Voices of HOPE: Educational Histories of Young Women in the Juvenile Justice System

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ABSTRACT

KIMBERLY M. H. FOREMAN: Voices of HOPE: Educational Histories of Young Women in the Juvenile Justice System
(Under the direction of Judith L. Meece)

Guided by ecological models of development that stress the importance of individual and contextual influences on development this study used the lens of stage-environment fit to investigate young women’s perceptions of their successes and difficulties in school prior to their entry into the juvenile justice system. The sample consisted of 13 female students, aged 10 to 18 years, who were court ordered to a minimum-security juvenile justice facility in the Southeastern United States. Feminist principles and narrative methodology guided this secondary data analysis and included a thematic analysis of one-on-one semistructured student interviews, a thematic analysis of letters from the students to their future teachers, and a document review of the students’ school and juvenile justice records. This investigation conceptualized school engagement as an indicator of the students’ perceived developmental fit with their schools. The students’ narratives suggested that as the young women entered adolescence they perceived a poor developmental fit with their school environments. Specifically, the students reported being engaged in early elementary school, however by the time they reached late elementary and middle school their school engagement had begun to wane. Behavioral indicators of this trend are discussed. Themes that emerged from the students’ narratives are discussed and suggest that teacher-student relationships, school success, and sense of belonging may be important protective factors in the lives of delinquent
girls. Furthermore, current schooling practices may serve to push delinquent girls out of school. The students’ histories also suggest that school experiences shape young women’s identity. After experiencing various levels of failures with both the academic and social aspects of their schools, the youth in this study disengaged from school and began to explore alternative identities that provided them with a greater sense of competence and relatedness. Overall, the young women’s narratives illustrate how multiple contexts interact in complex ways with individual characteristics to place youth on positive or negative developmental trajectories. The findings have important implications for educational programming for high risk girls.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughters, Abby and Riley. I began this process before you entered my world. However, as soon as you became a part of my life you became my inspiration for completing my studies. I wish for you a love of learning that is even deeper than my own. I hope for you a passion that drives your intellectual curiosity. I crave for you a belief in yourself that will sustain the pursuit and achievement of your goals, despite all obstacles. And, I promise to you a never-ending source of support for whatever your endeavors may be.
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Finally, I am grateful for the support of my family. To my husband, his parents, and sister thank you for the numerous hours spent entertaining Abby and Riley so that I could abscond somewhere quiet to write. Most importantly, to my parents, thank you for logging almost as many hours working towards this degree as I have. Without your patience and never-ending help with childcare, carpool, meals, laundry, yard work, literally just anything and everything, my time and my mind would never have been freed up enough to get this many thoughts down on paper. The more I learn about the contextual influences operating in the lives of delinquent youth the more grateful I am of the patient, loving, supportive, stable influences you have always been in my life.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Female juvenile delinquency cases as a whole, as measured by Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and juvenile justice system records, have actually increased over the last two decades in the United States despite a reduction in the overall juvenile crime rate for most offenses since the mid-1990s and a higher number of male than female juvenile delinquency cases in general (Snyder, 2008; Stahl et al., 2007). In fact, between 1985 and 2005, female juvenile arrests increased proportionally more, or decreased less, than male juvenile arrests (Snyder, 2008; Stahl et al., 2007). Subsequently, there has been an increase in the number of young women being held in juvenile justice facilities that provide temporary, short-term, or long-term housing and/or programming for youth who have been placed in their care by the juvenile court system (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).

Certainly, male and female juvenile delinquents share some treatment needs. However, several important differences between these populations warrant the creation and implementation of programs that address the unique developmental needs of female delinquents (American Bar Association & National Bar Association [ABA-NBA], 2001; Belenko, Sprott, & Peterson, 2004; Dixon, Howie, & Starling, 2004; Harms, 2003; Scahill, 2000; Welch, 2007; Zahn, Hawkins, Chiancone, & Whitworth, 2008). In fact, prevention and intervention programming specific to delinquent girls is needed not only in juvenile justice

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1The construct will be defined later in more detail; however, in general, juvenile delinquency refers to illegal or antisocial behaviors committed by youth (Shoemaker, 2000).
settings but in school and community settings as well. Unfortunately, treatment interventions are not as prolific for female delinquents as they are for male delinquents (Dixon et al., 2004).

Ecological theories of development maintain that individual and contextual factors combine in complex ways to influence developmental pathways. That is, risk factors that increase the likelihood of adverse effects, promotive factors that increase the likelihood of favorable effects, and protective factors that buffer the effect of risk factors, continually operate and interact at both the personal and environmental levels to influence developmental outcomes (Cairns, 1986; Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Fraser & Allen-Meares, 2004; Magnusson, 2003; Najaka, Gottfredson, & Wilson, 2001; Sameroff & Gutman, 2004). Furthermore, ecological perspectives emphasize the significance of relationship quality in developmental outcomes (Cairns, Bergman, & Kagan, 1998; Eccles & Midgley, 1993; Peck & Roeser, 2003). Schools exert one of the strongest contextual influences on young people’s development (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 1996; Eccles, 2004; Roeser & Eccles, 2003; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998). Moreover, girls’ experiences in schools can place girls on either positive or negative trajectories (Zahn, 2007). Like other social environments, schools have different affordances and constraints that influence developmental pathways (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). For example, the quality of relationships between students and adults in school settings is associated with sense of belonging to school and shapes educational outcomes for students (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Lee & Burkam, 2003; McCombs

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2On a dimensional continuum, promotive factors are conceptualized as being located at the opposite end of risk factors; thus they promote, as opposed to impede, positive developmental outcomes (Fraser & Allen-Meares, 2004; Sameroff & Gutman, 2004).

As will be discussed later in more detail, one ecological model, *stage-environment fit theory*, maintains that schools must provide opportunities matched to the developmental needs of their students in order to foster students’ positive developmental outcomes (Eccles et al., 1993). The construct will be defined later in more detail; however, in general *school engagement* refers to students’ behavioral, emotional, and cognitive investments in school (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). School engagement is an indicator of student-school fit and is particularly important for delinquent girls. School engagement fosters healthy youth development and in that regard functions as a promotive factor. Moreover, evidence suggests that school engagement operates as a protective factor for youth at risk of poor developmental outcomes (ABA-NBA, 2001; Eccles, 1999, 2001; National Research Council [NRC], 2004; Roeser et al., 2000; Zahn, 2005). That is, school engagement serves as a positive constraint in the lives of at risk youth by propelling them toward more successful developmental outcomes than they would have otherwise experienced.

However, individual and contextual impediments to school engagement permeate delinquent girls’ lives (Acoca, 1999; Acoca & Dedel, 1998; ABA-NBA, 2001; Hirsch, Horvat, & Simkins, 2004; Weiss, Nicholson, & Cretella, 1996). For example, the quality of delinquent girls’ relationships with other youth and with adults, both inside and outside of schools, plays a vital role in their engagement in school. Alarmingly, disengagement in school represents a prominent risk factor in girls’ delinquency (ABA-NBA, 2001), and as such demonstrates one way schools negatively influence girls’ trajectories. Furthermore, although we know delinquent girls experience problems in school and that school failure can lead to delinquency few studies have actually examined the possible contributions of
schooling experiences to problem behavior among high risk girls (Biglan, Brennan, Foster, & Holder, 2004). Indeed, we know little about this population’s experiences in or perceptions of schools nor how their educational histories relate to their subsequent delinquent behavior.

In summary, recent trends of increased arrest rates for girls challenge juvenile justice systems and community school systems to provide appropriate services for a growing population of female juvenile delinquents. Effective programming for these girls (both prior to and/or after entering the juvenile justice system) provides services that address their unique developmental needs. Schooling experiences play an important role in youth development in general, and in the etiology of female delinquency in particular. Therefore, systematic research addressing the impact of schooling experiences on delinquency patterns in girls informs prevention and intervention programming choices for this population (Zahn, 2005, 2007).

Definitions and Rationale for Study

Researchers use multiple terms when discussing juvenile delinquency. Overlap between constructs can cause confusion (Trickett & Gordis, 2004). Therefore, this section reviews relevant terminology from the literature base and establishes working definitions for the present investigation. Next, it examines factors that prompt the need for this study on the educational histories of girls in the juvenile justice system. Thus, it reviews recent trends in girls’ delinquency and discusses the protective role schooling experiences play in delinquent girls’ lives. Finally, it reviews the suitability of qualitative methodology for an investigation about girls’ perceptions of their schooling experiences.

Relevant Terminology

This study follows FBI and Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) report standards and defines juvenile or youth as people under the age of 18.
Youth come under juvenile court jurisdiction for two different types of offenses. *Delinquent offenses* refer to acts committed by juveniles that could result in criminal prosecution had they been committed by adults (Stahl et al., 2007). Examples of delinquent offenses include theft, burglary, and selling drugs. *Status offenses* describe acts committed by juveniles that are illegal only because the individual committing them is a juvenile (Stahl et al., 2007). Examples of status offenses include running away, truancy, and *incorrigibility*, or being beyond the control of one’s guardians. Collectively, these offense types (criminal and status) committed by youth under age 18 are commonly called *delinquent behaviors* (Shoemaker, 2000). Furthermore, the youth committing them are called *juvenile delinquents*. A broader term, *antisocial*, describes behaviors in general that violate socially accepted ways of behaving as well as the youth who frequently violate these norms (Walker & Horner, 1996). Aggressive, disruptive, and/or violent behaviors are considered antisocial (Farmer, 2000; Farmer, Farmer, Estell, Hutchins, 2007).³

The present study endorses this same terminology. However, it collapses the distinction between antisocial behaviors and delinquent behaviors sometimes found in the literature and uses both terms interchangeably to refer to any behavior that violates social norms for youth, whether it is criminal, status, aggressive, disruptive, and/or violent. Finally, this investigation uses the terms *high risk* or *at risk* to refer to girls who represent more vulnerable candidates for delinquency due to the complex nature of their risk profiles. Specifically, while experiencing multiple risk factors at the individual and environmental levels they experience

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³Social or relational aggression plays a role in female development (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Gariépy, 1989; Crick & Gropeter, 1995). However, this study does not address social forms of aggression. To date, formal definitions of delinquency do not include social forms of aggression. Furthermore, while some consider it antisocial, other researchers have found social aggression adaptive in certain situations (Adler & Adler, 1998; Merten, 1997; Xie, Farmer, & Cairns, 2003; Xie, Swift, Cairns, & Cairns, 2002). The role social aggression plays in girls’ pathways to delinquency constitutes an important area for future research (Ehrensaft, 2005).
an absence of promotive and/or protective factors at both levels (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Farmer, Xie, Cairns, & Hutchins, 2007).

**Trends in Girls’ Delinquency**

A recent Girls’ Study Group investigation analyzed three disparate data sources to determine the accuracy of recent media reports about the rise in girls’ violent behavior (Zahn, Brumbaugh et al., 2008). Specifically, they compared official arrest data from the FBI Uniform Crime Report, self-report data from the Monitoring the Future study, and victimization data from the National Crime Victimization Survey (see Glossary for study descriptions). The researchers found a discrepancy between girls’ arrest trends and their self-report and victimization trends. Discussed in further detail below, girls’ arrest rates for violent crimes increased from 1996 to 2005. However, girls’ self-reports of violence remained fairly constant during that same time period and did not increase relative to boys’ self-reports of violence. Furthermore, victimization data showed little variation in girls’ versus boys’ assault offenses or in their Violent Crime Index offenses, the FBI’s grouped measure of murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault trends (FBI, 2008). Zahn, Brumbaugh, et al. (2008) concluded that although in recent years girls’ arrests for violent offenses has increased girls’ actual involvement in violent behavior has not changed significantly. Furthermore, they attributed the increase in girls’ arrests for violent crimes to changes in legal, law enforcement, school, and court policies rather than to changes in girls’ behavior. This important finding highlights the need for research on these policy changes and their consequences for girls. However, it also

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4In 2004, OJJDP convened this interdisciplinary group of scholars and practitioners to create a theoretical and empirical foundation to aide in the understanding, reduction, and prevention of girls’ delinquency (Zahn, Brumbaugh, et al., 2008; Zahn, Hawkins, et al., 2008).
emphasizes girls’ increased involvement with the juvenile justice system and the subsequent call for prevention and intervention programming that meets delinquent girls’ unique needs.

The overall racial profile for male versus female delinquency cases is similar; the majority of delinquency cases involve white youth (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Furthermore, in almost all offense categories, boys account for more of the delinquency caseload than girls (Snyder, 2008; Stahl et al., 2007). However, according to FBI and juvenile justice system records, in the last two decades female delinquency arrest rates increased more, or decreased less, than male delinquency cases in many categories, including the most serious ones. For example, between 1995 and 2004, female arrests for person offenses, or crimes against another person, increased by 10% while male arrests for person offenses decreased by 13% (Stahl et al., 2007). Specifically, from 1996 to 2005, female arrests for aggravated assault, or an attack on another person, usually including a weapon, with the intent to inflict severe bodily injury (FBI, 2008), decreased only 5% while male arrests for aggravated assault declined 23% (Snyder, 2008). Simultaneously, girls’ arrests for simple assault, or an attack of a less serious nature without the use of a weapon (FBI, 2008), increased 24% while boys’ arrests for simple assault decreased 4%. Interestingly, the girls who commit the most serious crimes do so “almost exclusively” within the context of either a dependent or an equal relationship (Acoca, 1999, section 2). That is, these girls either follow the lead of a primary perpetrator (usually a male adult), or they engage in crime as members of same-sex or mixed-sex groups (Acoca, 1999).

Finally, girls historically have been more likely than boys to be arrested and placed in juvenile justice facilities for status offenses like running away, incorrigibility, or truancy.

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5However, given the proportion of black youth in the juvenile population, a disproportionate number of delinquency cases involve black youth. For example, in 2002, the overall juvenile population was 78% White, 16% Black, and 6% Other races; the delinquency caseload for males was 67% White, 29% Black, and 3% Other; for females was 67% White, 30% Black and 4% Other (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006).
(Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004). In 2004, girls accounted for proportionally more status offense cases than delinquency offense cases (Stahl et al., 2007). Moreover, the only status offense category in which girls represented a larger proportion of the caseload than boys was the runaway case rate (Stahl et al., 2007). However, among girls, the most common status offense category is truancy. In fact, between 1995 and 2004 the truancy rate for girls was higher than the rates of all other status offenses (Stahl et al., 2007). This trend begs the question: Why are high risk girls avoiding school? And, what role do schooling experiences play in girls’ subsequent delinquent behavior?

Significance of Schooling Experiences for Delinquent Girls

Schooling experiences influence the developmental trajectories of high risk girls because school provides an important context for adolescent development (Eccles, 2004; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Roeser & Eccles, 2003; Roeser, Eccles, & Freedman-Doan, 1999; Roeser et al., 1998). Furthermore, a strong association exists between antisocial behavior and underachievement in school for both boys and girls (Hinshaw, 1992; Maguin & Loeber, 1996). That is, schools play an important role in increasing or decreasing youths’ risk of antisocial behavior (Zahn, Hawkins et al., 2008; Roeser et al., 1998). For example, the quality of delinquent girls’ relationships in school settings impacts not only their school success but also their delinquent outcomes. Thus, antisocial friends have less influence on girls’ delinquent behavior when girls feel emotionally close to their teachers and perform well in school than when girls feel alienated from teachers and experience school failure (Crosnoe, Erikson, & Dornbusch, 2002).

As previously mentioned, the interaction of individual and contextual variables shapes developmental pathways (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Eccles et al., 1993; Farmer et al., 2007; Lerner & Galambos, 1998; Roeser et al., 1998). At the individual level a number of
important school-related factors (e.g., commitment to school, attachment to school) reduce the risk of delinquency for girls (Crosnoe et al., 2002; Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992; Gottfredson, 2001; Maguin & Loeber, 1996; Payne, Gottfredson, & Kruttschnitt, 2005). Moreover, research highlights school success as an important aspect of female development and a consistent moderator of delinquency for girls (Valentine Foundation & Women’s Way, 1991; Zahn, 2005; Zahn, Hawkins, et al, 2008). Conversely, underachievement and alienation from school increases risk of delinquency for both girls and boys (Eccles, Lord, Roeser, Barber, & Jozefowicz, 1997; Roeser et al., 1999). At the school level a number of variables, including school size and school climate, also influence the risk of delinquency (Gottfredson, 2001). Finally, the developmental appropriateness of a school environment impacts positive versus negative student outcomes (Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles, 2004).

**A Qualitative Approach**

Scientists now study pathways to delinquency unique to girls, or in other words, how girls, as distinct from boys, come to engage in delinquent behaviors. Subsequently, they have identified numerous correlates, or factors, that signify the individual attributes or characteristics, situational conditions, or environmental contexts that yield a risk, promotive, or protective influence (Najaka et al., 2001) on girls’ delinquency (Mullis, Cornille, Mullis, & Huber, 2004; Putallaz & Bierman, 2004). Undeniably, such information holds important relevance for program development for female juvenile delinquents. However, while the current research provides quantitative data on trends common to these young women’s existence, very little of this information offers qualitative insight into their life experiences. Yet, experts in the field of girls’ delinquency clearly emphasize that program development for female juvenile delinquents must consider delinquent girls’ life histories (Zahn, Hawkins, et al., 2008).
Fortunately, qualitative methodology offers an ideal way to explore such histories and to enhance understanding of how delinquent girls experience their various contexts. Its focus on real individuals in naturally occurring, truthful settings and events generates rich, holistic data that emphasizes people’s “lived experience” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10). Indeed, qualitative methodology offers researchers a way to “from the inside” capture data on participants’ perceptions about a given context and thus create an opportunity for deep, empathetic understanding (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 6). In particular, during the last few decades, narrative methods, which focus on personal experience as expressed through language (e.g., case study, life history, autobiography, ethnography), have become increasingly valued among researchers in the social sciences and humanities as well as among researchers in psychology (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006). Unfortunately however, few studies have utilized narrative methods to enrich the current knowledge base on female delinquency (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004).

A person’s self-report of a given context provides more validity than an objective measure of a person’s experience (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). Thus, rather than examining school and juvenile justice records to track the educational histories of female offenders, this study uses an ecological perspective to investigate delinquent girls’ perceptions of the schooling events, processes, and structures in their lives prior to their involvement in the juvenile justice system. Furthermore, via narrative methodology this study will meet a secondary goal of providing a group of adolescent girls from diverse backgrounds a platform to experience empowerment through voice, or confidence in one’s ability to express her opinions and needs (Gilligan, 1990, 2004). According to some scholars, many girls experience a loss of voice as they enter their adolescent years. Furthermore, “girls on the margin” rarely have an opportunity to describe their experiences from their own
perspective (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004, p. 237). Yet, we stand to gain an immense amount of knowledge (about schooling for girls, female delinquency, and program development for delinquent girls) from simply listening to what delinquent girls have to say.

Therefore, guided by ecological models of development that stress the importance of individual’s perceptions of the personal and environmental influences operating in their lives, this study asks one group of incarcerated girls about their early school experiences, their relationships with teachers, their peer relationships, their family support for education, their academic successes and difficulties, and their perceived fit with the school environment. The general research questions include: What were the overall schooling experiences for this population? Did these young women experience difficulties in school? If so, when did they begin to experience difficulties in school? And finally, what was the nature of their problems?

Summary

Regardless of whether or not girls’ involvement in delinquent behavior has actually changed in recent years, evidence confirms that girls’ arrests for delinquent acts have in fact increased. Therefore, currently more girls enter the juvenile justice system. Consequently, both community and juvenile justice settings require intervention and prevention programming specific to the unique needs of female adolescents. Furthermore, schools represent an important context for youth development and play a significant role in increasing or decreasing girls’ delinquency. In fact, the extent to which schools match or do not match students’ developmental needs determines students’ positive or negative developmental outcomes, respectively. Unfortunately, many factors operating within schools are of particular concern for high risk girls. More importantly, these factors operate prior to,
as well as concurrently with, the emergence of girls’ choices to engage in truancy, dropout, and delinquency.

Additionally, although we know that school disengagement and failure can lead to delinquency, we do not have much information about how girls experience this process. Furthermore, despite its obvious relevance, research on girls’ perceptions of their schooling experiences is scarce. Narrative methodology offers a unique and enriching way to address this paucity and to learn more about delinquent girls’ perceptions of schools, their schooling experiences, and about how delinquent girls navigate schools. Therefore, this investigation uses a qualitative approach to contribute to the small, extant knowledge base that explores the schooling experiences of young women in the juvenile justice system. Specifically, using an ecological perspective, this exploratory, narrative study seeks to give voice to one group of incarcerated young women and in so doing to cultivate a richer understanding of their educational histories.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Research should be guided by theoretical models that inform both conceptual and methodological decisions about a given study (Creswell, 2002). Furthermore, it should begin with a review of the literature base that provides empirically sound knowledge about the population in consideration as well as the personal and contextual influences relevant to that population. Thus, this section begins with an overview of the historical progression of stage-environment fit theory, the theoretical model that frames this study. It also explains how narrative methodology and feminist perspectives have informed both the design and interpretation of this investigation. Secondly, this section provides a review of relevant literature. Consequently, it discusses female delinquency, including important theoretical perspectives and related empirical research. Next, it briefly overviews how the developmental stage of adolescence engenders personal and environmental transitions that play a role in both female delinquency and schooling difficulties for high risk girls. Finally, it examines the concept of school engagement and its protective role in the lives of high risk girls.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical models provide a framework upon which to build empirical studies (Creswell, 2002). This section discusses the theoretical perspectives that frame this
investigation. As such, it reviews stage-environment fit theory, autobiographical narrative, and feminist perspectives as well as their influences on this study’s design.

Stage-Environment Fit Theory

In the mid-1930s, Kurt Lewin’s paradigm shifting *person-environment interaction theory*, \( B = f(P, E) \), conceptualized behavior as a function of a person interacting with his or her environment (Lewin, 1935). Forty years later, Hunt and Sullivan (1974, 1975) employed a developmental lens to explore Lewin’s heuristic. Consequently, they used a *B-P-E* formula to link psychological concepts and educational practice. They asserted that in order to understand a child in developmental terms one must, first, possess an understanding of a child’s present developmental stage in relation to a larger sequence of stages, and second, have an awareness of environmental experiences necessary for growth. Specifically, they argued that developmental growth (\( B \)) is shaped by a child’s current developmental stage (\( P \)) and the environment she encounters (\( E \)). They applied this theory to educational settings and recommended that teachers create classrooms that not only meet a student’s contemporaneous needs but that also consider the developmental continuum of needs through which all individuals progress (Hunt, 1975; Hunt & Sullivan, 1974).

During the mid-1980s another group of researchers applied these same concepts to a specific stage of development and a specific schooling context. In what became known as *stage-environment fit theory*, these scholars specifically investigated how well schools serving early adolescents addressed their students’ unique developmental needs (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Eccles and colleagues repeatedly found that academic environments lacking opportunities matched to the developmental needs of early adolescent students did not foster favorable developmental outcomes (Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles, Lord, & Buchanan, 1996;
Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, Midgley, & Adler, 1984). Specifically, a mismatch between the developmental needs of early adolescents and the characteristics inherent in their school environments resulted in a decrease in academic interest, a decrease in intrinsic motivation, and an increase in negative attitudes toward schooling.

Indeed, their research reveals several instances of stage-environment mismatch that leads to subsequent student disengagement from school. For example, as youth approach adolescence the need for autonomy intensifies, social awareness heightens, and cognitive capacities increase. Unfortunately, classrooms for many adolescents emphasize teacher control and discipline, utilize instructional practices that encourage social comparison of ability (normative grading, ability grouping, etc.), and offer assignments requiring lower cognitive skills (Eccles et al., 1996; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1984). In such settings, few opportunities exist for students to make decisions or to engage in self-management. Moreover, a focus on grades and competition can negatively affect academic competence and intrinsic forms of motivation (Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006).

As previously mentioned, ecological perspectives including stage-environment fit theory, emphasize the quality of relationships between youth and adults in school settings. This becomes particularly relevant at the onset of adolescence when adults other than parents begin to hold integral developmental roles for youth. However, secondary schools are usually much larger than elementary schools, and in general, large school environments do not foster high quality teacher-student relationships. Moreover, secondary teachers are less likely to trust their students, and junior high school teacher-student relationships tend to be less personal, less friendly, and less caring than elementary teacher-student relationships (Eccles et al., 1996; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1984). These patterns can be especially
harmful to girls who, according to some scholars, derive their sense of self through their connections with others (Belknap, Dunn, & Holsinger, 1997; Gilligan, 1982, 1990, 2004; Josselson, 1987).

In summary, stage-environment fit theorists argue that a mismatch between the developmental needs of early adolescents and the characteristics inherent in their school environments undermines the healthy development of young adolescent students (Eccles et al., 1996; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1997). Consequently, this ecological perspective offers a framework through which to understand how the schooling experiences of high risk girls may be one of many factors that places them on the pathway toward delinquent behavior. Indeed, it is quite possible that these same schooling processes function to undermine positive developmental outcomes for girls at risk of delinquency. Unfortunately, limited knowledge exists in this area. A deeper understanding of the educational histories of incarcerated female adolescents will increase awareness and aide the creation of effective prevention and intervention programs uniquely suited to this population. Thus, this investigation uses the lens of stage-environment fit to explore the schooling experiences of one group of incarcerated young women.

Autobiographical Narrative

Narrative methodology offers a process approach to study design (McLean, 2008), which suits an exploration of delinquent girls’ schooling experiences framed within an ecological model of development. In particular, life story, the subjective account of a life as remembered, reflected upon, or narrated, has become an especially valuable tool for psychologists seeking to explore how individuals make sense of their lived experience both at one point in time as well as across their life spans (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Habermas &
In this regard, life story represents a personal and autobiographical endeavor (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Thorne & Nam, 2007). At the same time however, social context shapes autobiographical narratives (McAdams et al., 2006; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Thorne & Nam, 2007). That is, such stories are situated, or socially constructed, within a specific situation, cultural, and historical context; for a particular listening audience; in response to specific social relationships; and to fulfill particular goals (McLean, 2005; McLean et al., 2007).

Furthermore, via autobiographical reasoning individuals reflect on and describe their pasts, while simultaneously constructing and reconstructing their selves (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Thus, autobiographical narrative intertwines with identity development (Habermas & Bluck; 2000; Habermas & de Silveria, 2008; McAdams et al., 2006; McLean et al., 2007). Indeed, some scholars maintain that identity is a life story (McAdams, 2001). Life story, like identity formation, is a life-long process. However the ability to construct a life story emerges during adolescence due to the onset of physiological maturity, increase in cognitive functioning, and new contextual demands associated with that developmental stage (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2001). The most significant psychosocial task of adolescence is identity formation (Erikson, 1968), and autobiographical narratives reveal important individual differences in the process of identity formation (McLean, 2008). The participants in this study are female adolescents who are actively constructing identities for themselves as daughters, sisters, friends, sexual beings, and members of society. In many ways, an investigation of their schooling experiences by default asks them to construct a picture of their identities as students as well. Thus, an exploration of their situated stories about schooling is an appropriate design for this study.
To review, narrative methodology provides researchers insight into how individuals construct meaning of their experiences. Autobiographical narrative is both an individual and a socially constructed process that is highly correlated with identity formation. Narrative methodology is a fitting design for this study because it provides a process approach to the exploration of delinquent girls’ perceptions of their past experiences as students.

Feminist Perspectives

Feminist perspectives on delinquency and education also play a role in the design and interpretation of this study. Thus, female behavior and interpretations of female behavior can not be separated from their context in a patriarchal society (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004). That is, female behavior is a reaction to girls’ and women’s positioning in society as one of vulnerability to victimization by boys and men, especially in regards to the destructive effects of abuse and poverty (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Roberts, Wechsberg, Zule, & Burroughs, 2003; Roberts, Jackson, & Carlton-LaNey, 2000; Shoemaker, 2000). Specifically, behavior is gender contextualized and the nature of female delinquency is influenced by gender stratification as well as by the reactions of a patriarchal juvenile justice system to female delinquent behavior. Likewise, as discussed later in more detail, education and schooling are unavoidably influenced by issues of power and gender associated with our patriarchal society (AAUW, 1990, 1992; Bank, Delamont, & Marshall, 2007; Sparks & Park, 2000). In fact, research suggests that gender differentiated aspects of schools such as staffing patterns, curricular materials, and access to technology and vocational education, can be more rigidly gender stereotyped than society at large (Meece & Scantlebury, 2006). Furthermore, some researchers have argued girls have a different way of knowing than boys;

6The construct of patriarchy refers to a culture that is headed by fathers (Gilligan, 2004). It involves a hierarchy where some fathers control access to power and knowledge, where some men are elevated over other men, and where women are subordinated.
therefore, regardless of whether or not girls’ relationality is innate or socially constructed, attention to relationship quality and ethic of care, or an emphasis on connections between people, is particularly vital to the understanding of girls’ schooling experiences (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Brabeck & Brabeck, 2006; Crawford & Unger, 2004; Gilligan, 1982, 2004; Noddings, 2003).

Because identity is situated, feminist perspectives place value on individuals’ subjective experiences (Enns & Sinacore, 2005). Narrative methodology deliberately captures participant’s perceptions and thus becomes an important instrument of voice for girls. Chesney-Lind and Shelden (2004) maintain that a gender-sensitive model of girls’ delinquency will emerge from literature especially concerned with girls’ actual lives and with how the problems they experience play a role in their delinquent behaviors. Few qualitative, feminist-guided, contextually-based studies that explore female behavior exist. However, delinquency scholars claim that this paucity must be addressed in order to generate further meaningful information on female criminality, to develop a more lucid understanding of male patterns of delinquency, and to uncover factors common to both male and female delinquency (Shoemaker, 2000). The integration of ecological, narrative, and feminist perspectives in this investigation’s design to explore specific delinquent girls’ situated stories about their schooling experiences and about how those experiences played a role in their subsequent delinquency constitutes a step toward that goal.

Female Delinquency

Historically, theory and research specifically addressing female delinquency has been scarce (Pajer, 1998; Zahn, Hawkins, et al., 2008). In recent years however more emphasis has been placed on generating theory that expressly accounts for female antisocial behavior.
Consequently, scholars have begun to use female samples to empirically test various hypotheses. Such research provides insight into the myriad biological and environmental factors that interact to influence problematic outcomes for girls. This section reviews the current theoretical debate about the onset of female delinquency. Furthermore, it discusses risk profiles of girls in the juvenile justice system as they relate to school engagement and achievement.

Theoretical Perspectives on Female Delinquency

Scholars have contemplated the origins of delinquent behavior among youth for centuries (Shoemaker, 2000). However, most of their attention has focused on how it is that boys come to engage in delinquency (Zahn, Hawkins, et al., 2008). During the last few decades theorists have pursued how it is that girls develop delinquent patterns of behavior (Bierman et al., 2004; Moffitt, 1993; Silverthorn & Frick, 1999). Thus, although this area of research is still an emergent field, models accounting for female delinquency now exist. A few theories direct current thinking about girls’ antisocial behavior and spur scholarly debates that lead to increasingly sophisticated explorations of this phenomenon. This section reviews three influential theories addressing delinquent behavior among girls.

Dual Taxonomy Model

One developmental model groups delinquent girls into one of two taxonomies. Members of the first group, *life course persistent* (LCP), show antisocial patterns that begin in childhood, intensify over time, and result in problematic adulthoods (Moffitt, 1993; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Moffitt, Caspi, Rutter, & Silva, 2001). Those in the second group, *adolescence limited* (AL), engage in antisocial behavior primarily only during adolescence. The AL pathway represents most delinquent girls, and the LCP pathway represents
delinquent girls in only “extremely rare” cases (Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Moffitt et al., 2001, p. 226). In essence, the LCP pathway does address female delinquency; however the number of girls who fit this pattern is extremely small, and therefore the LCP pathway does not account for the majority of girls who become delinquent. Other research testing the dual taxonomy hypothesis has shown general support for the model with some important modifications (Brennan, Hall, Bor, Najman, & Williams, 2003; Fergusson, Horwood, & Nagin, 2000; Kratzer & Hodgins, 1999; Mazerolle, Brame, Paternoster, Piquero, & Dean, 2000). That is, studies evaluating this model suggest that for the majority of female delinquents antisocial behavior commences in adolescence, reminiscent of the adolescent-limited rather than the life-course persistent typology (Fergusson et al., 2000; Fergusson & Horwood, 2002; Foster, 2005; Kratzer & Hodgins, 1999; Mazerolle et al., 2000; Moffitt, 2003; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001.)

Delayed-Onset Trajectory for Girls

Interestingly, AL girls may experience poor adult outcomes, similar to the LCP boys (Moffitt & Caspi, 2001; Moffitt et al., 2001). Consequently, other theorists question the efficacy of a dual typology model to explain girls’ delinquency. Silverthorn and Frick (1999), for instance, consider the gender variation in the expression of antisocial behavior across development (i.e., small male to female ratio during first three years of life, larger ratio during childhood, small ratio again during adolescence; Keenan & Shaw, 1997; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeberr, 1998; Silverthorn & Frick, 1999; Talbott, 1997) as well as the childhood characteristics and adult outcomes unique to antisocial girls and conclude that a third trajectory better captures the nature of female delinquency. Specifically, the delayed-onset

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7 The research of Aguilar, Sroufe, Edgeland, and Carlson (2000) is an exception to this pattern.
(D-O) pathway for girls shares childhood predictors and adult outcomes with the LCP pathway yet demonstrates adolescent onset of antisocial behavior (consistent with the AL pathway). The empirical support for this model is limited. However, the D-O trajectory model has been an important influence in the field by stimulating new theory and research to address sex-specific concerns with the dual taxonomy model.

Nonaggressive-Disruptive Starting Patterns for Girls

An important example of this trend is found in the work of Bierman and colleagues (2004) who question how well the aforementioned models actually measure predictors of female delinquency in the first place. That is, the current models of female delinquency may not accurately represent girls simply because the tests these models use to predict early or late onset of antisocial behavior do not tap qualities unique to female delinquents but rather assess predictor behaviors common to male delinquents (Bierman et al., 2004; Zahn-Waxler, 1993; Zoccolillo, 1993). As previously mentioned, unlike their male counterparts, female delinquents are less likely to show patterns of early physical aggression (Broidy et al., 2003; Bierman et al., 2004; Caspi, Lyman, Moffitt, & Silva, 1993; Moffitt & Caspi, 2001). Instead, girls on the pathway toward delinquency show early patterns of nonaggressive, disruptive behaviors (Bierman et al., 2004). These include behaviors classified as oppositional (disobedient, argumentative, stubborn, angry reactions) or impulsive (hyperactive, impulsive, acts without thinking). For the most part, high risk girls do not display the type of aggressive behaviors that will be detected by school screening instruments until adolescence (Bierman et al., 2004; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004). This can preclude them from being properly identified at an early age as at risk for delinquency, place them at risk for poor school adjustment and achievement, and reduce their likelihood of receiving early intervention.
Therefore, broader measures that emphasize nonaggressive/disruptive as well as aggressive/disruptive behaviors may better identify high risk girls, more accurately explain female delinquency, and increase the likelihood that high risk girls will receive the early intervention necessary to increase their school engagement and achievement and decrease their risk for delinquency.

*Risk Profiles of Girls in the Juvenile Justice System*

Regardless of the theoretical debate on female delinquency recent research does suggest that different risk patterns operate in male versus female delinquency (Bierman et al., 2004; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Caspi et al., 1993; Potter, 2004; Zahn, 2007). Such research identifies salient risk, promotive, and protective factors that can negatively or positively influence girls’ risk for delinquency. These personal and contextual correlates of female delinquency also impact girls’ schooling experiences. Therefore, this section briefly reviews the associated risk profiles that place girls at risk for poor school achievement and engagement. Specifically, it discusses family, peer, and school-related influences and addresses their correlated nature.

*Family Influences on Female Delinquency*

Evidence clearly establishes that family influences have a significant impact on school engagement and adjustment and are important to school success. For instance, students exposed to *authoritative parenting styles*, where parents monitor youths’ activities, consistently provide warm, responsive, emotional support, and encourage independent decision-making, are more engaged and involved in school than are students exposed to other parenting styles that do not include such practices (Baumrind, 1991; Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Steinberg, Darling, Fletcher, Brown, & Dornbusch,
These students are also more likely to experience school success and are less likely to drop out of school (Rumberger, 1995).

Additionally, via processes such as modeling, reinforcement, and instruction, various types of parental involvement in youths’ education (at home or at school) positively affect students’ skill and achievement levels, their self-efficacy for achieving school success, as well as their behaviors in and attitudes toward school (Epstein, 1995, 2002; Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). In fact, even for youth who are engaged in and successful at school, positive parent-child relationships and parental involvement in school are necessary to maintain their school success (Englund, Egeland, & Collins, 2008). Furthermore, in the absence of parental support and/or positive parent-child relationships, even academically capable students are more likely to experience school failure. Thus, healthy, positive relationships between family, students, and schools are important.

Alternatively, negative family relationships may place girls at risk for poor school adjustment and achievement. Unfortunately, delinquent girls commonly experience conflict in their family relationships (Allen-Meares & Fraser, 2004; Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Ehrensaft, 2005; Fejes-Mendoza & Miller, 1995; Goldstein & Heaven, 2000; Henggeler, Edwards, & Borduin, 1987; Hoyt & Scherer, 1998; Moffitt et al., 2001; Weiss et al., 1996; Weist, Freedman, Pasketwitz, & Proescher, 1995; Zahn, Hawkins, et al., 2008). For example, delinquent girls often come from low-income homes where family members, including parents, abuse alcohol and/or drugs, suffer from depression or other psychiatric problems, and/or have a criminal history (Acoca, 1999; Acoca & Dedel,

These findings may be more applicable to European American and Hispanic American students than to students from other ethnic groups (Steinberg, Darling, & Fletcher, 1995).
1988; Fergusson & Horwood, 2002; Foster, 2005; Moffitt et al., 2001). Such contexts render girls’ access to social supports for school sporadic at best.

Additionally, according to the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, 95% of the girls within the juvenile justice system do not have stable home environments (Acoca & Dedel, 1998). In fact, many report several moves between relatives, foster homes, and group homes. Evidence suggests that multiple family transitions place girls at risk for drug use and delinquency (Thornberry, Smith, Rivera, Huizinga, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1999). Certainly from a logistical perspective multiple moves impede school continuity. Furthermore, family fragmentation leaves delinquent girls with low levels of parental supervision and monitoring, weak family bonding, and again, with few social supports for school achievement (Sondheimer, 2001).

Abuse victimization. The prevalence of maltreatment in delinquent girls’ families can add to their school adjustment problems. Delinquent girls are more likely than girls in the general population to be survivors of abuse victimization, or emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse or neglect (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Browne, Miller, & Maguin, 1999; Holsinger & Holsinger, 2005; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Sadly, for many girls, maltreatment is often perpetrated by a family member or by someone they already know; thus for many delinquent girls, the family provides a context for abuse (Acoca & Dedel, 1998; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; OJJDP, 2000; Phillips, 1998; Potter, 2004; Trickett, Kurtz, & Noll, 2005; Zahn, Hawkins, et al., 2008).

These traumatic encounters correlate with many negative developmental outcomes for girls. For instance, abuse victimization is frequently associated with lowered self-esteem in girls (Azar, 2005; Trickett & Putnam, 1993) and with engagement in delinquent behaviors.
(e.g., running away, serious drug use, truancy, early sexual activity, gang involvement, 
vviolent crime; Acoca, 1999; Acoca & Dedel, 1998; Belknap et al., 1997; Chesney-Lind & 
Shelden, 2004; Gaarder & Belknap, 2002; Hawkins, Graham, Williams, & Zahn, 2009; 
Phillips, 1998; Roberts, Wechsberg et al., 2003; Siegel & Williams, 2003; Weiss et al., 1996; 
Widom & Maxfield, 2001). Furthermore, even after accounting for contextual factors (e.g., 
SES, family social class, neighborhood), survivors of abuse and maltreatment are more likely 
to experience academic failures such as lower test scores, higher absenteeism, poor school 
performance, increased discipline problems, more grade retention, and higher rates of 
dropout than are matched control groups (Eckenrode, Laird, & Doris, 1993; Howing, 
Wodarski, Kurtz, Gaudin, & Herbst, 1990; Kurtz, Gaudin, & Wodarski, 1993; Perez & 
Widom, 1994; Wodarski, Kurtz, Gaudin, Howing, 1990). Thus, not only does abuse 
victimization increase girls’ risk for delinquency it also increases girls’ risk of poor school 
adjustment.

Substance abuse. Abuse of drugs and/or alcohol is also linked with school failure. The 
number of family disruptions experienced by female adolescents is positively associated with 
their increased likelihood of drug use (Keller, Catalano, Haggerty, & Fleming, 2002). 
Furthermore, girls who are from chaotic families and/or who are victims of abuse often turn 
to drugs and/or alcohol to escape the harsh realities of their lives (Acoca & Dedel, 1998; 
Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Weiss et al., 1996). In fact, substance abusing girls and 
women who report sexual abuse often experience mental health difficulties such as 
depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Roberts, Nishimoto, & Kirk, 2003). Girls who 
abuse drugs and/or alcohol are more likely to participate in other risky behaviors such as 
unsafe sexual practices, gang activity, truancy, violence, and violent offending (Acoca &
Dedel, 1998; Browne et al., 1999; Gaardner & Belknap, 2002; Holsinger & Holsinger, 2005; Weiss et al., 1996). Indeed, many girls inside the juvenile justice system have abused drugs and/or alcohol (Chesney-Lind, 2001; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Goldstein et al., 2003; Teplin, Abram, McClelland, Dulcan, & Mericle, 2002; Weiss et al., 1996; Welch, 2007). Furthermore, girls who abuse drugs and/or alcohol are more likely to maintain recurring contact with the juvenile justice system, subsequent involvement with the adult criminal system, and to experience mental health problems as adults (Belenko et al., 2004; Wångby, Bergman, & Magnusson, 1999). Finally, drug and/or alcohol abuse compounds girls’ difficulties in schools, impeding their school engagement and achievement while increasing their likelihood of school failure (Acoca & Dedel, 1998).

To review, chaotic family systems, patterns of family deviance, and abusive experiences are more influential predictors of substance abuse and delinquency for adolescent girls than for adolescent boys (Allen-Meares & Fraser, 2004; Belknap & Holsinger, 1998; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1998). In essence, these formative experiences serve as “pathways to offending” (Belknap & Holsinger, 1998, p.1) that lead girls along distinctive routes into the juvenile justice system. Furthermore, these influences and their correlates also place girls’ at risk for poor school engagement and adjustment.

Peer Influences on Female Delinquency

Research suggests that peer relationships exert considerable influence on school engagement and achievement (Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003; Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Kindermann, 1993; Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch, 1996). In fact, peer groups operate as contexts of influence on students’ school adjustment (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005a). When evaluating schooling experiences, feedback from and relationships with peers factor heavily
into students’ perceptions of schools, especially for early adolescent students (Eccles & Midgley, 1993; Harter, 1990). Specifically, peer groups function to establish behavioral norms for youth; validate students’ sense of self-worth; and cultivate a sense of belonging, which plays an important role in students’ school engagement and achievement (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005a).

Members of peer groups often share behavioral tendencies and schooling characteristics such as engagement, achievement, and attachment to school (Akos, Hamm, Mack, & Dunaway, 2007; Kindermann, McCollom, & Gibson, 1996; Ryan, 2000; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Indeed, a young person’s achievement level and intrinsic valuing of school are often associated with the achievement levels and school valuing of her peers (Ryan, 2001). For example, regardless of family background, students who have close friendships with academically oriented peers are more likely to enroll in higher-level voluntary math courses than are students with low achieving friends (Crosnoe, Riegle-Crumb, Field, Frank, & Muller, 2008). Furthermore, adolescents who form relationships with low achieving peers will often perform at lower levels, and the configurations of low-achieving peer groups are relatively stable over time (Kindermann et al., 1996).

In general, deviant peer groups function to reinforce the maintenance of antisocial behaviors over time (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Gariépy, 1988; Giordano, Cernkovich, & Pugh, 1986). Deviancy training is the process by which peers encourage, model, and reward each other’s antisocial behavior (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999; Dishion & Piehler, 2007; Dodge, Dishion, & Lansford, 2006). Unfortunately, delinquent girls report more peer pressure than non-delinquent girls (Pleydon & Schnler, 2001; Weiss et al., 1996), so peer groups that approve of and engage in antisocial behavior
wield a strong influence on girls’ decisions to follow suit (Kerpelman & Smith-Adcock, 2005; Pleydon & Schner, 2001). Thus, high risk girls’ tendency to associate with other antisocial youth at school undermines their engagement in school (Bierman et al., 2004; Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Farmer, 2000; Roeser et al., 1999; Roeser et al., 2000). Moreover, once formed such peer groups function not only to reinforce antisocial behaviors but to contribute to subsequent alienation from academically engaged peers, both of which lead to further disengagement from school (Cairns & Cairns, 1994).

To review, a good deal of homophily with regard to antisocial behavior exists among youth. Consequently, girls who associate with delinquent peers are more likely to engage in antisocial behavior. Furthermore, youth who associate with disengaged peers are more likely to disengage from school.

School-Related Influences on Female Delinquency

Delinquent girls also experience noteworthy school-related risk patterns that negatively influence their engagement in school (Acoca, 1999; Acoca & Dedel, 1998; Hirsch et al., 2004; Weiss, et al., 1996). For example, the majority have repeated a grade, been suspended or expelled, and/or been placed in a special classroom (Acoca & Dedel, 1998). Repeating one or more grades predicts eventual school dropout for both boys and girls. However, girls who are held back tend to drop out even earlier than do boys (AAUW, 1992). Additionally, a disproportionate number of delinquent girls have learning disabilities that unfortunately, in some girls, are not identified in their early years of school (DeZolt & Hull, 2002; Weiss et al., 1996). Furthermore, delinquent girls describe their schools as places where they are not only frequently bored, but where they must endure racist and sexist practices, peer rivalries,

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9School suspensions and expulsions are correlated with delinquency (especially early delinquency) for both boys and girls (Bachman et al., 2008).
and apathetic adults (Acoca & Dedel, 1998; DeZolt & Hull, 2002; Hand & Sanchez, 2000; Weiss et al., 1996). It is not surprising that skipping and even dropping out of school are viewed by some as an escape. However, the high numbers of school absences and truancy among delinquent girls (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Hirsch et al., 2004) just contribute further to lower levels of school engagement and achievement (Acoca, 1999; Acoca & Dedel, 1998; Weiss et al., 1996).

Gender role expectations and stereotypes may also play a role in delinquent girls’ school-related risk profiles. As previously mentioned, for the most part, high risk girls do not receive early intervention because they do not display the type of aggressive behaviors detectable by school screening instruments until adolescence (Bierman et al., 2004; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004). Moreover, in our society, girls are expected to be “good students” and to succeed in school sans difficulty. Evidence suggests that overall teachers give more attention of all types to boys (e.g., for instructional purposes, communication, misbehavior), while girls tend to receive more teacher attention (and praise) for quiet, attentive, and obedient gendered normed behavior (Bank et al., 2007; DeZolt & Hull, 2002; Meece, Glienke, & Burg, 2006; Meece & Scantlebury, 2006). Due to gendered expectations, girls’ difficulties in school may go undetected until later stages of development, even though many delinquent girls report they started struggling in school by the third or fourth grade (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004).

Finally, African American girls and girls from low income homes, regardless of ethnicity, are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Sickmund, 2000; Snyder, 2008). Research on these populations suggests that, beginning with the transition into early elementary school teachers have lower expectations for poor and
minority children (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Comer, 1989). Teacher expectations play an important role in student achievement and are particularly important for girls, students from lower socioeconomic neighborhoods, and African American students (Jussim, Eccles, & Madon, 1996; Jussim & Harber, 2005). Moreover, when compared with more economically advantaged peers, poor and non-white minority children are more likely to experience academic problems in school including grade retention, low achievement, low educational aspirations, and early school dropout (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; McLoyd, 1990). Lastly, perhaps due to the environments in which they live, such girls have few social supports to inspire school engagement (Sondheimer, 2001).

To review, delinquent girls frequently experience difficulties in school that negatively impact their school engagement. Indeed many have experienced some form of school failure. Due to gendered practices, few high risk girls have received the services necessary to ensure their success. Furthermore, poor and minority girls often face more challenges in school yet receive less support than other girls.

*Correlated Nature of Delinquent Girls’ Risk Profiles*

As illustrated via the research discussed above, the pathways that lead girls to engage in delinquency can be quite diverse (Talbott & Thiede, 1999). Not all delinquent girls follow the exact same pathway to delinquency; however, commonalities do exist in the family, peer, and school-related risk profiles that influence girls’ engagement in delinquent behavior (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004). Furthermore, these mutual individual and contextual risk profiles interact simultaneously to influence their delinquent behavior (Brennan et al., 2003). That is, for some girls, the unique combinations of factors that cluster within and outside of them form an interdependent system of *correlated constraints* that inevitably function to
steer their developmental trajectories toward delinquency (Cairns, 1986; Cairns & Rodkin, 1998; Magnusson, 2003; Sameroff & Gutman, 2004). Moreover, these same correlated risk patterns also place girls at risk for poor school engagement and adjustment.

**Summary**

Theory and research developed over the past decade that addresses female delinquency informs our understanding of delinquent girls’ difficulties in school. Family influences, including abuse victimization and girls’ abuse of drugs and/or alcohol as a coping mechanism, peer influences, and school-related influences all impact girls’ engagement in delinquency as well as their disengagement and underachievement in school. Furthermore, these risk profiles operate simultaneously to further consolidate negative developmental outcomes for girls.

**Adolescence**

As previously discussed, girls’ delinquency usually onsets in adolescence. Thus, in addition to the family, peer, and school-related influences operating in their lives, adolescent girls experience biological, physiological, social, and contextual transitions that may also contribute to their delinquent behaviors as well as to their disengagement and underachievement in school. This section discusses the significant personal and environmental changes associated with adolescence.

**Biological and Physiological Transitions**

As the second fastest phase of development, adolescence can be a particularly challenging time for youth (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development [CCAD], 1989, 2000) because all levels of the person-in-context system are affected and system reorganization is necessary (Cairns & Cairns, 1994). At the individual level, puberty induces
numerous internal and external transformations to the body. Cognitive changes occur as well as adolescents gain the ability to think in more abstract and complex ways. These cognitive expansions pave the way for developmental shifts in self-concept. Youth begin to think of themselves in abstract and differentiated ways as they work toward achieving autonomy. Furthermore, as their understanding of themselves as sexualized individuals transforms during adolescence, youth begin to explore sexual identities (Phillips, 1998). For girls who are already experiencing family, peer, and school-related difficulties such changes can be exciting and empowering but also confusing and daunting.

*Social and Contextual Transitions*

Early adolescence, in particular, may be distressing because young people must address the development of a new self-image in response to the physiological changes their bodies are undergoing (CCAD, 1989, 2000; Roeser et al., 2000). Body image is extremely important as adolescents become concerned about the appearance of their changing bodies. Compared with boys, adolescent girls struggle with changes in their bodies brought on by puberty (O’Sullivan, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). However, European American girls are more susceptible to this trend than are African American girls (Eccles, Barber, Jozefowicz, Malenchuk, & Vida, 1999; Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999; Malenchuk & Eccles, 2006).

Additionally, because cognitive functioning increases, youth become more self-reflective. Adolescent girls become very aware of the perceptions of others and tend to be highly critical of themselves (Harter, 1990, 2006). Their heightened social awareness and self-consciousness dictates much of their behavior and can impact identity formation. Furthermore, peers take on a new salience as the capacity to develop intimate relationships
with people outside of the family evolves. Youth who are adjusting to all of these transformations often seek to loosen their ties to their parents and to increase their autonomy. They experiment with different ideas, values, and roles in their quests to define themselves and to lay claim on their places in society. At school, many delinquent girls affiliate with other delinquent peers and adopt antisocial identities that impede their school engagement and achievement (Bierman et al., 2004; Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Farmer, 2000; Kerpelman & Smith-Adcock, 2005; Pleydon & Schner, 2001; Roeser et al., 1999; Roeser et al., 2000).

At the contextual level, the transition to middle school, which occurs in early adolescence, engenders an environmental change that also fundamentally impacts the person-in-context system. This particular experience can be difficult even for individuals who are doing well in school, because as previously discussed, the emerging developmental needs of early adolescents are not adequately addressed by secondary school settings (Eccles et al., 1996; Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Thus, the transition to middle school brings changes in school context that engender declines in motivation and achievement (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993), decreases in self-esteem, and increases in emotional distress and depressive symptoms (Eccles et al., 1997; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). Furthermore, this transition can be even more challenging for adolescents struggling with family, personal, and school-related problems (Roeser et al., 1999), all of which are common to delinquent girls.

To review, evidence suggests that girls’ delinquent behavioral patterns begin to emerge in early adolescence. When combined with risk profiles already operating in high risk girls’ lives, the demands placed on all levels of the person-in-context system during adolescence inevitably contribute further to the onset of girls’ antisocial behavioral trends (Cairns & Cairns, 1994).
Special Considerations for Girls

The period of adolescence is qualitatively different for girls and boys. To begin with, relationships are particularly integral to female development, so traits like care and sensitivity are important to girls (Brabeck & Brabeck, 2006; Crawford & Unger, 2004; Gilligan, 1982, 1990). Thus, there is a relational component to female development that holds important implications for the person-in-context system and for influences that precipitate changes in behavioral patterns for adolescent girls. This unique aspect of female development also elucidates the previously mentioned relational nature of female delinquency; girls often engage in delinquent behaviors within the context of their relationships with others (Acoca, 1999). Additionally, because girls develop their self conceptions through their relationships with others, the quality of social bonds (including those with teachers) may be more crucial to female development than to male development (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Cross & Madson, 1997; Gilligan, 1982, 1990; Josselson, 1987). In fact, delinquent girls frequently perceive troubled relationships especially between themselves and female adults such as mothers or teachers (Fejes-Mendoza & Miller, 1995). Such characteristics play a role in how girls’ experience schools.

Finally, some researchers who study female development consider early adolescence a “crossroads” in which girls must come to terms with female gender role expectations imposed by society (Basow & Rubin, 1999; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 2004). Specifically, they must reconcile the stronger, self-confident, outspoken nature of girlhood with the more insecure, restrictive, other-focused character of womanhood. This can be a frustrating, anxiety-producing process for girls and can further impede their focus in schools. Not surprisingly, during adolescence, many girls’ regard for themselves declines (AAUW,
1990; Eccles et al., 1989; Gilligan, 1990; Harter, 2006). In fact, although both sexes experience a drop in *self-esteem*, or how much they like or accept themselves in general (Harter, 1990), adolescent girls report lower self-esteem than do adolescent boys (Harter, 2006; Malenchuk & Eccles, 2006). Furthermore, in some populations, adolescent girls’ self-esteem drops to a greater extent than does adolescent boys’ (Eccles et al., 1999; Kling et al., 1999; Kling & Hyde, 2002; Malenchuk & Eccles, 2006). However, ethnic differences do exist in regards to self-esteem. When compared to European American girls, African American, Asian American, and Hispanic American girls tend to report higher levels of self-esteem and may not evidence as steep a decline in self-esteem during early adolescence, if they experience a drop at all (Rotheram-Borus, Dopkins, Sabate, & Lightfoot, 1996; Eccles et al. 1999; Meece & Scantlebury, 2006; Twenge & Crocker, 2002).

Adolescent girls’ decline in self-esteem is attributed in part to cultural processes that perpetuate gender stereotypes, devalue feminine characteristics, and vary across contexts (Allen-Meares & Fraser, 2004; Phillips, 1998). However, physical appearance is the domain most highly correlated with feelings of global self-esteem during adolescence (Harter, 1999, 2006). Peer social acceptance is the second most influential domain with academic success and athletic competence playing a lesser role. Interestingly, African American girls do evidence lower self-esteem than European Americans in the domain of academic success (AAUW, 1990; Holsinger & Holsinger, 2005). Negative feelings associated with school performance certainly hold implications for school engagement and achievement for African American girls (Bachman et al., 2008; Holsinger & Holsinger, 2005).
Summary

Adolescence is a dynamic period of development that encompasses numerous personal and environmental transitions for youth. Furthermore, girls’ experience of adolescence is qualitatively different from boys’. Knowledge of adolescent development enhances our understanding of person and environmental influences that operate concurrently with family, peer, and school-related risk profiles to impact delinquent girls’ school engagement and achievement. Additionally, it highlights the period of adolescence as being one where the person-in-context system is ripe for change. Thus, school-related protective factors operating during the adolescent period have the potential to impact system reorganization toward adaptive outcomes (Eccles, 2008).

School Engagement

School engagement is one such school-related protective factor. Needless to say, the previously discussed system of correlated constraints experienced by many high risk adolescent girls renders engagement in school a difficult, seemingly unachievable, and low priority task and engagement in delinquency a more likely outcome (Acoca, 1999; Acoca & Dedel, 1998; Belknap, et al., 1997; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; NRC, 2004; Weiss et al., 1996). However school engagement is particularly important for adolescent girls with multiple family, peer, and school-related risk profiles. This section provides a deeper discussion of the concept of school engagement as well as the protective role it plays in girls’ lives. Finally, it also reviews two factors influential in nurturing girls’ engagement in school.

Definition and Protective Role of School Engagement

School engagement includes students’ behaviors that engender or impede academic success (e.g., participation/involvement versus conduct problems/incomplete work),
students’ *emotional responses* toward school and the relationship to task completion or activity involvement (e.g., interest versus boredom), and students’ *cognitive orientations* for completing tasks (e.g., mastery goals versus performance goals; for detailed review, see Fredericks et al., 2004). As mentioned earlier, school engagement serves as a protective factor for adolescents (NRC, 2004). Research by Eccles, Roeser, and colleagues (1997, 1999, 2000) suggests that low school engagement is a key predictor of mental health problems. This finding is particularly relevant because a large number of delinquent girls suffer from mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Teplin et al., 2002).

Additionally, school engagement is negatively related to school failure in that students who are more engaged in learning are less likely to experience problems at school. That is, young people who exhibit high levels of behavioral engagement by going to school, participating in academic and social activities, and completing assignments have fewer discipline problems, evidence higher levels of academic achievement, and are more likely to complete school (Bachman et al., 2008; Connell, Halpern-Felsher, Clifford, Crichlow, & Usinger, 1995; Finn & Rock, 1997). Finally, school engagement is positively associated with academic achievement, which is a particularly important protective factor for girls (Valentine Foundation & Women’s Way, 1991; Zahn, 2005). Thus, engagement in school can work to propel high risk youth toward positive developmental trajectories. This investigation uses school engagement as an indicator of a student’s perceived fit with her school environment.

Psychological processes influence school engagement. Individual needs for *competence*, *autonomy*, and *relatedness* operate within school settings to influence student outcomes (Connell, 1990; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Roeser et al., 2000). Competent students have
strategies for achieving academic goals and believe they have the capacity to do so.

Autonomous students understand how their behaviors are connected to goal achievement and are able to regulate their behaviors accordingly. Related students feel connected to their schools. They perceive positive relationships with school personnel and these connections enable them to feel capable and worthy as individuals. Student and teacher perceptions of relatedness are associated with students’ behavioral and emotional engagement in school (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

Interestingly, competence, autonomy, and relatedness are not only considered influential in school engagement, but they play instrumental roles in positive youth development (Connell, 1990; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Roeser et al., 2000). Adolescents, in particular, need opportunities to feel competent, autonomous, and related to others. Furthermore, as previously discussed, relationships are particularly integral to female development. Girls derive their sense of self through their connections with others, and perceptions of their relationships often influence their behaviors. Eccles, Midgley and colleagues (1993; 1993) have purported that in order to promote positive outcomes schools must meet students’ developmental needs. Consequently, schools that address female adolescents’ psychological needs are more likely to promote school engagement than schools that do not.

*School-Related Factors that Influence School Engagement*

The next section reviews literature on two school-related protective factors, school success and sense of belonging, which address female adolescents’ psychological needs and play an important role in cultivating school engagement for adolescent girls.
School Success

School success addresses the degree to which students prevail in academic settings, and is often used interchangeably in the literature with terms like academic achievement, academic competence, academic success, school achievement, school performance, educational success, and, at times, educational attainment (Peck, Roeser, Zarrett, & Eccles, 2008; Roeser et al., 2000; Zahn, 2005, 2007). Measures of school success often include achievement data (most commonly grades or grade point averages but sometimes standardized test scores), while data on suspensions, expulsions, retentions, and ultimately school drop-out signify a lack of school success (AAUW, 1992; Crosnoe et al., 2002; Hawkins et al., 2009; Maguin & Loeber, 1996; Najaka et al., 2001; Phillips, 1998; Zahn, 2005, 2007).

School success is important for all youth. A recent study by Bachman and colleagues (2008) found school success (measured by grade point average) to be a strong predictor of positive developmental outcomes. For instance, adolescents with good grades are more likely to enter and complete college and are less likely to be involved in delinquency, to smoke cigarettes, to use drugs and in early adolescence to use alcohol (Bachman et al., 2004). For these and other reasons, for girls, school success holds significant long-term implications for girls themselves, as well as for their future children and families (AAUW, 1990, 1992, 1996; Phillips, 1998; Wyche, 2002). Success in school allows girls to develop a sense of intellectual competence, personal worth, and optimism about their futures. Furthermore, a girl’s ability to successfully complete school impacts her ability to secure a job, the type of job she is qualified to perform, as well as the salary at which she will be paid.

Across most ethnic groups, female dropouts have higher poverty rates than their male counterparts (AAUW, 1990, 1992, 1996; Phillips, 1998; Wyche, 2002). Moreover, a
mothers’ level of education and subsequent earning potential is related to childhood poverty. That is, the women who achieve higher levels of education and who earn higher incomes are more likely to reduce the risk of childhood poverty among their offspring (Meece, 2006; Phillips, 1998). This finding is particularly important for women of color as well as for women who head single-parent families, two groups who are already at higher risk of poverty (Meece, 2006; Wyche, 2002). Also, girls who do not succeed in school are more likely to become pregnant at young ages and are more likely to become single parents than are girls who successfully complete school, two additional situations that are related to childhood poverty. Finally, postsecondary education (i.e., at least two years or a vocational degree) increases young women’s likelihood of earning enough money to escape poverty and also influences her future children’s achievement levels. Indeed, the children of women with a postsecondary education perform at higher academic levels than do the children of women with a high school diploma (Wyche, 2002).

While success in school engenders positive outcomes for girls in general, it is particularly salient for high risk girls (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004). A 13-year follow-up of the female adolescent offenders interviewed for the Ohio Serious Offender Study revealed that 83.2% of the girls never graduated from high school (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Lowery, 2004). Additionally, Resnick and colleagues (2004) found that school success was the most salient protective factor differentiating youth who engage in violence from those who do not. In general, students who do well in school are less likely to engage in delinquency (Bachman et al., 2008; Crosnoe et al., 2002; Manguin & Loeber, 1996). Furthermore, research by Roeser and colleagues (2000) suggests that school success serves as an “intrapsychic
“resource” that protects high risk youth from current as well as future social-emotional problems and life adversities (p. 457).

Using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a nationally representative school-based study, Hawkins et al. (2009) found that, for girls who have been physically abused, school success is a protective factor against property, violent, and status offenses and has a stronger effect than neighborhood disadvantage. In fact, among physically assaulted girls, those with a 3.0 grade point average (GPA) are 60% less likely to commit a property offense and 49% less likely to commit a violent offense than those with a 1.0 GPA. Furthermore, for girls who have been sexually abused, school success is a protective factor against property offenses. Among sexually assaulted girls, those with a 3.0 GPA are 72% less likely to commit a property offense than those with a 1.0 GPA. Finally, a meta-analysis by Maguin and Loeber (1996) revealed that intervention studies focused on improving school success were successful at decreasing delinquency among high risk youth. Moreover, school success operates as a protective factor against delinquency for girls with delinquent friends (Crosnoe et al., 2002). In summary, school success is a malleable school-related protective factor that holds many implications for delinquent girls’ developmental outcomes as well as their engagement in school.

*Sense of Belonging*

*Sense of belonging* addresses the degree to which students feel accepted, supported, and included at school as well as the extent to which they feel they are an important part of their school (Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b; Osterman, 2000). Respect for personal autonomy and for students as individuals are important features of this construct. Sense of belonging is subjective in that it reflects students’ perception of belonging within an educational context.
Conceptually, it is similar to relatedness, as discussed above, as well as to other social constructs associated with school engagement (e.g., bonding, connectedness). All support the idea that affiliative ties to school serve as protective factors for most students (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1992; Goodenow, 1993a; Goodenow, 1993b; Maddox & Prinz, 2003; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Osterman, 2000; Resnick et al., 1997; Wentzel, 1996), but may be particularly important for high risk girls (Irvin, 2006; Smith-Adcock & Kerpelman, 2005; McNeely et al., 2002; Zahn, 2005).

Sense of belonging is related to motivation and achievement. For instance, students who report high sense of belonging engage in fewer behaviors that work against school success (e.g., tardies and absences) than do students with weak sense of belonging (Goodenow, 1993a). Also, students who perceive their schools as supportive environments evidence higher achievement, increased performance expectations, and place a higher value on school success (Goodenow, 1993b). Faircloth and Hamm (2005) found that across four ethnic groups (African American, Asian descent, European American, and Latino) sense of belonging mediated the relationship between motivation (i.e., efficacy beliefs and school valuing) and achievement. Finally, Degelsmith (2000) reported a stronger relationship between sense of belonging and engagement and achievement for girls than for boys. Furthermore, she found that the relationship between sense of belonging and task-mastery goal orientation may be stronger for girls than for boys. Task-mastery goal orientation is related to cognitive engagement and academic motivation and achievement (Meece, Anderman, et al., 2006; Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988). Thus, sense of belonging may be particularly important to school engagement and achievement for girls (Degelsmith, 2000).
Peer relationships function as contexts of development, and peer groups influence sense of belonging as well as school engagement and achievement (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005a; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). In schools, peers often settle into groups differentiated by sense of belonging to school (Akos et al., 2007; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005a; Kindermann et al., 1996; Ryan, 2001). Interestingly, Hamm and Faircloth (2005a) found that peer groups with above average sense of belonging in the fall maintained above average sense of belonging status over the course of a school year. However, peer groups with below average sense of belonging in the fall evidenced progressively less sense of belonging status over the school year. Thus, the peer context of disengaged students inhibits sense of belonging to school by increasing bonds with other disengaged students who support further disengagement from school. This is particularly relevant for delinquent girls who often associate at school with other disengaged youth and outside of school with older, deviant youth, and quite frequently with older, antisocial men (Acoca, 1999; Bierman et al., 2004; Cairns & Cairns, 1994).

Teacher support is another particularly salient component of sense of belonging. Indeed, research stresses the importance of student perceptions of teacher caring and of the relational quality of student-teacher relationships (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Wentzel, 1997, 1998, 2002). For early adolescents, students’ perceptions of teacher caring and support predict student motivation, engagement, achievement, and social behavior even after controlling for previous academic achievement (Goodenow, 1993; Wentzel, 1997, 2002). Interestingly, perceived teacher support is more associated with sense of belonging, and sense of belonging is more associated with expectancies, for girls than for boys (Goodenow, 1993b). Furthermore, sense of belonging mediates the relationship between student-teacher relationship and positive school affect, academic efficacy, and ultimately
academic achievement (Roeser et al., 1996). Unfortunately, delinquent girls often report emotional voids in their relationships with teachers and do not perceive that teachers care about, support, or even understand them (Fejes-Mendoza & Miller, 1995).

Finn (1989) uses the term identification to describe students who have internalized a sense of belonging to school and who value school-related goals. Furthermore, the emotional dimension of identification is manifested in a behavioral dimension of participation. That is, a students’ identification with school influences her participation in behaviors that engender school success. Alternatively, students who do not experience a sense of belonging may withdraw from participating in school activities, which perpetuates further disidentification from school. Without intervention, disidentification can intensify over time resulting in problem behaviors and eventually drop out. Students from chaotic family systems that offer little emotional or educational support are especially susceptible to this cycle because they begin their educations predisposed neither to participate in nor to identify with school. In this regard, sense of belonging has been posited by some scholars as the most crucial factor in the school engagement of at risk students from less advantaged backgrounds (Finn, 1989; Finn & Voelkl, 1993).

**Summary**

In summary, although we only have a limited amount of information about how girls look in terms of academic profiles in school, research clearly shows that school engagement plays an important role in female adolescent development. Moreover, school-related protective factors like school success and sense of belonging work to increase girls’ engagement in school. Alternatively, school failure can place girls on a negative trajectory. That is, school failure can operate as a risk factor of delinquency for girls. Consequently, it is clear that a
relationship exists between negative schooling experiences, disengagement from school, and female delinquency (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Finn, 1989; Osterman, 2000; Weiss et al., 1996). In an attempt to more thoroughly understand this cycle, the present investigation turns to one group of incarcerated female adolescents for insight into their perceptions of this process.

Purpose of Study

The rise in recent years of female delinquency cases has triggered an increasing exigency for research initiatives focused specifically on prevention and intervention programs that address the unique needs of delinquent girls. Developmental histories of delinquent girls clearly demonstrate that individual and contextual risk factors interact over time (often with a lack of promotive or protective factors) through a transactional process to maintain deviant behavioral trajectories for high risk girls (Brennan et al., 2003). Furthermore, although school provides an important context for youth development and plays a protective role in female development, it is clear that delinquent girls do not commonly experience success in school settings. We know that engagement in school is negatively related to female delinquency. However, at present, little is known concerning the role that schools may play in the development of girls’ delinquent behavior (Biglan et al., 2004). Consequently, a better understanding of the educational histories of incarcerated female adolescents is needed to create effective prevention and intervention programs for this population.

Qualitative research offers a way to understand how various members of a certain group come to construct meaning from the world around them (Glesne, 1999; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams et al., 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Furthermore, it specifically explores variations in meaning existing between group members (Weis & Fine, 2004).
Autobiographical narrative concentrates on people’s perceptions of the events, processes, and structures in their lives. Narrative researchers assume that an individual’s constructed reality consists of multiple, complex, interactions that are indivisible into discrete, unrelated factors. In this regard, narrative methodology allows social scientists to uncover various complexities of meaning while honoring and respecting complex social interactions. In summary, qualitative methodology generates rich, holistic data about people’s life experiences and is consequently particularly well suited for an ecological study on girls’ perceptions of their schooling experiences (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Therefore, this investigation uses a qualitative approach to examine the educational journeys of one group of female juvenile detainees. The specific aim of this exploratory, narrative study is to better understand the schooling experiences of these youth prior to their entry into the juvenile justice system. Additionally, in response to feminist perspectives that are concerned with girls’ actual lives as well as the issues that operate in girls’ lives, this investigation is particularly interested in the girls’ own perceptions of their successes and difficulties in school. Consequently, a secondary goal of this investigation is to give voice to a group of incarcerated young women, and in so doing, learn from their current perceptions of schooling how prevention and intervention programs might best be suited to their needs. Thus, guided by ecological models of development, narrative methodology, and feminist perspectives and using the lens of stage-environment fit, this study asks one group of incarcerated girls about their early school experiences, their relationships with teachers, their peer relationships, their family support for education, their academic successes and difficulties, and their perceived fit with the school environment.

The general research questions include:
1. What were the overall schooling experiences for this population?

2. Did these young women experience difficulties in school?

3. If so, when did they begin to experience difficulties in school?

4. What was the nature of their problems?

5. How does a stage-environment fit framework help to explain girls schooling experiences?
CHAPTER III

METHOD

The purpose of this dissertation study is to cultivate a richer understanding of the educational histories of female delinquents. Therefore, through the lens of stage-environment fit, this investigation uses an exploratory, qualitative design to address the previously mentioned general research questions. Specifically, it involves a secondary data analysis of one portion of de-identified data collected from a larger study designed to evaluate the efficacy of the HOPE program located at Lakeside Youth Development Center (LYDC), a minimum-security juvenile facility located in the Southeastern United States. LYDC provides long-term rehabilitative care to female youth aged 10 to 18 years who have committed a delinquent or criminal offense. HOPE is a treatment program located on the LYDC campus. All proper nouns have been changed to insure confidentiality.\footnote{Furthermore, this analysis evaluated de-identified data from the larger study. The researchers assigned pseudonyms to each of the students as well as to their corresponding letters and records. Those pseudonyms are used in this analysis.}

Procedure

Upon entry to LYDC, students completed a battery of preliminary assessments regarding their past and current levels of functioning (e.g., physical health, mental health, substance abuse history). Results from all assessments were accumulated in student files that also contained past schooling, offense history, psychological assessment, demographic, and social information. Additionally, upon entry into the HOPE program students completed additional
assessments to further clarify their mental, social, and academic needs while in the program. To assess their levels of academic functioning HOPE students completed an online version of the Test of Adult Basic Education 7 & 8 (TABE 7 & 8). (A description of the TABE 7 & 8 is located in the Instrumentation section below.)

Furthermore, shortly before students prepared to exit the HOPE program and return to their communities they participated in one-on-one semistructured interviews conducted by one of two researchers who had worked in the HOPE classroom offering assistance and support to the HOPE teacher and to the HOPE students on a weekly basis for the entirety of the students’ stay in the HOPE program.

Finally, prior to their discharge from the HOPE program, during a writing prompt assignment as part of their regular classroom activities, students wrote letters to their future teachers. The letters allowed the students to reflect on what they each personally needed from schools and teachers (e.g., what they most value about schooling) and to actively request for those needs to be met.

This exploratory, narrative investigation uses the lens of stage-environment fit to conduct a thematic analysis of the 13 students’ interviews. It also incorporates a thematic analysis of the students’ letters to their future teachers as well as a document review of the students’ school and juvenile justice records.

Participants

The participants for this study include the first cohort of students enrolled in the HOPE program at LYDC. Young women are court ordered to LYDC for long-term education, treatment, and rehabilitative services. Placement in this facility is reserved for serious or violent offenders as well as for chronic offenders. The participants in this study were selected
from the general population at LYDC to participate in the HOPE program on the LYDC campus. To protect the confidentiality of these youth, the specific selection process will not be explained in this dissertation. However, the girls selected to participate in the HOPE program were very similar to the girls in the general population at LYDC. Furthermore, a matched cohort of girls in the general population was followed in the larger study evaluating the efficacy of the HOPE program. The minimum stay at LYDC is six months. The participants in this study included 13 female students enrolled in the HOPE program located on the LYDC campus over a two year period during the early 2000s. As previously mentioned, HOPE provides treatment to female adolescents who have been sentenced to long-term care at LYDC.

**Demographic Profiles**

The 13 young women ranged in age from 15 to 17 years ($M = 15.92, SD = .86$). The sample was 62% Caucasian, 31% African American, and 7% Multi-Racial. On average, the students had two prior adjudications ($M = 1.69, SD = 1.49$). Table 1 shows the breakdown between age and race. The students’ most serious offenses included misdemeanors, felonies,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Multi-Racial</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$n$</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>$n$</td>
<td>%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and violent felonies. The young women spent between 6.5 months to 16.7 months ($M = 11.63$, $SD = 3.10$) enrolled in the HOPE program. Table 2 provides specific offense demographics for all 13 members the sample.

A majority of the students were from small metropolitan areas. They came from a variety of home living situations. Fifty-four percent of the sample came from single parent homes. The primary care takers for these youth were biological mothers, fathers, or grandmothers. Prior to incarceration, the remaining 46% of the sample lived with both biological parents, with a biological parent and a step parent, with relatives, or in a group or foster home. Sixty-nine percent of the sample had at least one family member involved in the criminal and/or juvenile justice systems. Sixty-two percent of the young women reported a history of physical, verbal, emotional, or sexual abuse. Incidences of abuse victimization occurred in the home for over half of the youth who had been abused. Four of the victimized young women had been raped, one by a family member. Figure 1 depicts trends in abuse victimization for the sample.

![Figure 1: History of abuse victimization.](image-url)
### Table 2

*Offense Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Commitment Offense</th>
<th>Prior Adjudications</th>
<th>Months at HOPE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amber</td>
<td>Assault w/ deadly weapon</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Larceny</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherí</td>
<td>Possession of stolen goods</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal</td>
<td>Person offense</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Running away</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesse</td>
<td>Larceny</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keisha</td>
<td>Larceny</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Controlled substance - sell/delivery</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurie</td>
<td>Burglary, 1st degree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Larceny</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monique</td>
<td>Armed robbery/Attempted armed robbery (2 counts); Kidnapping, 2nd degree; Possession of stolen goods</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracey</td>
<td>Unauthorized use of motor-propelled conveyance; Simple assault</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Prior to their entry into the HOPE program, the highest grades the students completed in public school settings ranged from seventh to ninth grades ($M = 7.85$, $SD = .90$).

Furthermore, their academic skills, when measured by the TABE 7 & 8 and expressed as national grade equivalents, ranged from 2$^{nd}$ to 11$^{th}$ grade in reading ($M = 7.53$, $SD = 2.70$) and from 3$^{rd}$ to 11$^{th}$ grade in mathematics ($M = 7.45$, $SD = 2.14$). Table 3 provides specific information on achievement data for all 13 students. Ninety-two percent of the students failed at least one grade. The initial grade levels failed ranged from 6$^{th}$ to 10$^{th}$ grade ($M = 8.33$, $SD = 1.44$). At least 15% of the students served out of school suspension. (Eighty-five percent of the files did not contain data on school disciplinary actions.) At least 77% of the sample spent time in alternative placements, either in alternative school settings or in special learning classrooms. (Twenty-three percent of the files did not contain data on alternative school placements.) Fifteen percent of the sample’s files contained or referred to students’ Individualized Education Plans.

This sample also experienced many transitions during their schooling histories. Students experienced at least two transitions in elementary school ($M = 1.86$, $SD = .90$, $n = 7$), at least three transitions in middle school ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.14$, $n = 10$), and two transitions in high school ($M = 1.75$, $SD = .50$, $n = 4$). Additionally, patterns of truancy existed. The number of days students missed school over one school year ranged from 7 to 80 ($M = 33.00$, $SD = 22.68$, $n = 11$). The students accrued these absences in grades 6, 7, 8, 9, or 10 ($M = 8.00$,

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11 Transition data was not available for every student or for every school level ($N = 13$). All 13 students attended elementary (ES) and middle school (MS). Four students attended high school (HS; $N = 4$). Amount of total applicable sample represented: ES = 54%, MS = 77, HS = 100%.

12 Eighty-five percent of total sample represented ($N=13$).
Table 3

*Achievement Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Last Grade Completed</th>
<th>Reading Level&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Mathematics Level&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>4.4</td>
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<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>9.4</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>9.2</td>
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<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
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<td>11.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>9&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>8.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>9&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Grade Equivalent Scores based on TABE 7 & 8
$SD = 1.34$). Figure 2 displays the number of days missed over one school year by student by grade level.

![Figure 2. Truancy over one school year by student by grade level (n=11).](image)

**Instrumentation**

The primary data source for this investigation includes one-on-one, semistructured interviews with 13 students in the HOPE program. Additionally, this study includes letters written by the students to their future teachers as well as the students’ academic and juvenile justice records.

**Student Interviews**

Semistructured interviews include both close-ended and open-ended questions (Creswell, 2002). This type of interview was appropriate for the present investigation because it allowed the researchers to obtain information that supports theories and concepts gathered from the literature base. However, it also provided students the opportunity to share their individual experiences and potentially go beyond information that may be documented elsewhere. Thus, researchers had the freedom to pursue unexpected storylines absent from the original interview protocol but relevant to the general research questions. Such personal and social experience stories enrich an ecological, narrative investigation that seeks to more fully
understand delinquent girls’ perceptions of schooling as well as give voice to a group of often marginalized students (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2002).

The 13 students gave verbal and written approval to be interviewed. Researchers assured the students that their responses would remain confidential and would in no way impact the remainder of their stay at the facility. Researchers also explained to the students that they could terminate the interviews at any time. All interviews occurred during the school day after students completed their academic assignments. The interviews took place in an empty classroom or office at the HOPE facility in which confidentiality could be assured. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. One researcher conducted, audio taped, and transcribed 11 of the interviews. The second researcher conducted and audio taped two of the interviews, and an assistant completed the corresponding transcriptions. Both interviewers were well-known by all 13 students due to their regular weekly presence in the HOPE classroom. To insure accuracy, all audio tapes were listened to as transcripts were proofread.

The interviews focused on the young women’s past and present perceptions about schooling. The available literature on delinquent girls informed the interview protocol. As such, the researchers anticipated that in the few years prior to incarceration, the students would have experienced hardships in their school environments. Therefore, the interview questions asked the students for descriptions of their most recent experiences in school settings prior to incarceration. However, because the researchers anticipated that the young women did have some positive experiences in school settings, questions also addressed the students’ earlier experiences in schools. Additionally, interview questions explored students’
perceptions of how things changed from one setting to the next (e.g., positive versus negative schooling experiences; See Appendix B for the Interview Protocol.)

Finally, the semistructured interview format provided researchers with flexibility to stray from the interview protocol when necessary to gain more insight into various topics. The researchers chose this interviewing method to gather more details when students gave one- or two-worded answers for open-ended questions. For example, when a researcher asked one student “Can you tell me about the last school you were in before you came here?” she responded, “It was alright.” So, the researcher supplemented the interview protocol with probes like “Alright? What did you like about it?” and “What where the people like?” to draw out more details from the student. Furthermore, the researchers supplemented the interview protocol when students discussed topics not included in the original interview protocol but relevant to the research questions.

As previously mentioned, interview questions explored the students’ schooling experiences. As such, the questions only addressed contextual influences in as much as they directly related to schooling. Based on the available literature on delinquent girls, the researchers expected that the students had been exposed to multiple adverse contextual factors that indeed impacted their experiences in school. However, the interviewers did not directly ask the students to discuss these influences. The study design intentionally incorporated this decision for two reasons. To begin with, although both researchers developed trusting relationships with the students, the context of those relationships revolved around the school setting. Thus, while the girls at times shared their personal histories with the researchers during school, the girls were never made to feel like it was a necessity to do so (as it was in other parts of their treatment program). The researchers valued the potential
knowledge gained from exploring the impact of adverse contextual influences on the students’ schooling experiences. Nevertheless, they preferred to maintain the same relational continuity previously established with the students prior to the interview. In so doing, the researchers hoped the students would maintain their previous level of comfort with the researchers during the interview process, which would in turn facilitate a better interview experience. However, when students brought up outside experiences on their own, researchers did probe the girls’ perceptions of how those experiences impacted their schooling.

Secondly, the decision to keep the questions directed only at schooling experiences allowed the researchers to keep bias out of the interview process. Commitment to LYDC in itself usually indicates that youth have experienced significant life hardships and have made poor behavioral choices. The researchers preferred not to allow the specifics of such knowledge to impact their impressions of the students and by default the course of the interviews. Therefore, the researchers did not explore the students’ abuse, family, and offense profiles until after completing the interviews and collecting the letters to future teachers.

*Letters to Future Teachers*

On a weekly basis at the beginning of class the HOPE teacher gave writing prompts to her students. After a few minutes of group brainstorming about the writing prompt topic the students responded to the prompts in writing. The HOPE teacher granted permission to one researcher to facilitate a writing prompt activity with the HOPE students. Using the white board the students and the researcher together “wrote” a letter together to their HOPE teacher. Together they generated ideas and came up with solutions for various aspects of letter writing (indentation, salutations, closings, paper folding, envelope addressing, etc.).
After the students acknowledged being comfortable with the letter writing process the researcher distributed the writing prompt handout, read it aloud to the students, and responded to their questions. (To maintain continuity with standard class procedures the researcher adapted the HOPE teacher’s writing prompt handout to address the question of interest. See Appendix C for Writing Prompt.)

The students and researcher brainstormed ideas for the writing prompt letter and created a concept web on a white board. Then, the researcher asked the students to begin creating their letter drafts as the HOPE teacher, HOPE teacher-assistant, and researcher remained available for assistance. The students kept their drafts for the rest of the day so that they could continue to work on them during spare time before copying them over to a final draft. They submitted final drafts before they exited the classrooms at the close of the day.

As mentioned previously, the student interviews took place during each young woman’s final week in the HOPE program. The youth entered and exited the program according to differing schedules over the course of the two year period during which the larger evaluation study took place. Therefore, the interviews transpired on various days during that time span. However, the researchers conducted the writing prompt activity on one specific day during that time span. Thus, they received letters from only the students currently enrolled in HOPE and in attendance at the HOPE school on the specific day they administered the writing prompt activity. The present investigation evaluates 13 student letters to future teachers. However, the letters analyzed here only include letters from 4 of the 13 interviewed students. This discrepancy constitutes a constraint. However, I included the additional nine letters in this analysis because the students who wrote them were enrolled in the HOPE program at some point during the same time of the 13 interviewed students. Thus, while each girl had
her own unique story to tell, I believed that because of the similarities in their delinquency and schooling histories, that collectively all of the girls would have more in common with each other than with girls outside of the HOPE program. More importantly, as I read the additional nine letters I noted consistencies in themes voiced by the girls’ who were interviewed. It seemed important to include the specifics here.

*School and Juvenile Justice Records*

Due to the nature of delinquent girls’ lives, the researchers expected that the students’ official records would provide incomplete and inconclusive evidence about the girls’ histories in school. Still, they believed that any information gleaned would contribute to a deeper understanding of the students’ educational histories and would also aide in the triangulation of their perceptions of their histories as shared via the interviews. Therefore, the researchers collected data from each student’s school and juvenile justice records. Subsequently, they created new files that included information gathered from the HOPE teacher’s classroom files and the students’ results from the TABE 7 & 8.

*Official Records*

As each student entered the HOPE program, the HOPE teacher copied records from the student’s official file at the LYDC main filing center to create her own personal file system at the HOPE school. Her files included data on past schooling (e.g., grades, end of grade/course test scores, standardized test scores, schools attended), criminal history (e.g., commitment offense(s), prior adjudication, family criminal record, abuse histories), and LYDC’s preliminary assessment tests (e.g., levels of physical and psychological functioning). The researchers duplicated the HOPE teachers’ files on the 13 students.
Test of Adult Basic Education 7 & 8

As previously mentioned, the researchers also administered an online version of the TABE 7 & 8 to all students upon their entry into the HOPE program. The TABE 7 & 8 is a basic skills test that evaluates skill areas generally covered in grades 1-12 and assessed by the General Educational Development Test (California Testing Bureau (CTB) / McGraw-Hill, 2008). The TABE 7 & 8 generates objective mastery information for basic skills, and provides percentile, scale, and grade equivalent scores. The HOPE students took an un-timed version of the TABE 7 & 8. Thus, comparisons to national norms are less accurate than if the students took a timed version. Table 4 describes the academic competencies assessed by the TABE 7 & 8.

Data Analysis

Principles of qualitative methodology guided data analysis for this investigation on the educational histories of female juvenile delinquents. Therefore, I began with a preliminary exploratory analysis of all the de-identified data collected on/from this sample and used in this investigation, a recommended first step in qualitative data analysis (Creswell, 2002). Specifically, I read and reread the interviews, letters, and records to gain an overview of the data. This process allowed me to immerse myself in the data, to generate and memo initial ideas, and to develop a general sense of the content. Following the preliminary reading of all the data I performed a thematic analysis of the semistructured interviews and the students’ letters to future teachers. Finally, I conducted a document review of the students’ school and juvenile justice records, which included but was not limited to a quantitative analysis to create descriptive statistics on the sample. This section further explains each type of analysis.
### Academic Competencies Assessed by the TABE 7 & 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABE 7 &amp; 8 subtest</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Applied mathematics</td>
<td>Assesses a wide range of mathematical concepts and skills, including budgeting, planning, predicting results, interpreting data, and making computations that involve time, distance and weight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics computation</td>
<td>Assesses mathematical operations including addition, subtraction, division, decimals, fractions, integers, algebraic expressions, exponents, and percents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Assesses ability to construct meaning from a variety of prose selections as well as ability to find and use information from different sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Assesses language usage, writing mechanics, sentence formation, and paragraph development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>Assesses spelling skills necessary for communicating effectively through writing, vowel sounds, consonant sounds, and structural units.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(CTB / McGraw-Hill, 2008)
Thematic Analysis

I analyzed transcripts of semistructured interviews along with students’ letters to their future teachers to identify themes operating in the educational histories of the 13 students in this sample.

Interviews

After the preliminary reading of all the data, I reformatted the interview transcripts by inserting them into a blank field notes template consisting of a two column table (D. Eaker-Rich, class lecture, January 29, 2004). I designed the templates such that codes could be inserted into the first column and interview dialogue could be inserted into the second column. Additionally, consecutively-ordered numbers ran down the center of the table so that each line of dialogue text could be numbered. Finally, a section at the bottom of the table entitled “Notes to Self” provided space to record memos about connections across the data and about my ideas on emerging patterns (Miles & Huberman, 1994; See Appendix D for a Blank Field Notes Layout).

To make sense of their data, qualitative researchers engage in the process of coding, or segmenting and labeling text as it forms categories or themes (Creswell, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Thus, the reiterative process of organizing and defining then redefining and reorganizing all pieces of data relevant to a research study creates an organizational framework (Glesne, 1999). Therefore, I reread each transcript and began the process of coding the data for one major research question at a time. However, because semistructured interview transcripts can read somewhat like a conversation and do not always progress in a logical fashion or according to protocol, I considered students’ narratives as a whole and coded accordingly. That is, I preserved the holistic integrity of the students’ stories
themselves by coding and including responses relevant to each research question regardless of whether or not they occurred after interview protocol items targeting that research question (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Reissman, 2002). Furthermore, I made a note when responses did not correlate with the protocol question asked so that I could also search for patterns in the students’ thought processes.

The initial data analysis was deductive in that my ecological, developmental framework, my understanding of the relevant literature, and my research questions informed the initial codes I anticipated using (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, to begin with I anticipated using the major code POS, to mark text describing positive schooling experiences, the code NEG, to mark text describing negative schooling experiences, the code TIM, to mark text indicating the timing of when difficulties began to occur, and the code MIS, to mark text indicating a mismatch between the students’ needs and the opportunities provided to her via her school environment. Additionally, I expected to further refine the major codes with other more descriptive subcodes attached as suffixes. For example, I anticipated using the subcode REL, to mark text describing times when relational factors played a role in positive or negative schooling experiences or in instances of student-school mismatch. Thus, I used the code NEG-REL to mark text describing an association between a relational factor and a negative schooling experience. Finally, as disclosed above, I anticipated some of the initial codes a priori; however, I also intentionally maintained flexibility during the coding process and remained open to the possibility of codes beyond my initial anticipations emerging from the data (Glesne, 1999). Furthermore, I sought to code in an inductive manner so that codes closely reflected the students’ actual words (Miles & Huberman, 1994).
After coding three interviews, I created a general list of codes, with descriptions and examples, from the codes generated at that point. I referred to this list as I coded the remainder of the interviews. If the list did not contain an appropriate code for a salient section of text, I created a new code and added it to the general list of codes. As I finished reading through each transcript I used the Notes to Self section to memo brief highlights of the transcript, ideas that came to mind about connections within that transcript and between other transcripts, and questions I had about topics brought up by the student. For example, in one section of my Notes to Self on Amber’s transcript, I wrote:

1) Being challenged, being considered smart, having friends, and feeling like she belongs seem important to Amber. She needs to feel comfortable in school. 2) Interesting to consider the impact of giving remedial work to students who are struggling – perhaps it does more damage than good – academically and psychologically? 3) Moving around to multiple schools seems extremely problematic for Amber – for all girls???

Once the coding process was complete, I used the general list of codes to compare and contrast all of the codes that emerged from the data. Subsequently, I began the process of systematically clustering together similar codes, reorganizing major codes in relation to subcodes and vice-versa, and thinking about relationships between codes (Glesne, 1999). For example, after coding all the transcripts and reviewing the code list I noticed that several subcodes could be grouped under several of the major codes, as opposed to under only one major code. For instance, family (FAM), peer (PER), and teacher (TCH) factors all played a role in relationship factors. Furthermore, relationship factors influenced negative schooling experiences, positive schooling experiences, and examples of student-school mismatch. Thus, the subcodes FAM, PER, and TCH operated as subcategories of the subcode REL, which operated as a subcategory of NEG, POS, and
After grouping and at times renaming codes on the general list of codes, I made coordinating changes to the codes on the transcripts.

Afterward, I began the process of systematically arranging the codes into an order that seemed to fit the data and that made sense to me. I grouped together data clumps, or major codes that appeared to belong with or relate to each other (Glesne, 1999). That is, I organized similarly coded data sections across all interviews that represented central ideas and concepts into themes apparent in the young women’s stories. During this process new major codes emerged that better reflected connections between the data clumps. For instance, the students’ palpable concern over belonging and feeling connected to others (BEL) surfaced as an underlying factor that explained why some teacher or peer relationship factors influenced positive versus negative schooling experiences. Thus, BEL transpired as a more salient major code than some of the major codes I anticipated a priori (e.g., POS, NEG). Finally, as new patterns began to appear I returned to the transcripts to verify whether or not certain variables played a role in certain patterns. I then created tables reflecting each major code clump and the correlated subcodes.

After identifying important connecting themes, I reread the transcripts again to determine the exact nature of how each theme was revealed through each student’s voice. Through this process I was able to discern how common or rare a given theme was across narratives. At this point, I also entered into the table the student name, page number, and line number of particularly relevant quotes which could serve as examples or counter examples of the theme. This allowed me to easily access specific pieces of data indicative of particular themes. The process of reading, coding, and rereading interview transcripts to identify important themes is
a commonly used qualitative data analysis technique (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Glesne, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

*Letters to Future Teachers*

I analyzed the students’ letters to their future teachers following the same protocol as described above for the interview transcripts. I entered the text of each letter into the blank fields note layout template. I then read each letter as I generated codes from the data. Specifically, I explored the letters for information that complemented, contradicted, or extended data from the interviews. When possible, I used pre-established codes from the already established general list of codes. However, when the pre-established codes did not represent a section of text from the letters, I created a new code and added it to the general list. After coding all of the letters, I clumped together codes that represented related ideas or apparent themes in the students’ letters. As with the interviews, I then created tables to organize this information. Subsequently, I reread each letter to determine how each theme was revealed through each young woman’s writing. Once more, I entered into the table the student name, page number, and line number of particularly relevant quotes that served as examples or counter examples of the theme. I then corroborated this data with information gathered via the semistructured interviews and academic and juvenile justice records.

*Document Review*

Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend using quantitative data to supply important background and/or overlooked information that may be pertinent to a given study. Furthermore, they advise the use of quantitative data to develop the scope and breadth of a qualitative study, to triangulate qualitative data, and to elaborate and enrich data analysis. Therefore, I conducted a document review of the 13 students’ school and juvenile justice
records. I created a spreadsheet to help me keep track of this information. As I read through each file I entered each student’s information into the spreadsheet. At times, as I read, new variables that I had not previously considered surfaced as potentially important factors. For instance, the researchers did not explicitly ask the students about alternative school placements. During the interviews a couple of the students mentioned them, but most of the sample did not. As I read through the files however, I noticed several records indicating such placements. So, I decided to add a variable entitled *alternative school placements* to the spreadsheet. I then returned to all the files to determine whether or not each student had experienced an alternative school placement. As this occurred with subsequent potentially important variables I created new columns on the spreadsheet to include those variables, and then returned to all the files to search for the appropriate data to enter.

One student’s file did not contain any records other than information created at LYDC and HOPE. That is, no prior school records existed for one student. I inserted *missing* for each data cell in the spreadsheet that could not be completed for this student. Thirty-eight percent of the files contained records dating back to elementary school. However, only 15% of those files dated back to earlier than fourth grade. Fifty-two percent of the files did not contain any records from elementary school. Again, I inserted *missing* for any cell for which there was no data available. Furthermore, three columns in the spreadsheet addressed the number of transitions students experienced during elementary school (conceptualized as K through grade 5), middle school (grades 6 through 8), and high school (grades 9 through 12). One student attended a junior high school during ninth grade. In this one instance I included ninth grade as a middle school grade. Finally, one student attended a Catholic school. Due to the unique nature of Catholic schools and to the fact that only one
student in the sample encountered this type of schooling experience I considered Catholic school an alternative school placement. (Note, some of the alternative school placements were considered constructive placements that engendered positive student outcomes; however, some of the alternative school placements were not considered constructive and did not engender positive student outcomes. Enrollment in a Catholic school was considered a positive alternative school placement.)

Data gathered from the document review allowed me to create descriptive statistics on the students and to document information such as their highest grade level achieved, grades, academic functioning, standardized achievement test scores, family environments, reports of abuse victimization, commitment offenses, and length of commitment. The document review also provided a way to corroborate the information provided in the interviews.

Establishing Research Validity

Researchers must establish the credibility of their findings. Qualitative research designs incorporate various strategies to validate findings and interpretations (Creswell, 2002; Glesne, 1999). This study’s design addressed authenticity in several ways. To begin with, time spent building relationships with participants as well as at the research site and in interviews contributes to trustworthy data (Glesne, 1999). In fact, Glesne (1999) asserts that “When a large amount of time is spent with your research participants, they less readily feign behavior or feel the need to do so; moreover they are more likely to be frank and comprehensive about what they tell you” (p. 151). The researchers devoted a large amount of time to this project. They were present when each young woman entered the HOPE program, and they remained a weekly constant in each student’s life throughout the duration of her stay. Each week the researchers would make an effort to get to know each student as they

13I used Microsoft® Excel 2002 SP3 to make calculations for the descriptive demographics.
helped her with various assignments. By the time of the interviews, both researchers had established a trusting relationship with all of the students. The effects of such relationship building contributed positively to the authenticity of the data presented here.

Secondly, triangulating among different data sources contributes to the accuracy of a study (Creswell, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This research design further addresses credibility because it allowed for triangulation of the primary data source. Semistructured interviews provided the principal data for this investigation. However, I also analyzed letters written by the students to their future teachers as well as the students’ academic and juvenile justice records. Thus, the researchers gathered data from three sources: interviews, participant-generated documents, and other-generated documents, and I compared and contrasted evidence from all three of these sources to corroborate the findings (Glesne, 1999).

Finally, the process of peer review and debriefing, when external sources reflect and provide input on your work, enhances research validity (Creswell, 2002; Glesne, 1999). Thus, to increase the validity of its findings even further, this study incorporated the process of external review into its research design. As such, my faculty advisor reviewed the data collected for this investigation. I consulted with her during each stage of the analysis for validation of the codes and themes I generated from the data. The goal was to come to a consensus regarding interpretation of the data. This auditing process increased the likelihood that the themes I derived from the data did in fact reflect the students’ histories (Glesne, 1999).
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

This exploratory, narrative investigation used the lens of stage-environment fit to conduct a thematic analysis of student interviews, a thematic analysis of students’ letters to their future teachers, and a document review of students’ school and juvenile justice records. Several themes became apparent during the process of data analysis as described in the preceding chapter. The present chapter relates those themes in a holistic, inductive manner. That is, instead of listing out my original research questions and inserting chunks of data as their respective answers, I organized the findings in a manner that reflects the overarching themes that emerged from the students’ stories. Moreover, as much as possible I used the young women’s words instead of my own to allow for a richer understanding of each theme.¹⁴

Thus, this chapter presents evidence of the students’ perceptions of their schooling experiences overall. Furthermore, because school engagement was used as an indicator of the students’ perceptions of their developmental fit with their schools, this chapter also discusses themes from the interviews that tied the students’ schooling experiences to their school engagement. Additionally, it reviews two themes that were not explicitly addressed by the interview protocol but that became obvious in the girls stories, the role families and peers

¹⁴Every student who participated in this study, either through the interviews or the letter writing, has been quoted at least one time in these findings. Some students have been quoted more than once due to the poignancy of their particular comments in regard to certain themes prevalent across multiple students’ narratives and letters. That is, some students’ language provided clearer examples of themes than did other students’ language; therefore, they are used here in an effort to better facilitate the reader’s understanding of all the students’ ideas.
played in the students’ school engagement. Finally, this chapter concludes by relaying the students’ hope for their future schooling experiences.

Declining School Engagement

This investigation explored the educational histories of young women in the juvenile justice system. For the majority of the sample, negative schooling experiences occurred more recently than did positive schooling experiences. Indeed, the students’ most recent years of schooling seemed to be riddled with frustrations and disappointments, which could be seen as indicators of poor person-environment fit. Some of the young women had universal perceptions that reflected negative beliefs about schooling in general. Jennifer, a 16-year-old Caucasian, stated:

All schools run exactly the same. Same crap. . . . It’s like we’re monkeys I guess and they’re the instructors, you know. It’s like a game; to a lot of teachers I think it’s a game. How, like, which teacher can have the most kids passing with the highest grades, you know, this amount of time this amount of years in a row and stuff.

Lisa, a 15-year-old biracial student, expressed a similar disillusionment, “The school was twisted to me because they didn’t know what they was doin’. They didn’t treat all the kids the same way. . . .” Cherí, a 15-year-old African American, articulated confusion over the messages she received about the purposes of school. She compared school to “like a fashion show because we didn’t, nobody came to school to do schoolwork. Everybody was in school to show off their new clothes, to fight, do drugs, everything but schoolwork.”

Each of the young women did reflect on their positive experiences in school. Curiously, however, some admitted that these events happened so long ago that they did not remember many details. In fact, 85% of the youth claimed that their positive schooling experiences occurred in elementary school. An observation by Jesse, a 15-year-old Caucasian, echoed a sentiment that seemed to be felt if not spoken by the others, “I liked school all the way up ’til
the 6th grade ... when I got to 6th grade it was just, I don’t know, everything changed. The students, everybody changed.”

Thus, by sixth grade, this sample’s perceptions of and experiences in school began to change. Specifically, the students expressed that as they entered early adolescence they became less interested and more disengaged in school. Tracey, a 15-year-old Caucasian, shared, “It was mostly boring. I mean, I can’t really explain it. I just didn’t like it.” Indeed, the girls discussed several behavioral indicators of their increasing disengagement as they entered secondary schools. For example, many of the girls reported earning lower grades in middle school than they had earned in elementary school. Kelly, a 17-year-old Caucasian, admitted, “I was passing, but just by . . . you know a little bit. . . . I got straight As and As and Bs in elementary school . . . but then [in middle school] I just didn’t care about school no more.”

Additionally, their narratives revealed that as they lost interest in school their school attendance decreased. Anna, a 16-year-old Caucasian, stated that after she entered middle school, “I never went to school that much. I would go for a couple of days and then a day off and another day.” Furthermore, several young women attributed their frequent absences and school disengagement to less positive attitudes overall towards their secondary schools. As Laurie, a 15-year-old Caucasian, expressed, “I went to school a little bit . . . but not really. I kinda hated school.” In other words, the girls provided clear evidence that as they entered early adolescence their school engagement began to wane.

As will be discussed in more detail later, the students attributed this trend to several contextual influences. For example, many of the girls discussed family issues that made it difficult for them to perform well in school. Also, almost every girl stated that unsupportive
teachers and deviant peers interfered with their school engagement. Indeed, contextual factors functioned to decrease the students’ perceived fit with their school environment. Specifically, the interviews revealed that the girls’ believed their elementary school environments provided them with opportunities to feel connected to and to succeed in their schools. During these times of perceived student-school fit, the girls exhibited behaviors conducive to school engagement. However, as the girls entered secondary schools they did not perceive opportunities to belong and succeed in school. At these times of perceived poor student-school fit, the students reported being disengaged.

Schooling Experiences and School Engagement

The major focus of this investigation was delinquent girls’ perceptions of their schooling experiences. Three major themes influential to school engagement emerged from the young women’s narratives. This section discusses how those themes were revealed through the girls’ voices. Specifically, it addresses the importance of teacher-student relationships, the importance of school success, and the students’ lack of sense of belonging in their secondary schools. In general, these three themes were discussed by the majority of the students in this study.

*Importance of Teacher-Student Relationships*

The connection between the young women’s perceptions of their relationships with teachers and their engagement in school emerged as a particularly salient and common theme in the girls’ interviews. Indeed, the majority of the students discussed issues concerning past teachers. Whether or not these young women perceived their teachers as caring, nurturing, and supportive played a large role in their engagement in and enjoyment of school. In fact, every student described at least one teacher whom she perceived made a difference in her
life. Interestingly, primary educators outnumbered secondary educators in these descriptions. Several young women grouped their elementary teachers as a whole in comparison to their secondary teachers. Laurie explained, “My teachers were really, really nice then. . . . they talked to me and stuff, you know, like we had a like a, a really cool relationship or whatever.” Jesse’s recollection of teachers from elementary school was that, “The teachers don’t yell. . . . The teachers were nice, you know, they wasn’t all mad.” Lisa described them as:

They was the type to help you out. They cared about my grades and stuff and whatever. They cared about what I was doin’. They won’t the type to just come to work for the money. They was the type to help people out and stuff.

Other students recollected individual teachers who stood out as particularly special. The young women reported that these teachers seemed to genuinely care about their students’ progress. These teachers took the time to help explain difficult material and often used incentives to reward the students’ hard work. The students reported more motivation to succeed in such teachers’ classrooms. Crystal, a 17-year-old Caucasian, who disclosed being particularly disruptive in class when she did not get along with her teachers, described one of her favorite elementary school math teachers who “helped me” because she “explained stuff better to me . . . And she gave us breaks. I mean working all the time just stresses people out and she gave us breaks every once in a while.”

Tracey considered her fifth-grade teacher to be “the best teacher I ever had in my life” because he took an interest not only in her academic life but her home life as well:

I felt, you know, he understood me when my step-dad was beating my mom and stuff. And, you know, I was bringing my anger to school. And he was just very cool. I never wanted to tell him nothing but I remember I had told him and it was my birthday, you know, a couple of days later, and my mom didn’t have no money ’cause she was, you know, leaving my step-daddy. He bought me some birthday stuff and stuff like that. He’d call my house and check up on me and my mom and, you know,
he helped me bring my grades up because I had done been put in detention. And he called up to make sure I was doing okay. And, you know . . . my mom got really broke and he asked my mom if she needed any money. Of course she said no, you know. . . . And um, he was just, he did everything he could to get me back on track after I started getting in trouble.

Two of the young women attributed a particular elementary school teacher with teaching them a subject so well that it became their favorite. According to Crystal and Kelly, two of their elementary school teachers did such a good job teaching them math that math became their favorite subject. Both students still enjoy working on math, and both believe they excel in that subject. According to the young women, teachers who helped them learn and helped them believe they could learn increased their motivation and desire to learn. Furthermore, the students reported that when they perceived being capable of success they were more likely to work towards and achieve success as well as to believe in their continued ability to succeed. Indeed it appeared as if one factor fed off of another in this cycle. In these situations, the students also spoke about working hard because they wanted to please their teachers and make them proud.

Alternatively, the majority of students cited poor and uncaring relationships with teachers as the number one contributor to their dislike of and disengagement in school. Kelly shared, “I don’t know. It was sort of like the teachers didn’t care. All they wanted you to do was do your work so they could do their work. That’s what it seemed like.” To several young women not only did the teachers not care, but they seemed spiteful. Crystal, recollected, “They was, I don’t know, they was smart alecks. And I didn’t get along with ‘em that well.”

The students also did not resonate with teachers whom they perceived as unsupportive and unwilling to provide help or direction in regard to their assignments. Jesse shared, “They
just give you work. They don’t tell you to, explain it to you, or anything. They’ll say, ‘Do this and go home’.” Cherí described settings where some of them [teachers] just give you a book and say “work.” And not knowing what you’re supposed to do, you, you can’t do anything. And when the test come they’re fussing at you, but you, you thinking, “Well, you didn’t teach me anything this whole year. So how, how am I supposed to know?”

When the researchers asked what approach would have been more preferable Crystal replied, “If the teachers would talk to me more and explain stuff to me instead of giving me worksheets and saying, ‘Here’.” Thus the girls’ expressed a desire for teachers who they perceived cared about them and wanted to help them with their work. Unfortunately, many of the students voiced regret that as they entered secondary schools they did not have teachers who they perceived were concerned about their individual needs.

A few of the young women also explained how their perceptions of the teachers’ expectations for them influenced their behaviors in school. Regardless of what grades the young women made in school, they very astutely picked up on the hidden agendas stemming from what they perceived to be teachers’ misguided preconceived notions about their abilities. Some students faced situations where their teachers based assumptions about their future behaviors on events from the young women’s pasts. Jennifer reflected,

I had been in and out of places like this [LYDC] and group homes and stuff. They tend to like not give you a chance to be anything. They’re just like “Ok, troublemaker.” It’s just like “You’re labeling me? You know, I could be one of the best students you’ll ever have and you labeled me from the second I stepped in your door just ‘cause you heard my name and some rumors about me?” That made me mad and that just made me hate the teachers.

Students claimed they did not work hard in classrooms where they felt teachers judged them because of their past experiences. In these situations, the students did not engage in school and even admitted that they did not care to.
Other students described different situations that were equally upsetting. Their teachers “babied” (Tracey) them and tried to coddle them through difficult times by requiring a lower standard for them than they did for their other students. These actions, which may have actually been attempts at caring by these teachers, only fueled the young women’s fires of discontent. Tracey, reported,

My teacher Ms. Johnson, she always was like “Oh Tracey its ok. I know you feel this way and that way and that way.” She really didn’t know she just said whatever. And she was like “You can stay after school and get extra credit ‘cause I know you want to pass ‘cause you’re already older” . . . So I’d just cuss her out and stuff so she’d put me in ISS or kick me out or do something. . . . It made me feel like I was a big sad story to them, “Oh, we got a helpless poor child.” And it just made me so mad. So I felt like I had to push them away. I didn’t want anybody to feel sorry for me. That’s just how I felt.

Instead of being treated as different or special, what Tracey really wanted was for her teachers “to treat me like everybody else. They would never do that because I had been here [LYDC] before and they just wouldn’t treat me normally or something.” The students knew when teachers held low expectations of them. This perception seemed to create a negative emotional reaction in the students that undermined their efforts to engage in school. Thus, the young women reported strong connections between their perceived relationships with their teachers and their engagement in school.

**Importance of School Success**

School success surfaced as another important and common theme associated with students’ school engagement. The young women perceived that several factors played a role in their school success or failure. To begin with, the students attended a variety of school (e.g., public, private, Catholic, alternative, detention) as well as classroom settings (e.g., mainstream, self-contained, pull out, special education, behavioral education). As mentioned previously, at least 77% of the sample experienced alternative school placements. A few of
these young women discussed positive experiences relating to alternative placements. For example, when Cherí entered 9th grade she was an A/B student and so were her friends. When asked about her teachers during that time in her life she replied, “I was in Catholic school so they were pretty strict. They, they taught. They were strict.” Cherí further stated that she actually enjoyed the school and that school was important to her at that time in her life.

Other young women viewed these alternative school placements as positive because they provided an opportunity for them to receive more individualized instruction and to develop better relationships with their teachers. Keisha, a 16-year-old African American, shared her experience in a self-contained classroom:

I had to be, stay in one class, which was, um, she taught 7th and 8th graders. But we, um, did all our subjects in her class ‘cause I had confrontations with other girls that was in my other class. I loved my teacher the most about that school.

Jesse also enjoyed her experience with a teacher at one of the alternative schools she attended. “The teacher he’ll work with you one on one. And he don’t sit there and just, you know, give you the work. He’ll sit there and explain it to you.” What made an additional impression on her was the freedom this teacher seemed to have to integrate meaningful incentives into his instructional routine. “Like if we say, you know, we do good for like a month, he, he’ll take us to the bowling alley or out to eat or something like that” (Jesse).

However, for the majority of students, alternative school placements exacerbated their disengagement in school. A few of these young women received homebound instruction, and they felt alienated from school in general. Other students, like Crystal, experienced multiple transitions in and out of alternative schools, “I was in an alternative school in ninth grade. I was in an alternative school through middle school too.” After being expelled from her
middle school Jesse spent time in three different alternative schools. Transitions to and from alternative placements appeared to increase some students’ feelings of disaffection from school and to reduce their desire to work towards success when at school.

Additionally, when discussing their schooling experiences several students explained how the type of assignments they received in different classrooms contributed to their engagement and success in those classrooms. They voiced more motivation to do their work when given assignments they could enjoy. Specifically, when describing their more successful times in school they described class assignments with phrases like, “It was fun,” or “School was fun in itself. Learning, that was, that was fun in itself,” or “I was liking school. I was liking learning.” (Monique, a 17-year-old African American, Cherí, and Kelly, respectively). The students also enjoyed learning and excelled in their studies when allowed to explore topics of particular interest to them. Lisa responded favorably to writing and spelling assignments because she enjoyed those areas. Similarly, Crystal excelled when allowed to work in her favorite areas, math and art. Finally, creative methods of instruction, as opposed to traditional skill-based or direct teaching approaches, motivated some students to engage in their class work. For example, Laurie enjoyed doing “hands-on stuff in class. . . . It was more interesting, like my classes weren’t boring. . . . And so I really liked school . . . and I went a lot.”

Alternatively, several students confessed that they did not engage nor excel in classrooms where teachers assigned boring work. For example, students particularly disliked worksheets and textbooks especially when teachers expected their students to navigate through the material without direction. Additionally, the students did not like being assigned busy work that was “just crazy stuff that didn’t really have to do with what they were teaching”
Furthermore, they preferred to be challenged by their schoolwork. They enjoyed making good grades, but realized when teachers assigned work that was beneath their abilities. Amber, a 16-year-old Caucasian, shared, “The teachers I had gave out easy assignments. And it was easy to get an A... I did like it in a way, but then again I didn’t because I knew I wasn’t doing nothing.” Overall, the girls argued when assignments were boring or unchallenging they lost interest in school. Hands-on activities that captured their interest motivated the students to work hard and do well.

Finally, the students’ judgments about their abilities to accomplish schoolwork, or their self-perceptions of competence in academic domains (Harter, 1985), also appeared to play a role in their school success and engagement. Several of the students reflected on times where they (and others) considered themselves (them) to be smart. Kelly was too advanced for her preschool class. Amber was the only student who could read in her kindergarten class, “Everybody always thought I was, you know, the extra smart one.” Crystal, Cherí, and Keisha all were A/B students at some point in their schooling. When Monique reflected on her earlier years she shared, “I was making good grades, you know, and it was fun.” In fact, most of the students enjoyed doing well in school. “I liked that I was making good grades and all the teachers were like, you know, ‘This is my A student. This is my best student’” (Amber). Crystal shared that when she made good grades, “I got a lot of attention.” She added that she liked it. Some students hinted that feelings of competence in their ability to be successful in school led to behaviors that insured their success. For example, when they had more confidence in themselves as learners, they were more willing to ask for help when they needed it. Thus, the desire to excel appeared to increase with the belief in an ability to excel.
As the students discussed the more recent, negative years in school, they voiced a lack of competence and almost an expectation of failure. Although several students referenced feeling stupid, Tracey was the only person who explicitly discussed feeling stupid or feeling like others thought she was stupid just because of her past antisocial behaviors. Several students made references to being afraid to ask what they perceived to be “dumb questions” (Amber). Others voiced apprehension over having other students know their ability levels. Nikki, a 17-year-old African American, stated that she would skip school because, “I didn’t want everyone else to see that I couldn’t read as good as they did.” During the years when they did not believe themselves capable of succeeding, few expressed comfort when asking for help. In fact, during these times of decreased confidence they expressed feeling like they did not receive enough individual attention to address their learning needs. As Jennifer noted, “There was too many kids in the class. And it’s just like not enough one-on-one attention with teachers and students and stuff.”

Furthermore, during the years when the students doubted their abilities to succeed they engaged in behaviors that increased the likelihood of their failures. Indeed, as previously mentioned, 92% of the sample experienced school failure, placing them at least one year behind their same-aged peers in school. The students accepted responsibility for their poor choices in that process, but accepting responsibility had its emotional costs. Lisa explained, “I didn’t, I never wanted to flunk no grades and stuff and I just wanted to get my things together.” Every student expressed a desire to be “in my right grade” (Keisha). They confessed embarrassment at being “the only one left behind” (Cheri) as all of their friends progressed without them. While the students accepted responsibility for their school failures interestingly, they likewise assumed ownership of their earlier school successes. It was as if
they believed at some point along the way they simply lost their academic abilities, as Tracey contemplated, “maybe I just did know more [back then].” Thus, although the young women discussed contextual factors that influenced their school engagement, they also disclosed the perception that personal factors played a role in their ability to succeed in school in the first place.

*Lack of Sense of Belonging*

As previously discussed, the interviews revealed that as the students approached early adolescence, their experiences in schools changed. Specifically, they perceived a decline in the quality of their relationships with teachers and fewer opportunities to experience school success. The girls shared that both of these trends functioned to decrease their engagement in school. However, their stories suggest that both their poor relationships with teachers as well as their lack of school success in secondary schools contributed to a third, highly salient theme in their interviews. As mentioned previously, the girls described behavioral indicators of school disengagement during times where they perceived a poor fit with their school environments. Thus, in this investigation, school engagement operated as an indicator of poor student-school fit. However, all of the girls’ stories also reveal that during their times of disengagement from school, the students were also experiencing a void of sense of belonging to school. Thus, sense of belonging, like school engagement, may be viewed as another indicator of perceived fit between a student and her school environment. Indeed, the young women’s interviews described how various contextual factors operated to decrease their sense of belonging to school.

To begin with, as discussed previously, as the students entered early adolescence they did not perceive positive relationships with their teachers. They spoke frequently about how they
felt ostracized by their teachers’ behaviors and comments. As they entered secondary schools, especially after they engaged in disruptive or delinquent behaviors, they perceived that their teachers did not care about them as students or as individuals. They also perceived similar feelings of disregard coming from members of their school’s administration. They quite clearly expressed how they did not feel as if they were important or valued members of their school communities.

Secondly, also as noted previously, this sample experienced many transitions in regard to their school placements. For example, Jesse discussed experiencing multiple moves in her schooling history. Crystal mentioned going to three different schools in a two week time span. Monique attended four different high schools during her ninth grade year. Tracey could count eight, and Kelly could count 13 different schools they had attended throughout their schooling histories. Some of these moves were the consequences of discipline infractions. Others were attributed to changes in family circumstances due to parents changing jobs, getting divorced, going to jail, and so on. The high number of transitions in and out of multiple classrooms and schools appeared to decrease the girls’ sense of belonging to any particular classroom or school. Furthermore, with each transition, the students had to endure again the process of seeking out and making new friends. Several of the students acknowledged experiencing difficulty fitting in or feeling like they belonged at their new schools. Tracey attributed regional differences to her feeling like an outsider, “Everybody was from the South and I was from the North and I talked different and I acted different.” Amber made an explicit reference to the difficulties inherent in undergoing so many transitions:

I hate going to new schools, gosh I hate it. But sometimes, you know, at some schools I just wouldn’t find anybody that I liked enough to spend time with so I just
stopped caring about it. I wouldn’t care. I, I would go to school. And I always done pretty good in school, you know, all my lawyers and stuff always brought that up in court. But I just, when I, when I went to school and I didn’t like it, and I stopped liking it I just stopped going. And, you know, all my remarks said that I had potential and all that stuff and I could make good grades but I just didn’t want to. I don’t know why. I just didn’t

Additionally, as discussed previously, the majority of this sample reported skipping school on a frequent basis. Interestingly, each of these students made the connection between missing school and earning lower grades. Monique shared, “My 10th grade year it got out of hand. I just didn’t go to school my 10th grade year. So that’s when I started going down hill when I stopped, when I started skipping school in my sophomore year.” Keisha, made a similar connection, “I never made bad grades until I didn’t go [to school].”

Some students simply reported no interest in going to school. Others missed school because they were caught up in cycles of running away and/or being arrested. “I kept running away. I really didn’t go to school” (Anna). Whether or not they intended to miss school absenteeism became the reality whenever they were on the run or locked up. Tracey reflected on her eighth grade year, “I’d been here [LYDC], back and forth out of detention, and running away, and homebound, and all that stuff. I mean, I hardly attended like a month, like 2 months in 2 years.” After missing a certain number of days it seemed futile to some young women to even attempt to apply themselves on the days they did attend. Jennifer confessed:

I just stopped caring. It’s not that I didn’t care. It’s just that I wasn’t in school. I didn’t skip school. I was just always on the run. I don’t know however I can explain that. I didn’t intentionally say, “Well I’m not going to school today.” I just was never in school ‘cause I was running away or locked up. So, the time I was in school it was just like, just pointless to do anything.

Thus, from the students’ perspectives, regardless of their reasons for missing school, their frequent truancy undermined their ability to make good grades as well as their motivation.
to do so. In other words, they were out of school so much that they felt no obligation to function as contributing members of their school environment when they did attend school. It appears their frequent absences functioned to prevent the girls from feeling connected to or becoming involved in their schools, and merely being present did not incline them to engage or to succeed.

Families and School Engagement

Although the interview protocol did not explicitly include questions about the role of families in the girls’ educational histories, according to the students, family factors did play a role in their schooling experiences. In fact, despite the variability across these students’ families, family influences on the students’ school engagement emerged as an important theme voiced by the young women in the sample. This section discusses their girls’ perceptions of how parental support, stable family life, and school-home discontinuity related to their engagement in school.

Importance of Parental Support

Parental support for school appeared to bolster the students’ desire to engage in school. Some of the young women fondly recalled times when their parents expressed pride in their successes in school. A few acknowledged that receiving their parents’ approval motivated them to strive to excel, especially in their early years of schooling. For example, Crystal was on the A/B honor roll through most of elementary school. She remembered walking across the stage to receive her certificates each year. In her interview, she stated, “My mom still has them!” [the certificates].

Alternatively, for some students it seemed that when parents stopped voicing concern over whether or not the students succeeded in school the young women lost interest as well.
and became disengaged. That is, when the students perceived that their parents stopped caring about their education, it reinforced the child’s disregard for school. Crystal shared that after a few years of having problems in school her dad just seemed to stop caring what she did, “My dad didn’t care. He let me stay home. . . . Then I just didn’t go to school anymore.”

**Importance of Stable Family Life**

The majority of the young women shared that unstable family situations distracted them from schoolwork and thus functioned to decrease their engagement in school. Some of the sample had siblings who served as negative role models because they had already entered the world of delinquency. However, Jennifer attributes part of her indifference toward school to:

changes in life style. Dad got locked up; we moved to the projects. Dad got outta jail; we stayed there. Then once they got their life straightened out it was, I didn’t care. It was just like, well, I don’t know.

Cherí explained that she lost interest in making good grades because:

I had a lot of anger my 9th grade year because my father passed. So I had a lot of anger and I just was looking for ways to cure myself. So, I just had fun. I didn’t care anymore. I didn’t want to go to school. I didn’t want to do anything.

Similarly, Tracey confessed that when her stepfather physically abused her mother she brought “my anger to school” instead of her determination to succeed. Nikki shared that her difficulties in school peaked in middle school after she had to relocate homes and schools due to experiencing abuse perpetrated by her father.

Some of the students relayed that negative family-related influences contributed to their experimentation with drugs and with their subsequent decreased interest in schoolwork. Kelly shared:

But when I got to like . . . 8th and 9th grade I just, I didn’t care about school no more. But then again, that’s when I first, you know, got into drugs and everything. Drugs and family problems. I wasn’t feeling like my parents wanted me and, you know, I was, I was just searching for something.
Regardless of why students initiated drug use, they all believed that their substance abuse inhibited their school success. Keisha asserted that the only time she did not enjoy school was when “I started using drugs and running away.” Lisa made a similar confession:

‘Cause, when I turned 13 that was . . . when I started doing drugs and stuff. And that’s when I went to that new school and school was kind of twisted. And that’s what changed my life. . . . I was bad. ‘Cause part of it was because, um, teachers and stuff and the other half was ‘cause I was on drugs and stuff.

*Discontinuity between School and Home*

Finally, a few of the students explicitly described how their parents’ beliefs and behaviors impacted their own behaviors and attitudes in school. Jesse mentioned how her father’s expectation that she stand up for herself often conflicted with school policy and frequently resulted in her suspension or expulsion:

Somebody says somethin’. You try not to say nothin’. But if you don’t say nothin’ back then they gonna start calling you names, chicken whatever, whatever. And so I, you know, me having a big mouth and I’d always say something. Or, you know, somebody’d bump into me, I’d push ‘em or somethin’. And my, you know, my dad’ll be like if somebody ever hit you, you know, you hit, don’t start it but finish it. That’s the way I was brought up and that’s the way I’ve always done. . . . Some people’s parents and stuff don’t see what you go through. Cause they never went through it. But its, its stressin’. It really is.

Thus, behaviors reflecting explicit messages Jesse received from home functioned to alienate her from school.

Other students shared how their parents called or went to their schools and engaged in heated confrontations with their principals and/or teachers. According to the young women after such incidents the teachers and administration held grudges against them. The students perceived being blamed for everything negative that happened in school from that point on. Thus it appears that regardless of their intent, parents’ negative
interventions at school left the students feeling like school outcasts and adversely impacted the girls’ desire to engage in schoolwork.

Peers and School Engagement

The interview protocol only contained two questions directed at the influence of peers in the girls’ schooling experiences, however as with family-related influences, peer-related influences on the students’ school engagement surfaced as another salient and common theme in the girls’ narratives. This section discusses the students’ perceptions of how using peers as a source of relational support and how their affiliations with positive peer groups related to their school engagement.

Peers as a Source of Relational Support

It appears that when the students did not receive needed support from their teachers or their families they all looked to their peers to fill their relational voids. Jennifer was a unique exception asserting that she usually did not have and did not want any friends, “I’ve always been pretty much a loner by myself.” All other members of the sample however disclosed at least one example of how peers filled their needs for companionship. Indeed, according to the girls, their peer groups offered them a place to belong and to feel appreciated.

It appears that as the students’ problems in schools increased, their associations with positive peers or positive role models decreased. Deviant peer groups thus provided a niche where the young women’s relational needs could be met. Crystal shared:

I just started hanging out with all the bad people ‘cause it was like, I don’t know, they was just, “Go Crystal,” and all this other stuff. . . . I don’t know the word for it. They always, every time I do something, “Yeah Crystal, you my girl,” all this stuff . . . . . I felt like they liked me more. I guess I got used to it and I kept going deeper and deeper. Digging myself deeper and deeper, getting in more trouble.
Indeed, the young women expressed that they often associated with deviant peer groups because group membership made them feel special and offered a sense of belonging.

Interestingly, the students described these peers with words like: “negative,” “the wrong kind,” “bad,” “trouble” (Lisa, Kelly, Crystal, Tracey, respectively). Furthermore, they reported being exposed to and participating in drug use when around these particular types of peers. In addition, some shared that these friends brought “drugs or knives, weapons” (Jesse) to school and/or belonged to gangs. Several noted that these friends frequently got in trouble, had “charges for something” (Kelly), had been in detention, and/or had been placed on probation.

However like Crystal, most students quickly confessed that association with these deviant peer groups usually foreshadowed their own personal downfalls. Cherí remarked, “after I got friends and started hanging with people that’s when I started going down.” Unfortunately, these friends did not value school and often pressured the young women to join them in disruptive behaviors similar to those mentioned above. Thus, from the students’ perspectives, while their associations with deviant peer groups functioned to meet their relational needs for companionship and self-worth, they also tended to decrease their sense of belonging to school as well as their school engagement.

**Importance of Affiliations with Positive Peer Groups**

As alluded to above, according to the students, their peer groups also served as a context for their school engagement. Interestingly, when the students reflected about times when they were engaged in school they reported friendships with people who also valued school. On these occasions, the young women emphasized that they had positive friends who were “goin’ to school” (Monique), who “did their schoolwork” (Cherí), and who were making
good grades. A few young women noted that during this time they did talk to “some people that got in trouble a lot” (Crystal). However, they were quick to clarify that the interactions were minimal and there was “no association after school” (Cherí) with these individuals. Thus, the students expressed connections between having associations with friends who valued and succeeded in school and valuing and succeeding in school themselves.

Conversely, associations with deviant, disengaged peers appeared to undermine the students’ school engagement. Jesse shared that peer pressure kept her from going to school at times. Cherí suggested that it was very easy for group members to persuade each other to skip school and do something more exciting instead. Some of the young women hung out with older peers who engaged in riskier behaviors. Crystal quite succinctly articulated the progression of negative influence, “They encouraged me to skip school. It all started out encouraging me not doing work, talking in class, being smart with teachers. Then it finally got down to skipping school and then quitting school.”

As described earlier, the girls often spent time in alternative placements. Some of the girls shared that these settings provided them with opportunities to associate with deviant peer groups similar to the ones they got in trouble with at their primary school. That is, despite entering alternative placements and knowing none of the other students, some students quickly formed alliances with peers based on problem behaviors. For example, Jesse shared that she was separated from the school friends with whom she got in trouble; however, not long after she arrived at her new placement she “did drugs with” some of the students at that alternative school. The young women confessed that associations with deviant peer groups in alternative school placements further undermined their engagement in school.
Interestingly, some students shared how their involvement with drugs influenced their friendships as well as their sense of belonging to and engagement in school. For example, Keisha, whose original peer group valued school, explained how she became disillusioned with her school friends once she entered the world of drugs with peers outside of school:

I guess I didn’t really fit in after a while because I started doing drugs. . . I never smoked with the people I went to school with, um. Um, I didn’t, I didn’t want to be around them kind of people because they didn’t do the things that I did. So I, I kind of distanced myself from them. You know they would always ask “What’s wrong?” you know, or um, “Are you ok?” “It’s just that I don’t fit in anymore. You know, you don’t do the things that I like to do now. So I don’t want to hang around you.”

Thus, the students perceived that their associations with deviant peers led to their disassociation with engaged peers as well as to their gradual disengagement from school.

Hope for the Future

Despite feeling alienated from and experiencing failures in their most recent school settings, the young women in this sample realized what they needed from schools to maintain their school engagement in the future. Indeed, despite being formulated at different times many of the desires revealed via the letters to future teachers reinforced the very issues reported as problematic in the interviews. To begin with teacher-related factors emerged the most frequently. The universal theme included hope for “strong” (Monique) support and help from teachers. “I would just like to feel like help is their [sic] if I need it (Laurie). Some young women conceptualized help as “explaining it to me” (Gayle, a 15-year-old African American) or one on one “tutoring” (Sandra, a 16-year-old African American). Others requested “more individualized attention” (Laurie), receiving potentially “even extra work” (Marybeth, a 16-year-old Caucasian), and when necessary “after school” assistance (Felicia, a 14-year-old African American). Other students viewed support as monitoring students to

15Gayle, Sandra, Marybeth, Felicia, Lavonne, Paige, Rachel, Penny, and Jackie are not represented in the interview sample, but did submit letters to their future teacher.
help “keep us on track” (Lavonne, a 17-year-old African American). Students firmly believed that supportive, helpful teachers would contribute to their increased desire and belief in their ability to engage in school.

Other teacher qualities also emerged as crucial in the girls’ letters. For example, students expressed hope for “very caring and concerned” teachers (Paige, a 15-year-old Caucasian). The young women felt they would progress further in school with kind teachers who consistently displayed respectful attitudes and behaviors toward them, regardless of their past delinquency histories. Students eagerly anticipated teachers who took the time to offer encouragement, in regard to school-related issues as well as to non-school-related issues. Likewise, the youth voiced a preference for understanding teachers, “that I can talk to easily about my schoolwork” (Rachel, a 16-year-old Caucasian) and about other salient issues like “if I’m struggling with my addiction” (Tracey). Students clearly equated warm, nurturing teachers with their future engagement in school. “I think if you keep encouraging students then they will be more prone to success” (Monique).

Secondly, some of the students also conveyed their hope for their future classmates. The young women wanted to escape the negativity and conflict-ridden chaos that often accompanied their associations with deviant peers. In the future, they desired classrooms where peers are “very cooperative,” “able to communicate,” and “get along with each other” (Paige). Interestingly, in 23% of the letters, students specifically requested to be placed in classrooms “with peers who have positive goals and who are serious about their education.” (Penny, a 17-year-old Caucasian). Indeed, these students realized the pull of negative peers in their pasts. As Felicia wrote, “The peers in my class will have to be willing to get help. If they don’t want help they shouldn’t come to class. It will distract me and my education.”
Thus, the students’ request for positive and engaged peers expressed a hope that their future schools would provide assistance as they navigated the delicate world of peer relationships.

Additionally, the students expressed some concern over their future class assignments. In particular, they hoped for work that was challenging, but “that’s on the student’s level” (Jackie, a 15-year-old African American). Thus, they preferred assignments within their ability range or perhaps slightly ahead of it; however, they did not want to feel overwhelmed by the material. “I need a school that allows me to work at my pace and helps urge me to move forward” (Rachel). To keep them from feeling overwhelmed, some students requested for work to be “broken down” or given in small pieces at a time, instead of being assigned large sections of material that they had to navigate on their own (Sandra). Finally, students desired access to both appropriate and inviting resources. They believed class work that captured their interest by integrating fun and creativity would increase their school engagement.

Finally, students shared preferences for their future classroom and school environments that would augment their engagement in school. The young women hoped that classrooms would “be clean and in order” as well as “quiet” (Felicia and Crystal respectively). Paige specifically requested a “structured classroom environment.” Finally, the students hoped for positive and safe school environments.

Overall, the students requested modifiable factors concerning their future teachers, peers, class assignments, and school environments. In their perceptions, their requests were minor, “I don’t need much to do well” (Tracey). Indeed, the majority of their desires reflected antidotes to factors that functioned to derail their school engagement in their most recent years of schooling. The students acknowledged that they too would have to take
responsibility for their future schooling experiences. Their letters merely illustrated their hope for the role others would play in and for what they might achieve due to their future school engagement.

I understand that a lot of this is up to me and I am eager and willing to work towards it [school success]. As long as I have a good support team, I know I can make it! (Rachel)
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

This dissertation investigation used a qualitative approach to examine the educational histories of one group of female juvenile detainees. It was guided by ecological models of development that stress the importance of person-environment fit at different stages of development (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Eccles et al., 1993; Lerner & Galambos, 1998; Roese et al., 1999). Moreover, its particular interest in girls’ perceptions of their successes and difficulties in school was informed by feminist perspectives. Thus, the specific purpose of this exploratory, narrative study was to better understand the schooling experiences of female juvenile offenders prior to their entry into the juvenile justice system. Furthermore, a secondary purpose of this ecological investigation was to provide a platform for incarcerated young women to voice their perceptions of schooling and in so doing elucidate how future prevention and intervention programs might best meet the needs of delinquent girls.

This investigation is timely given the current status of the field of female delinquency. The female delinquency caseload is increasing (Stahl et al., 2007). Consequently, school and community settings are increasingly expected to provide services to a growing number of delinquent girls. Thus, the call for programs uniquely designed to meet female juvenile delinquents’ needs has increased (Belenko et al., 2004; Dixon et al., 2004; Harms, 2003; Scahill, 2000; Welch, 2007). Researchers have identified salient factors that contribute to female delinquency, as distinct from male delinquency, and such information is vital to
program development for this population (Mullis et al., 2004; Putallaz & Bierman, 2004). However, despite many delinquency experts’ requests to the contrary, most of this research is quantitative and does not capture delinquent girls’ voices or their perceptions of the factors operating in their lives that influence their paths to delinquency (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Shoemaker, 2000; Zahn, Hawkins, et al., 2008).

Additionally, although school engagement operates as a protective factor for high risk youth (ABA-NBA, 2001; NRC, 2004), we know delinquent girls often have many individual and contextual obstacles that impede their engagement in school (Acoca, 1999; Acoca & Dedel, 1998; ABA-NBA, 2001; Hirsch et al., 2004; Weiss et al., 1996). Furthermore, despite having quantitative data that establishes delinquent girls’ struggles in school we know little about how girls’ schooling experiences relate to their involvement in delinquent behavior (Biglan et al., 2004). However, systematic research addressing the impact of schooling experiences on delinquency patterns in girls would inform the increasingly necessary prevention and intervention programming choices for this population (Zahn, 2005, 2007).

This study contributes to the literature by addressing these chasms in the field. Specifically, in general, program development has historically drawn from literature based on male juvenile delinquents; however, this investigation uses a female sample to explicitly explore the needs of female juvenile delinquents. Additionally, whereas much of the schooling data on delinquent girls is quantitative in nature and does not capture delinquent girls’ perceptions of schools or the connections between girls’ schooling and girls’ delinquency, this investigation intentionally uses qualitative methodology to give voice to one group of incarcerated girls by exploring their perceptions of the relationship between their schooling experiences and their delinquent behaviors. Finally, although little of the
current literature that does address female delinquency has considered what delinquent girls have to say themselves about the factors operating in their lives, this study deliberately offers a group of delinquent girls the opportunity to explicate some of their needs and thus play a role in the design of programs that may provide hope and change for other groups of delinquent girls.

This chapter provides a discussion on the connections between this study’s findings the current literature base, this study’s limitations, the conclusions drawn from this study’s findings, directions for future research in this area, and the practice implications of this study’s findings.

Linking Findings to Literature

This section discusses this study’s findings as they relate to current literature. This investigation used an ecological lens to explore delinquent girls’ educational histories and considered school engagement an important indicator of stage-environment fit. Thus, a discussion of the how the students’ perceived fit with school decreased over time is followed with a review of how their school engagement waned as well. Next, it provides a discussion on the role schooling experiences played in the students’ school engagement. Additional sections discuss the ways in which other developmental contexts, as well as identity processes, shaped students’ school-related experiences. Finally, issues concerning positionality and positioning are discussed in relation to the girls’ narratives and educational histories.

Poor Stage-Environment Fit

This investigation used the ecological lens of stage-environment fit to explore the schooling experiences of delinquent girls. Schools are important contexts in the lives of
adolescents, and thus have the potential to shape adolescents’ development in significant ways (Eccles, 2004; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Roeser et al., 1998, 1999). School environments that provide opportunities matched to student needs engender positive developmental outcomes whereas school environments that do not meet developmental needs stimulate unfavorable outcomes for students (Eccles et al., 1993; Roeser et al., 1998; Seidman & French, 2004).

The students in this study shared multiple examples of how their schools did not meet their unique developmental needs. Similar to an interview study by Chesney-Lind and Shelden (2004), the students experienced success during their primary years of school. By late elementary and middle school however, all of them disclosed struggles that interfered with their educational pursuits. As their lives became more complex they drifted further and further away from being the “traditional” students that most schools are prepared to serve. As suggested below, it is likely that the mismatches between these students’ unique needs and the characteristics of their school environments contributed to their eventual disengagement from school.

The young women in this sample reported that their disengagement in school coincided with their entry into early adolescence. Thus, most likely, these students experienced simultaneously multiple transitions related to the onset of puberty as well as to their school placements, family influences, and peer relations. Evidence suggests that cumulative, simultaneous personal and environmental changes such as these expose youth to multiple risks (Eccles, 1999). In general, school transitions can be challenging for all youth, however high risk students who are dealing with adverse situations in multiple realms of their life can be particularly vulnerable to the stress associated with such transitions (Cadwallader, Farmer,
Furthermore, evidence suggests that the transition into middle school appears to be a particularly risky normative ecological transition, especially for youth who have experienced stressful events in families, neighborhoods and schools prior to the transition, as did many of the young women in this study (Seidman & French, 2004). Moreover, social adjustment during transitions may be especially taxing for high risk girls (Cadwallader et al., 2003).

Additionally, during times of heightened negative constraints the young women in this sample experienced a void of social support from their schools and their families that made it difficult for them to cope with the complexities of their lives and social circumstances. As a result, the young women turned to their peers for their relational needs and support. Thus, returning to an ecological perspective, the girls’ educational histories were shaped by the influences of multiple contexts (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Eccles et al., 1993; Farmer et al., 2007; Lerner & Galambos, 1998; Roeser et al., 1998). Also, as described in the next sections, the changes in one context (i.e., family) often influenced changes in other contexts (i.e., connection to school and peer relationships). This study’s interview protocol primarily focused on school-related experiences. However, given that the students volunteered information, sometimes in detail, about their families and peers suggests that these developmental contexts are interwoven in the lives of delinquent girls.

School Engagement

This investigation conceptualized school engagement as an indicator of the students’ perceived developmental fit with their schools. As previously noted school engagement functions as a protective factor for high risk youth, especially for girls (ABA-NBA, 2001; NRC, 2004; Valentine Foundation & Women’s Way, 1991; Zahn, 2005). Furthermore,
disengagement in school is a prominent risk factor for school failure, mental health problems, and girls’ delinquency (ABA-NBA, 2001; Bachman et al., 2008; Eccles et al., 1997; Roeser et al., 2000). Unfortunately, the interviews suggested that while the students in this sample were engaged in early elementary school, by the time they reached late elementary and middle school their school engagement had begun to wane. The students shared many behavioral indicators of this trend.

During elementary school the girls earned good grades, won awards, and believed they were academically competent. However, by secondary school most of the students reported earning low grades and at times failing courses or grade levels. In fact, all but one of the students was one or more grade levels behind her same-aged peers. Most of the students skipped school on a regular basis, another indicator of disengagement. Several of them experienced suspensions, expulsions, and alternative school placements during their more recent schooling histories. Again, during adolescence as other contextual factors began wielding more influence over their lives, other high risk girls have also reported experiencing school failure, or a lack of school success (Acoca, 1999; Acoca & Dedel, 1998; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2001; Weiss et al., 1996).

Unfortunately, the students’ interviews suggested that despite progressing through their early years with relative ease, all of the students came to struggle in school. Additionally, while most of the young women described their early schooling histories as fun and engaging, the majority of the youth eventually came to view school as boring and frustrating. Consequently, during their most recent years of schooling, the students were not engaged in school. In these regards, their educational histories exhibited many of the patterns common to other high risk female students who also became disengaged in school over time (Acoca,

Schooling Experiences and School Engagement

The major focus of this investigation was to examine delinquent girls’ perceptions of their schooling experiences in their pathways toward the juvenile justice system. This study is unique because it focuses on the role of schooling experiences, a source of influence that has been neglected in prior research on delinquent girls. This section discusses four themes that emerged from the girls’ narratives as they relate to prior research. As such, it addresses teacher-student relationships, school success, sense of belonging, and pushouts.

Teacher-Student Relationships

Individual needs for relatedness are vital for school engagement as well as for healthy youth development (Connell, 1990; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Masten, 2001; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Roeser et al., 2000). Children depend on their family to provide their initial source of relationship. However, as children mature their focus turns to peers, other adults, and schools as additional sources of influence to meet their relational needs (Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben Avie, 1996; Lee & Burkam, 2003). Thus, over time relationships in schools become important, perhaps increasingly so as students enter adolescence (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Research clearly emphasizes the importance of positive teacher-student relationships in students’ self esteem, school adjustment, motivation, engagement, social behavior, and success (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Lee & Burkam, 2003; McCombs & Laeur, 1997; Pianta & Suhlman, 2004; Roeser et al., 1996; Wentzel, 1997, 1998, 2002) and suggests it may be especially important for girls (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Goodenow, 1993b). In fact, in a nationally representative study, Crosnoe and colleagues
(2004) found that, for girls, stronger student-teacher relationships were associated with higher academic achievement (especially for Hispanic American girls) and with lower likelihood of behavior problems (especially for White girls).

Teachers and schools function as a primary socializing influence for high risk youth who lack supportive connections with adults in their families or communities (Comer et al., 1996). Most of the students in this investigation shared that their families were at times unstable and did not provide them with as much relational support as they would have preferred. Furthermore, a few of the young women discussed how their teachers stepped in at times and filled their relational voids. Recall one student shared that one of her teachers went the extra mile to reach out to her when her family was experiencing economic difficulties and an abusive environment. Moreover, in their letters all of the students indicated they needed positive, supportive, and caring relationships with their future teachers in order to engage and succeed in school.

Unfortunately, as the youth entered secondary schools they no longer perceived that teachers cared about their progress. Indeed, the young women’s narratives suggest that they did not feel supported by their teachers. Moreover, the students believed that their teachers did not respect them, thought poorly of them because of their failures in school as well as their involvement in antisocial behaviors, and ultimately did not like them or want them in their classrooms or schools. The interviews reveal that as the students began to experience negative relationships with their teachers, they turned to their peers to once again locate a source to satisfy their relational needs. Furthermore, as the young women lost supportive relationships with teachers and began perceiving teachers’ disregard, they lost motivation to engage in schoolwork. Thus, it appears that for the young women in this sample positive
versus negative relationships between students and teachers were positively related to students’ engagement versus disengagement in school (respectively).

**School Success**

School success addresses adolescents’ developmental need for competence, is important for school engagement, and influences girls’ immediate as well as future well-beings (AAUW, 1990, 1992, 1996; Phillips, 1998; Roeser et al, 2000). Furthermore, school success is particularly important for high risk girls because it operates as a protective factor that decreases the likelihood of girls’ involvement in delinquency (Bachman et al., 2008; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Giordano et al., 2004; Hawkins et al., 2009; Manguin & Loeber, 1996; Resnick, Ireland, & Borowsky, 2004), even when they associate with delinquent peers (Crosnoe et al., 2002). The young women in this sample indicated that they felt more engaged in school when they were successful in school. During their early schooling histories, they considered themselves successful students and reported being engaged in school activities. However, as they approached early adolescence it appears that several factors made it difficult for them to remain successful or engaged in school.

Recall, quite a discrepancy existed in the academic abilities of students in this sample. It is possible that the lower academic skill levels of some students’ inhibited their success in late elementary and middle school. Roeser and colleagues (1999, 2000) have discussed how youth with multiple problems often lack the skills necessary to succeed in school. In fact, their research suggests that, rather than simply low intelligence, inappropriate skills and behavior may be what actually lead to frustration, poor conduct, teacher disapproval, and ultimately failure in school.
Additionally, many of the young women in this sample were placed in alternative school placements. A few of the students shared that alternative settings functioned to increase their school success and engagement. However, many of the students claimed that these placements left them feeling alienated from mainstream classrooms and schools, provided them with opportunities to affiliate with other disengaged students, and decreased their desire to work towards success. Also, many of the students attributed their school failures to the type of assignments they were given and the lack of support they received in completing their schoolwork. The young women remarked that teachers did not take time to individualize or direct attention to their specific educational needs. Thus, the interviews suggest that high risk girls who are behind in academic skills, especially those who have been placed in alternative school settings, may need (or just as importantly may perceive that they need) purposeful, challenging, engaging assignments combined with conspicuous guidance and support to complete their schoolwork and succeed in school. Indeed it appears that during school years when the girls received interesting work and the support they perceived as necessary to achieve school success they were engaged in school.

Furthermore, all but one of the students were retained at least once during their schooling histories. Obviously, failing a grade is the antithesis of experiencing school success. Also, failure experiences may be especially distressing for girls (Eccles et al., 1999). Moreover, poor achievement contributes to students’ internalization of negative beliefs about themselves as well as about their schools (Roeser et al., 1999). Researchers have discussed how teachers’ criticisms of girls, along with other aspects of the hidden curriculum, often subtly encourage girls to internalize their failures and have found that in fact girls do take more internal responsibility for their failure experiences (Bank et al., 2007; Eccles, 2002).
Indeed, the young women’s narratives illustrated the students’ internalization of their school failures. Many of the girls described how although they were smart when they were younger, over time they lost their academic prowess. It follows that girls who have experienced such failures and who have attributed their failures to personal inability would be inclined to disengage from school as did these students.

**Sense of Belonging**

As discussed above, the narratives suggest that because the young women’s relational and competency needs were not being met they did not experience a sense of belonging to their secondary schools. Evidence clearly establishes that affiliative ties to school function as promotive factors for most students (Osterman, 2000), and may serve as protective factors for youth who experience difficulties in their home environments (Perkins & Jones; 2004) and for high risk girls (Irvin, 2006; Hawkins et al., 2009; Smith-Adcock & Kerpelman, 2005; McNeely et al., 2002; Zahn, 2005). Sense of belonging is related to motivation and achievement (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b), and may be particularly significant for girls’ school engagement and achievement (Degelsmith, 2000). Furthermore, students who have internalized a sense of belonging to school and who value school-related goals are more likely to participate in behaviors that engender school success (Finn, 1989). High risk students from chaotic family systems who lack positive support systems are less likely to follow this positive trend and are more likely to disidentify with and withdraw from school and ultimately become involved in problem behaviors (Finn, 1989; Finn & Voelkl, 1993).

All of the youth in this study reported feeling connected to their teachers, peers, and schools when they were younger. During these times, they enjoyed being at school, tried to
make good grades, and followed the rules. That is, when they expressed feeling a sense of belonging to school they also reported being motivated to engage in school. Over time however, they began to consider themselves outsiders to their school environments. Similar negative sentiments toward and feelings of alienation from schooling have been expressed by other high risk girls (Acoca, 1999; Acoca & Dedel, 1998; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2001; Weiss et al., 1996). As the students in this sample transitioned into secondary school environments, they reported less connection to school. In fact, the young women commonly referred to feelings of alienation and isolation in regard to school. Furthermore, as they began to perceive that their teachers viewed them in a negative light they became emotionally detached from their schools and began participating in activities that were not conducive to school success. If they did form relationships with peers at school it was with other students who were similarly disenfranchised. In essence, these students did not feel they were vital parts of their secondary schools or that they mattered. Their emotional detachment from school appeared not only to decrease their motivation to apply themselves in school but also to signal their behavioral disengagement from school. Thus, the young womens’ narratives emphasize the importance of sense of belonging as a protective factor in the lives of delinquent girls.

**Pushouts**

The students’ educational histories reveal that over time not only were they disengaged in school but that most of these young women began to feel quite unwelcome and in a sense “pushed” out of their schools. Cairns and Cairns (1994) discuss this phenomenon in their study of rural youth. They make a distinction between “dropouts,” youth who leave school of their own accord and “pushouts,” those who leave involuntarily because of suspension or
expulsion (Cairns & Cairns, 1994). Fine (1986) also describes the negative schooling experiences that “push” youth out of school. The students’ stories reveal similar processes at work. As the students approached adolescence, contextual influences, often negative, began to take more precedence in their lives. During these times their school environments did not address their unique developmental needs. Subsequently, as the students’ sense of belonging to school diminished and they began to experience school failures they became disengaged in school. Their subsequent poor grades, truancy, and behavioral problems reflected their disidentification with school (Finn, 1989). Consequently, as do the schools of many other high risk youth, the students’ schools responded by implementing suspensions, alternative placements, and expulsions (Acoca, 1999; Acoca & Dedel, 1998; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2001; Hirsch et al., 2004; Weiss et al., 1996). Thus, by default the students were left alienated from their base schools with little to no opportunity to succeed, which of course reinforced the cycle of school disengagement and left them, in essence, pushed out of school.

**Schooling Experiences and Identity Development**

Youth gain the capacity to construct a life story during adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2001). That is, they develop the ability to reflect on their past selves while they simultaneously construct and reconstruct conceptions of their present selves. This process reflects identity formation (McLean, 2008). Thus, youths’ autobiographical narratives disclose salient aspects of their conceptions of self or their identities (McLean, 2008). Moreover, as will be discussed in more detail later, even the manner in which youth go about recounting their stories (e.g., what they highlight, what they omit, how they position themselves within their narrative and with their audience) and with whom they share their stories plays a role in the meaning derived from the narrative as well as in identity formation.
The narratives shared by the students in this study revealed that schooling experiences shaped their identity development.

Identity formation is the premier task of adolescence (Erikson, 1968). As youth forge a conception of themselves they reconcile how various aspects of themselves come together as a whole. Self-perceptions undergird identity formation, thus self-esteem, competency beliefs, and beliefs about worthiness and lovability are vital to the process. Identity formation can be a tentative process for girls for several reasons. First of all, during adolescence many girls, especially European American girls, experience declines in self-esteem and self-confidence (Malenchuk & Eccles, 2006). Additionally, girls who are struggling academically are more likely to believe that they are incapable of learning (Bank et al., 2007; Eccles et al., 1999; Valentine Foundation & Women’s Way, 1991). Furthermore, girls are more negatively affected by failure experiences (Eccles et al., 1991). Finally, relationships with teachers are important for girls’ school engagement and achievement (AAUW, 1991; Crosnoe et al., 2002; Goodenow, 1993b) however, high risk girls often report problematic relationships with teachers (Fejes-Mendoza & Miller, 1995).

Needless to say, negotiating a positive conception of self despite these encumbrances can be a thorny process for any girl. However, such factors may have been particularly difficult for the students in this study. Most of the young women expressed concern over one if not all of the areas mentioned above. Indeed, many struggled with self-esteem and self-confidence, all came to a point in their schooling where they struggled academically and experienced failures, several voiced a disbelief in their ability to learn, and the vast majority cited examples of poor relationships with teachers. Roeser and colleagues (1999) assert that youths’ internalization of negative self-perceptions of academic competence, negative
feelings of self worth, and low school valuing mediate students’ continued involvement in problem behaviors. Furthermore, negative feedback from teachers (and parents) contributes significantly to students’ negative beliefs. Thus, considering the schooling experiences shared by the young women in this sample, it is not surprising that they were not able to negotiate traditionally accepted positive identities that validated their sense of self-worth. Therefore, to be accepted in at least one realm of their life, they opted to reject female gender role standards and instead develop identities that were in opposition to mainstream culture. In essence, they became the “Other” students because they did not fit into the prevailing narrowly constructed roles that schools establish for girls (Bank et al., 2007, p. 559).

Unfortunately, “Other” students are often conceived of as problem students and are generally unsuccessful in the school environment.

Many scholars have discussed the development of oppositional identities and more explicitly how this process operates in regard to schooling (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Osborne, 1997; Steele, 1992). Racial discrimination and minority status typically provide rationales for the behaviors associated with this typology. The students in this study do not qualify for minority status due to ethnicity, but many were disadvantaged due to their home and schooling experiences. Furthermore, adolescents with negative social stereotypes are at greater risk of disengaging from or disidentifying with an unsupportive academic culture (Bank et al., 2007; Eccles, Wong, & Peck, 2006; Finn, 1989; Osbourne, 1997; Steele, 1992). Generally, adolescents involved in the juvenile justice system are often considered “troubled” or “criminal.” The students in this investigation certainly perceived their teachers’ and administrators’ disregard for them. After experiencing various levels of failures with both the academic and social aspects of their schools, the students disengaged from school and began
to explore alternative identities that could possibly provide them with more feelings of competence.

Accordingly, the narratives of the young women in this study are a reminder of the powerful role of normative identity development processes in adolescence. Youth who are unable to develop “acceptable” academic, vocational, and social skills look for other identities for their source of self-esteem. In their educational histories, the young women appear to be constructing their identity in the moment, without a sense of who they could become in the future. Their schools, as well as their families and peers were important sources of their identities. Unfortunately, most of the messages received from these contexts contributed to their adoption of antisocial or deviant self-perceptions. Placement in alternative settings and/or juvenile justice facilities, with their emphasis on rehabilitating “troubled” or “delinquent” youth, likely further inhibited their adoption of positive self-identities.

The Role of Families and Peers in Girls’ Educational Histories

In their narratives, the young women shared how family-related and peer-related influences shaped their schooling experiences. This section discusses both themes as they relate to prior research.

Family Influences

The influence of family-related factors on the students’ school engagement emerged from the students’ educational histories. Numerous studies have highlighted the importance of parental support for adolescents’ academic success (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998; Steinberg et al., 1996), especially for low income youth (Hill et al., 2004). Like most adolescents, the students in this sample reported motivation to do well in school when their
parents supported them and took pride in their academic accomplishments. However, due to
difficult home environments, or frequent moves between relatives, foster homes and group
homes, a majority of the students did not receive the support needed for school success. In
fact, several youth stated that their family problems intensified their difficulties in school.
Furthermore, as other high risk adolescents have shared (Allen-Meares & Fraser, 2004), the
students reported that they began to experiment with drugs or to associate with peers who
abused alcohol and drugs to cope with or escape from abusive or unstable home
environments. Moreover, the students perceived that their substance abuse contributed to
their further school disengagement. Thus, formative experiences in their homes related to
their delinquent choices in adolescence (Belknap & Holsinger, 1998). In this regard, it is not
just the school environment that failed these young women. From an ecological perspective,
the narratives illustrate how adolescents’ home and school environments are often closely
linked (Eccles et al., 1993).

Peer Influences

Associations also existed between the students’ peer relationships and their school
engagement. The young women strived to create meaningful relationships with their
teachers, with their peers, and with their families. In fact, much of their behavior seemed to
revolve around a search for connections with others, which is not surprising given the
integral role relationships play in female development (Belknap et al., 1997; Belenky et al.,
1986; Gilligan, 1982, 1990, 2004). Unfortunately, as other studies have shown, the young
women in this study turned to other troubled youth for their source of acceptance and
belonging when they experienced difficulty at school and home (Dishion, Eddy, Haas,
Fuzhong, & Spracklen, 1997; Roeser et al., 1999). Many of the students, formed
relationships with other disengaged students at their schools. Some of the young women began to affiliate with friends who were not in school at all.

Peer relationships exert considerable influence on school engagement and achievement (Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003; Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005a; Kindermann, 1993; Steinberg et al., 1996). In fact, peer groups function as contextual influences on students’ school adjustment, establish behavioral norms for youth, and reinforce the maintenance of behaviors over time (Akos et al., 2007; Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Farmer, 2000; Farmer et al., 2007; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005a; Ryan, 2000, 2001). Furthermore, adolescents who form relationships with low achieving peers will often eventually perform at even lower levels, and the configurations of low-achieving peer groups are relatively stable over time (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005a; Kindermann et al., 1996). Consistent with these views, the students in this sample recalled associating with positive friends who were engaged in school during the years when they experienced school success. As they began to have problems at school however, they admitted associating with peers who were also struggling academically. Their narratives revealed that many of these young women began to see themselves as “bad students” as they began affiliating with peers who were similarly disengaged in academics. The students shared that their disengagement and subsequent problems in school persisted as long as they continued to affiliate with other disengaged youth.

Thus, peers have the power to affect both positive as well as negative change (Gwynn, Meyer, & Schaefer, 1988). In this regard the students’ narratives illustrate an argument made by intervention researchers, that problem behavior is embedded in the context of peer groups (Dishion, 1990; Dishion et al., 1999; Dishion & Piehler, 2007; Dodge et al., 2006). In their
work with adolescent boys, Dishion and colleagues (1999) found that after controlling for parental influences and prior behavioral problems, deviancy training was associated with increased levels of violence, substance abuse, and delinquency. Furthermore, deviancy training was the mechanism by which high risk youth obtained friends. This same process appears to have been operating in these young women’s lives. Certainly, the delinquent girls in this study reported several instances where their antisocial friends encouraged them to engage in delinquent behaviors. They also expressed feeling important and more liked when they behaved as their antisocial peers preferred. Again, returning to an ecological perspective, the narratives reveal the complex interrelations of contextual influences operating in delinquent girls’ lives (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Eccles et al., 1993).

The Role of Positioning

In narrative analysis researchers must consider why individuals choose to tell their stories in the manner in which they do and to the person with whom they share them (McLean & Thorne, 2006; Reissman, 2002). Positioning refers to the social and emotional stances that individuals take with reference to others (Thorne & McLean, 2003). Positioning can occur between characters within a narrative as well as between a narrator and her audience. Master narratives are enforced positions held by cultural authority figures (e.g., teachers, parents, valued peers) that are regarded as appropriate ways to experience the world. Thus, master narratives function as cultural standards against which community members feel compelled to position their personal experience. Interestingly, a narrator may reject a master narrative; however in so doing, she by default acknowledges its existence. Reflection on the dynamics all of these processes provides narrative researchers with access to their study participants’ constructions of identity.
Within-Narrative Positioning

One master narrative operating in the students’ stories is the belief that school is valuable and important. When the girls were in elementary school they agreed with this position. Furthermore, they reported having friendships with peers and receiving support from parents who were also in agreement of this cultural norm. However, as the girls moved to secondary schools, began feeling alienated from schools, and experiencing school failures, they also began rejecting the master narrative embracing school. Many perceived that their parents lost interest in their stance on schooling. All of them actively sought friendships with peers who likewise rejected the master narrative on schooling. In fact during their later years, it may be that peers offered a new anti-school master narrative that became more salient than the previous pro-school position.

Interestingly, while their scant school records usually confirmed that earlier schooling experiences were more positive than later ones, the students’ perceptions of their earlier years almost seemed romanticized. This nostalgia is reflective of their current stance on schools as well as of their current conceptions of themselves. Through the interviews the students were taken back to a period in time where they liked themselves and when they enjoyed their lives. Between elementary school and the juvenile facility the girls experienced quite a number of school-related struggles. However, they had all experienced enough success in the HOPE school to increase their disregard of their secondary schools as well as their nostalgia of their elementary school years. In some ways, their romantic notions of elementary school appear to reveal their re-acceptance of the original pro-school master narrative and the reinstatement of their identities as capable students.
Finally, the students’ narratives included a lot of information on their relationships with others. Indeed, patterns emerged showing associations between their relationships and their experiences in schools. Thus, another master narrative that emerged from the girls’ stories is the belief that relationships are important. However, in general, when sharing their stories girls and women are more prone than boys or men to include people, relationships, and emotions in their narratives (Fivush & Buckner, 2003). Thus, gender differences in narrative telling may have impacted why this position emerged as being salient to their educational histories. However, as discussed previously, other research suggests that relationships are integral to female development and do play a role in girls’ school engagement (Belknap et al., 1997; Crosnoe et al., 2002, 2004; Gilligan, 1982, 1990, 2004; Goodenow, 1993b; Josselson, 1987; Noddings, 2003; Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

**Narrator-Audience Positioning**

Feminist perspectives emphasize the role power plays in determining who says what to whom (Fivush & Buckner, 2003). Thus, a narrator’s perception of the appropriateness of sharing certain kinds of information over others to a particular listener influences what she discloses in a given story. Consequently, the researchers’ positions in the HOPE school environment as well as their relationships with each of the students impacted the stories the students shared with them. Both researchers spent time in the HOPE classroom encouraging and supporting the students in their academic studies. Therefore, the students were well aware that the researchers strongly endorsed school engagement. Thus, when sharing their educational histories with the researchers, the girls were actively negotiating which pieces of the story the researchers should hear versus which they should not. This undoubtedly
influenced the information the students shared in their narratives, as well as the themes that could be derived from this analysis.

Furthermore, because gendered displays result from specific developmental and situational contexts, their role in an interview setting may be just as much a function of a narrator’s audience as of her own gender (Fivush & Buckner, 2003). Both of the researchers were women. All of the students were young women. It is possible that the students chose to discuss the relational as well as other specific issues of their educational histories with the researchers because they were speaking to a female interviewer. That is, the stories may have emphasized different areas had they been told to a male interviewer. Thus, the nuances of female to female conversation dynamics impacted the stories told by the girls to the researchers and analyzed here.

Furthermore, the mere acts of interviewing students and asking them to write letters to their future teachers functioned as interventions that influenced the interviews and these findings. Just being asked to share one’s schooling experiences provides validation to a disenfranchised student. Furthermore, being able to voice one’s needs to a future teacher represents an opportunity to self-advocate that is rare for any student, much less for a student who has struggled in schools. Both of these aspects of this study’s design empowered the students and certainly influenced what they voiced and how they wrote about schools. Thus, consistent with ecological views of development, the students’ narratives in this investigation illustrate how autobiographical narrative, identity, and gender are interlinked (Fivush & Buckner, 2003).
Limitations

This study has several limitations that need to be addressed in future research. First, most of the students were discharged from the juvenile facility shortly after being interviewed. It was not possible to go back and clarify their words or follow up on important comments that the researchers neglected to pursue during the sole interview. Likewise, the researchers did not collect letters to future teachers from all of the interviewed students. Furthermore, family context and peer relationships emerged as an integral piece to the girls’ narratives. However, the interview protocol was focused on schooling experiences. It did not explicitly ask the young women to share information about their families and only asked them two questions about their relationships with peers. Because the researchers did not probe for explicit details about events operating outside of school the current analysis could only consider the small pieces of their stories related to families and peers that the students volunteered to share.

Also, as mentioned previously, the researchers were not able to access the complete official records for the students. Some of the data included in this study is based on the documents from the original files that were collected by the HOPE teacher for her classroom purposes. However, the primary data source for this study was based on the students’ self-reports of their school successes and failures. Self-report measures are frequently used in motivation research, and they are highly predictive of school achievement and educational attainment (Schunk et al., 2008). Additionally, this investigation did not explore the impact of ethnicity on the girls’ schooling experiences. Certainly, such research is vital for program development attempting to meet the needs of delinquent girls from disparate ethnic backgrounds (Holsinger & Holsinger, 2005). Finally, the findings of this study are limited to a small sample of young women in one juvenile facility. Thus, the generalizability of these
findings to other populations of female juvenile detainees is limited by the sample selection used in this study. Likewise, this investigation focused on girls and cannot generalize to samples of male juvenile detainees with similar histories.

Conclusions

Despite these limitations, there is much to be learned from this sample of incarcerated female juvenile delinquents. First, the 13 students were quite diverse in terms of their academic abilities, home environments, and delinquency histories. Yet there were several common themes in their schooling experiences. Most of the students were able to recall positive experiences from their earlier years in school. However, all mentioned that family or peer relationships made it difficult to remain focused on school as they approached adolescence. Additionally, many of the students experienced difficulty with school transitions. Recall that three of the students attended multiple schools within one academic year; while one resident attended 13 different schools before she entered the juvenile facility at age 16 years. Most young people experience some difficulty with school transitions, regardless of their age (Eccles, 2004; Crockett, Petersen, & Graber, 1989). For young people who have experienced academic or behavioral problems in elementary school, these school transitions can be particularly challenging (Cairns et al., 1989; Eccles et al., 1997; Roeser et al., 1999).

Under these circumstances, school engagement can play an especially important role in reducing risk (Baker, Dilly, Aupperlee, & Patil, 2003; Comer, 1989; Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002; Pianta, 2006; Roeser et al., 1998; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Smith, 1979; Rutter & Maughan, 2002). However, none of the girls’ reported a sustained sense of belonging to school or experience of school success, both of which influence school
engagement and operate as protective factors for most students (Goodenow, 1993a; Goodenow, 1993b; Osterman, 2000; Wentzel, 1996; Resnick et al., 1997), but may be particularly important for high risk girls (Bachman et al., 2008; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Crosnoe et al., 2002; Giordano et al., 2004; Hawkins et al., 2009; Irvin, 2006; Manguin & Loeber, 1996; Zahn, 2005). Furthermore, many of the young women lacked support from their teachers, families, or peers to bolster their school engagement. Without social support, young people must rely more on their own internal resources to succeed in school. Roeser and his colleagues (2000) reported that positive academic motivation and valuing of school serve as important intrapsychic resources that enable emotionally distressed youth to stay on track academically. By adolescence, the young women in this study blamed themselves for doing poorly in school, lacked confidence in their abilities, and expressed little interest in school. Thus, the youth had few internal resources to help them overcome their difficulties. Negative self-perceptions along with problematic peer group affiliations may serve as important mediators of the continuity of problem behavior from childhood to adolescence for high risk girls (Roeser et al., 1999).

Directions for Future Research

The study suggests several directions for future research. First, the young women’s narratives illustrate how multiple contexts (family, school, and peers) interact in complex ways with individual characteristics to place young people on positive or negative developmental trajectories (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Eccles et al., 1993; Farmer, et al., 2007; Lerner & Galambos, 1998; Roeser et al., 1998). More qualitative and person-centered analytic research is needed to capture the complexity of these developmental processes (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Farmer, Quinn, Hussey, & Holahan, 2001; Irvin, 2006;
Magnusson, 2003; Peck & Roeser, 2003; Shoemaker, 2000). Second, the study highlights the role of schooling experiences in girls’ pathways toward delinquency. While school success has been found to decrease the risk of delinquency in girls (Zahn, 2005), it appears that schooling experiences can produce the opposite effect as well. Consistent with an ecological perspective, schools, like other social environments, have different affordances and constraints that affect development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Roeser et al., 2000). Further systematic research is needed to fully understand the relationship of schooling experiences to delinquency patterns in girls (Zahn, 2005). Finally, as previously mentioned, this investigation did not explore the impact of race and ethnicity on delinquent girls’ educational histories. Much is to be gained from research that addresses this interaction (Holsinger & Holsinger, 2005).

Implications

The results of this narrative study also have important implications for designing educational programs for delinquent girls. First of all, prevention and intervention programs must consider the unique needs of delinquent girls’ lives. That is, they must be guided by theoretical models that account for the complex interactions of individual and contextual factors operating in high risk girls’ systems of correlated constraints. Thus, intervention efforts must consider the dynamic influences that work together to engender girls’ antisocial behavior as well as those that are required to potentially modify girls’ antisocial behavior (Farmer, 2001; Farmer et al., 2007; Farmer & Xie, 2007). Farmer and colleagues (2007) propose using a developmental science perspective to shape preventative interventions. Specifically, they provide a theoretical framework to guide comprehensive approaches that incorporate universal (e.g., school wide social skills training), selective (i.e., targeting only
students at risk of developing antisocial behaviors), and indicated (i.e., interventions specifically for students with disruptive behavior disorders) strategies and that create collaborative structures among multiple service agencies within given communities. Considering the complex interactions of factors operating in delinquent girls’ lives, it is likely that programs targeting these youth need to take such an approach.

Additionally, developmental science suggests that the dynamic nature of adolescence is such that the person-in-context system is particularly suited for change (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Eccles, 2008). Furthermore, middle schools have been recognized as salient contexts within which to reach students at risk of school disengagement and problem behaviors (CCAD, 1989; Roeser et al., 2000). Certainly the young women in this study expressed that their problems in school and delinquency increased as they entered early adolescence. Thus, it may be particularly vital to initiate prevention and intervention programs for delinquent girls during the late elementary and early middle school years. Furthermore, because system reorganization is not merely the work of the individual but of the individual in concert with her environment, those of us who share community (e.g., teachers, schools, juvenile justice) with delinquent girls have a responsibility to aide in their pursuits of system reorganization (Roeser et al., 2000).

Also, female delinquents may not be receiving enough monitoring at school. Indeed, record-keeping on students who are frequently in and out of school and who have attended multiple schools is not an easy feat. The records for the students in this study were seriously lacking. Yet, careful monitoring is a key component for disengaged youth (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). In fact, current risk and resilience literature recommends that schools maintain files for struggling students that reflect not only the educational contexts (e.g.,
teachers, classrooms) but the broader environmental contexts (e.g., family, neighborhood, community conditions) that impact students’ school engagement as well (Morrison, Brown, D’Incau, O’Farrell, & Furlong, 2006). Thus, strengths-based record keeping on patterns operating across time in struggling students’ strengths, challenges, and protective contexts sheds light on variations in student connectedness to school and facilitates appropriate intervention. Schools that do not keep up with their students can not intervene in their lives. Schools that closely monitor high risk girls’ school-related and non-school-related circumstances will be better prepared to provide necessary intervention at the appropriate time.

Additionally, many female delinquents are likely to be distrustful of teachers and schools due to their previous learning experiences. Also, many girls within the juvenile justice system are apt to be two or three grade levels behind their same-aged peers, and some will need specialized attention due to a learning disability. Detention schools and training schools for girls that are modeled after traditional middle or high schools and use whole-class instruction as the primary mode for instruction are not likely to provide female detainees with the educational services they need.

Furthermore, attention needs to be given to the peer culture of programs for female juvenile delinquents. Peers play an important role in school engagement and achievement (Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003; Berndt, & Keefe, 1995; Kindermann, 1993; Steinberg et al., 1996). Moreover, research on deviancy training suggests that intervention grouping antisocial youth can wield short- and long-term iatrogenic effects (Dishion et al., 1999; Dishion & Piehler, 2007; Dodge et al., 2006). That is, interventions which group antisocial youth together may actually create situations where negative behaviors are reinforced and where
more deviant youth actually teach problematic behavior to their less deviant counterparts (Gwynn et al., 1988). Furthermore, although early adolescence is a critical time for intervention in the lives of high risk girls, some experts maintain that early adolescence is the most vulnerable time for influence by deviant peers (Dodge et al., 2006). Fortunately however, other researchers have shown that peer influence can be context dependent, so the social ecology of a group can moderate the outcomes of a group intervention (Handwerk, Field, & Friman, 2000).

Thus, interventions that group antisocial youth must be deliberate in their design to engender positive effects. For example, interventions for antisocial youth that incorporate group formats, community-like (as opposed to institutional) settings, and family-style treatment have evidenced increases in youth’s academic performance, improved youth’s attitudes about themselves and their futures, as well as enriched youth’s relationships with the adults involved in their treatment program (Gwynn et al., 1988; Handwerk et al., 2000). Additionally, interventions for antisocial youth in residential settings that group together peers with similar attributes and skills (thus, providing all group members the opportunity to function as leaders and equals instead of inferior, problem makers) enable youth to develop and exhibit prosocial skills (Farmer, Stuart, Lorch, & Fields, 1993). Further suggestions for interventions targeting groups of antisocial youth include integrating aggressive youth into programs that contain high numbers of prosocial youth (Dishion et al., 1999; Dodge et al., 2006). Also, it is important to remain mindful of antisocial youths’ developmental age as well as to their susceptibility to peer pressure. Additionally, negative peer cultures exert less influence when treatment is structured and includes close, adult supervision to prevent

16Dishion and colleagues (2006) actually claim that “assembly of deviant youth during early adolescence to discuss substance use, delinquency, and sexual deviance should be avoided” (p. 372).
escalation of negative behaviors (Dodge et al., 2006; Gwynn et al., 1988; Handwerk et al., 2000).

Because youth’s attitudes towards treatment are important, intervention should also promote a positive atmosphere that includes frequent praising for positive behaviors and allows antisocial youth to develop healthy, meaningful relationships with adult staff members (Gwynn et al., 1988; Handwerk et al., 2000). Finally, interventions for antisocial youth must provide explicit values education as well as opportunities to engage in various prosocial activities (Gwynn et al., 1988). Indeed, schools in both community and juvenile justice settings that incorporate peer-related interventions have the potential to increase the prosocial skills and academic performance, improve the self-perceptions, brighten the future outlooks, and enrich the student-teacher relationships of delinquent girls who previously have experienced little school success (Farmer et al., 1993; Handwerk et al., 2000).

Furthermore, it is clear from the students’ stories that they are searching for adults who understand them, accept them, and will help them find a different path to the future. More importantly, their narratives voice their expressed hope for their futures. These young women value learning. They want to succeed in school. Moreover, they know they need help to make that happen. Certainly, community and juvenile justice schools serving this population have an obligation to not only consider the unique needs of female juvenile delinquents but to create schooling opportunities that best fit those needs.

Finally, the findings of this study corroborate with other literature to indicate that certain aspects of schooling are critical for meeting the unique needs of delinquent girls:

• The relational aspect of schooling is vital for girls’ healthy development and for their school engagement (Belknap et al., 1997; Belenky et al., 1986; Crosnoe et al., 2004; Gilligan,
Adolescent girls need positive, healthy relationships in their school settings (Irvin, 2006; Hawkins et al., 2009; Zahn, 2005). Teacher-student relationships are particularly integral to girls’ sense of belonging to school as well as to their success in school (Degelsmith, 2000).

- Peers provide a relational basis for adolescents in school (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005b). Furthermore, girls who are not able to meet their relational needs via healthy relationships with teachers and positive peer groups will turn to other sources to have these needs met. Indeed, disenfranchised students draw from antisocial peer groups to meet their relational needs (Dishion et al., 1997; Roeser et al., 1999). Delinquent girls are particularly vulnerable to affiliating with other disengaged and antisocial youth at their schools, as well as with older, antisocial individuals outside of their schools. Specific attention must be paid to the peer context of interventions for delinquent girls.

- Gender stereotypes operating in schools negatively influence girls’ school engagement. For example, as opposed to boys, many delinquent girls have significant learning problems that are not diagnosed in early elementary school (Bierman et al., 2004). Furthermore, when these girls become discouraged in school and begin acting out they are more likely to receive negative reactions from their teachers for eschewing the nice and quiet stereotyped behavioral expectation for girls (Bank et al., 2007; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004). Schools serving delinquent girls must deliberately avoid enforcing gender stereotypes.

- Delinquent girls’ abuse histories are different from delinquent boys (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Zahn, 2007). By the time delinquent girls enter the juvenile justice system, they have more severe mental health issues than do the delinquent boys. Traditional school settings that target traditional students will not effectively
meet the needs of delinquent girls, and thus will not foster school engagement for this population. Delinquent girls’ abuse and mental health issues must be addressed in their educational settings.

- Delinquent girls who have experienced multiple failures in school settings are likely to internalize those failures. Thus, delinquent girls need opportunities to experience success in school and specific attention must be paid to reestablishing their self-perceptions of competence in academic settings.

- Delinquent girls who are not engaged in school and/or who drop out of school are more likely to become mothers at a younger age than are girls who succeed in school (Phillips 1998; Wyche, 2002). Also, women are more likely than men to be single or single heads of households with children under the age of 18 (Meece, 2006). Furthermore, female dropouts, young mothers, single women, and female, single heads of households are at high risk of living under the poverty line (AAUW, 1990, 1992, 1996; Meece, 2006; Phillips, 1998; Wyche, 2002). However, a mother’s level of education and income level is negatively related to her children’s risk of poverty as well as to their future achievement levels in school (Meece, 2006; Phillips, 1998; Wyche, 2002). Thus, not only is engagement and success in school vital for advancing delinquent girls’ future educational and occupational opportunities, it is critical for preventing the continuation of poverty and crime into the next generation (AAUW, 1990, 1992, 1996; Phillips, 1998; Wyche, 2002).

Thus, due to the interaction of multiple personal and contextual factors, delinquent girls are especially vulnerable to disengagement from school. However, school engagement fosters healthy youth development and protects delinquent girls from negative developmental outcomes such as future delinquency, mental health problems, school failure, teenage
pregnancy, adult crime, poverty, and poverty for their future children (AAUW, 1990, 1992, 1996; ABA-NBA, 2001; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Crosnoe et al., 2002; Giordano et al., 2004; Phillips, 1998; Resnick et al., 2004; Valentine Foundation & Women’s Way, 1991; Wyche, 2002; Zahn, 2005). Therefore, it is particularly critical that schools in community and juvenile justice settings work towards re-engaging delinquent girls in learning.
APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

abuse victimization: any form of neglect and/or abuse (e.g., emotional, physical, sexual)

adolescence limited: one of two developmental taxonomies of antisocial behavior; includes individuals who engage in antisocial behavior primarily only during adolescence

aggravated assault: an attack on another person with the intent of inflicting severe bodily injury; usually includes the use of a weapon or some other means likely to produce significant bodily harm or death

antisocial / delinquent: behaviors that violate socially accepted ways of behaving (e.g., criminal, status, aggressive, disruptive, and/or violent); or youth who frequently violate these norms

authoritative parenting styles when parents monitor youths’ activities, consistently provide warm, responsive, emotional support, and encourage independent decision-making

autobiographical narrative a personal and autobiographical life story that is also shaped by social context (situated story); how individuals construct and describe their pasts, while simultaneously constructing and reconstructing their selves

autobiographical reasoning the process by which individuals reflect on and describe their pasts, while simultaneously constructing and reconstructing their selves

autonomy: an individual’s need to understand that her behaviors are connected to goal achievement and that she possesses the ability to regulate her behaviors accordingly

burglary: the unlawful entry of a structure to commit a felony or theft; including forcible entry, unlawful entry where no force is used; and attempted forcible entry (http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2007/offenses/property_crime/burglary.html)

coding segmenting and labeling text as it forms categories or themes; strategy for making sense of qualitative data

competence: an individual’s need for strategies to achieve academic goals and the beliefs that she has the capacity to do so
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<th>Term</th>
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<tr>
<td>correlated constraints</td>
<td>the unique interdependent system of factors that cluster within and outside of individuals to shape their developmental trajectories</td>
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<td>data clumps:</td>
<td>major codes in the data that appeared to belong with or relate to each other</td>
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<td>delayed-onset:</td>
<td>a third developmental pathway to explain girls’ antisocial behavior; shares childhood predictors and adult outcomes with the LCP pathway, yet demonstrates adolescent onset of antisocial behavior as in AL pathway</td>
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<td>delinquent offenses:</td>
<td>offenses committed by juveniles that could result in criminal prosecution had they been committed by adults (e.g., theft, burglary, selling drugs)</td>
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<td>deviancy training</td>
<td>the process by which peers encourage, model, and reward each other’s antisocial behavior</td>
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<td>ethic of care</td>
<td>an emphasis on connections between people; plays an important role in female development</td>
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<td>factors (or correlates):</td>
<td>the individual attributes or characteristics, situational conditions, or environmental contexts that yield a risk, promotive, or protective influence on an individual’s developmental trajectory</td>
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<td>global self-esteem:</td>
<td>how much someone likes or accepts herself as a person in general</td>
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<td>high risk (or at risk)</td>
<td>girls who are more vulnerable candidates for delinquency due to the complex nature of their risk profiles</td>
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<td>identification:</td>
<td>an individual’s internalized sense of belonging to school</td>
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<td>incorrigibility:</td>
<td>being beyond the control of one’s guardians; a type of status offense</td>
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<td>juvenile (or youth)</td>
<td>individuals under the age of 18</td>
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<td>juvenile delinquency:</td>
<td>illegal or antisocial behaviors committed by youth</td>
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<td>juvenile justice facility:</td>
<td>any facility (temporary, short-term, or long-term) that provides housing and/or programming for youth who have been placed in its care by the juvenile court system</td>
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larceny: the unlawful taking away of property from the possession of another without use of force, violence, or fraud; includes attempts to do this act; includes shoplifting, pocket-picketing, purse-snatching, and thefts from motor vehicles (http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius_04/offenses_reported/property_crime/larceny-theft.html)

life course persistent: one of two developmental taxonomies of antisocial behavior; includes individuals with antisocial patterns that begin in childhood, intensify over time, and result in problematic adulthoods

life story the subjective account of a life as remembered, reflected upon, or narrated; how people make sense of their lived experience both at one point in time as well as across their life spans

master narratives enforced positions held by cultural authority figures (e.g., teachers, parents, valued peers) that are regarded as appropriate ways to experience the world; cultural standards against which community members feel compelled to position their personal experience.

Monitoring the Future: an ongoing longitudinal study of the behaviors, attitudes, and values of American 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students Approximately 50,000 students are surveyed annually (Zahn, Brumbaugh, et al., 2008).

narrative: qualitative methodology which focuses on personal experience as expressed through language (e.g., case study, life history, autobiography, ethnography)

National Crime Victimization Study: Conducted annually since 1973 by the Census Bureau. Individuals 12 and older from a nationally representative sample of approximately 50,000 households are interviewed about their experiences as victims of various criminal offenses (Zahn, Brumbaugh, et al., 2008).

participation: the behavioral manifestation of identification

patriarchy: refers to a culture that is headed by fathers; involves a hierarchy where some fathers control access to power and knowledge, where some men are elevated over other men, and where women are subordinated
peer review / debriefing: when external sources reflect and provide input on your work; enhances validity in qualitative research

person-environment interaction theory: conceptualizes behavior as a function of a person interacting with his or her environment, or $B = f(P, E)$

person offense: an offense against another person (e.g., criminal homicide, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, simple assault, and kidnapping)

positioning: refers to the social and emotional stances than individuals take with reference to others in their autobiographical narratives

preliminary exploratory analysis: initial review of all data to gain a general overview of all the data collected on/from a sample; allows the researcher to immerse herself in the data, generate and memo initial ideas, and develop a general sense of the content

promotive factors: person and environmental influences that increase an individual’s likelihood of positive developmental outcomes; conceptualized as being located at the opposite end of risk factors

protective factors: person and environmental influences that buffer the effect of risk factors on an individual’s developmental outcomes

relatedness: an individual’s need to feel connected to their schools, to have positive relationships with people at school, and to therefore feel worthy and capable as an individual

risk factors: person and environmental influences that increase an individual’s likelihood of adverse developmental outcomes

robbery: the taking or attempting to take anything of value from the care, custody, or control of a person or persons by force or by threat of force or violence and/or by putting the victim in fear (http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/cius_04/offenses_reported/violent_crime/robbery.html)

school engagement: students’ behaviors that engender or impede school success (e.g., participation/involvement versus conduct problems/incomplete work); students’ emotional responses toward school and the relationship to task completion or activity involvement (e.g., interest versus boredom); and
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<tr>
<td>students’ cognitive orientations</td>
<td>for completing tasks (e.g., mastery goals versus performance goals)</td>
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<td>school success:</td>
<td>the degree to which students prevail in academic settings</td>
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<td>self-perceptions of competence</td>
<td>students’ judgments about their abilities to accomplish schoolwork</td>
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<td>sense of belonging:</td>
<td>the degree to which students feel accepted, supported, and included at school as well as the extent to which they feel they are an important part of their school</td>
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<td>simple assaults:</td>
<td>assaults that are not of an aggravated nature, do not result in serious injury to the victim, and do not include the use of a weapon</td>
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<td>situated stories</td>
<td>stories that are socially constructed within a specific situation, cultural, and historical context; for a particular listening audience; in response to specific social relationships; to fulfill particular goals</td>
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<td>stage-environment fit theory:</td>
<td>application of person-environment interaction theory to school settings; in order to foster positive developmental outcomes, schools must meet students’ unique developmental needs</td>
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<td>status offenses:</td>
<td>offenses committed by juveniles that are illegal only because the individual committing them is a juvenile (e.g., running away, truancy, incorrigibility)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Violent Crime Index (VCI):</td>
<td>the FBI’s measure of serious person offenses, including murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault</td>
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<td>voice</td>
<td>confidence in one’s ability to express her opinions and needs; many girls experience a loss of voice as they enter their adolescent years</td>
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APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

I would like to ask you a few questions about your school experiences before you came to HOPE:

1. How old you are?

2. What was the last grade you completed?

3. What is the last school you attended?

4. Can you tell me a little bit about the last school you were in? (Probes: Where was it located? How big was it?)

5. Can you tell me about whether or not you liked that school? (Probes: Why? What specifically did you like and dislike?)

6. How were you doing grade-wise at that school?

7. How about behavior-wise?

8. In general, what were the teachers like at that school?
   8a. Describe if you can, your favorite teacher? (Probe: What was it about him/her that you particularly liked?)
   8b. Can you describe a teacher you did not like? (Probe: What was it about him/her that you particularly disliked?)

9. Tell me about the friends you hung out with at school? (Probes: popular, goth, cool, etc.)

10. Since it seems you didn’t enjoy your last few schools, was there ever a time when you really enjoyed being at school?

11. What made that experience(s) different and enjoyable for you (compared to your more recent experiences)? (Probe: What did you like about school then?)

12. How did you do grade-wise at that school? behavior-wise?

14. What were your teachers like then?

15. What was the group of friends that you hung out with like then?

16. Is there anything else about your schooling history that you would like to share with me?
APPENDIX C: WRITING PROMPT

Name: _______________________
Date: _______________________

Writing Prompt: So many of you have really done a great job in the HOPE school, and you have proven yourselves to be very successful students. Please write a letter to a future teacher and tell him/her what you will need to help you continue to be successful in school.

(Things to think about: What do you need from your teacher? What type of classroom environment do you need? What type of school environment do you need? What type of peers do you need?)
### APPENDIX D: BLANK FIELD NOTES LAYOUT

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<th>Index</th>
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APPENDIX E: AUTHOR POSITIONALITY

The HOPE program was a joint venture between a department of juvenile justice in the Southeastern United States and experts in the fields of education and social work, including my faculty advisor and the fifth faculty reader for this dissertation proposal, respectively. During the year prior to my entrance in graduate school as well as the first three years of my doctoral training, I assisted my faculty advisor with the HOPE project. In that regard, I provided assistance in the functional creation of the principal investigators’ conceptualizations for HOPE. Specifically, I assisted my faculty advisor with the educational component of the HOPE school. Additionally, after its opening I visited the HOPE program on a weekly basis over a two year time span and worked in the HOPE school. My purpose was to offer assistance and support to both students and teachers. Thus, I developed a personal relationship with each of the young women represented in this study, and got to know some of them quite well. My faculty advisor also provided assistance and support in the HOPE classroom on a weekly basis and thereby established a relationship with each of the girls in this investigation as well. Thus, my faculty advisor and I are the two researchers who conducted this interview study and who are referenced throughout this dissertation. I interviewed 11 of the students and completed the corresponding transcriptions. My faculty advisor interviewed the remaining two students. Furthermore, I conducted the writing prompt activity with the HOPE students. This information was not divulged in the Method section of this dissertation to protect the confidentiality of the youth involved in the HOPE program. However, my role as a participant and observer in the HOPE classroom as well as a researcher on this project undeniably played a role in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data included in the present investigation.
REFERENCES


Aggression, antisocial behavior, and violence among girls: A developmental perspective (pp. 137-161). NY: Guilford Press.


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