

**A Narrative of Successful Graduates Raised in Single-Parent Homes
while Attending Rural Title I Schools**

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ABSTRACT

Across the United States each year, schools implement national and state reforms dedicated to improving district personnel, district budgets, and district instructional resources for the improvement of student achievement and career readiness. In the last twenty years, Georgia schools failed to significantly improve student graduation performance, this is particularly true for students living in rural, single-parent households (County Health Rankings, 2019; Dalton, 2019 GADOE, 2019; KCDC, 2019). The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of students who graduated from high school, came from single parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district. I incorporated an embedded, exploratory case study with a multiple-case design and investigated the social and academic experiences of six participants (Yin, 2018). Participants were identified from two rural, Title I school districts in central Georgia through the use of both snowball and purposive sampling procedures (Guetterman, 2015). After analyzing participant data, I concluded high school graduates who lived in single-parent households and attended rural Title I school districts established a secure attachment to overcome or eliminate associated risks. When the consequences were minimized or eliminated in a student's home microsystem, the effects were noticeable in their school microsystem.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Since 2001, states have responded to the requirements of national school reform under No Child Left Behind ([NCLB], 2002) and the Every Student Succeeds Act ([ESSA], 2015). Each reform directive focused on improving school performance by increasing professional learning opportunities, financial sustenance, and school improvement support for underperforming schools. NCLB required states to develop and administer federally approved standards-based assessments to gauge student achievement.

To increase accountability at the secondary level, the federal government required the adjusted graduation cohort rate as an additional indicator in 2010 under NCLB. The adjusted graduation cohort rate is the measure of students who successfully complete high school in 4 years. The adjusted graduation cohort rate became the determinant for success in the United States, because the federal and state governments connect proficiency with a school's graduation rate. Likewise, students are labeled successful if they graduate and receive their diploma within four academic years.

The reported adjusted graduation cohort rate for the 2010-2011 school year in Georgia was 81%, but after revisions were made to calculation guidelines, the reported graduation rate for 2011-2012 was 67% (Dalton, 2019). The 2018 College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) report released by the Georgia Department of Education [GADOE], (2019) determined the adjusted cohort graduation for all Georgia schools was 81.6%. The state average for children

living in single parent homes between 2013-2017 was 37% of the population (Kids Count Data Center [KCDC], 2019; County Health Rankings, 2019).

A single-parent household can be defined as a household in which one parent, mother or father, is absent due to divorce, death, separation, deployment, or out-of-wedlock pregnancy (Meier et al. 2016). Per the American Community Survey estimate (2018), 17.7% of family households were single-parent households; of those 4.8% were male head-of-household and 12.9% were female head-of-household. Recent studies have shown a relationship between students living in single-parent homes and poor academic success. On average, students living in single-parent households have a lower reported GPA than students living in two-parent homes (O'Malley et al., 2015). In 2015, Wilcox and Zill reported in its publication, *Strong Families, Strong Schools*, students living in two-parent, married homes are the biggest predictor of high school graduation rate and greater academic achievement.

The difference in student achievement for single-parent homes and two-parent homes could be attributed to a variety of risk factors influencing a student's environment, and more specifically, a student's macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). An individual's macrosystem is the interactions occurring between other people and places shaping their culture and environment. A macrosystem is subdivided into three levels: microsystems, mesosystems, and exosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). The direct interactions transpiring between an individual and their various environments is a microsystem. An individual could have many microsystems depending on the populations and communities with which they interact regularly. Microsystems encompass relationships an individual has with their school, family, and friends. The mesosystem is defined by the exchanges between two or more microsystems. The relationship between a student's parent(s) and their school is an example of a mesosystem. An exosystem

encompasses the indirect relationships a child has with his or her environment. For example, an exosystem might be the relationship a parent has with their employer and how that relationship affects a student's home environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Students living in single-parent homes could experience a fractured macrosystem due to risk factors such as stress, poor parent-child interactions, low socioeconomic status, parental education, and single-parent family structure (O'Malley et al., 2015; Reardon 2011; Turner & Juntune, 2018).

The negative consequences associated with risk factors can be counteracted with promotive and protective factors. The internal and external assets a student possesses are promotive factors. The assets allowing a student to close gaps in social and academic microsystems are protective factors. Intrinsically-motivated individuals, positive parent-child relationships, positive school climate, and supportive peers are all examples of promotive and protective factors (Reardon, 2011).

Problem Statement

National school reform began in 1965 with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) enacted by President Lyndon Johnson. ESEA was established to provide "equal access to a quality education" and was the cornerstone of Johnson's "War on Poverty". The tenets of ESEA were to provide funding for primary and secondary education, increase expectations, and provide accountability measures. ESEA funding provided for professional learning, instructional materials, resources, and the promotion of parental involvement. The greatest accomplishment associated with ESEA was the creation of the nation's Title I program to distribute additional funding to schools and districts with an increased percentage of economically disadvantaged students. Initially, Title I funding provided for instructional materials and professional learning to help educators close the gap between economically disadvantaged and advantaged students in

the areas of reading, writing, and math. Title I funding continues to provide schools with instructional materials and professional learning, but the focus has shifted to overall school performance and graduation rate (GADOE, 2019). Georgia currently has 492 high schools and 263 of those schools are designated as Title I schools (GADOE, 2019).

The ESEA is reauthorized every five years. NCLB was the reauthorization of ESEA under George W. Bush's administration. NCLB presented drastic changes to school reform as accountability became a measurable objective for teachers and students. During the NCLB era, the Department of Education's undersecretary Margaret Spellings introduced an adjusted graduation cohort rate as a new measure required for high school accountability. The adjusted graduation cohort rate is equal to the number of students within a cohort who graduated on time. The number is calculated by dividing the number of graduating seniors by the number of students who entered 9th grade four years prior to graduation. The calculation and accountability measure for graduation rate are still a requirement of ESEA under the new reauthorization ESSA.

The national average for graduation rate has increased gradually since 2011, the year graduation rate became an accountability measure. The national average for adjusted cohort graduation rate in 2017 was 84.6%, an increase of 5 points since 2011 (Balfanz, 2019; Balingit, 2017). Georgia's graduation rate initially soared, but little progress has been demonstrated in the last four years. The initial graduation rate for Georgia schools in 2011 was 69.7%. The average graduation rate for all Georgia schools in 2018 was 81.6%, an increase of 10.9 points since 2011 (GADOE, 2019). The statistics are encouraging for students attending urban and suburban, non-Title I schools. However, students attending rural, Title I schools may experience less success. According to the CCRPI data for 2017-2018, 323 Georgia high schools were at or above the

81.6% state graduation rate of which 47 were designated as both Title I and rural (GADOE, 2019). To provide a frame of reference, in 2017 Georgia designated 128 high schools as rural, 263 high schools received Title I funding and 55 schools were labeled as rural and Title I (GADOE, 2019; Georgia Office of Student Achievement [GOSA], 2019).

In 2015, Wilcox and Zill reported in their publication, *Strong Families, Strong Schools*, students living in two-parent, married homes are the biggest predictor of high school graduation rate. Likewise, family structure has a greater role in determining student success than race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. The state average for Georgia single-parent homes between 2012-2016 was 34.6 % of the population (KCDC, 2019). When examining the bottom 10% of traditional 9-12 high schools for adjusted cohort graduation rate, I found four schools were rural, 26 schools received Title I funds, and eight schools had a percentage of single-parent homes greater than 50% (County Health Rankings, 2019). In contrast, the top 10% of districts for adjusted cohort graduation rate were composed of 12 rural schools, 13 schools receiving Title I funding, and three schools had greater than 50% of children living in single-parent homes (County Health Rankings, 2019). The graduation rate in Georgia has not shown significant improvement since 2012 and this is particularly true for students living in rural, single-parent households.

Despite years of national and state school reform focused on increasing human, financial, and fiscal resources to improve student achievement and career readiness, Georgia schools have failed to significantly improve student graduation performance. In Georgia, students from single-parent homes are more than twice as likely not to graduate from high school when compared to all Georgia high school students.

Purpose Statement

When examining adjusted cohort graduation rate for the 2017-2018 school year and comparing the top 10% to the bottom 10% of traditional schools, it is obvious that Title I status, geography, and family structure play a role in graduation. However, the difference between schools is not staggering, and there are students who are able to overcome the stressors in their environment - socioeconomic status, limited parental involvement, or reduced access to high-quality teachers or educational materials.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of students who graduated from high school, came from single parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district. The risks associated with the target population are rural education, possible low socioeconomic status, and single-parent households. Through their experiences, I hope to identify promotive and protective factors that helped them overcome risk factors.

Research Questions

This research builds on the idea the individual's social and academic life experiences shape their eventual success or failure. The following research questions will guide this study:

- Research Question 1. What were the social and academic life experiences of students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district?
- Research Question 2. What were the perceived barriers experienced by students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district?

- Research Question 3. What strategies were used by students to graduate from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district?

Life experience is the combination of smaller experiences used to either enhance or diminish an individual's identity (Merriam, 2002). The social and academic experiences occurring within a person's macrosystem can be either positive or negative. Understanding a high school graduate's response to positive and negative experiences may provide insight into their success.

Significance of Study

Despite years of national and state school reform focused on increasing human, financial, and fiscal resources to improve student achievement and career readiness, Georgia schools have failed to significantly improve student graduation rates (Dalton, 2019; GADOE, 2019; KCDC, 2019). In Georgia, students from single-parent homes are more than twice as likely not to graduate from high school when compared to all Georgia high school students (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1995; Parke, 2003; Wilcox & Zill, 2017). The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district. Teachers, administrators, educational policymakers, those entrusted with the training of these educators, single parents, and students may benefit from this study. Voices of high school graduates from single-parent homes may inspire parents who may be struggling in raising their children. Valuable perspectives about these students may be contrary to recent trends in research and a voice for successful high school graduates from single-parent homes in rural areas.

Conceptual Framework

Bronfenbrenner (1979), a developmental expert in the twentieth century, took a different approach in defining how individuals develop and determine self. Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed the ecological systems theory based on the principle an organism is connected to his or her environment, and the organism's development is grounded in environmental influences. The essential components of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory fit together like a set of measuring cups. Those "cups" are the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem.

The central setting, the microsystem, refers to the most intimate interactions an individual has with his or her environment. Examples of one's microsystem might be their immediate family and home environment, co-workers and working environment, or close peers in a school environment. Bronfenbrenner (1979) spent a great deal of time in this theory explaining the composition of elements of an individual's microsystem. He began by distinguishing the relevance of molar activities. A molar activity is defined as, ". . .an ongoing behavior possessing momentum of its own and perceived as having meaning or intent by the participants in the setting" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, pg. 45). In other words, the individual becomes more complex as they can maintain more than one molar activity and relationship simultaneously.

Aside from molar activities, the relationships an individual has with those persons in his or her microsystems are foundational. Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 56) defined a relation as ". . . whenever one person in a setting pays attention to or participates in the activities of another." Bronfenbrenner pushes further with the definition of relations by explaining a relationship is a dyad, or when two people interact and participate in one another's activities. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), a dyad is essential because it is both critical and foundational to

ecological development. Maynard et al. (2014) supported Bronfenbrenner's research by suggesting positive and supportive dyads are crucial to development. In their study, Maynard et al. (2014) discovered a direct correlation between dyadic relationships and school engagement.

The relationships, or dyads, existing between two microsystems are an individual's mesosystem. There are two forms of linkages within a mesosystem: multi-setting participation and indirect coupling. Multi-setting participation occurs when an individual participates in more than one microsystem. This creates an ecological transition between both microsystems. For example, when a teenager spends one-third of their day at school, one-third at home, and one-third at work they participate in three microsystems. If the same teenager has a sibling in the same school, then the teenager experiences multi-setting participation because of their sibling in both the home and school microsystem. The teenager is known as the primary link, and their sibling is known as a supplementary link. The relationship between both individuals is known as a linking dyad. An indirect linkage is when two people are linked, but they do not share a microsystem. The relationship occurs because they are connected by a third person who exists in their respective microsystems. For example, two teenagers who attend separate high schools begin a relationship with one another because a mutual friend introduces them. Blandin (2017) provided empirical support for Bronfenbrenner's hypothesis regarding the importance of home and school connectedness. In Blandin's (2017) review of literature, she found multiple studies citing the importance and correlation between positive home and school connectedness. Sommerfeld (2016) provided empirical evidence regarding post-secondary attainment where peer, parental, and personal expectations guide an individual's success in school. Thus, the intertwining relationships between microsystems can support an individual's high school success.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 237) defined the exosystem as “. . . consisting of one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant but in which events occur that effect, or are affected by, what happens in that setting.” Consequently, relationships occurring in the exosystem do not directly involve the central individual, but they are influenced or affected by those relationships. For example, a teacher’s mood is altered to anger because she received a low score on her yearly evaluation before entering the classroom, and she sits glumly at her desk. The students in the school are affected by the teacher’s relationship with her employer because they do not receive instruction during her class period. While the exosystem is an essential layer in Bronfenbrenner’s theory, it will not be a focus for this study.

The last tier of an individual’s ecological environment is the macrosystem. This level is deeply rooted, all-encompassing, and influenced by one’s cultures and subcultures on all relationships. For example, if an individual is raised in a Catholic household, they learn from an early age the importance of monogamy and marriage. The macrosystem touches every facet of an individual’s ecological system, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

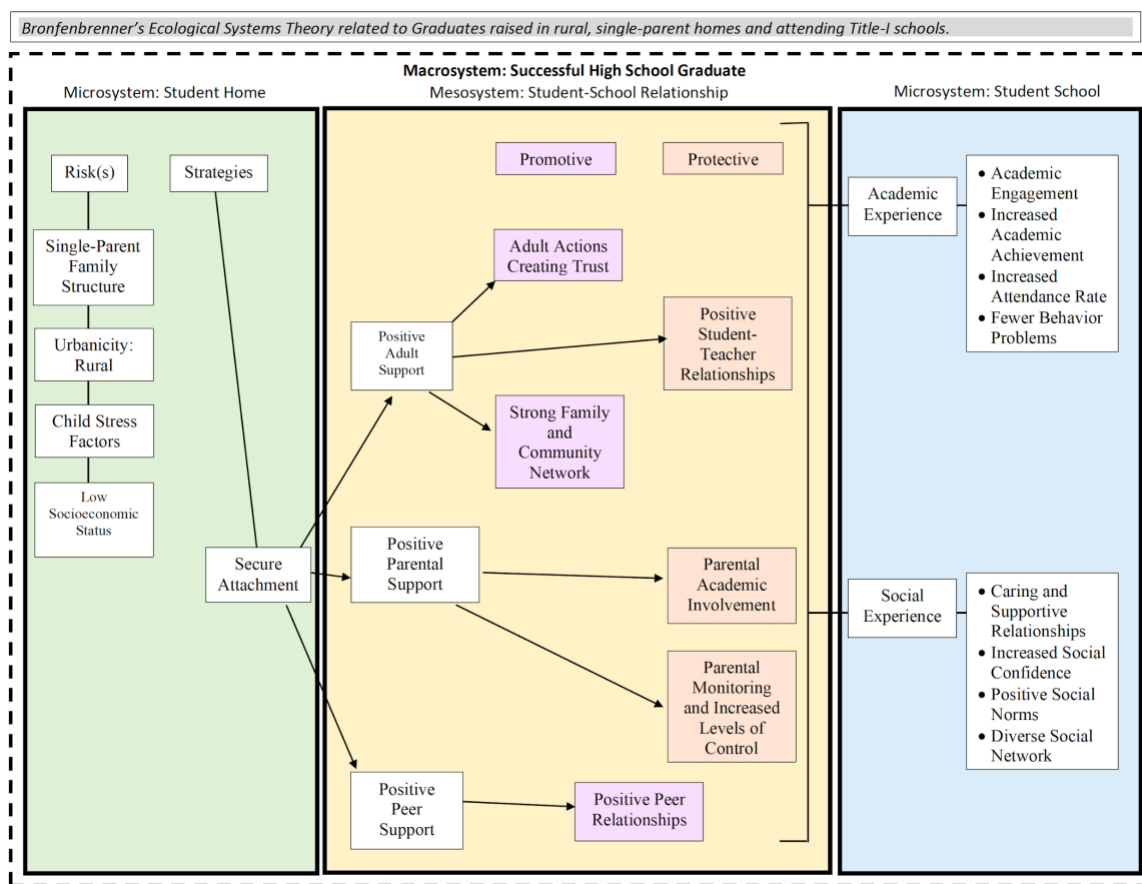
The ecological systems approach attends to what is desired, feared, or perceived by the individual, and how the interactions mold those attentions said individual has with their environment. Bronfenbrenner indicated a person is not trapped by his or her environment, but they can change their circumstances by adding promotive and protective factors to their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

For this research, I focused primarily on the home microsystem of students who attended Title I schools in Georgia and were raised in a rural single-parent homes. I focused my attention on the mesosystem linkage between the participants’ home microsystem and school

microsystem. After investigating current research, I identified four risk factors present in the home microsystem of graduates in my sample population: (a) single-parent family structure,

Figure 1

Macrosystem of the Successful High School Graduate



Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

(b) child stress factors, (c) rural urbanicity, and (d) low socioeconomic status. To compensate for risks, an individual must develop strategies. By studying Bronfenbrenner's (1979) and Bowlby's (1988) research, as well as current research related to each of the identified risk factors, I have isolated secure attachment as the primary strategy used by graduates living in at-risk populations.

Summary of Methodology

In this study, I incorporated an embedded, exploratory case study with a multiple-case design (Yin, 2018). An embedded, exploratory case study design provided me with an opportunity to investigate the narrowly researched phenomenon of graduates from single-parent households, while participants shared their experiences through detailed and descriptive responses to interview questions (Yin, 2018). An embedded case study design allowed for the collection of multiple case study measures. Specifically, I used documentation, interviews, and direct observations as case study measures (Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2013; Yin, 2018). The accessible population for the study was high school graduates raised in single-parent homes and attended rural Title-I schools. The study sample arose from a combination of snowball and purposive sampling procedures (Guetterman, 2015). I invited as many qualifying participants as possible to ensure I recruited enough people to reach data saturation. After achieving the desired sample size, I contacted all participants and established a research meet-and-greet session to establish trust, expectations, and boundaries for the research study.

This study took place in two rural, central Georgia, Title-I school districts. Due to the magnitude of case study data, it was necessary to examine, organize, and evaluate the data regularly. I used elemental, effective, and focused coding techniques for interview transcripts, document memos, pre-analysis memos, and direct observation journals to derive coding patterns and themes. To derive code meanings and the answers to the research questions a cross-case comparison between functional coding categories were employed.

Limitations

Case study research design is limited by generalizability, researcher bias, and reactivity (Maxwell, 2013; Yin, 2018). The reduced size of the sample population and the selection of only two locations will limit the generalizability of this research study. Generalizability is the extension of the study population's research results, conclusions, or participant accounts to a broader population not directly related to the study (Maxwell, 2013). The data collection methods for this case study are limited by researcher bias and reactivity. Reactivity may influence the interview setting and illicit inauthentic responses from participants. Researcher bias may influence the analysis of interview transcripts, document memos, pre-analysis memos, and direct observation journals (Maxwell, 2013).

Throughout the research process, it will be necessary to reflect and check personal research bias. My prior experience in a rural single-parent home could create partiality during data collection and analysis. To minimize researcher bias, I will triangulate data from multiple sources (interviews/observation/documents) to create a tight evidence trail for readers, and I will reflect and memo after each examination of data (Yin, 2018).

During the current health crisis, we are facing in America, due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, I could have difficulty securing participants for this study. I may have a further problem during interviews securing the intimate sites preferred by participants due to social distancing guidelines for the pandemic may. Another issue that could arise as a result of the outbreak is maintaining an appropriate research timeline. If a participant were to contract COVID-19, they would need to self-quarantine for 14 days. Depending on when exposure happens, I may need to shut the whole process down for 14 days until all participants are asymptomatic. Aside from health concerns, if I do not begin sampling before fall semester begins

it might be difficult to find local participants. During the summer, viable participants meeting the purposive sampling criteria are home from college. In the fall, those participants are away at college and less able to participate in regular interviews.

Chapter Summary

Although years of national and state school reform focused on improving student achievement and career readiness, Georgia schools have failed to improve student graduation rates significantly (Dalton, 2019; GADOE, 2019; KCDC, 2019). Georgia's high school graduation rate for the 2018-2019 school year was 82%, an increase of 12% since 2012, the year the state changed graduation rate calculations in Georgia (Dalton, 2019; GADOE, 2019). The national graduation rate for the 2018-2019 school year was 84.6% (Dalton, 2019). In Georgia, students from single-parent homes are more than twice as likely not to graduate from high school when compared to all Georgia high school students (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1995; Parke, 2003; Wilcox & Zill, 2017). The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title-I school district. Using an embedded, exploratory case study with a multiple-case design, I will investigate the experiences of graduates from single-parent households (Yin, 2018). I will use documentation, interviews, and direct observations to ascertain participant experiences (Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2013; Yin, 2018).

Definition of Terms

The conceptual framework for this research study will use terminology based on Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Model and John Bowlby's (1988) Attachment Theory. Listed below are operational terms in the conceptual framework.

Microsystem – The most central layer of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Model, the microsystem is known as a person’s most intimate relationships with his or her environment. A person may have more than one microsystem during their lifetime (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Mesosystem – The interactions between an individual’s microsystem(s) and other environments the individual actively participates within. The mesosystem is a bridge linking two or more environments the individual participates in regularly. For example, the relationship between home and school is a child’s mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Exosystem – One or more settings that do not actively involve the individual, but events affect, or events are affected by the individual’s direct environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Macrosystem – The manifested cultures and subcultures of an individual based on their microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem layers of ecological development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The macrosystem encompasses all the environments an individual is affected by, either directly or indirectly (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Secure Attachment – The timely response of caregiver protection, proximity, and stimulation to a child’s needs during development develops a secure emotional bond between both individuals, resulting in emotional stability, resilience, and confidence (Bowlby, 1988).

Single Parent – Single-parent families contain children under the age of 18, and the custodial parent or guardian is either widowed, divorced without remarriage, or the parent has never married (United States Census Bureau, 2019).

Rural – The National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES] released three categories for rural areas: fringe, distant, and remote. A rural fringe area is less than or equal to five miles from an urban area, a distant fringe area is between six and twenty-five miles from an urban area, and a remote area is greater than twenty-six miles from an urban area (NCES, 2019).

Title I – A federal funding program enacted during President Johnson’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act aimed at providing additional funding to schools with increased numbers of economically disadvantaged students (GADOE, 2019).

Urbanicity – An area’s primary population, economic center, and adjacent communities creating a dense population cluster. Rural areas have a less dense cluster than urban and suburban areas (NCES, 2019).

Child Stress – An abrupt alteration to a child’s expected structure, routines, milestones, and schedules (Amato, 2001).

Promotive Factor – A strategy employed by an individual to counteract or diminish the unfavorable effects of a risk (Lätsch, 2018; O’Malley et al., 2015; Peters & Woolley, 2015).

Protective Factor – A strategy used by a person to alleviate or eradicate the adversative consequences of a risk Lätsch, 2018; O’Malley et al., 2015; Peters & Woolley, 2015.

Triangulation – Using more than one method of data collection to reduce threats to validity and view various dimensions of the same phenomenon (Maxwell, 2013).

Risk – Any element in an individual’s ecological system that might hinder their success and keep them from graduating (O’Malley et al., 2015; Reardon 2011; Turner & Juntune, 2018).

Strategies – A tactic an individual might use to overcome perceived risks present in his or her ecological system (O’Malley et al., 2015; Reardon 2011; Turner & Juntune, 2018).

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

To fully understand the impact of single-parent homes in rural and low socio-economic areas, it is necessary to review previous literature related to the topics in this study. Before searching for any sources, it is essential to organize the topics of interest categorically. In analyzing the categories, several themes emerged: (a) changing family structure, (b) single-parent homes, (c) barriers to success for parents and students, and (d) keys to success for parents and students. Using the Galileo Access Anywhere portal, available through the University System of Georgia, I accessed relevant material available from a plethora of databases. Naming each database retrieved within the Galileo platform would detract from the appropriate material presented in this chapter. However, it is essential to note the studies and literature retrieved were related to Psychology, Education, and Science.

In searching for material within the Galileo platform, I narrowed my search by adding several parameters. I limited the search to only full-text articles released within the last ten years. I narrowed the search only to retrieve materials available by books or e-books, academic journals, reports, and magazines. After viewing the current results, I restricted the information only to studies completed in the United States. I believe it is essential to keep the information, especially information related to academic performance and urbanicity, within familiar geography. To ascertain literature relating the relationship between student success and environment, using the parameters mentioned above, I used the following keywords in my search: (a) single-parent households, (b) academic achievement, (c) urbanicity, (d) rural

education, (e) socioeconomic status, (f) high school graduation, (g) success, (h) Title I schools, (i) family structure, (j) divorce, (k) death, and (l) separation.

Description and Critique of Literature

The environmental conditions and biological development of children and adolescents shape who we become as adults (Lätsch, 2018). A developing child's environment cultivates from a combination of risk factors and protective factors present in their primary environments.

Risks

There are several risk factors that have been identified related to the accessible population in this study. These risks include single-parent family structure, rural urbanicity, low socioeconomic status, and familial stressors.

Statistics About Single-Parent Homes

The nuclear family represented in the 1950s has changed drastically in the last 60 years. George P. Murdock (1949) created the term *nuclear family* because he thought each member of the family fit together like pieces of an atom. In 1960, the *family unit* was defined as a mother, father, and children. Today, the composition of the nuclear family has changed; families have lost key pieces of the atom or merged with other atoms to meet their needs (Duffin, 2019). The number of marriages has increased by 21.18 million since 1960, but the increase is due to a rise in our nation's population rate. The number of single-parent homes is currently 15.05 million single-mother households and 6.5 million single-father households.

The number of single-parent families is an increase of 8.02 million single-parent households since 1990 (Duffin, 2019). According to the Parker et al. (2015), two-parent homes are declining, while single-parent, cohabitating relationships and families created through remarriage are on the rise. The number of children living in single-parent homes continues to

steadily increase (Kramer, 2020; Duffin, 2019). Currently, the United States has the highest statistical average of children living in single-parent family structures when compared to other countries. Globally, school-aged children living in single-parent homes occur at a rate of 7%, but in the United States, the average is tripled (Kramer, 2020). Within the number of single-parent households, 83% are single-mother households (Duffin, 2019). The percentage of U.S. children living with aunts, uncles, grandparents, or other close relatives is much lower (8%) when compared to the percentage of children (38%) in other countries living with close relatives (Kramer, 2019).

The link between family structure and success resides in resources and support, and both are deficient in single-parent homes. According to data available through the Ann E. Casey Foundation, 39% of Georgia students live in single-parent households, and 37% of rural Georgia students live in single-parent homes (KCDC, 2019). These values are higher than the national average of 15%. Additionally, the breakdown between mother-only and father-only single-parent homes is drastically different in Georgia; 80% of single-parent homes are mother-only family structures. The national average for mother-only single-parent households is 85% (KCDC, 2019).

Structure of Single-Parent Homes

Regardless of the circumstances leading to a single-parent family structure, a few characteristics are shared by all single-parent homes. All single-parent households experience stress, a lack of resources compared to two parent homes, and increased parental responsibility. According to the available research, parents raising children in single-parent homes are more likely to exhibit lower levels of happiness, a higher incidence of anxiety, and greater frequency of emotional disorders (Meier et al. 2016). Parental stress is a key component leading to each of

these psychological disadvantages. Stress can be attributed to low social support, increased caregiver burden, low socioeconomic status, or many relationship transitions (Meier et al., 2016).

Employment can be a source of stress for single parents due to reduced sleep and increased solo care for children, although, Meier et al. (2016) found unemployed single parents had similar triggers for stress (e.g., lack of sleep, solo care). Unemployed single parents reported higher levels of stress than employed single parents and the lowest rates of parenting satisfaction. Meier et al. (2016) found employed single mothers presented decreased levels of happiness and increased values of sadness, stress, and fatigue when compared to employed married mothers. These values were present in unemployed single mother responses and appeared more detrimental to their population. Thus, employed single mothers provided a more stable home environment for children than unemployed single mothers.

In research conducted by Swafford et al. (2015), they reported single-parent families have difficulty meeting basic family needs such as paying utilities, finding appropriate housing, and providing stable living arrangements. Swafford et al. (2015) interviewed 17 families to determine if local assistance was adequate in helping single parents supply their families with basic needs and medical care. After analyzing the data, the team realized local support is insufficient to meet all the requirements of single-parent households. Mothers participating in the study shared their perceptions regarding why single-parent families experience low socioeconomic conditions. One mother stated, "I have most definitely seen that there is a stigma attached to being a single-parent." She explained how the young single-mother stigma created barriers and forced her to become an advocate for her family in all situations. Another mother told how being the sole provider causes a great deal of emotional angst and increased

responsibility, limiting the amount of time she can spend with her children (Swafford et al., 2015).

Heuvelin et al. (2010) sought to understand the differences in access to resources for improving academic performance and how that varies among children from single-parent and double-parent homes. The team based their research on two hypotheses: (a) policies created by the government to reduce the economic difference among single-parent and two-parent households can create an academic difference or achievement gap between both groups, and (b) policies designed to minimize disparities in public settings can either directly or indirectly affect how a child performs academically. Heuvelin et al. (2010) gathered data from the TIMSS survey, which collects data from 14 countries across the globe. The study consisted of three questionnaires aimed at different populations - teachers, students, and the administration. After collecting the data, Heuvelin et al. (2010) focused on the students' living arrangements at the time of the survey and the climate of their home environment. Results were analyzed for trends among single-parent homes and student achievement. A fixed-effects model accounted for differences among countries and submitted data. Heuvelin et al. (2010) found students living in single-parent households performed academically lower than students from two-parent continuously-married homes, regardless of government created policies. Furthermore, the achievement gap in both math and science was significantly higher among single-parent homes and two-parent homes in the United States.

How Children Are Separated from Parents

Single-parent households are derived from various life situations, but divorce is a common reason in current literature. Parental incarceration, parental death, and military deployment are circumstances changing the two-parent household. In the United States, the

crude divorce rate was measured at 2.9% in 2018 (Center for Disease Control [CDC]/National Center for Health Statistics [NCHS], 2018). Georgia's crude divorce rate for the same year, dropping ten percentage points from the previous year, was 2.5%, slightly lower than the national average (CDC/NCHS, 2018). The crude divorce rate is the number of divorces in the population divided by 1,000 (CDC/NCHS, 2018). According to Amato (2010), after a divorce, child stress factors increase, while student achievement and parental involvement decrease. Jeynes (2002) sought to determine if increasing parental involvement could compensate for child stress factors and reduced access to one parent in recently divorced households. Parental involvement was defined as: *parents will help students with their homework, be involved in their social lives, discuss school events with their children, and attend school events, meetings, and activities* (Jeynes, 2002). After the study was concluded, Jeynes (2002) found increased parental involvement did help children of divorce improve their academic success. Still, parental involvement cannot overcome the effects of reduced access to one parent. Thus, children living in divorced, single-parent homes will have reduced academic success compared to their peers living in a home with two parents who are continuously married. Sigle-Rushton et al. (2014) investigated whether or not the length of time two people remained married with children, increasing the range of time children were exposed to dual-parental involvement, mattered to student success. A sibling, fixed-effects model was employed for the study, and the Norwegian register data applied. Sigle-Rushton et al. (2014) found children whose parents divorced after they turned 16 performed better academically than children whose parents divorced when they were younger. This may suggest the longer children have access to both parents in the home, the better they will perform academically. Parental involvement is key to student success, but it does not work in isolation.

Amato, Kane, and James (2011) proposed the idea of a *good divorce*, with the research identifying whether parental involvement and parenting styles could help prevent child maladjustment in the wake of divorce. A *good divorce* was defined as joint custody situations in which both parents remain in constant communication and support each other's policies on discipline and authority. The purpose behind the study by Amato et al. (2011) was to ascertain if children who were living in *good divorce* situations would flourish and benefit academically and socially compared to children living in *bad divorce* circumstances. However, after conducting their study, they found adolescents living in *good divorce* situations were no different from adolescents living in *bad divorce* cases. Across the board, adolescents from divorced households struggled with substance abuse, self-esteem, grades, and early sexual practice (Amato et al., 2011). The research team attributed the lack of difference to reduced parental access.

In a study completed by Sapharas et al. (2016), the researchers investigated the effects of divorce or paternal death on student academic achievement. They examined the probability of graduating from high school after experiencing divorce or parental death. The research sample consisted of male ($n = 1,761$) and female ($n = 1,689$) participants, ages 19 to 37. High school graduation was defined by either formally graduating with a diploma or GED. Then, Sapharas et al. (2016) identified "dummy" variables for further analysis, such as maternal high school dropout, paternal completion of higher education, and mothers who were 19 or younger at participant's birth. After analyzing the data, Sapharas et al. (2016) determined females had a greater likelihood of completing high school than males across all family structures measured. However, the odds of completing high school after parental divorce or parental death were greatly reduced for female participants than male participants.

According to statistics provided by Enns et al. (2019), 20% of American children have had at least one parent incarcerated for at least one night. According to the Kids Count Data Center (2019), 8% of children living in the United States have had at least one parent incarcerated during their childhood. The percentage is slightly higher for children living in Georgia (10%). Nichols et al. (2016) investigated the effects of parental incarceration on student's academic experiences. Nichols et al. (2016) went beyond the current correlational research to identify whether or not parent adversity affects student outcomes and if students with absent parents due to incarceration possess certain protective and compensatory factors. The research team specifically sought to identify individual, family, and school resources, promoting resiliency during situations with increased risk. The research sample consisted of individuals with at least one guardian incarcerated after their birth. All student participants resided with one parent or appointed guardians. Nichols et al. (2016) found parental incarceration significantly affected student achievement and social adversity. In addition, Nichols et al. (2016) found parental incarceration did not increase or decrease a student's connectedness to their school. The researchers did attenuate their findings by controlling for urbanicity, socioeconomic status, and gender. The research conducted by Nichols et al. (2016) supported the assertion that students residing in single-parent homes experience greater academic and social risks.

The available literature regarding parental deployment reveals school-aged children of deployed service members struggle academically, emotionally, and behaviorally. In a study completed by Lester et al. (2016), children of deployed parents had several risks – general anxiety, separation anxiety, peer problems, and weak positive social norms – when compared to their peers. Additionally, the research team discovered that the deployed parents exhibited separation and general anxiety. Lester et al. (2016) found a relationship between child social,

emotional development, and parent behavioral health. If the parent exhibited impaired behavioral health, then it imprinted on the child and increased the chances a child would have poor social, emotional development. Lester et al. (2016) attributed the imprinting to poor child attachment to the parent.

Differing Roles Between Single Fathers and Single Mothers

Kim (2018) investigated gender differences among parents and the educational involvement differences between mother-only single-parent homes and father-only single-parent homes. The guiding definition Kim used for parental involvement was the commitment of resources, whether it be monetary or time, to their child's academic experiences. She was quick to mention in her explanation of parental involvement that it is much more than spending time at a child's school or helping them with homework. Kim (2018) expressed parental involvement encompasses the whole child, and productive parental involvement taps into the socioemotional aspects of parenting. The literature partnered with Kim's research distinguished between three types of parental involvement: (a) academic socialization, (b) home-based participation, and (c) school-based involvement. Academic socialization refers to how parents communicate with their children regarding academic expectations. Home-based involvement includes parental involvement with educational activities or demands at home, such as homework and projects. School-based involvement is the traditional definition of parental involvement; it is how often parents attend school functions like conferences and school performances. In Kim's research, she analyzed the differences between the three types of parental involvement among mother-only and father-only single-parent homes. Results of the study indicated parental participation across the three domains of involvement did differ between mother-only and father-only. Mothers provided more school-based involvement, but there was no difference in the mother's and

father's delivery of academic socialization and home-based engagement. Kim postulated a father would provide more school-based involvement in a single-parent family structure because of his identity shifts from fathering as a voluntary activity to fathering as an active role.

In retrospect to the previous study, there are two widely accepted perspectives related to single mother and single father research (Lee & Hofferth, 2017). One viewpoint is mothers and fathers will assume similar roles, instead of gender-based roles, in a single-parent family structure. Another view is single parents will exhibit gender-based caregiver roles in their single-parent home. Lee and Hofferth (2017) used the second viewpoint, gender-based caregiving, in their study. They investigated whether there were differences in home-based parental involvement within a single-parent family structure when comparing maternal and paternal parental involvement, and if disagreements did occur, whether an opposite gendered adult moderate them within the family. Using ten years of survey results from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS), Lee and Hofferth selected a sample population of 10,985 single-parents with at least one child under the age of 18. According to Lee and Hofferth's results, single parents spent 1.5 hours in home-based parental involvement each day. However, on average, single fathers provided significantly less involvement (54 minutes) than single mothers (1 hour and 39 minutes). A good portion of single-mother involvement was spent on routine care, while single fathers spent no more than 20 minutes on any one task. The amount of time devoted to regular care, play, and teaching activities decreased for single fathers when female caregivers were present; management care did not reduce. Management care fell for maternal caregivers when male caregivers were present in the single-mother home, but routine care, play, and teaching held steady. The results supported the perspective that a single parent assumed gender-based

caregiver roles when opposite gendered caregiver were present. This research is significant because it highlights the differences between single mother and single father caregiving.

Challenges Facing Children from Single-Parent Homes

It is evident from the research provided that single parent family structure can impact how students function emotionally and academically. Keller (2016) investigated whether or not students transitioning through a changed family structure before entering high school impacted their high school experience. Keller studied students living in recently divorced homes, unstable two-parent homes, and stable two-parent homes. The purpose of using the populations was to determine if decreased student achievement was due to the dissolution of the existing family structure or if the decline in performance occurred before the divorce because of family stress and tension. Keller discovered the gap in student achievement directly correlated with a change in the family structure. Students with recently-divorced parents performed significantly lower on academic and social measures than students living with intact family structures, even if the family environment was volatile. Additionally, Keller found students who were considered “better performing” before a change in family structure suffered a more significant academic and social decline than students considered “low performing” prior to their parent’s divorce.

Children living in single-parent homes often experience many episodes of instability or repeated changes in their microsystem. Fomby and Mollborn (2017) hypothesized that family stress, due to increased volatility, leads to increased behavioral issues in kindergarten children. For their research, Fomby and Mollborn measured and assessed children’s experiences with repeated changes. The specific changes or instability episodes measured during their experiment were changes to union status, co-resident grandparent or other adult changes, co-resident child changes, residential moves, mother’s work status, and nonparental care changes. Fomby and

Mollborn discovered children in their research population experienced, on average, 7.19 instability episodes prior to kindergarten. Twenty-five percent of children experienced 12 or more changes before age five. Within the entire research population, the most significant instability occurred between the ages of two and five years of age. Students who experienced high frequencies of change experienced teacher-reported poor behavior, outward projections of behavior, and delayed approaches to learning. Fomby and Mollborn, discovered it was more advantageous to investigate more than one dimension related to instability. Isolating instability episodes (i.e., changing family structure) did not provide high statistical power, but considering all the changes occurring in children from single-parent homes did provide insight and analytical power.

Ham (2003) examined the grade point averages (GPA) and attendance of seniors, in a suburban middle-class high school, for both intact and single-parent homes. He found students from two-parent intact homes had GPAs 11% higher on average than students raised in single-parent households. Ham postulated the family structure present in two-parent, continuously-married homes provided students with the best support for stability and academic success.

Browne and Battle (2018) investigated the relationship between family structure and gender specificity, explicitly referring to academic performance. Browne and Battle gathered data from the Educational Longitudinal Study and randomly selected participants from a population of 15,000 African American students. The highest level of educational attainment measured academic success. Browne and Battle employed eight models, four models for each gender, to determine if the academic performance differed among genders living in single-parent and dual-parent homes. Single-parent homes had a more significant negative impact on females than males concerning academic performance. When controlling for urbanicity, females

performed better in urban schools than rural schools, and males showed no difference between settings. Additionally, the presence of multiple siblings negatively impacted female performance, but the male performance was unaltered. Browne and Battle concluded female students are more susceptible to changes in their family structure than male students.

Urbanicity

The word “rural” is typically stereotyped as deprived, isolated, and a region with insufficient resources and diversity (Goetz et al. 2018). While that may have been the case in prior centuries, it is not the case in the twenty-first century. The federal definition for rural classification is a community with a population less than 50,000 and a commuting percentage higher than 25 percent (Goetz et al., 2018). This is not an accurate reflection of rural communities with limited resources. Rural areas can be classified into one of three groups: (a) high-amenity regions, (b) metro-adjacent rural communities, or (c) remote rural communities (Goetz et al., 2018). High amenity and metro-adjacent communities are thriving communities with little industry; people living in these communities travel for labor and have access to unlimited resources. Remote rural communities are the stereotypical struggling rural communities. It is essential to note the distinction between non-metropolitan areas because it does make a difference when researching the effects of urbanicity on student outcomes. For this study, I will only examine remote rural communities with Title I school districts or Title I high schools.

Students living in rural school districts, especially poor rural areas, lack access to a variety of programs, especially those students who are living in single-parent homes, who attend rural Title I schools (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016). Advanced Placement testing is one such program most rural districts are deprived of partaking in. Gagnon and Mattingly (2016, pg. 272)

explained, “Only 51.4% of rural school districts enroll at least one student in an AP course, compared with 78.3%, 93.8%, and 97.3% of the town, suburban, and urban districts, respectively.” Gagnon and Mattingly (2016) sought to understand AP access and success throughout the United States concerning district demographics and urbanicity. Gagnon and Mattingly reported students living in urban and suburban districts enroll their students in AP programs at a rate of 30% higher than rural communities. The researchers deduced rural school districts are less inclined to offer AP courses if the school district is small, has an increased poverty rate, and is isolated. Students attending rural school districts have reduced success when taking AP exams; on average, their AP exam scores are 1.4 percentage points lower than students taking AP exams in suburban and urban school districts (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016).

Hoffman et al. (2017) found students living in remote rural school districts have a greater risk of not completing high school. At the district level, schools in rural areas received a smaller tax digest, and were less likely to fund positions and interventions to support student learning, unlike urban and suburban school districts. Likewise, rural regions did not have equal access to highly qualified educators (Hoffman et al., 2017). On the individual level, students living in rural areas had an increased risk of mental health, dropping out of school, and higher levels of stress and anxiety (Hoffman et al., 2017). The researchers posited that peer relationships were strenuous for individuals living in rural areas because those individuals had limited social networks due to risk. Students with limited social networks experienced delinquency, disengagement, and isolation. Students who attended rural schools struggled academically if they were not academically motivated and lacked connectedness to the school (Hoffman et al., 2017).

In the United States, a little over one-fourth of the public education system is considered rural. In totality, rural public-school districts serve roughly nine million students (Walker, 2017).

Providing adequate instructional materials is a task because only 17% of state education funding directly benefits rural school districts. Georgia is ranked seventh as one of the 10 highest-priority states for poor student achievement and inadequate college readiness in rural areas (Showalter et al., 2019). Georgia is listed as one of 10 states with a widening academic performance gap between low socioeconomic, rural students, and their rural peers across the state. In recent years, the number of rural students attending public school districts has grown to half a million Georgia students. Rural school districts in Georgia are both racially diverse and low-income (Why Rural Matters, 2019).

Brown et al. (2017) investigated maternal attachment among rural, low-income families. Their research was guided by two questions: The first question was “Does early maternal attachment relate to poor behavior later in a child’s life?” The second question was “If poor behavior does occur, can it be related to childhood environment and circumstance?” Brown et al. (2017) visited the homes of 276 rural, low-income, African-American families when their children were 6, 15, and 24 months of age. To accurately observe the relationship between children and their mothers, the research team videotaped each meeting within the home. During the meeting, mothers were asked to engage in either free-play or puzzle-play activities with their children. Brown et al. discovered when analyzing their results, harsh-intrusive parenting projected children would have decreased secure attachment to their mother and poor behavior upon entering formative schooling. In retrospect, the levels of attachment security were more influential among the research sample than samples used in other research findings. Brown et al. attributed this unique finding to the increased support provided in this population of mothers. Additionally, the MCAST tool used to assess maternal attachment captured the relationship better than the tools used in the existing literature.

Socioeconomic Status

Henry et al. (2011) explored the disadvantage of students attending rural school districts. The researchers hypothesized students experiencing poverty and attending disadvantaged school districts had a greatly reduced expectation of graduating from high school. Henry et al. conducted their research by administering anonymous surveys to 64,350 students in grades seven through nine. The research team approached their inquiry by focusing on investment and expectations to graduate by all stakeholders, students, parents, and educators. Student and school district educator perceptions were measured using surveys geared at expectations and perceptions. Henry et al. examined parental expectation by measuring six indicators of parental investment; the first four indicators centered around parent perception (e.g., the student received a bad grade) and the remaining two indicators measured parental involvement. All student participants were asked the same question, “Will you graduate from high school?” To analyze the results, Henry et al. employed two models: level one and level two. The level one model measured how a student’s economic status influences or predicts their expectation to graduate from high school on time. The team found a significant difference between students living in low socioeconomic environments and students living in moderate to high socioeconomic environments. Students experiencing low socioeconomic status were less likely to have expectations of graduation. Level two measured how effective a school district can be at influencing those students with compromised economic statuses. Henry et al. found a greater amount of student disadvantage created greater difficulty promoting and graduating students on time. Parental measures were significant ($p > .001$) as well, parental involvement and parental investment and indicators 5 & 6. Henry et al. accepted their research hypothesis, finding low socioeconomic status significantly affected student, parent, and district educator expectations

regarding high school graduation. In addition, higher socioeconomic status correlated with increased parental involvement and perceptions regarding graduation. However, if a student with low socioeconomic status had increased parental involvement and perception, they were more likely to graduate than peers with reduced, increased parental involvement and perception regardless of socioeconomic status. The findings by Henry et al. were promising because they supported the assumption parental support can become a mediating factor in homes with increased circumstances.

Welton and Williams (2014) conducted a case study aimed at determining if high poverty and high minority high school could effectively implement a college-driven culture. The foundational question of their research was, “How do accountability systems and sociopolitical structures impact the development of a high school’s college-going culture?” Welton and Williams found both accountability and sociopolitical structures affected how faculty and students attending high-minority and high-poverty secondary institutions view college. Students and faculty members were presented with looming failure and poor academic performance. Instead of a college-going culture, the case study school offered a culture of high staff turnover, a culture of low expectations, and a culture of sacrificed instruction. Welton and Williams concluded that once a school is labeled as poor-performing, it is difficult for faculty and students to become college-driven. Often, students living in single-parent homes, who attend rural Title I schools, experience the negative impacts of accountability systems and sociopolitical structures. In Georgia, the current percentage of students living in poverty is 21% compared to 18% in the United States (KCDC, 2019). More than half of the children attending a rural school district reside in low-income families, and 24% of rural children live in poverty (Miles & Irwin, 2018; Walker, 2017). Specifically, 27% of children ages birth to 5 live in rural areas and impoverished

conditions (Miles & Irwin, 2018). Furthermore, on average, 34% of rural students reside in single-parent families, and this number is 14 percentage points higher than it was in 2003 (USDA, 2016). Within the number of rural single-parent households, 33% are father-only households, and 66% are mother-only households (Miles & Irwin, 2018).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics ([NCES], 2019), there was a proficiency gap among low-income and high-income students entering kindergarten for the first time. Students raised in the highest income quartile scored 60% higher on direct cognitive measures during kindergarten than students raised in the lowest income quartile (NCES, 2019). Poverty affects children living in rural areas due to rapid economic shifts as a result of industry loss (McCarty, 2016). The effects of poverty are widespread, influencing every facet of a child's development. Exposure to poverty during early childhood can have a more significant influence than poverty exposure during adolescence (McCarty, 2016). Children living in economic hardships have difficulty in several areas, such as personal health, criminal justice, and education (Hostinar & Miller, 2019). Children living in low socioeconomic environments have an increased risk of coronary disease, stroke, and premature death in adulthood.

Children living in low income households can suffer cognitively (Liu et al., 2017). Cognition can be measured in early childhood by the development and display of fine motor skills and gross motor skills in child play and daily activities. A delay in adequate motor skill development can create frustration and peer-related social distancing for a child with poor cognition (Liu et al., 2017). Arora and Domadia (2019) hypothesized children living in affluent households reach cognitive milestones faster than children from low socioeconomic families, and children living in low socioeconomic households achieve gross motor skills milestones at a higher rate than children living in affluent homes. The hypothesis was based on the assumption

that children raised in prosperous families have greater access to learning materials and experiences, thus providing them with a better opportunity for greater cognitive development than children from lower socioeconomic households, but children from lower socioeconomic home environments develop gross motor skills faster because parents in low-income situations encourage their children to develop these skills quickly. Arora and Domadia (2019) assessed how and when children from different economic groups achieved developmental milestones to see if there is a difference in skill attainment. Arora and Domadia found a minimal difference in milestone achievement among children ages 6 months to 24 months. However, the results yielded in the 36-month age group were consistent with the existing literature. Children living in high socioeconomic households were able to reach the fine motor, speech-language, cognitive, and social-emotional milestones sooner than children from low-socioeconomic environments, and children in low SES environments accomplished gross motor skills milestones earlier (Arora & Domadia, 2019). Liu et al. (2017) completed a similar study evaluating motor skill attainment in preschool-aged children. They found significant gross motor skills and fine motor skill delays in children from low socioeconomic households. It would appear the gap in cognition continues to expand as children age.

A change in a child's family structure due to divorce or death can significantly impact the socioeconomic status of the remaining family structure (Amato, 2010). Altering the economic status of a child's household can lead to cognitive and behavioral issues (Amato, 2010). Ryan, Claessens, and Markowitz (2015) sought to determine if the effects of a change in family structure were more significant depending on a child's socioeconomic status. They investigated whether modifications to a child's familial structure were more considerable during the child's formative years, ages 1-5, or later in childhood. The research process involved analyzing

longitudinal data covering the first 12 years of a child's life. The team examined children's behavior problems concerning the family structure and socioeconomic status. By using a twelve-year study, Ryan et al. (2015) could observe progression without compromising the integrity of the data. The research team discovered a significant behavioral effect occurred when children from moderate to high-level income households experienced changes in family structure. Children from low-income households did not experience the acute change in behaviors witnessed at other socioeconomic levels. Ryan et al. attributed the differences in socioeconomic status and changes in family structure to internal mechanisms and child resilience. Ryan et al. found a change in family structure during the first five years of a child's life had a greater impact than changes occurring later in a child's life.

Stressors

When a child transitions through a change in family structure or they continuously face the hardships induced by poor living conditions, mediators (also known as *child stress factors*) enhance the harmful effects of family fracture or low socioeconomic conditions, causing undue stress, decreased academic performance, and social distance (Amato, 2001). Paul Amato (2001), a forerunner in studying the effects of divorce on student performance and adjustment, published his update on the Amato and Keith (1991) meta-analysis regarding children of divorce. Amato's (2001) findings reinforced earlier results; children from divorced households scored significantly lower on measures of achievement due to child stress factors, such as a decline in parental support/discipline, loss of contact with one parent, continued conflict between divorced parents, and economic downturn. Keller (2016) discovered children who experienced a change in financial status, a significant stressor, rendered a more substantial decline in math achievement than those who remain in the middle to high economic class. Arkes (2015) found student

achievement declined two to four years (on average) before a family structure change, and decreased performance can continue for an additional two years after the adjustment occurs. Child stressors have the potential to impact student performance and socialization (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Arkes, 2015; Keller, 2016).

As mentioned above, children living in low socioeconomic conditions historically experience more significant instances of household stress compared to students living in middle and high socioeconomic environments. According to Torche (2018), poverty is linked to a myriad of stressors, like noise, cramped living quarters, violence, family adversity, and reduced access to basic needs. Household stressors existing in the home environment contribute to a delay or poor child development. The effects of stress on a child living in low socioeconomic households, and when those effects are most prevalent in the child's life are vague in the literature. Torche focused her research on the impact of poverty-induced acute stress in utero. She chose this period of a child's development because previous research supported critical development occurring during the prenatal period of growth. As an experimental group, she used birth records from children born in Chile during the years 2004, 2005, and 2006. The children born during this time frame were in utero before, during, or after the Tarapac earthquake in 2005. Torche measured cognitive ability using verbal, performance, and total scores from the WISC-III for the experimental group at age 7. She found children living in low socioeconomic households and exposed to external stress in utero, did have significantly lower cognition than children in moderate to high socioeconomic environments exposed to the same acute stress in utero. However, it is important to note other variables cannot be ruled out with this experiment. The difference in cognition could be attributed to other factors present in utero.

Food insecurity is an example of a household stressor related to reduced access to basic needs. Food insecurity can trigger parental and child stress. Food insecurity is defined as “reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet” or “multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake” (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2019). Members of households with low food security are often worried about food depletion, skip meals, and consume greater quantities of carbohydrates than other macromolecules due to cost. According to statistics released by the USDA (Coleman et al., 2019), 11.1% of households in the United States were considered food insecure, 6.8% were determined low food insecure and 4.3% were deficient food insecure. Food insecurity fuels parental stress and anxiety, leading to fractured parent-child interactions and family social-emotional well-being (Gill et al., 2018). In studying the relationship between food insecure stress and parent-child relationships, Gill et al. (2018) found that food insecure parents reported a greater need to discipline their children than food secure parents. The need for more discipline arose from child stress manifesting in undesirable behaviors and parental stress resulting in lower tolerance and higher anxiety (Gill et al., 2018).

Parental stress is a condition resulting from perceived familial burdens surpassing actual parenting resources (Garcia et al., 2017). Parental stress can negatively affect a parent-child relationship, resulting in child misbehavior, child stress, or mistrust. Parent-child conflict is the term used to describe a negative parent-child relationship (Garcia et al., 2017). Research indicates parental conflict is a cycle, and parents bolster negative behaviors in their children and, by doing so, increase negative personal feelings towards their child. Garcia et al. (2017) found a direct correlation between parental stress and parent-child conflict. Behavioral problems present in school-aged children were a result of the parent-child conflict cycle (Garcia et al., 2017). These researchers asserted parental stress and high parent-child conflict, leading to undesirable

student behavior, were precursors for a student's non-completion of high school. Stress, induced by insufficient resources, rural poverty, and single-parent guardianship, can have a negative or positive effect depending on the parent's willingness to provide academic and emotional stability and support for their children.

Cadigan and Skinner (2015) investigated the impact of maternal depression management on the home environments of low-income mothers in the rural South. Cadigan and Skinner interviewed 32 participants, asking them to describe their depressive symptoms, the management of said symptoms, and the emotional impact of depression on their family. Each mother participated in a minimum of 15 individual interviews over 18 months. In both Caucasian and African American mother subgroups, depression was a direct effect of situational stressors (e.g., finances or relationships). Cadigan and Skinner found African-American mothers were less likely than Caucasian mothers to seek treatment for their depression, but both groups felt their communities shunned those with depression. Cadigan and Skinner discovered children living in depressed single-mother homes must become mature, independent caregivers earlier in their childhood than like peers and this rapid maturation can lead to increased social risk and decreased academic performance.

Parental burnout is defined as repeated exposure to parenting stress, and the effects of parental burnout are consuming exhaustion, creating emotional distance from one's children, and self-doubt. Mikolajczak et al., (2018) explored four categories influencing parental burnout: (a) sociodemographics, (b) the individuality of the child, (c) stable traits of the parent, and (d) family functioning factors. To increase study participation and decrease initial bias, the research team presented the study as "being a parent in the 21st century." Mikolajczak et al. (2018) discovered anxiety, avoidance, neuroticism, and emotional intelligence were the chief traits exhibited by

individuals with parental burnout. Stable parental characteristics accounted for 22% of the variance within the statistical model. Likewise, 45% of the difference was associated with family functioning. Child individuality and socioeconomic status accounted for less than 3% of the variance. To further their findings, Mikolajczak et al. (2018) constructed a risk factor model encompassing stable parental traits and family functioning. The results revealed a correlation between parents' stable features (.89), family functioning (.66), and both stable parental characteristics and family functioning (.73). This study is essential to understanding why parents rearing children solo might experience varying degrees of success and offer more or less support to their children. Students living in a single-parent home with reduced parental burnout might experience more exceptional comfort.

Many children with childhood stress experience adverse childhood experiences (Brumley et al., 2017). An adverse childhood experience (ACE) is defined as acute traumatic experiences or chronic environmental stressors (Brumley et al., 2017). An acute traumatic experience could be sexual abuse, physical abuse, parental loss, or neglect. Chronic environmental stressors are situations occurring daily compounding additional stress on children living in low socioeconomic conditions. According to Brumley et al., children exposed to ACEs are more prone to exhibiting problematic behaviors (i.e., substance abuse, violence, and alcohol abuse) well into young adulthood (Brumley et al., 2017). According to Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000), ACEs affected a child's development and shaped their future aspirations.

Children and adolescents who experienced ACEs had an unenthusiastic view of their present and future academic progress, as well as possibilities after college (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). However, Bronfenbrenner and Evans (2000) indicated in their socio-ecological theory that an individual's microsystems (i.e., home, school, church) can alter their future

trajectory. This means if children who experience ACEs have a supportive environment, they can be successful and refrain from problematic behaviors. However, if a child lacks support in their various microsystems, they are likely to experience difficulty in future endeavors. According to data shared on the Kids Count Data Center (2019), 24% of Georgia children in 2017 reported two or more ACE's compared to 20% of children nationally.

Brumley et al. (2017), found a correlation between ACEs, delinquent behaviors, and future expectations. Children and adolescents who experienced ACEs had a dim view of future aspirations because they did not envision themselves completing high school, attending college, or living beyond early adulthood (Brumley et al., 2017). They also concluded adolescents exposed to acute ACEs had a greater risk of not completing high school and college than adolescents exposed to chronic stress experiences. Likewise, Brumley et al. (2017) learned that ACEs fostered child stress, especially in those children living in low socioeconomic households, and lead to decreased expectations for graduation.

Zaff et al. (2016) took a different approach and investigated the emotional and academic impact suffered by students who did not graduate from high school. They specifically targeted high school dropouts because they wanted to know what triggers led to their dropping out of school and what barriers kept them from returning to high schools. The participants were part of a re-engagement center aimed at helping individuals complete their high school careers. Participants were interviewed individually and as a group to ascertain the reasons they decided to leave high school. Zaff et al. (2016) discovered that living within toxic environments while enrolled in high school caused instability, disengagement, and eventually, removal of oneself from the academic setting. Participants suffered varied adverse life events, including but not limited to physical and emotional abuse, victims or witnesses to violence, and neglect. With

respect to their home environments, the participants exhibited rational decision-making, goal setting, self-management, positive relationship skills, self-awareness, and social awareness. Zaff et al. (2016) concluded students who left high school before graduating were capable of the same competencies exhibited by students who did not leave high school. However, participants did not have a positive and supportive social network to help them cope with issues outside of the academic setting.

Strategies

In the available literature, there are several strategies identified to help students in the accessible population overcome or compensate for the risks acknowledged above. These strategies include secure attachments and supportive relationships.

Secure Attachment

The guiding principle behind John Bowlby's (1958) attachment theory is all individuals show a preference for a primary figure in their life. In most cases, an individual shows a choice for his or her mother, but a mother is not the only person one can form an attachment to as they age. Bowlby (1958, 1988) started his quest to discover how connections are formed and severed between parent and child after the loss of a particular person in his childhood. He was one of six children living in an affluent part of town. He saw his mother and father once a day for one hour. The remainder of his time was spent with Minnie, his caregiver or nurse. When Bowlby turned four, Minnie left the family's service, and he had a challenging time with her going. John Bowlby's caregiver, Minnie, was a surrogate primary figure because he became more attached to her than his mother.

Before World War II, Bowlby (1958) studied 45 delinquents, juvenile thieves, to determine if loss early in their lives accounted for their thievery and misguidance. He found 43

of the juveniles spent some time away from their primary caregiver during the first five years of their lives; the remaining two youths did not. The separation between the 43 juveniles and their primary caregiver was due to divorce, death, or abandonment. The researcher conclude that all individuals will form an attachment to a primary caregiver as a child, and at some point, the individual will form another primary attachment to a significant other. Bowlby (1958) explained there is a hierarchy to one's attachments. At the bottom of the hierarchy of attachment are friends and acquaintances, followed by secondary attachments like siblings and grandparents, and lastly, at the top of the hierarchy are the primary attachments, for example, parents and spouses. All persons are said to have formed one primary attachment in their lives. If they do not create a primary attachment, research has shown they will be significantly disturbed.

At the time of Bowlby's (1988, p. 27) research on juveniles, other psychoanalysts were searching for answers about attachment. All researchers agreed the definition for attachment is ". . . any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other identified individual who is conceived as better able to cope with the world." Attachment is easier to see when a person is scared, sick, or in distress. Bowlby et al. (1952) discovered a sequence of steps leading to the bonding of one's primary attachment. The first step in the chain is asocial attachment (0-6 weeks); during this time, infants typically respond to all positive interactions with a smile or similar gesture to connect with their attachment figure. During indiscriminate attachment (6weeks-7 months), the connection has evolved; not only will a child smile during positive interaction, but they will become agitated and upset of the person giving positive interaction stops the communication. Specific attachment (7-9 months) follows and is crucial in attachment theory because this is the stage when the infant shows a preference for one particular primary caregiver. Infants exhibit separation anxiety and stranger fear at this stage in

the attachment sequence when they are removed from their primary caregiver. The last step in the attachment sequence is multiple attachments (10 months-adulthood). The individual is independent at this stage in their life and can form more than one primary attachment.

Bowlby (1958, 1988) hypothesized that attachment is a mechanic of evolution, and the behaviors exhibited by individuals in response to attachment loss are adaptations. Bowlby (1958, 1988) suggested crying, screaming, and clinging are behaviors eliciting a reaction from the child's primary caregiver, and these behaviors are evolutionary responses reinforced by natural selection. Bowlby (1988) postulated attachment behaviors are deeply rooted in biological needs in response to parental protection. Bowlby (1988, p. 10) stated, "Children with a secure relationship to both parents were most confident and most competent; children who had a secure relationship with neither were least secure, and those with a secure relationship to one parent but not the other came in between." Bowlby offered three ways a child reacts when the caregiver responds to their cries, screams, or clinging behaviors, and they are secure attachment, anxious-resistant attachment, and avoidant attachment. Secure attachment occurs when an infant is in distress, and they immediately become relieved when comforted by their primary caregiver. Anxious-resistant attachment differs from secure attachment in that once comfort is achieved, the infant displays behaviors meant to punish the primary caregiver, such as a tantrum or evasion. Avoidant attachment transpires when the infant is not distressed after separation from the primary caregiver. Infants exhibiting avoidant attachment will often ignore the primary caregiver when reunited. In addition to the three mechanisms mentioned in this paragraph, Bowlby (1958, 1988) asserted there are four attachment styles exhibited by adolescents as a result of their attachment to a primary caregiver.

The four attachment styles exhibited by adolescents are secure attachment, dismissive-avoidant attachment, anxious-preoccupied attachment, and fearful-avoidant attachment (Bowlby, 1958; Bowlby, 1988). Secure attachment in adolescents is similar to the attachment seen in children, but the emotions are more robust. Individuals participating in a securely attached relationship feel trust, comfort, and secure emotional attachment to the other member of the dyad. Dismissive-avoidant attachment is the adolescent version of the anxious-avoidant attachment. Persons exhibiting this style of attachment are often closed off emotionally to other persons and avoid emotional connection. Anxious-preoccupied individuals display jealousy, clingy behavior, and form shallow attachments to primary caregivers or significant others. Anxious-preoccupied attachment is akin to anxious-resistant attachment seen in children. An individual displaying fearful-avoidant attachment often hide their emotions and compartmentalize their feelings to deal with relationships. Only individuals who show secure attachment behaviors can form deep, meaningful relationships with primary caregivers or significant others. In his book, *A Secure Base*, Bowlby (1988, p. 4) stated “. . . healthy, happy, and self-reliant adolescents and young adults are the products of stable homes in which both parents give a great deal of time and attention to the children.”

Stevenson et al. (2018) investigated child relocation as a result of divorce or parental separation. The focus of their study was to determine if children living close to their non-custodial parent felt the same degree of attachment loss as children living at least one hour apart from their non-custodial parent. The study sample consisted of 38 families; 76 parents who separated before their child turned 12 years of age. The results of the study revealed that separation from their father or non-custodial parent presented a risk for children and could result in long-lasting emotional impairment. The results of the investigation provided an interesting

dichotomy. Children ages 12.5 to 15 years of age felt insignificant to both their custodial and non-custodial parents, and children ages 15.5 to 19.0 years of age experienced anxiety and depression, as well as participated in criminal or inappropriate behaviors (Stevenson et al., 2018).

Chen (2017) sought to discover if attachment influences student academic performance. Chen (2017) asserted parent-adolescent attachment could affect academic achievement and academic engagement. The results procured during his investigation supported his assertion. Chen (2017) discovered that students securely attached to both parents exhibited academic success and commitment, while students without a secure base performed inadequately. Chen (2017) also found the difference between attached and unattached adolescents can be attributed to self-confidence and taking risks, and students who are securely attached to both parents feel valued, confident, and they are more likely to explore and expand their educational opportunities.

Kocayoruk and Simsek (2015) found the same results when examining the relationship between parental attachment and student self-esteem. Children securely attached to both parents exhibited higher self-esteem and less alienation than peers without a securely attached parental base. It is crucial to note Chen (2017) did not find a significant difference between adolescents separated from their mother, and adolescents separated from their father. Academic achievement and adolescent development were central ideas in a study conducted by Ramsdal et al. (2015). The fundamental purpose guiding their research was the idea that secure attachment between preschool-aged children and their primary caregiver influences the child's academic performance in subsequent years and eventually leads to graduation. The results yielded from their study support the connection between academic success and attachment (Ramsdal et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the results support another necessary attachment crucial to child development – the relationship between a child and his or her teachers during the formative years of education.

Positive Supportive Relationships

School climate can serve as a promotive and protective factor for adolescents living in at-risk homes. According to current Georgia CCRPI reports measuring graduation rate and school climate, 71% of schools with a star climate rating of 3 or higher had a graduation rate higher than the state average (GaDOE, 2019). Additionally, when analyzing the graduation rates and climate scores for rural, Title 1 schools in Georgia, 72% of those schools had a climate score of 3 or above and a graduation rate above the state average. Lätsch (2018, pg. 282) said, “Researchers have found a positive sense of school belonging to be associated with better academic achievement, a better grade point average, lower rates of school drop-out and better socio-emotional and behavioral functioning.” The relationship between teachers and at-risk students can either establish or diminish emotional security in the classroom, leading to academic, socio-emotional, and behavioral consequences (Lätsch, 2018). Positive student-teacher relationships and peer-student relationships are critical to a struggling student’s academic, socio-emotional, and behavioral success. If children are part of a negative association with either peers or adults, they can be at risk for unhealthy maturity, causing them to feel lonely, depressed, and stressed (Lätsch, 2018).

O’Malley et al. (2015) proposed that a positive school climate could act as both a promotive and protective factor to create a successful academic outcome for students living in different family structures. O’Malley et al. (2015) analyzed results from existing survey data. The previously-administered survey covered eight separate categories related to student perceptions of school climate: (a) school connectedness, (b) school mentor relationships, (c)

opportunities, (d) school safety, (e) positive learning environment, (f) decreased racial and ethnic tension, (g) decreased access to drugs and substance abuse, and (h) minor instances of violence and victimization (O'Malley et al., 2015). All of the schools that administered the test were federally-funded Title I schools or schools receiving additional state funding to support at-risk students. To better understand survey results, O'Malley et al. (2015) used two separate models. The first model measured family structure versus grade point average, and the second model measured how family structure and grade point average variables in Model 1 can be affected by school climate perceptions. After controlling for sociodemographic factors, the results from Model 1 implied students living in two-parent, continuously-married homes on average had a GPA of 0.24 points higher than students living in single-parent households. Model 2 provided clarity regarding positive school climate perceptions and academic achievement; students living in single-parent homes with a positive school perception showed an average GPA increase of 0.34 points. O'Malley et al. (2015) explained a positive school climate perception due to positive adult and peer relationships can compensate for inadequate home environments and support students.

Williams et al. (2017) suggested that positive peer relationships contribute to the success of at-risk students. They used a phenomenological approach to investigate the protective factors leading to academic gains for at-risk middle school students ($n = 24$). Three themes related to positive peer support emerged from their research: (a) positive peers cultivated pro-academic behaviors, (b) non-academic help, and (c) mutual academic support (Williams et al., 2017). The sample population stated they emulated the pro-academic behaviors of their peers by attending class earlier, completing homework and classwork assignments, and studying. Non-academic peer support came in the form of encouragement, openness, advice, and motivation, leading to a

welcome distraction from student home life. Positive peers provided mutual academic support by helping at-risk students, outside of school hours, complete assignments and understand difficult subjects. Williams et al. (2017) also found positive student-teacher relationships led to successful student outcomes. Teachers who provided caring behaviors (e.g., focusing on strengths, positive future expectations, additional academic support) improved student perceptions of school. Additionally, teachers who communicated to students they understood the risks associated with student home environments, promoted student success by creating trust and empathy (Williams et al., 2017).

Positive parental support can improve at-risk students' academic performance by providing parental monitoring and increased levels of control. Parental supervision of student academic performance can lead to higher grades and student engagement (Santiago et al., 2014). Likewise, parental monitoring can lead to a positive adolescent adjustment in high school and middle school. Peters and Woolley (2015) found a direct correlation between parental control and student academic success. Increased levels of control (e.g., rules, guidelines, or boundaries) led to higher academic performance and grades. Parents building trust with their children by providing unwavering support also led to improved academic performance and higher grades. Additionally, parents who provided students with increased opportunities for challenge also saw an enhanced academic achievement and higher grades. It is important to note, without parental control, even if support and challenges were present, students did not have higher grades and performance (Peters & Woolley, 2015).

In a similar study by Mahony et al. (2015) examined the support given by teachers to children experiencing parental separation or divorce. Mahony et al. (2015) found that teachers employed a myriad of strategies to provide differentiated emotional, academic, and behavioral

support to children experiencing divorce or separation. In turn, students began regulating their own social, emotional, and educational behaviors without the intervention of their teacher.

Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this research is to investigate the experiences of students who graduated from high school, resided in single-parent homes, and attended an identified rural Georgia Title I school district.

This study will be grounded in two theories – Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory and Bowlby’s (1988) attachment Theory, mentioned previously. Combining these two theories may help understand the strategies used by individuals who graduate from high school while living in a high-risk environment possessing specific strategies to compensate for the risks they face. For this research, I will identify the risks and strategies present in the home microsystem of high school graduates raised in single-parent homes and attended rural; Title I schools in Georgia.

The ecological systems theory does not approach development in a traditional method, rather on what is absorbed, preferred, feared, or observed, and how this information is shaped by an individual’s interaction with their environment. The appropriate definition to use for ecological development is a person’s changing perception and interaction of their environment, and the ability to investigate and alter one’s perceptions and interactions as needed to sustain their environment. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory is similar to developmental theories proposed by Piaget and Lewin, because all three theories rely heavily on the interconnectivity between an organism and its surroundings. The difference between Bronfenbrenner’s theory and the other two theories is rooted in the evolving nature of the organism. Essentially, Bronfenbrenner did not believe a person is the product of their

environment. Instead, a person has an active role in their environment and can make adjustments to change their circumstances.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 3) described the ecological environment as, “. . . a set of nesting structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls.” An individual’s ecological environment is composed of four levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The macrosystem encompasses all the environments a person might have. The most central layer (i.e., the core) of the four-layer system is the microsystem, and this layer contains the most intimate interactions an individual has with his or her environment. It is essential to note an individual may have more than one microsystem depending on the context. During my research, I will focus primarily on the participant’s home microsystem, and the connection between the home microsystem and the participant’s school microsystem.

Using available and current research, I have identified four risk factors present in the home microsystem of graduates in my sample population: (a) the single-parent family structure, (b) child stress factors, (c) rural urbanicity, and (d) low socioeconomic status. Each of these risks could inhibit the progress of a high school student from graduating. To compensate and overcome risks, an individual must develop strategies. By studying Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) and Bowlby’s (1988) research, as well as current research related to each of the identified risk factors, I have isolated secure attachment as the primary strategy for graduates living in at-risk populations.

Secure attachment provides a child with trust, comfort, confidence, and safe emotional attachment to a primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1988). Individuals with secure attachment in a relationship are more likely to take risks, form deep, meaningful relationships with other individuals, and will explore and expand their educational opportunities (Bowlby, 1988;

Kocayoruk & Simsek, 2015). There are three secure attachment pathways I will explore during my research: (a) parental support, (b) adult support, and (c) peer support. According to Bowlby (1988) and Kocayoruk and Simsek (2015), these pathways provide individuals living in at-risk environments with secure attachments, by either employing promotive factors or protective factors to overcome risks.

A protective factor mitigates or eliminates the adverse outcomes of a risk, while promotive factors compensate or minimize the adverse consequences of a risk. Promotive factors are identified in the adult support and peer support pathways, while protective factors are identified in the adult support and parental support pathways. The promotive factors present in the adult support pathway are adult actions creating trust and secure networks built by an individual encompassing family and community members (Lätsch, 2018; O'Malley et al., 2015; Peters & Woolley, 2015), while constructive student-teacher relationships are the protective factors present in adult support (Lätsch, 2018; Mahony et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2017). Parental academic involvement, parental monitoring, and parental control are all protective factors in the parental support pathway (Lätsch, 2018; O'Malley et al., 2015; Peters & Woolley, 2015; Santiago et al., 2014). Positive peer relationships are promotive factors in the peer support pathway because they offset the risk factors in a child's home (Latsch, 2018; Williams et al., 2017).

Chapter Summary

Risk factors affect student performance and emotional development because they alter an individual's foundation. Every person has a unique microsystem framing their foundation for future success. Children raised in a dual-parent, continuously-married household with equal access to both parents can form secure attachments to both parents and flourish academically and

emotionally. Their exosystems are more diverse and are the result of plentiful resources and stable relationships between themselves and persons outside of the home. Single-parent households are a risk factor for student academic performance and emotional development because children have reduced contact with proper healthcare, parental support, and economic resources. Too often, children living in single-parent or fractured family structures face more than one risk factor, such as parental and child stressors, low socioeconomic status, and rural urbanicity. Additional risk factors further weaken attachments between the child and guardian. Children possessing protective and promotive factors can compensate for foundational damage to their microsystems. These children can use these factors to overcome the risks present in their microsystems and mesosystems.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district. Each student will provide insight into their social and academic life experiences, perceived risks to graduation, and promotive factors used to overcome risk factors. All stakeholders associated with a student's exosystem will benefit from the information shared in this research. Stakeholders might include but are not limited to, teachers, administrators, educational policymakers, those entrusted with the training of these educators, single parents, and students.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

President Lyndon Johnson began National School Reform in 1965 by ushering in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) aimed at providing “equal access to quality education” for all students, especially those students living in poverty. The cornerstone of the ESEA program was Title I, additional funding for schools and districts with increased percentages of economically disadvantaged students. Title I funding continues to provide at-risk schools with instructional materials and professional learning today. However, the accountability focus of the program shifted over the years to graduation rate and overall academic performance (GADOE, 2019).

No Child Left Behind, a reauthorization of ESEA under the Bush administration, focused accountability measures on teacher and student outcomes instead of school outcomes. The adjusted graduation cohort rate was one such measure, and it was equal to the number of students within a cohort graduating in four years. The average graduation rate for Georgia students in 2018 was 81.6% compared to 84.6% nationally (Balfanz, 2019; GADOE, 2019). Forty-seven rural Title I schools were scoring at or above Georgia’s state average out of 323 schools scoring at or above the state’s average (GADOE, 2019).

Another indicator of performance is the family structure. According to Wilcox and Zill (2015), family structure has more influence on student achievement than race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. The adjusted cohort four-year graduation rates support their findings in current College and Career Readiness Performance Index reports. The top ten percent of schools

in Georgia for adjusted cohort graduation rate contained 12 rural schools, 13 Title I schools, and three schools with a percentage of single-parent homes greater than 50% (County Health Rankings, 2019).

Even though years of national and state school reform focused on increasing human, financial, and fiscal resources to improve student achievement and career readiness, Georgia schools have failed to improve student graduation performance significantly. In Georgia, students who resided in a single-parent home during some part of their childhood are more than twice as likely not to graduate from high school when compared to all Georgia high school students (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1995; Parke, 2003; Wilcox & Zill, 2017).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district. To fully understand their personal experiences, it is necessary to use case study research methodology. The following sections in this chapter will provide rationale and support for the chosen research design, as well as a course of action for selecting participants, instrumentation, and collecting data.

Research Questions

The foundation of this research builds on the idea that an individual's social and academic life experiences shape their eventual success or failure. The following research questions will guide this study:

- Research Question 1. What were the social and academic life experiences of students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district?

- Research Question 2. What were the perceived barriers experienced by students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district?
- Research Question 3. What strategies were used by students to graduate from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district?

Life experience is the combination of smaller experiences used to either enhance or diminish an individual's identity. The social and academic experiences occurring within a person's macrosystem can be either positive or negative. Understanding a high school graduate's response to positive and negative experiences may provide insight into their success.

Rationale

Although years of national and state school reform focused on increasing human, financial, and fiscal resources to improve student achievement and career readiness, Georgia schools have failed to improve student graduation rates significantly (Dalton, 2019; GADOE, 2019; KCDC, 2019). Georgia's high school graduation rate for the 2018-2019 school year was 82%, an increase of 12% since 2012, the year the state changed graduation rate calculations in Georgia (Dalton, 2019; GADOE, 2019). It is important to note the largest increase (6.4%) occurred between 2014 and 2015, other yearly increases average one percent each year. The national graduation rate for the 2018-2019 school year was 84.6% (Dalton, 2019). In Georgia, students from single-parent homes are more than twice as likely not to graduate from high school when compared to all Georgia high school students. The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district. Teachers, administrators,

educational policymakers, those entrusted with the training of these educators, single parents, and students may benefit from this study. Voices of high school graduates from single-parent homes may inspire divorced parents, who may be struggling raising their children. Valuable perspectives about these students that may be contrary to recent trends in research, and a voice for successful high school graduates from single-parent homes in rural areas.

Research Design

In this study, I used an embedded, exploratory case study with a multiple-case design (Yin, 2018). I derived significance and understanding, served as the principal source of data collection, and provided a genuine account of participant experience (Merriam, 2002). Additionally, I explored deeper into the phenomenon of graduates from single-parent households, with limited available research.

The case study research design allowed me to investigate and understand the “how” and “why” questions of recent events. I did not seek to control the events in the research (Yin, 2018). Use of the case study research design enabled me latitude to study the phenomenon as participants freely shared their experiences through in-depth and detailed answers to interview questions (Yin, 2018).

I applied an embedded, exploratory multiple-case study research design to genuinely give voice to the experiences of participants and investigate beyond self-reported measures or quantitative variables (Newman et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). It was necessary to use an embedded case study when multiple case study measures were applied from various sources, such as family observations, single-interviews with graduates, and whole-group interviews with graduates, peers, parents, or teachers (Newman et al., 2015; Yin, 2018). I chose the case study approach, because it provided me with more insight into the microsystems of successful high school

graduates and the possible promotive and protective factors compensating for the established risks.

Setting

The study was conducted in two rural, central Georgia, Title I school districts. In deference to Institutional Review Board (IRB) privacy concerns, I used pseudonyms for each of these counties, East County and West County. The percentage of students residing in single-parent homes in East County (29.2%) was below the state average (34.0%), but the percentage of students living in single-parent homes was above the state average (38.7%) in West County (KCDC, 2019). The reported poverty rates for both East County (24.3%) and West County (32.7%) were higher than the state average (21.0%) (KCDC, 2019). According to the latest census, the estimated population size for East County (19,000) was considerably smaller than the West County population (26,000)(Census, 2019). However, the difference in the number of individuals ages 20-29 in East County (2,800) was not as significant when compared to the number of individuals ages 20-29 in West County (3,320) (Census, 2019).

Population and Sample

The accessible population for the study was high school graduates, who were raised in single-parent homes and attended rural Title I schools. The study sample derived from a combination of snowball and purposive sampling procedures (Guetterman, 2015). Purposive sampling was a technique applied by qualitative researchers to reduce the probability or chance in a sample population. Snowball sampling was a method used by qualitative researchers to discover research participants through a social network. I used the following characteristics to identify participants for this study:

- high school graduates 19-26 years of age. This age range was relevant because current social and academic experiences were essential to the study.
- traditional graduates who obtained a diploma within four years. Graduates who earned a GED or completed an alternative education program were not considered because those programs did not count toward the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate calculation.
- resided in single-parent homes before entering their ninth-grade year of high school, (Bowlby, 1988; Stevenson et al., 2018). The time frame was significant because the length of time a student had to adjust to the effects of attachment loss impacted their experience and success (Bowlby, 1988; Stevenson et al., 2018).
- attended rural Title I high schools. It was essential to note that participants did not need to attend the same high school all four years, but they must remain in a rural Title I high school all four years to participate in the study.

Purposive sampling techniques yielded four participants, and I used snowball sampling to recruit the additional participants. Participant recruitment involved asking participants to suggest additional individuals who met the selection criteria set for this study. Information on potential participants remained strictly confidential, in accordance with IRB protocols. All participants received research information from a trusted source and contacted me to participate.

I invited qualifying participants by mail to ensure I recruited enough people to help me reach data saturation. It took me eight weeks to recruit my full study sample. After I achieved the desired sample size, I contacted all participants and established an individual research meet-and-greet session due to COVID protocols, to establish initial trust, expectations, and boundaries for this research study.

Data Collection and Methods

Yin (2018) claimed a researcher could use case study data collection methods to gather data about actual human events and behaviors (realist approach) or accumulate data concerning unique viewpoints (relativist approach) about the case study. For this study, I used the realist approach via three sources of evidence: documentation, interviews, and direct observation.

Documentation

Documentation was the analysis of participant records or archives by researchers to answer specific research questions (Frey, 2018). I used documents to obtain union and rationale among participant data sources and demonstrated reliability (Frey, 2018). School progress reports, academic awards, and report cards were sources of documentation. I gathered documentation from each research participant to develop a rich, informative case study. Documents provided a stable source of data that was specific and inconspicuous (Yin, 2018). Documentation corroborated and augmented evidence, verified important details within research findings, and allowed for additional inferences (Yin, 2018).

I examined all documents after the second interview. For each document, I used a document observation matrix (see Appendix A). Saldaña (2016) said, “Each artifact has a history of how it got there and a reason or meaning for its presence.” He implored researchers to look closely at documents and try to discover the documents’ “clues” and secrets (Saldaña, 2016). After careful inspection, I wrote a brief narrative about each document explicitly addressing the question, “What was my first and general impression about this document’s environment, and what detail within it led me to that impression (Saldaña, 2016)?”

Interviews

Seidman (2013) claimed that interviewing was a well-crafted talent and was not a skill that could be taught. However, there were a few skills every amateur must know before entering the interviewer seat. First, to gather appropriate data and gain the trust of participants, an interviewer must “listen more, talk less” (Seidman, 2013). Interviewers must listen to what the participant is saying with their weak inner voice while remaining aware of the interview process and moving in a forward direction, careful not to spiral in an unproductive session (Seidman, 2013). To ensure I listened to each interview, I used a recording device to record all interviews. After the sessions finished, I used Express Scribe software to convert audio recordings into transcripts for further analysis. Next, interviewers must ensure additional, off-script questions asked during the interview process flow and follow the answers to interview questions. Additional questions should seek to understand, clarify the subject, and unearth new information without leaving the participant feeling like they have participated in an inquisition (Seidman, 2013). Third, an interviewer should ask real questions for which they do not already know or anticipate the response (Seidman, 2013). The interviewer should not sway the course of the conversation, but ask open-ended questions, and at all costs, avoid interrupting the participant (Seidman, 2013). I prepared an interview guide for each interview session and minimized anticipation, interruption, or detours. Lastly, the interviewer should learn when to endure or move past moments of silence during the interview (Seidman, 2013). Over the course of the study, I embraced the silence and felt comfortable with participants..

Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face with each participant in a setting of their choosing. The researcher used an interview guide to conduct interviews (see Appendix

B). The interview was simultaneously audio recorded for transcription and coding purposes during data analysis. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes (Seidman, 2013). I intentionally focused on different phases of the participant's life during each interview.

During the first interview, I focused on the participant's social and academic experiences before entering ninth grade in an effort to gather and review their life histories before they entered high school. In the second interview, I focused on participants' social and academic experiences during high school, 9th grade through graduation. In the final interview, I asked participants to reflect on their current lives and determine how their present lives may be a result of their prior experiences.

Interviews were conducted simultaneously with video-recorded non-participant observations. The purpose of this form of observation was to allow me to determine participant understanding, check for researcher bias, or reactivity. Participants were given full disclosure regarding audio and video recording during interviews, and privacy procedures throughout the research study.

Non-Participant Observation

Video recording each interview session provided another source of data for this research. After each interview session commences, I observed the videos and journaled my observations, careful to record any comments about participant body language or follow-up questions for the next interview session. The purpose of this form of observation was to check for participant understanding, researcher bias, and reactivity; the influence a researcher could have on the participant's interview responses. As stated previously, participants received information regarding audio and video recording during interviews and privacy procedures to protect their identities throughout the research study.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data Analysis Strategies and Techniques

There was no set strategy or plan of attack for this case study research design data analysis, because all case studies were reported as different in approach and findings (Yin, 2018). Experienced case study researchers develop strategies over time, but as a rookie researcher, I trusted basic approaches (Yin, 2018). Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested a new examination of research data to inform case study research. They suggested that by examining the data early, a researcher can look for trends, patterns, insights, or concepts that might require attention when interviewing participants in later rounds.

After hours of interviews, video recordings, audio recordings, and many documents and memos, there were piles of data to sift through, organize, and determine if it is sufficient for addressing the research questions. Coding was a method for translating the data into meaning or patterns that were categorized and transcribed into research explanations (Saldaña, 2016). I coded Express Scribe audio interview transcripts, document memos, pre-analysis memos, and direct observation journals.

I used two first-round coding techniques to derive a common language among the data: elemental coding and affective coding (Saldaña, 2016). Elemental coding, specifically *process coding*, provided a firm base for future coding cycles because of the essential nature of elemental coding filters (Saldaña, 2016). Process coding used action words, or gerunds (*-ing* words) as a framework for the coding language (Saldaña, 2016). Process coding was useful in all forms of qualitative analysis, but it was beneficial when seeking to understand human nature. Affective coding deliberately acknowledges the biased qualities a participant displays. I used two types of

affective coding this study, emotion coding and values coding. In both emotion coding and values coding, the characteristic displayed was annotated on the transcript.

To provide a deeper understanding of the first cycle coding methods, I used focused coding as a second cycle coding method (Saldaña, 2016). Focused coding “. . . searches for the most frequent or significant codes to develop the most salient categories in the data corpus. . . .”, and it requires the researcher to conclude how the pieces of the puzzle fit together with the conceptual framework (Saldaña, 2016). I created functional categories based on coding patterns and themes. Functional groups for coding were descriptive and included research participants’ perceptions, opinions, philosophies, and beliefs. Lastly, I conducted cross-case comparisons between categories to understand code meanings and the answers to research questions.

In conjunction with coding, I utilized a general data analysis (Yin, 2018) to explore my research questions and the conceptual framework. Furthermore, I used the theoretical propositions strategy as a roadmap for analyzing my data and looking for underlying themes.

In addition, the logic models and cross-case synthesis were used for further analysis of the data. Specifically, the logic model analytics helped me determine participants’ progress and, ultimately, success. This process involved examination of participants’ experiences and the arrangement of them in cause-and-effect patterns (Yin, 2018). This allowed for insight into what stimulated the person and showed an attachment linkage. On the other hand, cross-case synthesis allowed me to compare and contrast patterns across cases within the study. This form of analysis strengthened validity because it built commonality among participants and improved generalizability among readers (Yin, 2018).

Validity

According to Maxwell (2013), many researchers made the mistake of naming several abstract strategies, without explaining how the strategies removed threats to validity. In this research, there were two threats to validity that were impossible to eliminate, researcher bias and reactivity. Instead of eliminating these threats, I explained how to minimize threats to validity.

Researcher bias was understanding personal values and beliefs and how a researcher can allow those qualities to influence their conclusions regarding research data (Maxwell, 2013). During this research, I collected interview data, observational and journal data after all sessions. The selection of data “meeting” and “not meeting” the conceptual framework was subject to researcher bias. It was essential to consider how my data selection choices affected the study and how I decided which data to include and exclude. To minimize threats to researcher bias, I triangulated data from multiple sources (interviews/observation/documents) to create a tight evidence trail for readers, and I wrote a memo after each investigation of evidence (Yin, 2018).

Reactivity was the influence of the researcher on the setting or the participants of the study (Maxwell, 2013). During interviews, participants felt some measure of researcher influence, and the situation did influence some participant responses. To ensure the validity of message was accounted for in the research process, I employed two tactics. First, I used respondent validation to follow each interview to eliminate confusion and misinterpretation. Second, I searched for discrepant evidence and negative cases looking for biases and assumptions with data sets (Maxwell, 2013)

Ethical Issues

In accordance with the guidelines of Valdosta State University (VSU) regarding the protection of human participants, I sought approval from the IRB to study six participants for this

study. Participant recruitment and data collection began after receiving IRB approval (e.g. Appendix C). I committed to taking diligent measures to protect participant privacy throughout the study. The best method for guarding participant confidentiality was to develop a system for managing and securing participant data. There were three areas of participant privacy vulnerability I needed to address with participants during the informed consent process: (a) research location, (b) participant identity, and (c) participant data.

It was possible to derive the identity of participants if a reader knows the intimate details of a participant's life and where they reside. To avoid this, I used pseudonyms to mask research site identities. Each site was located in a small rural town in central Georgia. Using aliases for each location reduced participant risk and prevented participant exposure.

I assigned participants case study identification numbers and pseudonym to minimize identity exposure. Participants only disclosed their legal first and last names on the informed consent, which was kept strictly under lock and key. All other documents (transcripts, interviews, memos) pertaining to the participant during the study were labeled with a case study identification number and pseudonym. The case study identification number was listed beside the participant's legal name on the signed informed consent.

During this research study, there was large volumes of electronic and paper data collected from research participants. All paper documents collected during the research process were stored in individual files and were labeled with the participant's assigned case study number. All digital files and recordings were stored in separate folders labeled with the participant's assigned case study number on an external hard drive. All digital and paper documentation will be accessible for two years after my dissertation defense, and then the documentation will be destroyed. Physical documents will be shredded, and digital documents will be erased.

Chapter Summary

For this research study, I used an embedded, exploratory case study with a multiple-case design (Yin, 2018). The embedded, exploratory case study with multiple case design was appropriate for this investigation because it met the three requirements of case study inquiry: (a) “how” and “why” questions, (b) the events within the investigation were recent, and (c) the researcher had no control over the events in the research (Yin, 2018). The case study approach allowed for more insight into the microsystems of successful high school graduates and the possible promotive and protective factors that could compensate for established risks.

The accessible population for this study was high school graduates raised in single-parent homes, who attended rural Title I schools. The research sample was comprised of high school graduates between the ages of 19-26 years who resided in single-parent homes before entering their ninth-grade year of high school. Selected participants engaged in one pre-interview and three formal interviews. Documentation, interviews, and direct observations provided three sources of evidence for data triangulation and analysis. Data analysis procedures included three strategies: general data analysis strategies and coding techniques outlined in this chapter (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldaña, 2016; Yin, 2018).

CHAPTER IV: PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Introduction

Over the years, national and school accountability systems have been created to improve student achievement and career readiness by providing an increase of human, financial, and fiscal resources. Despite the sweeping reform, Georgia schools have failed to significantly improve student graduation performance. In Georgia, students from single-parent homes are more than twice as likely not to graduate from high school when compared to all Georgia high school students. The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district. The risks associated with the target population are rural education, possible low socioeconomic status, and single-parent households.

The accessible population for this study were high school graduates who were raised in single-parent homes and attended rural Title I schools. The study sample arose from a combination of snowball and purposive sampling procedures (Guetterman, 2015). Participants were identified from two rural, Title I school districts in central Georgia. In regard to IRB privacy concerns, I used pseudonyms for each of these counties, East County and West County. The participants met the following criteria:

- high school graduates 19-26 years of age.
- traditional graduates who obtained a diploma within four years.

- resided in single-parent homes before entering their ninth-grade year of high school, (Bowlby, 1988; Stevenson et al., 2018).
- attended rural Title I high schools.

Participant Profiles

Kansas

On a rainy Wednesday in August, Kansas arrived at the West Board of Education. After two failed attempts to meet, this was our first successful meeting. We agreed to meet in a conference room in the back of the office in the West Board of Education building for privacy and participant comfort instead of meeting at her grandmother's house where she currently resides. She decided on the meeting location after initial conversations about her reluctance to bring me into her home. Kansas graduated from West High School in 2015 and has remained in this community since graduation.

Kansas arrived at the first interview dressed in blue jeans, flip-flops, and a maroon t-shirt. Her hair was pulled up in two buns, sitting adjacent to one another, on top of her head. She took her seat and began reading the IRB disclaimer. As I started the interview with small talk and a brief explanation of the interview process, I noted her hesitation and discomfort. In reviewing the first interview video recording, I observed she began the interview process with her arms crossed and her head leaning on her shoulder; then, she alternated to a position of insecurity by placing her hand under her chin and ear.

However, her demeanor changed once we started talking about her elementary and middle school social and academic experiences. While her body language remained uncomfortable and guarded, her answers are well thought out and fully disclosed. Kansas had faint childhood memories growing up in a single-parent household. She stated, “. . . I didn't

know exactly what happened until I was in eighth grade. I've never been with my biological mom or dad. And my aunt raised me." Soon, Kansas relaxed after she realized it was okay to freely talk about life experiences. She ascertained, "Is it okay if I get emotional?"

Kansas was born after her mother was raped at the age of seventeen. After the first two weeks of her life, her mother could not care for her due to problems of drug addiction and was ultimately raised by her aunt. She recounted this early childhood experience in the following anecdote:

My mom and my dad was on drugs, and when my mom had me, she was 18. Actually, she was just about to turn 18. . . she had dropped out of school. . . And my aunt, she just refused to let me go through foster care.

Kansas formed a secure attachment to her aunt at an early age. Her aunt's home became her microsystem.

Other than her cousins, Kansas had few close friends in elementary school. She was comfortable having cousins as close friends because they understood what she was going through at home. She developed strong family bonds with her cousins. These family ties helped her navigate the home-school connection. She "wasn't social at all" without her family to lean on. She preferred to sit with the teacher during unstructured time, like the playground or lunchroom, rather than with her peers. She avoided playing with other children outside of her family network and "never wanted to be around anybody," and she would "literally scream and cry" when others tried to invade her personal space. Kansas harbored deep resentment at the world and isolated herself as she avoided unleashing her anger at her peers. She described this coping strategy:

I'm just going to stay to myself because I know that if I play with them or if I try to go talk to them or go with the clique or whatever, I was going to be a bully, and I did not want to be a bully at all.

Kansas explained this behavior as a way of dealing with all her anxiety during the school day, due to the looming thought of returning home each afternoon. In fourth grade, Kansas came face-to-face with her oppressor every afternoon.

In fourth grade, Kansas lived between two primary microsystems: her aunt's home and her grandmother's home. She spent most of her time living with her aunt, but each day after school, she would ride the bus to her grandmother's house and wait there until her aunt finished working at a nearby doctor's office. Kansas's biological mother had recently moved in with Kansas's grandmother, forcing Kansas to see her mother and her mother's boyfriend each day. Her grandmother's new tenants frequently used drugs in the house without her knowledge, but Kansas knew. The boyfriend participated in sundry other illegal and shady activities while living in her grandmother's house.

Both visitors were unwelcome guests in Kansas' eyes, but the boyfriend was criminal because of his various illegal activities shared by Kansas. He sexually abused Kansas and her sister Alabama every day after school. Soon the abuse escalated to rape. Kansas took the brunt of sexual abuse because she did not want her sister Alabama to face the horrific acts. She endured sexual abuse and rape well into high school without confiding in her grandmother or aunt. Although her mother knew that her boyfriend was abusing her daughters, she did nothing to protect her children. Kansas "knew for a fact that she knew what was going on because she's seen it with her own eyes, but just denied it and she really wouldn't listen." Her mother frequently "disowned her" and told her, "That's why I never wanted you. And I should have

aborted you.” Kansas also witnessed the physical abuse of her mother and her life was fractured at this point. The microsystem she lived in with her aunt provided security and support, but the microsystem she endured in the afternoons filled her with fear, anxiety, pain, and distrust.

Kansas reacted to the abuse by acting out whenever possible and drawing as much negative attention as she could. The abuse negatively influenced her academic performance and her grades plummeted. This was her cry for help. She explained: “. . . trying to get somebody’s attention because I was thinking maybe a teacher or principal or somebody would be like, ‘Is there a reason that you’re acting out like this?’” “No one came to her rescue as the abuse and molestation intensified at home. She was completely isolated and blamed herself and her teachers and peers for what was happening to her. She shared, “I felt like the teachers were just onto me. I felt like the students always just wanted problems with me, but it was me because I didn’t understand how to express myself. And I was afraid.” Kansas felt like one of the most significant barriers she faced before going to high school was “not knowing how to communicate” and “not being able to talk” about “the things building up inside.”

Ninth grade was a pivotal point in Kansas’s life because she met an educator who helped her turn her life around. For the first time, she met Mrs. Tango who seemed to care about her. She soon earned Kansas’s trust and was allowed into her tumultuous life. Mrs. Tango counseled Kansas about her self-worth. She mentored Kansas throughout high school and stepped in as a supportive figure in her life. Mrs. Tango provided Kansas with positive adult support, creating a sense of trust and a positive student-teacher relationship. Kansas shared:

We didn’t just have talks all the time. She would take me places and show me things to help me learn. And I met a whole lot of people through her, some people that went through the things that I went through. And when I’d seen that, once they talked about

their problems and it helped them feel better, then I was like, ‘Maybe I should start doing the same.’

Kansas and Mrs. Tango are still close to this day, and they even try to have lunch every other week.

Meeting Mrs. Tango did not drastically change the circumstances of Kansas’ life immediately. The abuse and her struggle with anxiety at school continued unabated. Kansas said, “Everything was kind of the same for the simple fact she was helping with--it takes time. Things don’t happen overnight.” Kansas maintained her close relationship with her cousins in high school and extended her circle of friendships outside her family network. She became more sociable and interacted more with her peers. Her grades improved, especially in her math classes, and she incurred fewer behavior infractions at school. She began to see school as a distraction from the anxiety of home life. If she could focus on small successes at school, it provided her with some joy. Her life began a new trajectory at school because now she “. . . had no choice but to get it together.”

Three days into her twelfth grade year, Kansas’ life took a complete turn for the better. She finally fought her mother’s boyfriend and successfully ended the abuse. She captured the events of that day in the following vignette: “And so that night, I had just. . . that day, I had just had enough, like I just had enough. But I’m like, everything that I’ve ever tried to do didn’t work. We had enough.” That night, Kansas and her sister fought back with violence and words. Kansas fought back until the police showed up, and when the police arrived, she told the police everything that happened over the last eight years. Kansas said proudly at the end of her second interview, “And from that day, he never touched me again.”

After high school, Kansas had no desire to go to college due to a profound sense of insecurity. She stated:

I had already made up my mind that I wasn't going to college at all. I did not want to go to college. I had already made up my mind. I didn't want to stay on campus by myself because I was always thinking something will happen to me or if something happens to me and I'm not close to home. . . the main fear is that he would find me.

In our third interview, I discovered the reason for her discomfort in answering the question stemmed from her desire to improve her situation, but the embarrassment of her anxiety and fear.

Kansas graduated on May 29th, 2015, in a venue full of strangers and one very proud grandmother and aunt. Graduation night was special for Kansas because her grandmother never left the house due to her illness, but she came to see Kansas graduate and sing the national anthem. Kansas was the first person in her family to graduate from high school in the traditional method and within four years. Kansas said, "When I was younger, that was my main goal. Whereas everyone else was saying, they wanted to be a firefighter or whatever. I just wanted to graduate. That was my main focus, was graduating from high school." Graduating from high school would be "a door opener" for Kansas.

Currently, Kansas is twenty-three years old, and she lives with her grandmother and younger brother; it is just the two of them in a safe and trusting microsystem. Kansas serves as a caregiver for her grandmother, younger brother, nieces, and nephews. After graduation, Kansas jumped from one retail job to the next, but eventually settled down at a nearby agri-tourism destination for families. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, operations were suspended and Kansas had to seek other employment. Kansas presently works for a temporary agency

moving from one manufacturing warehouse to the next. She has maintained employment since graduation and considers herself earnest in her abilities. She uses phrases like, “I’m always on top of my game,” “I go to strictly work,” and “I’m always on time. I’m always there. I go for overtime” to describe her work ethic. In high school, Kansas used hard work as a strategy to avoid thoughts of life after school. The small successes she saw provided her with joy. Kansas is not living in an abusive environment presently and she has developed a strict work ethic. Kansas’s focus is to work and support her grandmother, little brother, nieces, and nephews in her life. When asked about plans and how her nieces and nephews fit into that equation, she remarked:

I want to be successful, and I still dream of the big house and all of that. But for right now, I just know that somebody got to stay with them, so they won’t go through what I went through. So that’s kind of my main focus.”

At work, she maintains minimal engagement with coworkers, except her cousins. The same cousins who served as her network of school support also work with Kansas, serving as a reliable network on the job. Kansas deliberately keeps her social network small and positive to diminish the effects of anxiety and fear, a promotive strategy she learned at an early age. In retrospect, Kansas has minimal experiences with family members living outside her home and work microsystems. When I questioned Kansas about why her communication has stopped with her aunt and other family members, she says, “It was kind of like the things that happened are kind of pushed under the road. So that just kind of push me away.” When I questioned further, I realized that she feels betrayed by her family because they are so willing to accept her mom and the boyfriend back into the family after they knew everything he had done to Kansas and

Alabama. Allowing people into her life who were willing to overlook and excuse the abuse that occurred was a risk to Kansas.

At the end of our last interview, I asked Kansas to reflect on how living in a single-parent home and facing the social and academic experiences we discussed in interviews one and two helped shape her as the adult she described in the last interview. Kansas stated the social and academic experiences she faced in school were “like lessons for me.” Kansas reflected on the barriers she faced, living part-time with a sexually and physically abusive adult, feeling unwanted and neglected by her mother, and experiencing social anxiety at school. Kansas revealed she leaned on hard work, Mrs. Tango, her cousins, and her aunt to endure, Kansas praised her aunt as the primary source of her strength:

I just watched her do a lot just to be able to take care of me. And I feel like that’s why I’m as I am when it comes to kids or anybody because she just always made it happen. . . . And so just watching her just helped me to be a strong person because she was extremely strong.

Her aunt provided positive parental support and secure attachment, two things Kansas’s biological mother could not provide. Kansas said, “I just refused to be a failure” and “I just don’t see the point in not doing it, especially when it can give you a little bit of life.”

Mrs. Tango and her cousins provided Kansas with positive adult support and peer support in her mesosystem during high school. Each helped to bridge the gap between her school microsystem and dual home microsystems. As a result, she began to see increased academic performance, fewer behavior problems, enhanced social confidence, and supportive relationships among her peers. They were providing Kansas with the tools she needed to graduate.

After hearing about the trauma Kansas endured during her childhood and the struggle she faced living in a single-parent home, I asked Kansas if she had the choice to live with her biological mom and biological dad together, would she? Kansas stated firmly:

I thank God that I wasn't stuck in that situation and that I was with my aunt or a single parent or whatever. I thank God for that because I just feel like that made me who I am, and if I wouldn't have went through that, I feel like I would be a totally different person, and I like the person that I'm becoming now, so I'm kind of thankful for everything at this point.

Macon

Macon was a twenty-one-year-old, Caucasian male raised by his single mother in rural East county. The three-part interview series took part in his mother's home where Macon continued to reside after high school graduation. There were no family members present during the interviews and Macon had the freedom to openly share the social and academic experiences he had while living in a single parent home while attending a rural Title I school.

At the beginning of our first interview, Macon appeared nervous and uncomfortable. He frequently fidgeted with the neckline of his t-shirt and anxiously raked his hands through his hair. Before I started recording our interview session, I attempted to lighten the mood by asking casual questions about the weather, asked if he was excited about the holiday season, and then I reiterated the topics I would discuss during the first interview. Starting in that manner seemed to relax Macon, because he made eye contact with me and stopped adjusting his clothing. However, during most of the interview, he seemed guarded in his answers and each question required multiple attempts to extract value.

Macon was six when he realized his microsystem consisted of Macon, his brother E, and his mom. His microsystem contained one parent instead of two, but Macon said, “I never really thought of it as different... Because a bunch of my friends, their parents were split up too that I knew.” The difference between Macon and his friends is his parents were divorced, and for a while, his father was in prison. I asked Macon if it bothered him in school that only one parent could attend parties or assemblies, and he jokingly said, “I wasn’t the smartest kid so I didn’t realize stuff like that.”

Macon’s father went to prison when Macon was three years old. While Macon was in primary school, his father was in the state penitentiary. To protect Macon and his brother, Macon’s mom told both boys their father “was away at work” or “on vacation.” Macon’s mother provided a secure attachment for him during the early stages of development, because she offered stability and security. Macon’s father was unable to form a secure attachment with him at an early age because he was in prison.

At the age of five, Macon started school and adjusted well socially. Macon’s social interactions with his peers were positive. Macon said, “I don’t really think I had a problem with talking to anyone.” He added, “I guess I was somewhat outgoing I guess. I just didn’t care to talk to anybody. Wasn’t really shy or anything.” Macon felt one thing that made him stand apart from his peers as a social strength during that time was his ability to “just get along with anybody” because he “understood people.”

As Macon grew older, he continued to get along well with others, but as he learned of his father’s real whereabouts, he dealt with insecurity and fear. Macon was afraid and “nervous that someone would know” his father was in prison and not “on vacation.” Macon did not want anyone to find out the truth, because “I’d always heard that some people think differently once

they know. I've always heard that some teachers will think differently about your kids for how their parents are." Macon's personality changed at this point.

Macon's father exited prison the summer before he started middle school. When Macon entered sixth grade, he "wasn't as outgoing" and he did not "go out of his way to talk to anybody". Macon limited himself to a certain group of friends and did not branch out to form new friends. His peer interactions were positive and supportive but limited to a core group. Macon's persona changed into mature, well-mannered young man. Macon said:

I think I was a little bit more mature than some of the people. I was kind of afraid of people thinking bad about me or something. I don't know what it was, but I didn't want to be in trouble.

Macon wanted to be the good kid; it was "his own personal thing". Macon's relationship with his mother during middle school "was really good." His mother was positive and supportive. Macon was protective of his mother and stepped into the "man of the house" role.

Macon's social experience in high school did not vary from his middle school experience. Macon continued to stay with the same group of friends all four years of high school. Macon maintained his "good kid" persona. He was humble and continued to keep to himself; he did not "go out of his way to talk to somebody." Macon did not participate in extra-curricular activities; he went to school and came home. A new social activity for Macon in high school was playing Xbox after school. After school, Macon would play Xbox online against his friends and other classmates. Macon admitted:

It's a little bit easier for you to talk to people, I guess. Because I was really shy when I was in school and didn't really talk to very many people. But when I was playing my games, nobody could see you, so it didn't really matter."

Macon's academic experiences were more difficult in school because schoolwork required more effort on his part. Macon said, "I think it could have come easier if I would have put myself more towards it." In primary, elementary, and middle school, Macon struggled to "sit and learn all that stuff" because he felt he "had more important stuff" in his head to do than schoolwork. Macon felt comfortable in social studies, saying, "I got that really easy. And science wasn't awful." However, math was "tougher" after a little while and literature was a "struggle." I asked Macon if his academic experiences were worse in middle school or better, and he responded:

I didn't really mind school. It was one of those things where I mean, I wasn't really angry to be there, and I wasn't when I was off it wasn't begging to be back. It's just I had to go there. But I mean, some of it got a little bit harder, but not crazy enough it's still the same thing about me not asserting myself towards it. That was my main problem with it.

Macon realized in middle school if he applied himself, he could learn anything.

In high school, Macon found if he took classes where he could participate in hands-on activities and learning experiences instead of typical classwork, he was successful. Macon maintained a high "C" to low "B" average during high school. Both of his parents were available during high school to monitor his academic performance and involve themselves in parent-teacher conferences. Having both parents present provided Macon with a stronger school-home mesosystem and increased his academic engagement.

A memorable class for Macon in high school was a Senior math class. Macon remembers the class because:

Other people struggled in it, and me and a couple of my friends would usually be the first two or three done with it. And it'd take the other people 45 minutes to do it and we'd be done in 20.

The premise behind the class was applying numbers to Excel formulas: hands on activities. Other memories for Macon centered around the six art classes he took and his Agricultural classes. All of these classes appealed to his kinesthetic learning style, because he was able to complete hands-on tasks verses the traditional method of learning.

Macon graduated four years ago from East County High School. Macon's mom and dad both attended his graduation and celebrated his achievement. I asked Macon if he considered himself a 'high school graduate who overcame and defied the odds'? Macon said, "I mean, not necessarily. I just did what was expected. I figured it was the least that I could do." Macon felt his mother expected him to graduate, and it was his responsibility.

Macon had several positive adults in his life to support him in his endeavors. Macon's mother was his "main role model" because she worked hard to provide for Macon and his brother. Macon recalled:

I really guess looked up to mom how she was because she'd get up and she'd bring us to school and then she'd go straight over to the college for cosmetology. Then she'd get down there and then go work at a restaurant until 11 o'clock at night and then she'd come to pick us up and do the same thing every day.

Macon was inspired by his mother's "commitment" and "willpower." Macon commented several times on "how hard Mom had to work for everything" and "how much work she put into everything." At one point, Macon's mother worked two jobs, to provide for her children, while

attending cosmetology school. Macon said, “Just seeing how hard she worked at it just helped my work ethic.”

Macon’s grandfather, “Pop”, and grandmother were positive adults who inspired him in other ways. His grandfather “would just put himself towards his work” and he did not “get angry.” His grandfather worked hard and did not lose his temper. When Macon was younger, between the ages of five and ten, he recalls the water being turned off at home frequently because his “mom was struggling.” Macon would emulate his grandfather’s attitude and look at the experiences as an opportunity; he would say, “Hey, this is just different. We’re doing something else.” His grandmother portrayed the same gentle spirit. She was also “willing” to help and “took care of us all the time.” Macon’s grandparents were positive adults who created trust and a strong family network.

Macon’s Pop passed away three years ago from leukemia. As a twenty-one-year-old adult, Macon remained close to his grandmother and mom. As a matter of fact, he never left home after graduation and they all share a house, along with his younger brother E. Macon maintained a close relationship with his father after high school graduation as well, but he lives 25 miles away. I asked Macon if he was ‘equally comfortable interacting with mom and dad at this point in his life,’ and he said, “Yeah. I would say so. . . I would be completely fine with either one.” As a follow up question, I asked Macon if it was easier to spend more time with one parent versus the other. Macon said, “It’s just really finding time to drive over there [dad’s house], and I’m over here all the time anyways [mom’s house].” Macon described his relationship with his father in late adolescence, and it was obvious he formed a secure attachment to his father after he was released from prison. Macon described his current relationship with both parents, and he is equally attached to both parents now.

Macon made a few acquaintances at work after high school, but his social interactions with others are limited to work and family. Macon prefers to “just sit around at the house and relax.” If he had the choice between hanging out with coworkers after work or family, Macon said, “I guess probably family. Because I feel like I’m closer to my family.” Macon also admitted his family provided safety and casual comfort.

After high school graduation, Macon attended a community technical college and pursued an automotive technician degree. In October of last year, Macon started the last portion of his training at a local dealership. He must work as an intern for the remainder of this academic year before he can graduate with his license. Macon’s coursework took him the better part of two years to complete, but he enjoyed the work because it was primarily hands-on learning. During his internship, Macon did “technician stuff like alignments and recalls and stuff.” His goal is to complete the basic introductory class for diesel motors and complete a transmissions course. I asked Macon if he would need to go back to school each time he wanted to learn a new skill, and he said:

After you get done with tech school for it, they’ll end up sending you, whoever you work for. If you’re working in an independent shop, you really don’t need any of it, but if you’re in a dealership, they’ll send you to get recertified. General Motors, they want you certified for working on their stuff.

Macon was unsure if he wanted to continue working at a dealership when he graduates or look for a job with an independent shop.

Before closing our final interview, Macon and I discussed his next steps. I asked Macon to describe his personal mission, what he would like to accomplish in his lifetime, and he said, “I

guess I'd like to kind of be successful in my field and kind of work my way up to be able to do a lot more stuff up there and just know how to do a lot more."

To dig a little deeper, I asked Macon to explain what success looks like to him. Macon said:

I guess being successful would be to the point where you had your life together, I guess, where you don't have to really worry about if bills or something like that show up, I guess, and just have your family and all, set up.

In that moment, I realized Macon's idea of success included the security he lacked as a child. Macon believed success was, "If a bill was to just show up, just not having to worry about it too bad." I asked Macon to expand on his personal mission and explain his future plans and vision. Macon said:

I hope to have a family started, I guess. I don't really want my own business because it's too much responsibility. I don't want to deal with all that. Yeah. Not necessarily married or anything like that, just have a family somewhat started, I guess.

Macon's vision of "starting a family" did not include the typical two-parent model and he did not plan on owning his own business someday.

Alexandria

Alexandria walked into the West Board of Education with a serious expression and confidence. Alexandria graduated from West County School System three years ago, and this is the first time she has returned. Alexandria and I made our way to a small, quiet conference room in the back of the board room to begin her first interview. When Alexandria sat down, I could tell she was guarded because her posture was rigid and quiet. However, after a few minutes of introduction to the interview process, Alexandria's shoulders relaxed, and she spoke freely about

her experiences. Alexandria was a twenty-two-year-old multi-racial female. Her mother was African American, and her father was Caucasian. Alexandria's parents separated when she was three, and since the age of four, she has lived with her father. Alexandria has six brothers and three sisters, and they all share the same mother.

In the first interview, I opened by asking Alexandria to explain when she knew something was different about her family structure; specifically, when she knew she lived in a single-parent home. Alexandria said, "I would say about four or five...Well, I went into foster care, so about." At the age of three, Alexandria's parents went their separate ways and Alexandria went to live with her mother because her father was a truck driver. While living with her mother, her mother's boyfriend physically abused Alexandria's brother. Alexandria's grandmother discovered the abuse while changing the child's diaper, "My grandma went to change my brother's diaper, and there were burn marks all over from where he had been burned." The boyfriend used a cigar to abuse the child. Alexandria said, "So they called DFACS, and they took us in." Alexandria went directly into foster care instead of going straight to her father because he was a truck driver, and he had to make arrangements to provide care for the children. Two months after Alexandria turned four, she and her brother Mack moved in with her dad. Alexandria's father never remarried, so she honestly had a single father through school. Alexandria's microsystem changed from an unstable and harmful environment to a microsystem filled with support and safety from her father.

Alexandria's social life experiences in school were tumultuous. In Pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten, and first grade, Alexandria was aggressive and would "physically fight" her teacher. Alexandria described herself at that age as "really angry," and everybody thought she had an "attitude," especially teachers. Most of Alexandria's anger and aggression were fueled by

the building's adults. Alexandria explained, "I was really just angry, and everybody used to think I used to have an attitude, and I was just mean, but I wasn't trying to be. I was just angry." Probing further, I asked Alexandria if she had any friends at that age. Alexandria said, "My whole life, I haven't had a whole lot of friends...I had one close friend, and I guess it was because of her situation at home, too. She kind of understood, but, yeah, I had one close friend." Often, when Alexandria surrounded herself by people, she felt "real nervous;" she "wouldn't talk to hardly nobody," and Alexandria "wasn't hearing it" when the teacher would try to help. During this time, she lacked positive adult support because the only adults Alexandria trusted were her father and grandmother. Alexandria did not possess a positive student-teacher relationship with any of her teachers at this age, and it fractured her family-community network. Alexandria lacked positive peer support and positive parental support as well. Regarding Alexandria's mesosystem, the school-home relationship was fractured because she missed the promotive and protective factors needed to overcome her single-parent family structure, urbanicity, child stress factors, and socioeconomic status.

During second grade, Alexandria's father stepped in and became actively involved in stopping Alexandria's school behavior. Her father became positive parental support, and Alexandria stopped directing her anger and aggression towards the building's adults. Alexandria explained what her father did that changed her behavior:

The first three years I was in school, I was bad, so my dad sat me down, and he explained to me that no child should have to go through that, but my daddy sat me down like, 'I'm not trying to make you feel bad, but all you got is me and your grandma. You got to do better. Your brother is looking up at you.' Whenever he told me that, it was like stuff starting settling in.

Alexandria's brother started school when she entered third-grade, and the anger once directed towards the teacher continued to be a shield against other students in the class.

Alexandria kept other students away by displaying animosity and brashness. Alexandria did not hit or physically torment other students; instead, she would yell and bully them.

Towards the end of our first interview, I learned the root cause of Alexandria's behavior stemmed from a combination of home and social anxiety. During elementary school, Alexandria's father participated in illegal activities to supplement his income. Alexandria said, "I didn't understand everything fully until the police came and kicked in the door. . . ." She felt afraid for her father, asking him, "Why do you do this?" Alexandria carried the fear with her to school, and she held it all inside. Alexandria's attachment with her father became insecure because he did not provide positive parental support during her formative years. According to Alexandria, it is because he was on the road for long periods of time. Alexandria exhibited child stress and couldn't tell anyone what she was going through because "You can't talk to them about stuff like that. That's not something you talk to somebody about." She became isolated. She was uncomfortable around large groups of people, and when someone attempted to draw her out in the crowd, she snapped. As Alexandria moved into middle school, her father's illegal activities ceased, and his parental involvement increased.

Standing taller than all the other students in sixth and seventh grade, Alexandria was the stereotypical bully. During our interview, Alexandria reminisced, "Yeah, I was a bully. And I got in trouble for it and got put out of school for a little while." Alexandria "realized how...I was bigger than everybody else," and she used it to her advantage. She held on to her elementary school attitude, but she let go of her anger. Alexandria "got suspended for a minute, and the school threatened to send me to YDC" because of her bullying behavior in seventh grade. In

response, Alexandria's father decided to teach her a lesson and finally stop her actions.

Alexandria's father took her to the sheriff's office and said:

I just can't do nothing else with her. I don't know what she's got going on, but she wasn't like this before she got in middle school. Now all of a sudden, she thinks she's all big and bad. Y'all do what y'all think is best.

Alexandria spent a few hours in jail, and then her dad returned to pick her up and take her home. Alexandria said, "Still to this day, I try not to be in trouble with the police." Alexandria's father exhibited increased control levels, forming a more secure attachment with Alexandria and mitigating risks in her mesosystem.

In ninth grade, Alexandria began forming new friendships and socializing with people outside her typical social network. Alexandria remembers one particular activity, *The Hunger Games Project*, which forced students to work across normal classroom boundaries and heterogeneously group students together. Alexandria said, ". . . we wouldn't sit with the people we would normally have class with. We were in class with everybody, and it opened up the chance for us to communicate and make new friends." The change in class arrangement made Alexandria feel "more comfortable" and "more social." Alexandria learned how to negotiate when a social situation was negative, and she removed herself before events became cataclysmic. Alexandria would often get her lunch and eat in a teacher's classroom to avoid any negative energy in the lunchroom. Even though she made great strides to improve her social status, she still had those who would seek to cause her trouble. Alexandria described her social transition from elementary school to high school as, "I became more openly honest or brutally honest with people, but I was still able to have a good time, play around, and joke around, but it did not lead

to bullying.” In high school, Alexandria found the missing piece, positive peer relationships, a new strategy she could use to minimize the risks in her microsystem.

During her freshman year, Alexandria found a new passion for occupying her time and channeling her attitude, the Navy Junior Reserves Officer Training Corp (NJROTC). Alexandria enjoyed the challenge and discipline associated with NJROTC. The first year was challenging because she “. . . wasn’t too accepting to the fact of somebody telling me what to do,” but after she became “more disciplined” and took the program “more seriously” everything began to change. Alexandria earned a leadership position her twelfth-grade year, giving her partial leadership over the company. Beaming, Alexandria said:

In ROTC, they look for people who have leadership potential that have the potential to take over the leadership positions in the program. One thing that helped me was the fact that at home, I had to pick up the slack, and I had to be the person who enforced rules upon my brothers and sisters. So, I think that’s one thing that contributed to ROTC and why I liked it so much was because it was something that related to what was going on at home.

Alexandria enjoyed the leadership aspect of NJROTC, especially during the Annual Military Inspection (AMI). During inspection, Alexandria had to insure she remained “disciplined” and “everything’s on point and perfect,” but most importantly she had to “communicate” with others. Alexandria said, “I took it very serious.” AMI allowed Alexandria an opportunity to shine and show her newly-honed social skillset. Alexandria primarily enjoyed NJROTC because she could display her natural talents and earn praise, but she also thrived because she had positive adult support in the program. Alexandria trusted her commanding officers and shared a positive student-teacher relationship with each.

Alexandria's academic experiences in school were vastly different from her social experiences. Academically, Alexandria maintained passing grades in elementary and middle school. She excelled in math and science but struggled in literature. Alexandria said, "I can read. Don't get me wrong. But it's not something I can get into."

Alexandria attributed her lack of interest in literature with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and her father's unwillingness to put her on medicine. Alexandria stated:

I got a little bit of ADHD. So, having to sit still, having to focus on one thing for a long time, that was a struggle for me, so I didn't. My dad didn't want me to get put on medicine for it. So, it was more of they will work with me. But it wasn't my strength. I would normally keep a good grade in literature. But it was something that I struggled with more than anything else.

Alexandria's father felt the school should work harder to meet her needs, and medicine was not the answer. Alexandria was a "B" student, even with her literature struggles. She was a "hands-on learner" who "never really had study habits," and she "would ask a lot of questions" to learn the material. If she needed to review anything at home, her dad would say, "I want you to show me how to do this," and Alexandria would demonstrate her understanding by showing her dad how to solve the problem or answer the question. Alexandria's father always took an interest in her academic progress and closely monitored her grades.

In high school, Alexandria struggled significantly in her math courses, especially eleventh and twelfth-grade math. While she did not fail her math classes, she came close to failing math in eleventh grade. Her relationship with each math teacher was infinitely different and ultimately played a role in her class performance. Alexandria had a poor relationship with her eleventh-grade math teacher because he lost her trust during an incident in class. Alexandria

admittedly used profanity in his classroom towards another student, and he removed her from class while stating, “The way that you’re acting, you’re never going to be nothing in life.” Alexandria disengaged from his class for the remainder of the semester. In retrospect, her relationship with her twelfth-grade math teacher was positive and supportive because she saw Alexandria struggling and asked, “. . . what can I do to help you learn, catch on to everything better?” Alexandria pointed out she wasn’t comfortable working with her current group assignment, and after the teacher made a switch, everything turned around for her. Alexandria’s twelfth-grade math teacher provided a protective strategy for her to minimize risks she may have in her mesosystem.

In Alexandria’s other high school classes, she simply maintained her grades. She did not push herself to excel, she “didn’t study,” and her work ethic “depended on the subject.” Alexandria often “procrastinated” and found herself turning in assignments “right there at cutoff.” The last semester of her senior year, her literature teacher sat her down and gave her a life lesson in an attempt to awaken Alexandria’s academic potential. Miss Q, Alexandria’s literature teacher, paired her with a struggling student in the class and asked Alexandria to work with her after school. Alexandria said, “Once I started helping C, I can say my grades, my work ethic got better in that class.” Miss Q joined a growing list of influential teachers in Alexandria’s life.

During our interviews, a common theme emerged, especially during the second interview: Alexandria felt the support of her teachers at school. In NJROTC, she felt supported by all three of her instructors and thought she could go to them for guidance. Alexandria spoke of Miss Q, her twelfth-grade math teacher, and mentioned other teachers who offered support along the way. To ensure no mentor went unnoticed, I asked Alexandria if she had a teacher

mentor or school mentor she could turn to when things at home got to be too much. Alexandria did not need time to think about these questions. Immediately she began telling me about Mrs. Lean, a teacher she had in middle school. Alexandria said, “. . . she became my teacher and mentor because I wasn’t an awesome student. That’s one person I, even to this day if I ever have any issue with anything going on, I can go to Miss Lean.” Later in our interview, Alexandria revealed Mrs. Lean moved to the high school during her eleventh-grade year and continued to be a source of support the last two years of high school. These positive adults provided support by creating trust, engagement, and a community for Alexandria.

Alexandria’s grandmother was additional adult support available to provide security and attachment at home. Her grandmother stepped into Alexandria’s life when her mother walked away. She made sure all the children attended church on Sunday and Wednesday night to keep them out of trouble and give them an activity to participate in outside of school. Alexandria said, “She had us in church, had us participating in choir and stuff like that, trying to keep us out of the streets with everybody else.” When Alexandria was thirteen, her grandmother passed away from cancer. Alexandria spent months caring for her grandmother and attending doctors’ appointments with her before dying. Alexandria became a mature young woman in the short period her grandmother lived with cancer. After her grandmother passed, Alexandria used her as a great motivator, saying, “Okay, look. You’ve got to do what you’ve got to do to make your grandmama proud.” Her grandmother motivated her to graduate even though she passed away well before high school.

Alexandria’s father was also a foundation of inspiration for her in school. Her father worked hard to raise Alexandria and her nine siblings while providing them with food and shelter. Growing up, her father was “real hard” on her and demanded more from Alexandria

because she was the oldest. Alexandria described their relationship as “just right.” She said, “We argue a lot, but that’s my go-to person for everything.” Her father is someone she can “go to” and “talk to,” even when she has “messed up.” Alexandria said, “He always let me know that I could always be comfortable enough to come to him and tell him anything.” Alexandria’s father was on the road quite a bit while she was in high school, providing her with plenty of unsupervised time to get in trouble. Alexandria realized, “My daddy doesn’t have nobody else to help with this. The person that was helping, she’s gone. So I can’t be out here messing up, and he doesn’t have anybody else.” Alexandria also realized doing things as a teenager in high school might compromise some of her goals later in life, and she did not want to settle. Alexandria explained, “There’s a lot of people from this generation that feel like--they get something little, and that’s all they need. You got to look at the bigger picture. You got to look at the future.”

Alexandria attributed her convictions to her father’s work ethic and persistence. Alexandria said:

I knew that I couldn’t let him down no matter what. That’s one thing that pushed me because there were times that I would think about, ‘Is it really worth doing all this?’ But then it’s like I look at my daddy, and he raised all of us on his own. And it’s like I can’t let him down.

Alexandria graduated high school in the spring, three years ago, under the stadium lights. Tensions were high because graduation almost had to move indoors at the last minute due to rain. However, the rain held off, and Alexandria was able to walk across the stage as the first member of her family to graduate. Alexandria said, “I’m the first one, from what I know, of my family to graduate. I guess you would say, I set the boundaries for the rest of my siblings and stuff.” Alexandria is the first of eleven siblings to graduate. In our last interview, she brought pictures of her graduation. In each image, it is evident Alexandria had a tight network of support

during high school to get her to the finish line. All of her siblings and father are equally proud of Alexandria and her accomplishment. They all shared in her joy on graduation night; they were all excited about her graduation.

After graduation from high school, Alexandria leaned on her social and academic experiences and the foundation provided by her mentors to become a contributing member of society. As an adult, Alexandria reserved her attention but held productive conversations when the situations arose. She held various retail and health occupations, but she has not found her niche. Alexandria currently works in the restaurant business and is flourishing. Alexandria described her current disposition at work as approachable and always willing to perform beyond her scheduled hours, meaning she is always available to pull extra shifts.

She maintains a close relationship with all of her family members and still lives at home with her father and siblings, still serving in the caregiver capacity. Alexandria is not engaged or in a serious relationship at the current time. Alexandria said, "I'm extremely picky with who I give my time to." Alexandria further explains in an ideal relationship, "I look at stuff like if I can't be wanted, if I am not a priority to you, then I don't have time for you." Alexandria isn't looking for marriage, "I'm not forcing it," but if it happens naturally, she will happily comply. Alexandria said, "If you force it, in the end, nothing will end up how it's supposed to end up. Everything will fall apart. Can't force it. You got to let it take its course." The strategies Alexandria obtained in school -- positive adult support, positive parental support, and positive peer support -- provided foundational social experiences for Alexandria. As an adult, Alexandria develops caring and supportive relationships, social confidence, and a diverse social network.

I asked Alexandria to elaborate on her mission and vision during our last interview, and she said:

My mission would be like anybody else; I want to be successful. Financially, I want to be where I don't have to worry about anything, nothing at all. I guess, in a sense, I want to. I'm not gone say my daddy don't have to work, but I do want to be financial stable - how my dad is. I do want to return back to school. I want to get back into nursing. And my vision, I want to get to where I come out of my box a little bit more, get out of my comfort zone. Because right now, it's kind of where if I don't feel comfortable or if it's out of my comfort zone, I won't do it. And sometimes that stepping out of your comfort zone could bring you more blessings out of it than what you would think that it would. Additionally, Alexandria would like to move out of West County to a bigger city with more opportunities.

Before ending our last interview, I asked Alexandria if she saw herself as a "graduate who overcame or defied the odds?" Without hesitating, Alexandria said:

Yep...I was always told that because I was raised by a single father that I would have a child before I'm even 21. Here I am about to be 22, and I don't have not a single child. Another thing is I've been told that because neither one of my parents graduated that it wasn't a high possibility for me to graduate. I beat those odds.

Jackson

Jackson is a twenty-four-year-old school resource officer working in West. He attended West High School, worked a few odd jobs, and finally settled with the local police department. After speaking with Jackson on the phone, we decided the best place to meet for all of his interviews would be his office due to convenience and privacy.

Jackson's home microsystem began as a fractured foundation when he entered primary school. At the age of five, Jackson's father left the family to start a new life without them.

Jackson was caught unaware; he said, “I thought things were going great; they always tried to hide everything from us. Some nights you could hear them fussing and stuff like that, but they never let us know about. . . “ Looking back, Jackson now realizes both of his parents were abusing drugs and alcohol with two small children in the house. After Jackson’s father left the primary microsystem, Jackson lived with his mother and sister until his mother remarried. After his mother remarried, Jackson periodically lived in other microsystems.

After Jackson’s mother remarried, the microsystem he grew up in became a “household full of drugs,” alcohol, and abusive language. The new adult combination in the house was toxic and presented Jackson with unknown risks for his success. The increased use of drugs and alcohol decreased the family’s socioeconomic status and forced the family to transition from one dwelling to the next frequently. Jackson’s mother and stepfather could not pay rent because they devoted their income elsewhere. Jackson witnessed abuse and frequent drug and alcohol use by both adults. During our first interview, Jackson described one night when his mother came running into his room and fell on the floor, saying, “Please don’t hit me. Don’t hit me.” Jackson stood between his mother and stepfather with a baseball bat, saying, “If you hit my mama, I’m going to kill you.” After his stepfather left the room, Jackson compartmentalized what happened and bottled up his emotions. Avoidance became his coping mechanism for dealing with the stress he faced as a child.

There came the point when Jackson was in primary school that his mother was unable to perform her caregiving duties, like helping him with his schoolwork and fixing his meals. Jackson’s grandmother stepped in and took over those responsibilities to make sure Jackson and his sister had their needs met after school. Jackson said, “We was always at my grandmother’s house. . . she would always help my sister and me with school stuff. I just always thought that

was a normal life, always being with my grandmama.” Jackson’s grandmother would help him with his schoolwork, feed him dinner, and get him ready for bed, and then his mother would come by and pick him up for bedtime. The next morning, he would get up and catch the school bus, and his day would start over. Jackson’s grandmother provided a secure attachment for Jackson and positive parental support. She provided Jackson and his sister with academic support by helping them with the schoolwork. She afforded increased monitoring and levels of control by offering them structure in the afternoons. Jackson said, “This was our routine until my nanny passed away, then my aunt Jean stepped in.” Jackson’s grandmother passed away when he was eight years old. After his grandmother passed away, Jackson moved away from West and closer to his aunt Jean. When Jackson described the relationship, he had with his aunt Jean, he used phrases like, “basically like my mama” and “I was with her a lot.” Jean made sure Jackson was with her on the weekends, and she attended all his ball practices and games. His aunt provided Jackson with a secure attachment, academic involvement, and structure he still lacked at home.

Due to his grandmother’s and aunt Jean’s influences, Jackson remained socially and academically stable in elementary school and middle school. Both women provided positive support in the school-home mesosystem, as protective factors mitigating the risks Jackson faced at home. Jackson felt like school was his “get away from everything,” which allowed him to “take my mind of everything” at home. Jackson said, “I always looked forward to being with my friends and stuff like that, so it was more of like I said, my getaway when I would be at school.” I asked Jackson to elaborate on his social experience in elementary and middle school to describe how he interacted socially during unstructured time at school. Jackson used phrases like, “I always had a bunch of friends” and “I was very social as a kid” to describe his social identity. Jackson elaborated on how he did not like conflict and, as a result, always tried to appease

others. He always tried to “get along with everybody” and “never really liked conflict.” When I asked Jackson what he thought his social strengths were before high school, he stated, “I’m always quiet because I’m trying to figure you out. . . I’m observant and cautious.” Jackson’s stumbling block was his “shy personality” and “unwillingness to share personal information with others” when he was hurting. Unfortunately, bottling all those emotions up at such a young age began to manifest stress in the forms of anger and aggression. Jackson said, “I had some anger problems as a kid, because of the stuff I witnessed. . . I could snap in a heartbeat.” As a result, Jackson began playing football and baseball as an outlet for his aggression. His anger problems improved over the years, but he still had “boundaries” and “buttons that could be pushed.”

Academically, Jackson performed well in elementary and middle school and brought home excellent grades. He preferred history class and loved math but detested reading and science. Jackson said, “Grades was never a problem with me. I hated reading. God, I hated reading, but I never had a problem academic-wise.” He did not struggle to read; as a matter of fact, he learned how to read at an early age. Jackson shared, “. . . when my nanny was alive, she would always sit there and read with us, and she was the one that taught me my ABCs, how to write my name, and how to read. . . “ When asked to describe a notable moment in elementary school, Jackson ironically chose a memory linked to reading and writing. Jackson won a pizza party in elementary school for his entire class by winning second place in a writing competition. Jackson stated, “I thought I was horrible at writing, but I got recognized.” He said, “I never saw myself winning something like that. . . It shocked me when I placed with that.” As a student, Jackson was motivated to stay on task and pay attention because he wanted to play baseball and football. He said, “I never got in trouble in school. Ninety percent of the time, I was always on

task and paying attention, and that's just because I wanted to learn and have good grades so I could play sports."

In fourth grade, Jackson met Dean, his best friend and "soul brother." It would be another three years before they met again and started their lifelong friendship. They met in grasscutter football, the first step of tackling football. Jackson said, ". . . we hit it off, because in a sense, his life kind of started out like mine did with his dad and mom." The three-year lull in their friendship was due to Jackson moving away for a short time. When Jackson returned in seventh grade, they reunited and became inseparable.

When Jackson started ninth grade, he "hit a bit of a rough patch" and wanted to "live the party life." Jackson evolved socially from the kid who knew and liked everyone to the teenager who wanted to be like everyone. He sought new experiences and tried new things to become the "life of the party." His new lifestyle made him numb to his surroundings, and Jackson said, "I really wasn't as sharp as I used to be because growing up, I was a sharp person." His numb persona gave Jackson the appearance of being "laid back," and he "went with the flow." Jackson remembers his nonchalant attitude created a desire to "fit in and live like the older crowd" and "find out where the party's going to be." When Jackson would find the party scene, he would interact with the older crowd, but he always felt empty afterward. Thankfully, he always knew his limits and never caused trouble for his aunt Jean or mother. Jackson never wanted the title of "bad kid" because he knew that label would limit his chances for help in school.

During his adventures in the party crowd, Dean always stayed by his side. He did not participate in the parties, but Jackson said:

He always kept me in line and always pushed me to you know like I said to be the best that could be, and that was a real positive experience for me and also just hanging out

with Dean and seeing the person that he was becoming and the positive influence he always had on my life.

Dean provided Jackson with a positive peer relationship and Dean became Jackson's accountability partner. Jackson finally found someone he could talk out the "hard stuff" with instead of pushing it down inside. Dean and his family also provided shelter for Jackson during high school when he needed a place to stay. Jackson didn't live at home during high school because he migrated between friends' houses, primarily staying with his aunt Jean or Dean's family.

Jackson finally gave up the party scene towards the end of high school. His uncle and mother argued in front of Jackson, revealing his mother's use of methamphetamines. Jackson left the house and found friends willing to drink and party. Jackson wanted to feel numb and "forget about everything." Jackson said, "When I woke up the next day, I didn't remember what happened that night. It was that bad. And I promised myself I would never do that again." Jackson realized a barrier for himself was knowing he would always live in the shadow of a "family curse." Jackson said, "You have two choices, it's either you fall in line with the family curse, or you make a difference. And I chose to make a difference." That day he turned his attention away from the party scene and towards baseball, football, and his classes.

In the first interview, Jackson described his academic experiences in elementary and middle school as "a priority" and "never a problem." In high school, Jackson had a similar approach to his high school studies. Jackson took college preparatory courses primarily and one Advanced Placement history course to stretch himself mentally in tenth grade. The AP course did not prove to be a challenge for Jackson because the content was not rigorous. In eleventh grade, Jackson met Mrs. G., and she taught Pre-Calculus. Math was always a weakness for

Jackson, but he didn't hate math. Mrs. G. worked with Jackson and pushed him to work for answers instead of giving him the easy problems and solutions. Jackson learned from Mrs. G., ". . . you have to work hard for it, and everything isn't just gonna be handed to you. . . You truly earned the grade, nothing was given." Jackson enjoyed her class because "she treated everybody the same. . . she didn't play favorites. . . and she was the same with everybody". She was a positive adult support for Jackson. She created trust and structure for Jackson in the school microsystem, and those qualities provided Jackson with increased academic engagement and achievement.

Aside from Mrs. G.'s class, Jackson breezed through his grades in high school. He studied very little and passed all of his classes with little effort. I asked Jackson if he would change anything about his high school experience and his response was, "I would do it all different. I could've done a lot better. To this day, I'm mad with myself because I know I could've done a lot better than I did do but can't change it now." He proceeded to say he would have worked harder on the football field, using phrases like, "I would've played a lot harder than I did" and ". . . I would've taken it more serious than I actually did."

Jackson graduated from West High School on the second day of June, 2014. He graduated with a cumulative GPA of 87.54 and was ranked 85th in a class of 271 students. Jackson didn't share much about graduation night, but he did share a significant moment related to his senior year. Jackson said:

The biggest highlight of my high school career when it came to sports was senior night, and I looked up, and I saw both my mom and my dad sitting in the stands. That meant more to me than anything. Was to actually have both of them there. Versus having my aunt there because I knew she was going to be there. Every time I looked up, she was

there. And I actually had the best game of my life when my mom and my dad were there.

This memory was significant to Jackson because it signified the only time in his school career where both biological parents took an interest in his concentrations. To Jackson, sports were more important than graduation, and because he had the increased social experience provided in sports, he was academically engaged and made it to graduation.

After high school, Jackson had dreams of entering college, but when graduation came, he decided, “I don’t want to go to school no more” and he entered the workforce. Jackson worked for a little while at the United Parcel Service (UPS) and ended up “not liking it.” Next, he went to work for a local electrical company specializing in fiber optics and “hated it.” After two disastrous job experiences, a friend introduced him to an exciting alternative, the local Sherriff’s office. Looking back, Jackson does wish he had pursued college and possibly played college football like his friend Dean. However, as he reflected on his job at the sheriff’s office, he stated it was “part of God’s plan” and shared how “God does stuff for a reason and puts you places for a reason.” Jackson inserted himself into a new family when he went to work on the force. He realized after working several months what it means to belong to a brotherhood, “Even though some of them piss you off, you still got to be there for them. No man left behind. Because at the end of the day, I mean we all got to go home to our family.” Jackson explained how he didn’t join the sheriff’s office for the brotherhood aspect. He just wanted to “change lives” and “help people,” but when he started working in the field, he realized you need everyone on shift with you; no call is simple. Socially, Jackson has developed the skills he attained in his school microsystem and from his home microsystem, nurtured by his aunt and grandmother, to build strong friendships with his peers at work.

The current relationship Jackson has with his mother is rocky and often tough to navigate. Jackson married his sweetheart Eliza this past August and began a new chapter of his life. Eliza was raised in a two-parent, continuously married home and has a younger sibling. Jackson found his place among Eliza's family instantly. Jackson uses phrases like, "I love them to death," "I want to be around positive," "I spend more time with her family," and "they're awesome" to describe Eliza's family. His relationship with Eliza's family has created a division between Jackson and his mother. Jackson's mother feels neglected by his preference to spend more time with Eliza's family, and she will openly make comments like, "Oh, just because they got more money than us, you want to be with them. You're always with them." Jackson's mother also inserts herself into Jackson and Eliza's marriage to create difficult situations for the newlyweds.

Jackson's mother sometimes calls and asks for money, relationship advice, or a place to stay. I asked Jackson how Eliza responded to his mother's intrusions. Jackson related how Eliza became frustrated and tried to convey to him this behavior had to stop, and Jackson replied, ". . . that's my mom, and I'm going to take care of my mom, regardless of what she's done to me." Eliza understands, but it is still an area of struggle in their marriage.

Jackson is still very close to Dean, and they each shared the role of best man in the other's wedding. During Jackson's wedding, Dean had the opportunity to speak. Dean revealed to Jackson how he had always looked up to him and admired how Jackson handled himself through all the adversity he suffered. Jackson said, ". . . I don't look at Dean as a best friend. I look at him like, he's my brother, because he's always been there for me." It was evident from our interview that Jackson and Dean's positive peer relationship gave Jackson promotive strategies to overcome the risks he faced in his home microsystem.

Another mediating influence in the risk Jackson faced, his aunt Jean, passed away from cancer in early 2019, shortly after Jackson met Eliza. Losing his aunt was very difficult because Jackson described her as a “solid foundation” and “always there for me.” Jackson said, “. . . when I lost her; I lost a piece of my heart. . . she was like my mom. . . thank God Eliza was there.” Jackson lost the secure attachment he formed with his aunt Jean, but he created a new attachment with Eliza, his wife.

I asked Jackson two big questions in our last interview to summarize his growth:

- How is your present life--how was it defined by your social and academic experiences growing up?
- How was your life defined by what you went through?

Jackson stated, “It made me who I am today.” Jackson went on to explain how people in his life told him he would continue the “family curse” “Oh, you’re just going to be like your parents. You’re going to follow along with your parents” and “end up like his mother.” Jackson explained:

I want to be that person. . . one day I have an interaction with a kid. I don’t know their personal life, but I want to be - I guess you could say - that change for them. . . You can go out and make something of yourself. You can be different. You don’t have to fall into the traditional family curse.

Jackson’s mission in life is, “I just want to be successful. And I think I’m doing a pretty good job of that so far.” Jackson went further to explain how he has a great wife, and he will eventually have kids. Jackson wants to build a modest home for his happy family and live the “good ole country boy life.” The last statement about his mission reflected the lack of opportunity he had as a child. Jackson said:

. . . when I have kids; I don't want them, If they want something, I want to be able to get it for them. I don't want to say, 'Well, maybe I can get it.' No, if they want it, I want to be able to get it for them. Because I was always that kid growing up with a bunch of empty promises. . .

Charlotte

Charlotte is a twenty-one-year-old volleyball player who attends an NAIA university in central Georgia. Charlotte lived in East County and graduated from East County High School in 2017 as a scholar-athlete. Charlotte chose to meet me at my office for each interview because she shares living quarters with her mother and sister when she returns home from college. At the beginning of the first interview, Charlotte admits she is ready to “share her story” and “I will be as open about this as you are comfortable.”

Charlotte's parents formally separated when she was in seventh grade. Her father moved out of the house and left Charlotte with her mom and sister. When I asked Charlotte to explain the moment, she knew her family changed from a dual-parent to single parent household, she said, “My dad wasn't in the picture even a lot. Even family vacations were always just us three.” Charlotte's parents lived separately for the majority of her childhood. Charlotte explained how he would work during the week until after she and her sister were already in bed, and on the weekends, he would find an excuse to be out of the house. She explained further how he blamed his absence on work, “He wanted to blame that it was work, but I really just think that he wasn't wanting to be a fatherly figure. . . .” Charlotte's father was a football, basketball, and softball coach. Charlotte's mother was a coach and found time to spend with her girls. After her parents divorced, Charlotte attended counseling and discovered she never honestly had a “mom and dad,” but rather a “mom and stranger” relationship with her parents. Charlotte's home

microsystem began with a secure attachment to her mother and a weak attachment to her father. Her parents' separation and eventual divorce did not change her attachment to either.

The relationship she shared with her parents affected Charlotte socially at an early age. Charlotte was the typical "shy until you get to know me" girl in elementary school. Teachers and peers saw Charlotte playing with the boys on the playground because she was a "tomboy" and a "roll in the mud" kind of person. Charlotte did not reach out and make friends first because she had a "fear of being liked," and she was "afraid of rejection." Instead, she waited on others to come to her, and then she was fiercely loyal. Once, Charlotte defended a friend's honor and had to visit the principal's office. Charlotte always protected the underdog and never allowed anyone to pick on her friends or little sister. Charlotte received and reciprocated positive peer support in elementary school. Charlotte described her social strengths as being a "leader by example," "leader," "doing the right thing," and "voicing my opinion." Likewise, many of the qualities Charlotte described as strengths she also felt were weaknesses for her when misused.

As Charlotte transitioned to a middle school student, her family structure and social experiences changed. Charlotte's parents officially separated, and she discovered a new identity. Charlotte developed within herself a "quiet strength," and she was able to "be quiet. . . listen. . . stay strong from the inside and hold it all in." Charlotte became a pillar of strength for her little sister and stepped into a parent role when they visited their dad on the weekends. Charlotte continued to "protect the underdog," but the "very sociable once you got to know me" child disappeared. Charlotte began to struggle with self-image and insecurity. Her self-doubt feelings were a direct result of her father's sexual abuse.

As part of the court-appointed custody, Charlotte and her sister were required to visit their father on the weekends. Charlotte and her sister had positive parental support with their

mother; they did not have positive reinforcement from their father. At first, both girls refused to visit his house on the weekends because they both knew something “wasn’t right” about their relationship with their father. Charlotte explained, “I didn’t realize till late. And then, that was kind of when the wave hit of, wow, this has been going on a long time.” A singular event that happened when Charlotte was thirteen and entering eighth grade solidified the abuse was happening to her. Charlotte recalls the event in her interview as “awkward” and “uncomfortable.” Thirteen-year-old Charlotte stood in her father’s shower, with only a clear shower curtain standing between her and her father. She asked him to leave the bathroom, and he refused. She asked him to hand her a towel to cover herself, and he refused. He proceeded to touch Charlotte inappropriately. Leaving the bathroom, Charlotte carried the secrets of her abuse internally until seventeen. Charlotte’s father continued to assault her in subtle ways each time she would visit his house until she no longer had to stay with him on the weekends. The shower incident triggered memories for Charlotte buried deep in her subconscious, and Charlotte began to recognize all the ways her father violated her privacy and person when her parents were married. Charlotte’s abuse elicited an attitude she carried with her into adulthood, “. . . boys, all they do is hurt you,” because the abuse she received from her father made her feel “used.” Trust became a barrier for Charlotte; she could no longer trust adults or peers, and she isolated herself.

Charlotte’s academic experiences did not reflect change between elementary and middle school, regardless of her parents’ separation. Charlotte’s microsystem, living with her mother, provided security, trust, and support. Charlotte kept quiet during the structured academic time and did her assignments on time. She was fiercely motivated and worked hard to attain information quickly. Charlotte’s work ethic was her strength, but her deficit was math of all kinds.

Nevertheless, she respected her teachers, especially math teachers, and pushed forward until the next day. During her interview, Charlotte shared the need to object if a teacher taught material in conflict with her Christian and moral belief system. She remembered questioning science and history teachers throughout elementary and middle school, commenting, “No, no. We don’t believe that,” or “That’s not true. I don’t believe in the millions and billions of years.” Charlotte spoke out if she heard something that “negated what I already learned from, of course, my belief system, my parents, or my mom.” Charlotte’s mother played a crucial role in her academic stability because she was positive parental support, even if her father was not positive support. Charlotte’s mother closely monitored her academic progress, set boundaries, and stayed involved with her school requirements.

During the unstructured time at school, Charlotte’s social experiences were turbulent. Towards the end of eighth grade, Charlotte struggled with social anxiety and generalized anxiety. She met with several counselors to discuss “mental issues” associated with her parent’s marriage, separation, and eventual divorce. Often, her counseling sessions occurred during school hours, and she would inquire about her frequent visits to the counselor. The constant questioning from her peers and the reason behind her visits led to embarrassment, shame, and eventually anxiety. Charlotte did not feel positive peer support, and as a result, she felt fractured in her school microsystem. Charlotte began pulling out her eyelashes to cope with her stress because doing so “felt better.” Charlotte’s peers would ask her, “What’s wrong with your eyes? What are you doing?” Of course, this line of questioning led to even more anxiety. As a result, Charlotte began having frequent migraines. The disconnect between her stable academic experience and unstable social experience was due to her mother’s parental academic involvement but limited awareness of Charlotte’s abuse. As Charlotte grew older and began to share with her counselor the abuse

suffered at the hands of her father, she developed positive coping mechanisms. Instead of pulling out her eyelashes, she would divert her attention to exercise or journaling. Charlotte would say to herself, “Okay, this is what you’re doing. You feel stressed so that’s why you’re plucking; go do something else with your hands. I need to go do something else to fidget around.” Charlotte’s counselor provided another adult she could trust to bridge the home and school mesosystem.

In ninth grade, Charlotte moved to East County High School, and she called it:

“... a fresh start because we had been in the same place for so long in the same house where my parents split up. . .” and moving to the area was “... supposed to be a positive change, and I believe it was.”

Charlotte was finally able to form close personal friendships with her peers because she was no longer moving from school to school. During middle school, she transitioned through five schools in three years. Due to all of those transitions, Charlotte had the mindset of “Don’t get close to people until we’re sure that we’re staying here,” and “Have your friends, but don’t get way too close to begin with because there might be something else that changes or some reason that we don’t stay or something like that.” Moving to East County, and knowing they were finally settling, Charlotte said, “...it was a big social thing for me, letting those walls down and understanding that we’re in a safe spot now.”

Of course, at first, creating friends in a new town as a ninth-grader isn’t the most straightforward task. Charlotte found it stressful knowing “where to sit” at lunch and “knowing where I fit in” because she wasn’t in a specific clique. At first, Charlotte would bounce around to different lunch tables and other social groups because she didn’t feel like she fit anywhere. Charlotte was “friends with everyone, but then, again, I wasn’t close with anyone.” Charlotte kept everyone at arm’s length, just in case they rejected her. Charlotte said, “I know now that it

did refer back to the divorce. . . not getting close to anyone just for fear that they don't like you or you're not good enough for them." Charlotte was afraid to let others get "close" and "see all the darkest parts" of her, and she knew when that happened, they were "going to leave too." As a ninth grader, Charlotte was "very shy," "introverted," and "vulnerable." However, as she became more comfortable in her new school, Charlotte went through a social metamorphosis; she was a different person in twelfth grade.

Charlotte was "extroverted" and "willing to put herself out there as a senior." The root cause for Charlotte's change was she finally found her niche, a core group of friends she could trust. Charlotte described her friends as "...more outgoing, so it pushed me to be more outgoing. And surrounding yourself by positive people makes you be more of a positive person." Charlotte made an inward change in high school because she "would go and make friends instead of letting people come to me." Charlotte attributes her social evolution to her core group of friends, an ability to reach out to others, and her involvement in extracurricular activities. In high school, Charlotte participated in volleyball, softball, chorus and actively participated in her local church.

Charlotte has always been an active member in her church, even before her parents' divorce. Charlotte's mother made sure "whether our dad was there or not," she and her sister were in church every time the doors were open. Charlotte recalled, "We're going every time the doors are open. We're going every Wednesday night. We're going every Sunday morning. We're going to every Sunday night. If they have an event, we're going, whatever that event is." Charlotte's father did attend on Sunday mornings before her parents divorced, but afterwards, he no longer attended. During that time of transition, Charlotte went through "a little rebellious stage" because she was "mad at God" for letting the divorce happen. Over time and through counseling, she realized:

God, yes, He allowed this to happen, but it's going to make you stronger in the end. He didn't do it because He hates you or because He's mad at you or anything like that. He has a purpose for this.

Moving to East county, Charlotte and her mom found a new church to attend. Charlotte felt the church they attended in East County was a source of strength for her mom, sister, and Charlotte. The youth pastor was heavily "involved" in the lives of his teen members, and the church leaders were "a very good foundation for us when we needed a family away from family to just talk things out." Charlotte felt like the church was a "safe zone."

As I mentioned before, moving to East county was a positive fresh start for Charlotte, but academically she did find East County High School lacking. She found herself scheduled in all honors classes her ninth-grade year. Charlotte recalls the rigor of her new courses to be subpar, saying, "honors classes here were more regular classes," although she quickly found she had to work very hard to maintain a B average in ninth-grade Algebra. On one occasion, she remembers meeting with the ninth-grade Assistant Principal and discussing her "C average" in ninth grade honors algebra. Charlotte pulled her grade up in Algebra and did not take another honors math class for the remainder of high school. However, she did take honors and advanced placement courses in the remaining core classes.

Charlotte's senior year, she had one goal in mind: acquiring a volleyball scholarship and gaining acceptance to a reputable university. She knew to begin the process, she would need to find a team and then apply to the university. She started looking for a team in October by emailing coaches and sending them film from her games. Charlotte knew how the process worked because her mother had been a collegiate athlete that played Division 1 basketball. When Charlotte received coaches' replies, she would send them grades, transcripts, and other requested

materials. Charlotte accepted a volleyball and academic scholarship to P University in her senior year.

Charlotte developed into a strong, independent young woman by the end of her education. At the beginning of her parent's divorce, she was "quiet," "introverted," and "full of self-doubt." When Charlotte graduated, she was a different individual, "confident," "extroverted," and "assertive." Charlotte's mother and sister attended her graduation ceremony, and against her wishes, Charlotte's father attended with his new wife.

When Charlotte entered ninth grade, she refused to see her father for visitation. During high school, she only saw him a few times during Christmas or on her birthday. Her dad would fight for weekend visitation, but Charlotte and her sister would refuse to go to his house. Charlotte blocked her father from all of her social media sites and would not accept his phone calls. In an attempt to rebuild their relationship, Charlotte's father asked if he could attend her graduation. Charlotte conceded, but she had one request, "I asked him not to bring his new wife to graduation." He brought his wife anyway. Charlotte wrote her father a simple email with these words:

Okay. I'm done. I'm sorry, but this isn't good for me. You haven't abided by what I've asked for. This relationship, I feel like it's toxic on my side. I'm putting in more work than you are, and you're the father. I'm done.

Unlike her father's relationship, Charlotte's relationship with her mother has always been her solid foundation. Her mother filled two parenting roles for Charlotte, even when her parents were married. Charlotte described her mother by saying, ". . . she could fill both roles very well." Charlotte said, ". . . she could teach me to fish, and to hunt, and roll in the mud, and whatever else; but she could also get me dressed nice for church, and teach me about makeup, and all that

kind of stuff.” Charlotte’s mother’s most incredible skill was she taught her that crying isn’t a weakness. Before the divorce, Charlotte’s mother would bottle up all of her emotions and refuse to show tears. After the divorce, her mother cried one day during church, and Charlotte remembered thinking, “. . . it was a weakness to show that you’re in pain.” Her mom shared with her the following words about crying and emotion:

It’s not a weakness. That’s a strength. If you’re showing that you have been hurt, that’s a strength. You’re going to get past it from then on, and you have to let it all out, and then you can continue to move on.

Charlotte is now twenty-one years old and a senior volleyball player at P University. She will graduate from P University in May with a degree in Exercise Science. Deciding on a degree was a tough choice for Charlotte:

I had gone back and forth between counseling, exercise science, physical therapy - but I knew that I loved athletics and all things sports, and so I wanted to be around that atmosphere at the same time of being able to help people, so I think that’s what made me decide exercise science.”

The inclination to become a physical therapist was rooted in Charlotte years ago when she began playing sports. Since then, her mother and sister have suffered sports injuries as well. After graduating, Charlotte will pursue a degree in Physical Therapy, and if she can get into her first choice, she will join the Air Force and earn her degree while serving her country. Earning her degree in the Air Force will save Charlotte money, provide a stable income after graduation, and allow Charlotte the option of early retirement.

Charlotte’s first year at P University felt like she attended “army bootcamp” because her volleyball coach freshman year pulled practice drills straight from the boot camp manual.

Charlotte's coach was "a very demanding" coach, and she showed preferential treatment to those players "who played well immediately." Charlotte struggled her freshman year and even her sophomore year because, for the first time, she was now in the "lower rank" of her volleyball team, and she found it increasingly difficult to interact and form a connection with her head coach socially. However, with her teammates, Charlotte was still able to integrate herself as part of the team and became a core member. P University is a small, private Christian college, providing Charlotte a community similar to her high school community. As a senior, Charlotte's volleyball career has taken a turn for the better. In her sophomore year of college, she received a new head coach, and his attitude about the team was very different. Charlotte said, "...he was a lot more positive and focused on us more like women of God and not athletes."

Moving away from home was difficult for Charlotte because she had to leave her mom and sister at home. Charlotte considered herself a "homebody" and she said, "I was very nervous because those were my two rocks, and they weren't going to be there every day to hold my hand to make sure that I made it through." Charlotte called her mom every day when she first left home, but her calls decreased after a while. Charlotte began making friends on campus and spending time with them outside of volleyball practice. Charlotte also began seeing her current boyfriend during her freshman year of college, occupying her additional free time. Currently, Charlotte speaks to her mom during the week, but it isn't every day, and often it is by text. She returns home to see her mom at the end of each semester to spend a few weeks, but Charlotte can tell she has socially matured into an adult. When she returns home, she has to remind her mother she's an adult by saying, "Mom, you have to understand that I go everywhere I want to when I'm at school, but I also have to understand that you're used to when I'm here you're in control. So, we have to understand each other."

Charlotte's mission in life "is to love and to be loved." That is Charlotte's "life motto" because her main goal in life is "...to honestly help people and to love people that may need it." For Charlotte, this means to help those who are hurting physically and emotionally. In the field of physical therapy, "people think it's you're fixing a body, but a lot of it is mental as well." Charlotte mentioned completing a degree in sports psychology to help potential patients heal from the inside out eventually. In ten years, Charlotte would like to have her "doctoral degree in physical therapy," "a successful career," and "hopefully married with some kids." As a follow-up question, I asked Charlotte to define success in her eyes, and she said:

Successful, to me, is happy. Loving what I do every day. Waking up actually excited to go to work, excited to face the day. A lot of people say about money. That's not a big thing to me because I've come from a background where we've always had enough, or God's always provided.

I then asked Charlotte if she thought her mother was successful, and her response was: Yes. I would say she's probably one of the most successful people because she's so happy where she is all the time. She makes the most of every circumstance, even with her past traumas or issues with the marriage failing and stuff like that. That was the lowest I've ever seen her, and she still put on a smile every day she could. So, I would definitely say she's very successful.

At the end of our third interview, I asked Charlotte to reflect on her current situation and circumstances and explain how they were shaped and defined by her past social and academic experiences. Charlotte elaborated first on her social experiences:

Socially, I would say that my past experiences definitely made me accept who I was, and I would just say boosted my confidence. I've been through a lot, but I have an amazing

support system that never let me get down on myself. And you could say academically or socially, I think they just pushed me to be a better person, not to let my past define who I am. My mom always says, “My kids will not become a statistic.” That was the big thing that she told us growing up. We will not be the kids that failed because of divorced parents. We will not be the kids that failed because of traumas that they’ve been through or abuse. And she stuck by that.

I asked Charlotte to elaborate on how her mother would keep her promise to not let her kids become a statistic, and she said:

If she saw us falling... or caught me doing something I shouldn’t have done, she immediately, “Okay, what’s the reason that you’re doing that? What is the action behind that? What is the mental process that you’re going through why this is going on?” And she just pushed us to be better. And then academically, I would say the same thing. If she saw us slipping in that area, she pushed us to go on and taught us that we didn’t need validation from anyone else to continue. The only person that mattered was God and us. Charlotte’s mother ingrained in her, “You define you and God defines you,” and Charlotte has used that mantra when life gets upside-down.

In May 2021, Charlotte will graduate from P University. Charlotte identifies herself as a graduate who “overcame and defied expectations” because she “slipped and fell a couple of times” and she’s “hit rock bottom a lot of times,” but she “overcame” her circumstances. In high school, Charlotte overcame her social anxiety and began learning how to break out of social isolation. She walked away from the toxic relationship she had with her sexually abusive father and shielded herself from further manipulation. As a college freshman, Charlotte encountered a new “rock bottom;” she was no longer the “star volleyball player,” and she lost playing time. She

started seeing her college sweetheart the same year, and their relationship wasn't "where it needs to be," and Charlotte knew they "need to fix" it because their relationship was "something worth fighting for." Overcoming adversity, Charlotte approached her coach about playing time, committed to more demanding workouts, and her circumstances improved. Likewise, she sat down with her boyfriend and explained how she felt about their relationship and asked him to either stay and make it work or walk away, and they are still together her senior year of college.

Charlotte overcame all of these obstacles -- social anxiety, toxic relationship, abusive parent, and rejection -- by working hard and becoming her advocate, being assertive. Charlotte said, "...if you want something, you work for it, and sometimes it takes asking someone or talking to someone instead of waiting, and that was a big deal for me because I didn't like confrontation."

York

I met York earlier this year when I began working with counselors in West County School System. York was a counselor at the West County Primary School, and he worked primarily with Kindergarten and first-grade students. My initial impression of York left me inspired. York projected enthusiasm, positivity, and determination in each task we worked on together. At the time, I did not know his background, but I knew York had local roots. I felt the strong desire to ask him if he was raised in a single-parent household and attended high school. After he affirmed he met the criteria of my study, he willingly committed as a participant.

York was raised by a single mother and attended rural East County High School, a Title I school. He was twenty-five and graduated from high school five years earlier. York's mother was the sole caregiver in his household. His mother provided secure attachment in his home

microsystem. York's father was incarcerated when he was three, and he remained in prison for twenty years. York commented on his father's imprisonment, saying:

This year will be year three that he's been free, so he was incarcerated all my elementary, middle school, high school, and undergrad in college. And when I graduated with my master's, he was released in a uniform.

York's parents were not together when his father went to prison. After roughly a year passed, York realized, "... everybody's just saying my mom, rather than mom and dad." I asked York if he ever felt like something was missing living with only one parent, and he said, "There was definitely a void there. It was like an empty space at one point in time." York commented further:

A lot of questions come along, why this and why this. So, I remember asking those questions. "Why he's in jail? Why did he have to go to jail?" Those types of questions built up a little anger for some time. Maybe elementary to middle school sometime like that. And probably once I hit ninth grade or something, I was just more stable and was able just to process. I wasn't able to process early on, but when I got into high school, it really didn't faze me as much anymore.

York found middle school the most challenging time to process his father's displacement because he was already in the "process of just emotionally finding" himself.

When York started elementary school in East County, York socialized on the recreational football field and played extensively with Playstation 2. He considered himself "a gamer" and someone interested in "just playing sports and stuff." I asked York to share a little about his personality and social interactions at that age. He explained he "hung with the popular kids," but never really "associated myself with that as a popular kid" because his mom had an "old type of

restriction that you can hang with them but outside of school.” York’s mother had strict rules because she was an “ordained minister,” and she expected him to do more in the church outside of school.

As an elementary student, York was “shy at first” until he warmed up to someone, then he became “talkative.” York was also a mixture of naturally gifted and classically prepared for school. In first grade, York was admitted to the gifted program, and one challenge he faced was the constant barrage of projects and presentations. York considered his shyness a social deficit, but he felt his ability to compensate for his inhibition as a strength. One example York used was the first presentation he gave in elementary school:

I remember doing our first project. And when I had to get up and present, it wasn’t for me. I’ll always request, “Could I do a poster board or a PowerPoint?” I would rather do it on technology and post a video and those type of things within third grade. At the end, my teacher still made me get up and present some portion of it. She won’t let me play the whole video.

York explained how his teacher slowly eased him into public speaking during third grade. She would have him start with a video presentation and end with a class’s spoken presentation. Over time, the video portion decreased, and the amount of time he spent speaking in front of the class increased.

York’s third-grade teacher, the one who helped him overcome his public speaking anxiety, was one of his mentors; she was his mother’s third-grade teacher as well. York described their relationship, saying, “I used to spend time with her and her husband on some weekends, and they would take me fishing. They became godparents to me.” On the weekends, York would spend time with his grandparents or godparents because his mother worked the night

shift as a nurse. Another layer of support for York was his elementary school principal, also happened to be a close relative. York said, “She was the principal. And I’d never get away with trouble one time. They were trying to do away with paddling, but I still got paddled.” York went further to say his mama knew his every move “before cameras was a thing.” Each positive adult support in elementary school provided a social network of provision for York in his home microsystem and school microsystem, solidifying the mesosystem gap.

In middle school, York’s social network expanded because his aunt worked at East County Middle School. She was a teacher at the school the entire time York attended East County Middle. His cousin also worked at the school as a teacher, and another cousin moved into administration before he transitioned to high school. York said, “I went all the way through K-12 with at least one family member in administration.”

Having a family member in the administration didn’t keep York entirely out of trouble. York’s personality changed in middle school because he was “more talkative,” “real talkative,” and hanging with people he was “not supposed to hang with.” During this time, York’s mother remarried, and he spent quite a bit of time with his step-father and grandparents because his mother worked long hours as a nurse. York got into “a little bit of trouble” in sixth and seventh grade, but in eighth grade, he was almost expelled for an incident involving a first-year teacher. York described the incident in detail:

It was his first-year teaching, and he messed around and said a word he doesn’t suppose to say to me and a group of people. At the time, it wasn’t fun. We had just left Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and he just told us, “What are you going to do? Are you going to start preaching to me?” And so I was like, “No, I’m just going to let you get it.” And by the time I did, the Bible came out my hand and tore the corner of his eye.

York's third office referral for the year, and he had assaulted a teacher. York went to a tribunal hearing to determine whether he would receive expulsion. In the meeting, York's principal said, "York, just give me one reason why we should not send you to alternative school?" After a minute, York responded:

'I'm going to give the reasons why you should.' And so I listed the reason because it was closer to my grandma, the house where I stayed when mama worked. School was maybe like a five minutes walking distance for me. And then alternative school, they had to be there at 8 o'clock, and they left at 12 o'clock at that time. And school was Monday through Thursday, and I could work at my own pace. I could possibly graduate earlier.

The principal stopped him and told him to go to class because he saw alternative school as an advantage, not a punishment. York admitted he was an intelligent young man, "I was an AB student, so I knew I was going to get ahead." When he returned to school the next day, he was reinstated as a gifted student and placed back in his honors classes. York also returned to the classroom where the incident occurred and remained until the end of the school year.

York never developed a positive adult relationship with the first-year teacher. York described their relationship by saying:

Even though he said it was an accident, I also knew that it was a setup. So, I would also just keep myself back in that back of the desk. And if it was something that I needed, I would raise my hand and ask, but if it's something like I need additional help with, I would just go to another social studies teacher and get help versus going to him, because even though he said it was an accident, but him and that assistant principal was trying to get him to push it and just say he did it on purpose. So I never did want that one-on-one

time with that teacher because I didn't want to be accused of anything, so. Then I used my head and went to another social studies teacher.

York lost his ability to trust the teacher and assistant principal. Thankfully, he had other positive adult relationships and teacher-student relationships within the school to compensate for the loss of trust.

In high school, York kept his pack of friends and added a few more. York was "a little bit more social," but he "didn't have too many" friends. The majority of his friends lived in single-parent homes because many kids from East county were born to young parents, and their parents "kind of split up as time went along." York said, "I know around eighth grade, most of our parents decided they would get divorced." I asked York if he thought the increased numbers of divorces were due to living in a rural area and lack of urban experience. York thought it might be "one of the possible reasons," and it was "more common than it should have been."

York's considered himself a "mature person" in high school, and he described himself as "really calm" and "laid back;" he wasn't a "rowdy person." However, most of York's friends were "rowdy," "didn't take nothing from nobody," and "they were quick to go off on someone." I found it interesting that York remained close with his friends after high school, even though they were opposites. I believe his friends provided York with positive peer support at school by building relationships established in trust, related circumstances, and security.

York's relationship with his father grew stronger during the four years at East County High School. His father was still incarcerated, but York would visit him every two weeks in south Georgia. During this time, York's mother went back to school to earn her Nurse Practitioner's license. When York wasn't visiting his father or hanging out with friends, he

worked one of three after school jobs and maintained excellent grades. York worked as a cell phone salesman, a Wing Shack waiter, and a 911 dispatcher.

As York progressed through high school, he relied on social experiences to encourage him and overcome the risks in his home microsystem. York said:

One of the things that I could say that motivated me was we did see a lot of people that, once we got to tenth grade when everybody turned 16, most of our class dropped out. So that was something that I was like, ‘Mm,’ I didn’t want to do that. And they was just sitting at home, not doing a thing. And I mean, they was pretty much struggling. That was something I didn’t want to do. And then, I would go back to the situation with my dad, and I was like, ‘I need to graduate. This way, I can, once I graduate, I can go to college. I can kind of get away from some of this stuff here for a while. To give my mind a break.’

York was driven to graduate from high school, and he had a desire to pursue life outside of East County. York started “setting long-term and short-term goals” so he could graduate. His mother helped him plan for his future. York’s mother would call the school and arrange his schedule with a rigorous course load to prepare him for college. York’s mother also attended all parent-teacher conferences, even when York had “good grades and no behavior issues.” York’s mother provided parental academic involvement and increased parental monitoring levels, all while pursuing higher education and working the night shift at the hospital. York’s father only participated in academic achievement conversations when York volunteered information.

York graduated from East County High School and, in the fall, attended a four-year university in South Georgia. It was not the college York wanted to attend, but it was York’s and his mother’s economic choice. At York’s high school graduation, his whole family came to celebrate his milestone achievement. The only person missing from the celebration was York’s

father. He would not be released for another two years. The night of York's graduation, his mother surprised him with a special gift. When York was in elementary school, she told York if he did well in school and graduated from high school, she would buy him a car when he graduated. That night after graduation, as he walked towards the parking lot, his mother waited on him in his new ride: a Ford Mustang. York's mother further cemented her secure attachment to York.

Since high school, York has remained very close to his family, York described his relationship with them as, "We're very social people, and we love to talk and get around with each other. We see each other just about every weekend, so we're very social." Throughout the week, York lived with his mother's mom because it shortened the work commute. He made time to see his other grandparents during that time as well. York said, "Our family lives like seven minutes away from each other, so I see both sets [of grandparents] every day." York also mentioned he saw his dad every day as well.

In the fall of that year, York began working on his counseling degree. After earning a four-year degree in Psychology, York completed his master's degree in Clinical Mental Health Counseling and then started working on his Doctorate. York and his mother began doctoral programs simultaneously, and she went back to school to add doctoral certification to her Nurse Practitioner's license.

While pursuing his doctoral studies, York realized he also had to earn a paycheck. One of York's closest friends from college introduced him to the education sector. York's friend signed up to teach at West County Middle School and told York to apply, even though York did not have an "educational background." After mulling over the decision, York applied and started

working and West County High School. York transitioned from high school English teacher to primary school counselor within a year, a position more aligned with his degree.

Before working in education, York worked in an autism clinic. His prior experience prepared him for working with younger children, but it did not prepare him for all the risks students faced. Still, York's previous social and academic experiences did prepare him. While working as a counselor, York dealt with suicidal and homicidal ideation, physical and emotional abuse, poverty, and homelessness.

York celebrated his first anniversary at West County Primary school a week ago. He enjoys working with his co-workers, and he called them a "close-knit" family. York said, "It's just like a regular family. It's just I see my co-workers Monday through Friday." He explained how he supports his work family by always stepping up when someone needs help:

I do a lot of working around-- they call me an all-around person. So, for instance, when H was out that day for her time, I was working IT. I help Ms. B. out some days when she needs a little extra help in the front.

York was one of two primary school counselors at West County Primary. He described their role as "the underdogs of administration" because they "do everything that the principal and the other administrators do" without disciplinary action.

York's approach to counseling is "tough love" and high standards. The students at West County Primary "admire" York, and for that reason, he always tries to make them feel significant. On Wednesdays, students dress in their finest clothes to "feel important." York knew how important it was to have mentors and positive adults who made him feel unique and supported. I commented to York, ' Well, it seems like you really enjoy your job,' and he replied, "Yes ma'am, I really do. I really do."

As an adult, York's mission was simple, "making the difference one child at a time."

York gave an example of two children who left his office earlier in the week.

One child, he couldn't read like the other kid. So I took the opportunity, like, "Okay. So you and I just come into my office, and I'm going to give you something that you can read. And I want you to read it at your own pace and see if you comprehend." I said, "It's not about how fast you're reading, but if you're able to comprehend. Can you tell me what it means?" So that's my mission. Just one child at a time.

York doesn't want children in his school or community to be left behind because of their risks; he would serve as their positive adult support. To support at-risk youth in York's rural community of East County, he would like to apply to turn an abandoned church into a center for tutoring, rehabilitation, and counseling.

York "wasn't a bad kid," and he "didn't have bad grades," but through his social experiences, he was "motivated" to "become a better person." York said, "I hate having to repeat a step back. My experiences just made me more conscious of decisions that I make." I asked York if he felt he had overcome the odds by graduating from high school, and he said:

I still remember that assistant principal saying to me that day, "I would be surprised if you graduate high school." And I saw her maybe two months ago. I said, "I graduated high school, and I graduated college twice." And I said, "I'm almost finished with my doctorate." And that's when she was looking, and she said, "I knew you could do it." I said, "We can say that now. But I remember back in 2008, in your office at 9:14 AM, you told me that you would be surprised if I would graduate high school. So that kind of stuck with me for a while."

York was able to graduate from high school despite his life risks. He had positive parental support, positive peer support, and positive adult support in his mesosystem, and each relationship had a secure attachment.

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS

Introduction

The focus of this chapter is to explain the strategies and techniques used to analyze participant data. Three rounds of coding transcribed interviews, documentation memos, and indirect observation memos provided common themes among participant data sets. In this chapter, a discussion of how each theme is connected to prior literature and how themes compared among participants is presented.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district. The risks associated with the target population were rural education, possible low socioeconomic status, and single-parent households. Through their experiences, I hoped to identify promotive and protective factors that helped them overcome risk factors. The following research questions guided this study:

- Research Question 1: What were the social and academic life experiences of students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district?
- Research Question 2: What were the perceived barriers experienced by students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district?

- Research Question 3: What strategies were used by students to graduate from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district?

Data Analysis

Data collection for this study began in August 2020 and concluded in January 2021, and data analysis began in February 2021. I acquired six participants from the accessible population for this study by purposive sampling. The participants resided in one of two rural, central Georgia Title I school districts.

Criteria for participation were that the participants: (a) graduated and earned a diploma within four years, (b) lived in a single-parent home during high school, and (c) attended a rural Title I high school for all four years. The participants provided research data through interviews and documentation. Participants provided documents to establish association and justification among participant data sources and institute reliability (Frey, 2018). In the initial interview with all participants, I asked them to provide documents representing aspects of their life that pushed them towards the finish line of graduation. Participants provided pictures from graduation, academic awards, school documents, and personal items that held value. For example, Jackson provided a letterman jacket, and Kansas brought a small bible to document personal items. The documentation provided by participants was valuable to the research and captured in analysis but could not be referenced specifically in this dissertation due to IRB considerations or redundant references made in the participant interviews.

All interviews followed Seidman's (2013) three-step interview process to maximize validity. Interviews were semi-structured, face-to-face, and conducted in a setting of the participant's choosing. An intentional focus on separate phases of the participant's life during

each interview established trust and allowed for an in-depth investigation. In the first interview, the goal was to gather and review their life histories before high school, and participants described their social and academic experiences before entering ninth grade. In the second interview, participants described social and educational experiences during high school, from ninth grade through graduation. In the final interview, I asked participants to reflect on their current lives and determine how their present lives may result from their prior experiences.

At each initial interview, I acquired participant permission using informed consent and assigned each participant a pseudonym to mask their identities because it might be possible to determine their identity if a reader knows intimate details about a participant’s life. Of the eight individuals identified as candidates for the study, six agreed to participate. Participant demographic information is shown in Table 1 for the six research participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Age	Name of County Where Participant Graduated (Pseudonym)
Alexandria	22	West County
Charlotte	21	East County
Jackson	24	West County
Kansas	23	West County
Macon	21	East County
York	25	West County

Participants chose all interview locations. Many participants elected to meet in a location with no personal connection such as, the West County Board of Education conference room.

This location was easy to acquire, quiet, and neutral ground for participants. Many participants

felt meeting at the West County Board of Education allowed them to speak more freely because many participants still lived with persons they would refer to in the interviews.

All interviews were audio and video recorded to ensure accurate transcription and to limit researcher bias between interviews. For this study, a realist approach was the best method because the data gathered in participant interviews, documentation, and direct observation directly related to human events and behaviors (Yin, 2018). To minimize threats to validity, I triangulated data from multiple sources (interviews, observation, and documents) and created evidence-based profiles for each participant (Yin, 2018).

After collecting and transcribing hours of interview recordings, document observations, and direct observation memos, it was necessary to sort through, organize, and determine what information addressed or directly related to the research questions.

Coding techniques are used for data analysis to translate the data into meaning and patterns and then develop themes to help address the research questions (Saldaña, 2016). Process coding and affective coding were two first-round coding techniques used to ascertain patterns or common language within the data. Focused coding was a second-cycle coding method used to narrow the scope of understanding and narrow functional groups (Saldaña, 2016). Table 2 shows the second-cycle coding used during data analysis.

Table 2

Second Cycle Codes

Code	Description	Participant Response
Co	Coping	Kansas: “I would do things that I know that I’ll get in trouble for but like I said, that was kind of my way of kind of trying to reach out to someone.”
Prot	Protective Strategies	Charlotte: “I would say it’s probably better. My mom always nicknamed me “quiet strength” because like I said, I wasn’t your person that was obviously strong, but I had a quiet strength about me,

		and being able to handle things, and being able to I was just mature in that area.”
Prom	Promotive Strategies	Jackson: “I wasn’t really as shy as I used to be because growing up, I was a shy person. I wasn’t really talking unless I actually knew you, but once I got to know you, then I would talk. But going through high school, I was kind of still the same, but I opened up a little bit more.”
Mot	Motivation	Macon: “Main thing is just seeing how hard Mom had to work for everything and just watching her. How much work she put into everything. Working two jobs and going to school at the same time when we were younger, going to school for hair. Going to school all day then working until 11:30 at night. Just seeing how hard she worked at it, just helped my work ethic.”
PS	Positive Support	Charlotte: “I wouldn’t say, necessarily, a straight situation but just my mom was the biggest encourager and everything. She’s definitely my rock, even still now, to me and my sister. Like I said, it’s always been us three, and we’re a very tight-knit group.”
SpI	Spiritual Influence	Kansas: “I thank God for that because I just feel like that made me who I am and if I wouldn’t have went through that, I feel like I would be a totally different person and I like the person that I’m becoming now, so I’m kind of thankful for everything at this point.”
ACE	Adverse Childhood Experiences	York: “This year will be year three that he’s been free, so he [York’s Father] was incarcerated all my elementary, middle school, high school and undergrad in college.”
BtC	Breaking the Cycle	Alexandria: “I want to be successful. Financially, I want to be where I don’t have to worry about anything, nothing at all. I guess, in a sense, I want to...I’m not gone say my daddy don’t have to work, but I do want to be financial stable, how my dad is.”

The final phase of coding involved creating functional categories based on coding patterns and themes. The functional categories that emerged from the third phase of coding were descriptive and based on participants’ opinions, philosophies, and beliefs.

Discussion of Themes

Using an embedded, exploratory case study with a multiple-case design, I was able to derive significance and understanding, serve as the principal source of data collection, and provide a genuine account of participant experience (Merriam, 2002; Yin, 2018). This qualitative research design provided for in-depth exploration into the phenomenon of graduates from single-parent households, with limited available prior research. Using a systematic process of transcribing, organizing, and coding, I was able to look for trends, patterns, and concepts emerging from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2018). The three major themes that emerged were: (a) perceived barriers, (b) attachment styles in early adolescence, (c) long-term strategies, and (d) breaking the cycle. Two of the major themes were divided into subthemes. Within the theme of attachment styles in early adolescence, I identified the following subthemes: (a) *dismissive-avoidant attachment*, (b) *anxious-preoccupied attachment*, (c) *fearful-avoidant attachment*, and (d) *secure attachment*. For the major theme of long-term strategies, I identified these subthemes: (a) *promotive factors*, (b) *protective factors*, and (c) *spiritual influence or church support*. In this chapter, existing literature connected to the major themes and subthemes through the lived experiences in participant data.

Perceived Barriers

The number of graduates from single-parent households and graduates raised in two-parent households has grown significantly, creating a more significant disadvantage for high school students living in single-parent homes than ever before (Harrison, 2015). High school students living in single-parent homes located in rural, Title I school districts are at a greater disadvantage because they face the barriers of living in a single-parent household and the obstacles associated with poor, rural areas. According to the available research, students in this

study's accessible population may have reduced access to resources through living in a rural district, adverse childhood experiences, low socioeconomic status, and child stress factors. In this exploratory case study with a multiple case design (Yin, 2018), each participant faced perceived barriers on their path to graduation.

Across all cases, I witnessed similarities among the trauma and stress each participant faced during their early childhood and adolescents. According to Amato (2001), students who face repeated exposure to stress and adverse life experiences score significantly lower on achievement measures. The stress and trauma students are subjected to in single-parent households can impact student performance and socialization (Amato, 1991, 2001; Arkes, 2015; Keller, 2016). Students who experience Adverse Childhood Experiences [ACE] or traumatic events during development are more likely to act out and manifest problematic behaviors (Brumley et al., 2017).

Episodes of instability or repeated changes to a student's microsystem are common in single-parent homes (Fomby & Mollborn, 2017). Repeated instability and transitions can cause stress among adolescents (Fomby & Mollborn, 2017). Jackson and Charlotte both experienced multiple transitions to their home microsystem during middle school. Jackson used the term "house jumped" to explain how his mom would move from him and his sister from one house to another when she could no longer pay rent. Jackson's wife couldn't believe the number of homes he had lived in before he graduated high school. Jackson said, "Well, I thought it was normal because I've done it my whole life. I thought it was something normal." Jackson continued to "house jump" during high school, but those moves kept him within West County's boundaries, meaning he did not have to reorient himself to a new high school. Charlotte attended "five schools within a four-year period." Charlotte did have to start over at each school she attended

with new friendships and new teachers. Transitioning between two households can also increase adolescent stress. Macon transitioned between his mom's and dad's houses when he was in middle school. Macon said, "I just happened to go back and forth between houses, and I would have to carry my stuff. It was like five and five, five days there, five days back switching." Macon's home microsystem may have changed, but his school microsystem did not change during that time. Macon considered this transition between both houses "stressful." The remaining participants in the study also reported transitions during elementary, middle, or high school.

In each participant interview, there was evidence of reduced income after changes to family structure. Only one participant boldly stated it was a stressor for him. Macon recalled how the "water would be off," and the power would be turned off at home. Other participants, like York, mentioned in middle school, he "was living with my grandmother" because his mother worked at night. In high school, York worked three jobs to help support himself. York also shared his mother's views on what college he would attend, "So I did choose to get ready to go to Clark Atlanta. She told me I couldn't go there because it was a private school. And it didn't take my whole scholarship." As I mentioned earlier, Alexandria's father sold illegal drugs to support his family because driving a truck did not pay all of the bills. Charlotte received scholarships to pay for college, but she has worked the last three years in the off-season to provide herself with spending money. The frequency with which Jackson's family moved and his mother's dependence on illegal substances are characteristic of low socioeconomic status. Kansas frequently referred to multiple family members living in a single household, and she shared how her sister struggles to make ends meet even now. All the participants in this study

faced low socioeconomic status as a barrier. Still, none of them allowed it to affect their grades or behavior, and they all graduated from high school.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACE) are the severe traumatic experiences individuals undergo during development and adolescence (Brumley et al., 2017). According to the available research, graduates who experienced one or more traumatic experiences during development have a reduced chance of graduating from high school, attending college, or living beyond early adulthood (Brumley et al., 2017). Of all the participants I interviewed, Kansas suffered the most trauma. Kansas was sexually abused, raped, suffered a miscarriage, attempted suicide, and repeatedly told she was unwanted by her mother. Kansas began experiencing abuse in middle school, and it didn't stop until her senior year of high school. At first, the sexual abuse manifested into problematic behaviors and poor grades in middle school. Kansas shared in her first interview:

I was just always in ISS because I was just disrespectful...I really just kind of fell out because I didn't really care about my grades or anything because I was so focused on what was going on at home.

Kansas explained how she acted out because she wanted someone, a principal or teacher, to ask her, "Is there a reason that you're acting out like this?" In middle school, no one ever asked Kansas that question. She continued to get in trouble at school and continued to go home every afternoon in fear because she knew she "always had to be on guard" because Kansas "never had a day" where the abuse didn't happen. As Kansas grew older, the abuse became more intense; She lamented:

He would kind of like ambush us. Like if we get home from school, he would blindfold us, and we would just get whippings for no reason at all. It was really only getting worse.

In the beginning, it was kind of just a touch-type thing. But then, once I got older and I'm in high school now, it was more on the rape side. And my mom knew about it.

Kansas knew she could no longer continue acting out, as she was tired of always being angry and living with her secrets about what happened when she left school. Kansas shared:

But in high school, I would use what I was going through for a strength type thing because I'm like, "I know one day I won't have to go through this anymore."...I didn't want to be that angry person all the time because it was hard for me to be mad at the world.

In ninth grade, Kansas pulled all her grades up and changed her attitude. Kansas no longer acted out at school, and she maintained good grades until graduation. The turning point for Kansas was when she realized she had other people in her family relying on her, looking up to her for guidance – her brothers and her sisters.

Charlotte also suffered sexual abuse during middle school, and her assailant was her biological father. At thirteen, Charlotte realized she had been a victim of abuse for some time. Charlotte said, "I didn't realize till late. And then, that was kind of when the wave hit of, "Wow, this has been going on a long time." Charlotte shared her story of awakening:

I was like, "Hey, can you get out? I'm done in the shower," whatever, and he was like, "No, I'm not getting out. This is my bathroom." And I'm like, "Okay." And so, I reach for the towel, and he takes the towel away. And I mean, that just kind of escalated.

The night after her father assaulted her in the shower, Charlotte said she laid awake and remembered other times in her life when her father "touched her inappropriately" or asked her to do abnormal things, like asking her, "come sit on my lap" when she was thirteen. Charlotte realized that night, "This is what's happening to me." Charlotte didn't share what happened in

her father's apartment with anyone until she was seventeen, not even her mother. After the shower incident, Charlotte was vigilant. She would sit in the bathroom while her sister took a shower, "...whenever she was taking a shower, I sat in the bathroom on the toilet while she was there just to know he's not coming in here to do this with me in here." Eventually, both girls quit visiting their father on the weekends. As a result of her father's abuse, Charlotte developed anxiety and low self-esteem, but neither of those personality traits caused behavior issues or academic issues for Charlotte.

York and Macon did not have abusive histories, but they did share a history of their father's incarceration while they were in elementary school. York's father stayed in prison until he graduated from college with his master's degree, and the state released Macon's father when he was in fifth grade. They each had a different reaction to their father's incarceration. York said:

A lot of questions come along, why this and why this. Those types of questions built up a little anger for some time. I wasn't able to process early on, but when I got into high school, it really didn't faze me as much anymore.

York admitted that his anger intensified during middle school. During that time, York maintained excellent grades and took gifted courses, but his behavior took a turn for the worse. In eighth grade, York received several behavior referrals, and the school administration sent him before a disciplinary tribunal panel to determine alternative school placement. However, York's intelligence saved him from expulsion, and he returned to East County Middle School to complete eighth grade. In ninth grade, York asked his father all the questions that had built up over the years and found closure. He did not have any behavioral issues in high school and maintained his stellar academic performance.

Macon was in second grade when he actually learned of his father's whereabouts. Macon said, "He was on vacation, he said, but he was in prison." His father went to prison when Macon was three years old. In elementary and middle school, Macon's struggled with his father's incarceration. He said:

I know I was always a little bit self-conscious and stuff when I was a little about that.

And I know when I was little when I first found out where my dad was, I was a little bit scared, not really scared, but nervous that someone would know.

Macon was always afraid someone would find out because he had "always heard that some people think differently" about you once they know your parents have been in jail. Macon also felt "some teachers" would "think differently" about kids based on their parents being incarcerated. To deter any ill thoughts from teachers and other students, Macon kept a low profile and "in general trying to be more mature" than his peers. Macon said, "I was kind of afraid of people thinking bad about me or something. I don't know what it was, but I didn't want to be in trouble." Macon maintained good grades while his father was incarcerated and after he was released.

Alexandria's father did not go to prison or jail, but there was a time in her life she thought he might end up behind bars. Alexandria's father drove trucks, "but also his hustle was he had to sell weed" to take care of the kids. Alexandria recalled asking her father, "Why do you do this? Why are you doing this?" Alexandria shared the moment she finally realized her daddy might go away for good, saying that:

The police came and kicked in our door, and it was like yeah, so it was after that I didn't understand everything fully until the police came and kicked in the door, whatever, that kicked in the door was like okay.

When the police showed up, and that wasn't the last time, Alexandria began dealing with anxiety. She did not share what happened at home with anyone at school, and she handled her anxiety by lashing out at others. Alexandria described being "really angry" and "fighting her teacher." She repeated third grade and did poorly in school. However, Alexandria's behavior and grades improved when she recognized she was a role model for her younger siblings. She said her daddy told her, "You got to do better. Your brother is looking up at you." Alexandria also felt she couldn't let her grandmother down, "Sometimes I had to tell myself, 'Okay, look. You've got to do what you've got to do to make your grandmama proud,' because that's all she wanted from me."

Jackson knew what it was like to have illegal substances in the house as a child. Jackson's mother used illegal substances while she was married to his father and then continued after they divorced. During high school, his mother's drug use accelerated, and she began using methamphetamines. Jackson said:

When I was in school, I knew my mom was on drugs, but I tried to be, I guess you can say, blind to the fact. I didn't want to really believe it. And then I'll never forget this. I knew what was going on, but I found out my mom had been doing methamphetamine. And it wasn't just methamphetamine there, but she was doing crack, methamphetamine. Anything you can think of, it was going on.

Jackson was "embarrassed" by his mother's addiction, but he loved his mother. Jackson moved out for a time during high school and lived with friends to escape the drugs and alcohol at home. Jackson always maintained a stellar behavior record and good grades in school. Jackson said:

I never got in trouble in school. Never had ISS or anything. I didn't want to be labeled as that bad kid. Always wanted to get in good with my teachers and everything. Because maybe they'll help me out if I was struggling a little bit.

Jackson kept his grades up and stayed out of trouble because he wanted to play sports. His aunt stepped in and helped support Jackson during high school. Jackson said, "My aunt told me as long as I played sports and had good grades, I didn't have to worry, that she would take care of everything for me." Jackson did not want to disappoint his aunt, and he held up his end of the deal. Jackson admitted in his final interview that his mother's drug use did not cease after he graduated from high school.

This study's participants faced several familial risk factors, like low socioeconomic status, illegal activities, parental incarceration, abuse, and multiple transitions. However, they were all able to remain academically engaged, maintain adequate academic achievement, and stay out of trouble. Most importantly, all participants graduated from high school within four years. Within each story was a consistent theme of strategy.

Attachment Styles in Early Adolescence

Exposure to adversity can change a student's trajectory, but each participant in this study stayed on course. In the available literature, two primary strategies emerge to help the accessible population for this study overcome or compensate for the perceived risks in their microsystem. The strategies include secure attachments and supportive relationships.

The founding tenet behind John Bowlby's (1958) attachment theory is all individuals need to establish security and trust with a primary caregiver at an early age. According to Bowlby (1958), the relationship between an individual and their primary caregiver is the basis for all subsequent relationships.

To better understand an individual's home microsystem, participants were asked to share their social and academic experiences in elementary, middle, and high school. In a cross-case comparison, it was evident that participants used their social interactions and academic performance to shield themselves from risks in their home microsystem.

Early in participant interviews, a pattern emerged from the data; each participant spoke of short-term emotional responses they experienced in early adolescence and the associated risk within their microsystem. As participants matured and moved into early adulthood, their behaviors and responses changed. After a careful review of participant data, the following subthemes emerged: (a) *dismissive-avoidant attachment*, (b) *anxious-preoccupied attachment*, (c) *fearful-avoidant attachment*, and (d) *secure attachment*. Each subtheme is one of John Bowlby's (1958) attachment styles.

Subtheme: Dismissive-Avoidant Attachment. According to Bowlby (1958), a person who formed a dismissive-avoidant attachment will often be closed off emotionally to other people and avoid emotional connection. Teens who are dismissive-avoidant lack the desire to initiate or maintain friendships or close relationships. Alexandria and Kansas both avoided emotional contact with peers and teachers at school during elementary and middle school. They both wanted to conceal the behaviors happening at home from prying eyes at school. Alexandria did not want her classmates to know about her father's illegal activities. She said, "I would get real nervous and used to whenever I would first start school; I wouldn't talk hardly. I wouldn't talk to hardly nobody. The teacher would try to make me feel comfortable, but I really wasn't hearing it."

In middle school, Alexandria didn't desire to branch out and make new friends. Alexandria held on to her only friend from elementary school; she said, "I had one close friend, and I guess it was because of her situation at home, too."

Kansas shared how her mindset was always ahead of other kids in class. Kansas began experiencing sexual trauma in sixth grade and found it difficult to maintain normal friendships. Kansas did not know how to relate to her peers. She often found making friends a burdensome task and would quit the process altogether, Kansas said:

I did not want to be around anybody at all. I just wasn't a social person at all whatsoever, and I tried, but it was horrible. I didn't really have friends like that because I didn't really talk. I was just always. . . not sad, but I was just always kind of like angry... I know that if I play with them or if I try to go talk to them...I was going to be a bully; I did not want to be a bully at all.

Throughout her first interview, Kansas reverted to statements about how she did not want to make friends in elementary and middle school because she did not want anyone to know what happened after school. Kansas shared at one point how her life after school controlled her thoughts; she said, "I would just think about everything instead of talking about it, but I was just like I didn't want to talk to anyone because I was scared, because I didn't really trust nobody."

Individuals who display dismissive-avoidant attachment styles have parents or caregivers in their childhood who encourage them to have a strong sense of independence at a young age, or they are asked to suppress their emotions. Both Kansas and Alexandria displayed independence at a young age. Alexandria is the oldest of twelve children, and her father was frequently on the road as a truck driver. Alexandria had to step up as a role model and, in some aspects, a caregiver for her younger siblings. Kansas often had to shield her sister from the unwanted sexual

advances of her mother's boyfriend, taking the brunt of the sexual abuse. Kansas was also told frequently to be quiet about her abuse; she said of her guardian, "I can't talk to her about anything. I only had myself." Kansas further alluded that her family didn't believe her "stories" and liked to "push things under the rug."

In high school, Kansas remained guarded, but she was no longer angry or afraid she would "be mean" to people. Kansas lamented on her high school social interactions by saying:

In high school, I was always that person who I smile, I speak to everybody, but that was just to keep people from actually looking at my face and being able to tell that I was actually going through something. So, I smiled. I did start talking a lot more.

Likewise, Alexandria "became more open to socializing with other people" in high school. Alexandria spoke about her high school experience, saying, "I became more openly honest or brutally honest with people, but I was still able to have a good time, play around, and joke around, but it did not lead to bullying."

It was essential to Kansas and Alexandria to mitigate the risks in their home microsystems in elementary and middle school by displaying short-term emotional responses. However, when both participants transitioned to high school, it was imperative to their future they eliminate the risk, meaning the threat no longer manifested in negative behaviors.

Subtheme: Anxious-Preoccupied Attachment. Children often display anxious-preoccupied attachment styles, when parents or caregivers exhibit inconsistent parenting behaviors. The child's primary caregiver may appear supportive and receptive but radically change to uncaring and cruel. Adolescents displaying characteristics of anxious-preoccupied attachment styles are self-critical, insecure, and have an intense fear of rejection.

Both Macon and Charlotte were confident and assertive in elementary school. They both had secure attachments to their primary caregivers and stable home environments. Macon said, “I guess I was somewhat outgoing, I guess. I just didn’t care to talk to anybody. Wasn’t really shy or anything. I was getting along with pretty much everyone.” Charlotte explained her socialization as, “... I didn’t have any problem, socially. I very much was very sociable once you got to know me, like I said.” Both participants lamented how they were not talkative, but they were friendly. Interestingly, both participants’ personalities changed before they entered sixth grade.

Macon was nervous, scared, and insecure around peers after he realized his father was in prison. Macon said, “I know I was always a little bit self-conscious and stuff when I was a little, when I first found out where my dad was, I was a little bit scared, not really scared, but nervous that someone would know.” Macon was self-conscious that “someone would find out” where his dad had been. Macon’s social interactions changed; He said: “I don’t know why I wasn’t, but it just I wasn’t as outgoing. I didn’t go out of my way to talk to anybody then. I just had my certain set group of people I would talk to.”

Charlotte built a wall to keep people from seeing the effects of her social anxiety and low self-esteem after her parents’ divorce and her father’s sexual assault. Charlotte’s opinion of her social interactions in middle school was guarded:

I was definitely more of a “Let me keep my emotions to myself and everything that I’m going through to myself,” almost like a fear of scaring off people with all your problems and stuff like that.

Charlotte developed a “wait and see” approach to her friendships. She said, “I definitely have the whole trust issue especially in any close relationship just, ‘Well, they could leave, or they could not always be there or something like that’.”

At the beginning of high school, Charlotte and Macon both used social selection as a short-term strategy to shield themselves at school from the risks in their home microsystems. However, as they moved towards their senior year, they exchanged social selection with personal acceptance. Each participant shared how they became more open to social interaction as they reached twelfth grade, and they became less concerned with what their peers thought about them. Macon described himself as a senior by saying, “I just stopped caring what people thought. Whatever they think, it didn’t really matter. So, I was a little bit more outgoing then.” Likewise, Charlotte described herself as “much more outgoing” because she understood who she was. Charlotte said, “You kind of find who you are throughout high school. Accepting me for who I was and understanding and trying to get past those insecurities.” Charlotte and Macon found personal acceptance through supportive relationships in high school and could eliminate their home microsystem risk.

Subtheme: Fearful-Avoidant Attachment. In the research presented by John Bowlby (1958) regarding attachment styles, he stated an individual with a fearful-avoidant attachment style will often hide their emotions and compartmentalize their feelings to deal with relationships. Fearful-avoidant adolescents desire attachment to other people, but they have difficulty sharing and connecting deeply in the relationship. Jackson developed a fearful-avoidant attachment style at an early age.

Jackson made friends with everyone; he said, “I was always the social type. I had a bunch of friends, never really had a negative encounter with anybody because I tried to befriend

everybody.” Jackson always “had a bunch of friends” because he desired a close connection with others, but he rarely shared his true self because he was “shy” and didn’t like “conflict.” Another facet of Jackson’s personality was his ability to suppress and bottle up his emotions. Jackson said, “I was the type where I would always hold stuff back... and I was really shy.” Jackson would keep his feelings bottled up inside because he didn’t like conflict. He explained during our second interview what happened when someone tried to push back on his boundaries, “I was pretty much friends with everybody, but I had my boundaries where there were still some things I wouldn’t open up about, or I was shy about, and stuff like that.”

Jackson set boundaries in his school microsystem and social interactions. Jackson tried hard to separate the risks he faced at home from the life he had at school. In elementary and middle school, Jackson described the school as his “get away from everything.” He could compartmentalize what happened at home and escape it at school. In high school, Jackson began partying and hanging out with an older crowd; he found a new escape. Jackson’s need to escape, fear of conflict, and bottled-up emotions combine into one short-term strategy, avoidance. Throughout school, Jackson maintained good grades, stayed out of trouble, and “tried to befriend everybody.” Jackson said, “I didn’t want to be labeled as that bad kid. Always wanted to get in good with my teachers and everything.” Jackson overcame the risks in his microsystem by avoiding the consequences of the risks in his microsystem.

Subtheme: Secure Attachment. Adolescent attachments to primary caregivers were similar to the attachment patterns seen in children, but adolescents’ emotions were more profound. In his book, *A Secure Base*, Bowlby (1988) explained the relationship between secure attachment and individual characteristics. Adolescents who formed a secure base with both parents were fully assured and highly adept. Adolescents without a secure attachment to either

parent were insecure, and adolescents who developed a secure attachment to only one parent fell somewhere in the middle.

Unlike the other participants, York appeared to secure attachment to his primary caregiver during elementary, middle, and high school. While some of York's characteristics were similar to other participant's, a closer look at his data revealed inconsistencies between his narrative and other study participants. Like Kansas and Alexandria, York was quiet in elementary school too, but for a very different reason. Kansas and Alexandria were shy because they avoided an emotional connection with their peers and teachers, but York wanted to avoid negative interactions with peers and teachers. York explained his elementary school principal was his aunt, so flying under the radar would have been a good strategy. York described himself as "shy starting out," but once he was "warmed up" and "started to get familiar with people," York was not so shy.

For a brief period in middle school, York started hanging with the wrong crowd. York described the group of friends and said, "I was hanging with some other people that I was not supposed to hang with, and it was getting me in a little trouble." During the first semester of York's eighth-grade year, he almost enrolled at the alternative school. York described how his mother reacted to the news, he said:

I had to turn my phone and stuff in, and I had to cut out all communication with my friends; she said I could talk to them at school, but when it comes down to when they doing something, she said, "You're old enough now you can make your decisions. When you see someone doing something they talking about to a teacher, you don't do that because I didn't raise you to do that."

York stopped hanging out with the wrong influences and went back to his unassuming behavior, a successful strategy for him.

In his research, Bronfenbrenner (1979) described how their childhood development and home environment do not define individuals. He explained how a person could make alterations to their situations and change their trajectory. After a careful examination of participant data, I discovered all participants, except for York, formed secure attachments during middle and high school. All participants attained secure attachments by (a) parental support, (b) adult support, or (c) peer support. According to Bowlby (1988) and Kocayoruk and Simsek (2016), these three types of support provide individuals living in at-risk microsystems with secure attachments by either employing promotive factors or protective factors to overcome risks.

Long-Term Strategies

Subtheme: Promotive Factors. I used the conceptual framework for this study as a guide when determining subthemes for long-term strategies. Adult support and peer support were two pathways participants could receive promotive factors to counteract or diminish the unfavorable effects of risk. The promotive factors identified in the adult support pathway were adult actions creating trust and secure networks constructed by an individual incorporating family and community members (Lätsch, 2018; O'Malley et al., 2015; Peters & Woolley, 2015). Positive peer interactions are promotive factors in the peer support pathway because they lessen the risk in a student's microsystem (Latsch, 2018; Williams et al., 2017).

Jackson consistently mentioned his Aunt Jean and his best friend Jake as the people who helped him get through the hard times. Jackson met Jake in "grass-cutter football," and they were instant friends, but they wouldn't become lifelong friends until Jackson relocated to West County in seventh grade. Jackson spent the weeknights with Jake's family and weekends with his Aunt

Jean. Jackson liked being at Jake's house because he could "feel the love" and he didn't have to endure "the conflict and fussing." The relationship Jackson and Jake shared was one of brotherhood; Jackson said, "Jake's always been like my brother to me. And there for a while in high school, I actually moved in with Jake for the longest time. So, I actually lived with Jake." The relationship Jackson shared with his Aunt Jean was stronger than the bond he shared with his biological mother. He said, "My aunt, she was basically like my mama to me." Jackson's aunt and his best friend stepped in and filled the gap his parents left behind. Jackson's aunt supported him in all his endeavors. He said:

She was my solid foundation. She was the person that was always there for me. She never missed any football games, baseball games. I mean, she was there. She was always there. Versus my mom and my dad, they were never really there.

Jackson's best friend provided him with moral support and gave him guidance. Jackson said, "I looked up to Jake growing up. But yeah, I don't look at Jake as a best friend. I look at him like, 'He's my brother.' Because he's always been there for me."

The grandparents of several participants also stepped in and reduced the risks in their home microsystems as well. All participants, except Charlotte, mentioned their grandparents taking an active role in their lives. Macon's mother went to school and worked two jobs while he was in middle school and high school. He reminisced about how his grandparents stepped in and helped look after him and his brother:

When our mom was doing all that work and stuff, we'd get off the bus and stay there...they just took care of us all the time. Just acted like nothing was really going on, nothing crazy.

Like Macon, Jackson also spent a great deal of time with his grandparents. Jackson said:

And we was always at my grandmother's house, ... And I just thought that was a normal life, always being with my grandmom, and she would help us out with our schoolwork, and she'd feed us, and then Mama would come pick us up after she got off work.

Jackson recalled learning his ABCs and how to read from his grandmother. He said, "...she would always sit there and read with us, and she was the one that taught me my ABCs, how to write my name, and how to read and stuff like that."

Kansas knew how to read before she started school, but that was not because of her grandmother; it was because of her aunt. Kansas' grandmother helped her develop emotionally, while her aunt supported her with a roof over her head and clean clothes. When Kansas was in middle school, she would get off the bus each afternoon and go to her grandmother's house. She loved her grandmother very much, but she did not love her house guest. Kansas's mother lived in the same house, along with her abusive boyfriend. Despite how much Kansas endured at the hands of her mother and the man she dated, she said, "I never told my grandmother. I never said anything to her about it up until I got older because she was my grandmother, and I was already kind of older, and she was just sick." Kansas continued to undergo and take the abuse because she felt she had to be strong. During one interview, Kansas said, "I kind of feel like I'm becoming my grandmother, a little bit because she's kind of like where everybody gets their strength from." Eventually, Kansas used her grandmother-like strength to put her abuser away behind bars. Kansas shared, "Every time the police came, ... we were scared because he always threatened to kill my grandmother. And so that night, I told everything. So, he ended up going to jail."

At her graduation, Kansas shared a special moment with her grandmother. Typically, her grandmother would not leave the house because she was always so sick, but that night she

surprised Kansas at graduation. Kansas spoke about that night and said, “And then as soon as I finished singing, I seen my grandma. That’s when I started crying. Graduation was the best day.” Kansas’ grandmother had never attended anyone else’s graduation. Kansas’s mother and father did not attend her graduation.

The relationship Alexandria shared with her grandmother and great-grandmother was different when compared with the relationship Kansas shared with her grandmother. Kansas shielded her grandmother from many of the atrocities she endured, but Alexandria shared a very open relationship with her grandmothers. Neither of Alexandria’s grandmothers was able to see her graduate from high school, but they both helped her make it to the finish line. Alexandria’s great-grandmother passed away before she entered high school, but Alexandria said, “Even though she had passed away before I got into high school, what pushed me is her strength, I will tell you.” Alexandria continued saying, “Sometimes I had to tell myself, ‘Okay, look. You’ve got to do what you’ve got to do to make your grandmama proud,’ because that’s all she wanted from me.” At our last interview, Alexandria brought a picture of her grandmother, and she explained the importance of the picture by saying:

[she was] one person that when nobody else, even when me and my dad was going through stuff, we’d probably get into it, probably fall out, might have our issues, but she was the one that was always no matter what, she was on me about everything.

Alexandria’s grandmothers provided support in her home microsystem. The relationship she shared with each adult was one of trust and motivation. Alexandria wanted to make both of her grandmothers proud. Each played a key role in overcoming the risks in Alexandria’s home microsystem.

Subtheme: Protective Factors. The purpose behind a protective factor is to mitigate or eliminate the adverse outcomes of a risk. The support mechanisms for achieving protective factors proposed in this study's conceptual framework were adult support and parental support. Positive relationships between teachers and students are the protective factors present in the adult support pathway (Lätsch, 2018; Mahony et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2017). A parental focus on student academic progress, parental monitoring of behavior, and parents' boundaries were all protective factors in the parental support pathway (Lätsch, 2018; O'Malley et al., 2015; Peters & Woolley, 2015; Santiago et al., 2014).

Alexandria and Kansas shared the influence of positive educators in their lives. Alexandria spoke of Miss Lean in middle school and said, "That's one person I could even to this day if I ever have any issue with anything, I could go to Miss Lean." Alexandria trusted Miss Lean and felt comfortable confiding in her. Even when Miss Lean wasn't her teacher, she worked behind the scenes to help Alexandria's other teachers reach her. Alexandria spoke of one incident:

Miss Green and Miss Lean. They were the ones that no matter what they say. You know what I mean? They pushed me. I don't even think Miss Lean, I don't think that she was my teacher.

Alexandria mentioned other positive teachers that helped her along the way, Miss Q, Mr. Holly, Miss Green, and her ROTC instructors.

Jackson was a charismatic high school student that got along with everyone, and he developed cordial relationships with many of his teachers. Two teachers were important enough to Jackson; he mentioned them in his second interview. Ms. McK was Jackson's eleventh-grade math teacher, and Jackson said, "...she was hard on me, but she stuck with me and worked with

me, and I ended up passing that class...” Jackson liked Ms. McK, because she forced him to earn his grades, and she taught him, “...to work hard for it, and everything is just not going to be handed to you.” Jackson made sure to mention his favorite thing about Ms. McK was, “She treated everybody the same.” Jackson liked Mr. Kirk for the same reason, “...he still treated everybody the same too.” Jackson felt Mr. Kirk was one of the best teachers he ever had, and he said, “When they moved him out of the classroom, they really did a disservice to other kids.” Ms. McK and Mr. Kirk both made a lasting impression on Jackson.

Kansas only spoke of one adult mentor in her life, Ms. Shore. Early in Kansas’ life, her aunt knew she needed someone to talk to about all the trauma and rage she felt inside. Kansas described the day her aunt introduced them to her. She said, “It was like two women that my aunt had tried to hire to talk to me. I think they were counselors or whatever, and one was supposed to be like a mentor, but I just wouldn’t talk, so I didn’t.” Kansas didn’t trust them, but Ms. Shore was different. In her second interview, Kansas shared the moment that Ms. Shore changed her life:

It was just me and her, and she was asking me questions that I was afraid to answer because I didn’t want anybody to get in trouble, and she kind of took it upon herself, she didn’t overstep any boundaries, but she kind of took it upon herself to try to figure me out... when I talked to Ms. Shore that day, and we had a long and deep conversation, and she kind of opened my eyes up to a lot of things that she made me look at things different from how I was looking at them. I just changed into a whole different person. I still had problems, but I knew how to communicate better and how to express myself more after talking to her.

Kansas knew the conversation with Ms. Shore was not a quick fix for her home microsystem risk factors. Kansas knew her relationship with Ms. Shore was a process. Kansas explained the difference between Ms. Shore and other adults; she said, “Ms. Shore, it wasn’t what she said, it was what she did. She kind of stepped into my personal life and, and she taught me about worth and self-love because I had none of that.” Ms. Shore became the “mother figure” Kansas was always looking for because she cared about her. Ms. Shore diminished the unfavorable effects of Kansas’s risks in her home microsystem.

Alexandria was one of twelve children. All her brothers and sisters share the same mother, but only Alexandria and her oldest brother share the same father. To keep all the children together and out of DFACS custody, Alexandria’s father raised all twelve children. Alexandria’s father was actively involved in her education and always set expectations for her behavior. Once in middle school, Alexandria spent a few hours in jail so he could teach her boundaries. Alexandria shared during her interview, “He left me up there for a few hours, and then he came, and he got me. I didn’t do it again.” Alexandria followed her statement up with, “Still to this day, I try not to be in trouble with the police.” Alexandria’s father wanted to make sure Alexandria knew the consequences of her actions. The relationship between Alexandria and her father has always been “just right.” She said:

So, we argue a lot, but that’s my go-to person for everything. Even if it’s just for me to have somebody to talk to, that’s who I can go to...I could always be comfortable enough to come to him and tell him anything.

Alexandria shared a picture of the two of them at graduation, and she said, “He actually cried. He didn’t want me to know. I’m not supposed to know that he cried that night.” Alexandria’s father was a high school dropout and a single father of twelve children.

Alexandria's graduation was a big milestone for the family. Alexandria commented on how her father's perseverance to work hard, push her towards the finish line. She said, "Seeing where my daddy came from, from when I was little to what he is now. That was a lot of my motivation in school and in life." Alexandria beamed with pride when she spoke about her father pushing her towards graduation. She said:

I knew that I couldn't let him down no matter what. That's one thing that pushed me because there were times that I would think about, "Is it really worth doing all this?" But then it's like I look at my daddy, and he raised all of us on his own. And it's like I can't let him down.

Similar to Alexandria's relationship with her father, Charlotte was equally close to her mother. It was always Charlotte, her sister, and her mom, even before the divorce. Charlotte commented on their relationship, saying, "we had our own ways of dealing with things, and us three held each other up and had to be strong for each other." The strength Charlotte spoke of was ingrained by her mother from an early age. Charlotte's mother always taught her to be strong and willing to learn. Charlotte shared the first time she ever saw her mother cry:

I remember when the divorce happened, first time I ever saw her cry was in church... I just was like, "I've never seen this before. What's going on? Is she okay?"... she came back later and was like, "It's not a weakness. That's a strength. If you're showing that you have been hurt, that's a strength.

Charlotte's mother provided a stable foundation, taught her how to work through her insecurities, and deal with her pain. Charlotte's mother always had a pulse on her daughter's emotions and helped her set personal goals for growth. Charlotte spoke of her social transition in high school by saying, "Coming from having at least a good strong background with my mother

and sister, I definitely could uplift people, definitely, when I accepted what had happened and all that kind of stuff. I could definitely relate more.”

Charlotte continued to share her mother’s philosophy on personal acceptance on growth, saying, “hurt people can also hurt people, but healed people can also heal people.” Charlotte considered her mother the model of success because “she’s so happy all the time” and “she makes the best of every circumstance.” A defining moment for Charlotte and her mother came in eighth grade when Charlotte won the MVP award at school for athleticism and good grades. It was a proud moment for her because she had “made it through” middle school and all the adversity in the prior two years. Charlotte said, “I just remember looking out at Mom, and I was like, ‘we finally did it. We got something out of this. We’re good. Okay, we’re starting somewhere new. We’re good.’” Charlotte could visibly see the risks in her microsystem diminishing.

York’s mother took an active role in his academic life. She participated in scheduling his classes and attended parent-teacher conferences. York said,

My mom, she was in charge of most of my scheduling... she made sure I was in college readiness classes... She attended most of the parent-teacher conferences and stuff...Even though when I had good grades and no behavior issues, she still attended those parent-teacher conferences. She voiced her opinion on the classes she felt that was best suited for me, and classes that she felt that wasn’t suitable for me.

York’s mother wanted him challenged at school; she didn’t like it when he came home from school and had all of his homework completed. York shared how his mother changed his schedule to AP literature because tenth-grade literature was too easy. In eleventh grade, York

started making his own class schedule because his mother felt he had earned the right after all his hard work. His mother's involvement in his education eliminated risks to his microsystem.

Subtheme: Spiritual Influence or Church Support. According to Culver and Denton (2017), having a spiritual influence in one's life promotes healthy behavior and positive well-being. While not explicitly stated in the conceptual framework, spiritual influence and church support can be both a promotive and protective factor. Involvement with a church community or delving into faith can help adolescents rebound from risks in their environment, serving as protective factors (Fletcher, 2020). In a study by Kim et al. (2019), participants found religion an important protective factor in removing the risks associated with substance abuse and early childhood trauma. Church families can function as promotive factors for at-risk youths because they can establish trust and build an additional network of support to compensate for risks (Lätsch, 2018; O'Malley et al., 2015; Peters & Woolley, 2015).

Three participants in this study admitted to a childhood rich with spiritual influence: Charlotte, Kansas, and York. The remaining participants admitted to attending church regularly as a child but did not speak of God throughout their interview.

In her first interview, Charlotte explained how her mother would make sure she and her sister were always in church. She said, "Ever since we were little, mom has always made it a point to take us to church to make sure that we're there whenever they're doing something, or the doors are open on Wednesday nights, Sundays." After her parents divorced, Charlotte's mother continued to keep both daughters regularly attending church. At first, Charlotte admitted to feelings of anger and resentment towards God. Charlotte said, "Now, when the whole divorce happened, I did have a little rebellious stage because I was mad at God for letting it happen or causing it to happen." However, over time, Charlotte "saw those purposes fulfilled" when she

and her mother moved to East County. Charlotte admitted she needed additional support in their new town, and the youth pastor at the local Baptist church offered a strong community network for her family. Charlotte said, “I feel like they were a very good foundation for us when we needed a family away from family to just talk things out with and stuff like that.” Her mother fostered Charlotte’s connection to God and her faithfulness in serving at church. Charlotte explained how her mother would use God as an influence in their lives:

The only person that mattered was God and us. I mean judgments from other people or even people saying you can’t do that, you’re not smart enough, or stuff like that. She was like, “You define you, and God defines you.”

Charlotte’s mother made a point to emphasize God’s work in their lives. Unlike Charlotte, however, Kansas did not have a mother to stress the significance of God, but she did have adults who encouraged her to attend church regularly. In her first interview, Kansas said:

The church was actually my favorite place to be, and I felt safe, and I just felt like nobody was judging me about things that I was going through, things that was happening because they didn’t know, but still, it was just. . . church was just, it was like therapy for me

Kansas did not act out in church; she did not appear shy and withdrawn, and she admitted she “wasn’t really afraid.” Beyond the walls of the church, Kansas had a deep personal connection with God. There were often times in Kansas’ life she “couldn’t talk to anyone,” and she would just “sit and cry” uncontrollably, but then Kansas said, “I would just start talking to God. Because this was all I could do.” Kansas admitted that “God” and “praying” kept her going through high school. The spiritual influence in Kansas life grounded her, provided her with a church family, and gave her purpose in some of the darkest moments.

Attending church and serving in the church are two different things. York and his mother not only attended church, but they both served in the church. Serving in church meant York and his mother were active members of their church community, meaning they not only received but provided support for others. At a young age, York's mother became an ordained minister in their church. Living with a minister affected York's life because he spent a great deal of time in service. The influence of God was evident throughout York's interviews. He would often speak of praying, church, or the ministry. York shared a story in his first interview of an event that occurred while visiting his father in prison. He said, "...two inmates, I guess they had some kind of tension with each other. So they got up, and they started fighting in the middle of visitation. I mean, so they basically killed one or the other." York was stuck in a bathroom with his father and grandparents for almost two hours while the prison was on lockdown. York said, "I was seven years old, and I didn't want to go back to that prison another day in my life." However, after some time, York gave his fear over to God. He shared, "I just said, 'I pray that God will forgive him for what he did.' Not that he killed that person but to just the other people that was around that saw that and witnessed it." York was told to "pray about it" by his mother and grandparents. As a high school student, York continued to assist his local church by serving, but his mother no longer worked as a minister. After completing his first college degree, York offered suicide prevention classes and served on the counseling ministry.

Breaking the Cycle

According to available research, students raised in single-parent homes are at a more significant disadvantage academically and socially than previously thought. In thirty years, the high school graduation gap between students from single-parent families and two-parent homes doubled (Abdul-Alim, 2015), meaning that students from two-parent, continuously married

households finished high school twice as often as students from single-parent families. If the student lived in a low-income, single-parent household, the risk increased (Abdul-Alim, 2015).

All the participants in this study graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district. During analysis, the perceived risks identified were reduced access to resources in a rural community, adverse childhood experiences, low socioeconomic status, and child stress factors. Participants used various strategies to overcome or eliminate risks in their home microsystems.

Participants shared during their final interview how their present lives were a result of their prior experience, specifically how they were able to graduate high school and change their life's trajectory. A specific element present in all final interviews was the participant's need to explain how they defied expectations and how their future expectations directly opposed their past. Jackson shared how people always thought he would end up like his mom and dad, another dropout. He said:

I've had some people tell me, "Oh, you're just going to be like your parents. You're going to follow along with your parents." ...And it's funny because some of the people that told me that they look at me today, and they're like, "Wow. I'm shocked. But then again, I'm proud of you."

Jackson's personal mission moving forward was to "be happy, have a great wife" and when he has kids, "If they want something, I want to be able to get it for them. Because I was always that kid growing up with a bunch of empty promises." Jackson wanted his future to include a two-parent household with adequate income for his wife and children.

People in Alexandria's life expected her to be pregnant during high school; she said, "I was always told that because I was raised by a single father that I would have a child before I'm

even 21. Here I am about to be 22, and I don't have a single child." Alexandria was the first person in her family to graduate from high school. Alexandria's mother and father dropped out of high school. Alexandria stated in her last interview that her goal after graduation was, "...like anybody else, I want to be successful. Financially, I want to be where I don't have to worry about anything, nothing at all." When Alexandria settles down and has children she wants them to have a stable environment, she said, "I don't want to have to worry about them having two separate homes." Alexandria desired a different outcome for her future self.

Similar to Alexandria, Kansas was the first graduate in her family. Graduation night was a proud moment in her life because she always saw her diploma as a golden ticket to her future. Kansas said, "I knew that my diploma ... It was kind of like a golden ticket for me. And so, I just refused to be a failure." Kansas shared how her mother and sister fell to the pressures of their environment and didn't make it; she said, "...my mom had me...when she was 17, and she had dropped out of school way before then. My sister is not holding it together...I refused to be that person, but my sister, she did." Kansas's sister dropped out of school just like her mother and now has multiple children Kansas helps care for when she is not at work. Kansas shared in her final interview that before she could move forward with her future, she would need to seek professional help. She said, "I plan on working on myself and kind of getting some type of professional help I don't want to say help but like, I know that I need to before I can do anything..." Recognizing the need for personal healing was a break from the generations of emotional trauma and silence in Kansas family.

In middle school, the assistant principal who placed York before a disciplinary tribunal panel to determine alternative school placement said to him, "I would be surprised if you graduate high school." Last year, York saw the administrator in a local store, and she inquired

about his life. York proudly reported, “I graduated high school, and I graduated college twice. And I said I’m almost finished with my doctorate.” York’s persistence after high school to obtain undergraduate and graduate degrees established he was not on the same path as his father – to prison.

Charlotte overcame her circumstances, but she didn’t see herself as a graduate who defied expectations. Charlotte sensed the risk in her microsystem motivated her; she said, “I think they just pushed me to be a better person, not to let my past define who I am.” Charlotte’s mother ingrained in her early on, “My kids will not become a statistic,” propelling Charlotte towards the finish line of graduation. Charlotte reflected on her experience and said, “I slipped and fell a couple of times, and I’ve hit rock bottom a lot of times. But I overcame my circumstances.” Charlotte recognized that to break the pattern and not end up like her father, she needed to redefine what success meant to her. Charlotte shared that success was:

Loving what I do every day. Waking up actually excited to go to work, excited to face the day. A lot of people say about money. That’s not a big thing to me, because I’ve come from a background where we’ve always had enough, or God’s always provided.

Like Charlotte, Macon did not feel he overcame the odds by living in a single-parent household and graduating from high school. When asked if he saw himself as a graduate who defied the odds, Macon said, “I mean, not necessarily...I don’t ever think of it that way. I just did what was expected. I figured it was the least that I could do.” Macon thought graduating from high school was the bare minimum he could do to show respect to his mom. During his interviews, Macon mentioned how his mother’s hard work and perseverance motivated him; graduating was his way of paying her respect. Macon doesn’t have elaborate dreams for his future; he wants a simple life. He said:

I hope to have a family started, I guess. I don't really want my own business because it's too much responsibility... to kind of be successful in my field and kind of work my way up to be able to do a lot more stuff.”

In the last year, Macon landed a promising job as a mechanic and the establishment promoted him twice.

Chapter Summary

The embedded, exploratory case study with a multiple-case design used with this research allowed for rich detail and significant amounts of participant data. This qualitative research design provided in-depth investigation into the accessible population of graduates from single-parent households, with limited available prior research. Interviews, documentation, and observations provided an overview of participant social and academic life experiences. After coding and analyzing all participant data, three major themes were evident: (a) perceived barriers, (b) attachment styles in early adolescence, (c) long-term strategies, and (d) breaking the cycle. Two of the major themes were divided into subthemes. Within the theme of attachment styles in early adolescence, I identified the following subthemes: (a) *dismissive-avoidant attachment*, (b) *anxious-preoccupied attachment*, (c) *fearful-avoidant attachment*, and (d) *secure attachment*. For the major theme long-term strategies, I identified the subthemes of (a) *promotive factors*, (b) *protective factors*, and (c) *spiritual influence or church support*. In this chapter, existing literature and participants connected to the major themes and subthemes through the lived experiences in participant data.

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

In the last twenty years, national school reform has been a focus for state and federal governments. The Bush Administration ushered in No Child Left Behind ([NCLB], 2002), and the Obama administration overhauled the regulations with the Every Student Succeeds Act ([ESSA], 2015). The essence of all school reform is to improve access and equity for all students, thus improving student achievement (ESSA, 2015; NCLB, 2002). Eight years after the authorization of NCLB, the federal government added accountability measures to secondary schools to accurately measure student success, the adjusted cohort graduation rate, or the number of students who successfully complete high school in four years.

Despite 20 years of school reform focused on improving student and teacher access and equity, Georgia schools have failed to improve student graduation performance significantly. In Georgia, students from single-parent homes are more than twice as likely not to graduate from high school when compared to all Georgia high school students. The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes and lived in a rural Georgia Title I school district. Through this research, I obtained data on the lived experiences of six graduates raised in single-parent households and who attended rural, Title I school districts during high school. The study findings revealed graduates who engage in promotive and protective factors can overcome risks in their home microsystems. The risks associated with the participants in this study are rural education, possible low socioeconomic status, and single-parent households. The following research questions were addressed in the study:

- Research Question 1. What were the social and academic life experiences of students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district?
- Research Question 2. What were the perceived barriers experienced by students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district?
- Research Question 3. What strategies were used by students to graduate from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district?

Purposeful sampling procedures were used to select six participants from the accessible population of high school graduates raised in single-parent homes and attended rural Title I schools. Exercising Seidman's (2013) three-step interview process and collecting document artifacts from participants, I captured in-depth and significant data. Interviews were semi-structured and face-to-face, in a setting of the participant's choosing. Documents were any artifacts that held significant value to the participant and motivated them to graduate. I used process coding and affective coding, two first-round coding techniques, to ascertain patterns or common language within the data. The first-round coding cycle generated 623 initial codes. To narrow the scope of data, I engaged in focused coding as a second cycle coding method (Saldaña, 2016), yielding eight categories. The final phase of coding involved reducing the categories into functional themes. The functional themes that emerged from the third phase of coding representing the participants' lived experiences were: (a) perceived barriers, (b) attachment styles in early adolescence, (c) long-term strategies, and (d) overcoming the odds. Two of the major themes were divided into subthemes. Within the theme of attachment styles in early adolescence,

I identified the subthemes of *dismissive-avoidant attachment*, *anxious-preoccupied attachment*, *fearful-avoidant attachment*, and *secure attachment*. For the major theme of long-term strategies, I identified the subthemes of *promotive factors*, *protective factors*, and *spiritual influence or church support*. The following sections include a discussion of the themes related to the research questions, the study's limitations, implications, recommendations for future research, and conclusions.

Research Questions: Summary Discussion

This study shared the social and academic life experiences of six Georgia high school graduates raised in single-parent homes and lived in rural Title I school districts. The stories participants shared through their interviews and documentation provided rich details about how they overcame the risks in their home microsystem and succeeded in their school microsystem. The purpose of this section is to answer the research questions that guided the study and discuss how they align with the literature and three themes that emerged from the data.

Research Question 1. What were the social and academic life experiences of students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district?

Throughout the study, the social and academic life experiences of graduates emerged through participant interviews, documentation, and observations. A participant's life experience was the culmination of smaller social experiences or academic experiences that either enriched or diminished the graduate's identity. To address RQ1, I chose the theme *attachment styles in early adolescence*. Participants shared their social and academic life experiences in elementary, middle, and high school in separate interviews. After participants shared their experiences, I reviewed their life histories before high school, during high school, and after high school. In a

cross-case comparison, it was evident that participants used their social interactions and academic performance to shield themselves from risks in their home microsystem.

Participant social and academic life experiences were a direct result of their secure attachment to a primary caregiver. If a participant formed a secure attachment as an infant and maintained the attachment throughout adolescence, their social and academic life experiences reflected minimal risks in their home and school microsystems. Participants without secure attachments reported substantial risk while explaining their social and academic experiences in their home and school microsystems. Within the core theme *attachment styles in early adolescence*, there were four subthemes: (a) *dismissive-avoidant attachment*, (b) *anxious-preoccupied attachment*, (c) *fearful-avoidant attachment*, and (d) *secure attachment*. While attachment styles in early adolescence are not a foundational tenet of Bowlby's (1958) research, each subtheme attachment style is found within his research.

The six participants in the study all shared the same attachment style as graduates, but as early adolescents, they were dissimilar. As middle school students, Alexandria and Kansas exhibited similar behaviors and fit within the subtheme *dismissive-avoidant attachment*. They both avoided their peers and teachers, lacked the desire to connect with others, and detached themselves emotionally from others. Alexandria "wouldn't talk to hardly nobody" and Kansas "did not want to be around anybody." Their behaviors were consistent with the available literature regarding dismissive-avoidant attachment; they lacked the desire to form or maintain relationships, and they did not value close relationships (Carvallo & Gabriel, 2020).

Macon and Charlotte had secure attachments with their primary caregivers during infancy, but in middle school, their secure attachments shifted, and they displayed anxious-preoccupied attachment. Based on the findings from their social and academic life experiences in

middle school, I placed Macon and Charlotte in the subtheme *anxious-preoccupied attachment*. Adolescents with anxious-preoccupied attachment styles are self-critical and insecure, and they have an intense fear of rejection (Bowlby, 1958). These behaviors were consistent with what Macon and Charlotte described in their social and academic experiences. Macon described himself as “self-conscious” and “nervous,” and he said, “I just had my certain set group of people I would talk to.” Charlotte explained how she guarded herself against rejection by allowing people to come to her and initiate friendships. She said, “I definitely have the whole trust issue especially in any close relationship, just, ‘Well, they could leave, or they could not always be there or something like that’.”

Only one participant fit into the third subtheme *fearful-avoidant attachment* – Jackson. On the outside, Jackson appeared securely attached; however, he often hid his emotions and had trouble forming deep emotional connections with others. Jackson’s behavior was consistent with Bowlby’s (1958) research on fearful-avoidant attachment behaviors in adolescents. Jackson was “always the social type,” and he “had a bunch of friends,” but he would “always hold stuff back” because he didn’t like conflict.

The subtheme *secure attachment* only fit one participant during early adolescence. York was the only participant to form a secure attachment at infancy and maintain the attachment throughout his education. Adolescents with secure attachments report less stress, stronger self-awareness, and better social skills than peers without insecure attachments (Monaco et al., 2019). Securely attached adolescents can better understand and regulate their emotions (Monaco et al., 2019). York was quiet and shy in school, but only to refrain from peers’ and teachers’ negative attention. York communicated well with his friends and teachers, regulated his emotions, and had a strong self-awareness. He self-regulated his negative behaviors in eighth grade after an

unfavorable incident resulted in a disciplinary tribunal, York said: “I started just to change...I’m not going to go down that road, so I started to just become a more mature person, and I was just making better decisions.”

According to the available literature, a secure attachment was not static and could become insecure if the primary caregiver-child relationship is disrupted (Divecha, 2017). Likewise, an individual with insecure attachment during infancy can rebound later in life with a supportive relationship (Sroufe, 2005). In late adolescence, the remaining participants formed secure attachments to other persons in order to overcome the risks in their home microsystems. Each participant shared how their lives changed, academically and socially, after bonding with a secure base.

Research Question 2. What were the perceived barriers experienced by students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district?

In the data analysis section of chapter five, I used coding methods to sift through participant interviews, observations, and documentation data. Four main themes were derived from functional categories after coding occurred. The themes identified during data analysis are most relevant when applied to research questions.

Perceived barriers experienced by graduates appeared in each of their interviews. After completing the second cycle of coding the data, it was apparent that *Perceived Barriers* emerged as a theme. All of the participants were raised in rural, single-parent households, but each had additional barriers or risks to graduation, including reduced access to resources through living in a rural district, adverse childhood experiences, low socioeconomic status, and child stress factors.

The traditional measure of a person's socioeconomic status is their occupation, education, and income (Berzofsky et al., 2014). Participants were not asked to disclose their parent's occupation, education, or income from when they were in high school, but other clues were provided in their interviews to help the researcher deduce their status.

During Macon's interview, he openly shared a barrier for him in high school was when the "water would be off" or the power would be turned off at home. He said, "...we'd have to go to the campground and stuff to take showers." Lack of access to public utilities is an indicator of low socioeconomic status. Macon shared how he didn't let lack of access get him down. He said, "I was like, that's probably a normal thing... I mean, if I did think something bad about it, I always looked into the good part of it and say, 'Hey, this is just different. We're doing something else.'" "

Truly understanding the impact of Macon's microsystem economic status came in his last interview when he shared his thoughts on success. Macon shared:

I guess being successful would be to the point where you had your life together, I guess, where you don't have to really worry about if bills or something like that show up. If a bill was to just show up, just not having to worry about it."

In Alexandria's situation, her father made a compromising decision to support his family, indicating she grew up in a home with low socioeconomic status. Alexandria shared how her father had to sell "weed" in order to make ends meet for the family. She said, "but also his hustle was he had to sell weed because he had kids to take care of." According to the Georgia Drug Threat Assessment (n.d., 2006), marijuana is typically distributed at the street level by persons who are considered "low-income." Adolescents who lived in low socioeconomic conditions during high school experienced more significant instances of household stress compared to

students living in middle and high socioeconomic environments (Amato,1991, 2001; Arkes, 2015; Keller, 2016).

Jackson's mother was an addict, and her addiction led to his frequent need to find housing elsewhere, either with another family member or a friend. It is my opinion that Jackson not only needed to escape his mother's drug use, but he also needed resources. Jackson alluded in several of his statements that he leaned on others for support. He said, "We'd go home at night, Mama wake us up, we'd go to school, then we'd go to Nanny's house and eat and do our schoolwork and go back home and just do it all over again." Jackson spoke of his aunt supporting him in high school, living with his best friend in high school, and how his friend's parents would take care of him. Other evidence supporting Jackson's need to find resources elsewhere were his comments about his mother being "lazy" and "always wanting everything handed to her." Lastly, Jackson made statements about his mother's need to "borrow money" or her comments about his in-laws, "...because they got more money than us, you want to be with them." Jackson's socioeconomic status in high school compounded the risk he already felt as a student living in a rural single-parent home.

The purpose of sharing the illegal activities of participants' parents was not only to highlight their living conditions but also to emphasize stress was a barrier for those participants in school. Stress in adolescence can be triggered by multiple sources such as emotional abuse, parental substance abuse/illegal activities, the burden of low socioeconomic status, or any other form of prolonged adversity (Harvard University, 2021). Without positive adult support, the effects of stress compound and lead to cognitive and behavioral issues (Harvard University, 2021) During the time Alexandria's father sold drugs as a source of income, she feared for her father, and she did not want him to go to jail; specifically, she knew she would go back into the

system if he went to jail. Alexandria said, “I didn’t understand everything fully until the police came and kicked in the door.” Having only one parent and knowing he might be arrested caused Alexandria stress during early adolescence.

Stress doesn’t always manifest out of fear, for Jackson’s stress arose out of embarrassment. Jackson shared his embarrassment over his mom’s drug use, saying, “We were sitting down to eat. And my mom was so high off pills. She was literally sitting there, eating, and she literally just, bam, just fell in her plate of food. And I was just like, this is embarrassing.” Jackson had two friends over that night. Jackson also shared how he never liked bringing girls home. He said, “I did, but not often, though. But when I did do it, we would just go straight to my room and just hang out, watch movies, and stuff like that. But I never really liked bringing my girlfriends over.” Kansas didn’t bring anyone home with her after school because she was afraid of her mother’s boyfriend. Kansas’ barrier was more than stress; she endured an adverse childhood experience that spanned seven years.

An adverse childhood experience (ACE) is defined as acute traumatic experiences or chronic environmental stressors (Brumley et al., 2017). An acute traumatic experience could be sexual abuse, physical abuse, parental loss, or neglect. Both Kansas and Charlotte had abusive men in their lives. Kansas was sexually abused by her mother’s boyfriend almost every day for seven years. Charlotte was sexually abused by her biological father when she was thirteen. Both participants admitted to the trauma associated with the abuse. Kansas said, “. . . high school was actually the worst time for me because that’s when everything started getting worse because I started fighting back. I had to do a whole lot of fighting, a whole lot of cutting, a whole lot of everything.”

I asked Kansas to specify what cutting meant in her interview, and she said, “I cut him.” Charlotte shared how her father’s abuse in early adolescence was a barrier for her in late adolescence. She said,

There was that fear that ‘ Okay. If I let someone close to me and see all the darkest parts of me or whatever, then they’re going to leave too.’ I had an issue in a lot of relationships with once they got to a certain point of vulnerability, I would automatically push away.

The current literature related to ACE’s and the accessible population of this study are congruent. According to Whiteside-Mansell et al. (2019), students from rural areas are at a greater risk for adverse childhood experiences. The Centers for Disease Control ([CDC], 2020) reported 61% of adults had at least one ACE and 16% had four or more ACEs. The percentage of high school students with one or more ACE and living in a single-parent household is 68% (Bethell et al., 2017).

Research Question 3. What strategies were used by students to graduate from high school, came from single-parent homes, and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district?

The foundational structure of this study’s conceptual framework was Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory and Bowlby’s (1958) research on secure attachment. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory was based on the principle that an organism interacted and connected with its environment and the organism’s development was shaped by environmental influences. Secure attachment was a significant strategy an individual could use in their development to moderate or remove the effects of risk (Bowlby, 1958; Bowlby, 1988; Kocayoruk & Simsek, 2016; Stevenson et al., 2018). Protective factors and promotive factors are variables that interact with risks and nullify their effects (Farrington & Ttofi, 2012). Within the

conceptual framework of this research, secure attachment operated as a protective factor and a promotive factor depending on the participant's relationship (Thompson et al., 2018; Walsh et al., 2019).

Protective factors and promotive factors were used interchangeably as weapons adolescents use against the barriers, they face in their home microsystems (Masten & Barnes, 2018). Protective factors were strategies used to diminish the effects of risk or stressors. Promotive factors were long-term primary strategies for overcoming and eliminating the effects of greater risk or traumatic events (Masten & Barnes, 2018). Participants in this study used protective factors and promotive factors to minimize or eliminate the risks in their home microsystems. Within the core theme *Long-Term Strategies*, there were three subthemes that encompassed the strategies used by participants: (a) *promotive factors*, (b) *protective factors*, and (c) *spiritual influence or church support*.

Within the subtheme *promotive factors*, there were two routes a participant could take to reduce the effects of a risk: adult support or peer support. The promotive factors identified by participants in this study were adult actions creating trust, additional networks of support by persons other than the primary caregiver, and positive peer interactions. Stoddard et al. (2013) found individuals with increased promotive strategies can reduce their environmental risk significantly. These findings are consistent with the present study.

All participants, except Charlotte, shared a family member or adult stepped in and provided additional support during adolescence. Participants shared how adults in their life helped them with access to resources and security. Macon explained how his grandparents stepped in and helped his mom, "when our mom was doing all that work and stuff, we'd get off the bus and stay there...they just took care of us all the time." Jackson spoke of his Aunt Jean and

said, “She was my solid foundation. She was the person that was always there for me... versus my mom and my dad; they were never really there.” Other participants shared how adults in their support network provided them with motivation and strength. Kansas and Alexandria shared how their grandmothers motivated each of them by their strength. Kansas said, “I kind of feel like I’m becoming my grandmother, a little bit because she’s kind of like where everybody gets their strength from.” Alexandria shared how her grandmother only wanted her to do well in school and make her proud. She said, “Sometimes I had to tell myself, ‘Okay, look. You’ve got to do what you’ve got to do to make your grandmama proud,’ because that’s all she wanted from me.”

Jackson was the only participant to share positive peer interaction in his interviews and documentation. Jackson’s best friend Jake provided him with moral support and trust during high school. Jackson said, “I looked up to Jake growing up. But yeah, I don’t look at Jake as a best friend. I look at him like, ‘He’s my brother.’ Because he’s always been there for me.” Jackson has an older sister, but Jake provided a positive interaction for him to eliminate the effects of his home environment. Zimmerman et al. (2013) found positive prosocial involvement can reverse the negative consequences associated with an adolescent’s home environment.

A protective factor alleviates or removes the unfavorable consequences of a risk in a participant’s microsystem (Lätsch, 2018; Mahony et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2017). After examination of participant data, two paths appeared as conduits for protective factors: adult support and parental support. The protective factors present in the adult support pathway were positive teacher-student relationships. The protective factors visible in the parental support pathway were parental monitoring, clearly defined boundaries, and parental monitoring of academic progress (Lätsch, 2018; O’Malley et al., 2015; Peters & Woolley, 2015; Santiago et al., 2014).

Three participants reported positive teacher-student relationships in high school. Alexandria trusted and confided in Miss Lean during middle school and high school. She said, "That's one person I could even to this day if I ever have any issue with anything, I could go to Miss Lean." Jackson respected Ms. McK and Mr. Kirk because they were positive influences in his life. Jackson shared how Ms. McK taught him something his mother didn't believe herself, "...to work hard for it, and everything is just not going to be handed to you." Kansas explained how Ms. Shore acted as a change agent in her life. She said, "When I talked to Ms. Shore that day, and we had a long and deep conversation, and she kind of opened my eyes up to a lot of things... I just changed into a whole different person." Ms. Shore made a difference in Kansas's life because she formed a personal relationship with Kansas. Positive teacher-student relationships eliminate the consequences of perceived risks in participant microsystems because the teacher serves as a secure attachment for students. According to Bergin et al. (2009), insecurely attached adolescents who formed secure attachments with secondary educators were protected from antisocial behavior, like aggression, illegal activities, violence, and promiscuity.

Parental monitoring, clearly-defined boundaries, and parental supervision of academic progress were protective factors identified in three participants' data. Peters and Woolley (2015) established a direct connection between parents setting boundaries for their children and student academic success. Santiago et al. (2014) found that parental supervision of academic progress led to higher academic performance and increased student engagement. Alexandria's father set boundaries for her and monitored her academic progress closely, even though he spent most of his time on the road as a truck driver. Alexandria shared how her father played a key role in motivating her to graduate. She said:

I knew that I couldn't let him down no matter what. That's one thing that pushed me because there were times that I would think about, 'Is it really worth doing all this?' But then it's like I look at my daddy..."

Charlotte's mother monitored her emotional well-being and provided Charlotte with the tools she needed for personal growth. Charlotte shared her school successes and failures with her mother. When Charlotte won the MVP award at school for athleticism and good grades, she looked at her mom and said, "...we finally did it. We got something out of this. We're good." York's mother took an active role in supervising his academic progress. York said, "...she was in charge of most of my scheduling" and "she attended most of the parent-teacher conferences..." His mother engaged in his school microsystem, creating a smooth home-school mesosystem for York.

The subtheme spiritual influence or church support involved both promotive factors and protective factors. According to Fletcher (2020), adolescents involved in faith-based communities or those who pursued personal faith reported eliminated risks. As a promotive factor, church families functioned to compensate for risks by the establishment of trust and support (Lätsch, 2018; O'Malley et al., 2015; Peters & Woolley, 2015). Three participants shared spiritual influence or church support as a strategy in their microsystem. Charlotte shared how her mother always taught her to lean on her faith and trust God's influence. Her mother made sure when Charlotte moved to East County, she had a church family for support. Charlotte said, "...they were a very good foundation for us when we needed a family away from family..." Kansas used her faith as a protective shield to diminish her risks; she said, "The church was actually my favorite place to be, and I felt safe, and I just felt like nobody was judging me about things that I was going through..." When Kansas didn't have anyone in the world to talk to, she

“would just start talking to God.” York’s faith and service in church minimized risks in his home. York served with his mother in the church at an early age, and he continues to serve today.

Study Limitations

The limitations found in the selected research methodology represent disadvantages that influenced outcomes and conclusions in participant data (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). In a qualitative study, researchers have an obligation to share with their academic peers an honest depiction of the restrictions present during experimentation without using broad language to describe limitations (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). The limitations of this case study were: (a) researcher bias, (b) non-participant observation, (c) lack of generalizability, and (d) minimal literature related to the accessible population.

As the researcher for this study, I served as the primary instrument for gathering and analyzing data in this embedded, exploratory case study with a multiple-case design (Yin, 2018). As the principal source of data collection, I investigated the narrowly-researched phenomenon of graduates from single-parent households and provided an account of their experience while participants shared their life histories through detailed and descriptive responses to interview questions (Yin, 2018). After data analysis occurred and before participant profiles were written, it was essential that steps were taken to minimize researcher bias. As the primary data collection and analysis tool in this research, I knew prior experience in a rural single-parent home would create partiality during data collection and analysis. To triangulate the data, participants provided articles of documentation, non-participant observations occurred during interviews, and participants read their profiles after they were written to check for inaccuracies. Participant member checking, articles of documentation, and interviews were excellent sources of data for

triangulation. All three minimized researcher bias and reactivity; the inauthentic elicited responses from participants during interviews (Maxwell, 2013). Non-participant observation was not a valuable research methodology tool.

The purpose behind non-participant observation was to provide another source of data during research by video recording participant interviews. After each interview, I watched the video recording and journaled my observations about body language or any follow-up questions for the next interview. After the first and second rounds of interviews with participants, non-participant observation memos did not provide valuable data. Participants were distracted by the iPad recording them during interviews. Participants would avert their focus to the iPad during interviews. Participants appeared rigid and tense at the beginning of their interviews, but I could not determine if it was due to the video recording or the interview in general. In the available literature regarding non-participant observation, Williams (2008) reported that overtly recording participants during interviews could be interpreted by participants as intrusive, and it might affect their behaviors and disrupt research. A phenomenon called the *observer effect* occurred when participants intentionally changed their behaviors due to intrusive observation (Williams, 2008). After investigating other research, it appeared that non-participant observation was most effective in studies spanning long periods of time with large sample sizes (Liu & Maitlis, 2010).

The reduced size of the sample population and the selection of only two locations limited the generalizability of this case study research. The findings and conclusions of this study represented a small population and did not transfer easily to broader populations (Maxwell, 2013). After purposive sampling techniques occurred, six participants agreed to participate in the research study. Purposive sampling involved the selection of a limited number of participants

based on specific criteria relevant to the research. The specificity associated with the accessible population limited the transferability of research findings and conclusions (Maxwell, 2013).

When I researched material for this study, I began in the Galileo platform. To search for available literature related to the accessible population, I used several parameters: full-text articles within the last ten years, located geographically in the United States, and only available by books or e-books, academic journals, reports, and magazines. To retrieve literature related to high school graduates and their environment, I used the following keywords in my search: (a) single-parent households, (b) rural education, (c) high school graduation, and (d) Title I schools. The available literature specifically related to the accessible population was limited. The Galileo database provided 165 search results that met the search criteria. Over the course of two years, I increased the number of keywords and used different combinations of words to search for new sources of information. I used the following words to increase the scope of literature: (a) single-parent households, (b) academic achievement, (c) urbanicity, (d) rural education, (e) socioeconomic status, (f) high school graduation, (g) success, (h) Title I schools, (i) family structure, (j) divorce, (k) death, and (l) separation. The addition, deletion, and rearrangement of search items over the course of two years generated over 7,000 additional search items, but only 84 were relevant to the accessible population.

Despite the limitations of this study, participants shared a unique and genuine account of their success by graduating from high school while attending a rural, Title I school district and living in a single-parent household. The collective stories of participants might inspire single parents, current high school students, or educators.

Implications

In this exploratory case study, six graduate participants from rural, Title I school districts who lived in single-parent households during high school shared their life, academic, and social experiences. The purpose of the study was to investigate participant experiences and identify promotive and protective factors they used to overcome or eliminate risks in their home microsystem. The four core themes that emerged after data analysis were the foundation for this study's implications, and they were: (a) perceived barriers, (b) attachment styles in early adolescence, (c) long-term strategies, and (d) breaking the cycle. The findings of this research may benefit educators, mentors, single parents, and students. Valuable stories about research participants were contrary to the trends in available research and provided a voice for successful high school graduates from single-parent homes in rural areas. Students from the accessible population used promotive and protective factors to nullify risks and graduate from high school within four years.

One implication of the research findings was that students raised in single-parent households needed a secure attachment to overcome the consequences of associated risks. All of the participants in this study, except one, had insecure attachments in early adolescence but formed secure attachments in late adolescence by uniting with a positive peer and securing quality adult relationships. All participants either had a positive adult relationship with a grandparent or teacher. The findings of this research may benefit educators, mentors, single parents, and students interested in finding ways to provide positive peer, positive adult, and positive parent relationships for adolescents.

Another implication I ascertained was students who were raised by a single parent and lived in rural Title I school districts have combined risks associated with their microsystems.

Students in the researched population not only lived in rural areas, lived in single-parent homes, and attended Title I schools, but they also added either low socioeconomic risks, stressors, adverse childhood experiences, or a combination of the three. Graduates used promotive and protective strategies to mediate or eliminate those risks. These findings may be considerations for single parents, students, and educators interested in reduced or eliminated consequences of risk in the home environment.

An implication derived from participant data was the shared sense of responsibility all participants displayed during their interviews. All participants made reference to their responsibility or need to finish high school. Some participants graduated high school for their grandparents, others walked across the stage for their parents, and one participant did it for her younger siblings. These findings may be considerations for parents, students, and educators in secondary education involved in arming potential graduates with tools for success. Additionally, these findings may inspire single parents to reevaluate how much responsibility they placed on their own children.

An additional implication revealed in the studied population was the presence of a spiritual influence or church support as a strategy for mediating the consequences of risks. Three participants explained how attending church regularly and having a relationship with God helped them work through difficult situations. Interestingly, the difficult situations participants referred to occurred during the time they lived in a single-parent household and incurred multiple threats to their success. The findings of this implication may assist single parents, mentors, extended family members, students, and church stakeholders concerned with fostering support and spiritual influence for at-risk youth.

Another implication found in participant data was students in the accessible population changed their future trajectory. During interviews, the individual participant descriptions of the future were very different from their past. In all cases, participants alluded to their definitions of success, and in each case, success to the individual was the opposite of what they experienced as a child. The participants in this study changed the trajectory of their lives by finding and maintaining a secure attachment. These findings may benefit single parents, students, and educators because participant stories were in direct opposition to available research and provide hope for all stakeholders.

One final implication was participants defied the expectations that others held for students raised in single-parent homes and who attended high school in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district. All participants explained during their interviews how they overcame the odds and defied the expectations of others. Participants shared stories of family members and friends who told them they expected them to drop out, get pregnant, or become incarcerated. Participants relished confronting those who told them they wouldn't graduate. This discovery may benefit single parents, students, educators, mentors, and education policymakers interested in changing the perceptions associated with students from the examined population.

Recommendations

This qualitative study contributes to the current literature on graduates raised in single-parent homes while attending rural Title I school. The primary focus of investigation during this research was the lived experiences of six participants who attended and graduated a rural Title I high school within four years while living with a single parent. Based on participant data, study limitations, and the available research, recommendations were prepared.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Increase sample size. The sample size for this study was six participants. For case study research, a sample size of six participants was adequate, but the small sample size limits the generalizability of the study. To improve the transferability of implications and conclusions, a larger sample size should be considered.

Conduct a quantitative study or mixed methods study. This research was a qualitative case study. It is recommended researchers use quantitative or mixed methods research in future studies. Quantitative data would transfer easier to a broader population and increase the generalizability of the research. Likewise, mixed methods research would increase the population size but still include participant voice in qualitative interviews.

Gender specificity. In the present study, there was no preference for gender specificity. There were three male and three female participants. In future studies, it is recommended to consider if there are differences among the protective and promotive strategies used by males and females. Additionally, were there other differences among male and female subgroups in students who lived in single-parent households and attended rural Title I school districts?

Race/Ethnicity. In the current study, the primary focus was not if there were differences in participant responses among racial or ethnic subgroups. A focused study on an individual ethnic or racial subgroup would improve the quality and findings of the research.

Urbanicity and geography. In the current study, six participants were from rural Georgia towns. An interesting comparison would change the setting to either an urban or suburban town in Georgia. Future studies should explore different geographic regions. Instead of rural Georgia, the setting of a future study may be rural Texas. It would be interesting to compare the difference in research findings.

COVID. The participants in the current study graduated several years ago, well before the COVID pandemic. Future studies should consider the impact of COVID-19 on students living in the researched population and determine the perceived risks and strategies of those who graduated. It would be intriguing to see if the COVID pandemic had a differential impact on the accessible population's graduation rate due to student engagement, absences, and overall lack of participation. Determining the effects of the COVID pandemic and securing attachment in late adolescence would be fascinating.

Longitudinal Studies. A recommended study to consider is replicating this study with these same participants over a period of five years and follow their progress. The future study should explore how their lives were changed by the five years and did their perspectives change from the previous study. The longitudinal approach would compare the initial results of the current study to new findings.

Conclusion

High school graduates who lived in single-parent households and attended rural Title I school districts established a secure attachment to overcome or eliminate risks in their home microsystem. Secure attachment provided high school graduates with trust, confidence, and a safe emotional attachment to a primary caregiver (Bowlby, 1988). Secure attachment increased the likelihood individuals would graduate (Bowlby, 1988; Kocayoruk & Simsek, 2015). There were three secure attachment pathways identified in this study: (a) parental support, (b) adult support, and (c) peer support. Each pathway provided at-risk students with secure attachments by either utilizing promotive factors or protective factors to overcome risks (Bowlby, 1988; Kocayoruk & Simsek, 2015). The perceived risks to the target population were rural education, low socioeconomic status, single-parent household, adverse childhood experiences, and child

stress factors. All risks were found in the accessible population of this study. The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of students who graduated from high school, came from single-parent homes and lived in an identified rural Georgia Title I school district. I used an embedded, exploratory case study to develop meaning, function as the primary source of data collection, and provide a voice for participant experience (Merriam, 2002; Yin, 2018). The findings of the research indicated students from the accessible population used promotive and protective factors to nullify risks and graduate from high school within four years.

The number of single-parent households increased with the authorization of No Child Left Behind, a national school reform that required new accountability measures, including adjusted graduation cohort rate in 2010 (Duffin, 2019; NCLB, 2002). Since the inception of NCLB, Georgia has failed to significantly improve the graduation rate. Students from single-parent homes were more than twice as likely not to graduate from high school when compared to all Georgia high school students. However, the findings from this research confirmed students who lived in single-parent households and attended rural Title I school districts could graduate from high school if the following conditions were met:

- Students needed a secure attachment to overcome the consequences of associated risks.
- Students who had combined risks associated with their microsystems and used promotive and protective strategies to mediate or eliminate those risks.
- Students were responsible individuals and intrinsically motivated.
- Spiritual influence or church support could be used as a strategy for mediating the consequences of risks.
- Students changed their future trajectory by securing attachments.

- Students defied expectations.

According to the available literature, students living in single-parent households with associated risks have an increased risk of dropping out than graduating from high school (Brumley et al., 2017; Zaff et al., 2016). Before a close examination of literature and data, I thought I knew what the trends were regarding high school completion and single-parent households. I suspected increased numbers of high school dropouts from single-parent households because of the trends in the available research. What I did not expect was the lack of information related to successful graduates from single-parent households. I was a successful graduate from a single-parent household, and I knew other graduates as well.

My brother and I lived in a single-parent household, and we attended a Title I high school in a suburban Georgia school district. We were exposed to low socioeconomic status and child stress factors, and we both graduated from high school in four years. Prior to the start of this study, I thought we possessed internal motivation unsuccessful students from single-parent households did not possess. What I learned from participant experiences and available research was that my assumption was partially correct.

The internal motivation was secure attachment, specifically the use of promotive and protective factors in supportive pathways. My parents divorced when I was nine; my brother was four. We moved to Georgia to live with my grandmother and three aunts. After my parents divorced, my mom took five years to find herself and discover her identity as a single mother. During that time, my grandmother and aunts stepped in and provided a secure base for my brother and me. They provided emotional stability, financial support, and trusting relationships. During high school, our mom found solid footing, and she provided monitoring, boundaries, and academic involvement.

Based on participant experiences and the available research, graduates received promotive factors by either adult support or peer support. Promotive factors were elements in their lives that would diminish or counteract unfavorable risks (Lätsch, 2018; O'Malley et al., 2015; Peters & Woolley, 2015). Graduates shared how adults in their life would provide support and trust for them, often replacing the absence of a resource like food or clothes. Church families were also a promotive factor because they provided additional stability and support for graduates when their home microsystem was unstable. One graduate explained how a positive peer relationship mitigated the negative aspects of his home microsystem.

Graduates established protective factors by adult support or parent support to eliminate the consequences of risk in their home microsystem. Parental academic involvement, parental monitoring, and parental boundaries were all ways identified by participants; their parents eliminated risks for them (Lätsch, 2018; O'Malley et al., 2015; Peters & Woolley, 2015; Santiago et al., 2014). Participants also shared how positive, caring teachers changed how they viewed school.

What I learned from participant experiences and the available research is that students who lived in single-parent households and lived in rural Title I school districts were successful when they used adult support, parental support, and peer support as secure attachment to overcome risks in their home microsystem. Each support pathway involved promotive or protective factors to compensate for or eliminate the consequences of risks in their home microsystem. When the consequences were minimized or eliminated in their home microsystem, the effects were noticeable in their school microsystem. Academically, participants improved academic performance, had fewer behavior problems, and were more engaged. Socially, participants were more confident, felt supported, and increased their social network.

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APPENDIX A:

Document Observation Matrix

Document Observation Matrix

Category	Suggested Topics (Not Limited)	Observational Notes
Appearance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clothing • Age • Gender • Physical Appearance 	
Physical Behavior and Interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are people in the document/evidence doing? • Who interacts with who in the document/evidence? • Who does not interact with whom in the document/evidence? 	
Personal Space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the documents, how closely are people standing to one another? • If the document is a letter, what does the handwriting tell you? Does it seem familiar and obtrusive or timid and withdrawn? 	
People Who Stand Out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify people who receive attention from others. • If the document does not have individual pictures, what does the document say about the individual and their experiences? 	

APPENDIX B:

Interview Protocol

First Interview with Potential Probes
The Participant's Social and Academic Experiences Prior to Entering 9th Grade
(Semi-Structured, Face-to-Face) 90 minutes

1. How old were you when you realized you were part of a single-parent household?
 - a. How and when did your family structure alter from dual parent to single parent?
2. Travel back to your formative years, what were specific social experiences that occurred in school prior to ninth grade?
 - a. What was unstructured time like for you in school (lunch, playground, etc.)?
 - b. What do you feel were social strengths you possessed in elementary school?
 - c. What do you feel were social deficits you portrayed in elementary school?
 - d. Did you maintain these strengths and deficits in middle school, or did they evolve into other attributes?
3. Along the same thought process, describe academic experiences that stick out in your memories prior to ninth grade.
 - a. What was structured academic class time like for you in school?
 - b. What do you feel were academic strengths you possessed in elementary school?
 - c. What do you feel were academic deficits you portrayed in elementary school?
 - d. Did you maintain these strengths and deficits in middle school, or did they evolve into other attributes?
4. Can you describe any perceived barriers beyond social and academic experiences you felt in elementary or middle school?
 - a. Did you undergo any Adverse Childhood Experiences during elementary or middle school?
 - b. Did you experience any transitions during elementary or middle school?
 - a. Did you develop any coping mechanisms or strategies to overcome the effects of these barriers?

Second Interview with Potential Probes
The Participant's Social and Academic Experiences 9th Grade through Graduation
(Semi-Structured, Face-to-Face) 90 minutes

1. When you entered ninth grade, do you remember how many of your close friends lived in homes that were not dual parent homes, continuously married homes?

2. During high school, were there specific social experiences that occurred in school during those four years?
 - a. What was unstructured time like for you in school (lunch, PE, etc.)?
 - b. How would you describe your personality and social life in high school?
 - c. How did you evolve socially from middle school to high school? If you changed, can you pinpoint what caused the change?
 - d. Were you actively involved in extra-curricular activities? If so, what types of activities?

3. Keeping in the same theme, were there specific academic experiences that stick out in your mind during high school?
 - a. Of the academic courses you took in high school, how would you rate their academic rigor? Were they mostly Advanced Placement, Honors, College Prep, or Technical courses?
 - b. How would you describe your study habits and work ethic in high school?
 - c. How would you describe your academic progress in high school?
 - d. During your senior year of high school, did you prepare for college by applying to colleges and universities?

4. Can you describe any perceived barriers beyond social and academic experiences you felt in high school?
 - a. Did you undergo any Adverse Experiences during high school?
 - b. Did you experience any transitions during high school?
 - c. Did you develop any coping mechanisms or strategies to overcome the effects of these barriers?

Third Interview with Question Prompts
The Participant's Social and Academic Experiences Present Day
(Unstructured, Face-to-Face) 90 minutes

1. Can you describe how you interact socially?
 - a. Explain your social interaction with family.
 - b. Explain your social interaction with coworkers.
 - c. Explain your social interaction with friends.
 - d. Explain your social interaction with the opposite sex.
2. Can you describe how productive you are in your current profession/trade?
 - a. Explain your work ethic.
 - b. Explain your mission.
 - c. Explain your vision.
 - d. Explain your future plans.
3. How was your present status defined by social and academic experiences faced in elementary, middle, and high school?
4. Do you see yourself as a graduate who overcame and “defied” expectations by graduating?
 - a. Can you explain why?
5. Can you describe a specific incident post high school graduation that sparked significant growth for you and allowed you to overcome a previously identified barrier?
 - a. Why was this incident significant?

APPENDIX C:

IRB Approval



**Institutional Review Board (IRB)
For the Protection of Human Research Participants**

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04048-2020

Responsible Researcher: Jessica Watson

Supervising Faculty: Dr. William Truby

Project Title: *A Narrative of Successful Graduates Raised in Single-Parent Homes while Attending Rural Title I Schools.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **Exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under Exemption **Category 2**. Your research study may begin immediately. If the nature of the research project changes such that exemption criteria may no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- *Upon completion of this research study all data (email correspondence, interview transcripts, participant name lists, etc.) must be securely maintained (locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years.*
- *Interview statement must be read aloud to each participant at the start of the recorded interview session. Recorded interviews must be deleted immediately upon creation of each interview transcript.*
- *Please review the current CDC/WHO guidance pertaining to COVID-19. Face-to-face interviews must be conducted using face masks, maintaining 6 ft. distance, etc. It is recommended that interviews are conducted via telephone, SKYPE, Microsoft TEAMS, etc.*

If this box is checked, please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at irb@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.

Elizabeth Ann Olphie *07.06.2020*

Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.

Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.

Revised: 06.02.16