate and classroom instruction and management would improve, which in turn would improve academic success among the students.

What Challenges, at the School Level, Do Teachers Face

in Regard to Redesign Programs?

In regard to program challenges, this study showed four areas of concern: (a) funding, (b) class sizes, (c) administrative support, and (d) instruction. In the area of

funding, the South Square program received initial funding and support to get the program going. Continued funding of the program proved to be an issue as supported by a statement made by one of the principals after an observation was conducted. The principal stated that the administration was experiencing challenges when it came to actually receiving the funding from the federal programs. The principal felt that this reduction in the number of payouts from the federal programs was due to the budget crunch that the State was experiencing. The redesign program was also experiencing difficulty receiving funding from the grants for which the school had applied. In many instances, the administration was counting on funding from grants for which the school had applied; these were monies that the school did not actually have, but administrators still were assuming that they would receive this funding.

In addition to getting the necessary funds to finance such activities as field experiences, purchasing or acquiring adequate equipment for the program also proved to be a challenge as evidenced in the observations conducted that showed that, with the South Square project, it was the intent of the administrators to furnish/finance project-based activities such as the “Foy Challenge” toy design competition (collected from documents), a cell phone design project, and a robotics project. Due to recent budget cuts at the district and state levels, many of the projects were put on temporary hold.

In the area of instruction, research showed that the South Square program faced challenges in the area of instruction when it came to finding a respectable balance in the area of implementing project-based learning and curriculum that places its focus on accountability standards in regard to high-stakes testing. After numerous interviews with the South Square staff, it was revealed that most of the teachers felt that the program

should move from 70% project-based learning and 30% instructional delivery to more of an instructional strategy that included 70% instructional delivery and 30% project-based learning activities.

What Similarities Exist Between the Two Programs?

In regard to the similarities and differences between the child-centered SBL program of South Square and the essentialist-based redesign program at East Circle, the study showed that there were similarities between the two programs, such as student absenteeism from the program due to behavioral problems. This was due to many of the students being placed on suspensions. The SBL program seemed to have more of a problem with this because the students attend other classes and tend to get into trouble in those classes. The East Circle program also experienced this problem, but because these students spend 80% of their time with the redesign teachers in the program, most of the student referrals came from these teachers. As a result, the referrals tend to be fewer in number. The students in the SBL program seemed to be more excited about school due to the project-based activities. In observations, I found that the disciplinary problems in the SBL school decreased significantly when students were doing project- or group-based activities. In addition, the researcher's observations of the design team meetings for South Square showed that the SBL program offered many more alternate learning activities for the students than the East Circle program. For instance, the SBL program had received funding to purchase design station equipment for the students. In one of the classroom observations, I observed the students participating in a group project in which they were preparing to enter a national toy design competition for fifth- through eighth-

graders. In this competition, the students would be able to utilize aspects of engineering to design and develop their toy for the competition. The SBL program also received funding to purchase Algebra I software to install on the design station machines that are scheduled to go into the classrooms. The majority of this equipment had not arrived as of December 2009. The SBL program also had many more ideas for field experiences than the East Circle program. Documents collected for this study also showed that the program at South Square aspired to pattern itself after the Coalition of Essential Schools, which was created by Sizer (2004).

The East Circle program was more traditional and focused more on teacher-led instructional activities. Through I's observations, it seemed that this program was more focused on the academic basics and standardized testing accountability standards. This program had fewer behavioral problems, but, based upon interviews and observations, this program also struggled with motivating the students to perform at their best. The students in the East Circle program also seemed to be less excited about their program than the students from South Square.

The study also showed, through collection of numerical data, that the overall academic performances of the two schools were significantly different. Although both schools were poverty-stricken schools with similar demographics, East Circle was labeled a successful school and South Square was labeled a school at risk of failing. These labels were based on the schools' performances on the 2008–2009 MCT2 examinations (Mississippi Department of Education, 2008). Drilling beneath the surface of student apathy and low academic performance may reveal an at-risk student that attends an at-risk school (Thompson, 2008). There was an abundance of research that

showed that the single-most important factor in student achievement is teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, 2007). In fact, the positive impact that teachers have on student achievement can be identified by three categories: (a) teacher experience, (b) the students' test scores for each teacher, and (c) teacher licensure (Kral, 2008). The quality of the overall school can also prove to have a significant and profound effect on the student, especially the at-risk student.

East Circle

How Do Redesign Programs Support Teachers?

In regard to how redesign programs support teachers, this study showed some interesting issues. These issues seemed to focus on four main areas: (a) administrative support, (b) professional development, (c) accountability, and (d) other related issues.

The program at East Circle, which is based on the highly structured and discipline-based philosophies of essentialist Bagely, this program had teachers who felt good about the administrative support they received but felt extremely frustrated with how the program placed so much emphasis on standardized testing results.

The teachers in this program stated, through interviews, that although for the most part their students behaved in class, they still had a serious problem with student apathy. As stated by one teacher, the students would get more motivated if they incorporated some activities and experiences that made the material more relevant to them. The teacher also stated that, right now, the students were not doing the work because they wanted to, but that they did the minimal amount they had to do to stay out of In-School Suspension (ISS). The study showed that the teachers at East Circle would like to have

more project-based activities and field experiences for their students to show them the relevance of the instructional material.

In the area of professional development, the data showed that during the initial phases of each program the teachers received adequate training. However, as the program developed, the teachers received little to no professional development to address issues such as dealing with the at-risk student or providing differentiated learning strategies to meet the needs of at-risk students. As one principal stated in an informal interview, there was practically no professional development available that specifically addressed the needs of rural at-risk middle school students.

There were little data to support the level of accountability to which the teachers and the program were held. The teachers did, however, stress their concerns about whether their students would perform well on the state-mandated tests. An area in which some of the teachers stressed that they would like to see more support was in providing a follow-up at-risk program for the students at the high school. Many of the teachers were not satisfied with the fact that once the students left their program at the middle school level, they were basically put right back into the same general school system with which they initially struggled once they got to the high school.

How Do Redesign Programs Benefit At-Risk Students?

In regard to how redesign programs benefit at-risk students, the study showed some interesting issues. These issues seemed to focus on four main areas: (a) motivation, (b) student outcomes, (c) academic performance, and (d) other related issues.

This study showed that the school redesign programs' effect on the students in regard to academic performance had a lot to do with the initial academic level at which the student was performing when the student first entered the program. For example, the redesign program at East Circle Junior High School separated the students into three groups (high, middle, and low performing) according to their performance on the MCT2. If a student scored high basic to Advanced on the MCT2, he or she was placed in the high group. Students who scored high minimal to basic were placed in the second group, and students who scored minimal were placed in the low group. Although all the students in the program had failed the previous year, the students in the high-performing group had significantly higher grades than the other groups. The middle group had the second-highest grades, and the low-performing group had the lowest grades. However, growth based on the student assessment programs that were used by the school showed that the low-performing students showed significantly more growth than the middle or high groups. However, for far too many of the low-performing students, the growth was not enough to make a difference in their academic standing. Based on the evidence from this research, in the world of standardized testing, academic growth does not count for much if the student continues to perform at the minimal level.

Because of this dilemma, I observed that many of the students in the low group became frustrated because, even though they did show growth, it was not enough to get them a higher score on the standardized tests. This type of frustration seemed to perpetuate their already existing apathy. As stated by Thompson (2008), low-performing students are the most likely to suffer from apathy. Thompson (2008) also stated that these students tend to have a higher percentage of apathetic parents.

***What Challenges, at the School Level, Do Teachers Face
in Regard to Redesign Programs?***

In regard to program challenges, this study showed four areas of concern: (a) funding, (b) class sizes, (c) administrative support, and (d) instruction.

Maintaining small class sizes also proved to be a challenge for the East Circle project. The initial intent of the program was to limit class sizes to 10–15 students per class. However, due to the recent budget cuts suffered by most school districts in the state of Mississippi (as well as with the rest of the country), central office administrators began putting pressure on the building principal to increase the number of students per class.

The study did show strong administrative support in relation to dealing with program challenges in the area of providing support for student assessments as shown through observations that showed that teachers and students had access to software programs such as SRI and Accelerated Reader (literacy programs). The students and teachers also were provided access to the library, to computer labs, and to Mississippi State University staff and resources. Still, administrators received negative feedback from the teachers about providing follow-up services to the at-risk students in the program when it came to providing at-risk services to the students once they made it to high school.

The lack of follow-up support for the at-risk students was also validated through documents collected by the East Circle teachers. These teachers went to the high school to do a checkup on 29 former students who had been in their program over the last 3 years. That checkup showed that only 7 out of 29 at-risk students were being

academically successful at the high school: two 9th-graders, four 10th-graders, and one 11th-grader. The other 22 students were experiencing challenges such as multiple course failings, alternative school placement, and even expulsions or dropping out of school.

In the area of instruction, research showed that the East Circle program faced challenges in the area of instruction when it came to finding a respectable balance in the area of implementing project-based learning and curriculum that placed its focus on accountability standards in regard to high-stakes testing. Documents collected during this research showed evidence of this as one of the East Circle teachers, through an e-mail conversation with her principal, made statements describing her concern that the program was placing too much emphasis on academics and not enough emphasis on project- and child-centered learning.

What Similarities Exist Between the Two Programs?

Both programs experienced challenges with the students in the areas of behavior and student apathy, especially at the beginning of the school year. As the year progressed, both programs did show improvements in the number of disciplinary problems that the students were exhibiting. Student apathy also showed some improvements, but these improvements were not satisfactory to the teachers in either program. These findings are consistent with the findings of Hwang (1995), which stated that student apathy is the leading factor in the diminished performance of American secondary students.

Cross-Case Analysis

The purpose of this study was to examine what impact the creation of programs or instructional strategies, devised and designed solely for the purpose of improving

educational outcomes among at-risk students, have on the at-risk middle school student. Research cited indicated that school practices and policies designed to address the needs of the at-risk student may have a positive impact on the at-risk student in regard to academic achievement and attitudes toward education. Further research cited indicated that school redesign programs were developed to provide the at-risk or academically challenged student alternate routes to acquiring academic achievement.

In this case study, educational success from school redesign programs were qualitatively measured through an oriental inquiry-based qualitative research design. The data obtained for this study came from interviews, observations, and data collection and analysis.

The cross-case analysis was based upon the following research questions:

1. How do redesign programs support teachers?
2. How does the school redesign program benefit middle school, at-risk students?
3. What challenges, at the school level, do teachers face in regard to redesign programs?

Based upon these research questions, the cross-case analysis was broken into three domains: (a) teacher support, (b) student benefits, and (c) program challenges.

Teacher Support

Both programs received teacher support in regard to professional development in the early stages of the program, but both programs also experienced a lack of follow-up training to address the specific needs of rural, at-risk middle school students. There were

differences in the way the programs were supported by their administrations. The South Square program teachers were satisfied with the level of project-based activities they received as well as the amount of field experiences they were able to provide for their students. On the other hand, the South Square teachers were not pleased with the level of administrative support they received in the area of student discipline. With the East Circle program, the staff members were pleased with the level of support that they received in the areas of maintaining student discipline and the amount of support they received in the area of subject-area testing. However, the East Circle staff was not pleased with the limited amount of field experiences that the students received. The staff also wanted to get more support in implementing project-based activities into the curriculum.

In the area of accountability, both programs' teachers felt the pressure of getting their students to perform well on the standardized examinations. Based on interviews, there seemed to be much more pressure on the East Circle staff to show academic growth than with the South Square program.

In other areas of teacher support, the teachers in both programs felt that they were making a difference in the lives of at-risk students. I received no indication from his research of any teachers in either program wanting to be reassigned to traditional classes. All the teachers seemed to enjoy working with the redesign programs.

Through interviews and observations, it was found that the teachers in the SBL program at South Square seemed to be more tense and frustrated about the child-centered learning strategy. Through interviews and observations, I found that the staff at South Square wanted to get more administrative support in the area of student discipline. One teacher said, "Well, our school has a 100 policy. At our school the focus is to maintain

100% ADA (average daily attendance) no matter what the cost, so the students that misbehave are usually sent back to class.”

The data show that there was support for the teacher in this program. The teacher stated that she enjoyed the project-based concept but that the purchasing of equipment and scheduling of activities was slow going and that this slow implementation of the project-based learning strategy was extremely damaging to getting and keeping the attention of the at-risk students. The teacher said, “The project side hasn’t started yet because we have not received the funds we need. The robotics project can be done for \$200.00. The district was awarded 50K, but it hasn’t made it to us yet.”

It also must be noted that the program at South Square did not become fully operational until late September 2009, whereas the redesign program at East Circle had been in operation since January 2007.

On the other hand, the program at East Circle, which is based on the highly structured and discipline-based philosophies of essentialist Bagely, had teachers who felt good about the administrative support they received but felt extremely frustrated with how the program placed so much emphasis on standardized testing results:

A: I do not agree. I believe that school redesign means that you’re redesigning everything about the school, so the curriculum is a component that also should be changed because you have such a diverse group of kids. I don’t think there will be any changes to curriculum in the near future due to State testing.

The teachers in this program stated, through interviews, that although for the most part their students behaved in class, they still had a serious problem with student apathy.

One teacher stated the in an informal interview:

Teacher: I think the students would get more motivated if we incorporated some activities and experiences that made the material more relevant to them...right now, they're not doing the work because they want to...they do the minimal amount they have to do to stay out of ISS.

The study showed that the teachers at East Circle would like to have more project-based activities and field experiences for their students to show them the relevance of the instructional material while the teachers at South Square wanted to have more support from their administration in the areas of project funding, student discipline, and overall structure of the program.

In the area of professional development, the data show that during the initial phases of each program the teachers received adequate training. The documents collected also revealed that one of the SBL school's provided a 4-day professional development training for its teachers.

However, as the programs developed, the teachers received little to no professional development to address issues such as dealing with the at-risk student or providing differentiated learning strategies to meet the needs of at-risk students. One principal stated, "I can't find at-risk professional development for my teachers."

There were little data to support the level of accountability to which the teachers and the program were held. The teachers did, however, stress their concerns about whether their students would perform well on the state-mandated tests.

An area in which some of the teachers stressed that they would like to see more support was in providing a follow-up at-risk program for the students at the high school. Many of the teachers were not satisfied with the fact that once the students left their

program at the middle school level, they were basically put right back into the same general school system with which they initially struggled once they got to the high school.

From the students' perspective, the research found that the students felt that they were being supported by the teachers in the program—specifically in the area of building relationships with the students. One student said, “Everybody on our team gets along pretty good.”

Student Benefits

In the area of motivation, both programs experienced some level of success with this category. In both programs, the teachers experienced some level of difficulty with the students in certain areas. The teachers in the South Square program experienced difficulty concerning student discipline. In the early part of the school year, the students in the South Square program were often disruptive and, as a result, tended to complete little to no school work. As the year progressed, however, the students became more involved in the class and started getting more excited about school. As a result, the students in the South Square program benefited from the project-based style of learning, and they seemed to acquire a new-found interest in their education.

In the East Circle program, the teachers did not have many problems with discipline in their classrooms, but they did experience challenges with student apathy. In the beginning of the school year, many of the students were apathetic when it came to doing their work. As one teacher stated, they would just do the minimum amount of work that was required to keep them from getting suspended. Again, as with the South Square

project, many of the students began to work harder in class as the year progressed. As the teachers developed relationships with the students, the students started to want to please the teachers, especially the students in the low-performing group. Still, the teachers stated that they experienced problems with the students in the high-performing group when it came to student apathy. The teachers stated that they felt that these students never performed to the best of their ability.

In the area of student outcomes, the data show that student outcome gradually improves after being in either program. Documents collected from the East Circle program showed that, after effectively implementing academic interventions with the students, reading performance increased by 62% over the course of the school year. Through informal observations, it was shown that by the end of the school year, 75–80% of the South Square students were working and actively on task. The teachers in both programs shared through formal and informal conversations that, by the end of the school year, they were satisfied with the work ethics of the majority of their students.

This study showed that the school redesign programs' effect on the students in regard to academic performance had a lot to do with the initial academic level at which the student was performing when the student first entered the program. For example, the redesign program at East Circle Junior High School separated the students into three groups (high, middle, and low performing) according to their performance on the MCT2. If a student scored high basic to Advanced on the MCT2, he or she was placed in the high group. Students who scored high minimal to basic were placed in the second group, and students who scored minimal were placed in the low group. Although all the students in the program had failed the previous year, the students in the high-performing group had

significantly higher grades than the other groups. The middle group had the second-highest grades, and the low-performing group had the lowest grades. However, growth based on the student assessment programs that were used by the school showed that the low-performing students showed significantly more growth than the middle or high groups. However, the English teacher stated that for far too many of the low-performing students, the growth was not enough to make a difference in their academic standing. She said, "I find myself working more with the middle and high groups because the minimal students are so low, that even though they improve their scores...they're just too low to get them from minimal to basic."

Based on the statement from the teacher, in the world of standardized testing, growth does not count for much if the students' academic performance does not rise above the minimal level.

Because of this dilemma, I observed that many of the students in the low group became frustrated because, even though they did show growth, it was not enough to get them a higher score on the standardized tests. This type of frustration seemed to perpetuate their already existing apathy. As stated by Thompson (2008), low-performing students are the most likely to suffer from apathy. Thompson (2008) also stated that these students tend to have a higher percentage of apathetic parents. I also found evidence of this finding in one of his observations at South Square. When one of the teachers was trying to get one of the low-performing students (who also had behavioral problems) to do his work, the following conversation took place:

Teacher: Dan, you need to do your work...don't you want to learn the material so that you can pass to the next grade?

Student: It doesn't matter...they will just move me to the next grade like they did the last time.

Teacher: Why do you say they moved you? Why don't you believe you passed on your own?

Student: I know I didn't pass because I couldn't do the work...and I told them I couldn't do the work, and I also told them that the I wasn't ready to go to the eighth grade...but they put me in the eighth grade anyway, and they'll put me in the ninth grade too because they want to get rid of me [student and other classmates begin to laugh].

In relation to student outcomes in education, the study showed that, although the majority of the students who were placed in the program scored minimal on at least one portion of the MCT2, there was a large percentage of students who, even though they had failed the previous school year, had scored basic or higher on at least one portion of the state-mandated examination. The study also showed that the majority of the students showed growth on all forms of student assessment instruments. Although the majority of the students showed growth, it may not have translated into academic success as far as the state requirements are concerned. For example, at East Circle there were several students who scored minimal on the Reading exam on the 2008–2009 MCT2 tests. Once these students were placed in the program, their reading levels were immediately measured by student assessment software programs such as the Accelerated Reading Growth Report program used by the school. Many of these low-performing students registered at a second- or third-grade reading level upon entering the program in August 2009 and usually ended the school year reading at a fifth- or sixth-grade reading level.

Although most educators would probably consider this significant growth, an eighth-grader who goes from reading at a second-grade level to reading at a fifth-grade level will still score minimal on the MCT2 examination. Thus, the student, the teacher, and the at-risk program would be considered a failure if based solely upon the results of the state tests scores.

Even though many of the students did not overcome the obstacle of being labeled a minimal student, this case study does show evidence that effective redesign programs and effective teachers can have a positive impact on improving the at-risk student's performance in a middle school setting. However, as Gray (1998) so eloquently stated, although effective programs and teachers can play a role in the academic improvement of struggling students on a temporary scale, permanent, significant academic growth will not take place unless these programs and teachers are "nested within broader school environments that explicitly encourage all students to tackle challenging subject matter and consistently employ instructional strategies that make complex material accessible to diverse learners" (p.10).

On the other side of the spectrum, the study showed that the at-risk students in the high-performing group seemed to flourish in the program. As observed at the East Circle program, many of the at-risk students in the high group began to receive rewards and recognition for making the honor roll and achieving high scores on common assessment exams. These students did not merely achieve the high score for the at-risk program, but many of the high-performing at-risk students were getting high scores compared to regular students in the traditional classes. In I's observations, evidence arose that showed that factors outside of the programs may have had an impact on the at-risk students.

According to Druian and Butler (1987), in addition to effective school redesign programs, other factors that play a key role in improving the academic performance of the at-risk student are as follows: (a) leadership – the role of the building principal is vital to any redesign program or school environment; (b) climate – all students and staff within the school building must share high expectations for student learning; and (c) classroom instruction and management – the classroom must be highly structured, and discipline must be a priority.

Concerning the SBL program, my interviews showed that the design team—a team comprised of the superintendent, principal, and teachers of the South Square team as well as a partnering professor from the local university—felt that there was a need to revise the balance between project-based learning and problem-based learning. This was evidenced in one interview with the university professor:

Professor: We started the program out with 100% project-based instruction, but it didn't work with the at-risk students.

In another interview with the mathematics teacher at South Square, she once stated:

Teacher: I want to talk to Dr. C [the principal] about changing the curriculum from 50% instruction/50% project-based to about 70% instruction and 30% project-based learning.

Based on the evidence from these interviews, the data showed that if the leadership of the South Square program revised the instructional strategy of the program, the areas of school climate and student behavior would improve.

From the students' point of view, the study found that students, upon entering the program, did not see any benefits from being in the program. However, after being in the program for a semester or more, most of the students could see the benefits of the program, especially in regard to the academic growth that most of them were showing. One student stated, "My grades have gone up. I almost made the honor roll."

Program Challenges

Through formal and informal interviews of teachers, administrators, and directors of both redesign programs, it was found that funding of both programs proved to be a major issue. With the South Square program, funding of the program seemed to be promising at the beginning of the year. The administration had made promises of funds coming from grants and federal funding. However, as the year progressed, it seemed that the administration experienced difficulties in keeping promises of fully funding the program. Some project-based activities and field experiences were funded; however, many of the projects that had been planned went unfunded. The East Circle program experienced just as much difficulty, if not more. Initially, the program was going very well. The administration had increased the staff from one certified teacher to three full-time certified teachers and one part-time certified science teacher. This also helped to decrease the class sizes to less than 13 students per class. Because of state budget cuts, though, the program is in dire straits. The administration says that teacher cuts to the program are imminent, and the administration predicts that the class sizes will increase from less than 13 students per class to as many as 25 students per class. According to Sizer (2004), increasing the class sizes to this number for at-risk students will not equate

to success for the at-risk student. With these types of cuts coming for the East Circle program, staff members do not anticipate receiving any additional funding for project-based activities or field experiences.

In the area of administrative support, teachers in both programs felt that more could be done to provide follow-up interventions for the at-risk students. The staff for both programs stated that all the effort was being applied to the middle school level as far as addressing the needs of rural at-risk students but that little effort was being made by the administration in regard to providing additional support to the at-risk students once they make it to high school.

In the area of instruction, both staffs felt that improvements could be made. The South Square staff felt that the instructional strategy should be revised from providing 70% project-based activities and 30% instruction to providing 70% instruction to 30% project-based activities. The staff at South Square felt that the students needed more remediation and, thus, more instructional time in the classroom. The staff at East Circle felt that the program should move away from providing 100% instruction and practically no project-based activities to a more balanced instructional strategy of 50% instruction and 50% project-based activities. The staff of East Circle felt that providing more project-based activities would make the subject area content more relevant to the at-risk student.

In the area of funding, both programs received initial funding and support to get the programs going. Continued funding of the programs, however, proved to be an issue as supported by a statement made by one of the principals after an interview was conducted, "Funding our program has become a major issue."

In addition to getting necessary funds to finance such activities as field experiences, purchasing or acquiring adequate equipment for the programs also proved to be a challenge as evidenced in the observations conducted that showed that, with the South Square project, it was the intent of the administrators to furnish/finance project-based activities such as the “Foy Challenge” toy design competition (documents collected), a cell phone design project, and a robotics project. Nevertheless, due to recent budget cuts at the district and state levels, many of the projects were put on temporary hold.

Maintaining small class sizes also proved to be a challenge for the East Circle project. The initial intent of the program was to limit class sizes to 10–15 students per class. However, due to the recent budget cuts suffered by most school districts in the state of Mississippi (as well as with the rest of the country), central office administrators began putting pressure on the building principal to increase the number of students per class. This is shown from the following interview excerpt:

Principal: With the budget/teacher cuts that have been coming down from the State, I am getting pressure to increase class sizes to as much as 30 students per teacher. This would be very damaging for my teachers and students who are a part of the transition program. One of the main themes behind the transition program was to provide the at-risk student with a better student/teacher class ratio.

The study showed strong administrative support in relation to dealing with program challenges for providing support for student assessments as shown through the observations that teachers and students had access to software programs such as SRI and Accelerated Reader (literacy programs). Students and teachers also had access to the

library, to computer labs, and to Mississippi State University staff and resources. Still, administrators received negative feedback from the teachers about providing follow-up services to the at-risk students in the program. In one interview a teacher said, “My dissatisfaction is after they leave [at-risk students], there is no follow-up. There is no program at the high school to track them and motivate them.

The lack of follow-up support for the at-risk students was also validated through documents collected by the East Circle teachers. These teachers went to the high school to do a check-up on 29 former students who were in their program over the last 3 years. That check-up showed that only 7 out of 29 at-risk students were being academically successful at the high school: two ninth-graders, four 10th-graders, and one 11th-grader. The other 22 students were experiencing challenges such as multiple course failings, alternative school placement, and even expulsions or dropping out of school.

In the area of instruction, research showed that both programs face challenges in the area of instruction when it comes to finding a respectable balance in implementing project-based learning and curriculum that places its focus on accountability standards in regard to high-stakes testing. Documents collected during this research show evidence of this as one of the East Circle teachers made the following statement to her principal during an informal interview, “I know that we have been focusing a lot on academics, but can we still incorporate the other things [field experiences, mentors, etc]?” This statement describes her concern that the program was placing too much emphasis on academics and not enough emphasis on project- and child-centered learning:

From the student perspective, the programs still face many challenges, especially in regard to achieving the schools’ goals of becoming project-based programs. The

students felt that the schools and their teachers did not keep their promises concerning all the field experiences to which they were told they would be exposed. One student said, –They said we would be doing a lot of field trips, but they lied.”

Similarities and Differences Between the Two Redesign Programs

In regard to the similarities and differences between the child-centered SBL program of South Square and the essentialist-based redesign program at East Circle, the study showed that there were similarities between the two programs, such as student absenteeism from the program due to behavioral problems. This was because many of the students were placed on suspensions. The SBL school seemed to have more of a problem with this because the students attend other classes and tend to get into trouble in those classes. The East Circle program also experiences this problem, but because these students spend 80% of their time with the redesign teachers in the program, most of the student referrals come from these teachers. As a result, the referrals tend to be fewer in number. The students in the SBL school seem to be more excited about school due to the project-based activities. In my observations, he had found that the disciplinary problems in the SBL school decreased significantly when students were doing project- or group-based activities. In addition, my observations of the design team meetings for South Square showed that the SBL program offered many more alternate learning activities for the students than the East Circle program. For instance, the SBL program had received funding to purchase design station equipment for the students. In one of the classroom observations, I observed the students participating in a group project preparing to enter a national toy design competition for fifth- through eighth-graders. In this competition, the

students would be able to utilize aspects of engineering to design and develop their toy for the competition. The SBL program also received funding to purchase Algebra I software to install on the design station machines that are scheduled to go into the classrooms. The majority of this equipment had not arrived as of December 2009.

The SBL program also had many more ideas for field experiences than the East Circle program. Other collected data also show that the program at South Square aspires to pattern itself after the Coalition of Essential Schools, which was created bySizer (2004). I collected the following instructions from a portion of a memo that was sent to the design team from the university professor, (K. Brocato, personal communication, September 15, 2009):

- 4) Make a proposal to the school about which CES School our group would most like to emulate.

Here is the website for the Coalition of Essential Schools. The Coalition is made of schools that are all unique but which were born and exist because design thinkers are the leaders who engage in propose-critique-iterate process.

http://www.ceschangelab.org/cs/clpub/print/cl_docs/10 . Please do make yourself an account. It is Free!

The East Circle program was more traditional, and it focused more on teacher-led instructional activities. Through my observations, it seemed that this program was more focused on the academic basics and standardized testing accountability standards. This program seemed to have fewer behavioral problems, but based upon interviews and observations, this program also struggled with motivating the students to perform at their

best. The students in the East Circle program also seemed to be less excited about their program than the students from South Square.

The study also showed, through collection of numerical data, that the overall academic performances of the two schools were significantly different. Although both schools were poverty-stricken schools with similar demographics, East Circle was labeled a successful school, and South Square was labeled a school at risk of failing. These labels were based on the schools' performances on the 2008–2009 MCT2 examinations (Mississippi Department of Education, 2008). Drilling beneath the surface of student apathy and low academic performance may reveal an at-risk student that attends an at-risk school (Thompson, 2008). There was an abundance of research that showed that the single-most important factor in student achievement is teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, 2007). The influence that teachers have on student achievement can be identified by three categories: (a) teacher experience, (b) students' test scores for each teacher, and (c) teachers licensure (Kral, 2008). The quality of the overall school, or school redesign program, can also prove to have a significant and profound effect on the student, especially the at-risk student.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a summary of the study and to present conclusions from the data provided by the two Mississippi School Redesign programs for at-risk middle school students. This chapter also addresses recommendations for future research for improving the social, emotional, and motivational outcomes for the at-risk middle school student.

Summary

As the United States moves into the 21st century, it is imperative that U.S. citizens continue to improve in the area of academic achievement among U.S. students in order to maintain global competitiveness, specifically with regard to the at-risk middle school student. This statement validates the purpose of this study, which was to address the emergence of school redesign programs in public education as it relates to addressing the needs of at-risk middle school students.

The review of literature showed that there is a substantial need for redesign programs in U.S. secondary schools to address the middle and high school dropout rate. According to Guarino (2007), the numbers are clear when it comes to the detriments of not finishing a K–12 education. According to Child Trends DataBank (2005), dropouts

will earn nearly \$300,000 less than high school graduates and nearly \$1 million less than college graduates. From 1971 to 2002, male dropouts have seen their earnings drop by more than 35%. Another recent, and alarming, statistic is that for the 2005–2006 school year, more seniors than students in any other grade dropped out of school. In fact, of all dropouts, 24.9% were ninth-graders, 25.3% were 10th-graders, 23.8% were 11th-graders, and 26.1% were seniors.

Even with these disturbing statistics, there are positive data to suggest that steps are being taken to decrease the high school dropout rate. The U.S. Department of Education launched the “Think Again” campaign in 2007 aimed at decreasing the dropout rate. Many states, Mississippi included, have followed suit. As a result, the national dropout rate for 2007–2008 was 3.3%, a drop from 3.8% the previous year. One solid part of this dropout prevention program has been the advertisement. These hip, modern commercials that were designed to target teenagers are having a positive impact (Mississippi Department of Education, 2008). Another positive impact has been that some states have begun counting high school dropouts who pass the GED by October 1 of the following school year as non-dropouts. All of these innovative steps and programs can be included as part of the school redesign movement.

Discussion

How Do Redesign Programs Support Teachers?

This study found that teachers in the redesign program received support, in one form or another, in the following areas: (a) professional development, (b) administrative support, and (c) accountability.

In the area of providing teacher support for professional development, the findings from this case study are consistent with the findings conducted by Rothstein (2008) who found that teachers who taught at-risk students desperately needed professional development training when it came to instructing at-risk students because most educators had negative views toward at-risk students. In fact, this study found that most teachers perceived at-risk students as lazy and as discipline problems. Another study conducted by Rozycki (2004) stated that teachers needed professional training to provide differentiated instruction to the at-risk student because, according to this study, using different learning styles with the at-risk student greatly increases the student's chance of success in school. The findings also found that administrators found it difficult to provide extensive training to the teachers that would assist them in meeting the needs of the at-risk students. Both programs were able to begin initial training for their staff, but as the year progressed, it became more difficult to find enough training for the instructional staff. These findings are consistent with the findings from a study conducted by Emeagwali (2008), which addresses the inadequate amount of training available for teachers of at-risk students and the need for educators to find a way to reach the at-risk student if public education is to continue to strive.

In the area of administrative support, the study found that, in both programs, the administrators tried to be as supportive of the teachers as possible. Although both programs received support, that support came from two different educational perspectives. One program (South Square) followed the project-based learning method, and East Circle followed the philosophy of essentialism. There are relevant studies that support both philosophies. Similar to South Square's philosophy, Meier (2009) showed

that project-based learning has a positive effect on the at-risk student. This was also true with the East Circle program, in which the philosophies are closely tied to the research of Bagely (1917), who was a pioneer in essentialism.

This case study also showed that the teachers in both programs received support in the area of school accountability. This includes such in-school factors as (a) providing differentiated instruction to the at-risk student, (b) implementing effective classroom management strategies, and (c) developing and fostering positive relationships with the at-risk student. These findings are consistent with the findings of Payne (2008), which state that, in order for schools to be effective with at-risk students, they must only make themselves accountable, or responsible, for in-school factors instead of trying to correct issues or factors that occur with the at-risk student outside of school. For example, based upon these findings, schools should not focus on homework for the at-risk student because the at-risk student may be in an environment at home that is not conducive to doing school work at home. Therefore, educators of at-risk students need to focus on working with the students while they have them at school. Both programs in this study seemed to support the teachers in this aspect.

The unique contribution of this case study is that it found that there was sufficient research to support the imperative to address the needs of at-risk students and the need to train teachers of at-risk students. This study also found that there was a substantial gap in the research that proves if there is any current educational organization that is creating professional development training specifically for the teachers of rural, middle school at-risk students.

***How Does the School Redesign Program Benefit Rural,
Middle School At-Risk Students?***

In this study, the findings showed that the students in both programs benefit from being in both redesign programs. The findings show that the students benefit in the following areas: (a) motivation, (b) student outcomes, and (c) academic performance. The study showed that these programs specifically benefit the rural at-risk student. These findings were consistent with several researchers' findings, such as Provasnik (2009), who stated that rural at-risk students receive far less attention from the federal government than their urban counterparts. This translates into funding, where urban at-risk students receive as much as three times as much federal funding than rural at-risk students. Jackson (2000) stated that urban at-risk students receive much more attention from politicians and therefore receive more funding from Title I sources. This allows urban programs to maintain small class sizes; create project-based activities for the at-risk student; and recruit, train, and retain highly qualified teachers for their programs. Rural schools, on the other hand, struggle to maintain this level of efficiency due to the insufficient funding they receive from the government. Although rural students comprise as much as one-third the number of at-risk students in this country, rural schools receive less than a quarter of the funding (Johnson & Strange, 2007).

Even with the struggles of inadequate funding, these two Mississippi redesign programs continue to strive to provide their at-risk students with small class sizes, highly qualified teachers, and project-based activities that make education relevant to the at-risk student. Researchers, such as Thompson (2008), state that the federal government does not do an adequate job of identifying and addressing the needs of at-risk students,

specifically at-risk students in rural school districts. Not only does the rural at-risk student have to settle for poverty-stricken schools, but also the rural at-risk student faces extreme personal poverty at home. Although rural child poverty rates have recently declined, they remain significantly higher (21%) than poverty rates for urban children (18%), and minority children in rural America are greatly overrepresented in the count of poor children in relation to their proportion of the population (Rogers, 2006).

As a result of the work of these two redesign programs in these rural districts, the students in these programs, over time, show significant improvement in their attitudes toward education. As a result, the teachers eventually have seen improvement in the students' work ethics in the classroom. Researchers such as Johnson and Strange (2007) also state that even though rural students are at a disadvantage to urban students, there is one advantage that rural students do have. Because rural school districts tend to be very small, the students get to develop more of a relationship with their teachers. This is consistent with the findings from this case study that show, in both programs, how the students slowly begin to develop strong relationships with their teachers, which, in effect, positively impact their views on education and school. The study showed that this is a definite benefit that is almost exclusively a benefit of being a rural at-risk student. The study also showed that both redesign programs are a definite benefit to the overall well-being of the at-risk student over time. This is consistent with a study conducted by Reig (2007), which stated that at-risk students have very negative views toward education and begin to mentally drop out in the middle school years. This study also stated that student apathy is a major issue for most at-risk students. This case study showed that, at the beginning of the year, most of the students in both programs displayed these types of

negative attitudes. However, as the year progressed, the vast majority of the students in both programs showed a significant improvement in attitude, motivation, and work ethic.

The study also showed that the at-risk students in these programs benefited in the area of academic performance. The students in both programs benefit from receiving one-on-one instruction and differentiated instruction. Findings from interviews with the teachers show that many of the students improved by one or more grade levels in the areas of mathematics and reading. These findings are consistent with the research of Darling-Hammond (2007), which stated that quality of instruction is, by far, the most important factor in student achievement for both the at-risk student and the traditional student.

The findings from this study showed that these types of redesign programs are greatly needed for the rural at-risk student in the state of Mississippi. One study collaborates with these findings. Johnson and Strange (2007) stated that one third of the nation's high schools are rural and that number is on the rise. In fact, the study stated that this growth in enrollment brings new challenges such as growing population diversity in the form of English language learners and additional costs for bilingual teachers, new curricula, and other services. Provasnik (2009) stated that rural schools are facing daunting challenges because these schools receive disproportionately lower amounts of federal funds than their urban counterparts. Furthermore, rural school districts have a harder time finding and hiring highly qualified, certified teachers who want to work in small, rural communities. This makes it extremely difficult for rural schools to ensure that all their students graduate from high school prepared for college, work, and life.

The unique contribution of this study is that, although many studies discuss the needs of rural students and school districts, there is not enough related research that discusses the specific creation of redesign programs within a school to address the needs of rural, middle school at-risk students.

***What Challenges, at the School Level, Do Teachers Face
in Regard to Redesign Programs?***

Through several observations and interviews, it was revealed that the teachers felt like they were presented with numerous challenges concerning the school redesign programs. In this study, the findings showed that the teachers faced challenges with the program in the following areas: (a) funding, (b) class size, (c) administrative support, and (d) instruction.

Acquiring adequate funding for both redesign programs was by far the biggest challenge. Although both programs are in poverty-stricken school districts and both programs are in Title I school districts, they both struggled to maintain the amount of funding needed to keep both programs running efficiently. As stated by Provasnik (2009), rural at-risk students receive the least amount of support from the federal government even though reports show that it is the rural at-risk student that needs the most support. The challenge of maintaining small class sizes falls right in line with both programs' inability to maintain funding. Without the necessary resources, it will be impossible for either program to maintain its current average student–teacher ratio of 15:1.

Funding becomes even more of a challenge for these two programs when considering that they both have a high minority representation percentage in the state of

Mississippi. Minority students make up 25% or more of the student population in 11 states (Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia). These states serve 80% of all rural minority students in the nation (Johnson & Strange, 2007). These challenges will persist for the redesign programs if they plan to continue addressing the needs of rural at-risk students because, according to Provasnik (2009), the overall public school enrollment has increased by 1% while enrollment in rural schools has increased by 15%.

The study also found that the programs experienced challenges in the areas of receiving administrative and instructional support. One major issue that teachers from both programs relayed was that they felt their administrations did not do a good enough job in providing follow-up services to the at-risk students once they left the middle school. These findings are consistent with the findings of Horwitz and Snipes (2008), which stated that, although at-risk students usually begin in middle school, the worst grade for at-risk students is the ninth grade and, for this reason, follow-up programs for at-risk students are greatly needed for high school freshmen. Another area of concern for the South Square program was that the teachers felt that they did not receive enough support from the administration when it came to disciplining the students. The concerns of the South Square staff are similar to the results of a study conducted by Berkins and Kritsonis (2007), which states that student behavior is one of the major reasons that at-risk students drop out of school.

In the area of instruction, the study found that both programs' teachers struggled with finding the right instructional balance that they felt would better meet the needs of their at-risk students. By the end of the year, the teachers in both programs wanted to

move to more of a balanced instructional program in which they would deliver 50% project-based learning and 50% instruction. These findings are consistent with findings of Friere (2006), who stated that cooperative learning (or problem-based learning) was the most effective strategy in reaching at-risk students. Other researchers such as Gardner (1993) and Rozycki (2004) felt that teachers' using different learning styles with at-risk students would greatly increase the students' chances for success in school.

Conclusions

Research Question 1: How Do Redesign Programs Support Teachers?

In regard to how redesign programs support teachers and what they mean to students, the study showed some interesting issues. These issues seemed to focus on three main areas: (a) administrative support, (b) professional development, and (c) accountability.

In the area of administrative support, this study, through the data collection process, showed that teachers in the SBL program at South Square seemed to be more tense and frustrated about the child-centered learning strategy. I found that the staff at South Square wanted to get more administrative support in the area of student discipline. A study by Berkins and Kritsonis (2007), which stated that student behavior is a leading cause of dropping out of school for at-risk students, supports this finding. This study also showed that the teachers at East Circle would like to have more project-based activities and field experiences for their students to show them the relevancy of the instructional material while the teachers at South Square want to have more support from their administration in the areas of project funding, student discipline, and overall structure of

the program. This finding is supported by Rozycki (2004), who found that using different learning styles increases the at-risk student's chance of success.

In the area of professional development, the data show that during the initial phases of each program the teachers received adequate training. However, as the programs developed, the teachers received little to no follow-up professional development to address specific issues such as dealing with the at-risk student or providing differentiated learning strategies to meet the needs of at-risk students. A study by Payne (2008), which stated that educators usually fail to identify and address the needs of at-risk students, supports this claim.

In the area of accountability, the teachers seemed to encounter tremendous pressure to make sure their students performed well on the standardized tests. Although the majority of the students showed growth on these examinations, many of the students' growth was not sufficient enough to move many of the very low minimal students from minimal to basic. This was supported by the research of Stover (2000), who stated that scientifically based student assessment is the most efficient way of measuring academic growth among learners.

Through observations, this study revealed that the students' perceptions of the program were positive. Through teacher inquiries, the students were asked (after being in the program for at least a semester) if they would like to be removed from the program. The vast majority of the students stated that they would like to remain in the program, and they also stressed concerns about whether they would have access to a similar program once they were promoted to high school. The students have a legitimate concern; some of the teachers stressed that they would like to see more support in the

area of providing a follow-up at-risk program for the students at the high school. Many of the teachers were not satisfied with the fact that, once the students left their program at the middle school level, they were basically put right back into the same general school system with which they initially struggled once they got to the high school. The concerns of the teachers are verified by the findings of Horwitz and Snipes (2008), who stated that follow-up programs are needed in the ninth grade for at-risk students.

Research Question 2: How Does the School Redesign Program Benefit Middle School At-Risk Students?

The results of this case study show that students in both redesign programs benefited from these programs in the following areas: (a) academic growth, (b) student outcomes involving school work, and (c) emotional and social growth. In the area of academic growth, students in both programs showed growth in a number of areas. The students in the South Square program showed significant growth in the areas of mathematics, and the students in the East Circle program showed academic growth in the areas of reading and mathematics. Although the students in both programs showed academic growth in these subject areas, the problem that was observed in both programs was that, while the students did show significant growth on student assessment tools, the growth for most of the students was not enough to remove them from being labeled as minimal or basic students in regard to the MCT2.

In the area of student outcomes, the students in both programs showed some improvement in the level of effort that they put into their course work. This improvement was especially noticeable when comparing the work ethic of the students when they first

entered the programs to their work ethics at the end of the school year. This finding was consistent with the study conducted by Reig (2007), who stated that most at-risk students have negative views toward education and, as a result, show signs of student apathy. However, as shown through interviews and observations, many of the teachers did not appreciate this improvement and would have liked to have seen even more improvement from their students. In fact, many of the teachers still viewed student apathy as a major problem for their students and the program.

Through observations and teacher interviews, the data showed that the students greatly benefited from both programs in the areas of emotional and social growth. Through such programs as mentoring, motivational speakers, and field experiences, the students developed a sense of belonging within each respective program and deep, meaningful relationships began to develop between the students and the teachers. The evidence of these benefits could be seen through the increased work ethics of the students as well as the increase in their attendance rates. Because of the high level of performance of these two schools to address the needs of their at-risk students, both programs saw significant improvement among their students. This finding was consistent with a study conducted by Rothstein (2008), who found that at-risk students in high-performing schools performed much better than at-risk students in mediocre schools.

Research Question 3: What Challenges, at the School Level, Do Teachers Face in Regard to Redesign Programs?

In regard to program challenges, this study showed four areas of concern: (a) funding, (b) class size, (c) administrative support, and (d) instruction. As previously

mentioned, lack of funding has hurt both programs, specifically in regard to providing project-based activities as well as vital field experiences for the at-risk youth.

Budget cuts have also had an indirect effect on the class sizes for these programs, especially for the East Circle program. As mandatory budget cuts trickle down, more school districts are forced to accommodate these cuts through teacher layoffs. As teachers are being cut from the payroll, classroom sizes substantially increase for the remaining teachers. This has proven to be a prominent challenge for the East Circle program, which saw its class sizes go from 10 per class to more than 20 per class over a 3-year period. This finding was consistent with a study done by Johnson and Strange (2007), which stated that school districts with rural at-risk students tend to receive the least amount of support and funding from the federal government.

Another challenge for these programs comes in the area of administrative support. The teachers in both programs, as discovered through interviews and observations, feel that their respective administrators do support them. However, these teachers also stressed severe concerns that the administration was not doing enough to provide follow-up programs for the at-risk students once they left their programs and moved on to the high school.

In the area of instruction, research showed that both programs face challenges when it comes to finding a respectable balance in the area of implementing project-based learning and curriculum that places its focus on accountability standards in regard to high-stakes testing.

Limitations

Before considering the recommendations for this study, the limitations of the study must be considered. These limitations include the following: (a) All students in this study came from the state of Mississippi; therefore, the findings may show some signs of bias because no at-risk students from other areas of the nation were included in this study; (b) The study only observed at-risk students in the redesign programs; there may have been at-risk students within each school that were in a traditional class setting who were not observed; (c) The data collected for this study were limited to the 2008–2009 and 2009–2010 school years, which may impact the results of the study when taking into consideration that at-risk students were identified in this county over 40 years ago (Silberman, 1971); (d) Both programs observed in this study are located in Title I schools; these are schools with low socioeconomic backgrounds; and (e) No data were collected from non-Title I schools for this study.

Recommendations

This study focused on the impact that school redesign programs have on the at-risk middle school student. The results of this study prompt the discussion of the following possible topics for further research:

1. This study could be replicated to include a follow-up study to determine how at-risk students fare once they make it to the high school level.
2. A study could be conducted to determine if there is adequate professional development to prepare educators for addressing the needs of at-risk students.

3. A study could be replicated to compare and contrast at-risk students who participate in a school redesign program versus the at-risk student who remains in the traditional class setting.
4. This study could be replicated to determine how at-risk students who attend low-performing schools compare with at-risk students who attend high-performing schools.

Implications

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact that school redesign programs have on the at-risk middle school student. The following implications for practice are offered based on the findings of this research:

1. Administrators and schools may benefit from providing their at-risk teachers more support in the area of classroom discipline.
2. At-risk students may benefit from the school redesign programs if administrators could provide the necessary funds to implement more project-based activities and field experiences.
3. Teachers and students could benefit from the teaching experience if emphasis was switched from standardized test scores to student academic growth.
4. Teachers and at-risk students could benefit from administrators and educational trainers providing more specific needs-based professional development that focuses on the needs of the at-risk student.

5. School districts, schools, and at-risk students could benefit from districts' implementing school redesign programs that focus on the at-risk student from grades 6–12.
6. At-risk students, parents, and schools could benefit from states' looking at the academic labels that they put on students and schools and placing more emphasis on supporting academic growth as much as academic achievement.
7. At-risk students and their teachers could benefit from school districts if they were to make maintaining small teacher-student class ratios a priority.
8. Students, teachers, and administrators benefit from providing teachers and students feedback and support via quick and efficient student assessment systems.
9. At-risk students could benefit from teachers finding an efficient balance in their instructional strategies between project-based learning styles and essentialist learning strategies.
10. The quality and academic performance of the overall school can have a significant impact on the overall educational outcome of the at-risk student as well as the school redesign program.
11. Rural at-risk students at the secondary level benefit from redesign programs designed to meet their needs and, as a result, counteract the disadvantages that rural students have compared to their urban counterparts.

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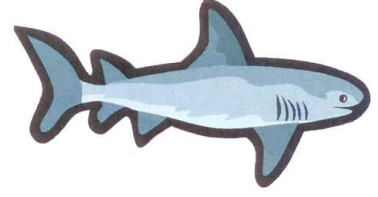
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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS AND EXAMPLES OF DOCUMENTS COLLECTED

SHARKS' MORNING MEETING



Goals:

- To build a respectful relationship between teacher and student, and amongst all students
- To give students a chance to responsibly use their voices when it's pertaining to their education.

Rules:

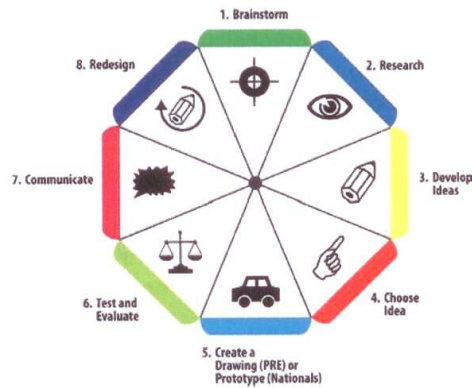
1. Exit the room quietly and orderly
2. Listen
3. Look at the person who's talking
4. Be respectful
Gentleman: Treat the ladies as if they are your sister.
Ladies: Don't be rude or loud; Act like a lady.
5. Sit wherever you'd like
6. Don't complain

Using your voice responsibly:

As our meeting progress, students will be given a chance to take part in discussions. This will be a chance to show your maturity when it comes to educational, political, and/or social issues. I encourage each student to refrain from being immature by laughing and playing. Each student should seriously think about the questions and/or statements being made, and carefully add an educated opinion that will add to the discussion.

**Any student who breaks any of the rules or who takes away from the respectful atmosphere that we are attempting to build will be removed from the morning meeting. This student will lose his/her privilege of participating in the morning meeting. He/She will be placed in a room to do writing assignments and will possibly be given a referral for insubordination.

The engineering design process is an interactive process ranging from researching and brainstorming, all the way through prototyping and refining. This is the actual process used by engineers in creating everything from an automobile to a zabra (a small Spanish sailing vessel).



ENGINEERING DESIGN PROCESS

Brainstorm

Get together for a brainstorming session to generate creative ideas. During this stage don't worry if their ideas are unrealistic. Encourage them to write down all ideas. They might also want to sketch several possibilities on paper, and include all ideas and sketches in their Logbook (don't forget to bring their Logbook to Nationals).

Research

Your team might have ideas about how to design and build your creation right off the top of your head, but in most cases they'll need more information and knowledge. Gather information online and from libraries, teachers, and people they think would play with their toy or game. Make sure teams research properly as to if their idea has already been created. Teams are also not allowed to create computer games as an entry.

Pick an idea

Eventually, they'll have to eliminate unrealistic ideas. They'll pare down their list to the most interesting possibilities that best meet the criteria that the judges will use to review their toy or game. Next, they should consider what might be limiting factors (e.g., money, time, skills, etc.) for each idea, further paring down their choices. After this, if they still have more than one good idea, they might debate further, or take a vote.

		Paid	Reduced	Free	Totals
	OKOLONA SEPARATE SCHOOL DIST	93 13%	58 8%	549 78%	700
1000	CHOCTAW CO SCHOOL DIST	505 31%	198 12%	908 56%	1,611
1100	CLAIBORNE CO SCHOOL DIST	0 0%	0 0%	1,762 100%	1,762
1211	ENTERPRISE SCHOOL DIST	404 46%	155 17%	316 36%	875
1212	QUITMAN SCHOOL DIST	463 22%	185 8%	1,441 68%	2,089
1300	CLAY CO SCHOOL DIST	5 3%	6 3%	144 92%	155
1320	WEST POINT SCHOOL DIST	548 16%	210 6%	2,645 77%	3,403
1400	COAHOMA COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT	0 0%	0 0%	1,629 100%	1,629
1402	COAHOMA CO AHS	17 6%	27 9%	232 84%	276
1420	CLARKSDALE MUNICIPAL SCHOOL DIST	166 4%	180 5%	3,150 90%	3,496
1500	COPIAH CO SCHOOL DIST	724 24%	255 8%	1,997 67%	2,976
1520	HAZLEHURST CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT	190 12%	97 6%	1,280 81%	1,567
1600	COVINGTON CO SCHOOLS	645 19%	336 10%	2,284 69%	3,265
1700	DESOTO CO SCHOOL DIST	17,629 56%	3,387 10%	10,030 32%	31,046
1800	FORREST COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT	677 27%	288 11%	1,460 60%	2,425
1802	FORREST COUNTY AG HIGH SCHOOL	241 42%	67 11%	264 46%	572
1820	HATTIESBURG PUBLIC SCHOOL DIST	569 12%	283 6%	3,689 81%	4,541
1821	PETAL SCHOOL DIST	1,913 47%	545 13%	1,567 38%	4,025
1900	FRANKLIN CO SCHOOL DIST	447 30%	151 10%	886 59%	1,484

80% proficient



Student List for Skills Review

STUDENTS	August																															SKILLS			
	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2	3										
Brownlee, Stacy						15											10/100																15	noun 4a1	
Carter, Ronald						10											100																10	pronoun 4a8	
Cooper, Jamal, James						15											10																10	adjective 4a	
Dexter, George						20											100																10	adverb 4a10	
Duncan, Robelia						10											100																	10	preposition 4a
Gandy, Danyez						30											10																	10	verb 4a2
Harrison, Shaquita						15											100																	10	conjunction 4a
Jefferson, Tyler						10											100																	10	interjection
Mann, Lacey						25											100																	10	Apostrophes 4
Nelson, Darius																	100																	10	* Quotation Mark
Orr, Carrie						35											100																	10	Commas

Notes

Linking/Temp verb

Parts of speech

basic question

Key

1 - w/ quotations

* w/ dialogue

quotation

1 - w/ quotations

* w/ dialogue

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

RQ#1 – How do redesign programs support teachers and what do the redesign programs mean to students?

1. Do all students in your program struggle academically?
2. What percentage of your students would you say struggle academically?
3. If you had to estimate the average reading grade level for your students, what would it be?
4. After a semester of being in the program, what percentage of your students showed sign of academic improvement?
5. Do your students show signs of improvement when it comes to their performance on standardized assessments?
6. How do you feel the program helps with the emotional state of the at-risk student?
7. What social aspects of the program do you feel may benefit the students, why?
8. How does the program contribute towards the students' attitudes toward education? Can you elaborate?
9. In what ways do you feel the program helps the students to be successful?
10. Describe the level of participation your students contribute to class activities? What do you feel, contributes to the differences in student output?
11. In what ways do your students show that they want to be successful?

RQ#2 – How does the school redesign program benefit middle school, at-risk students?

1. How much do you know about other types of at-risk programs?
2. Do you think it would benefit you to observe other types of programs?
3. What, in your opinion, is the strongest aspect of your program?
4. What is the weakest aspect of your program?
5. In your program, do you feel like you are apart of the school or a separate entity?
6. Describe, in your opinion, the educational philosophy of your program.
7. Describe three important aspects of your program, in your opinion.
8. In your program, do you feel like you are apart of the school or a separate entity? Explain.
9. Describe some important characteristics that you feel are lacking in your program.
10. Do you think it would benefit you to observe other redesign programs? Please elaborate on your response.

RQ#3 – What challenges, at the school level, do teachers face in regard to redesign programs?

1. Do you feel that your program is helping any of your students? Explain.
2. Do you ever get frustrated with the program? What are some issues (within the program) that cause you frustration?
3. Do the students ever give you the impression that they want to be successful in school?
4. Do the students ever give you the impression that they want to be successful outside of school?
5. After being in the program awhile, do you ever feel like some of your students begin to think positively about school?
6. Explain how you feel your program is helping, or not helping, your students.
7. What are some issues within the program that may cause you frustration? Explain why.
8. In what ways does the administration show support for the program?

What similarities and differences exist between the two school redesign programs?

1. Do all students in your program score low on standardized examinations?
2. Do you have students that do well in class, but perform poorly on standardized exams?
3. Do you have students who perform well on standardized exams, but are apathetic in the classroom?
4. Are your students showing any progress in regard to practice examinations?
5. How much emphasis does your program place on standardized testing?

APPENDIX C

RESEARCH AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (FOR STUDENTS)

Research and Interview Questions (For Students)

Research Question 1 – How do redesign programs support teachers?

Interview Questions

1. Have you had problems, academically, in school?
2. Based on a scale of poor, average, or good, how would you rate your reading ability upon entering the program?
3. After being in the program for a semester, do you feel you are improving in school?

Research Question #2 – How does the school redesign program benefit middle school at-risk students?

Interview Questions

1. What do you like most about being in the program?
2. How do you feel about your school?
3. How do you feel about school work?

Research Question #3 – What challenges do students face in regard to redesign programs?

Interview Questions

1. What do you dislike most about the program?
2. Is there anything you would like to see added to the program?

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW TOPICS: TEACHERS

Interview Topics: Teachers

Name _____ School _____ Date _____

Ethnicity _____ Gender _____ Age _____

Years in Education _____ Years in Teaching _____

Degree _____ Concentration _____ Certification _____

1. Discuss your interpretation of School Redesign.
2. Discuss your knowledge of the different components that make up School Redesign.
3. Discuss your thoughts on the correlation between drop-out prevention and School Redesign.
4. Describe the School Redesign program that has been implemented into your school.
5. Discuss the implementation process that your school used.
6. Describe how your schools' program addresses the needs of the at-risk student.
7. Give your interpretation of the effectiveness of the program.
8. Describe the type of training that you have received to teach students in this program.
9. Discuss how the program that you're in is different from the traditional school setting.
10. Describe your opinion of the curriculum you are teaching.
11. Discuss how the Redesign program relates to student academic achievement.
12. Discuss to what extent the role you played in the development of the Redesign program.
13. Describe your satisfaction and dissatisfaction with how the program is progressing.
14. Describe what you think will be the long-term results this program will have on students.

APPENDIX E
DATA ANALYSIS: INTERVIEWS

Data Analysis: Interviews

Research Questions (School Redesign as it Relates to the Middle School At-Risk Student)

1. How do redesign programs support teachers?
2. How does the school redesign program benefit middle school, at-risk students?
3. What challenges, at the school level, do teachers face in regard to redesign programs?

DIMENSIONS	DIMENSIONS	SUPPORTING DETAILS	RESEARCH NOTES
Teacher Support	Prof. Development	“I can’t find at-risk P.D for my teachers” – Administrator	There does not appear to be substantive professional development training on how to address the needs of at-risk students.
	Administrative Support	–When it comes to being recognized by the school, the administrators do a good job of recognizing our program as part of the school”.	
	Accountability	–Performing well on the MCT2 is really stressed at my school”.	
	Other Support	–I feel we get adequate support on our project-based activities”.	
Student Benefits	Motivation	“As the students stay with the program, their attitude towards education improves”.	Students have the desire to do well in school and they genuinely want to be successful.
	Student Outcomes	“I believe that my program is helping 75% of my students. I notice how my students’ expectation level for themselves increases dramatically by the end of the year”. – Teacher	
	Academic Performance	–About 90% of the students want to be successful in school. I can tell not only by impressions, but also because they tell me that they want to do well. At-risk students need more time on the basics of math”. – Teacher	
	Other Benefits	–. but the whole purpose of the program is to decline the number of drop-outs within the district.” – Teacher	
Program Challenges	Funding	–Funding the program has become a major issue” – Admin	Administrators state that funding their programs is a major problem. RQ#4 addressed in cross-case analysis
	Class Sizes	–Due to the budget cuts, I fear that our class sizes will be dramatically increasing for the next year”. – Teacher	
	Administrative Support	–My dissatisfaction is after they leave, there is no follow-up, there is no program at the H.S to track them and motivate them.”	
	Instruction	–This 9 weeks I have placed a huge emphasis on standardized testing. I even give levels based on their practice test grades on whether they would be advanced ,proficient, basic, or minimal so that they can work towards getting better” – Teacher	

APPENDIX F

DATA ANALYSIS: OBSERVATIONS

Data Analysis: Observations

Research Questions (School Redesign as it Relates to the Middle School At-Risk Student)

1. How do redesign programs support teachers?
2. How does the school redesign program benefit middle school, at-risk students?
3. What challenges, at the school level, do teachers face in regard to redesign programs?

DIMENSIONS	DIMENSIONS	SUPPORTING DETAILS	RESEARCH NOTES
Teacher Support	Prof. Development	College professor will spend 28 days in the school year working with the school's at-risk program.	In one of the programs, it appears that teachers need disciplinary support from the administration.
	Administrative Support	One school states that they will receive a grant to start a studio school program.	
	Accountability	//////////////////////////////////// ////////////////////////////////////	
	Other Support	Teachers have access to many software programs such as SRI and A.R	
Student Benefits	Motivation	Students occasionally discuss how they enjoy the field experiences	Teachers consistently discuss how the field experiences and project-based activities make the instructional material relevant to the students.
	Student Outcomes	75-80% of students in both programs observed to be working and on task.	
	Academic Performance	Student academic performance improves over the course of the year in both programs.	
	Other Benefits	Class observed preparing for a field experience. Teacher has class construct 5 questions for field experience. Students receive extensive one-on-one instruction.	
Program Challenges	Funding	Equipment sited in grant has not been purcha	Essentialist based program wants more emphasis on motivational strategies. The other program wants more emphasis on academics RQ#4 addressed in cross-case analysis
	Class Sizes	Average class sizes for both programs is between 10 -16 per class. Pressure from administration to increase class sizes.	
	Administrative Support	The programs observed do not get as much access to library, computer labs, and college faculty and resources as they would like.	
	Instruction	The teachers in one program feel that too much emphasis is placed on project-based learning and should concentrate more on the basic math skills. The teachers in the other program feel that too much emphasis is placed on academics.	

APPENDIX G
DATA ANALYSIS: DOCUMENTS

Data Analysis: Documents

Research Questions (School Redesign as it Relates to the Middle School At-Risk Student)

1. How do redesign programs support teachers?
2. How does the school redesign program benefit middle school, at-risk students?
3. What challenges, at the school level, do teachers face in regard to redesign programs?

DIMENSIONS	DIMENSIONS	SUPPORTING DETAILS	RESEARCH NOTES
Teacher Support	Prof. Development	Newsletter discussing 4-day professional development for studio school teachers.	Studio school program sends out periodic newsletter via local university discussing progress and activities of the program.
	Administrative Support	Documents collected show that student outcomes in reading increased by 62% after academic intervention was implemented by administrators.	
	Accountability	//////////////////////////////////// ////////////////////////////////////	
	Other Support	Teachers allowed to do some follow-up with at-risk students who made it to the high school (e-mails)	
Student Benefits	Motivation	Students attend morning meetings designed to motivate and build a more respectful environment for students (newsletter)	One program keeps detailed academic records concerning literacy via lexile and A.R scores as well as assessment scores.
	Student Outcomes	Documents collected showed that student outcomes in reading increased by 62% after academic intervention was implemented (A.R report)	
	Academic Performance	An at-risk student in one of the programs wins the schools' spelling bee contest. 1/14/10	
	Other Benefits	Students participate in "Toy Challenge" – a national toy design competition for 5 th – 8 th graders. (Handbook)	
Program Challenges	Funding	Administrators state that funding is a major problem.	Most districts promise funding for the programs, but the actual funds making it to the program are slow to materialize.
	Class Sizes	//////////////////////////////////// /////	
	Administrative Support	//////////////////////////////////// ///	
	Instruction	High School follow-up (by teachers) reveals that only 7/29 at-risk students are currently successful in high school	

APPENDIX H
DATA ANALYSIS: SUMMARY

Data Analysis: Summary

Research Questions (School Redesign as it Relates to the Middle School At-Risk Student)

1. How do redesign programs support teachers?
2. How does the school redesign program benefit middle school, at-risk students?
3. What challenges, at the school level, do teachers face in regard to redesign programs?

DIMENSIONS	DIMENSIONS	SUPPORTING DETAILS	RESEARCH NOTES
Teacher Support	Prof. Development	The programs appear to implement professional development for teachers early in the programs, but fail to give follow-up training. Especially in the area of managing at-risk students.	No follow-up prof. development. Administration is, overall, supportive of the programs. Standardized testing a priority.
	Administrative Support	Analysis showed that there is strong administrative support for the redesign programs.	
	Accountability	Some accountability in regard to high-stakes testing.	
	Other Support	Teachers receive support in areas of technology and some educational freedom.	
Student Benefits	Motivation	Relationship-building techniques seem to improve student motivation	Teacher/student relationships a definite benefit to the students. Reading levels and basic math skills improve for students.
	Student Outcomes	Data showed that student outcomes improve over time after being in the program.	
	Academic Performance	Students in program show progress, over time, in the area of academic performance.	
	Other Benefits	Students receive the benefits of field experiences, motivational speakers, and project-based activities	
Program Challenges	Funding	Consistent funding is a problem for both programs	Student apathy is a concern for both programs. Instructional balance is an issue for both programs.
	Class Sizes	Funding causes problems for maintaining small class sizes.	
	Administrative Support	Administrative not very supportive with follow-up programs.	
	Instruction	Both programs seek to find a better balance between project-based learning and basic core subject-area content.	