

The At-Risk Student's Journey with Online Course Credit: Looking at Perceptions of Care

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Studies addressing at-risk students' perceptions of valuable caring relationships within their unique online environment are rare. While the phrase at-risk has a variety of meanings, this study examined the term pertaining to students who were labeled due to endangerment of not graduating from high school based on their life circumstances. Through qualitative interviews, this study uncovered participant circumstances included death of a parent, bullying, pregnancy, and physical/mental health issues. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore successful at-risk high school students' insights regarding their experience with online education, which they undertook in order to meet high school graduation requirements. More specifically, it is the intent of this study to examine the presence of care through the voices of those who journey into the virtual high school classroom. The multiple layers of meanings of care are discussed, as well as the factors that govern success for the at-risk participants in an asynchronous online credit recovery model. The article offers reflections and participant suggestions for implication and future research.

THE AT-RISK STUDENT'S JOURNEY WITH ONLINE COURSE CREDIT: LOOKING AT PERCEPTIONS OF CARE

When examining online credit recovery programs for high school graduation, the *International Association for K-12 Online Learning* (iNACOL) reported 88 percent of school districts offered these types of programs during the academic year of 2009-10 (Powell, Roberts, & Patrick, 2015). However, much work remains to be done as 750,000 students fail to graduate from the United States educational system (Camera, 2015). As rising new technology interfaces with the demands of academic accountability, the internet has become a feasible solution for educational leaders. Building on the foundation of web-based access, educators have positioned online education and credit recovery programs as an alternative to a traditional brick and mortar classroom environment (Abel, 2005; Velasquez, Graham & West, 2013).

The rapid progress of web-based education implies that each state—on both state and district levels—is considering online learning programs to meet educational demands among various populations. For example, Powell, Roberts, and Patrick (2015) reported educators across the United States are finding online and blended learning programs as valuable alternatives, impacting student populations who are labeled at-risk and could potentially drop out of high school. Many districts are using online credit recovery programs to offer an alternative way to encourage students who have failed classes or who have become disengaged in the brick-and-mortar educational setting (Powell, Roberts & Patrick, 2015). The intent of these online credit recovery programs is to provide high school students with another option to meet graduation requirements. The objective is to give at-risk youth, who may potentially drop out, the opportunity to “make up credits to meet graduation requirements and meet graduation deadlines” (Powell, Roberts & Patrick, 2015, p. 13).

To assist educators in supporting at-risk student populations, there are numerous studies regarding factors that also impact at-risk students and dropout rates (Dryfoos, 1998; Loutzenheiser, 2002). One such influence is the essential concept of caring that aids student success in education, especially for the at-risk population (e.g., Kessler, 2000; Noddings, 2003; Sykes, 1990). In the context of education, caring can be conveyed through active teacher/student relationships (e.g., Noddings, 2003, 1995; Stizman & Leners, 2006). Known for her care ethics, Nel Noddings (2003), addressed the educational challenge of a caring environment by suggesting that instructional practices should produce more than academic achievement efforts. She cautioned educators to establish a focus on caring relationships with students. Although care is difficult to measure and the research has multiple

perspectives on care, the essence of this study includes a person “mindfully and appropriately attending to the unspoken needs of another” (Stizman & Leners, 2006, p. 254).

While many studies focus on at-risk high school student challenges and needs for caring relationships, studies that examine this reality from an online at-risk student perspective are rare. Furthermore, most researchers have neglected addressing studies of online at-risk students who have beat the odds and have reflected on their perceptions of the experience. Barbour and Siko (2012) explained, “the area related to the success of at-risk students in K-12 online learning environments is where more research is needed” (p. 3). By using in-depth phenomenological inquiries, this study examined seven at-risk students and their online experience while successfully completing an online credit recovery program. More specifically, the study focused on the students’ perceptions of care as it relates to their successful completion of self-guided online curriculum.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature and background related to this study is discussed by an in-depth discussion of the concept of the at-risk student, online credit recovery programs, and caring pedagogy in virtual online learning.

The At-Risk High School Student

Students who are at at-risk are historically characterized in a variety of ways. In the report, *A Nation at Risk*, (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), the term “at-risk” was first used to describe a United States society that was culturally and economically endangered. From reports that followed (e.g. National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1985; National Research Council, 1993), new definitions of “at-risk” arose and focused on students who had a high probability of dropping out or were failing school. The U.S. Department of Education (1992) expanded students who are at-risk to mean not only those students who were likely to fail school, but also those students who did not reach a proficiency in key subjects such as math and reading. Comer (2004) contended that these students are educationally disadvantaged, and their exposure to educational experiences has been inadequate or inappropriate.

Some might argue that all high school students are at-risk in various ways, while others emphasize that certain high school students face much higher risks than do other students (e.g. Churchill, 2010). In the vernacular of educational literature, the label “at-risk” is a conventional term used to denote students who are unlikely to graduate and who are unable to succeed

in the regular classroom (e.g., Bulger & Watson, 2006; Powell, Roberts, & Patrick, 2015). For the purpose of this current study, the use of the term “at-risk” is used in the conventional sense of the literature. For example, in *Broadening the Definition of At-Risk Students* (Bulger & Watson, 2006), the authors categorized students as at-risk if they have characteristics of poverty, single-parent families, have changed schools more than two times, are part of a minority ethnicity/race, or have repeated a grade. While the literature uses “at-risk” as acceptable language when discussing a wide variety of student problems, the expression has multiple meanings within educational contexts and often fails to capture the complexity of a student’s reality.

It is important to note the term “at-risk” is not absolute and there is not a nationally recognized definition. Current research focuses on the deficits of an at-risk learner, and researchers tend to abandon an appreciative inquiry centering on a student’s assets and learning opportunities (Calabrese, Hummel, & San Martin, 2007). Therefore, it is the underlying intent of this research to help the reader understand that many phrases, expressions, and labels in education have multiple nuances and that using such a conventional term is sometimes problematic for a student’s emotional well-being.

Effective Strategies for the At-Risk Learner

When defining effective schooling practices for the at-risk learner, it is first easier to examine what has been shown ineffective. Druian and Butler (1987) summarized contributing ineffective schooling factors for at-risk youth as, “separate low expectations, lack of consistent discipline, no teacher involvement, lack of attention to the needs of individuals, and lack of engagement of learning” (p. 1). Viewing schools as uncaring and unwelcoming places is a barrier hindering students from completing school and transitioning into adulthood (Goodenow, 1993). Once a student disconnects from school, isolation and alienation become the next steps which lead to a student dropping out of school (Nigg, 2008). Wehlage and Rutter (1986) stipulate that school administration and teachers have power over the determinants that influence at-risk students’ disengagement. Examples of necessary factors for at-risk learners include educational engagement, a perception of a caring atmosphere, and options for alternative curriculum methods (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989).

Educational engagement is a complex concept that involves more than motivation (Finn & Rock, 1997; Nowicki & Duke, 2004; Wehlage et al., 1989). Wehlage et al. (1989) described “educational engagement and school membership” as key concepts in dropout prevention and retention of at-risk high school students (p. 192). In his research, Hamilton (1986) found that summaries of effective programs for at-risk students share commonalities. These include out of classroom learning, low student-teacher ratio, small

and individualized instruction, and counseling opportunities. Wehlage et al. (1989) provided an example of such programs through their study of 12 dropout prevention programs. These authors concluded that effective dropout prevention programs combine key elements of beneficial community support with strong support of educational engagement and caring for students. In addition to educational engagement impacting at-risk students, the forces of perception of care and supportive connections significantly influence at-risk adolescents (J. Kennedy & C. Kennedy, 2004; Taylor & Dunlop, 1997).

The concept of building trust and the premise of an educational caring foundation is conceptualized by several historical educators such as Socrates, Dewey, and Montessori (Velasquez, 2012). Building on these conceptualizations, researchers and practitioners continue to focus inquiry on the merit of caring as it correlates to the effects of educational practice (e.g., Noddings, 2003). For example, in their in-depth ethnographic study of 11 at-risk young women, Taylor and Dunlop (1997) found that the students' engagement in school directly correlates to the results of "appreciated institutional caring" and direct interaction between students and teachers (p. 10). Additionally, Kessler (2000) indicated that students are more likely to persevere if they feel there exists a relationship that "is a profound respect, a deep caring, and a quality of being that honors the truth" (p. 19).

When looking at effective strategies for at-risk students, the research suggests customized approaches are needed that should include distinctive curriculum and instructional methods (Archambault et al., 2010; Churchill, 2010). As changes in the K-12 learning environment have taken place, online and blended instructional methods have become "critical go-to models" for educators (Credit Recovery, 2009, p. 7). The acceptance of online pedagogy has become a viable option of opportunity for at-risk learners to complete academic requirements. One possible offshoot of this innovation is the credit recovery program model.

The Online Credit Recovery Model

A 2015 report on online learning, *Keeping Pace with K-12 Digital Learning* (Gemin, Pape, Vashaw & Watson, 2015), stated "online learning emerged as a solution to meet specific school challenges" and one such student need is "credit recovery programs for at-risk students" (p. 25). Online curricula and course length can vary from district to district and state to state. The curriculum can be provided through software from the "district or school, state-run virtual schools, charter schools, non-profit consultants, or for-profit consultants (McCabe & Andrie, 2012). One specific aspect of online programs is the ability for students to work at their own pace. Bridgeland, Dilulio and Morrison (2006) implied that self-paced options are

appealing to students who believe they missed too much instruction and cannot catch up or feel they have already failed the curriculum. In a typical online credit recovery design, students work at home or in a school lab with little supervision. Additionally, a high school diploma is given by the specific school district instead of a third party provider. However, the determined effectiveness and research on best practices is largely deficit in educational data. Furthermore, McCabe and Andrie (2012) question “if credit recovery programs are really helping students learn, or greasing a pipeline for graduation” (para 17).

As school districts see the potential for improving graduation rates, decisions to implement online credit recovery programs will be driven by school budget financial restraints as well. State funding is at stake when a district loses students to drop out statistics or if students go to alternative programs outside the district (Trotter, 2008). Because online learning does not require a “dramatic budget increase,” approaches to enrolling students in online environments allow school officials to “keep funding associated with those students” (Credit Recovery, 2009, p. 7).

Since districts lose state funding when students drop out of school, some educational leaders are concerned that “part of the push toward credit recovery may be financial” (McCabe & Andrie, 2012, p. 3). The growth of high school online credit recovery within the past two decades is far outpacing the research in regards to the best practices for student success, care, and experience. Moreover, according to Sawyers (2010), credit recovery curriculum now consists of \$500 million out of a \$2 billion digital educational market. School administrators may opt for different sources to initiate online credit recovery curriculum. Such options include national online education companies, state virtual schools, or district/school course content (Credit Recovery, 2009). One such model is a “hybrid” program or “blended” model.

Blended and Online Models

Blended learning models in credit recovery offer a mix of face-to-face and online learning instruction (Picciano & Seaman, 2009). In a blended/online environment, a student sees the content delivered online and uses online discussion; however, real-time instruction may be offered with teachers (McCabe & Andrie, 2012). Not only can high school students recover classes through the blended model, benefits can be accessible through a fully online program as well.

In a fully developed online model, students can access credits through online software and online participation (Credit Recovery, 2010). Options for online models include districts loading content to software providers or national online providers being used as resources for access, software,

and curriculum. Usually this setting provides “no face-to-face meetings or opportunities for real-time instruction; work is done at home or in school labs with little or no supervision” (McCabe & Andrie, 2012, para. 2). On-line communication is commonly categorized as either synchronous or asynchronous (Green, 2009). In the online synchronous design, teachers use instructional methods of instant messaging, phone conferencing, and live discussion to communicate with students (Green, 2009). In contrast, in the asynchronous method, students work on their own with self-guided lessons, and students and teachers do not interact in real time (Andrade, 2005). The table below outlines the differences between the characteristics of the two methods.

Table 1
Fully Online Communication Methods

Asynchronous	Synchronous
Self-guided curriculum	Curriculum in live time
Email	Phone conferences
Non-instantaneous communication	Instantaneous Web chat
Independent	Less independent

Note: Fully Online Communications Methods from Andrade, 2005; Green, 2009.

There is a wide array of implementation models for fully online instructional approaches that include options of vendor staffing, professional development, and technology support (Bakia et al., 2013). Commercial online providers also add to their e-learning environments by including the use of multimedia elements that include audio, video, and interactive games (Bakia et al., 2013).

A marketing interest of for-profit entities, such as *Plato*, *Pearson*, and *Apex*, is the at-risk student and the supports needed for this population. For example, in a 2013 Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation report, six online providers for an online Algebra I course were examined and factors of instructional approaches and implementation towards at-risk students were explored. In their key findings, the authors proposed that online providers should “build in more supports” to improve student confidence, resilience, and time-management (Bakia et al., 2013, p. 3). Additionally, the authors stated that to support “at-risk student’s success in online courses may require special consideration and instructional adjustment” (p. 2).

Recognizing that online learning can seem impersonal to adolescent learners, Velasquez, Graham and West (2013) explored technology choices by teachers to create caring relationships with students. Using Noddings' (1984) ethic of care model, the researchers interviewed teachers and students of an online high school to examine how they foster caring interactions and their technology preferences to facilitate care in the virtual classroom. Their findings indicated that students felt "understood and cared-for when they perceived that teachers jointly experienced the learning process with them by working together with the student towards a specific project" (p. 291). The authors further suggested future research is needed in online education to initiate additional exploration of their study and apply concepts to diverse populations—such as the at-risk learner. More significantly, there is a deficit of literature focusing on the phenomenon of care as it relates to at-risk students and their plight to graduate using online credit recovery programs.

Conceptualizing Care for At-Risk Students

The complexity of adolescent development and the interrelationships of an adolescent's "multiple worlds" leads to the possibility of students feeling vulnerable and disengaged (Erikson, 1963; Phelan, Davidson, and Cao, 1991). An at-risk student's academic effort, classroom performance, and success or failure is influenced by whether the student senses a feeling of belonging and perceives an attitude of caring by teachers (Goodenow, 1993).

The perception of care has become an increasingly significant concern for educational practice. Osterman (2002) indicated that a student's sense of belonging and acceptance strongly correlates to academic engagement. Additionally, Noddings (2003) challenged educators to understand the phenomenon of educational care and its relevance in educational settings. With multiple meanings, historical and present scholarly research focuses on caring and its many aspects to education and development (e.g. Mayerhoff, 1987; Noddings, 2003; Tronto, 1993). Understanding there are various aspects of care, Beck and Newman (1996) encouraged researchers to recognize the possibility that "care takes many forms and faces" (p. 172).

For at-risk students, the need for relational care is a recurring theme in research (e.g., Waterhouse, 2007; Watson & Gemin, 2008). Furthermore, without relational care from adults, the challenges that at-risk students face create a sense of being lost and overwhelmed (Greene, 2008). For these students, an organization, such as a school, that conceptualizes a community of care and caring culture is essential to defend isolation (Noddings, 2008). The critical component in caring for students who are at-risk is the perception that a school community is responsively empathic to their needs (Fein

et al., 2002; Waterhouse, 2007). For example, Waterhouse investigated at-risk students' experiences and states, "The participants (at-risk students) describe care as a complex, interwoven process of collaborative actions and personal attributes" (p. 96).

Caring for At-Risk Students in the Online Classroom

To date, researchers have focused on student interactions with an emphasis on autonomy and content of instruction. When looking at technology-mediated instruction, Rovai (2002) emphasized the importance of decreasing transactional distance and increasing social presence with immediacy as a foundational building block to form community in online courses. Furthermore, the author stated a perception of transactional distance varies among learner. However, an increase of dialogue and presence in virtual classrooms can reduce transactional distance for online students and create a "heightened awareness of social presence" (p. 8). Few studies exist that cross contexts of online education and center on the focal point of care (e.g. Goldstein & Freedman, 2005; Velasquez, Graham, & West, 2013).

Attempting to set an agenda for further research, the iNACOL Research Committee (2010) released a report on at-risk learners and online education which showed that current literature focuses on higher achieving students. The authors indicated a need for research to assist students at the "other end of spectrum" in the online environment (p. 19). Expanding on iNACOL's call for research of at-risk students and online education, Barbour and Siko (2012) conducted a case study of one at-risk student in a rural school who enrolled in a K-12 virtual school in order to graduate on time. The authors noted the at-risk student experienced difficulty with the demands of online productivity, and experienced limitations in accessing technology. Recognizing that online learning can seem impersonal to adolescent learners, Velasquez, Graham and West (2013) explored technology choices by teachers to create caring relationships with students. Using Noddings' (1984) ethic of care model, the researchers interviewed teachers and students of an online high school to examine how they foster caring interactions and their technology preferences to facilitate care in the virtual classroom. Their findings indicated that students felt "understood and cared-for when they perceived that teachers jointly experienced the learning process with them by working together with the student towards a specific project" (p. 291).

However, against the backdrop of distance education, few studies examine educational care from the voices of the online high school student (Barbour & Siko, 2012). Moreover, the literature is non-existent regarding the at-risk high school student's perception of care as it correlates and moves into the virtual classroom. Adding context to existing literature, this study listened to students' stories in order to examine perceived care of successful at-risk students who accessed credit recovery courses to obtain graduation requirements.

METHODS

Changes within education are often brought about from the interests of policy makers and administrators, and the voices of children and adolescents are often disregarded in a quest to improve educational process. Cook-Sather (2002) stated “it is time that we count students among those with authority to participate both in the critique and in the reform of education” (p. 3). Currently, there exists a lack of examination in the research of the voices within subgroups of the online environment. One manner of recognizing students in education is for “his or her story to be told” (Bingham, 2001, p. 36). A qualitative approach, rooted in a tradition of phenomenological inquiry, emphasizes the voice of students and deepens our understanding of their lives at school (van Manen, 1990). The purpose of this study is to add to the needed research regarding at-risk high school students’ perception of care in their journey from the traditional classroom to their participation in the online education environment. More specifically, this research asked: How do online at-risk youth who were successful in an asynchronous environment view the term care as it relates to their experience?

To understand perceptions of student care and virtual education, it is critical for this particular at-risk population to tell their stories and examine their perceptions of problems and support. A qualitative research, with a framework of hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990), allows the interpretation of the central concept of care through the voices of students who may be at-risk. This phenomenological approach intends to create meaning on the context of relationships and aspects within experience that may become overlooked in ordinary life (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). Considering phenomenology as an appropriate direction to explore phenomena, van Manen (1990) indicates the methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology espouses understanding of lived experiences and its essence of hidden meanings (Kafle, 2011; van Manen; 1990). Important to note in van Manen’s design is a research methodology with guiding principle, and not a research method. Furthermore, van Manen (1990) adds that the purpose of the interview process in hermeneutic phenomenology is to explore and gather narrative material and develop a relational conversation about the lived experience with the participant. To assume the uniqueness approach to the topic of care, the design of this study was flexible and fluid in nature and provided a venue for participants to tell their stories.

The Setting

Participants in this study were selected from a school district in the Mid-South United States. The school district consists of two high schools and one alternative high school. The district serves over 14,000 students and had an overall teacher to student ratio of 15.82 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010-2011). In an effort to promote high school resources and graduation rates, this particular district’s program allowed high school

students to take online credit courses during the school day, or in a computer lab at their home high school, or independently after school. In its last year of a three-year high school online pilot program, the district received funding by America's Promise Alliance, founded by General Colin Powell (2013). As part of the program, the district uses online curriculum provided by Apex Learning, Inc., a Seattle based-digital learning provider for secondary education (Apex, 2013; Bakia et al., 2013).

Apex Learning, Inc., is a large provider of online and blended programs that serves all 50 states and 72 countries (Apex, 2013). It allows students to work at their own pace, using a fully online asynchronous model. The school district in this study employs a coordinator to enroll students, work with district counselors, and monitor student progress with the Apex online software. Additionally, the district provides support to students using paraprofessionals to monitor the lab setting for technical help and enlist specific course content teachers, to be available one night a week. The availability of the school computer night lab provides access to the online course work; however, students are only required to attend the lab when taking course exams. Students may work on course content off-site.

Participants

The researcher purposefully selected at-risk participants who had successfully completed the online course curriculum to meet graduation requirements. This list of students was gathered not only by data, but also by interviews with the district online coordinator and high school counselors. While collecting participant data, school staff noted that the rates of course completion were low and the pool of successful participants in the program was small. Thus, the research sample size was generated from fourteen successful students within a school year who took a course online, and were identified as at-risk by school counselors and staff. These students were in the district's label of "dropout prevention" category. Based on availability, the researcher then conducted in-depth interviews with seven of these at-risk high school students in order to gather their perceptions of the phenomenon of care and their experience of online education. The seven participants were students who had fallen behind academically and then successfully completed an online course toward their high school's graduation requirements.

Data Collection and Analysis

The primary source of data was individual interviews with participants. The interview process opened with general questions about the participant and their educational experience. However, true to hermeneutic phenomenology design, the remainder of the interviews became fluid in nature (van Manen, 1990). The researcher did not have preconceived conclusions or predictions and allowed the participants to share glimpses of personal expe-

rience with care in their own words and recount their story with online education. Consistent with using the phenomenology interview method, Morse and Richards (2002) state phenomenological designs of study are descriptive in nature and allow a participant to experience the event. Each interview was conducted face-to-face at the student's home high school, lasted approximately sixty minutes, was recorded on a digital audio device, and then transcribed.

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach (van Manen, 1990) was used in synthesizing the interview data. The process of this hermeneutic framework is to find thematic statements and note lifeworld existentials in reflection (van Manen, 1990). The manner of uncovering thematic aspects within the study began with the highlighting of transcriptions. The criteria for annotating a theme stems from listening and reading transcripts of participants while noting dialogue relevant to the phenomenon (Smith, et al., 2009; van Manen, 1990). After transcribing the interviews and reviewing the participants' reflections, the researcher devised a means of finding and interpreting the threads of dialogue related to the phenomenon of care by journaling and highlighting interpretive comments. The means for capturing themes and subthemes for this study derives from van Manen's (1990) philosophy that certain fundamental existentials pervade all human beings, regardless of their particular situation in life. To reflect on the participants' perception of the phenomenon, van Manen's (1990) four existential lifeworlds of *lived time* (temporality), *lived space* (spatiality), *lived body* (corporeality), and *lived other* (relationality) guided the thematic analysis of each participant's responses (Table 2).

Table 2
The Four Existentials in Human Experience

Existential	Description
Lived Time (temporality)	A temporal reflection of being in the world. Includes a person's temporal landscape where time is subjective. It includes concepts of past, present, and future.
Lived Space (spatiality)	The way a person experiences day-to-day existence. It is the felt space and includes the way a person moves in that space.
Lived Body (corporeality)	A person's experience of being in the world. It is the essence of what is happening on the inside of a person, but not always revealed to the outside world.
Lived Other	A relational reflection. It is how humans relate with others in the interpersonal spaces shared.

Note: Reprinted from The Four Existentials in Human Experience van Manen, 1990.

Sociologist Fuchs (1993) suggested that when a field accompanies high uncertainty and a weak resource base, then the mode of intellectual dialogue and inquiry is that of hermeneutics. Investigations on the present state of the field of at-risk online credit recovery programs and care for these students closely fit with Fuch's criteria for a hermeneutic phenomenology study. The scope of van Manen's (1990) four existentials provided this researcher a methodology and means to generate a presentation of findings in narratives. Identified themes and findings connect to the current literature of at-risk students, care, and online learning.

Trustworthiness and Researcher Reflexivity

To add to the interpretation of the study, careful consideration took place of the elements of trustworthiness and the researcher's reflexivity within the research. This qualitative research design is a flexible study, and its findings are from participants with individual perspectives regarding a specialized setting. The study is not replicable. Credibility was distinguished in the study by the researcher providing truth in the depiction of participant's meanings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The researcher used techniques during the interview process that included clarification, focused attention, and recounting to the participant their lived experience perception (Seidman, 2006). In addition, the researcher included verbatim quotes directly from data collection to ensure the essence of meaning within the study.

The endeavors of hermeneutic phenomenology require the researcher to engage in a process of self-reflection (Munhall, 2007). Understanding one's core values and positions provides the researcher "with clues for orienting oneself to the phenomenon and thus to all other stages of phenomenological research" (van Manen, 1990, p. 57). After working twenty years as a school counselor in various settings, this researcher has witnessed the lives of children impacted by divorce, poverty, bullying, verbal and physical abuse, and the pressures of academic standards. While working with these students, it is hard not to wonder if they "will make it and graduate" and what will become of them if they do graduate. Through the years, the difficulty of working to find care for these students in the form of mentors and teachers has dominated this researcher's responsibilities working in public education.

Additionally, this researcher taught online courses in psychology. Thus, within this context, this researcher brings conceptions of working with students in the online environment and attempting to bridge the gap of transactional distance and engagement (e.g., Moore, 1993; Werner & Smith, 1992). Years of experience listening to students' stories are a continuous emotional experience for this researcher.

As the researcher, the interpretation of the participant's stories in this study is vital to understanding their emotional and social well-being. In this study, this researcher acknowledged that her own transformation occurred about a particular subject as she listened to each participant.

Additionally, she needed to avoid the “fixed signposts” and discover the “responses to the question at hand” that related to the phenomena (van Manen, 1990, p. 29). In doing this, it becomes easier to grasp the descriptive language and uncover layered themes of experience (van Manen, 1990). The complexity and movement of this hermeneutic phenomenological study highlights the participant’s understanding of the phenomenon, the researcher’s understanding of the participant’s lived experience, and the researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). Details of the findings will show a hermeneutic process that dialogues the horizon of the interpreter and horizon of the participants (or phenomenon) merge to gain a better understanding (Graber & Michum, 2004)

FINDINGS

When beginning the interview process, the researcher was cautioned by district staff, that according to their experience, the at-risk participants would not “talk much” and probably “did not have a lot to say.” However, during the interviews, each participant openly discussed their feelings and seemed to have a genuine desire to convey all aspects of their educational journey. The participants’ vivid reflections were organized into specific themes encompassing their *lifeworlds* (van Manen, 1990). van Manen’s thematic categories of temporal reflection (lived time), spatial reflection, (lived space), corporeal reflection (lived body) and relational reflection (lived other) assisted in interpreting participant meaning. The participants’ responses and recollections added to the overall analysis of the study findings. Additionally, their perceptions shed light on at-risk youth and views of care in educational practices and relationships.

Existential Lifeworlds

The four existentials of time, space, body and relation may be distinguished in the lived experience, but they cannot be separated (van Manen, 1990). Through interpretation, concept threads emerged connecting the participants’ perceptions of care as it related to their experience in traditional education and in their online learning experience that included: belonging/ isolation, unconditional positive regard/judgment, and the concept of help / not enough help (See Table 3).

Table 3
Participants' Lifeworld Themes

Lived Time	Lived Space	Lived Body	Lived Other
Specific Crisis or Difficulty	Belonging and/or Isolation	Unconditional Positive Regard and/or Judgment	Help and/or No Help

Temporality (lived time)

Our temporal way of being in the world involves the dimensions of past, present, and future (van Manen, 1990). When the participants were asked to trace their educational journey and their perception of care, all of the participants noted their suffering of specific life crisis or difficulties. One participant shared:

Middle school was kind of a bad era for me because my dad died. I didn't really care about attendance. It just didn't seem to matter that I didn't go to school.... My GPA went down and now that hinders me when I want to go to college.

Participants experienced life events and emotional complications, such as parental death, divorce, attempted suicide, learning difficulties, family responsibilities, and pregnancy. These events impacted the participants' existence in time.

Spatiality (lived space)

The felt space around a person largely impacts their experience in the day-to-day affairs of life (van Manen, 1990). Each of the participants gave detailed and varied responses concerning the spaces of their educational past. Several participants felt a sense of belonging in traditional school; however, some did not. All participants shared feelings of isolation within the traditional and online environment. For example:

I really had some issues in middle school. I got grades that were all over the place ...you know A's, B's and C's. I had two friends and they moved away after seventh grade. I felt that I had to start over in eighth grade, and it just didn't work out well. Eighth grade year was pretty lonely. I would go home after school and just sit around and do homework. I took piano and it was an outlet for me.

As each participant shared their struggle with lived space, they become connected with the different ways they sought alternatives from the spatiality of the traditional classroom. Online learning was a resource to avoid the requirements of their existing lived space. One participant expressed her desire for the online classroom in this sense:

They offered me the online class as an option. They said it would be like being in a classroom without all the people. They said I could go at my own pace. It would be really helpful with my depression, because some days with depression, you don't want to do anything. I was hoping that I could finish high school in online classes.

The online lived space provided a sense of hope and motivation to overcome the struggles of their temporality.

Corporeality (lived body)

To be bodily present in the world will affect the way a person interprets the world (van Manen, 1990; 1997). The seven participants characterized their perceptions of caring relationships as a form of unconditional positive regard towards themselves and their circumstances. These relationships included teachers, counselors, and parents; however, these relationships were exceptions to the participants' norm. One participant shared a specific example from her cheerleader squad:

They [the cheerleaders] were really mean to me. They would make me feel like I didn't have any friends. I did not actually have a good freshmen year. I just didn't feel like I belonged. I quit cheerleading. I didn't have any friends towards the end of my freshmen year. In fact, I started eating lunch every day in one of my teacher's rooms. She was a young teacher and you know, sometimes you just connect with teachers. I started to tell her about the cheerleader problems. She would listen.

The feeling of being judged was detailed in each participant's story regarding traditional classroom, but some participants also expressed a sense of judgment regarding their circumstances in the online environment as well.

Relationality (lived relation)

Within relationality, van Manen (1990) suggests there is a dimension of influence of others, and it can be altered with interactions of others. Interpersonal relationships, or the noticeable lack thereof, had a profound impact on the participants when it came to defining their views of care. When describing relationships, the participants shared their stories of discontent with

those who did not care because they “did not help them” in both their traditional and online educational journeys. For example, the traditional environment, one participant recounted this experience:

I was in advanced classes. My geometry teacher was the worse. He would get up and teach a lesson, and then he would go play games on his computer. He would give us our homework assignment and say “work on it.” He would not control his class. I felt that like he wasn’t into it. I mean I would go up and ask a question, and he would just explain it like the lesson and it would just be a half-way attempt.

Furthermore, the participants described caring teachers or others who helped them with their individual circumstances. One participant shared this example after her suicide attempt:

I was put in a children’s hospital for ten days and I missed quite a bit of school. I missed finals week. I was exempted from my finals for that though. It seemed the school system understood during that time. My French teacher actually came to see me in the hospital. I tried to continue on and go to school dealing with my stuff.

Their perceptions of these interactions are congruent with van Manen’s (1990) description of lived relationships that humans maintain with others in the interpersonal space they share with them.

It was not the intent in the study to find the one precise definition of care, but rather to examine and inquire of its meaning and value. By listening to the participants’ voices regarding the significance of care, two contextual themes were revealed. These themes are detailed below under the framework of care, and the opposite of the perception—the theme of *non-care*.

The Context of Care

The traditional relationship between student and teacher are central elements to the ethics of care in education (Maurer, 2005; Noddings, 2002). Lan and Lanthier (2003) emphasize preventing student disengagement and dropout rates; schools need “friendly and supportive environments that pay close attention to the students’ needs” (p. 327). In their traditional educational experience, participants evaluated their context of care in reference to teachers and other school community members. They voiced how the act of caring was an important component to their enjoyment and willingness to learn and become engaged in school. Each participant expressed how care characteristics seemed individualized for their circumstances and its unique significance in their perception of care. One participant noted this concept:

You know, care is when someone has respect for you, so you have respect for them. You can go to them about anything and they will listen and probably try to help you. You feel that you can ask questions if you need to, and it just feels more open.

The participants shared perceptions of care in the online environment, the participants shared perceptions of care that were exhibited by others as a sense of help and unconditional positive regard. Specifically, participants noted the descriptions of meaningful adults that helped and supported their educational journey.

A Sense of Help and Unconditional Positive Regard

Caring and support from good teaching practices give specific benefits to at-risk students (Maurer, 2005). In their study of dropout students, Bridge-land et al. (2006) find adolescents desire attention from others in the school setting and “a teacher who cares about their school success” (p. 13). The at-risk participants in this study regarded care as the act of “helping” with the difficulties in the educational curriculum and with their life circumstances. If teachers were willing to assume a role of help and guidance when they needed it, the participants voiced the perception of a caring person. One participant noted an example:

They showed a genuine interest in me. They would talk to me like I was a human being and equal. They would actually try to get to know me. At some point, it would seem like that they weren’t an authority figure. I felt like I was actually having a conversation with someone.

Participants noted a lack of assistance in the online setting; however, a few of the participants found help and care elsewhere. Many others found either parental or school staff support helpful in their successful completion of courses. For example, by accessing her school counselor for help, one participant found someone who understood and took time to know the reality of her circumstances and her school struggles (Noddings, 2003). She commented:

She [school counselor] would check on me and I would email her when I was done with a class. There was a project for the art class where you had to take a picture and talk about it. I couldn’t get a hold of a teacher to ask about the project. I mean I didn’t have a real camera or anything to take a picture. The counselor helped me get in touch with a teacher.

Based on the premise of Maslow’s (1970) ideas of human needs for self-actualization and belonging, Rogers (1980), a humanistic psychologist, coined the term “unconditional positive regard” which she defined as “an

acceptance of this other individual as a separate person, a respect for the other as having worth in his or her own right. It is a basic trust—a belief that this other person is somehow fundamentally trustworthy” (p. 271).

Participants highlighted important interactions with unconditional positive regard from counselors and parents while they took online course credits. Former teachers were noted as caring relationships while the students moved through the online credit recovery courses.

The actions of teachers from previous classes were noted as continuing relationships by checking on students and encouraging course completion. One participant noted she would often “go hang out” in her former teacher’s classroom to work on online assignments. Participants also emphasized the existence of unconditional positive regard through their immediate family while they worked through the online environment. Many noted the role parents played a support system as they navigated their way through the online course.

The Context of Non-Care

Sadly, the participants also made known the impact of non-care in both the traditional and online classroom. A sense of *isolation*, *judgment*, and *lacking help* is evident in their stories. For example, participants voiced their examples that included:

My junior year, I went a lot less. I hated going to school, I would be so unhappy. I think teachers and other staff at the school need to try and connect with you. They just don’t try.

You feel very isolated in the online classroom. I actually like traditional school better. When I went online, I lost the few friends that I had.

You don’t talk to anybody online. When you go into the lab, you sign your name, and they have to come unlock your test. When the class was online, I was already prepared that it was going to be independent, and I was going to be by myself. What I didn’t like, was going into the lab, and the person that was in the lab just didn’t seem to care that I was there.

The uncovering of these themes is congruent with the literature concerning at-risk youth and the effects of uncaring relationships and environments. Numerous factors contribute to schools potentially diminishing the positive development of at-risk students (Cummins, 1986). These features include

impersonal and distant relationships, large class sizes that reduce students to a passive role, and atmospheres of pressure and constraint (Fine, 1991; Noddings, 1984, 2003).

Within the school environment, research also stated teachers often disengage themselves from students who carry a stigma of deficiency, and this attitude serves as a contagion to others, such as peers, in the form of isolation (Cameron & Shephard, 2006; Wehlage et al., 1989; Wotherspoon & Shissel, 2001). At some point in each participant's journey in the traditional classroom, a sense of non-care manifested itself with relationships within the school community.

Isolation and Judgment

The participants verbalized a sense of isolation during their time in both the traditional and online environments. Evidence supports that a school environment strongly affects a student's outlook on belonging and participation in school (Finn and Rock, 1997; Goodenow, 1993; Wehlage et al., 1989; Wilms, 2000). Students who are at-risk often encounter the obstacles of balancing school expectations with the circumstances of their personal lives, and, as a result, they sense alienation from school culture (Fine, 1986). During their interviews, participants indicated their feeling of isolation stemmed from a slow withdraw from school and from others. Some participants also suggested their "introverted" personality or a personal temperament of being "shy" or "quiet" contributed to their disengagement from school and the traditional environment.

The participants used words such as "alone" and "isolating" to describe their time online and meeting the requirement of going to the online resource room. There is a potential for any student who uses asynchronous distance education programs to "experience a feeling of isolation . . . students have to work mostly on their own, with little contact with other students and instructors" (Green, 2009, p. 31). When describing the district computer lab provided to take online course tests and complete work, participants noted experiences similar to the following:

It wasn't what I expected. I felt alone. You definitely don't have friends in there. You eventually may say "hi" to someone, but you don't make friends in the lab. You can't because you can't talk a lot and everybody has on headphones.

In the participants' account of their educational path, the phrase "judged" or "not wanting to be judged" referred to their impressions of relating to peers and teachers in the traditional school setting. Although not as prevalent in the online classroom, feelings of "being judged" and peer stigmatization influenced their decision to begin online course credit. Research demonstrates how the effects of teacher-student relationships and teacher behaviors are

associated with an adolescent's emotional adjustment and academic success (Demaray & Malecki, 2002; Moses, 2010). There was a general sense, from the participants' accounts, that choosing to access online learning led to hope of protection from judgment of others and help for an alternative way to graduate. As one participant noted:

A lot of what my teachers' saw was the perception of someone slacking off in their class. I just don't think teachers realize that kids go through stuff. I mean I wasn't the only one going through some stuff.

Once in the online setting, the participants voiced frustration navigating through nonverbal communication of being judged for their presence in the online credit recovery program.

I know they labeled me as a potential drop-out, and I don't like being put in a category. I'm in here because I have circumstances that are out of my control.

While battling their personal challenges, participants also noted problems of interpersonal relationships and "getting help" in both the traditional school and online education.

Lack of Help

During each interview, participants described their daily routine of taking online course credit and their sense of engagement in the process. Participants described logging on to the website, selecting a class, and working through tutorials. Although the participants enjoyed the convenience of online learning, they voiced a strong dislike towards a perceived "lack of help" and a sense of non-care in the online environment. Several of the participants complained of becoming "locked out" of the software after wrongly answering questions to assignment questions, or getting "stuck" during assignments. They indicated their need for human interaction to provide answers and help getting "unstuck" from their course problem. One student stated, "It [online class] won't let you move forward if you get stuck. You have to wait to find help. It would have been nice to have a connection with someone online." Similarly, another student shared:

There seems to be a lot of waiting in class. I feel like the idea of an online class is to help you just get it done. To make you wait for help or other stuff is really frustrating. It doesn't make it sense. Just getting into the online class there was a lot of waiting. And if you get locked out because you did something wrong, it was still waiting around.

Although the study participants anticipated an independent atmosphere in online learning, they expressed their surprise at having to seek out help with assignments and with questions.

Often participants described a comparison of traditional methods with their online classroom and pointed out the deficits of online “help” with their work. While some parental support was described at home, participants still noted specific struggles with questions. For instance, one participant discussed going to the night computer lab to complete her online course:

I would have to go back to the night lab when my specific teacher would be there. In the regular classroom, I was used to getting help when I needed it. The lab monitor didn't know anything about my courses.

Another student added, “I would say a downside of online school is nobody helps you. Email doesn't really work. It's a lot easier to get help when someone is standing right there.”

The participants' examples of non-care experiences with isolation, judgment, and lack of help expressed problems in their navigation of academic issues and social dynamics. Impassioned responses of frustration and anger were evident in their voices as they recounted a lack of support in meeting their social and emotional needs during their educational journey. Further examination of the participants' responses reveals the critical issue of how these adolescents, considered at-risk, were able to successfully complete their online courses despite their perception of non-care. The factors governing their success are explored below in the following section. Additionally, recommendations for at-risk youth, online learning, and care as it relates to this study and the implications in future research.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to inquire and question the meaning of care for the online at-risk youth. As previously outlined in the literature, defining care is a difficult task. However, Rauner (2000) notes the importance of understanding students' care relationships and how “these experiences relate to the overall context of their lives” (p. 61). In this study, at-risk participants perceived care and non-care as components to their success in school and to the survival of their circumstances. Non-care was a predominant factor in the participants' school experience and resulted in their leaving the traditional high school classroom. Nevertheless, these students overcame barriers of non-care and successfully completed courses in an asynchronous online environment.

When using the framework of hermeneutic phenomenology, the process attempts to maintain a full interpretation of meaning and keep the phenomenon open for possibility (van Manen, 1990). While interpreting the descriptive accounts of the participants' experiences, a deeper question emerged as to how these students were successful in the online classroom, despite having a perception of non-care components. Research explains the current participants' success as a component of resilience or a development of protective factors (Benard, 1993; Finn & Rock, 1997). Despite challenges of isolation, judgment, and lack of help, each at-risk participant defied adversity and obtained credit from an online course. For example, one participant mentioned, "I realized that I was about to graduate, and I needed to kick it in high gear. If I didn't, I knew that I was not going to graduate on time."

Moving beyond their descriptive awareness of care, this researcher uncovered interwoven influences, such as personal attributes, intense motivation, and a capacity to seek and desire help from others, which contributed to their success in online learning.

Personal Attributes

As participants talked about themselves, many used various personality descriptors such as "quiet" and "shy" to illustrate their persona in the traditional classroom. Current literature shows successful online students demonstrate a preference towards an autonomous style of learning and higher academic self-efficacy (Boyd, 2004; Green, 2009; Reisetter, 2004; Rosser & Nelson, 2012; Vonderwell, 2003). Furthermore, Santo (2001) stated students who prefer online learning have a lower level of extraversion than others. Cain (2012) states the traditional school environment "can be a highly unnatural, especially for an introverted child who loves to work intensely on projects he cares about, and hang out with one or two friends at a time" (p. 253).

In addition to introverted descriptors, several participants indicated they were identified as gifted and talented in early education. Bandura (1993) maintains students hold various beliefs about their ability to handle tasks. For example, a student with high academic self-efficacy will persevere through challenges; whereas a student with low self-efficacy will shy away and retreat. Roblyer and Marshall (2002) find students with high academic self-efficacy have favorable success with online learning. Several of the participants discussed successful grades were important to them and easy to achieve when they made an effort. When discussing the online environment, participants indicated high levels of reading and taking notes were required in their asynchronous online curriculum. Like others in the study, one participant emphasized her ability to combat these reading and writing challenges by stating:

I'm fairly smart once I put my mind to it. I think it helped that I was good at reading, writing and comprehending stuff. It just comes naturally for me. In regular class, I would get bored in English because I thought I was learning the same stuff over and over again. In the online class, I think I learned some new things. That was pretty neat.

Motivation

While the lifeline of individual traits was a common protective factor to success, the participants also focused on a motivation to graduate from high school (R. Cairns & D. Cairns, 1994). A central motivating factor in completing online course work is a student's locus of control and self-efficacy (Huckabee, 2010; Schrum & Hong, 2002). Rotter (1966) refers to locus of control as "the degree to which a person expects that reinforcement, or an outcome of their behavior, is contingent on their own behavior or personal characteristics" (p. 489). Despite their negative experiences in the traditional environment, the study's participants entered the online setting with both a will and a desire to fulfill course requirements and a determination to graduate. One participant considered the following:

I could've chosen not to even try at the online thing, but I was motivated to do it. I just wanted to knock it out. It started to sink in that high school really does matter, and if you got a bad GPA, then colleges will not even look at you.

In addition to being comfortable with small settings and having motivation to graduate, several participants indicated they sought help to have success in the online environment.

Self-Regulation—Finding Care

By interpretation of their stories, it is apparent participants viewed care as a form of support and help in their education. In addition to being comfortable with small settings and having the motivation to graduate, several indicated they sought out help to have success in the online environment. Despite the asynchronous online environments having little face-to-face contact, an attribute of several study participants was a strategy to seek out help from others during their online experience. As they struggled with content in the curriculum, students with high self-regulation will possess "self-awareness and strategic knowledge to take corrective action" (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 2).

Evaluating the use of Apex curriculum with students in a blended learning environment, Huckabee (2012) found successful students with high self-regulation strategies regularly seek help from teachers, peers, and academic coaches. Similarly, in this research, Jill explained her annoyance of devising a strategy for completing assignments. She further notes:

I got really frustrated when there wasn't a teacher available to help with certain subjects. I had to wait until a certain day to go ask the math teacher for help. If it was Monday, and I was having trouble with math, I would have to wait for the math teacher to come in one Thursday night to help me complete the assignment.

Participants also acknowledged getting help from parents, school counselors and previous teachers. Zimmerman (2002) found a component of self-regulation is the resourcefulness of students understanding their learning environment and learning needs. Furthermore, students with high self-regulation will alter their physical learning setting to meet their preferences for learning (Huckabee, 2012; Roblyer & Marshall, 2002; Zimmerman, 2002). Desiring to graduate, but having no success in the regular classroom, the study's participants moved to the online setting.

Through the interpretation of participant interviews, this study addressed the question regarding perceptions of care for students who are at-risk who were successful in the online classroom. Although this study was a small sample of at-risk student voices, it underlined presumptions and challenges surrounding online learning and the care received by students who may be at-risk. The following section explores the prevalent inferences and difficulties addressing the successful congruence of at-risk learners, online learning, and care.

Challenges for At-Risk Students, Online Learning, and Contextualizing Care

At the beginning of this study, this researcher set out to interview students who were considered at-risk as defined by school district personnel. These students had life crisis challenges, but also recognized their need to finish school. The study participants chose online learning as an alternative to traditional school, and as a means of combating their elusive dropout prevention label. They wanted to finish their education, but needed an alternative way in order to combat obstacles in their life.

By choosing online learning, participants in this study found a successful alternative to complete the courses they needed to graduate. However, after evaluating their experience, they believed their satisfaction with online courses would have been better with a synchronous or a more

assistive type of environment. While it is the student's decision to choose online courses, it is the educators' task and responsibility to produce quality learning experiences in the online classroom (Chen, 2004). Research with credit recovery programs for learners who are at-risk shows a preference for using a mediated or blended online environment, allowing time for face-to-face teacher support and individualized instruction (Huckabee, 2010; Watson et al., 2008). As the literature notes, online programs are not for everyone, and online environments often have higher dropout rates (Bakia et al., 2013; Barbour, 2012; Palisoc, 2013; Uhlig, 2002; Watson & Gemin, 2008).

The choice of having a fully online or blended learning lab dictates how students will access care, in the form of help, and how they will be successful in a specific online environment. As one participant noted, "there is no help button" in the online classroom. Strategies that encompass face-to-face curriculum support and provide navigation of online environments are often needed to increase at-risk learners' online performance (Huckabee, 2012; Borup et al., 2014).

Shedding light on the challenge of providing care for at-risk online students, the participants in this study made their own suggestions for online care. Their answers focused on teacher availability and support must be in place for care to exist and matter. Recent research highlights on-site facilitators can directly assist students and can be the key to motivating student ability in online course (Robyler, Freeman, Stabler, & Scheidmiller, 2007). Additionally, participants voiced a desire for someone to care about their plight to graduate and to understand their sense of powerlessness in the traditional high school setting. They highlighted a need for school staff to offer consistent assistance and timely communication regarding required graduation credits, enrollment changes, and procedures. In other words, when students who are at-risk choose an online alternative journey to complete graduation requirements, they do not want to be forgotten by the school community (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006).

Recommendations from Participants

The intent of this research was to focus on the student voice. Consequently, during the interviews, this researcher asked each participant to describe their ideal learning environment and, if they wanted, to give recommendations for online learning. Their suggestions for care and help reinforce the findings of this study. For example, one participant highlighted the importance of individual attention in the classroom:

It's important to have a teacher that could come to you and check on you as an individual. I think it is important that if you do badly, you need to have a teacher come to you and help you.

Talking about the need for online relationships, one participant voiced an opinion that online high schools should model the online course of her current higher education class:

I like college online better than high school. For one thing, you have an assigned professor for your class. There's actually a whole class that like online, so you're not having to do it all by yourself. There is discussion going on as well, and the professor talks to the class online. You have access to email and chat to both the professor, and even the people in your class.

In their comments about online learning, participants specifically outlined a recommendation for teacher interaction in the online classroom. In her suggestion, one participant highlighted a specific recommendation, also noted by other participants, to enhance care in the online classroom:

I think offering online is a caring thing to do. I mean it offers another way. Sometimes you just can't come to school, and this is another way. It offers more flexibility. I mean in the online classroom, kids are doing it for different reasons, and it is very self-paced, so I think the teachers need to be more understanding. I mean if someone is caring about you and wants you to accomplish something, it motivates you. It makes you think you can do it, and you will accomplish something and be proud of it.

As these participants noted, finding the right method or system to define students will not enhance care in a student's life. Instead, barriers need to be removed and supports put in place for students to achieve success in their educational endeavors. Additionally, additional research needs to be conducted and questions need to be answered to help at-risk students experience success in the online environment.

Implications for Future Research

Although the framework and methods of this study cannot be generalized to other settings, key issues in this study, regarding care, at-risk youth, and online education, highlight the need for additional research activity. A number of scholarly endeavors could provide starting points for additional research and address the limitations of this study. For instance, a more experimental, quantitative design could be used to evaluate alternative methods used for high school graduation. Furthermore, using the foundation of this study, research is needed to examine the underlying perceptions of at-risk youth in the school community and the criteria used to recommend

students for online credit recovery programs. As this study focused on success, a research endeavor moving forward is needed to evaluate perceptions of online care from those who do not successfully complete or withdraw from online high school courses.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of educational care is more than a relationship with a teacher or school staff member. As the study's participants aptly described their journey and their perception of care, it is now the responsibility of educators to understand the impact of student problems. Additionally, at the core of care, is the willingness to offer support and help for all students by providing caring alternatives in education.

The current research shows that students who are at-risk care about school. Understandably, there are challenges of defining needs within a student population. However, educators should consider program choices in online learning that reflect a caring environment for students. Furthermore, if educators focus on creating a school community that validates students and their life problems, then the act of caring will empower students to learn and feel a sense of belonging as they move toward graduation.

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