Student Perceptions of Caring Adults in Schools: A Qualitative Multi-Case Study

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**Abstract**

Although rates of school dropout have decreased over the past few decades, about two million individuals aged 16 to 24 did not complete their high school education in 2019. Notably, disparities exist within the number of students who do not complete their high school education. Given that the United States values higher education and there are well known negative outcomes associated with discontinuing one's high school education, it is imperative to identify ways to reduce the number of students who do not complete their high school education. One way to do this is increasing the number of protective factors students have by focusing on the relationships with the adults at school. The current study used semi-structured interviews to explore ninth grade students' relationships with the adults in their schools. Specifically, it investigated if students felt they had at least one caring adult present in their schools and the qualities and actions of those adults that demonstrated that they cared. A thematic analysis across participants highlighted the major themes that were present in the data and specific actions and qualities of teachers (e.g., uses eye contact, asks questions about students' lives, remembers details about students). Moreover, a phenomenological approach revealed specific ways that participants have felt supported by adults in their school and how school would be different based on the number of caring adults present.

*Keywords:* school dropout, high school students, caring relationships in school

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**Chapter 1: Introduction**

More than two million young people between the ages of 16 to 24 do not complete their high school education each year (US Department of Education, 2020). Disparities in high school dropout exist for students with certain characteristics, including being male, belonging to a minoritized race or ethnic group, low socioeconomic status, and special education status. Given the extensive long-term negative effects of school dropout, it is imperative to identify timely interventions that prevent dropout and promote more equitable outcomes for all students. Research has demonstrated that connecting students to caring adults outside of the home is one of the most significant protective factors that can lower a student's risk of experiencing negative outcomes (e.g., Laursen & Birmingham, 2003; Sieving et al., 2017; Werner & Smith, 1992). Focusing on these relationships at natural developmental transitions (i.e., transition into high school) would allow for more support as students experience a myriad of changes during these times (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Neild et al., 2008). While studies have investigated student-teacher relationships (e.g., Hughes et al., 2008; Longobardi et al., 2016; Pianta, 1999) and documented the difficult transition from middle school to high school (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Goldstein et al., 2015), there is a paucity of research on high school students' perceptions of caring adults in school. Studies that examine student-teacher relationships often prioritize the teacher's perspective (Akos & Galassi, 2004) or use quantitative methods (e.g., Thijs & Fleischmann, 2015). The purpose of this project was to conduct a qualitative, multi-case study to explore student perceptions of caring adults in schools with a specific focus on students who have characteristics associated with increased exposure to risk and the presence of early warning indicators

for school dropout. Within each case, student experiences were explored using a phenomenological approach to highlight each individual's experience with caring adults. Across all case studies, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify themes that emerged across participants.

**School Dropout**

In the United States, people view education as one of the most critical factors that contributes to life success (Reinhart & Ritter, 2020), yet more than five percent of students discontinue their education each year (US Department of Education, 2020). School dropout is a public health issue with broad sociopolitical implications (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007; Lansford et al., 2016). The consequences of dropping out of school can impede multiple domains of life including one's employment, physical health, and mental health. Moreover, school dropout has expansive economic consequences for the country (Amos, 2008; Rumberger, 2020).

Individually, those who do not earn a high school degree are more likely to experience serious physical health problems such as hepatitis, stroke, and diabetes (Vaughn et al., 2014). Furthermore, lower educational attainment is predictive of an earlier death (Molla et al., 2004). School dropout is also associated with increased criminal behaviors such as larceny, assault, and possession of drugs (Lochner & Moretti, 2004; Maynard et al., 2015), and higher engagement in risky health behaviors (e.g., smoking, being overweight, decreased physical activity; Lantz et al., 1998). Individuals who dropout of high school are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors and have increased rates of teenage pregnancy (Marcotte, 2013). Additionally, research has demonstrated that those who drop out of high school are twice as likely to report suicide

attempts than their peers who graduated (Maynard et al., 2015), and overall, they report poorer well-being (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011).

Youth who drop out of high school later earn lower wages and rely more on public services (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018; Waldfogel et al., 2005). The more than 12 million students projected to drop out over the next decade will cost the U.S. about three trillion dollars in lost wages, crime-related costs, and federal and state taxes (Amos, 2008). Along with higher crime rates, those who do not complete their high school education are more likely to be in local jails and state or federal prisons increasing incarceration expenses for taxpayers (Wise, 2007; Maynard et al., 205). For these reasons, school dropout poses a large financial burden and therefore has gained interdisciplinary and national attention (Rouse, 2005). Much of this attention has been focused on risk factors and warning indicators of dropout (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

**Risk Factors, Early Warning Indicators, and Protective Factors of Dropout**

School dropout is a process that unfolds over time (Doll et al., 2013; Gubbels et al., 2019). There is not one event or single factor that results in students discontinuing their education; rather antecedent events initiate the dropout process and are typically compounded by a series of factors. Research has investigated risk and protective factors related to the individual, family, community, and school environment as they all affect how an individual functions and the outcomes they are likely to experience inside and outside of school (e.g., Gubbels et al., 2019; Ingul et al., 2012). Many theories and frameworks that explain the process of school dropout exist that detail a series of factors that are associated with school dropout including school, community, and societal

contexts in which students are nested (e.g., Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Cabeus & De Witte, 2016; Finn, 1989; Jordan et al., 1994).

For the purposes of this study, the terms "characteristics associated with increased exposure to risk," "early warning indicators," and "protective factors" are used. Characteristics associated with increased exposure to risk are similar to risk factors as they increase the probability of experiencing a negative outcome (SAMHSA, 2019). Thus, they are defined relative to a specific negative outcome, such as dropout. However, many factors associated with dropout that have been considered risk factors in the past include characteristics of students that are static and not malleable (e.g., race, ethnicity, sex). It would be remiss to ignore that these characteristics themselves do not put students at risk for dropout (Zuberi, 2011). Rather these characteristics are linked to disproportionate exposure to untoward experiences such as structural racism, discrimination, and harmful practices (e.g., exclusionary discipline; Baker-Smith, 2018; Skiba et al., 2011). Therefore, increased exposure to harm that exists inside and outside of the school must be acknowledged.

Falling under the concept of risk is the notion of early warning indicators, which reflect data gathered on specific perceptual or performance metrics that can predict, during students' first year in high school, whether certain students are on the path toward eventual graduation (Heppen & Therriault, 2008). These are distinct from characteristics that are associated with risk because they reflect malleable perceptual and behavioral indicators of functioning within school that can change in response to intervention (Bruce et al., 2011). Thus, early warning indicators are probabilistic and used to demonstrate likelihood of a student being on a trajectory towards dropout.

Lastly, protective factors are defined as those characteristics, behaviors, or factors that decrease the likelihood of experiencing negative outcomes (SAMHSA, 2019). Protective factors serve to buffer students from experiencing early warning indicators in the face of risk of longer-term negative outcomes, such as school dropout. Moreover, protective factors can be used to pinpoint specific targets for intervention that can lower the risk associated with certain characteristics through minimizing proximal early warning indicators that are linked to more distal outcomes, such as dropout.

### *Characteristics Associated with Increased Risk*

**Racism**. Like most systems in the United States, disparities among racial groups in relation to school dropout exist. It has been well established that Black students are more likely to receive exclusionary discipline practices (e.g., suspension, expulsion, referral to law enforcement) than white students (Baker-Smith, 2018; Hannon et al., 2013; Losen & Skiba, 2010). Research has also demonstrated that Black students are likely to receive a more severe punishment than white students for the same behavior (Anyon et al., 2014) or when the definition of the behavior is subjective (e.g., disrespect; Skiba et al., 2002). Differences in school dropout follow a similar pattern. Students who belong to minoritized groups are more likely to discontinue their high school education than their white peers (US Department of Education, 2020).

**Sex**. Being male has also been associated with increased exposure to risk in schools. For example, males are more likely to be held back in school than females (Warren et al., 2014). While males account for half of all students, they represent 59% of all high school dropouts (Child Trends, 2018). Previous research has also shown that males are less likely to have close student-teacher relationships than females (Hughes &

Kwok, 2007; McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015). Historically, males had higher graduation rates than females but since the 1980s males are more likely to drop out of high school than females (Chapman et al., 2011). This trend is present across various racial and ethnic groups as well (i.e., Black, Hispanic, Asian, Multiracial, white; US Department of Education, 2020).

**Socioeconomic Status.** Students who come from families that belong to a low socioeconomic status are more likely to discontinue their high school education than their peers (Chapman et al., 2011). While there are many ways to measure socioeconomic status, this study will use self-report of free and reduced priced lunch to identify students who belong to a low socioeconomic status.

**Special Education Status**. Another characteristic associated with an increased exposure to risk is special education status. Special education status includes those who struggle with a learning disability, a behavioral concern that significantly impedes their learning, or a physical disability. Of the students who had a learning or physical disability, 36% dropped out of high school in 2018 (Bustamante, 2020), more than twice as much as their peers without a special education status (US Department of Education, 2020). Notably, students receiving special education services are suspended 2-3 times more than students who do not receive those services (Losen et al., 2015). In a study conducted by Klehm (2014), the author found that about 54% of teachers have lower expectations for students with disabilities which can have further implications about how they interact with these students.

*Early Warning Indicators*

There are several early warning indicators that serve as probabilistic indicators regarding whether a student is on a path towards school dropout (e.g., disengagement, truancy, poor academic achievement; Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Kearny, 2008). These include perceptual data based on students' experiences in school and objective behavioral indicators of school performance. Below are the types of early warning indicators that suggest a student is struggling.

**Disengagement**. Student engagement has received a lot of attention and many definitions of engagement exist (Fredricks et al., 2004). Despite overlapping, and at times, duplicate definitions, school engagement can be conceptualized into three categories, (1) affective engagement, (2) behavioral engagement, and (3) cognitive engagement (Jimerson et al., 2003). Affective engagement refers to students' feelings about teachers, peers, and the school. Behavioral engagement refers to participation in school activities, homework completion, GPA, and test scores. Lastly, cognitive engagement consists of the students' perceptions about their teachers, peers, the school, and themselves. This multidimensional definition of school engagement has demonstrated that disengagement predicts high school dropout (Henry et al., 2012).

**Sense of Belonging**. A student's sense of belonging is another factor that can influence dropout. One's sense of belonging in school is how much they feel accepted, respected, included, and supported (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Lack of sense of belonging and connection reflect perceptions that one is not a valued, respected member of the school environment and that they do not fit in (Sanders & Munford, 2016). Those

who feel less connected to their school, peers, and teachers are more likely to be less engaged and drop out of school (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

**Truancy**. Students become truant after missing a specified number of days of school due to an unexcused absence (Smink & Heilbrunn, 2005) and those who are truant are more likely to drop out of school, among other negative consequences (Jordan, 2019; Kearny, 2008). Notably, Black students and students with disabilities are more likely to become truant (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

### *Combined Indicators*

Just as high school dropout is a process, and no single, immediate event results in dropout, a single warning indicator does not lead to dropout (Allensworth, 2013). Rather, individuals who experience multiple warning indicators are less likely to complete high school (Bowers et al., 2012). Moreover, a combination of characteristics associated with increased exposure to risk and warning indicators can be detrimental to a student's success in school. This is concerning given that Black males with a disability status (i.e., three characteristics associated with increased exposure to risk – race, sex, and special education status) are treated unfavorably and receive lackluster supports in school (Girvan et al., 2017; Skiba et al., 2011). However, understanding the multiple factors that can mitigate risk and focusing on those factors that are malleable (e.g., teacher-student interactions, perceptions of belonging, attendance, school climate, etc.) offers promising avenues to reduce dropout rates for all students (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015; Heppen & Therriault, 2008).

**Middle to High School Transition**

More students fail the ninth grade than any other grade and many students drop out of school before 10th grade (Eccles et al., 2003; Herlihy, 2007). Transitioning from middle to high school is difficult and much like school dropout, researchers have argued that this transition is not a one-time event, but rather and ongoing process (Hertzog & Morgan, 1999). Contextually, students must adjust to a larger school and class size (Barber & Olsen, 2004). Moreover, students experience multiple teachers throughout the day. Although students in middle school also have multiple teachers, most of their classes are often located close to each other, while high school classes vary in location resulting in more chaotic transitions (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Furthermore, ninth-grade educators are more likely to be new to the school and the teaching profession and therefore have less experience with classroom management as well supporting students who have already started to fall behind academically (Neild & Farley, 2005). Students entering high school are also met with greater academic demands (Neild & Balfanz, 2006) and research suggests that GPA and standardized test scores drop during the middle to high school transition (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Pantleo, 1992). Importantly, ninth grade marks the beginning of earning credits to successfully move through high school, yet many students do not recognize this and once they do, it might be too late to graduate "on time" with the rest of their peers (Kerr, 2003).

Paired with all of the stressors related to the middle to high school transition, students also experience a myriad of developmental changes as they enter puberty. Adolescence is marked by significant changes in biology, broadening social networks, and a search for one's identity and autonomy (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). During this

period individuals can experience emotional and mental health problems which are not only compounded by changes in brain chemistry, but also the stressors related to acclimating to a new environment.

Given the changes and stressors present during this transition, it is evident that students can benefit from additional support. Furthermore, research suggests that despite demographics, family characteristics, past school success, and pre-high school attitudes, a difficult ninth grade experience is associated with higher dropout rates (Neild et al., 2008), suggesting the importance of targeting the ninth-grade transition. In total, 54% of students who dropout in do so in the 10th and 11th grades (Bustamante, 2020) after a series of events and negative feelings toward the school experience but intervening early in the ninth-grade transition would allow for an opportunity to change the trajectory of high school dropout.

**Pinpointing Targets for Intervention**

Supports that favor early intervention and prevention strategies, as well as increasing a child's number of protective factors is necessary. Shifting the focus to protective factors (i.e., relationships, self-efficacy, etc.) aligns with a resiliency theoretical framework. Although many views on theory and definitions of resilience exist (e.g., Masten, 2014; Rutter, 2006), the general theme across definitions is that an individual has experienced risk and, despite this, has positively adapted to their environment (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten et al., 2009). Some theories of resilience incorporate an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) acknowledging the ability of the environment to facilitate growth within an individual rather than placing the onus on the individual to adapt (Gamezy, 1991; Luthar et al., 2000; Ungar, 2013). Using these

theories in conjunction demonstrates the importance of bolstering protective factors by improving the environment.

However, to date, much of the research related to school dropout has focused on risk factors (Lehr et al., 2003; Prevatt & Kelly, 2003), with less research elucidating effective practices and policies to reduce school dropout (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). Moreover, this research is either correlational or based on descriptive statistics (Prevatt & Kelly, 2003). In a systematic review, Freeman and Simonsen (2015) found that there is a gap in the literature between what we know about risk factors for school dropout, expert recommendations, and experimental research on dropout interventions. In their meta-analysis, Dynarski & Gleason (2002) found that many interventions and strategies to minimize school dropout do not have strong evidence for effectiveness. Since many studies focus on risk factors at the individual and family level, the focus of intervention programs is skewed toward students and families rather than schools (Davis & Dupper, 2004).

### *Caring Adult in School as a Target for Intervention*

Strong relationships between students and teachers have been found to be a critical protective factor at the transition to high school (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Hamre & Pianta, 2006). Other things being equal, high schools whose teachers are supportive of students manage to cut the rates of dropout nearly in half (Croninger & Lee, 2001). The link between strong teacher-student relationships and high school dropout is even more pronounced among historically underserved groups, who particularly struggle to establish a sense of belonging in school (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). Strong relationships with teachers enhance student engagement (Hughes et al., 2008; Wang & Holcombe, 2010)

and positively affect student behavior (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). However, ninth graders, particularly students belonging to minoritized groups (e.g., Black, Hispanic), often report feeling poorly supported by teachers (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Seidman et al, 1996).

Research suggests that having a caring relationship with at least one adult outside of the immediate family can act as a protective factor (Laursen & Birmingham, 2003; Werner & Smith, 1992). Protective factors can buffer students from risk, increasing the likelihood of favorable outcomes (SAMHSA, 2019). Therefore, focusing specifically on ensuring that students have a caring relationship with an adult in school provides an avenue for facilitating students' transition into high school by minimizing early warning indicators and reducing exposure to risk.

At the minimum, a ninth-grade student interacts with 6-7 different adults during the school day, providing many opportunities to increase students' protective factors by fostering caring relationships with adults. Although many studies and meta-analyses have noted the benefits of student-teacher relationships (e.g., Croninger & Lee, 2001; Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Roorda et al., 2011), few examine student perceptions of caring adults in school, including the characteristics of adults that lead them to feel cared about. Many studies focus on relationships from teachers' point of view (e.g., Fowler et al., 2008) or use quantitative methods (e.g., Archambault et al., 2009), yet students' perceptions of caring adults ultimately determine how they feel and behave in school. Moreover, social exchange theory posits that within interpersonal relationships, each individual continuously engages in a cost-benefit analysis to determine if the relationship is rewarding (Richard & Emerson, 1976). It is crucial to understand student perceptions to identify what they need from relationships with caring adults and develop a deeper

understanding of how adults in school can foster supportive relationships with students as they transition into high school.

**Gaps in the Literature**

Undoubtedly, having access to caring adults in school is associated with improvements in students' academic and behavioral outcomes (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Hughes et al., 2008). However, current literature lacks students' perspectives of these relationships and their perceived level of support from these adults. Given that students at risk for dropout are likely more disconnected from schools, research should focus on the perspectives of the students who need the most support. In addition, the majority of research uses a quantitative approach or highlights the teachers' perspective of their relationships with students. There is a need for qualitative research that explores students' perspectives and perceptions of the adults in their school in an attempt to identify actionable themes that could inform relational interventions to increase protective factors that buffer students from risk, school failure, or dropout. Additionally, research has focused primarily on elementary and middle school populations (e.g., Prewett et al., 2019), with fewer research focused specifically on ninth grade students transitioning into high school. In order to better understand what older students want from a caring adult as they are transitioning into high school, it is imperative to gather information to identify specific characteristics of adults that can foster protective relationships that buffer certain students from risk and decrease the likelihood of negative outcomes and promote success-enabling factors (e.g., engagement, classroom behavior).

**Current Study**

The purpose of this project was to conduct a qualitative multi-case study to explore student perceptions of caring adults in schools with a specific focus on students who have characteristics associated with increased exposure to risk and the presence of early warning indicators for school dropout. Within each case, student experiences were explored using a phenomenological approach to detail each individual's experience with caring adults. Across all case studies, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify themes that emerged across participants.

This study occurred in the context of a larger randomized controlled trial that aimed to evaluate the effects of the Establish-Maintain-Restore approach (Cook et al., 2018) as a dropout prevention program for students transitioning into ninth grade. The current study aims to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent do students experience a caring adult present in schools?

2. How do students describe their experiences with caring adults in schools?

3. How do students' experiences with caring adults influence their school experience?

4. Across student perceptions, what themes emerge regarding characteristics of caring adults in schools?

5. Across student perceptions, what themes emerge regarding building trust with a caring adult in schools?

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter provides a discussion of the background literature that helps frame

the rationale for a qualitative multi-case study examining student perceptions and

outcomes associated with a caring adult in school. It begins with a discussion of the

prevalence of school dropout and the associated outcomes. Next, frameworks for school

dropout are presented to provide a deeper explanation of the dropout process students

experience to identify areas in which educators can intervene. This sets the stage for a

discussion of the factors that are associated with school dropout, including characteristics

that are associated with increased risk in the school, warning indicators that signal when a

student is struggling, and protective factors, such as positive relationships, that can deter

the dropout process. This will help build the case for why research examining student

perceptions associated with caring adults in schools is needed to pinpoint more precise

approaches to school dropout prevention. The chapter ends with a discussion of the gaps

in the existing literature and how this study aims to contribute to addressing these

existing gaps.

**Defining Drop Out**

Despite consensus in the United States that educational attainment is one of the

most critical factors of life success (Reinhart & Ritter, 2020), the number of students who

do not complete their high school education is concerning. Historically, states and school

districts took the liberty of defining, and thus calculating school dropout; however, in

2008, the United States Department of Education began requiring all states to abide by

the same definition and process for calculating graduation and dropout rates (NCES,

2017). By the 2010-2011 school year, all public schools were using the same method to calculate graduation rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Throughout the United States, two types of dropout statistics are typically calculated, each one measuring slightly different definitions of dropout (McFarland et al., 2020). The first is an *Event Dropout Rate.* The event dropout rate measures "the percentage of 15- to 24-year-olds in grades 10 through 12 who leave high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or an alternative credential (e.g., GED)." In 2019, the event dropout rate was 4.3% (Irwin et al., 2021). This statistic does not include students who leave school after starting ninth grade without returning to tenth grade, which is problematic as it does not immediately count students who do not return to school for their tenth-grade year or do not receive enough credits to be considered a sophomore. The second type of statistic is the *Status Dropout Rate* which refers to the number of 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school diploma or an alternative credential, compared to the total number of 16- to 24-year-olds in the U.S. population (McFarland et al., 2020). This rate differs from the event dropout rate because it captures all individuals within this age range who have not received a high school credential regardless of when or where they last attended school. Therefore, this rate includes individuals who previously attended school in a different country and then did not continue to attend school in the United States. In 2019, the status dropout rate was 5.1% (Irwin et al., 2021). Given that this statistic looks at 16 to 24-year-olds, it also does not capture those who might have dropped out in their ninth-grade year as most ninth graders are 14 to 15-years-old; however, this will be the statistic that will be referred to in this study given that

it eventually captures the proportion of students who do not complete their high school

education (Rumberger, 2020). Additionally, in the United States, higher educational

attainment is valuable and therefore, regardless of where an individual originally attended

school, if they are living in the United States, they still might face challenges associated

with not completing their high school degree. Thus, the status dropout rate better captures

the individuals who are more likely to experience negative outcomes associated with not

completing their high school education.

Often paired with dropout statistics, are three graduation statistics that schools

typically report. The first is the *Status Completion Rate.* The status completion rate

depicts the percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds who are no longer enrolled in high school

and have received a high school diploma or an alternative credential (McFarland et al.,

2020). In 2019, the U.S. status completion rate was 94.3% (Digest of Education

Statistics, 2020a). Another statistic often considered is the *Adjusted Cohort Graduation*

*Rate (ACGR).* The ACGR refers to the percentage of U.S. public high school students

who graduate within four years with a regular diploma (i.e., following the typical high

school educational trajectory). In 2019, 86% of 18- to 24- year-olds had received their

high school diploma or an alternative credential within four years. However, the ACGR

does not account for students who complete their high school education after a four-year

period, thus, not fully capturing those who do graduate from high school (Rumberger,

2020).  Lastly, there is the *Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR).* This statistic

estimates the percent of public high school students who graduate with a regular diploma

"on time" (i.e., after four years of beginning ninth grade). Although the AFGR is similar

to the ACGR, it does not adjust for students as they enter or leave a high school for any

reason, thus, ACGR is a more accurate measure of on-time graduation (Seastrom et al., 2006).

**Prevalence of School Dropout**

As stated above, in the 2018-2019 school year, the event dropout rate was 4.3% (Digest of Education Statistics, 2021a) and the status dropout rate was 5.1% (Irwin et al., 2021). Although these rates appear to be low, and generally, dropout rates have been decreasing over time (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2010), a 5.1% status dropout rate equates to about two million individuals between the ages of 16 and 24 who did not complete their high school education in 2019 (NCES, 2021). Moreover, in 2019 the ACGR was 86%, suggesting that of those students who began their ninth-grade year with the hopes to graduate in the 2018-2019 school year, 14% did not receive their high school diploma (Irwin et al., 2021). While this does not mean those students will never graduate or earn an equivalent high school credential, falling behind in school can have negative implications for graduating with a high school diploma (Neild & Beafanz, 2006).

*Race, Ethnicity, and High School Dropout Rates*

While the total school dropout statistics do not appear to be that bad, the disproportionate rate at which it affects some students more than others highlights the disparities that exist within the educational system and mirrors broader systemic issues. For example, although the total status dropout rate is 5.1%, for those students who identify as Black, Hispanic, American Indian, or Alaskan Native, dropout rates are higher (NCES, 2021). Specifically, for Black students, it is 5.6%, for Hispanic students it is 7.7%, and for American Indian or Alaskan Native students is 9.6% (Irwin et al., 2021). Students with Asian, white, and Pacific Islander racial and ethnic identities, and those

who are multi-racial, on average, have a lower status dropout rate than the total dropout rate. Those who identified as Asian had the lowest dropout rate at 1.8%. Moreover, when looking at the ACGR, Black (80%), Hispanic (82%), and Alaskan Native and American Indian (74%) students had graduation rates lower than the average ACGR (86%) for the 2018-2019 school year (Digest of Education Statistics, 2021b).

*Gender and Dropout Rates*

Status dropout rates for males were higher than the dropout rate for females for all but one racial and ethnic category (McFarland et al., 2020), with the total dropout rate for all males being 6.0% (compared to a 5.1% average) and 4.2% for females. However, when looking at the intersectionality of race and sex, Black males had an 8.8% dropout rate while Black females had a 4.3% dropout rate. This striking difference is seen in other minoritized groups as well. Hispanic males had a 9.3% dropout rate while Hispanic females had a 6.0% dropout rate. American Indian and Alaskan Native males had a 10.2% dropout rate while American Indian and Alaskan Native females had an 9.0% dropout rate. Across all groups, males had a higher dropout rate than females except for Pacific Islander students, where females had a dropout rate of 8.2% and males had a rate of 7.8%. For students who identified as Asian and white, as well as those who identified as multi-racial, their status dropout rate was lower than the average dropout rate for both males and females.

*Special Education Status and Dropout Rates*

The status dropout rate for students with a disability status was 10.7% in comparison to their peers without a disability who had a status dropout rate of 4.7%. Moreover, ACGR in 2019 for students with disabilities was 68% compared to an average

of 86 percent for all students. In the 2018-2019 school year, almost 32% of high school students with a disability discontinued their high school education (Digest of Education Statistics, 2020b). The intersectionality of race and disability status further highlights the existing disparities. In 2019, 76% of white students receiving special education services graduated with a traditional diploma while only 65% of Black students enrolled in special education received a traditional diploma (Digest of Education Statistics, 2020c).

### *Low Socioeconomic Status*

Students whose families belong to a lower SES are less likely to complete their high school education in comparison to their peers whose families belong to a higher SES (Chapman et al., 2011; Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Moreover, schools with higher populations of families with a low SES are more likely to have a higher proportion of students who do not complete their high school education, even after controlling for an individual students' SES (Rumberger, 2020). It is evident SES plays a role in a student's graduation trajectory at an individual and school level. Thus, school dropout can be seen as a microcosm of broader societal and systemic inequities for minoritized groups and youth living in conditions of poverty.

### Outcomes of School Dropout

Studies have demonstrated the numerous adverse effects associated with not completing high school (e.g., Liem et al., 2001; Maynard et al., 2015; Vaughn et al., 2014, etc.). These effects are present across multiple domains such as physical and mental health, involvement with the justice system, individual finances, and career attainment. Furthermore, broader societal implications exist, impacting more than the individual who discontinued their high school education (Belfield & Levin, 2007).

*Health Outcomes*

Individuals who do not complete their high school education are more likely to have hepatitis, stroke, diabetes (Vaughn et al., 2014) and overall, they are also more likely to self-report poorer health (Lansford et al., 2016). Additionally, they engage in more risky health behaviors such as smoking and are more likely to be overweight (Lantz et al., 1998). In one study, results showed that dropping out of high school was associated with an increase in daily cigarette use and nicotine dependence (Maynard et al., 2015). Furthermore, those who do not complete their high school education are more likely to have a teenage pregnancy and engage in risky sexual behaviors (Marcotte, 2013). Molla and colleagues (2004) also found that lower educational attainment is predictive of an earlier death.

Aside from physical health issues, there are also associations between an individual's mental health and the completion of high school. In a longitudinal study, Liem and colleagues (2001) found that students who dropped out of high school reported higher levels of depression than their peers who graduated, both at the time of expected graduation and two years later. Results from this study suggested that two years after their expected graduation date, those who had dropped out of high school experienced more anxiety (Liem et al., 2001). In another study, results also showed that students who dropped out of high school had higher levels of depression and lower levels of life satisfaction at the time of their expected graduation (Liem et al., 2010). Moreover, individuals who dropout of high school are twice as likely to report suicide attempts than those who graduated high school (Maynard et al., 2015) and overall, report poorer well-being (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011).

*Involvement with the Criminal Justice System*

Another set of outcomes that have been associated with high school dropout are criminal behaviors. One study found that 65% of individuals who dropped out of high school had been arrested compared to 20% of individuals who graduated and those who did not complete their high school education were more likely to have gone to prison (Lansford et al., 2016). On average, 1 in 33 male students that earned a high school degree ended up in a correctional facility, compared to 1 in 10 males who did not complete their high school education ended up in a correctional facility (Sum et al., 2009). When looking at specific criminal arrest charges, individuals who dropped out of high school were more likely to have criminal records for larceny, assault, and drug possession (Lochner & Moretti, 2004; Maynard et al., 2015).

*Financial and Career Attainment Outcomes*

Discontinuing one's high school education can have adverse effects on one's finances. Those who do not graduate from high school are more likely to have a lower income than their peers who graduated (Maynard et al., 2015; Rouse 2007). In 2004, individuals who dropped out of high school earned 37 cents for each dollar earned by someone with a higher level of education (Rouse, 2007). Moreover, when looking at other financial-related benefits, for those who dropped out of high school, only 28.6% had a job where their employer provided a pension plan compared to 49.7% for those who graduated high school, which has long-term financial implications (Rouse, 2007). Over the last couple decades, studies have demonstrated the effect of dropping out of high school on a person's career goals. In 2004, 53% of those who dropped out of high

school were employed compared to 69% who had received a high school diploma (Rouse, 2007).

### Societal Outcomes

Adverse effects of dropping out of high school do not stop at the individual level. Rather, communities can also experience some deleterious outcomes. Individuals who have dropped out of high school are more likely to need government assistance (Rouse, 2007), less likely to stimulate the economy due to paying less taxes (Rumberger, 2020), and less likely to vote (Belfield & Levin, 2007). Additionally, incarceration for those who have had more involvement with the criminal justice system can be costly (Sum et al., 2009). Estimated tax revenue losses for individuals between 25 and 34 years of age who did not complete high school was approximately $944 billion in the early 2000s (Thorstensen, 2004).

### Disproportionate Outcomes

Undoubtedly, there are adverse outcomes that are associated with not completing one's high school education. These adverse outcomes disproportionately affect certain groups of people more than others. For example, students who did not graduate from high school but whose family was of a high SES, experienced fewer negative effects than their peers who did not graduate and were of a low socioeconomic status (Lansford et al., 2016). Individuals from higher income families were also more likely to be employed despite dropping out of high school (Sum et al., 2009).

Disproportionate adverse outcomes also affect Black students who did not complete high school at a higher rate than their peers. Specifically, Black students who do not complete high school have a higher unemployment rate than their other peers who

have dropped out of school (Sum et al., 2009). Furthermore, about 23% of Black males

who drop out of high school populate juvenile homes and jails compared to 6% of

Hispanic males, 6.6% of white males, and 7.2% of Asian males (Sum et al., 2009).

**Frameworks and Theoretical Underpinnings that Explain High School Dropout**

There are numerous reasons that students are unable to finish their high school

education. In fact, there are so many factors that occur and unfold over periods of time, it

is difficult to isolate causal links to just one factor (Rumberger, 2020). Historically, a lens

of blame has been put on the individual or their familial circumstances and, therefore, the

focus of interventions was to identify an individual's risk and protective factors for

school dropout (e.g., grades, attendance, test scores, etc.; Lehr et al., 2003). However, it

has become evident that factors outside of the individual, including social and

environmental factors, have a strong influence on one's ability to complete their high

school education (Kim et al., 2018; Rumberger, 2011) and thus, should be considered

when identifying appropriate preventative and intervention strategies and practices (e.g.,

Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Suh & Suh, 2007).

*Push, Pull, and Fallout Factors Framework*

One way of categorizing these risk and protective factors associated with dropout

was identified in the Push, Pull, and Fall out factor framework (Jordan et al., 1994; Watt

& Roessingh, 1994). Originally, Jordan and colleagues (1994) noted two main reasons

that students drop out of high school: they were pushed out or they were pulled out.

Students get pushed out of school when unfavorable situations occur which can lead to

consequences and ultimately end in dropout (e.g., poor attendance, testing, discipline

policies, behavior consequences, etc.). Contrastingly, students can be pulled out by

personal factors that deter their ability to complete school (e.g., pregnancy, financial stressors, out-of-school employment, illness, family needs, etc.; Jordan et al., 1994). Based on these factors, the agency can either fall with the school (i.e., push out) or with the student (i.e., pull out); however, these options do not capture every situation. Watt and Roessingh (1994) therefore determined that there were also fall out factors that can contribute to dropout. Fall out factors occur when a student has multiple negative experiences that lead to feeling letdown by their school or educational career. When this occurs, a lack of academic progress or success coupled with a lack of support can lead to a sense of apathy (Watt & Roessingh, 1994). In these instances, there is no assumed agency and the connection between the student and the school deteriorates resulting in the discontinuation of the student's education (Doll et al., 2013).

Historically, students reported that pull factors were the reason for dropping out, however, more recently, school dropout has been attributed to push factors (Doll et al., 2013; Eckland, 1972). Specifically, students noted that an inability to get along with teachers or peers were some of the main reasons for dropping out (Peng, 1983). While general categorization is helpful and demonstrates who has the agency to intervene, better identification of specific factors that contribute to dropout will allow for a more tailored approach to interventions. Recognizing and identifying the influence of multiple factors that contribute to school dropout will allow for more targeted support in the future (Suh & Suh, 2007).

### *Social-Ecological Systems Theory*

It is clear that school dropout is not only an individual's problem. Rather, many people and environments in which the individual exists can contribute to one's success

throughout their educational career (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Thus, it is imperative to view school through an Social-Ecological Systems lens to take into consideration all factors that influence an individual's performance in, and connection to, school.

In the 1970s, Bronfenbrenner (1977) posited that the scientific study of human development must include the environments in which an individual exists as well as the relationships within these environments and between them. He identified a nested model of one's social and ecological environment and how it influences their life. Starting at the individual level, the microsystem includes the person and their immediate environmental setting (e.g., a child at school). Within the microsystem, an individual reacts to the environment and fulfils a particular role (e.g., student, peer, friend, etc.) and engages in activities throughout that time. The mesosystem consists of the relationships between the immediate environments in which the individual frequently exists (e.g., interactions between school and home). The exosystem includes the social structures and environments that do not immediately affect the individual but affect those that are present in their microsystems thus affecting them indirectly (e.g., school climate, caregiver job, educational system, and policies, etc.). Lastly, the macrosystem consists of the patterns of culture and subcultures that influence all of the environments in which an individual exists (e.g., political systems, systemic racism, etc.). Eventually, Bronfenbrenner noted the significance of time within and across these ecological systems and incorporated the chronosystem into his model (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) to highlight the environmental changes, historical events, and life transitions that occur throughout an individual's life and influence their development.

Not only did Bronfenbrenner provide a theory to better conceptualize the interconnectedness of an individual with the environments they inhabit, but he also expanded on this theory to stress the four components (process, person, context, and time) of the model that would support improved research incorporating ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Processes refer to the interactions that occur between the individual and those in their microsystem while Person consists of specific characteristics of the individual that might influence the way they interact with their environment and the people in their environment (i.e., dispositions, resources, and demand characteristics; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Context is the environment in which the individual exists, and time captures how all of these pieces move, change, and exist throughout an individual's life. While the original theory stressed the different environments in which a person exists, in this updated theory, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) note that proximal processes are what foster and guide development. Moreover, these relationships are bidirectional, meaning it is not solely the child who is developing that contributes to their development through life, but those with whom the child interacts also supports their development. When considering a student's educational trajectory, it is clear that the importance of these proximal processes that occur - or do not occur - can influence one's success in school. While teachers might not have control over larger macrosystemic factors or a student's homelife, one thing they can control is how they interact with their students in a way that fosters supportive relationships.

### Resilience Theory

There is no doubt that the environments in which one exists and the interactions within and between those contexts can have negative or adverse consequences for the

individual. For example, it is undeniable that systemic racism (i.e., a macrosystem level factor) is present in the educational system and therefore, present in the schools that students attend and the relationships they have with individuals in the school (i.e., microsystem level factors). Thus, the implicit and explicit demonstrations of this racism (e.g., disproportionate suspensions, stricter punishments for Black children than white children for the same behavior, etc.; Skiba et al., 2002) can adversely impact a student's school experience.

Yet, children are resilient (Masten & Garmezy, 1985; Werner et al., 1971). Many definitions of resilience exist in the literature (e.g., Masten, 2014; Rutter, 2006, Garmezy, 1991), however the broad theme of all of these definitions is that an individual has experienced risk, and despite the negative effects of that risk, they have positively adapted to their environment (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten et al., 2009). Similar to school dropout, developing resiliency is also a process (Masten, 2014) and like the factors that impede one's completion of their high school education, resiliency is not something that a child needs to work towards on their own, the onus for change does not rest with them alone (Garmezy, 1991; Luthar et al., 2000; Ungar, 2013). Many definitions of resilience acknowledge that contextual factors can also influence one's development of resiliency and argue that greater focus should be placed on the environment when investigating resilience (Garmezy, 1991; Luthar et al., 2000; Ungar, 2013). Notably, theorists identified effective schools and strong social relationships as important protective factors (Masten 2001, Ungar 2011). Therefore, it is necessary to accept how the environments in which a child exists can cause them harm, but it is imperative to recognize how

contextual factors can facilitate growth within an individual to support adaptation and continued development.

### *Social Exchange Theory*

One contextual factor that has been frequently studied is relationships, what Bronfenbrenner would consider to be the proximal processes that children have with adults outside of the home (e.g., Laursen & Birmingham, 2003, Werner & Smith, 1992). However, according to the Social Exchange Theory, these interpersonal relationships must be mutually beneficial, and perceived as rewarding by both individuals because they are bidirectional (Richard & Emerson, 1976). These relationships require bidirectional, reciprocal interactions where both individuals benefit (Sameroff, 1995). Individuals are constantly assessing if their relationships are rewarding, and if they are not perceived as rewarding, it is likely that those relationships will end, regardless of the type of relationship (e.g., platonic, romantic, business; Richard & Emerson, 1976). This is particularly important given that research has shown that students relationships with their teachers worsen as they move from elementary school to middle and high school (Furrer & Skinner, 2003).

To better understand high school dropout and conceptualize ways to attend to the problem, it is important to recognize that, (1) the problem does not solely exist within the individual or their family, but that the broader context and environment can influence one's experiences in school, (2) an individual's resiliency can be bolstered by an environment that supports positive adaptation despite previous adverse experiences, (3) relationships with adults outside of the home is one example of characteristics of a

supportive environment, and (4) these relationships must be meaningful and perceived as such by the student and teacher to be rewarding for the relationship to continue.

Given the numerous influences on a student's education and graduation trajectory that cannot conclusively be explained by one theory, this study will combine the Social Ecological Systems Theory, Resilience Theory, and Social Exchange Theory in an effort better understand factors that educators have control over to create a relationally supportive classroom and school environment. By using a combination of frameworks and theories related to school dropout, this study recognizes the intricacies that are present within one's educational career. Additionally, these theories will help identify factors of a supportive environment that foster resilience by creating positive relationships in schools that can benefit students. Ideally, these factors within the school microsystem will support and promote student resilience to achieve school completion as a determinant of physical and mental health, overall wellbeing, and success.

**Factors Associated with School Dropout**

There is not one specific event or factor that results in a student dropping out of school, rather, a series of antecedent events contribute to the process of school dropout (e.g., Doll et al., 2013; Gubbels et al., 2019; Ingul et al., 2012). However, the following factors have been frequently identified in the literature. In this study, the terms *characteristics associated with exposure to increased risk* and *early warning indicators* will be used. Characteristics associated with increased exposure to risk are similar to risk factors as both increase the probability of an individual experiencing a negative outcome (SAMHSA, 2019). However, many factors related to school dropout that have been historically referred to as risk factors include personal characteristics that cannot be

changed (e.g., race, ethnicity, etc.). Thus, it would be a disservice to the students that we hope to serve to refer to these unmalleable personal characteristics as risk factors when they do not put students at risk for dropout (Zuberi, 2011). Instead, these characteristics are linked to disproportionate exposure to harmful experiences present within their environment such as structural racism, discrimination, and prejudice.

### *Characteristics Associated with Increased Risk*

**Racism.** Undeniably, Black students are more likely to receive exclusionary discipline practices such as detention, suspension, and expulsion than their white peers (Hannon et al., 2013; Losen & Skiba, 2010). School dropout data depicts a similar pattern – students belonging to minoritized groups are more likely to drop out of high school (US Department of Education, 2020). Moreover, Black students report less positive relationships with teachers and less connectedness than their white peers (Fan et al., 2011; Voight et al., 2015).

From a macrosystem perspective, the culture of the United States centers on the white cultural perspective which naturally creates systemic inequities for those who do not identify as white. This broader societal culture influences the climate of the school as well as the policies and expectations that are upheld (e.g., behavioral expectations that center values and norms of the dominant culture). At a microsystem level, in schools, this consists of majority white teachers and administrators which might perpetuate these behavioral expectations. For example, Black students are punished more harshly for subjective offenses such as 'defiance,' 'disrespect,' and dress code violations. Research has demonstrated that one of the most significant predictors that explains discipline disparities is race (e.g., Huang & Cornell, 2017; Skiba et al., 2011).

**Sex.** Although historically males had higher graduation rates than females

(Chapman et al., 2011), currently, males are more likely to experience an increased

exposure to risk in the school environment. Specifically, males are more likely to be held

back (Warren et al., 2014) and school dropout affects them disproportionately when

compared to their female peers (Child Trends, 2018). This pattern occurs across

numerous racial and ethnic groups (i.e., Black, Hispanic, Asian, Multiracial, white; US

Department of Education, 2020). Males are also more likely to be suspended and

expelled than their female peers (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2002; Welsh &

Little, 2018) and they are less likely to have positive relationships with their teachers

compared to their female peers (e.g., Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

**Socioeconomic Status.** Studies have demonstrated that students belonging to a

lower socioeconomic status (SES) are more likely to discontinue their high school

education than their peers (Chapman et al., 2011; Duncan et al., 1998). Moreover, this

characteristic associated with increased risk for school dropout influences all students in

the school. Specifically, schools who have more families that belong to a low SES are

more likely to have a higher proportion of their students discontinue their high school

education (Rumberger, 2020). Additionally, these students are less likely to report

experiencing positive relationships with their teachers (Rudasill et al., 2010). In the 2018-

2019 school year, 20 percent of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds

(identified per state) did not complete their high school education (Digest of Education

Statistics, 2021c).

**Special Education Status.** Special education status includes those who struggle

with a learning disability, a behavioral concern that significantly impedes their learning,

or a physical disability (IDEA, 1997). Under the federal law, any child who is identified as struggling with one or more of these concerns has the right to receive additional supports from their learning environment, and thus, qualifies for special education services. Students who receive special education services are more likely to be suspended than their peers despite safeguards in the law that are intended to protect them from loss of instructional time (Losen et al., 2015). Moreover, students with a disability are more than twice as likely to drop out of high school (US Department of Education, 2020), and have less positive relationships with their teachers (Murray & Greenberg, 2001).

**Intersectionality.** As previously mentioned, no single, immediate event or factor causes dropout, rather it is a process (Allensworth, 2013). This allows for the combination of factors that increase one's exposure to risk and early warning indicators to add to a student's ongoing, stressful (and potentially negative) school experience. Furthermore, individuals who have more characteristics that expose them to increased risk in their environment and have multiple warning indicators and are more likely to drop out of high school (Bowers et al., 2012). For example, 8.0% of Black male students (i.e., two characteristics associated with increased exposure to risk) drop out of school compared to 4.9% of white male students (i.e., one characteristic associated with increased risk; McFarland et al., 2020). Additionally, Black males with a disability status (i.e., three characteristics associated with increased exposure to risk) are less likely to receive the supports they need in school (Girvan et al., 2017; Skiba et al., 2011).

*Early Warning Indicators*

Different from characteristics that are associated with increased exposure to risk, early warning indicators are identified by perceptual and performance data. These are

based on student experience and objective school indicators of performance (e.g., attendance, test scores, accumulated credits, engagement; Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Kurlaender et al., 2008). Early warning indicators are malleable factors that are identified through gathering data on student perceptions of their peers, teachers, and broadly, their school as well as performance data such as test scores. These factors can predict if a student is on track toward eventual graduation (Belfanz et al., 2007; Heppen & Therriault, 2008) and identify areas where a student is struggling to target a place for intervention.

**Disengagement.** Many definitions of school engagement exist (Fredricks et al., 2004). Generally, they can be conceptualized into three categories, (1) affective engagement, (2) behavioral engagement, and (3) cognitive engagement (Jimerson et al., 2003). Affective engagement encompasses how a student feels about their school, teachers, and peers. Behavioral engagement includes how frequently a student participates in school activities as well as engaging in academic content such as completing their homework (Finn 1993; Birch & Ladd, 1997). It also includes attendance and behavioral problems (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Last, cognitive engagement consists of a student's perception about themself, their teachers, peers, and the school. Overall, studies have demonstrated that disengagement from school is associated with many untoward consequences, including school dropout (Henry et al., 2012). Disengagement has also been associated with males and students with special education status who had a history of underachievement (Archambault et al., 2009). Notably, similar to the process of dropout, student engagement can change over time (Fredricks et al., 2004).

**Sense of belonging.** Sense of belonging refers to how much a student feels accepted, respected, included, and supported in school (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Although the terms sense of belonging and engagement are occasionally used interchangeably, it is important to note that despite some similarities - particularly related to affective and behavioral engagement - school engagement also consists of the students' ability to put forth effort and persist with their schoolwork (Skinner et al., 1990) and in this instance, a sense of belonging might relate to that but is not defined by it (Allen & Kern, 2017).

Students who feel less connected to their peers, teachers, and the school are more likely to drop out (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Moreover, a higher sense of school belonging is associated with lower absenteeism and truancy (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Hallinan, 2008) and increased school completion rates (Allen & Kern, 2017). Notably, a study conducted by Uslu and Gizir (2017) found that student-teacher relationships were the most important predictive factor in school-belongingness.

**Truancy.** Although states have the responsibility of determining how many days a student can miss without an excuse before they become truant, truancy occurs once a student reaches this number of days due unexcused absences (Sanders & Munford, 2016). Across the United States, about 11% of students are truant - a statistic that has been stable for over a decade despite large efforts to reduce truancy rates (U.S. Census Bureau 2011; Vaughn et al. 2012). Students who are considered to be truant are more likely to drop out of school (Kearny, 2008). Although truancy can be objectively measured (e.g., unexcused absences), it is important to note the subjective factors that are associated with higher rates of truancy including negative school climate and culture, poor relationships with

teachers, poor teaching, disciplinary practices within the school, and dissatisfaction with school (Corville-Smith et al. 1998; Malcolm et al. 2003).

***Additional Factors Associated with School Dropout***

As noted previously, high school dropout is not solely due to characteristics within an individual. Aligned with the Social Ecological Systems Theory, many factors within an individual's mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem can influence their school experience. Moreover, these factors that influence the discontinuation of one's high school education can occur over time (Doll et al., 2013; Gubbels et al., 2019).

Aside from individual warning indicators for dropout, other factors present in the school can impede a student's completion of their high school education such as peer relationships and the school context (Vitaro et al., 2001). Peer groups composed of individuals who engage in delinquent, anti-social behavior, or truant behavior are at higher risk for dropout (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Vérronaeu et al., 2008). Higher dropout rates are further associated with schools where students and teachers perceive more teasing and bullying (Cornell et al., 2013).

The school environment itself can be a risk factor for dropout. Specifically, larger class sizes, high retention rates, and poor quality of teachers are risk factors for dropout (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Schools that are perceived to have unfair discipline climates are associated with higher rates of dropout regardless of individual characteristics (Rumberger, 2011; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Notably, negative attributes of schools can increase the likelihood of non-completion for students despite individual characteristics that are not associated with risk (Rumberger, 2011; Rumberger, 2020).

Therefore, it is imperative that work to increase high school completion occurs within the school setting.

***Protective Factors***

Despite the many factors that can interfere with a student's graduation trajectory, it is necessary to identify the factors that bolster the completion of their high school education and protect students from the detrimental effects related to exposure to risk in the environment. Protective factors are characteristics, behaviors, or factors that decrease the likelihood of negative outcomes (e.g., school dropout; SAMHSA, 2019). Not only are these factors important in buffering a student's experience with characteristics associated with increased exposure to risk and early warning indicators, but protective factors can allow for the identification of specific targets that can mitigate the risk of school dropout.

Similar to factors that impede a student's ability to earn their high school degree, protective factors can occur within multiple systems at all levels of Bronfenbrenner's social ecological theory (i.e., individual, mesosystem, exosystem; Gubbels et al., 2019; Ingul et al., 2012). On an individual level, participating in more school activities and extracurriculars (Crispin, 2017), connecting with positive, prosocial peers (Lansford et al., 2016), and engagement (Christenson et al., 2008) are related to more positive school outcomes (e.g., graduation). From a broader, systemic lens, schools that utilize policies and procedures that support their students (e.g., MTSS) and do not overwhelm teachers can lead to an overall healthier and more productive school environment (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). These policies include intentional efforts to diversify the teaching workforce, increased implementation of discipline policies that are more restorative in nature (e.g., School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports; discontinuing

zero tolerance policies, etc.), incorporating Social Emotional Learning curriculum, and anti-bullying policies (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007).

One specific protective factor that has received extensive attention is positive relationships with adults outside of the immediate family and outside of the home (e.g., Laursen & Birmingham, 2003; Sieving et al, 2017; Werner & Smith, 1992). These relationships have been associated with better social skills, improved school competence, reduced involvement in bullying and reduced absences (Sieving et al., 2017). While there are community programs that can connect children and adolescents with adult mentors (e.g., Big Brothers Big Sisters), one natural environment that allows for the student to connect with an adult outside of the home is schools, providing a space to improve a student's environment to support their resiliency.

### Targeting Student Drop Out

Given the large focus the United States puts on educational attainment and the untoward effects associated with not completing high school, it is important to identify interventions and strategies that reduce the number of students who do not complete their high school education.

Over the years, researchers aimed to increase high school completion and improve progression through school by identifying risk factors and addressing the early warning signs of dropout (e.g., poor grades, low attendance, and decreased student engagement; Henry et al., 2012; Kearny, 2008). In a systematic review of the literature investigating interventions that aim to prevent school dropout, few studies focused on improving the contextual factors that influence a student's educational trajectory despite general acknowledgement that the school environment also contributes to a student's educational

experience (Lehr et al., 2003). In a more recent review of the literature, Freeman &

Simonsen (2015) found that interventions that target school dropout appear to deviate

from expert recommendations. Specifically, experts recommend utilizing a tiered system

to target the process of dropout (MacIver & MacIver, 2010) but many current

interventions focus on intensive, individualized interventions that are implemented

toward the end of the process.

Despite the concerns raised in these systematic reviews, there are a few

interventions targeting students at risk for not completing their education that are well-

known and have demonstrated positive results. One intervention that has received a lot of

attention is Check and Connect (What Works Clearinghouse, 2015). Check and Connect

can be used with K-12 students who are at risk for dropping out and exhibit warning

signs of disengagement with school (University of Minnesota Institute on Community

Integration, 2022). In an effort to foster engagement and improve students' progress

through school, Check and Connect depends on intervention staff, referred to as

monitors. Monitors build supportive relationships with students and serve as advocates

that foster positive connections between the student, family, and school with an ultimate

goal of educational success. While many studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of

Check and Connect regarding increased positive relationships and school completion

(e.g., Maynard et al., 2014; Sinclair et al., 1998; Sinclair et al., 2005) others did not (e.g.,

Heppen et al., 2018). When specifically investigating the implementation of Check and

Connect with general education high school students, results have been mixed (Maynard

et al., 2014; Heppen et al., 2018). While the benefits of Check and Connect are notable, it

is important to acknowledge the high cost of the intervention. Aside from training costs,

to fully implement all components of Check and Connect requires monitors which are often additional personnel at the school requiring wages equivalent to a paraprofessional. Realistically, many schools do not have the financial, time, or personnel resources to dedicate to implementing the Check and Connect intervention as intended.

Another well-known initiative is Communities in Schools (CIS). The aim of the CIS model is to form connections between students, families, and community resources while providing tiered supports (Somers & Haider, 2017). To accomplish this, CIS recognizes five basic principles including individual relationships with a caring adult, a safe environment to learn, development of useful skills after high school, an opportunity to support peers and the community, and having a healthy start (Communities in Schools, 2022). Moreover, this model utilizes primary and secondary levels of intervention based on student- and site-based needs assessments that are disseminated and reviewed by the CIS team (Hammond et al., 2007). Notably, some studies have demonstrated the positive effects of CIS (e.g., reduced dropout rate and improved progression through school in comparison to non-CIS schools; Somers & Haider, 2017). However, CIS is a model that highlights the importance of relationships, safe educational environment, and data-based decision making, but allows schools to implement any primary or secondary-level interventions of their choice (Hammond et al., 2007). Thus, CIS does recognize numerous factors that influence one's educational trajectory but provides little guidance in the specific interventions and relational strategies to use within the model.

Aside from models and interventions that target school dropout, researchers and experts have developed various practice guidelines and recommendations aimed at reducing dropout (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Rumberger et al., 2017). Although

different versions of practice guidelines exist, generally, they include recommendations that cover the following areas 1) early identification and intervention of students exhibiting warning indicators of dropout, 2) tiered services to support students, 3) improved relationships between students and adults in the school, 4) safe and personalized learning environment, and 5) engaging and relevant instruction. Each of these recommendations on their own require high levels of diligence and buy-in, however, one strategy that has been helpful in improving student achievement, belongingness, and engagement is focusing on student-teacher relationships (e.g., Croninger & Lee, 2001; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

*Student-Teacher Relationships*

There are a multitude of factors that can influence a student's progression through school. While this includes some individual factors, there are also several contextual factors that have an effect on a student's educational career. Although it is easy to point the finger at a child or their family, schools also have a responsibility to provide a safe and supportive learning environment to their students through the use of evidence-based interventions when necessary. One avenue to do this is by focusing on the relationships between teachers and their students.

Strong student-teacher relationships are critical for students (Croninger & Lee, 2001). Notably, this protective effect is even more present with students from historically marginalized groups (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008).  One study by Lessard and colleagues (2004) found students' negative perception of their relationships with their teachers was a factor that increased the likelihood of dropout. This increased probability was more prevalent for males, further depicting the disparities related to dropout. Furthermore, in a

study looking at the effect of relationships of students with their Check and Connect monitor, results showed that when the relationship was viewed more positively by students, school engagement was higher (Anderson et al., 2004). Additionally, middle- and high school students' positive views of their relationships with their teachers was associated with less disciplinary issues and higher achievement (Crosnoe et al., 2004).

Moreover, the beneficial effects associated with positive student-teacher relationships can last well beyond a student's high school education. In a longitudinal study conducted by Werner and Smith (2001), during a follow up interview when participants were 40 years old, researchers found that individuals were still influenced by the caring teachers they had in the past. Thus, given that more positive relationships can improve an individual's educational experience, benefit students with characteristics associated with increased risk in the environment and those who display warning indicators, and can have long-lasting supportive effects, it is imperative to focus on the student-teacher relationships especially as students transition into high school.

**A Need for Earlier, Universal Intervention in High School**

As noted previously, school dropout is a process that occurs over time (Doll et al., 2013). Therefore, the earlier that interventions can mitigate or deter this process, the better. One time period that could be influential and has received a lot of attention is the transition to ninth grade (e.g., Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Eccles et al., 2003). Often this transition includes a number of environmental changes (e.g., new school, more homework, new teachers, receiving credits for courses etc.; Neild & Belfanz, 2006) as well as personal changes (e.g., puberty, evolving friendships, etc.; Barber & Olsen, 2004). Given the many changes and challenges related to the ninth-grade transition, it is

not surprising the number of students that struggle to complete their high school education.

Undeniably, students struggle to navigate the transition to high school. Researchers have seen a bottleneck starting to appear in ninth grade where many students who enter into ninth grade do not accrue an adequate number of credits to have 10th grade standing, thus creating the "ninth grade bulge" (Wheelock & Miao, 2005). In Philadelphia, one-third of students who discontinued their education were considered ninth-graders due to the number of credits they received (Neild, 2009). While there are numerous implications of this bottleneck effect, the main one is that a student's educational trajectory can be thrown off early in their high school career. This is problematic because students who are not on a timely path to graduation are less likely to graduate (Kerr, 2003). For example, in Chicago, of students who got off track in their ninth-grade year, only 22% had an on-time (within four years) graduation rate. Comparatively, of students who remained on-track in their ninth-grade year, 81% graduated on time (Neild, 2009).

**Gaps in the Current Literature**

Many interventions targeting student-teacher relationships exist, yet students belonging to minority groups (e.g., Black, Hispanic) often report feeling poorly supported by their teachers (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Historically, there has been a heavy focus on student and familial-level changes that need to occur to result in timely completion of their degree (e.g., Davis & Dupper, 2004). More recently, there has been a shift acknowledging the influence of the systems in a student's educational trajectory (e.g., Gubbels et al., 2019; Ingul et al., 2012). These studies have identified

interventions to prevent school dropout with students who have multiple early warning indicators (Lehr et al., 2003), focused on the benefits of the student-teacher relationship (Croninger & Lee, 2001), and attempted to improve the overall climate of schools to increase engagement and a sense of belongingness (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). While these are all important in contributing to a student's completion of their school degree, more needs to be done to bolster a student's successful completion of high school and to reduce the disparities in graduation rates in particular.

To date, few studies focus on the student perceptions of their teachers using qualitative measures (Johnson, 2008; Prewett et al., 2019; Raufelder et al, 2016). Of the studies that gather qualitative information regarding reasons students did not complete their high school education, most happen after the dropout process is complete (e.g., Azzam, 2007). More qualitative research is needed to better understand the various perspectives of students in schools as it relates to their experiences and relationships with their teachers. Numerous expert guidelines, practice guidelines, and recommendations for reducing the school dropout rate exist and acknowledge the importance of the student-teacher relationship (Dynarski & Gleason, 2012; MacIver & MacIver, 2010; Rumberger er al., 2017). Using a qualitative approach to identify how teachers can establish these types of caring relationships is necessary to provide more nuanced information and strategies to build relationships with ninth graders.

Finally, much of the student-teacher relationship literature focuses on younger students instead of adolescents (e.g., Prewett et al., 2019). While these early student-teacher relationships are important to a student's educational success, it is imperative that these positive relationships continue throughout their educational careers.

Understandably, as adolescence begins, these student-teacher relationships will differ

from those between elementary students and their teachers given all of the changes that

occur as a student enters a new learning environment full of additional stressors and more

a more rigorous workload. Thus, it is important better understand and investigate how to

improve student-teacher relationships early in one's transition to high school (i.e., ninth

grade) and investigate the student's perspective in what they want in a supportive

relationship with their teachers so that we continue to reduce the number of students who

do not complete high school due to school-related factors.

**Current Study**

The purpose of this project was to conduct a qualitative multi-case study to

explore ninth grade student perceptions of caring adults in schools with a specific focus

on students who have characteristics associated with increased exposure to risk and the

presence of early warning indicators for school dropout. Within each case, student

experiences were explored using a phenomenological approach to detail each individual's

experience with caring adults. Across all case studies, a thematic analysis was conducted

to identify themes that emerged across participants.

This study occurred in the context of a larger randomized controlled trial that

aimed to evaluate the effects of the equity-centered version of the Establish-Maintain-

Restore (EMR) approach (Cook et al., 2018; Duong et al., 2019) as a dropout prevention

program for students transitioning into ninth grade. The equity-centered version of EMR

builds on the original intervention by incorporating equity levers (e.g., gathering facts to

disprove assumptions, gaining perspective) within each step of establishing relationships

with students, requiring teachers to address aspects related to diversity and equity in their

interactions with students. The following study aims to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent do students experience a caring adult present in schools?

2. How do students describe caring adults in school and the influence they have on them?

3. How do student experiences with caring adults relate to early warning indicators of school dropout?

4. Across student cases, what themes emerge regarding characteristics of caring adults in schools?

5. Across student cases, what themes emerge regarding building trust with a caring adult in schools?

This study is exploratory in nature and, thus, relied on a phenomenological approach investigating student perceptions of caring adults in schools. Thus, precise hypothesis formation and testing was less applicable. However, there were broader hypotheses informed by the extant literature, including:

1. Themes regarding characteristics of caring adults in schools include taking time to listen to their students, showing an interest in their students' lives outside of school, and providing academic and emotional support when needed (Kincade et al., 2020; Wilkins, 2014).

2. Themes regarding building trust with caring adults in schools include providing appropriate self-disclosure and making the classroom feel like a safe space (Bullock, 2015).

**Chapter 3: Method**

The current study was a part of a larger randomized controlled trial of the effects of a universal relationship-focused program (Cook et al., 2018; Duong et al., 2019) that was approved by the University of Washington's Institutional Review Board as well as participating school district's internal research committees. In the larger study, participants were 415 ninth grade students from six public high schools in the Pacific Northwest. Of these students, 37.7% were non-white, and 24% received free and reduced priced lunch.

For the current study, recruitment procedures began in March 2020. Participants were 11 high school students. Interviews were conducted March 2020 through June 2020. Notably, during this time, COVID-19 was spreading rapidly, which resulted in schools moving to fully remote instruction. These circumstances made recruitment challenging. Although recruitment efforts were impacted by COVID-19, a sufficient sample of students was recruited for purposes of a qualitative method inquiry about their perceptions of caring adults in school.

**Participants**

A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure the participants included in this study had at least one characteristic that are frequently correlated with poorer teacher-student relationships (e.g., males, individuals of color, individuals with behavioral concerns, and individuals with lower GPAs). Additional characteristics included belonging to a low SES (measured by free and reduced lunch), a history of repeating grades, and a history of failing a class. Furthermore, participants of this study were a subset of individuals previously enrolled in the broader study. Due to the design of

the larger study, all participants were in ninth grade and attended one of six high schools in the Pacific Northwest region. Also, students either attended a school where teachers were receiving professional development training to improve teacher-student relationships, or they attended a control school. Thus, a stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure that there was representation from each of the schools.

The sample of 11 students was relatively diverse with regard to race, ethnicity, and free and reduced priced lunch (FRL; Table 1). Overall, 72.7% of the sample was female ($n = 8$) and the average GPA was 3.34 ($SD = 0.51$). Race and ethnicity demographics were as follows: two participants were Asian, two participants were Hispanic or Latino, two participants were white, and there was one participant for each of the following racial backgrounds, Black/African American, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Black and Latino, Indian, Punjabi, and Sikh, and white and Brazilian. Three students (27.3%) had repeated at least one grade. The average GPA of the participants was 3.34, with a range from 2.10 to 3.80. Of the participants who reported FRL status ($n = 5$), 45.5% were eligible for FRL at their school. All but one of the participants (Table 1) were 15 years old.

**Measures**

The measures in this study consisted of questionnaires and a semi-structured interview. Participants completed questionnaires at a separate time as a part of the larger study, but data were used to determine individuals who were eligible to participate in the current study. These questionnaires gathered information regarding the participants' demographics and information regarding social, emotional, and behavioral health. The interview lasted approximately 20 minutes with each student.

*Demographic Questionnaire*

Participants were asked to provide information regarding age, sex, race, ethnicity, English language status, GPA, socioeconomic status, and history of grade repetition, expulsions, and suspensions. For the purpose of this study, low socioeconomic status was determined by participant self-report of receiving free and reduced priced lunch at school.

*Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Self-report Version)*

This measure was designed to gather information regarding the mental health of children between the ages of 4 and 17. The questionnaire consists of 25 items that fit into five subscales: Emotional Symptoms (e.g., "*I worry a lot*"), Conduct Problems (e.g., "*I fight a lot. I can make other people do what I want*"), Hyperactivity-Inattention (e.g., "*I am constantly fidgeting or squirming*"), Peer Relationship Problems (e.g., "*I would rather be alone than with people of my age*"), and Prosocial Behavior (e.g., "*I often offer to help others*"). Each subscale consists of 5 items to which participants respond on a three-point scale (not true, somewhat true, or certainly true). Scores on each subscale range from 0 to 10. To identify an individual's total difficulties score, items from the first four subscales are summed for a range of 0 to 40 (Goodman et al, 1998). Higher scores reflect more endorsement of the respective construct. Goodman and colleagues (1998) found that the reliability of the self-report version of the SDQ varies by subscale from moderate to good across subscales ($\alpha = 0.61$, peer problems; $\alpha = 0.65$, prosocial behavior; $\alpha = 0.69$, hyperactivity; $\alpha = 0.72$, conduct symptoms; $\alpha = 0.75$, emotional symptoms) and very good on the total difficulties score ($\alpha = 0.82$).

***Caring Adult in Schools Semi-Structured Interview***

The Caring Adult in Schools semi-structured interview (Appendix A) was designed to gather information regarding participants' experiences with adults in schools. There were two versions of this interview depending on the participant's response to the first question: *Is there at least one caring adult in your school who you trust and believe goes* above *and* beyond *to take notice of you and show that they care about you*? If the participant responded 'yes,' they received an additional 10 questions that probed different aspects of their relationship with that individual (e.g., "*On a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being 'Not Very Much and 5 being 'Very Much,' to what extent do you feel like you can trust this individual or that they are someone you can go to when you have a problem you are struggling with?*" and "*If this individual was not at your school, how do you think your school experience would be different?*"). If the participant responded 'no' to the initial question, they received five more questions regarding potential caring adults in their school (e.g., "*What would an adult need to do to make you feel like you can trust them?*" and "*Is there someone in the school who you think has the potential to be a caring adult if they put in a little effort?*").

The semi-structured interview was created using an iterative process. Once agreement on each of the items was reached, a group of graduate students practiced giving the interview to ensure adherence to the interview protocol. After each interviewer achieved fidelity with administration (i.e., delivery with no mistakes), they were able to conduct interviews with participants.

**Procedures**

*Eligibility*

Participants had to already be enrolled in the larger study and meet that eligibility criteria (i.e., student transitioning into ninth grade, attend one of the six public schools in the study). Further eligibility preferences for the present study included males, individuals of a minoritized race or ethnicity, individuals endorsing symptoms of a conduct or emotional problem (as identified by responses to the SDQ), and individuals with low GPAs (i.e., 2.0 or below). Due to the challenges with recruiting students during COVID-19 and the demographics of students from the sample in the original study, eligibility criteria were ultimately expanded to include females, students of any race or ethnicity, and students whose GPAs were higher than 2.0 but endorsed behavioral concerns on the SDQ.

*Recruitment*

It is important to note that these recruitment efforts occurred in the context of COVID-19, with schools being required to rapidly move to distance learning and increased global stressors. Furthermore, recruitment was a rolling process, thus efforts occurred in the context of the resulting unrest due to police brutality and the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many others.

A total of 60 individuals were eligible to participate in the study. Initially, we sent correspondence to 30 individuals, and reserved 30 for back up. Recruitment strategies included an initial text message introducing the study, a follow-up text for those who did not respond, a follow-up email, and a follow-up phone call. The first 30 received a text late March, checking in every 3-4 days until all formats of communication were

attempted. The second set of 30 individuals were contacted early May, with check-ins every 3-4 days via the aforementioned formats of communication.

Initially, participants were offered 10 dollars to complete the interview. After an initial low response rate, the incentive amount was increased 30 dollars. Compensation was in the form of gift cards to the participant's choice of Panera, Starbucks, or Chipotle. Once individuals responded that they were interested in participating in the interview, they received a link to schedule an interview time via the activity scheduling software, Calendly. After participants scheduled the interview, they received further information depending on the modality that they preferred. In total, 10 participants participated via calling into Zoom and one completed the form version of the interview via email.

*Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 students who attended a high school in the Pacific Northwest. Ten participants completed semi-structured interviews online using an audio-only Zoom meeting. In order to increase equity regarding access, two other alternative formats were created: a semi-structured interview via text, and a form version of interview via email. One participant needed accommodations and chose to fill out the form version of the interview via email (Appendix B) given challenges accessing a cell phone or computer with access to zoom capabilities. This participant engaged in back-and-forth communication with one of the interviewers after they submitted their original responses to clarify any comments they made. The duration of the Zoom-based interviews ranged from 12 to 20 minutes. One interview was disconnected and had to be rescheduled to a later dated to finish the interview.

Interviews occurred during the Spring 2020 semester via the web-based video conferencing platform, Zoom Video Communications. These interviews lasted about 15 to 20 minutes. Participants first gave assent for engaging in the interview and the recording of the interview. Additionally, there was a check for understanding to ensure participants knew what was meant by a "caring adult in schools." After determining each participant understood the purpose of the interview, the interviewer followed the interview protocol. At the end of the interview, each participant identified how they wanted to receive their compensation.

**Data Analytic Approach**

A qualitative multi-case study utilizing a phenomenological approach and thematic analysis was conducted to address the primary research questions guiding this study. Consistent with Cresswell and Poth (2016), the phenomenological approach explored the profiles of ninth grade students with characteristics associated in an increased risk for school dropout (e.g., belonging to a minoritized background, FRL, male, etc.) or demonstrated early warning indicators of school dropout (e.g., GPA, etc.) and their experiences with caring adults in schools. Specifically, this analysis addressed the first 3 research questions: (1) to what extent do students experience a caring adult present in schools, (2) how do students describe their experiences with caring adults in schools, and (3) how do students' experiences with caring adults influence their school experience? These case studies incorporated qualitative data from the structured interview and quantitative data from questionnaires. The qualitative data explored the experience of each student, while the quantitative data was used descriptively to provide more background information for each participant. Within each case, a phenomenological

analysis was conducted to develop a deeper understanding of each student's perceptions regarding their experiences with adults in schools in the context of their previous experiences in school (Cresswell & Poth, 2016).

Across participants, a thematic analysis was conducted to analyze and report themes that emerged throughout the semi-structured interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This analysis addressed the fourth and fifth research questions: (4), across student perceptions, what themes emerge regarding characteristics of caring adults in schools and (5) across student perceptions, what themes emerge regarding building trust with a caring adult in schools. An inductive, semantic approach was used to describe and organize the explicit meanings of the qualitative data (Boyatzis, 1998), followed by an interpretation of the patterns in the themes (Patton, 1990). Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2016) step-by-step guide the following steps will be taken to conduct the thematic analysis, (1) familiarization of the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes across initial codes, (4) reviewing themes, and (5) defining and naming themes. In step one, verbal data were transcribed, and a thorough review of the data was conducted. After familiarization with the data, a list of initial codes was created to identify features within the data. Once identified, codes were reviewed for themes that are present. After the initial set of themes is created, they were refined to ensure that there is data to support them or if changes need to occur before creating a thematic map of the data. Once all themes were identified and a thematic map was created, themes were defined and named based on their characteristics. Agreement on the codes and resulting themes was obtained through consensus discussion with members of an established research team.

## Chapter 4: Results

**Research Question 1**

Overall, every participant reported that they had at least one caring adult that they could trust at their school. Additionally, 45.5% of participants reported that they see their caring adult every day of the week, 27.3% said they see their caring adult at least four times a week, 18.2% said every other day, and one participant said three to four times a week.

**Phenomenological Approach to Address Research Questions 2 and 3**

To better answer the second and third research questions, a phenomenological approach was used to explore each participant's unique experiences with caring adult in schools. Despite all participants having at least one caring adult in their school, their criteria for what they look for in a caring adult varied. Thus, an exploration into each participant, their prior experiences in school, and their perceptions towards caring adults in schools allows for further understanding of the specific circumstances that influence their interactions with the adults in their school.

*Participant One*

Participant One identified as 15-year-old Black female. In her pre-interview surveys, she reported that she does receive FRL. Furthermore, she reported that the follow items were true on the SDQ: loses temper, often fights with other children, often lies or cheats, and steals from home. However, she also endorsed that she is generally well behaved and usually does what adults request.

This participant completed the interview via the form version through email as well as responding to follow-up prompts to clarify some of her answers. She noted that

she does have a caring adult that she is able to interact with every other day she goes to school. She knows that this adult cares about her because she "actually takes the time to ask about me and how I feel, which most people don't." She also knows that this adult is trustworthy because, "she looks for other ways to help in a situation," and "she takes her personal time, like her lunch break, to talk to students who need help." Moreover, when asked what she would say to the caring adult in her school, she wrote, "Thank you for always pushing me to do my best work and believing in me even when I didn't believe in myself."

Out of the seven adults she regularly interacts with at school, Participant One acknowledged that four of them are caring and someone she can trust. She noted that if her caring adult was not present at her school, her experience would be "very different" and "students would not be in a safe learning place that would not let them do their best work." Overall, this participant believes that if all of the adults in her school building were caring, "others would open up more and people would feel safe in a learning environment."

### Participant Two

Participant Two was a 15-year-old, Asian male. On his pre-interview survey, he denied receiving FRL at school, and reported that his GPA was a 3.56. Regarding his scores on the SDQ, he selected the items of loses temper, fights with other children, and lies or cheats to be somewhat true.

This participant completed a Zoom audio interview and reported that he does have an adult at school that he believes cares about him and is someone that he can trust. Specifically, he believes that this adult cares about him because "she got to know each of

us as students and what we like to do," and "she always asks me how dance is going." He stated that he knows this adult can be trusted because:

> She is open about things in her life that make us be able to relate with her –
>
> different stories and stuff – and because she is very open with us, like,
>
> transparent, I feel really comforted that I can talk to her person-to-person and then
>
> adding to that, she also knows who I am and that is like, like a friendship bond as
>
> well as her being my teacher.

When acknowledging what he might say to this teacher about how they have influenced his high school experience, he said:

> I appreciate so much about her and how open she is with her life and how
>
> trustworthy she is with my problems. I'm really grateful for her because she's
>
> gotten to know me as a person. She's a really big blessing.

He also added that because he feels comfortable with his teacher, he also feels more comfortable with the other students in the classroom. He believes that without this teacher, "I would definitely not have a very good relationships with a few of my teachers – I wouldn't have been as open because at the beginning of the year I wasn't too happy with some of my teachers and the way they talked." Overall, participant two stated that 7 out of 8 adults that he interacts with are caring and adults that he can trust but if all of the adults in his school were caring, he thinks that he "would be a lot more open with teachers and also the students... I would be more comfortable in certain classes with opening up and making more friends because I would be more comfortable and I would feel safer because of the teacher."

Participant Two added that one of the teachers he interacts with at school can come across as "not very personable because she is very busy and there are a lot of students in that class to are a lot to handle for her and she gives a lot of homework." But he noted that he had a chance to talk with her on a field trip and realized that "she's very kind and very genuine."

### Participant Three

Participant Three identified as a 15-year-old, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, female. She reported that she receives FRL. Additionally, she has previously failed a class, and she needed to repeat a grade. This participant did not endorse any items on the SDQ that were related to her behavior or interaction with others.

Participant three reported that she has a caring adult at school with whom she interacts every day. She believes that this adult cares for her because she has:

> Been going through some stuff and she's been there, and she's given me great advice to get me back on track and has reminded me what I should be doing and how I shouldn't le tother people are me affect the goals that I'm trying to achieve in the future... I got myself into a bad crowd and we would – I skipped with them, and she told me that skipping isn't a good thing because then you have to make it up towards the end of your school year and not graduating would not help me become a doctor because that's what I want to be in the future.

Moreover, Participant Three believes that this adult is trustworthy because "I've been able to talk with her since the beginning of the school year and she's always been able to give me advice and I can trust her because I've told her so much stuff and yet she's the only person who knows." When asked how she knew that she could trust this adult from

the beginning of the school year, participant three stated that "she's always welcoming and if I go a day without talking to her, she will come, and she'll check up on me and make sure everything is okay."

Participant Three stated that if this caring adult was not at her school:

> I wouldn't be able to put myself on back on track and I would just continue to surround myself with the bad pack that I was. And I feel like I probably wouldn't be – I'd probably fail my whole freshman year and wouldn't be able to graduate.

If given the opportunity to tell her teacher how she has influenced her school experience, she said that they have, "helped me with my grades, is always there, motivates me, is always supportive to me with my schoolwork and my life in school and my life outside of school."

She noted that outside of this adult, she does not "really talk to anyone else," and does not feel like there are other caring adults in her school. However, she believes that if all of the adults that she interacted with were caring and trustworthy:

> School would be way better than it is now because - don't get me wrong, my teachers are all nice and everything, like there's nothing wrong with them but – I feel like if I was having a bad day, I would be able to talk to anyone about it and not have to wait until the end of school to try to figure it out or situate my issue. That's what I struggled with [earlier in the school year], having a bad day at school and not being able to talk to anyone else an having to wait until the day was over to be able to let my emotions out.

She also stated:

> I feel like I would have a more positive outlook on school, because right now the
> only time I really look forward to is after school when I get to talk to and see [my
> caring adult]. So, like, if that were the case – that I was able to talk to everybody
> like how I talk to [my caring adult], I'd be able to feel more welcome at school.

### Participant Four

Participant Four identified as a 15-year-old, white, male. He reportedly receives FRL and has a 2.1 GPA. In the pre-interview surveys, he endorsed that the following items were certainly true: loses temper, lies or cheats. He also reported that fights with other children and steals from home were somewhat true.

Regarding a caring adult at school, he stated that he has one that he sees every day. He identified this adult to be caring because, "she lets me know that if I needed to talk to her, she could definitely take some time out of her day to talk to me." Moreover, he knows that this adult is someone he can trust because "she's just a nice person, she seems very hospitable. She's just very personal, I guess. She'll talk to you if you need to talk to her or whatever and she's just pretty nice in general and just kind and considerate." He noted that if this adult was not present at his school, "it would be a little worse, I guess. Less people to trust because she is a nicer one of my teachers."

If given the chance to tell his teacher how she has influenced his school experience, he would acknowledge how she has, "always made it clear that she's there for me to talk to her about personal issues as well as she's just something to look forward to during school."

Overall, Participant Four stated that all five of the adults with whom he interacts are caring adults and people that he can trust, however, he noted that if all of the adults in the school building were caring, it would be "way more welcoming. It would be easier to get a lot of things done as well as just a better environment. It would just be better."

### *Participant Five*

Participant Five was a 15-year-old, Hispanic/Latina female. She noted that she does not receive FRL, and she has a 3.4 GPA. In the pre-interview measures, she endorses that losing her temper was somewhat true. Participant five reported that she has a caring adult that she sees every day that they have that class. She believes that this adult cares for her because:

> She doesn't talk to everyone as a whole. She takes time to talk to people individually and like, makes eye contact and everything. Not like, 'oh I'm somewhat listening to you,' but like, 'I have all my attention on you, you can say what you need to say.'

Participant Five also noted that she knows she can trust her caring adult because "she is really open to listening and I've already talked to her about a few things that happened or like, I need help with something and then she'd always help me with it." If this adult wasn't at her school, she stated,

> I don't think I would try as hard as I do in her class or in like a math class. Because my classmates including – and her, it's like, it engages me better and what I want. Like I don't enjoy math, but I'll do it because of the people around me.

Furthermore, when asked what she would tell this adult about how they have influenced her high school experience, she said, "I'm really grateful for you to be my math teacher, I'm so happy that you listen to me and the things I have to say and that you're so caring. Thank you."

Out of the 8 adults with whom she interacts at school, Participant Five reported that three of them are caring adults who she can trust. She noted that if all of the adults she interacted with were caring adults her school experience would be different:

> That would be much better since it's like, it's not just like 'oh it's their job to be at least somewhat nice to me,' it's – they actually feel like I should be there and so you feel wanted or I feel wanted and like 'oh, I'm happier here knowing that I'm cared for and wanted.' It's like, better thinking that a teacher actually likes me versus 'oh I think this teacher – I might not as well do any of the work because they already hate me.

Participant Five also added that she has a teacher who awards extra credit when students "come in to talk with her – just talk." She noted that she thinks "that's a really good idea – it doesn't feel forced like, 'ugh I need to get my grade up a little bit I guess I have to do work,' it's just like a nice conversation which is really nice, like she's not putting more stress on us."

### *Participant Six*

Participant Six is a 15-year-old, Black and Hispanic/Latino male. He reported that he has previously failed a class, repeated a grade, and receives FRL. According to his responses to items on the SDQ, participant five noted that losing his temper was

somewhat true and being generally well behaved and usually doing what adults request were not true.

This participant reported that they had a caring adult at school who they interacted with every other day. He believes that this adult was caring because, "he listens to what I have to say and gives feedback." He also believes that he can trust this adult because, "he's just a good person in general and not just as a teacher." Participant six noted that if this caring and trustworthy adult was not at his school it would be different and he "would not have an adult to count on at school."

If given the chance to tell his teacher how he has influenced his high school experience, he would tell him, "telling your past stories and everything and makes like everything seem okay and that you will be fine and everything." Overall, this participant identified two of seven adults to be caring and someone he could trust. He noted that if all of the adults were caring school would be different because he would "feel more welcome at school and more excited to go to those classes and looking forward to school and all that."

### *Participant Seven*

Participant Seven was a 15-year-old, Indian/Punjabi and Sikh female. She reported that she has a GPA of 3.8. On her pre-interview measures, she reported that losing her temper and fighting with others was somewhat true.

Participant Seven reported that she has a caring adult at school she sees for days a week. She knows that this adult cares for her because:

This one time I wasn't feeling really good and she was there for me when like –
she was asking me if I was feeling okay and she was willing to take me down to

the nurse's office and the counselor and she was like giving me food and making me feel good.

Participant Seven also noted that she knows she can trust this individual because:

She was very kind from the first day I met her. She was so caring for her students and she just wanted to be one of us – like one of our friends. So, like, I could open up to her and I have told her some things that she's never told anyone and I can count on her when I need her.

If Participant Seven had the opportunity to tell this adult how they have influenced her school experience, she would tell them how, "she has really cared for me and helped me through my bad times." Overall, this participant reported that all of the adults she interacts with at school (6) are caring and trustworthy adults; however, she noted that if all of the adults at her school were caring, "people wouldn't keep bullying, they would feel safer – like, if the teachers would care then they would see that people are being picked on and they would fix it right away."

### *Participant Eight*

Participant Eight was a 15-year-old Asian male who reportedly has failed a class in the past. Additionally, he indicated that he has a 3.6 GPA and does not receive FRL. On the SDQ, he endorsed the item *loses temper* as certainly true, and *generally well behaved* and *usually does what adults request* as not true.

Participant Eight reported that he has a caring adult at school who is sees about 3-4 days a week. He knows that this adult is caring because, "he shares his personal stories and like, talks to us like we're his friends than a student. So, he's more open." He also believes that this adult is someone he can trust because,

The personal stories he brings, like, other teachers don't talk about and then he connects himself to it. So, it's like, 'oh you can trust him because he's more open and he's more like – you can relate to him more than other teachers.

He noted that if this adult was not at his school, it would be different because this teacher,

Makes biology a lot more fun than other classes, and if we didn't have him at our school, we might have a more boring teacher for biology and we might not get the same experience. And he's just in general more of a person that you can talk to when you're like, having a hard time.

If Participant Eight had the chance to tell this adult how they have influenced his high school experience he would say, "you open up really well and you – you get me and other people in our class and just makes the experience of class more enjoyable than other teachers." Overall, participant eight reported that five of the seven adults that he regularly interacts with in the school building are caring and trustworthy and he noted that if every adult at school were caring and trustworthy, "I feel like class would be a lot more enjoyable and I would probably pay more attention to class. I tend to pay more attention in class if I actually like the teacher and I relate to them, so probably I would do better in those classes."

### *Participant Nine*

Participant Nine identified as a 15-year-old Hispanic/Latina female. Reportedly she receives FRL and has a 3.2 GPA. Furthermore, on her pre-interview survey, she endorsed that *generally well-behaved, usually does what adults request, lies and cheats,* and *steals from home* were somewhat true of her.

This participant identified a caring adult that she has at school. Specifically, she knows that this adult cares for because, "she always makes sure you have enough space or like if you're not doing well, she always makes sure not to give you too much work and lets you like have a little break." She also noted that she can trust this adult because,

> Every Friday we have, like, this one task where we just write anything we want and sometimes I write about my weekend or what my week has been like and I sometimes put like the bad stuff and she like –the next day she like always comes up to me and asks if I'm alright and if I need a break, I can just let her know.

Participant Nine believes that if this adult was not at her school, she would, "feel like I don't have a teacher to really like tell her about myself, because she really like makes sure we're all doing fine and some of my teachers to that too, but she does that the most." She also noted that she "would feel less heard." Overall, she reported that five out of five adults that she interacts with at school on a regular basis are people she can trust and people that care about her. She noted that if all the adults in the building were caring adults, things "might be the same," because she focused on the teachers that she sees a lot, but "maybe if I actually knew the other teachers, they might do the same."

### *Participant Ten*

Participant Ten identified as a 15-year-old, white, Latino, and American Indian/Alaskan Native female. She has repeated one grade throughout her educational history and had a 3.2 GPA. On the SDQ she endorsed the following items as somewhat true: lies or cheats and loses temper.

This participant reported that she does have a caring adult that she interacts with four days of the week. She knows that this adult is someone that cares for her because,

If someone is having an issue, then she'll check in and make sure you're okay and she offers different ways to get you help; and she's generally very understanding with any issues that students have. She'll work overtime and like, she response to try and help her students all learn the material.

Moreover, she knows that she can trust this teacher because,

She notices if a student is just like, just not there emotionally or like, there's an issue she'll notice and she'll pull you aside, like maybe outside and she'll see if you're okay. She generally gives multiple resources to reach to and get help.

Without this adult present, Participant Ten thinks that, "learning a new language might be harder because she teaches Spanish, so like, if you didn't have a teacher that was understanding or like able to kind of cater to individuals like a whole group, I think that it would be a little bit harder." If participant 10 had the opportunity to tell this teacher how they have influenced her high school experience, she would say, "[You have] made going to the classroom a welcoming experience and that [you] always makes us feel safe no matter who is in the classroom and that [you have] overall made learning a language possible."

Participant Ten acknowledged that 5 of the 7 adults that she regularly interacts with at school are caring adults and people she can trust. She stated that if all of the adults in her school were caring and trustworthy, "I think that would make school a bit easier." Further she compared this to another one of her teacher's that "doesn't really listen to feedback from students about the quality of the class" and how "instead of going in excited about it, we are dreading it a little bit and then by the end a lot of people are really frustrated and a few people have dropped [the class]."

*Participant Eleven*

Participant Eleven is a 14-year-old, white, Brazilian female who has 3.7 GPA. On the SDQ, she reported that fights with other children was somewhat true. Regarding caring adults in school, she reported that she does have one that she is able to see four days a week. She knows that this adult cares about her because, "she makes class like actually fun, and she helps me with how to feel less anxious." She also believes that this teacher is someone she can trust because, "she helps me with finding people that can help me with my homework when I'm struggling." Participant 11 believes that if this teacher was not at school, "it would be harder because she helps a lot," and "I wouldn't have a high grade or someone to give me extra work and help me study."

If given a chance to tell this adult how they have influenced her, she would say, "[You were] very helpful and helped me succeed and [you were] very helpful through the school year."

Participant 11 reported that all of the adults she interacts with at school (6) were caring adults and she noted that if her primary caring adult was not present at school "it would be harder because she helps a lot." Also, if all of the adults in the entire school building were caring, she believes that she "would be more open towards teachers and ask them for help when she needs it."

*Summary of Phenomenological Approach*

Overall, despite every participant having an adult that cares for them and is someone that they can trust at school, they all highlighted different experiences that led them to trusting these adults. While some students focused on how these adults have made schoolwork and class better, others chose to highlight how teachers have supported

them through difficult times in their life that occurred outside of the classroom. Many

participants also focused on how their caring adult has supported them related to an early

warning indicator (e.g., engagement, school performance) and how more adults would

further support these early warning indicators (e.g., increasing safety, sense of

belonging).

**Thematic Analysis to Address Research Questions 4 and 5**

Throughout the structured interview, participants were asked to provide

information on (a) the caring and trustworthy aspects of their relationships with an adult

in school, (b) in what ways school is different with the presence of a caring adult, and (c)

what school would be like if all of the adults at school were caring and trustworthy. Four

themes were identified through systematic thematic analysis: caring and trusting adults,

school climate, academic performance, and attitude towards school. Additionally, a series

of subthemes and codes were identified under each theme (Table 2).

*Caring and Trusting Adults*

All participants reported that they had at least one caring adult present in their

school, however, the qualities of their caring and trustworthy adult varied. The majority

of participants listed multiple relational characteristics their caring and trustworthy adult.

Responses that were identified more frequently include an adult that listens, understands,

keeps private information confidential, shares information about themselves, and is

relatable, dependable, and welcoming. Specifically:

She doesn't talk to everyone as a whole, she takes time to talk to people

individually and makes eye contact and everything. Not like 'oh I'm somewhat

paying attention to you,' but like, 'I have all of my attention on you, you can say what you need to say.' [Participant Five]

I think it it's also with the personal stories, he just brings that other teachers don't talk about. So, it's like, oh you can trust him because he's more like more open and he's more like – you can relate to him more than other teachers. [Participant Eight]

Another quality that was identified by participants was their caring adults' effort to learn personal information about their students:

In the beginning of the year, she got to know each of us as students and what we like to do … so she is always asking me how that is going or like if I have any competitions. [Participant Two]

Many participants referenced their caring adult's ability to make time to interact or support their students throughout the day. Notably, this varied from brief moments where the adult would say hello to a student to checking in to make sure that the student was doing okay if they appeared upset:

She just lets me know that if I needed to talk to her she could definitely take some time out of her day… she just takes time out of her regular schedule or day to say 'hi' or whatever. [Participant Four]

She always makes sure you have enough space or like, if you're not doing well, she makes sure not to give you too much work and lets you, um, have a little break and stuff. [Participant Ten].

If I go a day without talking to her, she'll come and she'll check on me and make sure everything is okay. [Participant Three]

Furthermore, caring adults were noted to provide advice, feedback, and connect students with resources in school building:

I've been going through some stuff and she's been there and she's given me great advice to get me back on track and has reminded me what I should be doing… she's always been able to give me advice [Participant Three]

She notices if a student's just not like – just not there emotionally, or like there's an issue she'll notice and she'll pull you aside, maybe outside to talk and she'll see if you're okay and she generally gives multiple resources to reach out and get help. [Participant Ten]

Lastly, participants reported that one way their teachers demonstrate that they care for their students and are trustworthy is their willingness to make modifications for students in the classroom:

She always makes sure you have enough space or like, if you're not doing well, she makes sure not to give you too much work and lets you, um, have a little break and stuff. [Participant Nine].

Overall, while participants identified a variety of relational characteristics and numerous actions that their teachers have done in the past to demonstrate that they are trustworthy and care in the minds of students. From actions as small as making eye contact when speaking to students to bigger actions such as working overtime or on their

lunch breaks to talk with students, participants were very aware of how these adults demonstrated that they cared.

### *School Climate*

Participants identified factors associated with the school climate that would be different if their caring adult was not present and what the school climate might be like if more caring and trustworthy adults were present. For those that spoke about how school might be different if their caring and trustworthy adult was not present, they noted:

Students would not be in a safe learning place that would not let them do their best work. [Participant One]

I would definitely not have a very good relationship with a few of my teacher if it wasn't for her… I wouldn't have been as open because at the beginning of the year I wasn't too happy with some of my teachers – just the way they talked – but she was very influential to me, just kind of waiting it out and following the steps and not I have a great relationship with all of my teachers and I really have her to thank for all of that. [Participant Two]

If all of the adults in the building were caring and trustworthy adults, I would feel more welcome at school and more excited to go to those classes. [Participant Six]

Conversely, when identifying how their school experience might be if more adults in their school were caring and trustworthy, participants stated:

People wouldn't keep bullying anymore. They would feel safer. Like if the teachers would care then they would see that people are being picked on and they would fix it right away. [Participant Seven]

I would be more comfortable in certain classes with opening up and making more friends because I would be more comfortable, and I would feel safer because of the teacher. [Participant Two]

Almost every participant discussed some aspect of the school climate related to their caring and trustworthy adult, or a lack of adults that were caring in their schools. While some participants identified how their caring adult made them feel safer in the classroom and in interactions with their peers, others noted that if all of the adults were caring adults, the school would be safer and more welcoming.

### *Academic Performance*

Another aspect of school that would change for participants if their caring adult was not present was their academic performance. Some of the participants made the connection between a caring adult and their academic motivation, performance and even longer-term educational attainment:

I wouldn't be able to put myself back on track and I would just continue to surround myself with the bad pack that I was… I'd probably fail my whole freshman year and wouldn't be able to graduate. [Participant Three]

I don't think I'd try as hard as I do in her class, or in like a math class because my classmates including her, it's like, it engages me better … like, I don't really enjoy math, but I'll do it because of the people around me. [Participant Five]

If she wasn't at school, students would not be in a safe learning place that would not let them do their best work. [Participant One]

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If all adults were caring and trustworthy, I feel like class world be a lot more enjoyable and I would probably pay more attention to class. [Participant Eight]

She helped me with my grades, is always there, motivates me, is always supportive to me with my schoolwork and my life in school and my life outside of school. [Participant Three]

Responses under this them supported the notion that having a caring adult in school increases academic motivation and performance. Moreover, it suggests that motivation and performance are undermined when students do not have access to a caring adult at school.

### Attitudes Toward School

Finally, participants addressed how their attitudes toward school, learning, and interacting with others in the school building would be affected if their caring adult was not present:

She's just something to look forward to during school because I know her class will definitely, probably have something nice to it because she'll be there to just talk or whatever if I need to. [Participant Four]

They also identified how things might change if all of the adults that they interacted with at school were caring and trustworthy. For example, two students mentioned:

That'd be much better since it's like, it's not just like 'oh it's their job to be at least somewhat nice to me, it's – they actually feel like I should be there and so you feel wanted, or I feel wanted and like, I'm happy knowing that I'm cared for and wanted. [Participant Five]

Being more excited to go to those classes, looking forward to going to school and all that. [Participant Six]

Overall, participant responses under this theme suggested the importance of having a caring adult in school as it relates to favorable attitudes towards school. Several participants acknowledged that because of the presence of a caring adult, certain classes were more enjoyable and they were more likely to engage in those classes. Some participants also noted that if all of the adults in the building were caring and trustworthy adults, going to school in general is more enjoyable and they look forward to going.

**Chapter 5: Discussion**

Theoretical models on risk, protection, and resilience as well as numerous peer-reviewed studies reference the importance of caring adults outside of the home environment as an important aspect of positive youth development and the prevention of untoward negative outcomes (e.g., Gamezy et al, 1991; Ungar, 2013; Werner & Smith, 1992). Furthermore, studies have shown that schools can be an avenue for children to connect with positive adults outside of the home (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Hamre & Pianta, 2006), and these connections can result in increased engagement, academic performance, and connection to school (Longobardi et al., 2016). Moreover, there are more than two million individuals between the ages of 16 to 24 do not complete their high school education (US DOE, 2020) and it is imperative to identify low-resource, high impact strategies, such as caring adults in schools, that can support students as they progress through their educational career. This study aimed to determine if students believe they have at least one caring adult at school and explored qualities of those adults and their actions that show students that they care and are trustworthy. Additionally, this study sought to gain information from students with early warning indicators and characteristics associated with increased risk for dropout; however, due to the COVID-19 outbreak during recruitment and the interview process, students with at least one characteristic associated with increased risk or one early warning indicator were included. Importantly, a goal of this study was to amplify the voices of ninth-grade students to identify what they are looking for in caring adults in their schools and how having caring adults would improve experiences and outcomes for students in school.

**Presence of Caring Adults**

Eleven 9th grade students participated in semi-structured interviews. All participants in this study identified at least one caring and trustworthy adult in their school. On the lower end, one participant identified they had two caring and trustworthy adults in their school. Conversely, on the higher end, one student identified that all of the adults they interact with (7) were caring and trustworthy. Given that research shows that presence of at-least one trustworthy adult in the school is a factor that is associated with increased sense of belonging (Uslu & Gizir, 2018) and school graduation (Croninger & Lee, 2001), the participants in this study appeared to be receiving some benefit from a positive relationship with the adults in their school. However, while all participants reported that they had at least one caring and trustworthy adult in school, it is important to recognize that this is not the same experience for every student. Specifically, males, students of color, and students with a special education status are less likely to have positive relationships with their teachers (Furrer & Skinner, 2003, Murray & Greenberg, 2001; Voight et al., 2015). There is some research that indicates roughly 30% of secondary age students report that they do not belong in school (Challenge Success Student Survey, 2019). What is unclear from this study is whether having a few caring adults in school is sufficient for a student to feel like they belong in school.

**Student Perceptions of Caring Adults**

Regardless of the number of caring and trustworthy adults that participants had in their schools, they all provided numerous qualities of adults that show they care. Additionally, they discussed various actions of the adults in their school that demonstrate care that could be incorporated into intentional approaches to cultivate healthy,

supportive student-teacher relationships. Across participant responses about the adults in their schools, four major themes emerged: Caring and Trustworthy Adults, School Climate, Academic Performance, and Attitudes Toward School.

***Caring and trustworthy adults: Actions and qualities***

The first theme that emerged came directly from the two prompts asking participants what their caring adult does to show they care and are someone who students can trust. Although, participants acknowledged that having a caring adult was different than knowing that an adult was trustworthy (e.g., there might be an adult that cares, but is not trustworthy), many of the qualities that participants identified were similar and thus, were grouped into one theme. Many subthemes emerged within this broader theme related to specific actions that caring adults exhibit to show they care and are trustworthy. Many participants mentioned that they knew their adult cared for them because they try to learn about students by asking questions about their interests, remembering details about their students, and knowing their students well enough to notice if students were having an off day. This is consistent with previous research showing that teacher's interpersonal skills such as asking open-ended questions and active listening are critical relationship building skills (Cornelius-White, 2007; García-Moya et al., 2019). Additionally, many participants highlighted that the caring and trustworthy adults make a point to find the time to interact with them during the school day. This includes taking time to check in with students, say hello, talk with students individually, and use their personal time (e.g., lunch) to connect with students. This aligns with previous literature that actions associated with a positive relationship more likely to occur outside of the classroom (Claessens et al., 2017). Notably, participants recognized the times when their

caring and trustworthy adult worked overtime (e.g., after school) or took time out of their schedule to help them with something. Offering additional support and taking extra time to help students has been discussed in previous research as a strong way to express care (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; García-Moya et al., 2019).

Another subtheme that emerged was that caring and trustworthy adults provide advice and feedback. Many students noted that their adult gives good feedback and offered ways to help that encouraged students to focus on their goals and pushed them to do their best work. This finding suggests that positive expectations from teachers can be a powerful way to support students. Moreover, this aligns with research related to the self-fulfilling prophecy (e.g., Jussim & Harber, 2005) and how expectations can influence an individual's performance. Caring and trustworthy adults also willingly made modifications when students were struggling or having a rough day. Specifically, participants identified how these adults had allowed them to take breaks, reduced the workload when they were unwell, and made sure that students had enough space. Participants also appreciated the times when their caring adult school would connect them with additional resources, whether that was connecting the participant to someone that could help with homework, the nurse when they were not feeling well, or someone else to talk to, participants identified these actions as a way that the adults in the school demonstrated care. All of these social exchanges are ways that teachers continue to engage in bidirectional relationships with their students, by doing things that show they care students continue to view their relationship as rewarding (Richard & Emerson, 1976).

Finally, the last subtheme focused on the relational characteristics that students appreciate about caring adults in their school; which furthers previous research findings of the importance of the adult's interpersonal skills and authenticity (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; McGrath & Van, 2015). Of these, many participants expressed that they know when adults care for them and are trustworthy when they listen, make eye-contact when they are talking to their students, share information about themselves, and is comforting, understanding, and dependable. This was an important finding as non-verbal and verbal cues indicating care and trustworthiness are malleable and can be taught through pre- and in-service training (Allen et al., 2011; Brock et al., 2008; Cook et al., 2018). Many participants also noted that they had given their caring adult an opportunity to demonstrate their trustworthiness by sharing personal information with them. Participants then realized that their caring adults were people they could trust when they did not disclose this information with others. Moreover, many participants said they enjoy when teachers are relatable and try to make connections between the educational topic and real-life experiences. This is consistent with culturally responsive student-centered teaching approaches where connecting content to lived experiences, increases relevance and engagement among students (e.g., García-Moya et al., 2019).

Despite the background differences among the participants in this study, these subthemes recurred throughout the interviews. Unsurprisingly, collectively these subthemes align with proximal processes that Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) identified as a part of social-ecological systems theory, especially aspects of the microsystem that youth directly experience. Specifically, participants' responses highlighted the importance of a bidirectional relationship on student well-being and

development. For example, participants frequently noted the importance of caring adults

who try to learn more about their students but also share about themselves. Furthermore,

these responses align with the social exchange theory (Richard & Emerson, 1976),

because while many students identified things that caring adults have done for them, they

also acknowledged how they in turn try to maintain those relationships with adults who

they perceive as caring in their school. Many participants reported a bidirectional effect

within the relationship with their caring adult (Sameroff, 1995). For example, they first

had to share information about their lives and hope that the adult would keep it

confidential, thus requiring students to be open to receiving the support from the adults in

their schools.

*School climate*

Another major theme that emerged throughout the interviews was school climate.

School climate is defined as the "patterns of people's experiences of school life and

reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices,

and organizational structures" (National School Climate Council, 2007). Moreover, a

positive school climate ensures an environment with shared norms, values and

expectations, where everyone feels respected and safe (National School Climate Council,

2007). During the interviews, participants were asked how their caring adult has

influenced their school experience, and many participants identified that their caring

adults makes them feel safe. Specific examples include creating a safe space in the

classroom and other learning environments, and making sure students felt wanted and

welcome. Not only does this finding align with guidelines and recommendations

targeting school dropout that stress the importance of a safe learning environment

(Dynarski & Gleason, 2002), but it also demonstrates how the actions of a teacher can influence the context of the classroom to foster an individual's ongoing development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Moreover, multiple participants expressed that if more adults in their schools were caring, they believed that they would be less bullying because staff would notice it and do something about it. While it is unclear if that would actually happen, research has demonstrated that school environments characterized by climates that are more positive have less teasing and bullying are associated with lower levels of truancy and dropout (Cornell et al., 2013).

Another subtheme related to school climate that emerged in the data was that caring and trustworthy teachers influenced participants' relationships with other people. For example, participants expressed that because of their relationships with their caring adult(s), they were more open with other teachers and students, felt like they could talk to other adults in the building, made more friends, developed relationships with other teachers, and sought out more positive peer relationships. Thus, the student's relationship with their caring adult had ripple effects across their school experience. This was an important finding and one that represents an important avenue for future developmental research to investigate how caring adults enable student to accrue additional benefits through increased engagement and greater social capital, which are enablers to academic performance (DiPerna et al., 2002). Intentionally ensuring that every student has at-least one caring adult could be a universal strategy that leads to students feeling more comfortable with other adults in the building and encouraging social relationships with positive peers—both of which have been associated with reduced probability for school dropout (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Vérronaeu et al., 2008).

The final subtheme related to school climate is sense of support. Participants discussed that given their relationship with a caring adult, they felt more comfortable asking for help, were able to talk to someone so they did not have to hold their emotions in all day, and knew they had someone to count on. This is important considering that people often imply that as students get older, they rely more on influences from their peers and the relationship with their teacher is less influential and given their age they might be expected to act more mature (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015). However, this finding indicates that students benefit from close relationships with their teachers and depend on their teachers as a source of emotional support. This is consistent with an ecological approach that focuses on creating the environment rather than simply creating expectations and telling students to advocate for themselves. Moreover, this shows the importance of an environment that can foster resiliency by creating a space where students are comfortable to talk about their stressors with a caring adult.

### *Academic performance*

Academic performance was another major theme throughout the data. Most notably, participants acknowledged how their caring adult influenced their grades. Examples involved helping them get on track to graduate and improving their grades. Given that poor academic performance is an early warning indicator for school dropout (Hammond et al., 2007) these relationships with a caring adult might be serving as a protective factor. Additionally, students who remain on track academically, are more like to graduate on time than their peers who get off track (Kerr, 2003). Therefore, having a caring adult present in schools might be one way to combat the ninth-grade bulge, and

instilling these relationships soon after students transition to high school could be a useful prevention strategy.

*Attitude towards school*

The final theme that was identified across the data is attitude towards school. First, many participants acknowledged that having a caring adult in school influenced the effort they put into their work in the class. Many participants endorsed that they worked harder or felt encouraged to do their best work by their caring adult. One participant even reported that her caring adult taught a subject she did not like as much, but because of the connection with the teacher, she worked harder than she would for someone else. Thus, adding to previous research that shows how positive relationships with teachers can increase student motivation and willingness to learn (Longobardi et al., 2016). Moreover, research has shown that favorable attitudes can positively influence motivation which is associated with academic engagement and performance (Finn, 1993; Whitlock, 2006).

Lastly, many participants commented on how their engagement with class was positively influenced by having a caring adult in school and expressed how if that adult was not present, they would not be as excited to go to class or school. They also noted that they found the class to be more interesting than other classes with teachers with whom they did not have as good of relationships. Notably, this aligns with many previous research findings that showed improved academic and behavioral engagement when students had more positive relationships with their teachers (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Roorda et al., 2011). Moreover, research has demonstrated that this can be particularly important for engagement of older students (Roorda et al., 2011),

thus findings from this study suggest that students also perceive increased engagement and feel more inclined to engage in class.

**Implications for Theory**

The current study explored various theories and how they help explain reasons that students discontinue their high school education. Moreover, these theories were used to identify ways that protective factors could be more salient within the school environment, particularly related to relationships with caring adults in schools.

First, this study focused on the Social Ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and how the environment can influence one's educational success (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Moreover, this theory further explores the importance of bidirectional proximal processes in an individual's development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Results from this study aligned with the Social Ecological Theory as participants reported that their caring adults influence the classroom environment and make it feel safer, they make learning more exciting, and they have played a role in fostering better relationships with other teachers as well as encouraging students to discontinue their relationships with friends who were poor influences. Thus, these proximal processes that exist between student and teacher resulted in perceived benefits for the student and increased their comfortability within their school environment.

Regarding the Resilience Theory, participant responses suggested that their teachers can also help them adapt to their school environment and bounce back from issues of adversity. Similar to Ungar (2013), Garmezy (1991), and Luthar and colleagues (2000) acknowledgements that resilience is not only a characteristic of an individual but can be a characteristic of the environment, this study demonstrated that a teacher can

support student resilience. Specifically, one participant shared how she had been off track with her grades and that her caring adult helped her understand the importance of staying on track and connecting with the right groups of friends. Furthermore, participants reported that their identified adult demonstrated they cared because they would give advice, provide support, and help students engage in behaviors that support their success in schools. Not only did participant responses suggest that they benefited from a teacher and environment that helped them adapt, but it also suggested that these adults serve as a protective factor given their influence to deter relationships with negative peers and help students foster closer relationships with other adults in the building.

Finally, results from this study aligned with the Social Exchange Theory which posits that individuals are always examining their relationships and assessing the benefits of these relationships (Richard & Emerson, 1976). This theory, as well as Bronfenbrenner's proximal processes component of the Social Ecological Theory both highlight the importance of a bidirectional relationship and participant responses provided evidence for this too. Specifically, participants identified the things that their caring adults have done for them that gained trust, and the ongoing actions that they do to show they care. Notably, these actions do not have to be large bids for attention; rather, participants often discussed behaviors such as asking about a student's life, checking in, offering to connect them with another resource and making eye contact as behaviors that demonstrate they care. Moreover, participants reflected that when their teachers care, they try harder in school, they are more engaged in the subject – regardless of their interest in it – and they are more open with the teacher. Therefore, both parties are continuously benefiting from each other's actions.

**Implications for Practice**

Several implications for practice emerged from the findings from this study, including strategies that might be beneficial to include in relationship-focused preventative interventions. Participants provided specific, concrete examples of how the adults in their schools interact with them to demonstrate that they care and can be trusted. Furthermore, participants described various characteristic traits of the caring and trustworthy adults in their schools. Given this information, it might be helpful for adults in schools to get to know their students by asking them questions, share information about themselves and if possible, connect their course work to life experiences. Additionally, the participants in this study appreciated when adults can help support them by connecting them to additional resources. Overall, the data demonstrated that participants enjoyed adults who talk to them, reach out, make eye contact, and come from a place of understanding. While it is evident that adults in schools have many roles and responsibilities that do not always result in proper compensation, the participants in this study outlined some specific, concrete actions that adults can do to make students feel more cared for and like they have someone they can trust in the building.

Practical implications also stem from the fact that students' level of need regarding close relationships varies based on their individual experiences in, and outside of, school. From an equity and prevention-oriented perspective, there is a need to focus on students who may not have a caring adult at school or lacking a sense of belonging and connection to specific learning environments. This is also important given that the average high school teacher interacts with roughly 120-180 students and has a finite amount of time to intentionally engage in relationship cultivating interactions with

students. Thus, identifying brief, straight-forward actions that demonstrate care allows teachers to connect with more students who are at risk of negative outcomes.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Notably, this study had some limitations. First, regarding recruitment, this study initially intended to and recruit students who had indicators and characteristics associated with increased risk for dropout. However, due COVID-19 and the demographics of the sample from the larger study, ended up with a sample that did have at-least one characteristic associated with potential negative experiences in school but not necessarily risk for dropout. Future studies should more strategically recruit participants that have more characteristics associated with increased risk and more early warning indicators for dropout to make sure that these perspectives are being heard.

Another limitation of this study is that it utilized an interview format where most questions were structured. While this provided information about specific aspects of the relationships between the participants and the adults in their schools, an interview that uses more open-ended and more general questions would perhaps allow for nuance to occur regarding aspects of interactions with adults in schools that facilitate or interfere with forming these relationships. Additionally, the phenomenological approach was achieved by using participant data from the SDQ measure as well as their responses to the interview questions. Future research would benefit from asking these questions related to participants' previous school experiences within the interview. Additionally, conducting focus groups with ninth-grade students might be another avenue to gather information about students' experiences with caring adults in schools.

Furthermore, given that studies have established that the transition into ninth grade is difficult for many students (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Neild & Balfanz, 2006), research should continue to investigate strategies to help foster the student-teacher relationship more quickly. While every student-teacher relationship is different, future research could continue to explore how teachers can establish caring and trusting relationships with their students.

Finally, although many studies have demonstrated the importance of student-teacher relationships (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Uslu & Gizir, 2017), especially as students get older (Roorda et al., 2011), future studies should explore if the number of caring adults that students have in school influences student engagement and sense of belonging. In the current study, participants believed that having more caring adults would make the school feel safer, that they would feel more comfortable, and have a more positive outlook on school. Given that students in high school interact with multiple teachers per day, further exploring the suspected benefits of multiple caring and trustworthy adults could provide deeper insight into the importance of these relationships.

**Conclusion**

This study aimed to explore student perceptions regarding caring adults in school and how their presence served as protective factors that buffer against school failure and dropout. The findings have implications for developing low resource high impact preventative efforts that can reduce school failure and dropout and promote greater engagement. Fortunately, all participants in this study identified at least one caring adult in their schools and provided detailed information on how these adults support them and make their school experiences better, which may be an artifact of the sample of

participants included in this study. But this is not the case for all students. Not everyone feels comfortable or safe in their school and it should not be on the children to improve their environment without the adults in the school recognizing how much they impact an individual's school experience. It is evident that having a caring adult present in school can have a positive influence and we should continue to ask students what they need to feel cared for and have someone they can trust.

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**Table 1**

Participant Demographics

| Participant Number | Gender | Race/Ethnicity | GPA | History of Failing | History of Repeating a Grade |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Female | Black/African American | Missing | No | No |
| 2 | Male | Asian | 3.56 | No | No |
| 3 | Female | Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander | 3.5 | Yes | Yes, 3rd |
| 4 | Male | White | 2.1 | No | No |
| 5 | Female | Hispanic/Latino | 3.4 | No | No |
| 6 | Male | Black & Latino | Missing | Yes | Yes, Kindergarten |
| 7 | Female | Indian & Punjabi | 3.8 | No | No |
| 8 | Female | Asian | 3.6 | No | Yes, 1st |
| 9 | Female | Hispanic/Latino | 3.2 | No | No |
| 10 | Female | White | 3.2 | Yes | No |
| 11 | Female | White & Brazilian | 3.7 | No | No |

*Note:* GPA is represented on a 4-point scale.

**Table 2**

Thematic Analysis Themes, Subthemes, and Codes

| Themes and Subthemes | Codes |
| --- | --- |
| **Caring and Trusting Adult** | |
| Tries to learn about students | Gets to know students<br>Remembers details about students<br>Asks questions about interests<br>Notices when students are not doing well |
| Takes time to interact or help | Works overtime to help<br>Takes time out of schedule/day to talk<br>Initiates check-ins<br>Talks to students individually<br>Uses personal time to talk with students |
| Provides advice and feedback | Gives good advice<br>Offers ways to help<br>Helped focus on goals<br>Pushes students to do their best work |
| Makes modifications for students | Allows students to take breaks<br>Reduces work if you are not doing well<br>Makes sure you have enough space |
| Connects to resources | Finds people to help with homework<br>Takes students to the nurse when unwell |
| Relational characteristics | Listens<br>Understanding<br>Shares about themselves<br>Makes eye-contact<br>Relatable<br>Comforting<br>Dependable<br>Talks to students like they're friends<br>Does not share information with others |

**School Climate**

    Safety

                                                  Creates a safe space
Feel safe in learning environments
More welcoming
Feel wanted

    Relationships with others

More open with other teachers and students
Could talk with anyone
Make more friends
Develop relationships with other teachers
Friends with positive peer influences

    Sense of support

Feel comfortable asking for help
Would not have to hold emotions in all day
Someone to count on

**Academic Performance**

    Grades

On track to graduate
Improved grades

**Attitude Towards School**

    Effort

Would try harder/do best work

    Engagement

Increased engagement
Excited to go to class/school
More interesting classes

**Appendix A**

Interview Script for Zoom-based Administration

**Interview Guide**

Greeting, Introduction to Study, and Assent

**<u>SAY:</u>** Hi, XXX, how's it going? [*check if they prefer to be called by a different name,*
**<u>SAY:</u>** Before we get started, I want to check - is XXXX your preferred name, or do you
have another name you go by?] Well thanks for taking a little time to meet with me. My
name is XXXX and I am from the UW working on the RELATE project with your
school. My job is to gather information that helps inform how schools can do a better job
engaging and supporting students. You've already been answering some online surveys.
This interview is going to be about caring adults in school; whether you think there is one
or not, and what about a caring adult makes a student feel respected and cared for as a
person. It will only last about 15-20 minutes. Also, for giving up some of your time to
provide us with information, you are going to get a 10-dollar gift card to XX. Also, we
will be recording these phone calls so that the research team can better analyze the data.
Is that alright with you? [*allow time for response, if ok, continue*]. Know that your
participation is voluntary and if at any time you do not want to finish the interview you
can stop without getting in trouble. Does that sound okay so far? [*allow time for
response, if ok, continue*]

Caring Adult Explanation and Example

**<u>SAY:</u>** As I mentioned, we are hoping to gather information about caring adults that
students might have in school. A caring adult is someone who you believe cares about
you, supports your mental health and/or academic performance, someone that you can
trust, and someone that ultimately makes your time at school a little bit better. For
example, [*My high school science teacher made class fun and it felt like she believed in
me. I could tell that she liked me and wanted me to be successful*]. With that said, we also
know that it can be hard to find a caring adult in school and that might be the case for
you. Either way, we are hoping to gather information about your experience with adults
in school.

[*Check for understanding*]

**<u>SAY:</u>** Does that make sense?

If student says **"yes"**, **<u>SAY:</u>** Great, just so we're on the same page can you
explain using your own words what we mean by a caring adult in school?

[*Allow for participant response, if it demonstrates understanding move on
to "Transition to interview" section*]

If student says **"no"**, **<u>SAY:</u>** A caring adult is someone who you believe cares
about you, supports you, someone that you can trust, and someone that makes your time

at school a little bit better. Did that help or is there a specific part I can help make more clear?

<u>Transition to interview</u>

**SAY:** Alright, now that we know that we're on the same page about what we are looking for, let's get started with the interview, so you can get back to your day.

**ASK:** Is there at least one caring adult in your school who you trust and believe goes *above and beyond* to take notice of you and show that they care about you? [*If participant says yes, move to "If yes.." section, If participant says "no," move to "If no.." section.*]

## If participant says yes…

**ASK:** Who is this adult? (looking for this person's *role*, not their name)

- If participant provides an individual's name, **ASK:** do you know what they do at the school?
- If they don't respond, **ASK:** Is _____ a teacher, counselor, administrator (like a principal), teaching assistant, school psychologist, social worker, another job I haven't listed?

**ASK:** About how often do you interact with XXXX? [*insert some pleasantry about them getting to interact with this individual i.e. "Nice, I'm glad you get to spend time with XXX twice a week"*

**ASK:** On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being 'Not Very Much and 5 being 'Very Much,' To what extent do you feel like XXXX respects and cares about you as a person, and not just a student?

If student gives a rating of 1 or 2, **SAY:** Tell me why you rated it this way.

If student can't decide between a rating of 2 or 3, **ASK:** which one fits best?

If student gives a rating that is above a 2 (i.e., 2.5 and up), **ASK:** What does XXXX *do* that lets you know (he/she/they) respect and care about you as a <u>person</u> and not just a student?

*If it is not clear what the individual does to show they care...*

- [Probe further by saying...
  - "Tell me more about them."] **OR**
  - "Can you tell me an example of how they do this?"

*\*\* paraphrase if necessary to check for correct understanding of participant*

**ASK:** On a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being 'Not Very Much and 5 being 'Very Much,' To what extent do you feel like you can trust XXXX or that (he/she/they) is someone you can go to when you have a problem you are struggling with?

> If student gives a rating of 1 or 2, **SAY:** Tell me why you rated it this way.

> If student can't decide between a rating of 2 or 3, **ASK:** which one fits best?

> If student gives a rating that is above a 2 (i.e., 2.5 and up), **ASK:** What makes you feel like you can trust XXXX?

> *If it is not clear why the participant can trust this person...*

> > ● Probe further by saying….
> > > ■ "Tell me more about _____."

> ** *paraphrase if necessary to check for correct understanding of participant*

**ASK:** If XXXX was not at your school, how do you think your school experience would be different?

> *If it is not clear how the school experience would be different...*

> > ● Probe further by saying...
> > > ■ "Tell me more about that."

> ** *paraphrase if necessary to check for correct understanding of participant*

**SAY:** You are doing great, we are almost done, are you okay to keep going?

**\*ASK:** I know it might feel a little awkward but if you had a chance to tell XXXX how (he/she/they) positively influenced you, what would you say?

> ** *paraphrase if necessary to check for correct understanding of participant*

**\*ASK:** How many different adults do you regularly interact (i.e. you might see them on a daily basis and have more contact with them than just saying hi) with at school? This can include your teachers, and other people like a counselor, coach, or someone else (*you will have to use your judgement here, if the student talks to this individual daily but only about grades/academics that applies, but if a student talks to this individual one a week about mental health or other things that also is appropriate; ideally, the student is talking with an individual more than just saying "hi" (e.g. interacting with a cafeteria worker or that they see every day, but don't have a conversation with*). [wait for participant to provide a number], **ASK:** Would you be open to listing these people for me and then telling me if you feel like they are someone who cares about you and that you can trust?

> [*this will be a yes/no option for each individual]*

**SAY:** You have been so helpful, we really appreciate it and I just have one more question for you.

**\*ASK:** Imagine if all the adults you regularly interacted with, that you just listed in the previous question, were a caring adult. How would school be different?

- Probe further by saying….
  - "Tell me more about that."

*\*\* paraphrase if necessary to check for correct understanding of participant*

*Transition to finishing the interview*

## If participant says no…

**ASK:** How many different adults do you regularly interact (i.e., you might see them on a daily basis and have more contact with them than just saying hi) with at school? This can include your teachers, and other people like a counselor, coach, or someone else (*you will have to use your judgement here, if the student talks to this individual daily but only about grades/academics that applies, but if a student talks to this individual one a week about mental health or other things that also is appropriate; ideally, the student is talking with an individual more than just saying "hi" (e.g. interacting with a cafeteria worker or that they see every day, but don't have a conversation with*). [wait for participant to provide a number], **SAY:** Would you be open to listing these people for me and then telling me if you feel like they are someone who cares about you and that you can trust (i.e. someone you can go to when you have a problem you're struggling with)? [*this will be a yes/no option for each individual -- verify that none of these individuals are a single caring adult*]

*If participant says 'yes' to an individual,* **ASK:** Would you consider XXXX to be a caring adult at your school? *If they yes, jump back up to the "If participant says yes' section. If they say no to this, proceed with the following question.*

*If participant says 'no' for each person, proceed with following questions.*

**ASK:** What would an adult need to *do* to make you feel like you can trust them?

*If it is not clear what an adult can do to increase trust...*

- Probe further by saying...
  - "Tell me more about that." **OR**
  - "Can you tell me an example of how they could do this?"

*\*\* paraphrase if necessary to check for correct understanding of participant*

**ASK:** How do you know when an adult cares about you as a person?

*If it is not clear how they would know...*

- Probe further by saying...
  - "Tell me more about this." **OR**
  - "Can you tell me an example of how they would show they care?"

*\*\* paraphrase if necessary to check for correct understanding of participant*

**ASK:** Is there someone in the school who you think has the potential to be a caring adult if they put in a little effort (yes or no)?

> *If participant says "yes,"* **ASK:** what could this person do to help you feel more connected to and supported in school?

**SAY:** You have been so helpful, we really appreciate it and I just have one more question for you.

**ASK:** Remember earlier when you listed out the adults that you interact with at school? Imagine if at least one of the adults you regularly interacted with, that you just listed in the previous question, were a caring adult. How would school be different?

- Probe further by saying….
    - "Tell me more about that"
*\*\* paraphrase if necessary to check for correct understanding of participant*

*Transition to finishing the interview*

**Finishing the Interview**

**SAY:** Those were all of the questions that I had for you today, but is there anything else that you want to add about a single caring adult in schools?

> *If they say yes, allow space for response, and then continue below.*

> *If they say no, continue below.*

**SAY:** Thank you so much XXXX for taking the time to talk with me today. The information that you provided will help our team better understand what people who work in schools can do to make better connections with students like you. As I mentioned at the beginning, we want to compensate you for your time because we know you have a lot going on and we appreciate your willingness to work with us. Someone from the team will be in touch with more information about your gift card.

**Appendix B**

Interview Items for Email Administration

**Student Interview (Email version)**
Please read all of the instructions thoroughly.

Hi there! My name is XXX and I am from the UW working on the RELATE project with your school. My job is to gather information that helps inform how schools can do a better job engaging and supporting students so thanks for taking some time to answer a few questions for me today about caring adults in school. For answering these questions, you will receive a 20-dollar gift card to Starbucks, Chipotle, or Panera. Please try to be as thorough as possible and know that because you are filling this document out on your own, we might contact you further if we have any questions or clarifications.

Caring Adults in Schools
We have defined a caring adult is someone who you believe cares about you, supports your mental health and/or academic performance, someone that you can trust, and someone that ultimately makes your time at school a little bit better. For example, my high school science teacher made class fun and it felt like she believed in me. I could tell that she liked me and wanted me to be successful. With that said, we also know that it can be hard to find a caring adult in school and that might be the case for you. Either way, we are hoping to gather information about your experience with adults in school.

Interview Questions:
1. Is there at least one caring adult in your school who you trust and believe goes *above and beyond* to take notice of you and show that they care about you?

   **If you responded yes, go to question #2**
   **If you responded no, go to question #10**

2. Who is this adult? What do they do at the school?
3. About how often do you interact with them?
4. On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being 'Not Very Much and 5 being 'Very Much,' to what extent do you feel like they respect and care about you as a person, and not just a student?
   a. If you gave a rating of 1 or 2: Tell me why you rated it this way.
   b. If you gave a rating that is above a 2: What do they *do* that lets you know they respect and care about you as a <u>person</u> and not just a student?
5. On a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being 'Not Very Much and 5 being 'Very Much,' to what extent do you feel like you can trust them or that they are someone you can go to when you have a problem you are struggling with?
   a. If you gave a rating of 1 or 2: Tell me why you rated it this way.
   b. If you gave a rating that is above a 2: What makes you feel like you can trust them?

6.  If this caring adult was not at your school, how do you think your school experience would be different?
7.  This one might feel a little awkward, but if you had a chance to tell them how they positively influenced you, what would you say?
8.  In total, how many adults do you regularly interact with at school?
    a.  Can you list out each adult and then next to their name, write yes or no for if you think they are someone who cares about you and that you can trust. (For example it might look like this: Ms. Hansen – yes; Mrs. Christenson – no)
9.  Imagine if all the adults you regularly interacted with (the ones you just listed in the previous question) were a caring adult. How would school be different?


**<u>If you said no to question #1</u>**

10. In total, how many adults do you regularly interact with at school?
    a.  Can you list out each adult and then next to their name, write yes or no for if you think they are someone who cares about you and that you can trust. (For example it might look like this: Ms. Hansen – yes; Mrs. Christenson – no)
11. What would an adult need to *do* to make you feel like you can trust them?
12. How do you know when an adult cares about you as a person?
13. Is there someone in the school who you think has the potential to be a caring adult if they put in a little effort (yes or no)?
    b.  If you said yes, what could this person do to help you feel more connected to and supported in school?
14. Remember earlier when you listed out the adults that you interact with at school? Imagine if at least one of the adults you regularly interacted with, that you just listed in the previous question, were a caring adult. How would school be different?


If there is anything else that you would like to add about caring adults in schools, please do so here.