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INTERRELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN
DEMOGRAPHIC, PSYCHOSOCIAL, AND ACADEMIC CHARACTERISTICS
AND GED ATTAINMENT AMONG AT-RISK YOUTH

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Social Work

in

The School of Social Work

by

Judith L. Rhodes
B.A., Louisiana State University, 1985
August 2007

Dedicated to
those individuals
who courageously return to GED Testing Programs
to redirect their futures
by pursuing their GED credentials

and

In Loving Memory of
Gabrielle Marie “Gabby” Marcantel

1978 - 2007

My Friend and Sister in the Lord

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory-descriptive research examines demographic, psychosocial, and academic characteristics of at-risk youth ($N = 111$) who attempted the General Educational Development (GED) Tests. Among students who passed and did not pass the GED Tests, numerous significant relationships emerged. Non-passers were more likely than passers to leave school for academic environment reasons ($t = 2.21, df = 109, p < .05$). As compared with those who passed the GED Tests, a greater number of moderately strong interrelationships among demographic, psychosocial, and academic characteristics emerged among students who did not pass. Most notably, for non-passers, significantly strong and positive relationships emerged between academic environment reasons for leaving school and two other variables: family reasons for leaving school ($r = .55, p < .01$) and psychosocial reasons for leaving school ($r = .57, p < .05$). In addition, a very strong and negative interrelationship emerged among non-passers between academic environment reasons for leaving school and the poverty status variable ($r = -.68, p < .01$). A multivariate perspective is critical for increasing knowledge regarding the social problem of dropout. Such knowledge is crucial for research and policy formation at the local, state, and national levels as well as for school social work practice and education.

CHAPTER 1: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

School dropout is a complex, multifaceted social problem. Individuals who lack a high school credential are in a precarious situation. High school dropouts are overly represented among the low socioeconomic, minority, disadvantaged, underachieving, and incarcerated populations (Franklin, 1992; Franklin & Streeter, 1992; Fraser, 2004). Lack of a high school diploma limits earnings. A U.S. Census Report showed that the average annual earnings in 2004 for dropouts was \$19,182 with average earnings for high school graduates at \$28,631, and average earnings for college graduates at \$50,623 (U.S. Census). Dropouts are more dependent on public assistance and other social programs. Almost half of families receiving public assistance are headed by a school dropout (Franklin & Streeter; Richman, Bowen, & Woolley, 2004; Wayman, 2002). Dropout is associated with criminality. A Bureau of Justice report indicates that 68% of state prison inmates do not have a high school diploma and that 47% of drug offenders lack a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) credential (Harlow, 2003). School dropouts experience a myriad of multiple stressors; such as, delinquency, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, lower wages and higher unemployment (Franklin). A number of risk factors contribute to dropout. Dropouts often come from families that are uninterested or unsupportive of education (Franklin & Streeter, 1992). Dropout is associated with low academic skills, especially in mathematics and reading (Franklin & Streeter; Richman et al.).

Individuals who fail to complete high school are classified as “dropouts,” once they leave the traditional K-12 school system. This label has a stigma affecting the individual’s self-esteem, employability, and overall life trajectory. Dropouts face problems in their personal lives, in their families, in the school community, and in spheres of employment, demonstrating the diversity

and complexities created by this social problem. Societal consequences of school failure include lower family and individual incomes, loss of national income and tax revenue, and higher unemployment as well as increased crime, increased demand for social services, reduced political participation, and higher health care costs (Richman et al., 2004). Public health concerns are also increased, such as, higher risk of sexually transmitted diseases, and school-age pregnancy (Richman et al.).

For the 39 million individuals without a high school credential or 18% of the United States population aged 16 or older who are not enrolled in school, the GED Tests are a portal to better employment and training and further education (General Educational Development Testing Service [GEDTS], 2006; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2006). In 2004 in Louisiana, 786,880 individuals lacked a high school diploma or GED (GEDTS, 2006) or 25.2% of the population aged 25 or older (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2006a; U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Nationwide, Louisiana ranks third, behind Mississippi and Kentucky, in the number of high school dropouts (GEDTS).

Because “educational attainment is one of the most potent predictors of life-course trajectories in adulthood” (Brooks-Gunn, Guo, & Furstenberg, 1993, p. 272), dropouts are able to redirect their futures by earning a GED credential. In Louisiana, the GED credential is equivalent to a high school diploma. This evaluation is based on the value of the GED for further technical and vocational training as well as access to higher education (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2006b). Once an individual earns the GED credential, opportunities for advanced training as well as admission to postsecondary education is possible. In Louisiana, the GED credential is accepted by 97% of colleges for undergraduate admission, and 95% of employers view the credential in a positive light in hiring employees (LDOE, 2006b).

In order to shed light on the factors that contribute to this social problem, this exploratory-descriptive research examines demographic, psychosocial, and academic characteristics of at-risk youth enrolled in the Louisiana National Guard's Youth Challenge Program (LNGYPC), who take the GED Tests. Approximately 71% of those who attempt the GED Tests pass nationally, and 72.5% pass in Louisiana (GEDTS, 2006). However, the percentage of adults in Louisiana who present for GED Testing is dismal. In 2004, only 1.4% of the target population tested in Louisiana with 1.0% of the Louisiana target population passing. This is similar to the national statistics of 1.7% of the U.S. target population that tested with a 1.0% target passing rate (GEDTS).

Numbers of individuals without a high school credential increase every year. Nationally in 2000, about 5 out of every 100 youths who had enrolled in high school in the fall of 1999 had dropped out. This accounted for about half a million of the 10 million 16 to 24-year olds who had been enrolled in the fall of 1999. This yields a cumulative effect of hundreds of thousands of youth dropouts. In 2000, 3.8 million 16 to 24-year olds were dropouts, or 10.9% of the 34.6 million youth in this age group. During the last three decades, the national dropout rate has decreased 0.1 percentage points per year (Kaufman & Chapman, 2001). Thus, a major task is to reintegrate these youth into pathways that will enable them to gain the life and educational skills necessary to navigate through life.

In 1993, the U.S. Congress authorized a pilot program of the National Guard to develop a program for at-risk youth, specifically high school dropouts. The result is the Youth Challenge Program (YCP). The 2005 YCP Annual Reports states that YCP has graduated 59,700 youth from the program (National Guard Youth Challenge Program [NGYCP], 2005). YCP is a multi-phased intervention model for at-risk youth, comprised of a 22-week structured Residential

Phase followed by a formal 12-month Post-Residential Phase. Its primary goal is to improve education, life skills, and employment potential. GED Testing is an integral part of the academic component at YCP. The program includes military-based discipline and training, mentors, and experiential learning. Eight core components include assisting students to obtain a high school credential, developing team work capacities and leadership, promoting service learning, developing job and life coping skills, and improving physical fitness and healthy lifestyles (NGYCP, 2005).

At present, federal policies continue to impact schools and the dropout issue. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 quantifies school success by evaluating high stakes test scores and dropout rates in K-12 schools (U.S. Government Accounting Office [USGAO], 2005). Louisiana's newly released High School Redesign directives have a strong emphasis on the dropout problem (LDOE, 2006b). The millions of Americans who are classified as dropouts are gaining national and state attention. Social workers are in a unique position, with their understanding of person-in-environment perspective to study and intervene in this grave social problem. The mission of the social work profession is to enhance the well-being of people and to help them attain their basic needs. The mission chiefly focuses on helping the vulnerable, the oppressed, and the poor (National Association of Social Workers, 1997). High school dropouts are at risk for these disadvantaged conditions. Understanding the factors that surround individuals who leave school and later return to earn a high school credential advances the knowledge base of social work. Implications for prevention interventions are especially valuable for the school dropout population.

Reasons for leaving high school are vast, diverse, and complex. Factors that affect the individual to drop out of school are found within the multiple systems of the person. Rather than

conceptualize school dropout as an individual problem, it can be viewed as a phenomenon, a result of complex interactions between systems of the family and school environments with personal, psychosocial, and academic characteristics impinging on those systems (Dupper, 1993; Franklin, McNeil, & Wright, 1990; Fraser, 2004). This is compatible with social work's person-in-environment and ecological perspectives. Ecological systems theory serves as a lens through which to view school dropout. This study of the interrelationships of individuals and the various systems in which they live provides a theoretical basis to understand this complex phenomenon. Social work practice is dual; the focus incorporates the person and the situation, as well as the system and its environment (Andreae, 1996; Ashford, LeCroy, & Lorrie, 2006; Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Nash & Randolph, 2004). This research examines at-risk students in the context of family, social, and school environments to explore the factors that may impede or promote attainment of the GED credential. This knowledge impacts both practice- and policy-making areas. The examination of demographic, psychosocial, and academic characteristics of at-risk youth who have attempted the GED Tests can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of factors associated with school dropout.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This review of the literature highlights the history, purpose, and content of the GED Tests. Students who drop out of school and later return for a high school credential are reconceptualized as resilient students. Protective and risk factors in relation to school dropout are presented as part of a resilience framework. A student may return to GED preparation programs for high school certification but there are numerous barriers to GED participation. Demographic, psychosocial, and academic factors impact a student's ability to return to school and pursue a high school credential. The literature review concludes with economic implications of dropout and the importance of literacy issues to social work research, practice, and education.

Historical Context and Purpose of the GED Tests

The GED Tests were formulated after WWII in 1942 to enable veterans to earn a high school diploma so they could become eligible for G.I. Bill college benefits. Passing the test aimed to show that veterans were academically prepared to succeed in postsecondary education. In 1947, New York allowed dropouts to seek the GED credential, even if they were not veterans. During the late 1960s, a rapid growth in the number of people earning the credential increased due to the Great Society initiatives that funded GED preparation programs (Murnane & Tyler, 2000).

Enabling adults to demonstrate high school level knowledge and skills, more than 700,000 adults took at least a part of the tests in the United States, Canada and their territories in 2004. More than 400,000 (approximately 70%) passed. In Louisiana, 10,931 students completed the tests in 2004 with 7,836 (72.5%) passing and earning the credential (GEDTS, 2006). Since its inception, the GED Tests have evolved substantially. The GED Tests currently serve one

purpose, which is to certify academic knowledge and skills equivalent to those of a high school graduate (GEDTS, 2006).

The 2002 Series GED Tests represent current national high school curriculum standards with content relevant to the community and workplace. The series is the fourth edition in the 60-year history of the program (GEDTS, 2006). The tests are normalized on a nationally represented, stratified random sample of high school seniors and are designed so that 60 percent of graduating seniors pass the tests. The tests are demanding and rigorous: Nationally, four out of ten high school graduating seniors do not pass the GED Tests (GEDTS, 2005c).

In order to earn a GED, a candidate must pass a 265-item test divided into five subject areas: writing, social studies, science, reading, and mathematics. Communication, problem solving, information processing, and critical thinking skills are also measured. The tests require 7 hours and 30 minutes of testing, usually over two testing sessions (GEDTS, 2006). The Language Arts (LA), Writing Test is in two parts. Part I has 50 multiple-choice questions and Part II requires the candidate to write an essay on an assigned topic. The time allowed for the LA, Writing Test is two hours. The Social Studies Test is composed of 50 multiple-choice questions and 70 minutes are allotted for this test. The Science Test is composed of 50 multiple-choice questions with 80 minutes of testing time. The LA, Reading Test is composed of 65 multiple-choice questions and 65 minutes are allotted for testing. The Mathematics Test is in two parts. Part I is a multiple-choice test and the use of a calculator is allowed. Students are allowed 45 minutes to complete the 25 questions in Part I and another 45 minutes to complete the 25 questions in Part II. The use of a calculator is not allowed once students receive Part II. Mathematical formulas that may be needed are printed in the test booklet (GEDTS, 2005a).

Passing the GED Tests gives the student a nationally recognized high school credential issued by the state.

Dropouts as Resilient Students

While most research on high school dropouts explores reasons why these students failed by dropping out of school, Wayman (2002) focused on dropouts who returned for a GED credential. The researcher utilized an educational resilience framework to determine which dropouts would return for a high school equivalency degree. One of the chief concepts of this framework was to view students who return for high school credentials as resilient students. This shifts the negative stereotype of the high school dropout to one with successful attainment of an equivalency degree. Reframing dropouts as resilient students creates a new perspective in which to view and intervene with this at-risk population. Results of Wayman's study showed that standardized achievement test scores and age at dropout were predictive of the type of degree attained, either a high school diploma or GED. Wayman also found that students' perception of school success, peer educational support, self-identification as a student, and intent to graduate could be targeted within interventions to aid students' return to a high school credentialing program.

Similarly, a resilience framework, as presented by Kumpfer and Bluth (2004), attempts to identify the influences of three areas for resilience processes to work, including personal strengths, family dynamics, and community contexts. This framework organizes resilient characteristics into five major categories of strengths, which are the person's cognitive, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual dimensions. Other strengths promoting resilience have been cited as purpose in life and determination (Kumpfer & Bluth, 2004; Sandau-Beckler, Devall, & de la Rossa, 2002). According to this resilience framework, the cognitive category

supports development of self-esteem and provides information and academic skills. The emotional aspect reflects feelings and reinforces mood management. The social factor coaches, models, and reinforces interactions with others, while the physical category teaches and reinforces good health and healthy choices. A spiritual strength supports development of talents, uniqueness, goal-orientation, perseverance, internal locus of control, and purpose in life. These are all areas of potential change for individuals (Fraser, 2004). While some risk factors are essentially impossible to change; such as age, gender, race, or innate intelligence; other risk factors, although difficult, are potentially changeable and affected by intervention. Examples of these more malleable characteristics include poverty, single-parent status, low socioeconomic status, inferior schools, inadequate community resources, and low literacy and education (Kumpfer & Bluth, 2004).

More study is needed that examines the interrelationships of the multiple factors associated with dropout. Richman et al. (2004) examined such interrelationships in the African-American culture. Racial and ethnic minority groups and lower socioeconomic status were highly associated with dropping out of school (Richman et al.), but in African-American culture, the presence of a maternal grandmother ameliorated the negative effects of teen parenting. Further, spirituality, religious involvement, a supportive network, and attitudinal values that challenged negative views about African-Americans all provided protection against stress (Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004). Due to cultural differences in childrearing and coping defenses among cultures, African-American children may experience less stress in single parent homes than do children in white families. This demonstrates the different aspects of risk and protective factors between cultures (Fraser et al., 2004). Nevertheless, accumulation of stress in

the way of multiple risk factors increases the likelihood of negative outcomes at personal, social, and environmental levels (Fraser et al., 2004).

Educational Resilience

Resilience is a complex, multifaceted phenomena that enables individuals to succeed in life despite difficult life conditions. In resilience theory, individuals' lives are viewed as a compilation of risk and protective factors (Fraser & Galinsky, 2004; Kumpfer & Bluth, 2004; Nettles & Robinson, 1998). Risk factors for child development have been enumerated as poverty, low socioeconomic status, few opportunities for education and employment, racial discrimination and injustice, medical illness, family stress, parental depression, and inadequate social support (Fraser et al., 2004; Nettles & Robinson). Environmental hazards include family unemployment, high crime and violence in neighborhoods, frequent resident mobility, cultural conflict, separated, divorced or single parent families, and restricted access to resources. Other social and community factors that increase risk are dysfunctional lifestyles dependent on illicit economies, alcohol and substance abuse, and gangs (Fraser et al.). These factors heavily hinge on the primary risk factor of poverty and are often associated with school dropout (Sandau-Beckler et al., 2002).

Knowledge of protective factors is more limited than knowledge of risk factors (Fraser & Galinsky, 2004). Interestingly, the study of resilience has emerged as a consequence of studying risk factors (Fraser et al., 2004). “Resilience is defined as observing a normal or even exceptionally positive developmental outcome in spite of exposure to major risk for the development of serious social or health problems” (Fraser et al., 2004, p. 22). Protective factors for child development are broad opportunities for education, social involvement and employment, regular religious participation, caring relationships, family cohesion, a good

relationship with at least one parent, peer support, intelligence, self-esteem, and health (Fraser et al., 2004; Nettles & Robinson, 1998). Protective factors within the environment include support networks beyond the family, effective neighborhoods, positive social cohesion, social control contributing to lower crime rates, and the presence of at least one caring adult who offers connectedness and social support (Fraser et al.; Nettles & Robinson). This caring adult can be a mentor, such as a teacher, social worker, or volunteer from a church or other community group. While poor mentoring programs can have negative effects, a mentoring program that involves attachments has positive effects on academic achievement, prosocial behavior, and interpersonal relationships (Golden, Kist, Trehan, & Padak, 2005).

Protective mechanisms are at work in communities as well. Higher socioeconomic communities tend to have fewer dropouts than less advantaged communities, lending support to the idea that resources such as access to high quality schools, health care, and positive role models benefit individual competence and prevent social problems (Fraser et al., 2004). Nettles and Robinson (1998) found that involvement of community partners with schools promoted resilience among students, especially mentoring and tutoring activities involving reading. Protective factors moderate the negative effects of an individual's risk factors increasing or enabling his or her chance at success. The disadvantages of poverty can be reduced or mediated by these protective relationships and coalitions. Positive outcomes can be attained even in situations of poverty and other risks.

Wang, Haertel, & Walberg (1994) defined educational resilience as "the heightened likelihood of educational success despite personal vulnerabilities and adversities brought about by environmental conditions and experiences" (p.46). In educational resilience models, the protective factors are categorized into two areas: personal and environmental factors. Personal or

internal attitudes and attributes include motivation, educational aspiration, healthy self-concept, and willingness to work hard (Wayman, 2002). Environmental or external factors that support an individual to overcome odds include positive adult support that provides a sense of trust in someone who assists the student with his or her problems. This adult does not necessarily have to be a family member: He or she may be a teacher or other relative outside of the home. Resilient students also have the capacity to form a support network of family, friends, and others (Wayman).

Predictors of School Dropout and Completion

Much research has been conducted regarding the precipitating events that cause a student to drop out of high school. School retention predicts dropout at every age (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2004). Students' weak academic backgrounds and long work hours are both associated with dropout (Entwisle et al.). Teenage pregnancy, adolescent alcohol and substance abuse, and running away from home are also antecedents of dropout (Brooks-Gun et al., 1993). High poverty rates are associated with school failure and dropout (Entwisle et al.). Dropout rates are higher in urban areas (Franklin, 1992). Among urban black youth, Brooks-Gun et al. found factors that enabled students to complete high school included the number of years that fathers were present in the home, as well as mothers' high educational aspirations for their children during the children's first year of life. Another predictor of high school graduation was not repeating an elementary school grade.

Historically, dropouts are viewed as mainly minority and low socioeconomic youth (Golden et al., 2005) but dropout also occurs among middle-class youth. Factors associated with dropout among middle-class youth include behavior problems; truancy; low or failing coursework grades among students with high-scoring standardized, achievement test scores; and

hospitalization for substance abuse and psychiatric disorders (Franklin, 1992; Franklin & Streeter, 1992). Two studies found white, middle class dropouts to have learning, behavioral, and family disorders (Franklin; Franklin & Streeter). The most frequent problems reported among the participants in the samples were substance abuse and conduct disorders. Other profound problems were attention deficient/hyperactivity disorder and affective disorders (Franklin; Franklin & Streeter). These latter studies highlight the need for social work services within schools to address socioemotional problems that can prevent dropout, ranging from psychosocial assessment to advocacy to fostering system change.

Dropouts who have been labeled as behavior-disordered youth leave school because they cannot interact successfully with other students or the school environment (Franklin et al., 1990; Richman et al., 2004). These students' socioemotional problems range from alcohol and substance abuse, social alienation, and family dysfunction to psychiatric disorders (Franklin et al.; Richman et al.). As cited in Franklin et al., Mesinger concluded after an exhaustive review of the literature that school environments with three specific characteristics yielded optimal success with this dropout population. These three school environments included talented staff that created an environment of caring and sense of community, a peer group with prosocial behavior to model, and environmental control over the students. Utilizing chiefly the caring environment milieu, a study was designed that combined a private alternative school with a graduate school of social work to provide an educational treatment program for 111 middle-class, behavior-disordered high school dropouts. The major modality of treatment was social group work (Franklin et al., 1990) and treatment offered in the program included individual therapy, social group work for students, family therapy, and group therapy for parents. The program also incorporated a small teacher to student ratio, voluntary enrollment, flexible scheduling and free

tuition (Franklin et al., 1990). The findings of the study showed significant progress in achieving both the educational and behavioral goals targeted for the students: More than two out of three dropouts who enrolled in the study showed positive outcomes that were statistically and clinically significant (Franklin et al.).

Predictors of Dropouts' Later High School Certification

Entwisle et al. (2004) used a life course perspective and longitudinal data from Baltimore dropouts whose dropout rate was 40%. This study compared temporary and permanent dropouts. Temporary dropouts received either a high school diploma or GED by age 22. Permanent dropouts came from more impoverished backgrounds, whereas researchers found that those with positive motivational qualities and work experience prior to dropping out were more likely to be temporary dropouts (Entwisle et al.). Male students who were parents were more likely to obtain a GED credential, but female students who were parents were less likely to obtain a GED (Entwisle et al.). Wayman's (2002) study of temporary dropouts showed factors correlated with a student's return were educational aspirations and achievement test scores. These temporary dropouts differed from permanent dropouts in that they had self-expectations of completing school, higher cognitive scores, and higher socioeconomic status. Grade at dropout was negatively associated with returning to school; the earlier a student exited school, the more likely the dropout was permanent (Wayman).

Barriers to GED Participation

King (2002) studied the barriers to participation in GED programs among recent high school dropouts, which included 119 students in a GED program, aged 16 to 23 who had dropped out of school within the previous five years. No statistically significant differences were found between black and white students; however, statistically significant barriers to

participation emerged between males and females, and also between urban and non-urban residents with respect to family constraints. Family constraints included such factors as difficulty arranging child care, lack of encouragement from family and friends, inability to attend classes regularly as well as reduction in family time and other family problems. These results indicated that psychosocial characteristics of the families were the primary barrier to GED program participation (King, 2002).

Psychosocial Characteristics

In a study that examined variables that predicted school dropout, specifically family and social factors, Lagana (2004) studied the continuum of risk for school dropout. This continuum conceptualized low-, medium-, and high-risk students. Low-risk students were in a traditional school program; students at medium-risk for dropout were in at-risk schools, and students in an alternative night educational program for dropouts were conceptualized as high-risk students. Lagana examined family cohesion, family adaptability, adult support outside the immediate family, and peer support as factors related to risk. The researcher hypothesized that positive scores on these variables would predict membership in the low-risk for dropout group and negative scores would predict membership in the high-risk for dropout group. Results supported the hypothesis, showing the three predictors of family cohesion, adult support, and peer support as predictive for group membership. Students in the high-risk group had less adult and peer support than those in the low-risk group. Students in the medium-risk group had less family cohesion than those in the low-risk group. Family adaptability was not related to any of the three groups (Lagana). Findings suggested that support by family, peers, and other adults should be a primary part of intervention strategies in schools (Lagana).

Entwistle et al. (2004) found students' employment status impacts dropout. Teens from impoverished families were employed less than half the time of their more affluent counterparts; however, when poor teens worked, they usually worked more than 20 hours per week, which is the threshold that is associated with adverse effects on school performance. Teens in poverty also tended to work to support their families while other teenagers worked for discretionary spending (Entwistle et al., 2004).

The interrelationships between dropout and family variables was shown in a secondary analysis of statewide survey data (Frank, 1990). Socioeconomic status, especially poverty, has been demonstrated to be one of the chief family links to dropout. Frank found, however, that dropout was primarily related not to family income, but to parent education, namely whether or not parents had graduated from high school. This was a surprising finding since most studies have found socioeconomic status to be the strongest indicator of dropout. The researcher found that the relationship between household income and dropout was not significant after adjusting for the effects of parent education and number of household stressors (Frank). The culmination of stressors present in a household was related to dropout. Frank concluded that "the family system cannot be omitted from any valid conceptualization of dropout" (p. 42). Thus, family dysfunction and psychosocial stressors are related to dropout.

Academic Characteristics

Many dropouts have marginal academic functioning (Richman et al., 2004). Students with weak academic backgrounds have a dramatically increased risk of dropping out of school (Entwistle et al., 2004). In separate studies, Brooks-Gunn et al. (1993) and Entwistle et al. found that early school grade failure was associated with later dropout. In the school environment, academic achievement is affected by IQ, self confidence, students' motivation for success and

attitudes about school, but factors for academic success appear to be most closely associated with students' relationships with parents, teachers, and peers (Fraser et al., 2004). Educational success is, therefore, impacted by more than grades and coursework.

GED Intervention Program

In a study by Franklin et al. (1990), a graduate school of social work and a private alternative school provided an educational treatment program for 111 middle-class high school dropouts. The purpose of the study was to evaluate family and social conditions and to assess the effectiveness of the educational treatment program. The authors noted that the state of research and evaluation for programs dealing with troubled high school dropouts had “little systematic empirical information regarding outcome in psychoeducational programs” (Franklin et al., p. 79). The private alternative school partnered with the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Texas at Arlington to provide a multimodal education and treatment program (Franklin et al.). Factors that promoted positive outcomes were individual attention of teachers, smaller classes, and availability of behavioral coaches. The researchers also found that the encouragement of prosocial behavior by peers through social work methods promoted positive results. Flexibility of academic programs and schedules, on-site treatment and the location of the alternate school in a university setting were also associated with positive outcomes (Franklin et al.).

Economic Implications of GED Attainment

Murnane, Willett, and Boudett (1999) used secondary data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to examine whether earnings of male high school dropouts were affected by obtaining the GED credential, employer training, or postsecondary education. The results indicated that individuals who obtained the GED showed an increase in wages for

students who left school with weak educational skills, but for students who left school with stronger educational skills, the GED did not increase wages. Higher wages for male dropouts were associated with postsecondary education and employer-sponsored training (Murnane et al., 1999; Tyler, Murnane, & Willett, 2003). Entwisle et al. (2004) found students who later earned GED credentials resembled traditional high school graduates regarding demographics and school performance.

In 2005, the Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (LSBESE) issued a report to the Louisiana legislature regarding future income and earning capacities of GED completers (LDOE, 2006b). It was found that both high school graduates and GED completers earn, on average, \$7,400 more per year than those who do not complete high school and did not earn a GED credential. Moreover, the review found that those passing the GED Tests received equivalent opportunity to access of admission to postsecondary education and training, employment opportunities, as well as military entrance (LDOE, 2006b). Studies by Murnane et al. (1999) and LDOE (2006b) both contradict a benchmark study by the National Bureau of Economic Research undertaken by Heckman and Cameron (1992), who found that permanent dropouts and GED passers are similar in poor wages, hours of work, unemployment and job status. Heckman and Cameron reported that marketable skills were determined by the students' number of years in traditional education only and that marketable skills were not affected by GED attainment. Findings of the LDOE study chiefly differed from the findings of Heckman and Cameron regarding the implications of GED attainment. Heckman and Cameron viewed the GED solely as a bureaucratically driven vehicle for entry into postsecondary education. Heckman and Cameron's findings equated GED attainment with low wages and this devaluated

the GED credential. The LDOE, however, views the GED not as a means in itself, but rather as a gateway to other opportunities (LDOE, 2006b). The GED is an educational credential with inherent limitations like any other terminal degree or certification. It does not guarantee high income-earning capacity, but it does routinely allow access to postsecondary education and training (LDOE, 2006b; Tyler et al., 2003). Moreover, without the GED credential, future education and training would not be available to these individuals. It is noteworthy that the Heckman and Cameron (1992) study evaluated the previous 1988 Series GED Tests. The present 2002 Series GED Tests have been designed to reflect national and jurisdictional standards representing core academic disciplines and contemporary problem solving skills to insure the tests are relevant for today (GEDTS, 2005c).

Earning potential is limited or enhanced by educational attainment. Sociodemographic statistics of the dropout population show the cyclic nature of the social problem of dropout that perpetuates the class status of those who do not graduate from school. Higher dropout rates are found in urban populations and the rates are even higher among low-achieving, low-income youths, as well as ethnic minority youths (Murnane et al., 1999). This correlation between low income and dropout signals future perpetuation of this problem, because the number of children living below the poverty line is increasing. Children of low socioeconomic statuses find themselves at an educational disadvantage because low income correlates with dropout. Failure to complete high school ends the option for higher education as well as technical and vocational education (Lagana, 2004). The cycle is clear: Low socioeconomic status contributes to dropout, and dropout leads to low socioeconomic status. Poor educational attainment results in reduced access to knowledge, resources, lower self-esteem, and vocational accomplishment. The cycle repeats as the high school dropout is limited in earning opportunities. The individual becomes

locked in poverty and this is perpetuated over generations (Entwisle et al., 2004). This predicament places the social problem of dropout squarely in the realm of social work, which serves and advocates on behalf of impoverished populations.

Literacy Issues and Social Work Practice

Many disadvantaged social work clients have experienced school dropout; individuals who leave school without a diploma often experience school failure due to low literacy, which is also associated with cognitive and learning disabilities (Richman et al., 2004). These clients may feel shame about their poor reading and academic skills, and they may be reluctant to engage in therapeutic relationships and have difficulty in following through with referrals (Greenberg & Lackey, 2006). The social worker should be aware of clients' problems associated with low literacy and resulting feelings of inferiority (Greenberg & Lackey). The strengths perspective in social work entails identifying clients' strengths. This may be particularly important for clients with academic deficiencies.

Review of the Literature: Summary and Implications

School dropout is a complicated multifaceted phenomenon. A review of the literature suggests that risk factors associated with dropout are legion. These include poverty, low socioeconomic status, few opportunities for education and employment, racism, illness, family stress, family problems, and inadequate family support (Fraser et al., 2004). Individuals who return to resume their education via GED programs may also possess protective factors. These protective factors serve to buffer and strengthen the individual. Some of these protective factors are opportunities for education, social involvement, employment opportunities, regular religious participation, caring familial relationships, a good relationship with at least one parent, peer support, intelligence, self-esteem, and health (Fraser et al., Nettles & Robinson, 1998).

Fraser and Galinsky (2004) state that the risk and resilience perspective is “based on the idea that childhood problems are multidetermined. That is, problems have many causes, whether at the level of the individual, the family or school, or the broader environment” (p. 386). High school dropout occurs as a multidimensional complex problem within multiple systems that are impacted by personal demographics; such as age, sex, and income; as well as psychosocial and academic characteristics. These factors should be considered in planning for interventions.

Risk factors associated with dropout, such as low socioeconomic status, unsupportive families, and academic deficiencies have been identified and many studies focus on the “event” of dropout (Franklin & Streeter, 1992; Richman et al. 2004; Wayman, 2002), yet little research has examined relationships between these factors and GED attainment, specifically among at-risk youth with or without predisposition to academic failure (Entwisle et al., 2004; Franklin et al., 1990; King, 2002; Lagana, 2004). This present study seeks to highlight these areas of risk within the multiple systems of the person by examining demographic, psychosocial, and academic characteristics of at-risk youth enrolled in a multi-phased intervention program. A more comprehensive understanding of the demographic, psychosocial, and academic characteristics that are associated with dropout have important implications for prevention for school dropouts, and for interventions for those who return to school to earn high school credentials like the GED.

The chief causal processes that are likely to benefit from interventions are called “keystone risk factors” (Fraser & Galinsky, 2004, p. 391). If these factors are ignored, the keystone risk factors potentially cause problems to exacerbate (Fraser & Galinsky). This current study seeks to tease out factors that are associated with students who take the GED Tests. There are millions of Americans who lack a high school diploma. Thousands of youth are added to this

number every year. The proposed research advances the state of the knowledge about this social condition by identifying characteristics which may be associated with keystone risk factors for dropout and by identifying characteristics which may promote students' attainment of a high school credential.

CHAPTER 3: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Purpose

The purpose of this cross-sectional, exploratory-descriptive research is to examine demographic, psychosocial, and academic characteristics of at-risk youth enrolled in the Louisiana National Guard's Youth ChalleNGe Program (LNGYPC), who attempted the General Educational Development (GED) Tests.

Research Questions

The current study sought to answer the following descriptive research questions:

- 1.) What are the demographic characteristics of at-risk youth?
- 2.) What are the psychosocial characteristics of at-risk youth?
- 3.) What are the academic characteristics of at-risk youth?

Bivariate research questions included the following:

- 4.) How are demographic characteristics similar and dissimilar among GED passers and non-passers?
- 5.) How are psychosocial characteristics similar and dissimilar among GED passers and non-passers?
- 6.) How are academic characteristics similar and dissimilar among GED passers and non-passers?
- 7.) Among GED passers, what are the interrelationships among demographic, psychosocial, and academic characteristics?
- 8.) Among GED non-passers, what are the interrelationships among demographic, psychosocial, and academic characteristics?

The present study also sought to examine students' reasons for testing and whether these reasons for testing differ between GED passers and non-passers.

Operationalization of Key Concepts

What Are the Demographic Characteristics of At-Risk Youth?

Demographic characteristics were defined as the age, gender, race or ethnicity, income, and poverty status of at-risk youth.

Age was calculated using students' date of birth. Age was measured at the ratio level.

Gender was self-reported by the student as either male or female. Gender was measured at the nominal level.

Race or ethnicity included the following six categories, as self-reported: Black, African-American, African descent; White; Hispanic origin or descent; American Indian or Alaska native; Asian; or native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Race or ethnicity was measured at the nominal level.

Income was measured in the following eleven categories of earnings per year, by self-report: \$0; \$1 to \$3,000; \$3,001 to \$5,000; \$5,001 to \$7,500; \$7,501 to \$10,000; \$10,001 to \$15,000; \$15,001 to \$20,000; \$20,001 to \$25,000; \$25,001 to \$30,000; \$30,001 to \$40,000; and more than \$40,000. The income categories were measured at the ordinal level.

Poverty status was composed of five variables that indicated whether the student was in a correctional or health facility, or whether the student was receiving public assistance, or whether the student was a single parent or emancipated minor. These variables were measured at the nominal level. These five nominal variables were summed to create the composite poverty status variable which was measured at the ratio level.

What Are the Psychosocial Characteristics of At-Risk Youth?

Psychosocial characteristics were defined as family and social characteristics that influenced students' reasons for leaving high school. All of the family and social characteristics were measured at the nominal level, with students indicating whether or not a factor was present when the student left school. The nominal family variables were summed to create the composite family variable which was measured at the ratio level. The nominal social variables were summed to create the composite social variable which was measured at the ratio level. Composite family and social variables were summed to create the ratio level psychosocial combined variable.

Family Characteristics. Twelve variables comprised the five categories of family factors. The five categories were care giving, economic, health, transitional issues, and family support issues.

The care giving category consisted of one variable that referred to whether the student left school to care for family members at home.

Four economic variables consisted of whether the student took a job, or if the job required too much time, or whether the student's money was needed to help out at home, or if the student did not have enough money to go to school.

The health category consisted of one variable measuring whether the student left school due to personal or family illness.

Three transitional variables measured whether the student got married, frequently moved, or became pregnant or made someone else pregnant.

The family support variables measured whether the student's parents supported education, if there was good place to study at home, or if other family members completed high

school. The 12 nominal family variables were summed to form the composite family variable which was measured at the ratio level.

Social Characteristics. Social factors that contributed to a student's leaving school consisted of 11 variables. Whether the student experienced alcohol, drug, or emotional problems comprised three social variables.

The legal variable measured whether the student had problems with the law or police.

The seven adaptability variables measured whether the student felt too old for his or her grade, or if student did not feel part, safe, or happy at school, if the student did not get along with other students or teachers, or if the student's social life was more important than school work. The 11 nominal social variables were summed to form the ratio level composite social variable.

What Are the Academic Characteristics of At-Risk Youth?

Academic characteristics were defined by four categories including the student's satisfaction with school structure or environment, the student's academic performance, the student's reasons to pursue a high school credential after dropping out of school, and forced school separation.

Academic Environment Characteristics. The academic environment category was comprised of nine variables measuring the student's perception of the school environment, including whether work and school schedules conflicted, or if the school offered desired courses or enough vocational/technical courses. Other academic environment variables measured whether the student received poor teaching or insufficient help from teachers, as well as, if the school work was too easy, if the student did not like school, was bored, or could not adjust to school routine. These variables were measured at the nominal level. The nine nominal level

academic environment variables were summed to create the academic environment composite variable which was measured at the ratio level of measurement.

Academic Performance Characteristics. Eleven variables comprised the student performance category. Length of time out of traditional K-12 school was measured in years and was self-reported by the student; this was measured at the ratio level. Highest grade in school completed was self-reported and measured at the ratio level. Student performance variables also included whether the student had trouble with math or reading, poor grades, or poor test scores. These variables also measured whether the student felt that school work or homework was too hard, had poor study habits, had too many absences, or trouble understanding the English language. These nine variables were measured at the nominal level. The nine nominal level academic student performance variables were summed to create the academic student performance composite variable which was measured at the ratio level of measurement.

Reasons for Testing. In addition to examining reasons for not completing high school, students indicated reasons for pursuing the GED credential. These reasons consisted of 17 variables in five categories. The categories were educational, employment, military, extrinsic, and intrinsic reasons. The 17 variables were measured at the nominal level and were summed to create the reasons for testing composite variable which was measured at the ratio level.

The four educational variables measured whether the student pursued the GED credential to enroll in technical/trade program, a 2-year or 4-year college, or a skills certification program.

The employment category consisted of five variables measuring whether the student pursued a GED for job training, to get a first or better job, to keep a current job, or as an employer requirement.

The military variables measured whether the student pursued a GED for military entrance or career.

Three variables measured extrinsic reasons including court order, a condition of early release, or as a public assistance requirement.

Two variables measured intrinsic reasons for pursuing the GED, and included whether the student wanted to be a role model for family or for personal satisfaction.

Forced School Separation. Two variables comprised the forced school separation category and indicated whether the student was suspended or expelled, or if the student was told to leave school by a school official. These two variables were measured at the nominal level. These two nominally measured variables were summed to create the forced school separation composite variable which was measured at the ratio level.

At-Risk Youth

Economically and educationally disadvantaged youth, aged 16 to 18, who have dropped out of school are eligible to enroll in the Louisiana National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program (LNGYCP) program. Students must voluntarily apply and be interviewed prior to their admission. Students must not be indicted, charged or convicted of a felony and must not be on parole or probation for other than juvenile status offenses. Students must be unemployed and drug free at the time of enrollment and be physically and mentally capable to participate with reasonable accommodation for physical or other disability (NGYCP, 2005).

Louisiana National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program (LNGYCP)

LNGYCP, a national multi-phased intervention model for at-risk youth, has a 22-week structured Residential Phase followed by a formal 12-month Post-Residential Phase. Its primary goal is to improve education, life skills, and employment potential. Chief components include

military-based discipline and training, mentors, and experiential learning. Random drug screens are conducted (NGYCP, 2005).

The GED Testing program administered at LNGYCP and located at the Gillis Long Center in Carville, Louisiana, is operated under the jurisdiction of the Louisiana Department of Education. According to state GED eligibility requirements, students who are 18 or younger must pass a half-length GED practice test before they may take the official GED Tests. All students from LNGYCP are required to pass the practice test prior to taking the Official GED Tests. GED Testing is an integral part of the academic component at LNGYCP and students who pass are considered high school graduates.

The General Educational Development (GED) Tests

In order to attain a GED, an individual must complete a battery of five tests in writing, social studies, science, reading, and mathematics. The 2002 Series GED Tests represent current national high school curriculum standards with content relevant to the community and workplace. The tests require 7 hours and 30 minutes of testing, usually over two testing sessions. The minimum score is 200 and the maximum score is 800 on each subtest. The average standard score for a sample of United States graduating high school seniors is 500. The minimum requirements for issuing a GED credential are set by the American Council Education's Commission on Adult Learning and Educational Credentials. To pass, students must earn both a minimum score of 410 on each test and an average score of at least 450 on all five tests in the battery; therefore, a minimum total score of 2,250 with no single test score below 410 is required to pass. Jurisdictions may set their standard higher, but not lower, than this level. The Louisiana Department of Education, like the rest of the nation, has adopted the minimum requirements for passing the GED Tests (GEDTS, 2005c).

GED Passers and Non-Passers

Passers are defined as obtaining an average score of 450 on the full battery of tests with the minimum score of 410 on each test. Non-passers are defined as scoring less than a 450 average, or obtaining a score of less than 410 on any one test. Scores were obtained from National Scoring Service, Inc., the GED scoring agent of the Louisiana Department of Education. Scores were measured at the ratio level of measurement.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

This cross-sectional, exploratory-descriptive study examines demographic, psychosocial, and academic characteristics of at-risk youth enrolled in the Louisiana National Guard's Youth ChalleNGe Program (LNGYPC), who attempted the General Educational Development (GED) Tests.

Sample

A non-probability sample of 111 at-risk youth comprised the sample. These subjects were students in the Louisiana National Guard's Youth ChalleNGe Program (LNGYCP) at the Gillis Long Center in Carville, Louisiana, and qualified to take the GED Tests.

A power analysis was conducted to ensure that an adequate sample size would be obtained for bivariate analysis. According to Rubin and Babbie (1997), a sample size of at least 80 was required to detect a medium effect size (.80) at the .05 level of significance. The sample size for this research study was 111, which more than satisfied the minimum number of subjects indicated by the power analysis.

Representativeness

Results of this study are only generalizable to at-risk youth who have been exposed to similar intervention programs.

Protection of human subjects

Secondary data were analyzed for this anonymous study. All subjects signed a release giving permission for data to be utilized for research purposes. There were no physical, psychological, social, or legal risks to the participants. Students' responses could not be traced back to subjects because all identifying information was stripped from records prior to analysis. The research met the criteria for exemption from IRB oversight.

Instrumentation

Data about students' demographic, psychosocial, and academic characteristics were gathered with the *U.S. Demographic General Educational Development Testing Program* form that was designed by The American Council on Education/GED Testing Service for the 2002 Series Tests. The eight page demographic form consisted of 32 sections and 279 items, total. For the purpose of this research, data from 117 items from 11 sections were used to answer the research questions. The bulk of these variables were measured at the nominal level with several academic-focused variables measured at the interval and ratio levels. Nominal level variables among categories were summed to form composite variables which were measured at the ratio level. Three combined variables were formed by summing composite variables which were measured at the ratio level.

According to Stephen J. Ruffini, Ph.D., Director of Research and Program Development for the GED Testing Service, the survey instrument was developed with a high level of input from state jurisdictional administrators at an Annual Administrator's Conference (S.J. Ruffini, personal communication, March 5, 2007). Validity or reliability of this instrument has not been empirically established; however, the demographic form is utilized by every United States GED Testing jurisdiction. LNGYCP cadets completed the demographic form after they qualified for GED Testing, which is standard GED Testing procedure (GEDTS, 2005b).

Data Analysis

Univariate analyses were conducted to obtain frequencies and to summarize data. Appropriate bivariate statistics were used to examine relationships among variables. Pearson's product-moment correlation (r) was used to examine relationships among variables measured at the interval and ratio levels. *T*-tests were conducted to detect differences in academic

characteristics between the two groups of GED students, passers and non-passers (Cohen & Lea, 2004; Rubin & Babbie, 2005). Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences™ (SPSS).

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

This research examined the demographic, psychosocial, and academic characteristics of at-risk youth ($N = 111$) enrolled in a multi-phased intervention residential program who attempted and passed or did not pass the GED Tests. For the total students, 87.4 % ($n = 97$) of the subjects passed and 12.6% ($n = 14$) did not pass.

For the total students, over three fourths (75.6%, $n = 84$) of the students were male, and 24.3% ($n = 27$) were female. Just under one fourth of the students were African-American (21.6%) and over three fourths (76.6%) of the students were White. Other races comprised 1.8% of the testing group. Among the age groups, 42.3% ($n = 47$) of the students were 16 years old, 44.1% ($n = 49$) were 17 years old, and 13.5% ($n = 15$) were 18 or 19 years old. Among students being out of school for three years or less, the largest proportion of students ($N = 105$) had been out of school for one year (73.9%, $n = 82$). Over 15% ($n = 17$) had been out of school for two years and 3.6% ($n = 4$) had been out of school for three years. Among grades 8, 9, and 10, the largest proportion of students completed the ninth grade (35.1%) with 29.7% completing the eighth grade and 18.9% completing the tenth grade.

Test Scores

The minimum test scores ranged from zero on the Writing Test to 400 in both the overall average and the Social Studies Test. For the maximum range, a perfect score of 800 was attained in the Reading and Science Tests. As seen in Table 1, significant differences emerged among the passers and non-passers on overall test scores as well as on all subtest scores.

Table 1

GED Tests Scores ($N = 111$)

t-test of Equality of Means ($df = 109$) with equal variances assumed

GED Tests	t	Passers M (SD)	Non-Passers M (SD)
		($n = 97$)	($n = 14$)
Average	-5.54*	539.65 (56.79)	452.92 (36.06)
Reading	-5.32*	557.01 (89.08)	502.14 (73.50)
Science	-4.69*	551.13 (69.87)	460.00 (50.83)
Mathematics	-3.94*	534.94 (81.16)	445.71 (62.22)
Social Studies	-3.61*	531.75 (63.85)	467.85 (43.35)
Writing	-5.32*	523.60 (72.01)	386.43 (172.78)

* $p < .001$

Demographic Characteristics

Gender

As shown in Table 2, a higher percentage of male subjects than female subjects passed. Proportionally, nearly twice as many of the female subjects did not pass compared to the male subjects.

Table 2

Percentages of GED Tests Passers and Non-Passers by Gender ($N = 111$)

Gender (n)	Passers (n)	Non-Passers (n)
Male (84)	89.3 (75)	10.7 (9)
Female (27)	81.5 (22)	18.5 (5)

Age

Among 16, 17, and 18-year olds, the 17-year olds comprised the largest proportion of passers, and the 16 and 18-year old groups of passers were proportionally similar. Percentages of passers and non-passers among age groups are shown in Table 3. For age, no significant differences emerged between passers ($M = 16.75$, $SD = 0.73$) and non-passers ($M = 16.57$, $SD = 0.75$) ($t = -.85$, $df = 109$, $p < .05$) among the four age groups.

Table 3

Percentages of GED Tests Passers and Non-Passers by Age ($N = 111$)

Age (n)	Passers (n)	Non-Passers (n)
16-year old (47)	83 (39)	17 (8)
17-year old (49)	91.8 (45)	8.2 (4)
18-year old (13)	84.6 (11)	15.4 (2)
19-year old (2)	100 (2)	0

Race

Passing and not passing rates were similar between the groups for the demographic characteristic of race/ethnicity, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Percentages of GED Tests Passers and Non-Passers by Race/Ethnicity ($N = 111$)

Race/Ethnicity (n)	Passers (n)	Non-Passers (n)
African-American (24)	83.3 (20)	16.7 (4)
White (85)	88.2 (75)	11.8 (10)
Other (2)	100 (2)	0

Comparing passing rates among Whites and non-whites for males and females, a similar proportion of White and non-White males passed, but a higher proportion of White females (85.7%) passed than non-White females (66.7%). About one third (33.3%) of the non-White females did not pass, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Percentages of GED Tests Passers and Non-Passers by Race/Ethnicity and Gender ($N = 111$)

Race/Ethnicity (n)		Passers (n)	Non-Passers (n)
White (85)	Male (64)	89.1 (57)	10.9 (7)
	Female (21)	85.7 (18)	14.3 (3)
Non-White (26)	Male (20)	90.0 (18)	10.0 (2)
	Female (6)	66.7 (4)	33.3 (2)

Income

Over 50% of students ($N = 108$, $n = 55$) reported incomes of \$3,000 or less per year, with 87% of subjects ($n = 94$) reporting a yearly income of \$5,000 or less per year. Just 13% of subjects ($n = 14$) reported a yearly income of \$5,001 or more. Over 90% of subjects ($n = 91$) earned less than \$5,000 or less per year and the passing and non-passing rates were similar between the \$1 to \$3000 (passers = 84.6%, non-passers = 15.4%) and \$3,001 to \$5,000 (passers = 89.7%, non-passers = 10.3%) income category groups.

Poverty Status

Over 50% of students ($N = 111$, $n = 62$) indicated that they were receiving public assistance at the time of testing. Passers (85%, $n = 53$) and non-passers (14%, $n = 9$) were proportionally similar to the overall passing and non-passing rates. Only one student indicated that he or she was in a correctional facility, and none indicated that they were in a health facility or emancipated minors at the time of testing. Two of the students receiving public assistance indicated that they were single parents and both of these passed. No significant differences emerged between passers ($M = .57$, $SD = .53$) and non-passers ($M = .64$, $SD = .49$) ($t = .43$, $df = 109$, $p < .05$) on the poverty status composite variable.

Psychosocial Characteristics

Family Characteristics

Among the twelve family characteristics variables, the most prevalent reasons for not completing high school were getting a job (14%, $n = 16$), having family members who lacked a high school diploma (9.1%, $n = 11$), and lacking a good place to study at home (9%, $n = 10$). As shown in Table 6, passing and non-passing rates for family variables were similar among these variables, except for the categories of those who needed money to help out at home and for those

who got pregnant or made someone pregnant, with over one third not passing in both groups. When examining summed responses that comprised the composite variable, no significant differences in family characteristics emerged between passers ($M = 0.64$, $SD = 0.98$) and non-passers ($M = 1.14$, $SD = 1.61$) ($t = 1.59$, $df = 109$, $p < .05$).

Table 6

Percentages of GED Tests Passers and Non-Passers by Family Characteristics ($N = 111$)

Family Reason (<i>n</i>)	Passers (<i>n</i>)	Non-Passers (<i>n</i>)
Care giving		
Needed at home to care for family members (7)	71.4 (5)	28.6 (2)
Economic		
Got a job (16)	81.3 (13)	18.8 (3)
Money needed to help out at home (8)	62.5 (5)	37.5 (3)
Job took too much time (4)	75.0 (3)	25.0 (1)
Not enough money for school (1)	100 (1)	0
Health		
Personal/family illness (6)	83.3 (5)	16.7 (1)
Transitional		
Family moved to often (6)	100 (6)	0
Got pregnant or made other pregnant (5)	60.0 (3)	40.0 (2)
Got married (0)	0	0

(table cont'd.)

Family Support

Other family lacked diploma (11)	81.8 (9)	18.2 (2)
No place to study at home (10)	90.0 (9)	10.0 (1)
Parents did not support education (5)	80.0 (4)	20.0 (1)

Note: Total is greater than 100% because respondents could select more than one reason.

Social Characteristics

Nearly 50% ($n = 50$) of the students indicated that drug problems were a reason for leaving school and over 90% ($n = 46$) of these students passed. Over one third of the students indicated that they were not happy in school with 84.1% passing ($n = 44$). Over one third of the students also indicated that their social life was more important than school with 91.9% ($n = 37$) passing. As shown in Table 7, the largest proportion, with over one fourth not passing among social variable, were those who did not get along with other students ($n = 31$). One fifth did not pass among those who felt they were too old for their grade ($n = 24$). When examining summed responses that comprised the composite variable, no significant differences between social characteristics emerged for passers ($M = 2.92, SD = 2.70$) and non-passers ($M = 2.75, SD = 2.08$) ($t = .28, df = 109, p < .05$). Both the family and social characteristics comprised the combined variable, psychosocial characteristics. No significant differences emerged between passers ($M = 3.40, SD = 2.46$) and non-passers ($M = 4.07, SD = 4.02$) ($t = .86, df = 109, p < .05$) on psychosocial characteristics.

Table 7

Percentages of GED Tests Passers and Non-Passers by Social Characteristics ($N = 111$)

Social Reason (n)	Passers (n)	Non-Passers (n)
Drug problems (50)	92.0 (46)	8.0 (4)
Legal Problems with law/police (31)	87.1 (27)	12.9 (4)
Emotional problems (21)	85.7 (18)	14.3 (3)
Alcohol problems (17)	88.2 (15)	11.8 (2)
Adaptability		
Was not happy in school (44)	84.1 (37)	15.9 (7)
Social life more important than school (37)	91.9 (34)	8.1 (3)
Did not get along with other students (31)	74.2 (23)	25.8 (8)
Did not get along with teachers (29)	89.7 (26)	10.3 (3)
Too old for grade (24)	79.2 (19)	20.8 (5)
Did not feel part of school (22)	90.9 (20)	9.1 (2)
Did not feel safe at school (2)	100 (2)	0

Note: Total is greater than 100% because respondents could select more than one reason.

Academic Characteristics

Academic Environment Characteristics

Nearly 70% ($n = 76$) of all students indicated that they did not like school, and over 40% ($n = 48$) indicated that they were bored with school. Passing (82.9%, $n = 63$) and non-passing (17.1%, $n = 13$) rates among students who did not like school and passing (83.3%, $n = 40$) and non-passing (16.7%, $n = 8$) rates of those who were bored with school were similar. As shown in

Table 8, nearly one third of non-passers indicated that inadequate help from teachers (28.6%, $n = 4$) and poor teaching (30.8%, $n = 4$) were among their reasons for leaving school. When examining the summed responses that comprised the composite variable, non-passers ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.55$) reported significantly more academic environment reasons for leaving school than passers ($M = 1.58$, $SD = 1.29$) ($t = 2.21$, $df = 109$, $p < .05$).

Table 8

Percentages of GED Tests Passers and Non-Passers by Academic Environment Characteristics ($N = 111$)

Academic Environment Reason (n)	Passers (n)	Non-Passers (n)
Did not like school (76)	82.9 (63)	17.1 (13)
Was bored (48)	83.3 (40)	16.7 (8)
Teachers did not help enough (14)	71.4 (10)	28.6 (4)
Poor teaching (13)	69.2 (9)	30.8 (4)
School work was too easy (13)	100 (13)	0
Could not work and study at the same time (12)	83.3 (10)	16.7 (2)
Could not adjust to school routine (10)	80 (8)	20 (2)
Not enough vocational/tech courses offered (2)	50 (1)	50 (1)
Courses not offered that were wanted (0)	0	0

Note: Total is greater than 100% because respondents could select more than one reason.

Academic Student Performance

Among the student performance reasons for leaving school, the two largest proportions of students indicated that they were absent too often (46.8%, $n = 52$) and that they had poor study

habits (45%, $n = 50$). These proportions were similar to the overall passing and non-passing rates, as shown in Table 9. When examining the summed responses that comprised the composite variable, no significant differences emerged in academic student performance reasons for leaving school among passers ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 1.99$) and non-passers ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 2.13$) ($t = .77$, $df = 108$, $p < .05$). Both the academic environment and academic student performance reasons for leaving school comprised the academic combined variable. No significant differences emerged between passers ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 2.85$) and non-passers ($M = 5.64$, $SD = 3.49$) ($t = .77$, $df = 108$, $p < .05$) on academic combined reasons for leaving school.

Table 9

Percentages of GED Tests Passers and Non-Passers by Academic Student Performance Characteristics ($N = 111$)

Academic Student Performance Reason (n)	Passers (n)	Non-Passers (n)
Was absent too many times (52)	86.5 (45)	13.5 (7)
Poor study habits (50)	86 (43)	14 (7)
Poor grades (42)	85.7 (36)	14.3 (6)
Had trouble with math (32)	84.4 (27)	15.6 (5)
Poor test scores (31)	87.1 (27)	12.9 (4)
School work was too hard (13)	76.9 (10)	23.1 (3)
Had trouble with reading (8)	62.5 (5)	37.5 (3)
Homework was too hard (8)	100 (8)	0
Had trouble understanding the English language (4)	75 (3)	25 (1)

Note: Total is greater than 100% because respondents could select more than one reason.

Years Out of School

Among students being out of school for three years or less, the largest proportion of students ($N = 105$) had been out of school for one year (73.9%, $n = 82$). Over 15% ($n = 17$) had been out of school for two years and 3.6% ($n = 4$) had been out of school for three years. No significant differences emerged between passers ($M = 1.34$, $SD = .86$) and non-passers ($M = 1.25$, $SD = 0.45$) ($t = -.39$, $df = 103$, $p < .05$) on years out of school.

Highest Grade Completed

Among grades 8, 9, and 10, the largest proportion of students completed the ninth grade (35.1%) with 29.7% completing the eighth grade and 18.9% completing the tenth grade. For the students ($N = 111$, $M = 8.69$, $SD = 1.15$), no differences emerged between passers ($n = 97$, $M = 8.77$, $SD = 1.10$) and non-passers ($n = 14$, $M = 8.14$, $SD = 1.40$) ($t = -1.92$, $df = 109$, $p < .05$) on highest grade completed.

Forced School Separation

The forced school separation academic category variable was composed of two individual variables: subjects who were told to leave school by officials ($n = 5$) or those who were suspended or expelled ($n = 40$). No significant differences emerged between passers ($M = 0.37$, $SD = 0.54$) and non-passers ($M = 0.64$, $SD = 0.63$) ($t = 1.70$, $df = 109$, $p < .05$) on the composite measure of forced school separation.

Reasons for Testing

Among the reasons for pursuing the GED credential, the two largest proportions of students indicated that they were testing for personal satisfaction (59.45%, $n = 66$) and that they were testing to enroll in a technical/trade program (45.94%, $n = 51$). Both of these reasons for testing showed similar passing and non-passing rates, as shown in Table 10. No significant

differences emerged between passers ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 2.15$) and non-passers ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 2.13$) ($t = .42$, $df = 109$, $p < .05$) on the composite measure of reasons for testing. Students' passing and non-passing rates by educational, employment, military, extrinsic, and intrinsic reasons for testing are included in Table 10.

Table 10

Percentages of Passers and Non-Passers: Reasons for Taking the GED Tests ($N = 111$)

Reasons (n)		Passers (n)	Non-Passers (n)
Educational	Enroll in technical/trade program (51)	86.3 (44)	13.7 (7)
	Enroll in 4-year college (38)	89.5 (34)	10.5 (4)
	Enroll in 2-year college (18)	83.3 (15)	16.7 (3)
	Enroll in skills certification (14)	100 (14)	0
Employment	Get a better job (36)	83.3 (30)	16.7 (6)
	Get first job (27)	81.5 (22)	18.5 (5)
	Job training (21)	85.7 (18)	14.3 (3)
	Employer requirement (13)	84.6 (11)	15.4 (2)
	Keep current job (2)	100 (2)	0
Military	Military entrance (18)	88.9 (16)	11.1 (2)
	Military career (6)	100 (6)	0
Extrinsic	Early release (9)	77.8 (7)	22.2 (2)
	Court order (7)	85.7 (6)	14.3 (1)
	Public assistance requirement (0)	0	0

(table cont'd.)

Intrinsic	Personal satisfaction (66)	87.9 (58)	12.1(8)
	Role model for family (26)	92.3 (24)	7.7 (2)

Note: Total is greater than 100% because respondents could select more than one reason.

Correlation Matrices: Variables Included

Two correlation matrices were computed. Table 11 represents the interrelationships of variables for the passer subsample ($n = 97$), and the interrelationships of variables for the non-passer subsample ($n = 14$) are shown in Table 12. Thirteen variables were included in each correlation matrix. Among the 13 variables, 7 were composite measures of summed responses (i.e., family, social, academic environment, academic student performance, forced school separation, poverty status, and reasons for testing), 3 were combined variables (i.e., average score, psychosocial, and academic combined), and the remaining 3 variables in the matrices were time out of school in years, highest grade completed, and age. The family reasons for leaving school and social reasons for leaving school included in the matrices were aggregated into the combined psychosocial variable. The academic environment and academic student performance variables were aggregated into the academic combined variable. Pearson's product moment correlational coefficient (r) was used to examine the relationships among these ratio-level variables. The strengths of the interrelationships were assessed according to the guidelines by Cohen (1988), with a correlation of .5 considered as strong, .3 as moderate, and .1 as weak.

The average score was composed of the individual scores on the Writing, Social Studies, Science, Reading, and Mathematics Tests; however, these latter five subtests were not included in the correlation matrices. Interrelationships between the average score and subtest scores were all significant for the passers; average score and subtest scores were all strong and positive and

ranged from .65 to .84 (at the .01 level). For passers, as average score increased, subtest scores increased. This was similar to the interrelationships between the average score and subtest scores for the whole sample ($N = 111$), where interrelationships between average score and subtest scores also were significantly and strong and positive, ranging from $r = .67$ to .83. However, among the non-passers, significant interrelationships emerged only for the average score and the Writing ($r = .72$) and Reading ($r = .69$) subtests. Both of these latter relationships and were strong and direct at the .01 level. For the non-passers, the correlations between average score and Social Studies ($r = .44$) and Science ($r = .12$) subtest scores were not significant. Among all groups, the only negative relationship that emerged between average score and any of the subtest scores was average score and Math ($r = -.29$) for the non-passers. This relationship was not significant.

Interrelations Among GED Passers

A correlation matrix was computed for the 97 passers. As shown in Table 11, thirteen significant relationships emerged at least at the moderate level ($r > .30$), and eight of these relationships were strong ($r > .50$). Four of the eight strong relationships (at the .01 level of significance) emerged between one composite variable and the combined variable of which it was a part. The combined variable, the psychosocial reasons for leaving school, was highly intercorrelated with both family reasons ($r = .55$) and social reasons for leaving school ($r = .91$). The academic combined variable also was highly intercorrelated with the two variables that comprised it: academic environment reasons ($r = .76$) and academic student performance reasons for leaving school ($r = .90$).

Among the remaining four strong relationships, significantly strong and direct intercorrelations emerged (at the .01 level of significance) between psychosocial reasons for

leaving school and two other variables: academic environment ($r = .60$) and academic combined ($r = .58$), showing that as psychosocial characteristics increased, academic environment and academic combined characteristics for leaving school also increased. Similar intercorrelations emerged between social reasons for leaving school and the same two academic variables: academic environment reasons for leaving school ($r = .52$) and academic combined reasons for leaving school ($r = .55$) ($p < .01$). As social reasons for leaving school increased, academic environment reasons and academic combined reasons for leaving school also increased.

Among passing students, a positive and moderate significant relationship emerged between family reasons for leaving school and academic environment reasons for leaving school ($r = .39$, $p < .01$), showing that as family characteristics increased, academic environment reasons for leaving school also increased. Correlations were direct and moderate between academic student performance and three variables: social ($r = .41$), psychosocial ($r = .43$), and academic environment ($r = .47$) reasons ($p < .01$). Increases in academic student performance reasons were associated with increases in social, psychosocial, and academic environment reasons for leaving school.

Interrelations Among GED Non-Passers

Using the subsample of 14 non-passing students, a correlation matrix was computed. Twenty-one significant relationships emerged and all correlations were strong ($r > .50$), as shown in Table 12. Four significant and very highly correlated relationships (at the .01 level of significance) were found among one variable and the combined variable of which it was a part. The combined variable, the psychosocial reasons for leaving school, was highly intercorrelated with both family reasons ($r = .88$) and social reasons for leaving school ($r = .96$). The academic combined variable also was highly intercorrelated with the two variables that comprised it:

academic environment reasons ($r = .82$) and academic student performance reasons for leaving school ($r = .89$).

Among the remaining 17 strong interrelationships, the relationship between social characteristics and family characteristics ($r = .72, p < .01$) was positive and very strong, indicating that social and family reasons for not completing school increased together. Significant and strong correlations emerged between family characteristics and three additional variables: academic environment reasons ($r = .55$), reasons for forced school separation ($r = .65$), and the academic combined reasons for leaving school ($r = .56$) ($p < .05$). As family-related reasons for leaving school increased, academic reasons for leaving school also increased. Among the three academic variables, the relationship between family characteristics and reasons for forced school separation was the strongest.

Significant relationships emerged between reasons for leaving school due to forced school separation and social ($r = .56$) and psychosocial ($r = .64$) characteristics (at the .05 level of significance). Both of these relationships were positive and strong, showing that as reasons for leaving school due to forced school separation increased, social and psychosocial characteristics also increased. There was a negative and strong relationship between forced school separation and time out of school in years ($r = -.61, p < .01$). Fewer numbers of years out of school were associated with more reasons for leaving school due to forced school separation.

Among the GED non-passers, significant relationships emerged between psychosocial reasons for not completing school and the academic environment reasons ($r = .57$) and academic combined reasons for leaving school ($r = .56$). Both of these relationships were positive and strong (at the .05 level of significance). As psychosocial reasons for leaving school increased, both academic environment and academic combined reasons for leaving school increased.

Unlike passers, significant relationships were found among non-passers and the poverty status variable, which is an indicator of poverty because it chiefly refers to students who were receiving public assistance. Significantly negative and strong relationships emerged between poverty status characteristics and age ($r = -.64, p < .05$), academic environment ($r = -.68, p < .01$) and reasons for testing ($r = -.63, p < .05$), showing that as poverty status increased, the three variables of age, academic environment reasons for leaving school and reasons for testing decreased. Age was also correlated with average score ($r = .56$) and highest year in school completed ($r = .56$) (at the .05 level of significance). These strong and positive relationships showed that as age of students increased, average test scores and more years completed in school also increased. Strong and negative relationships emerged between highest grade completed in school and three variables: family ($r = -.65$), social ($r = -.58$), and psychosocial ($r = -.65$) reasons for leaving school (at the .05 level of significance). A greater number of years completed in school was associated with fewer family, social, and psychosocial reasons for leaving school.

A Comparison of Interrelationships Between Passers and Non-Passers

Because significant differences emerged between passers and non-passers regarding academic environment reasons for leaving school ($t = 2.21, df = 109, p < .05$), these data were further examined. Table 13 was constructed to show the interrelationships between academic environment reasons for leaving school and other reasons for leaving school among the passers and non-passers. Interrelationships between academic environment reasons for leaving school and poverty status characteristics for passers and non-passers were also included. As the academic environment characteristics increased, the other variables of family, social, psychosocial, and academic student performance reasons for leaving school also increased for passers and non-passers; however, academic environment reasons for leaving school and family

reasons for leaving school were moderately correlated for the passers and highly correlated for non-passers. For passers, the interrelationship between the academic environment reasons for leaving school and the poverty status variable was not significant ($r = .10$), but for non-passers, a significantly negative and very strong relationship emerged for academic environment reasons for leaving school and poverty status ($r = -.68, p < .01$). For non-passers, as academic environment reasons for leaving school decreased, the poverty status increased.

Table 11

Correlation Matrix : GED Passers (n = 97)

	Time Out	Highest Grade	Age	Average Score	Family	Social	Psychosocial	Academic Environment	Student Performance	Academic Combined	School Separation	Status	Reasons
Time Out	1	-.28**	.09	-.16	.12	-.09	-.02	-.15	-.12	-.14	.07	.14	.09
Highest Grade	—	1	.27**	.42**	-.15	-.02	-.08	.07	.00	.05	.02	-.07	.00
Age	—	—	1	.25*	-.09	.00	-.03	.05	-.08	-.02	.07	-.05	-.00
Average Score	—	—	—	1	-.07	.21*	.14	.28**	-.00	.09	-.14	-.03	.13
Family	—	—	—	—	1	.17	.55**	.39**	.19	.28**	-.18	.15	.06
Social	—	—	—	—	—	1	.91**	.52**	.41**	.55**	.15	.03	.16
Psychosocial	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	.60**	.43**	.58**	.05	.09	.17
Academic Environment	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	.47**	.76**	-.10	-.10	.14
Student Performance	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	.90**	-.03	-.05	.26**
Academic Combined	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	.11	-.10	.27**
School Separation	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	-.13	.02
Poverty Status	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	.02
Reasons for Testing	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 12

Correlation Matrix GED Non-Passers (n = 14)

	Time Out	Highest Grade	Age	Average Score	Family	Social	Psychosocial	Academic Environment	Student Performance	Academic Combined	School Separation	Status	Reasons
Time Out in Years	1	-.10	.25	-.12	-.05	.12	.06	.00	.13	-.02	-.61*	.09	.09
Highest Grade	—	1	.56*	.22	-.65*	-.58*	-.65*	-.31	-.49	-.50	-.37	-.14	.04
Age	—	—	1	.56*	-.26	-.12	-.19	.36	-.07	.05	-.34	-.64*	.47
Average Score	—	—	—	1	.12	.27	.23	.53	-.03	.24	.15	-.36	.31
Family	—	—	—	—	1	.72**	.88**	.55*	.33	.56*	.65*	-.31	.26
Social	—	—	—	—	—	1	.96**	.52	.27	.50	.56*	-.13	.51
Psychosocial	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	.57*	.31	.56*	.64*	-.21	.45
Academic Environment	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	.52	.82**	.32	-.68**	.49
Student Performance	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	.89**	.27	-.30	.16
Academic Combined	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	.49	-.52	.37
School Separation	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	-.19	.29
Poverty Status	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	-.63*
Reasons for Testing	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 13

Comparison of Interrelationships Between Academic Environment Reasons for Leaving School (AE) and Other Reasons for Leaving School ($N = 111$)

Other Reasons for Leaving School	Passers ($n = 97$)	Non-Passers ($n = 14$)
Family x AE	.39**	.55**
Social x AE	.52**	.52
Psychosocial x AE	.60**	.57*
Academic Student Performance x AE	.47**	.52
Poverty Status x AE	-.10	-.68**

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

This exploratory-descriptive research examined demographic, psychosocial, and academic characteristics of at-risk youth enrolled in the Louisiana National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program, who attempted the GED Tests. Characteristics of passers (87.4%) and non-passers (12.6%) were expected to be somewhat similar because all students were school dropouts of similar age in a multi-phased intervention program for at-risk youth. Findings of this study were similar to those in previous studies regarding demographic characteristics of dropouts in terms of age, race, income, and poverty status characteristics (Entwisle et al., 2004; Richman et al., 2004). The students in this current study cited psychosocial reasons for leaving school that were similar to those in previous studies, which included getting a job (Entwisle et al.), lack of family support (Franklin, 1992), and substance abuse (Brooks-Gun, et al., 1993). Academic reasons for leaving school were similar to those of students described in previous studies, in terms of years completed in school (Entwisle et al.) and poor grades (Richman et al., 2004).

The students in this present study showed demographic, psychosocial, and academic characteristics associated with dropout; however, as compared with those who passed the GED Tests, there were a greater number of moderately strong interrelationships among these characteristics for non-passers. The findings showed that the academic environment was the only significantly different characteristic that emerged between passers and non-passers. Academic environment reasons for leaving school included the students' perceptions of the conditions of their learning environment as well as relationships with teachers and peers. Franklin et al. (1990), for example, found school dropouts in an educational program that focused on school environment characteristics showed better academic outcomes upon completion of the program. A study by Golden et al. (2005) reported teachers' attitudes as well as how students perceived

their “fit” in schools affected students’ decisions to drop out of school. In the same way that school environment characteristics were associated with school dropout in these latter studies, academic environment reasons for leaving school in the present study were related to dropout of school, especially for the non-passers, who also may not have “fit” in school. From an intervention perspective, academic environment characteristics are more easily accessed and changeable than demographic and psychosocial characteristics.

In the present study, the academic environment variables were also interrelated with family, social, psychosocial, other academic characteristics, and the poverty status indicator for both passers and non-passers. One interesting finding was that the interrelationship between the academic environment reasons for leaving school and poverty status ($r = -.10$) was not significant for the passers, but for non-passers, a significantly negative and very strong relationship emerged between academic environment reasons for leaving school and poverty status ($r = -.68, p < .01$). Thus, as academic environment reasons for leaving school decreased for non-passers, poverty status increased. This is a perplexing finding. More study is warranted to investigate this relationship. Perhaps, the poorest students attended school less or perhaps this finding is an artifact of the measure. Nevertheless, this research suggests that psychosocial and academic environment characteristics interacted negatively for this sample and especially for those most at risk, the non-passers. In this study, all of these students were considered to be at-risk youth; however, the non-passers were more seriously at risk, as evidenced by the greater number of and stronger interrelationships among variables describing why these students left school. In the quest to address this major social welfare problem, dropouts have been conceptualized as a somewhat homogenous group, and this has resulted in masking differences within the at-risk population. Results of this current study suggest that dropouts are not a uniform

group and that perhaps new strategies are needed to identify those at greater risk among at-risk youth. Findings suggest that students living in poverty and non-white females, in particular, may be especially vulnerable to circumstances that precipitate dropout. More careful inquiry is warranted.

Little research exists regarding GED passers and non-passers, and research that examines factors beyond GED students' earning potential is particularly scarce. This study is the first known investigation in social work utilizing GED Testing Service demographic data. There is a gap in the social work literature around GED testing, low literacy issues, and school dropout. This current research revealed interesting and unexpected findings with regard to passers and non-passers and their reasons for leaving school. The significant findings that emerged regarding academic environment reasons and their interrelationships between demographic, psychosocial, and academic reasons for leaving school are particularly notable. The present study exposes a segment of at-risk youth who are at greater risk. This research also describes the GED passers who successfully earned a high school credential. These passing students who dropout and return to adult learning programs can be reconceptualized as resilient students (Fraser & Galinsky, 2004; Wang et al., 1994; Wayman, 2002).

Implications for Social Work Research, Practice, and Education

Empirical study is needed to expand the knowledge about the social issue of school dropout. Research is needed to examine how school structure and staffing either support or impede student educational success. Such knowledge can be used to develop new programs that distinguish between groups of students at varying levels of risk. Because high school dropouts are at risk for low earning potential, criminality, and poverty (Franklin, 1992; Franklin & Streeter, 1992; Fraser, 2004), it is critical to better understand the relationship between students

and academic environment characteristics. Helping at-risk and greatly at-risk students obtain a high school credential is an important step that can ameliorate problems associated with low academic functioning, which in turn may fracture the cycle that perpetuates poverty.

Effectiveness in social work practice can be improved when low literacy and academic functioning of clients is taken into account. Dropouts often experience school failure due to low literacy, which is also associated with cognitive and learning disabilities. These clients may arrive at social workers' doors feeling shame about their poor reading and academic skills (Greenberg & Lackey, 2006). Clients may be reluctant to engage in professional relationships and may also have difficulty in following through with referrals. The social worker should be aware that some clients' reluctance to complete forms or participate in activities may be a result of low literacy and resulting feelings of inferiority (Greenberg & Lackey). Social workers can increase their resourcefulness in learning about barriers to education and adult literacy education to better advocate for their clients. The strengths perspective in social work entails identifying clients' strengths. This may be particularly important for clients with academic deficiencies. Clients may exhibit some indicators that they have low literacy issues. For example, they may say that they cannot fill out forms because they have forgotten their reading glasses. Clients may complain about the length of forms and ask for assistance in completing them. Clients also may request to fill out forms at home and return with the information at a later date or request that forms, such as confidentiality waivers, be read to them (Greenberg & Lackey). In such cases, the social worker can enhance the helping relationship by being sensitive to these issues and assisting clients with written and reading tasks.

In school social work practice, more comprehensive assessment tools are needed when working with students at risk for poverty and other disadvantages. Students at greater risk, such as those similar to the GED non-passers in this present study, must be identified. Assessment should include not only the students' psychosocial characteristics, but also include specific information about the environment of the school. This approach could raise ethical questions for school social workers who may find themselves at odds with school administration when they uncover school environments that are unresponsive to the needs of at-risk students. These quandaries for school social workers could potentially jeopardize their employment if they find school systems are not helping youth succeed in school at best, or creating barriers to academic success at worst. This present study has emphasized the importance of a broad assessment that includes the shortcomings and strengths of the school environment.

In addition to addressing assessment issues, school social worker roles need to be strengthened and expanded to fulfill needed tasks as advocates, grant writers, and policy evaluators and developers (Dupper, 1993). These practice roles must be fueled by empirical knowledge. Further policy changes should stem from research and not from current popular thought based on good intentions or political ideology. Contemporary school social worker practice and program development and evaluation require school social workers to become key players in reform efforts.

Education policy, namely, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, is currently driving the education agenda. Accountability criteria mandate that high school graduation rates be included in the formula that determines school and school district success (U.S. GAO, 2005), which has served to focus more attention on the national dropout issue. The findings of this present study and previous research (Franklin et al., 1990) suggest that NCLB and its emphasis

on testing and the quantification of student and school success should be revised. The impact of the school environment must also be considered for student success. School social workers are well positioned to influence school reform by developing empirically-based interventions at the micro and macro level.

Social work must embrace issues surrounding school dropout, which spans the problem from risk identification of students and prevention in schools (Dupper, 1993; Franklin & Streeter, 1992), to intervention and strength assessment among multiple systems of the student (Frank, 1990; Franklin, 1992; Fraser, 2004; Lagana, 2004), to involvement after dropout in GED and alternative school programs (Franklin et al., 1990). Increasing awareness of the social problem of dropout and populations at risk must be part of the social work education agenda. Greater awareness includes incorporating concepts of both educational poverty and educational resilience in curricula (Richman et al., 2004). Content about dropout is appropriate in various areas of instruction; namely, social work practice, research, policy, and human behavior and the social environment. The social problem of school dropout and at-risk populations is especially suited for instruction within the context of developmental models and the person-in-environment ecological perspective. Collaborative efforts between educators and social workers around the problem of school dropout may yield more positive educational outcomes for students. This interdisciplinary alliance is integral for meeting the needs of youth in school (Golden et al., 2005; Greenberg & Lackey, 2006). High school graduation rates are hinged on more than completing course work with passing grades: Socio-environmental factors, including the school environment, merit additional empirical attention.

Limitations

As with all exploratory-descriptive studies, several limitations must be acknowledged. The use of self-report data by GED students is one measurement issue. Data were derived from the *U.S. Demographic General Educational Development Testing Program* form, which was designed by The American Council on Education. This instrument included items that were presented as conceptually distinct, but were, in fact, quite similar. Thus redundancy among items may have compromised the reliability of data. Further, the reliability of the instrument has not been empirically verified (S.J. Ruffini, personal communication, March 5, 2007). Another limitation is the non-random sample, which limits generalizability. Although the sample was demographically similar to the population of dropouts, the results cannot be generalized to all at-risk students or all school dropouts. Students who passed were disproportionately represented suggesting that the findings of the present study can be generalized to a population of dropouts that have participated in a similar residential intervention program. The current study was limited by the use of bivariate analyses. Multivariate approaches are needed to assess the relative importance of numerous variables for explaining different student outcomes.

This present study could be expanded by using a multivariate approach, such as multiple regression to identify which variables best predict passing scores. This study should also be replicated with a larger probability sample that proportionately represents non-passers. Revisions to the demographic instrument are warranted to enhance reliability and validity.

Nevertheless, this study provides an important preliminary look into the multifaceted social problem of dropout and underscores why this crucial issue merits additional empirical attention in social work. This study also offered an initial look at a subset of GED students who are at greater risk, the non-passers. An additional strength of this study is that it successfully

condensed and summarized a large number of variables in an understandable fashion. Because the study used available secondary data from the GED Testing Program, the present study suggests that these data have value for secondary analyses.

The GED Testing Program is a national program that serves one primary purpose, which is to certify high school level knowledge and skills in individuals who did not complete high school. The population that GED serves is by definition, at risk for multiple social problems. Those students who eventually earn a GED are enabled to pursue opportunities for learning, training, and vocations that would otherwise be unavailable. Social workers are needed on the frontline of programs like the GED Testing Program, which helps ameliorate or mitigate life circumstances that pose additional risk to youth. Literacy and learning is incumbent on successfully navigating through school life and meeting academic goals. Social workers, as well as skilled education professionals are needed in this arena. Social workers are especially well equipped to interface between the individual student and his or her family and community. This training and knowledge is urgently needed in research, policy and practice areas to address the school dropout problem (Richman et al., 2004).

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VITA

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