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# Am I Another Statistic?: A Phenomenological Study Of Border Region At-Risk Latina/o Youth

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AM I ANOTHER STATISTIC?: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF  
BORDER REGION AT-RISK LATINA/O YOUTH

VIRGINIA MARTINEZ

Doctoral Program in Teaching, Learning and Culture

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Dean of the Graduate School

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by

Virginia Martinez

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## **Dedication**

As I chose to walk this journey, my three hearts always came to mind, therefore, I dedicate this dissertation to Maite, Eunice, and Esteban. Being the first college graduate in my family, I longed to pave the road that I wish they'd soon follow. They have witnessed and weathered the tumultuous traveled road I opted to take upon this endeavor, as I hope one day they too will choose a road less traveled by. I love you babies.

I also dedicate this dissertation to the five participants in this study; Andrew, Nevaeh, Jorge, Cassandra, and Isabel. Thank you for sharing some of the most intimate stories of your life. I will be forever grateful for your time, interest, trust, and honesty as your stories assisted in creating to shape this study. These five participants represent the many students that have walked into my mathematics classroom as a teacher, the students seeking guidance as they were called into my counselor's office, and the devastated and frustrated students advising me of wanting to dropout of high school as an administrator.

My greatest hope is that I shared my conation to all my students. That I allowed them to see that an algebra equation is not too hard to solve, that attending school every day is part of learning to be responsible, but most importantly in knowing that failure is part of succeeding. I sincerely hope that one-day, education begins to assimilate failure as part of the learning process as it will create individuals with a strong conation to persevere and thus become resilient to walk away with a diploma.

Abe, thank you for coming into life and listening to my endless thoughts as I came to the culmination of my study but most importantly for keeping me sane through my all-nighters. Ama, Abuela, I hope I've made you proud. Wish you were here, I miss you.

AM I ANOTHER STATISTIC?: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF  
BORDER REGION AT-RISK LATINA/O YOUTH

by

VIRGINIA MARTINEZ, M. ED.

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Doctor of Philosophy

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I am indebted to the study participants for taking the time to share their valued experiences which has given wealth and depth to this research. I am thankful they trusted in me to share their voice via this dissertation. Our time spent together as I collected my data through their narratives I will forever cherish as I humbly and respectfully represent their experiences as accurately as possible.

I thank my dearest friends and colleagues for believing that I would reach this commendable aspiration; a doctoral degree. I wholeheartedly appreciate all the kind words of encouragement and immense support as they never lost faith in my completion of this set goal. I like to believe my conation is most enduring.

God, thank you.

## **Abstract**

As diversity continues to increase in the United States, schools are facing an enormous challenge of educating youth to function effectively in our democracy. With the growing Latina/o population, it is essential that schools accommodate to the needs of what will be the largest ethnic or race minority. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to analyze and study past at-risk students' unique predicament and determine two factors of failure; encouragement by failure and discouragement by failure. The study focused on understanding the role of failure as a main contributor in the decision making of Latina/o at-risk students dropping out without their high school diploma. This was accomplished through ten written anecdotes and fifteen individual unstructured in-depth interviews as five participants shared personal narratives of their encounter with the phenomenon of failure. Analysis of the data resulted in fourteen essence descriptors as they unfolded within the dichotomy of failure as interpreted from the shared narratives.

Conclusions are presented in the form of a conceptual framework to depict the interconnectedness of essence descriptors in the step-by-step linkage diagrams as the at-risk Latina/o youth encounter failure and their conative disposition responds within each construct of failure. Altogether 350 actions were marked for causal coding as they were taken from all scripted meanings units and significant statements within the essence descriptors for the meta-inference.

The study found that one student graduated from high school, another has obtained the GED (General Education Development), two are still pursuing their high school diploma, whereas one is a dropout. This would imply that as students are facing

failure and are at the junction of Dichotomy of Failure, only one student was encouraged and four were discouraged. Most telling was the one graduated student followed the conceptual framework of Encouragement – Self-Regulated Learning. Sadly, another student has remained in the Discouragement – Learned Helplessness conceptual framework diagram. And three of the participants acquired self-regulated learning, Discouragement – Learned Helplessness – Self-Regulated Learning.

The experiences expressed by the participants indicated that for the most part at-risk Latina/o students are discouraged by failure. Although this study suggests that as the participants shared of their encounters with failure, their perception ultimately changed. As noted by John Dewey (1939), “we do not learn from our experiences; we learn by reflecting on our experiences.” Post-hoc analysis suggests that due to reflective practices during the study, most participants’ conative disposition had shifted toward encouraged by failure.



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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction to the Study**

#### **Background**

Latina/o students currently make up 15% of the elementary school-age population and collectively will make up nearly 25% of the total school-age population by the year 2025. Over the past 20 years, the enrollment of Latina/o's in public elementary schools has increased over 150%, compared to 20% for African American students and 10% for White students (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Statistical reports from the U.S. Census (2010) indicate that Latina/os are the fastest growing ethnic group, and yet the most poorly educated. As diversity continues to increase in the United States, schools are facing an enormous challenge of educating youth to function effectively in our democracy. With the growing Latina/o population, it is essential that schools accommodate to the needs of what will be the largest ethnic or race minority. Schools must be prepared but also cognizant of the resources that Latina/o students will need in order to assist them toward the path of graduation.

At the same time, the number of school-aged children in the United States opting to leave school without a high school diploma is alarming and will continue to raise national concern regarding the dismal future that awaits this population. Data from the *Common Core of Data 2009* show that approximately 3.0 million 16- through 24-year-olds were not enrolled in high school and had not earned a high school diploma or alternative credential. In due time these students will account as high school dropouts and thus reflecting a variance in terms of males and females. In 2007 it was recorded that about 66% of males and 72.9% of females did graduate from high school. But again, the numbers will be slightly different when they are reported according to their racial and ethnic subgroups since many are considered as students not



obtaining a high school diploma: Asian-American 19.3%, African American 46.3%, Hispanic 44.5%, Native American 49.3%, and White 23.4%. In the state of Colorado only about 30% of high school students don't graduate and less than half of the African American, Hispanic, and Native American students who start high school actually finish (MacIver & Groginsky, 2011).

According to Balfanz and Legters (2004), there are currently between 900 and 1,000 high schools in the country in which graduating is at best a 50/50 proposition. It is estimated that within 2,000 high schools, a typical freshman class shrinks by 40% or more by the time the students reach their senior year. This percentage represents nearly one in five regular or vocational high schools in the U.S. that enroll 300 or more students. As students enter high school, about 40% to 60% of students will become chronically disengaged from school – urban, suburban, and rural – as these numbers do not account for those who have already chosen to drop out before entering their first year of high school.

Disengagement is one of the many reasons students may consider not continuing their high school completion. According to Bridgeland and Julio (2006) and Jerald (2006), students can become bored with a curriculum that fails to provide rigor and relevance. In addition, they will not learn to develop relationships with their teachers and thus will not know the meaning of a supportive adult that can provide guidance or a sense of belonging (Blum, 2005). Furthermore, teachers are critical components to engaging students with activities that may trigger a sense of wanting to learn but most importantly completing their high school education. Sadly, though, teachers are also a contributing factor that leads students to choose to not return to school since their expectations may seem unreachable by struggling students. Failure may seem a continuing pattern for many of these students as they lose their focus and become completely overwhelmed and ultimately make the decision to drop out. Snow, Porche, Tabors, & Harris (2007) have noted

that as students enter high school, many have been accustomed to a small community they have known in their elementary school and quickly begin to experience differences in their larger middle schools and thus leading to having major issues in their respective high schools where they will begin to experience discouragement by failure through the disengagement of the overcrowded school environment.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Students are leaving schools in alarming numbers without earning a high school diploma or General Education Development (GED) certificate. The problem of students opting not to complete their high school education has become a national concern as numerous researches have focused on characteristics that may correlate with the decision of leaving school. The nation's largest ethnic or race minority are people of Hispanic origin; about 16% of the nation's total population. This estimates the Latina/o population of the United States as of April 1, 2010 of being 50.5 million. Between 2000 and 2010, the Hispanic population increased by 15.2 million thus accounting for over half of the 27.3 million added to the total population of the United States. Therefore, the importance of public schools knowing that the U.S. population is transforming into a more ethnically diverse nation is of critical essence. At this rate, by July 1, 2050, the projected Latino population in the United States will be 132.8 million or 30% of the nation's population (U.S. Census, 2010). Despite the increase in the overall Latino population, only 54.9% of them are graduating from high school (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

The Southwest border region does not differ from the national dropout problem; according to the San Antonio-based Intercultural Development Research Association (Johnson, 2007), almost 50% of dropouts in Texas are Hispanic. Nationwide, the rate increases to 58% (Editorial Projects in Education, 2008). Similarly, the Texas Education Agency report that a total

of 20,032 students in the class of 2012 Grade 9 cohort dropped out. Of these, 71.2 percent dropped out in the third or fourth year of the cohort, in addition, from the students who dropped out in the fourth year (2011-12), more than half (52.2%) had not reached Grade 12 (Texas Education Agency, 2013).

The major focus of this study will be to analyze the narratives and voices of at-risk student populations that may lead to the awareness of how youth are coping with failure. Initial predicaments may determine significant risk factors as early warning indicators lead to dropping out. When examined individually, early warning indicators may serve as a tool to detect students as early as first grade by allowing schools to monitor certain behaviors that may lead to dropping out of school. Many schools have created interventions that may assist the student and their families by preventing consistent behaviors that may lead to falling through the cracks of a broken system. Most prevention efforts recognize the needs of at-risk populations that present a challenge since each student risk factor(s) differs from other at-risk students while contemplating and determining to stay in or leave school. Understanding reasons for the dropout problem and creating awareness about these factors needs to be highlighted as a key influence that schools, their organization, leadership, and teachers may have on a student's decision to stay in or drop out of school.

### **At-risk**

The word at-risk has been vastly used to label students that may exhibit behaviors or assimilate characteristics non-traditional within classroom settings. For example, Croninger and Lee suggests that there are three types of at-risk students: (a) those who are members of socially disadvantage groups (b) those who experience school-related or academic difficulties prior to entering high school (Catterall, 1998), and (c) those who fall into both categories (2001).

In the state of Texas under Texas Education Code – Section 29.081. Compensatory, Intensive, and Accelerated Instruction, a school district shall code “student at risk of dropping out of school” to include each student who is under 21 years of age and who:

- was not advanced from one grade level to the next for one or more school years;
- if the student is in grade 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, or 12, did not maintain an average equivalent to 70 on a scale of 100 in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum during a semester in the preceding or current school year;
- did not perform satisfactorily on an assessment instrument administered to the student under TEC Subchapter B, Chapter 39, and who has not in previous or current school year subsequently performed on that instrument or another appropriate instrument at a level equal to at least 110 percent of the level of satisfactory performance on that instrument;
- if the student is in prekindergarten, kindergarten, or grade 1, 2, or 3, did not perform satisfactorily on a readiness test or assessment instrument administered during the current school year;
- is pregnant or is a parent;
- has been placed in an alternative education program, DAEP, in accordance with Section 37.006;
- has been expelled in accordance with Section 37.007;
- is currently on parole, probation, deferred prosecution, or other conditional release;
- was previously reported through the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) to have dropped out of school;
- is a student of limited English proficiency as defined by Section 29.052;

- is in the custody or care of the Department of Protective and Regulatory Services or has, during the current school year, been referred to the department by a school official, officer of the juvenile court, or law enforcement official;
- is homeless as defined by 42 U.S.C. Section 11302 and its subsequent amendments; or
- resided in the preceding school year or resides in the current school year in a residential placement facility in the district, including a detention facility, substance abuse treatment facility, emergency shelter, psychiatric hospital, halfway house, or foster group home.

According to Lagana-Riordan, Aguilar, Franklin, Streeter, Kim, Tripodi, & Hopson (2011), recent trends in education have drawn attention to students at-risk of school failure and dropout in the United States. Research suggests that while the education system is rapidly increasing with diverse populations, schools are facing greater challenges in meeting the needs of all students. The intent is for school systems to strive to reflect the full spectrum of the plurality in order to accommodate ethnically and racially diverse families and children. State Compensatory Education is defined in law as programs and/or services designed to supplement the regular education program for students identified as at-risk of dropping out of school. The purpose is to increase the academic achievement and reduce the dropout rate of these students. State Comp. Ed. seeks to provide a challenging and meaningful instructional program to close the achievement gap between children at-risk of dropping out of school and their peers.

As illustrated in Figure 1, a sample of an I.S.D. At-Risk Student Profile demonstrates all necessary information upon coding a student of being at-risk. The student profile card is kept in the student's Cumulative File folder and follows the student to every receiving campus. Every

school year, the student profile card must be updated to ensure that each individual is receiving the proper services to ensure academic progress. Illustration 1.1 provides a sample card.

| I.S.D. At-Risk Student Profile  |              |           |            |    |        |  |               |
|---|--------------|-----------|------------|----|--------|--|---------------|
| PEIMS ID#   | STUDENT ID # | LAST NAME | FIRST NAME | MI | D.O.B. | Place student's information label here |               |
| <b>Student Performance/Identification Criteria</b><br>A "Yes" response to any question qualifies the student as "At-Risk."  |              |           |            |    |        | Year<br>Grade                          | Year<br>Grade |
| For indicators 1, 2, 3 or 4, write the name of the test and score, or grade level retained. If At-Risk indicator is marked for the 1 <sup>st</sup> time in current school year, include date in indicator box.  |              |           |            |    |        |  |               |
| 1. Is in Pre-K, K or grades 1, 2, or 3, and did not perform satisfactorily on a readiness test or assessment instrument administered during the current school year. NOTE: Change effective the 2009-2010 school year: adds a provision to §29.081 that changes the compensatory education definition of "student at risk of dropping out of school" by excluding a student who did not advance from PK or kindergarten to the next grade level only as the result of the request of the student's parents. (this is NOT retroactive) |              |           |            |    |        |  |               |
| 2. Is in Grade 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and did not maintain an average equivalent to 70 on a scale of 100 in 2 or more subjects in the foundation curriculum during a semester in the preceding or current school year or is not maintaining such an average in two or more subjects in the foundation curriculum in the current semester.   |              |           |            |    |        |  |               |
| 3. Was not advanced from one grade level to the next for one or more school years.  |              |           |            |    |        |  |               |
| 4. Did not perform satisfactorily on state assessment instrument administered to the student under Subchapter B, Chapter 39, and who has not in the previous or current school year subsequently performed on that instrument or another appropriate instrument at a level equal to at least 110 % of the level of satisfactory performance on that instrument.   |              |           |            |    |        |  |               |
| 5. Is pregnant or is a parent.  |              |           |            |    |        |  |               |
| 6. Has been placed in an alternative education program in accordance with §37.006 during the preceding or current school year.  |              |           |            |    |        |  |               |
| 7. Has been expelled in accordance with §37.007, TEC during the preceding or current school year.   |              |           |            |    |        |  |               |
| 8. Is currently on parole, probation, deferred prosecution, or other conditional release.   |              |           |            |    |        |  |               |
| 9. Was previously reported through the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) to have dropped out of school.  |              |           |            |    |        |  |               |
| 10. Is a student of limited English proficiency, as defined by §29.052, TEC.  |              |           |            |    |        |  |               |
| 11. Is in custody or care of the Dept. of Protective & Regulatory Services, or has during the current school year, been referred to the DPRS by a school official, officer of juvenile court, or police.  |              |           |            |    |        |  |               |
| 12. Is homeless, as defined by 42 U.S.C. §11302, and its amendments.  |              |           |            |    |        |  |               |
| 13. Resided in the preceding or current year or resides in the current school year in a residential placement facility in the district, including a detention facility, substance abuse treatment facility, emergency shelter, psychiatric hospital, halfway house, or foster group home.   |              |           |            |    |        |  |               |
| Verified At-Risk Classification (Date)  |              |           |            |    |        | ___/___/___                            | ___/___/___   |
| Confirmed Exit of At-Risk Classification (Date)   |              |           |            |    |        | ___/___/___                            | ___/___/___   |

Under the appropriate column for year/grade, write initials of the campus and person completing the form. \_\_\_\_\_

**Shaded text** - Indicator permanently places student in At-Risk category

Texas Education Code, Section 29.081

Illustration 1.1: TX. At-risk Student Profile Card

## **Drop-out Gap in Public Education**

The central message is that while some students drop out because of significant academic challenges, most dropouts are students who could have, and believe they could have, succeeded in school. The drop-out gap only suggests that, despite career aspirations that require education beyond high school, circumstances in students' lives and an inadequate response to those circumstances has led to national epidemic of dropping out. While reasons vary, the general categories remain the same, whether in inner city Los Angeles or suburban Nebraska.

Studies indicate that when it comes to at-risk students, one reason why there is a higher dropout rate is due to the lack of participation. If a student participates in an after school activity, the more willing they will be to attend school and achieve higher academic success. In Finn's article, *Withdrawing from School*, he cites, "dropouts have been found to participate less in extracurricular activities and sports than their non-dropout peers" (Finn, 1989). Consequently not being part of the school culture may also lead to developing additional social risk factors.

"Social risk refers to demographic factors correlated with a higher likelihood of school difficulties (Palles, 1989). Race, language-minority status, gender, family income, parents' education, and family structure have all been used as social factors to characterize students' risk of experiencing school-related problems (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990). The greater the accumulation of social disadvantage associated with factors, the greater the presumed risk of failure. Thus, students who come from poor, single-parent households, where parents did not graduate from high school, are thought to be more at risk than students who possess only one or two of these social-risk factors (Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Schorr, 1988)." While there is no single cause for students dropping out, research indicates that lack of or grueling transitions to high

school, deficient basic skills, and a lack of engagement, all serve as renowned obstacle to graduation.

## Graduating from High School

As a class cohort enters high school, many junctures along the four-year experience will lead to many not obtaining a high school diploma. Factors such as truancy, deviant behavior, parental involvement, and school engagement may attribute to students deciding to drop out, but positive implications are greater than the negative stigma it seems to uphold. The U.S. Census Bureau of 2006 estimates that students with a high school diploma will earn \$9,634 more per year than a high school dropout as completers are less likely to be unemployed as displayed in Illustration 1.2 Education Pays.

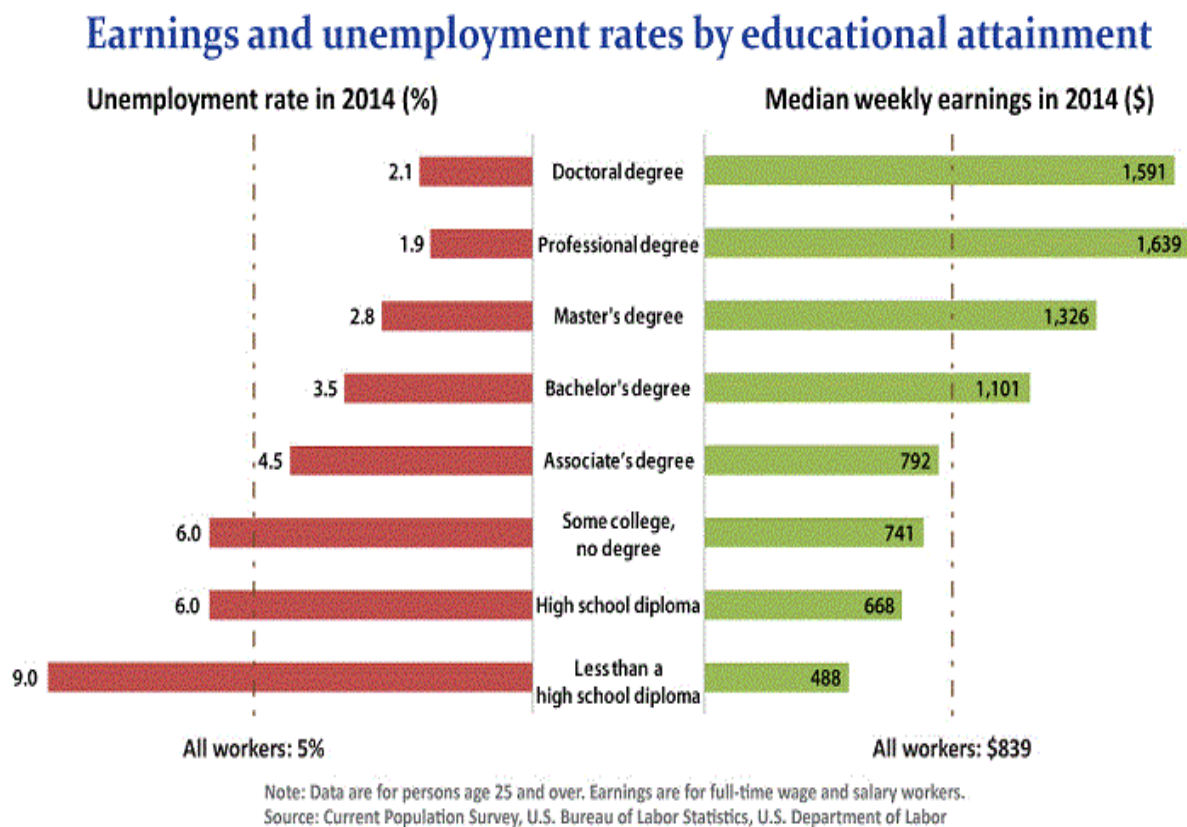


Illustration 1.2: Education Pays



A high school diploma also provides the opportunity to further enhance post-secondary endeavors since virtually all require the diploma or GED upon admission. Graduates also provide both economic and social benefits to society by contributing to higher tax revenues and by participating with health insurance and retirement benefits. Altogether they live a healthier lifestyle, and are more likely to raise vigorous better educated children. In addition, high school graduates engage in civic activity, including voting and volunteering in their communities, at high levels (Junn, 2005).

### **Dropping Out**

The national dropout rate is a serious crisis. It is estimated that about 1.23 million students drop out annually in our country – or a stunning 7,000 each day (Editorial Projects in Education, 2008; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002; Wise, 2008). At-risk students lack the home and community resources to fully benefit from conventional school practices. Dropouts have minimal chances of securing a good paying job and are faced with living a lifestyle of despair as their prospects become increasingly dire. Alarming each class of dropouts will be responsible for substantial financial and social costs to their communities as high school dropouts have a higher probability of receiving reduced earnings; being unemployed, living in poverty, higher likelihood of alcohol abuse and dependence, involvement with crime, and teenage pregnancy. Annually, the toll of lost wages, taxes, and productivity can be characterized to dropouts thus amounting to more than \$200 billion for the nation as whole. That does not take into account the fact that more than two-thirds of the inmates in state prisons are school dropouts.

Although there are several factors for students choosing to leave school, there are correlations between public schools not being designed to meet the changing and challenging

needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Every single dropout costs the nation approximately \$260,000 during his or her lifetime. With an annual dropout rate of 1.3 million students nationwide, this results in a \$335 billion loss in total of lifetime earnings. If the dropout trend continues, the collective loss increases to \$3 trillion (Wise & Rothman, 2010).

### **Significant Risk Factors**

Dropout rates are too high which need to be addressed. Far too many will have the same characteristics of being labeled as “at-risk” whether it is due to their low test scores, poverty, race, ethnicity, language or other factors, but most importantly; the lack of providing an ongoing program of support to this growing segment of learners. At-risk students are especially concentrated among minority groups, borderland regions, labeled as immigrant, non-English speaking families, single parent homes, and economically disadvantaged. According to *Dropping Out is Hard to Do*, by Jerald (2006), “Most dropouts are already on the path to failure in the middle grades and engage in behaviors that strongly correlate to dropping out in high school. Various researchers have identified specific risk factors, such as low attendance or a failing grade, which can identify future dropouts—in some cases as early as sixth grade.” Additionally, youth who are retained late in school often place themselves on more active delinquent trajectories than youth who are not retained in school (Shaw, Gilliom, Ingoldsby, & Nagin, 2003).

Students who eventually drop out of school often have a history of absenteeism, academic trouble, and other forms of disengagement from school life. It is imperative that these signs be recognized and dealt with appropriately. “Such factors as low grades, low educational expectations, early-grade retention, and discipline problems gauge how much trouble students have had in school. If students fail to resolve these difficulties positively, they can find

themselves in a downward spiral that leads to other adolescent and school-related troubles” (Alexander, Enwisle, & Horsey, 1997). Furthermore, up to 60% of students identified as at-risk in middle school do not graduate with their class or at all (Bowers, 2010).

### **Poor Academic Performance**

In a recent study by John Bridgeland, “The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts” (2006), 45 percent of dropouts reported that they entered high school unprepared for rigorous studies. As a result, some students become distanced from school, are not motivated to work hard, and ultimately fail to progress through high school. Academic risk highlights the actual manifestation of school related problems. These early problems predict future difficulties in schools such as absenteeism and skipping classes, disengagement from school activities, and, of course, dropping out. “Many students are held back in ninth-grade—creating what is known as the *ninth-grade bulge*—and drop out by tenth grade—contributing to the *tenth-grade dip*,” claims Williams and Richman from the National High School Center.

Far too many students are not graduating on time to obtain a high school diploma. Ninth grade serves as a bottleneck since many students enter high school already labeled as at-risk, having minimal academic skills and little or no motivation to challenge themselves. They begin the school year with almost no interest and thus fail some or almost all courses which will then contribute to having to repeat ninth grade courses hence creating a sense of failure or negativity to earning higher education. Students having minimal academic skills are far less likely to graduate from high school and more likely to decide with the option of dropping out. Most high school dropouts fail at least 25% of their ninth grade courses, while 8% of high school completers experienced the same difficulty (Duke & Jacobson, 2011). A substantial review of research literature documents the fact that the transition into high school is marked by

discouragement by failure, an increased disengagement and the lack of motivation among students, which in turn, predict subsequent school failure and dropout (Easton & Soguero, 2011).

### **Low Socioeconomic Status**

Social risk refers to demographic factors correlated with a higher likelihood of school difficulties. Race, language-minority status, gender, family income, parents' education, and family structure have all been used as social factors to characterize students' risk of experiencing school-related problems. The greater the accumulation of social disadvantage associated with factors, the greater the presumed risk of failure. If students view themselves as powerless to overcome the discrimination within established rules, they respond by avoiding authority structures and questioning the legitimacy of mainstream institutions (Kupchik, 2009).

Thus, students who come from poor, single-parent households, where parents did not graduate from high school, are thought to be more at-risk than students who possess only one or two of these social-risk factors. Failure to graduate from high school compounds the likelihood that any demographic group will serve time in jail since nearly all prisoners lack any education beyond high school (Pattillo, 2004).

### **Behavioral Problems**

At-risk students are also stigmatized with entering middle school and high school with a number of discipline behavioral issues. Disrespectful, theft, hazing, bullying, and insubordination may be seen as reoccurring which need to be caught quickly and remedied as soon as possible before escalating to criminal charges. Criminalization is more prevalent and intense in schools that are heavily populated by disadvantaged urban minorities (Hirschfield, 2007). In a study conducted by MacIver and Groginsky (2011), it is suggested that dropping out can be a cumulative process of disengagement that begins as early as the first grade. Likewise,

Knesting (2008), concludes that researchers and school personnel sometimes single out societal and student characteristics, such as poverty, single-parent families, teenage pregnancy, or gang violence, as factors that make it difficult for schools to impact students' decisions to continue their education or drop out of school.

Similarly, Jozefowics-Simbeni (2008), found that school settings, primarily student bodies, transmit a stigma and discriminatory practices as many of them uphold exclusionary treatment which sends a strong message whether a student, or a group of students "belong" in school. Many of these students have mental health difficulties such as decreased self-esteem, higher levels of anxiety and self-consciousness, and depression, which may lead to deviant activities such as substance use, and criminal acts. During this period, adolescents experience school behavior problems that may lead to truancy court, school suspension, and initial encounters with law enforcement. Consequently, Steinberg and Allen (2011) found through their study that of all special education groups, students identified with emotional and behavioral disorders, were far more likely to drop out of school (48 percent) than were students in other special education categories (30 percent) or students without disabilities (24 percent).

### **Alternative Schools**

The National Center for Education Statistics (Hoffman, 2009) defined an alternative education school as a public elementary/secondary school that addresses students' needs that (1) typically cannot be met in a regular school, (2) provides nontraditional education, (3) serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or (4) falls outside of regular, special education, or vocational education. Alternative schools may meet the needs of disengaged students. Various models of alternative schools have been designed to provide a range of educational experiences that may possibly create an engaging environment and assist the national dropout problem. Raywid (1994)

clarified that alternative schools are created for unsuccessful students, “with those who by virtue of being ‘disadvantaged,’ ‘marginal,’ or ‘at-risk’ cannot or will not succeed in a regular program.... A fine line divides at-risk or special needs students from the rest.”

One of the challenges for alternative schools is identifying quality programs; in fact, only a few of the hundreds listed on the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network website have been evaluated for their effectiveness (Tyler & Lofstrum, 2009). Kochhar-Bryant and Lacey (2005) reported that “a major problem with research and research synthesis on alternative schools is the lack of conceptual standardization and a standard definition.” According to the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N, n.d), “the most common model of alternative school operating today is to serve youth in at-risk situations which is designed to be part of a school district’s comprehensive dropout prevention program.”

Alternative schools are one method for preventing the severe and long-lasting consequences of underachievement and decisions of dropping out. They argued that the most effective means of serving at-risk populations is through the development of alternative schools. They contend that these settings are better able to keep students in school because the culture of the alternative school—administration and organization, teacher culture, student culture, and curriculum—is focused on meeting the needs of individual students. This type of school provides a community of caring that may not exist for many students in more traditional high schools. In turn this will enable parents to grow in their ability to help their children get the best education possible as schools learn to communicate effectively with parents thus providing awareness and encouragement of involvement and collectively viewed as a process rather than a one-time event.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study will be to analyze and study at-risk student populations' unique predicament and determine two factors of failure; encouragement by failure and discouragement by failure. This study seeks to analyze how failure contributes to a life changing decision of either dropping out of high school or persist and obtain a high school diploma. The purpose is to understand students' experiences by recording and analyzing their reasons for choosing to stay or dropout out of school along the Southwest border region. Such efforts are necessary because the distinctive challenges of early adolescence can bring about an escalation of academic and behavioral difficulties which can preeminently lead to school dropout. This study focuses on understanding the role of failure as a main contributor in the decision making of Latina/o at-risk students dropping out. As drop-out numbers continue to increase within the educational system, schools will also continue to lose ground in the efforts of minimizing the number of students walking away without their high school diploma. The purpose of this study is to contribute to the knowledge base of failure and its effects on at-risk Latina/o students.

### **Research Questions**

The study is guided by the following questions:

- Research Question 1: What can we learn from past at-risk students' narrative discourses on reasons of failure leading them to graduate or dropout of high school?
- Research Question 2: What are the differences in conative disposition between at-risk students exhibiting encouragement by failure-vs.-discouragement by failure?

### **Significance of the Study**

The analysis of this study is to listen to the voices of Southwest border region Latina/o students making a life changing decision primarily based on academic failure. According to Groth (1998), most researchers studying the dropout problem have focused primarily on the at-risk students' characteristics and completely neglected their personal experiences. The significance of this study is to acknowledge how failure affects the decisions made by high school Latina/o students on a daily basis and thus adding to the social problem. The students' decisions attribute to many negative personal and societal consequences in which schools have the opportunity to identify major risk categories that are leading to opting to continue school or leave high school without a diploma. Early recognition of how at-risk student populations manage failure would contribute to more effective mechanisms for defining and intervening prevention efforts thus leading to positive social change.

Discussing the stories of potential high school dropouts can provide valuable information related to root causes as to why teenagers decide to leave school without their high school diploma. This information can be used to develop programs designed to create and increase preventive measures and collectively contribute to the decrease of dropout behaviors. The analysis of the stories obtained will give voice to Southwest border region Latina/o students' who may be unable or unwilling to complete high school significantly due to failure. In addition, it provides a forum for conceptualizing discouragement by failure and conative theory to develop a dialog for reduction of the national dropout problem.



### **Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. First, the definition of at-risk is widely misrepresented as many students are simply categorized by their appearance or socio economic status. For the benefit of this study, it is important to comprehend the definition of categorizing students as being at-risk of dropping out of school. Second, participants were selected based on experiencing failure during their high school enrollment. Third, the focus is on failure and how it impacts the student's decision making of whether to persist their road to graduation or to simply drop out. Overall, the implication for researchers is that failure identification needs to involve consideration of the various at-risk student realities and perspectives that can inform the societal issue at hand.

### **Researcher Perspective**

As an educator for the past 15 years; classroom teacher, school counselor, and school administrator, I have witnessed how learning is impacted via a social learning theory approach. A number of students may learn by observing and imitating the teacher's modeling, which results in good behavior and achievement, but unfortunately students also learn by modeled bad behavior and observation. It is amazing how students readily acquire deficient behaviors but most importantly choose to follow a path directed toward achievement failure. As a classroom teacher, my goal was to unlock the world of mathematics in which I assumed that *all* students would be motivated to learn. Soon I discovered how much students dislike mathematics and the difficulty of uncovering a world they so much despise. I soon found that students' conation to learn mathematics always comes last. Students do not understand the importance of learning mathematics and therefore their personal desire of comprehension is dismissed.

As a school counselor, I would meet with students to discuss their completion of credits

and state accountability testing. I found a pattern of behavior in which students continued failure led to students basically giving up due to their disappointments with the state exam. I would encourage students to attend tutoring, make suggestions of how to receive continued practice via the Internet, and even tutored students myself but to no avail. Students found themselves caught in a whirlwind that simply they felt could not get out of. I observed how helpless they had become but also saw how some were able to self-regulate their actions and found themselves succeeding against the faced odds. As a school administrator of an alternative campus, I listened to the many detrimental stories that my students have to tell. I still provide a lot of counseling and find myself having to guide students as to how to change their actions in order to achieve success. These are the students that in spite of failure were encouraged enough and found a glimpse of light at the end of the tunnel and were able to continue. The few students that are so discouraged by their failure simply find it easier to walk away and not obtain their diploma.

As I foresee the launching of the study, my own self-reflexivity will immediately take stock as my own position and identity will become an important role while conducting the study as well as noting common themes across the personal narratives.

### **Assumptions**

The lingering question that has perturbed me for the past 15 years has been as to why students' first instinct at failure is simply to give up. As a classroom teacher, it baffled me to see students being content with a fairly decent average rather than being more ferocious at attaining the highest possible grade. More so were the students that simply did not seem to care of them receiving a passing or failing grade. Therefore as I began considering a topic for my dissertation, I dove right in into wanting to discover the reasons of students accepting failure.

Before comprehending the entire process of conducting a study, I had always believed that students simply did not care of their education. That accepting failure was a contentment of living in the same vicious cycle of their upbringing. That they would only speak of having goals but had *no* real intention of fulfilling those goals. In other words, they were simply saying what they believed the adults wanted to hear. Through my years of directly working with students, I too had developed the mentality of *lazy students are the ones to easily give up*. Therefore as a future researcher my assumptions were of finding that the lazy and the non-motivated students would be the ones to easily yield in accepting failure. I assumed that students had accepted failure due to truly not wanting a better future and having their social life as a priority since many of them simply did not want to attend school.

In essence, I believed that I would uncover an *I don't care* mentality to answer my questions of failure.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions were defined as follows:

1. Alternative schools - Alternative schools have been established to meet the needs of children and adolescents who cannot learn effectively in a traditional school environment. They often have curriculum elements that focus on improving student self-esteem fostering growth of individuality, and enhancing social skills. Alternative schools are more flexible in their organization and administration, which allows for more variety in educational programs.
2. At-risk – school aged students in danger of not obtaining their high school diploma.

3. Dropout – a student who is absent without an approved excuse and does not return to school by the fall of the following school year (National Dropout Prevention Center, n.d.).
4. Failure – an act that does not achieve its intended goal; the condition or fact of not achieving the desired end or intended purpose; nonperformance of what was required or expected.
5. Latina/o or Hispanic – refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race.

### **Summary**

At-risk students have a disadvantage upon entering their first year of high school. Because of poverty, cultural or linguistic differences, they tend to have low academic achievement leading to an increased number of high school dropouts. The immense number of at-risk students beginning to demonstrate tendencies have been found as early as first grade, which may eventually lead to the decision of dropping out. Latina/o students live in households and communities that experience high levels of sustained poverty. It is estimated that about 35% of Hispanic children live below the national poverty line, which constitutes to the dropout rate being much higher than that of other ethnic groups. The high school completion rate for Latina/o's was 63%, compared to 81% for African American and 90% for White students. In 2009, almost 40% of all Hispanic 16- through 24-year-olds were high school dropouts which is more than double the rate for African Americans (17%) and more than four times the rate for Whites (8%). Only 63% of Latina/o kindergartners go on to graduate from high school. High schools need the direction of how best to help at-risk students and have a successful implementation of structural reforms to better assist and provide supportive interventions. This

will provide the necessary conditions for success as coupled reforms with specific instructional and curricular alternatives will only strengthen their academic achievement and long-term success in high school.

In summary, improving the enrollment of Latina/o students will take more than just an awareness of the reasons at-risk students opt to dropout of high school without achievement of their diploma. It will require the concerted efforts of all educators to respond to this crisis by insisting on immediate attention and accepting no more excuse (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Additionally, when school leadership is able to embrace and lead positive change by utilizing all resources; primarily parents and mentors, with both a sense of urgency and awareness of devotion to the four-year commitment; *all* students will then be engaged with significant amount of high school success. The call to action and collaboration amongst all educators is of utmost importance in order to better understand how Latina/o students are responding to failure.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Philosophical Worldview**

The study's philosophical assumption rests on the constructivist worldview. Constructivism lies on the understandings or meanings of phenomenon that is formed through participants and their subjective views. According to Creswell (2011), "when participants provide their understandings, they speak from meanings shaped by social interaction with others and from their own personal histories. Creswell (2011), states "social constructivism... includes subjective meanings that are negotiated socially and historically... formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives. From a social constructivist perspective, researchers focus on the "...processes of interaction among individuals" (Creswell, 2007), or as applicable to this study will be the awareness of how at-risk Latina/o high school students perceive failure and thus determine to either pursue a high school diploma or simply opt to drop out.

The Constructivist Worldview lens will bring perspective to the problem of school dropouts, as it has significantly become a national obsession based on the numerous research studies focusing on characteristics that may correlate with the decision of leaving school. The Southwest border region does not differ from the national dropout problem; according to the San Antonio-based Intercultural Development Research Association (Johnson, 2007), almost 50% of dropouts in Texas are Hispanic. Nationwide, the rate increases to 58% (Editorial Projects in Education, 2008). Most studies have focused on dropout characteristics and factors leading to dropping out, but limited have considered the students' experience with failure. Therefore, this study's significance is to acknowledge how failure affects the conative disposition and the decision made by high school Latina/o students on a daily basis.

## **Literature Review**

The foremost purpose of this study is to contribute to the knowledge base of failure and its effects on at-risk Latina/o youth. The intent is to study and analyze past at-risk student populations' unique predicament and determine two factors of failure; encouragement by failure and discouragement by failure. This chapter will review pertinent literature that may assist in understanding crucial constructs as high school students reach their decision of either graduating or dropping out. The first construct is conation as its definition lays the understanding of its importance to human learning. Failure is the second construct that denotes how humans respond as they encounter it. The third and fourth constructs are the dichotomies from failure; learned helplessness and self-regulated learning since both are attributed by failure.

### **Conation**

The Latin word “conatus”, from which conation is derived, is defined as “any natural tendency, impulse or directed effort.” The concept of weakness of will, or as the ancient Greeks called it, *akrasia*, has been with us since the time of Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato (Charlton, 1988). The Ancient philosophers Plato and Aristotle spoke of the three faculties through which we think, feel, and act. George Brett in his “History of Psychology,” said, “Augustine was not far from the same standpoint...his language at times suggests the same three-fold division of knowing, feeling and willing.” Like Plato’s Rationalism, Spinoza’s Homic philosophy focused on an understanding of the three-faculty concept as a necessary prelude to the quest for ideal self-actualization. Similarly, in McDougall’s Outline of Psychology (1923), he refers to the three-faculty concept as “generally admitted.” He said,

“We often speak of an intellectual or cognitive activity; or of an act of willing or of resolving, choosing, striving, purposing; or again of a state of feeling. But it is generally admitted that all mental activity has these three aspects, cognitive, affective and conative; and when we apply one of these three adjectives to any phase of mental process, we mean merely that the aspect named is the most prominent of the three at that moment. Each cycle of activity has this triple aspect; though each tends to pass through these phases in which cognition, affection and conation are in turn most prominent; as when the naturalist, catching sight of a specimen, recognizes it, captures it, and gloats over its capture.”

One reason that the study of conation has lagged behind the study of cognition, emotion, and behavior is that it is intertwined with the study of these other domains and often difficult to separate (Snow, 1989). For example, conative components are often considered when measuring cognition or emotion. The Wechsler scales of intelligence include a conative component (Cooper, 1997; Gregory, 1998); Goleman’s (1995) construct of emotional intelligence includes both affective (e.g., empathy, optimism, managing emotions) and conative (e.g., setting goals, self-regulation) components. Likewise, conation has cognitive and affective, as well as volitional, components (e.g., Gollwitzer, 1990; Snow & Swanson, 1992).

As a faculty of the mind, conation is defined by Funk & Wagnalls Standard Comprehensive International Dictionary (1977) as “the aspect of mental process directed by change and including impulse, desire, volition and striving”, and by the Living Webster Encyclopedia Dictionary of the English Language (1980) as: “one of the three modes, together with cognition and affection, of mental function; a conscious effort to carry out seemingly volitional acts.” Atman (1987) defined conation as “vectored energy: i.e., personal energy that has both direction and magnitude.” Conation is the innate fortitude to plow forward in spite of experienced failure or perceived failure, it is also the expectation of achieving success. It reveals itself by the energy one puts toward achieving the set goal and the mindset of getting closer to the culmination of experience.



Daily conative issues can be:

- What are my intentions and goals;
- What am I going to do;
- What are my plans and commitments?

Many researchers believe volition or will or freedom of choice is an essential element of voluntary human behavior and that human behavior cannot be explained fully without it (Bandura, 1997; Campbell, 1999; Donagan, 1987; Hersberger, 1989). Miller (1991) concurs, suggesting that conation is especially important when addressing issues of human learning. If a person does not display competence in the conative domain, he or she will always be controlled by the circumstances of the situation or environment due to the lack of conation. And as one considers one's life purpose, every perception, thought, feeling, commitment, or action will be influenced by one's belief about the purpose of one's life.

In this study, past at-risk students will be allowed to talk about their beliefs' on the purpose of their lives. This is important since story represents an attempt by individuals to make meaning of and to actively construct their lives (Patton and McMahon, 1999). The study will attempt to find meaning through the thick descriptions of how their conative disposition has allowed failure to direct and determine the purpose of lives.

Complicated by the lack of theory that is specifically focused on the connection between conation and failure is being confronted in this study as it attempts to advance such an understanding by determining the nature of the dynamic link as high school students face the decision to either graduate or drop out of school.

## Failure

For many individuals, failure can be detrimental to their mental state of mind since society does not acknowledge failure as an essential component for success. Kanfer (2002), “failure is defined in terms of the difficulties involved in the implementation of intentions or goals to which the individual is committed—that is, to goals that the individual has adopted.” Scientist and engineers understand that in order to accomplish or succeed within a task, the process of trial and error must exist within the act of learning from and building on each mistake. Difficult to accept, Birney, Burdick, and Teevan (1969), highlighted anticipatory consequences due to failure:

- Devaluing of one’s self-estimate – lowering of perceived ability,
- Non-ego punishment – academic/skills performance,
- Social devaluation – disappointing family member.

As individuals respond differently to failure, their created meaning about the outcome may include particular expectations within their line of reasoning. For example, Diener and Dweck (1978) allowed the detection of wider constellation of cognitions as they requested student’s responses in a variety of *achievement-related verbalizations* to mediate failure within learned helplessness. Individuals with poor expectations of success, may fail from the outset since they have initially failed to adopt a goal or have the enough conation for such accomplishment.

Within the realm of education, Weiner, Graham, and Reyna (1997) assumed that if a student fails because of not studying “lack of effort,” inferred a volitional control of the event that gives rise to the ascription of responsibility and the student is perceived as responsible for

the failure. A distinct characteristic amongst at-risk students is their non-acquisition sense of responsibility for academic failure. Although the failure gap may not be due to a lack of commitment to learning or their conative disposition, but to the simple sense of not being successful along with their peers. Ultimately, academic failure can result by hurting students' chances of ever improving and disrupting other domains of functioning, this response compounds the initial at-risk problems, with long-term, postsecondary consequences (Bachman & Paternoster 1997; Elliott, Huizinga, and Menard 1989; Schulenberg, Strauss, O'Malley, & Johnston 1994).

Young people who are distracted from their academic pursuits, could throw their educational careers off track and disrupt the critical transition into adulthood that is a foundational period for long-term trajectories of educational attainment (Bachman & Paternoster 2003; Crosnoe, Muller, and Frank 2004). After all, academic failure can impair intergenerational relations, create family conflict, distract the school from its educational mission, disrupt the order and stability of the school, and impair the future opportunities of young people (Cairns and Cairns 1994; Coleman 1961; Crosnoe, Muller, and Frank 2004).

Conversely, in a canonical analysis conducted by Bartels and Ryan (2013), results suggested in assisting students by allowing them to view failure as an opportunity to learn from mistakes, de-emphasize the relevance of one instance of failure on one's global self-estimate, and emphasizing that one's future does not ride on the outcome of one test or assignment or grade. Maria Ferguson (2014) emphasized that *Failure IS an option* and that "failing actually is a good thing. When we pay attention to what went wrong, and why, it only and invariably prepares us to succeed in the future." Innovators and CEO's know that failure is and must be an accepted part of the learning process and ultimately be influenced far more by their failures than their

successes.

In the case of achievement behaviors, encouragement by failure may lead a student to reach out for assistance in order to acquire the skills needed to learn from their mistakes. Whereas discouragement by failure may lead a student to block all assistance needed and therefore simply learn to accept failure. Kaplan and Midgley (1999) results from their analyses provided strong support for the need to regard school failure not only as a determinant of psychosocial outcomes but also as a proactive attempt to rescue vulnerable youth.

Lack of conation may lead to students becoming discouraged through failed attempts and thus leading to becoming high school dropouts. In comparisons to a standard measure of grade point average, the accumulation of course failures better identifies students who are most at-risk for grade retention and dropping out (Kaplan, Peck, and Kaplan 1994; Needham, Crosnoe, and Muller 2004). Once students have associated their perception of continuous failure (lack of conation to succeed), their negative feelings with the school environment will begin to develop attitudes and defenses choosing to dropout of high school rather than to find alternative measures to complete their high school journey. Students who are repeatedly exposed to school failure are particularly at-risk for the development of learned helplessness (Licht & Kistner, 1986).

For instance, over time people gradually develop consistent patterns of attributions for their successes and failures as these patterns in turn may affect their expectations for future performance. In comparison, some people may typically attribute their accomplishments to their own abilities and efforts by having an *I-can-do-it* attitude known as mastery orientation. Whereas other people may attribute successes to outside and uncontrollable factors and believe that their failures reflect a relatively permanent lack of ability and thus have an *I-can't-do-it-even-if-I-*

*tried* attitude known as learned helplessness.

## **Learned Helplessness**

In the late 1960s, a hot topic in animal research was “learned helplessness”: lab animals sometimes didn’t do what they were capable of because they’d given up from repeated failures. As a graduate student at Yale, Carol Dweck started off studying animal motivation and through more than three decades of systematic research, she has been figuring out answers to why some people achieve their potential while equally talented others don’t—why some become Muhammad Ali and others Mike Tyson. Dweck (1975), explained that for individuals, after repeated failures, they automatically believe the situation to be hopeless and out of control thus resulting in passivity, even when the outcome effect can change—she calls this “learned helplessness.” Therefore, learned helplessness is the notion that after repeated punishment or failure, persons become passive and remain so even after environmental changes that make success possible (Martinko & Gardner, 1982).

Learned helplessness is characterized by a lack of motivation to respond, a lack of understanding that responding works, and a lack of understanding of reinforcement (Maier & Seligman, 1976). Learned helplessness attributes failure as to the lack of ability and not to the lack of conation but altogether view failure as insurmountable and success as less salient, less predictive, and enduring; overall less successful. Students who are identified with espouse learned helplessness have a tendency to attribute failure to external factors rather than effort, tend to show decrements in performance following failure (Licht & Dweck, 1984). Similarly, learned helplessness may be a response pattern that retards learning especially when learning involves material that is difficult for the individual thus influencing academic achievement over time (Fincham, Hokoda, & Sanders, 1989). Moreover, parents and teachers may not be fully aware of

learned helplessness students and of their reaction to poor grades and unmet expectations.

U.S. psychologist Martin Seligman and colleagues, state that “People who learn that they have no control over unpleasant or painful events in one situation are unlikely, in later situations, to try to escape or avoid aversive events even when it’s possible for them to do so” (Ormrod, Turner, Finkelhor, Hamby, Leeb, Mercy, & Holt, 2012). Seligman (Sutherland & Singh, 2004) suggested that learned helplessness produces three deficits: an undermining of one’s motivation to respond, a retardation of one’s ability to learn that responding works, and an emotional disturbance, usually depression or anxiety. Learned helplessness is often viewed as a clinical depression and being related to mental illnesses which may result from perceived absence of control over the outcome of continued sense of failure. Other feelings related with learned helplessness are anxiety, stress, frustration, hostility, resignation, apathy, fatigue, anger, and shame (Miller & Seligman, 1975).

Their study indicates (Sutherland & Singh, 2004) that as a result of repeated academic failure, students will begin to doubt their intellectual abilities and thus leading to doubt that they can do anything to help overcome their difficulties. In addition, Diener and Dweck’s study (1980), suggested that helpless students consistently express an appreciable degree of negative affect along with statements that implied they had given up trying to solve the problems. Helpless students under failure, also reflected a tendency to dwell on the present to emphasize the negative and to seek escape from the situation. They also concluded, that helpless students perceived past success as irrelevant to future outcomes since continued success in an area was not sufficient in itself to buffer the effects of failures.

Carol Dweck’s expertise—and her recent book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of*

*Success*— the key, she found, isn't ability; it's whether you look at ability as something inherent that needs to be demonstrated or as something that can be developed with effort or practice. She has shown that people can learn to adopt the latter belief and make dramatic strides in performance. Consequently, she is sought out wherever motivation and achievement matter, from education and parenting to business management and personal development. Interestingly, Dweck often continues to wonder how humans cope with as she asks: "What makes a really capable child give up in the face of failure, where other children may be motivated by the failure?"

### **Self-Regulated Learning**

Self-regulated learners are ones that have knowledge of effective learning strategies and know how and when to use them (Bandura, 1991; Winne, 1995). Self-regulated learning refers to the self-directive process through which learners transform their mental abilities into task-related academic skills to accomplish the given task. Failure at self-regulation, according to the Greeks, is a personality trait that is unchangeable—or more precisely, a personal flaw that is worthy of condemnation and ridicule (Smart and Wegner, 1996).

Self-regulation describes a process of taking control and evaluating one's own learning and behavior. Therefore, self-regulated learners are successful because they control their learning environment and apply acquired skills to fulfill their desired goals. They exert this control by directing and regulating their own actions toward their learning goals. Indeed, Dweck (1975) found that a few learned helplessness students do actually appear more sensitive to failure after they have experienced prolonged success. If this is true, these students experiencing learned helplessness may learn to reach out for assistance and begin to acquire possible self-regulated skills and thus begin to redirect their conative disposition.

The highest level of autonomy is achieved when individuals regulate their own behavior by self-evaluative and other self-produced consequences (Bandura, 1971). Later in 1996, Bandura claimed that;

People are proactive, aspiring organisms. They set for themselves performance challenges that create motivating discrepancies to be mastered. Self-regulation thus involves a hierarchical dual-control process of disequilibrating discrepancy production followed by equilibrating discrepancy reduction. It requires proactive control as well as reactive control.

Zimmerman & Schunck (2013), make the claim that the key issue defining learning as self-regulated is not whether it is socially isolated, but rather whether the learner displays personal initiative, perseverance, and adaptive skill in pursuing it. Zimmerman (1998) describes self-regulatory learning as a cyclical process occurring in three major phases:

- 1) Before the learning process is forethought – goal setting, strategic planning, self-efficacy beliefs, goal orientation and intrinsic interest,
- 2) During the learning process is performance or volitional control – attention focusing, self-instruction, and self-monitoring,
- 3) After the learning process is self-reflection – self-evaluation, attributions, and self-reactions and adaptability.

Students who cultivate self-regulated learning skills are much more apt to find gratification in daily conative issues. They may even find delight within the learning experience that may forcibly be grinding and completely uninteresting. They've developed a kind of "visioning," often unconsciously, that makes them very "gritty" as they continue to learn while they are becoming great learners' with a sense of pleasure in exploration that tends to make them ambitious, self-disciplined, and persistent (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007).



## **Summary**

In summary, the literature reviewed here provides some insight into the four constructs between the relationship of conation, failure, learned helplessness, and self-regulated learning for the purpose of conducting this study. Given the problematic nature of the connection of academic failure and dropping out of high school, may lead to an understanding as to why it occurs within our young at-risk Latina/o youth. A rich interdisciplinary literature had documented how adolescence serves as a linking stage in the life course, flowing out of childhood experiences and acting as a springboard into adulthood (Elder, 1998; Shanahan 2000). The linking this study is to uncover is how conation or lack of conation has a direct correlation with failure and thus attributing to the major life changing decision of graduating or dropping out of high school.

This study will explore and analyze the connection between conation and failure thus leading to encouragement by failure or discouragement by failure and thus ending at the threshold of self-regulated learning or learned helplessness. This study will elucidate through the shared experiences of past at-risk students whether conation or lack of conation are root causes why Latina/o youth decide to leave school without their high school diploma due to failure.

## **Conceptual Framework**

This study will be conducted from a Constructive Worldview perspective by uncovering the phenomenon of failure as it is being explored through the mindset of conative disposition. Carol Dweck's (2008) approach to understanding student's mindsets – conation, was to expose learning and school achievement. It is confounded in the premise of the psychological worlds—in which students are afraid of challenges and devastated by setbacks, and one in which students relish challenges and become robust in the face of setbacks—the conative disposition.

## Major Construct

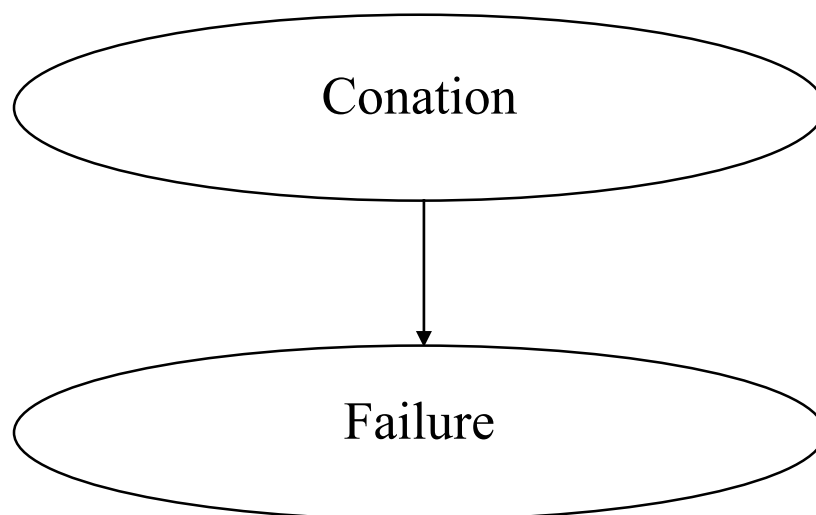
The major construct being identified is conation, it will assist as the theory guiding this study. Conation refers to the intentional and personal motivation of behavior (e.g., the proactive direction, energizing, and persistence of behavior). The conative domain is defined as the mental process that activates and/or directs behavior and action. William G. Huitt and Sheila C. Cain (2005) identify conation as the connection of knowledge and affect to behavior. It is associated with the issue of “why” people think and feel the way they do. The “why”, is the personal, intentional, planful, deliberate, goal-oriented, or striving component of motivation, the proactive (as opposed to reactive or habitual) aspect of behavior (Baumeister, Shmueli, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Emmons 1986). Although motivation is a feeling, whereas conation is the style of action a person uses to respond to that feeling (Poulsen, 1991). The simple daily issues may seem unattainable without any plan or inclination of first action to take place. Both Bagozzi (1992) and Miller (1991) proposed that conation, a term that includes volition, but also includes additional aspects such as planning and perseverance, is especially important when addressing issues of human learning and that failure to adequately predict behavior was because that construct of conation had been omitted.

Important to distinct, is the misuse and misunderstanding of the term conation as the ability to set and achieve goals through a cognitive process. Davis and Henry (1997) wrote that some people are more successful at setting and achieving goals than are others because they are more motivated and have more control over their behavior—something they called *higher conative capacity*. Gerdes and Stromwall (2008) reaffirmed that “conation is not goal-setting motivation or achievement, but the way in which a person with any degree of motivation or goal orientation goes about acting on that motivation and achieving those goals.”

## Conation Link to Failure

While goals associated with overt behavior and cognition paradigms are deeply enmeshed in schools today (e.g., basic skills, critical thinking), Barell (1995) proposes that helping students develop the conative attitudes and skills associated with self-direction and personal efficacy is one of the most critical tasks presently facing parents and educators. Consequently, in school settings, conation and or volition will control intentions and impulses so that the expected action occurs. Corno (2004) has emphasized that in school “*motivation* can get students started, whereas *volition* gets them to follow through.”

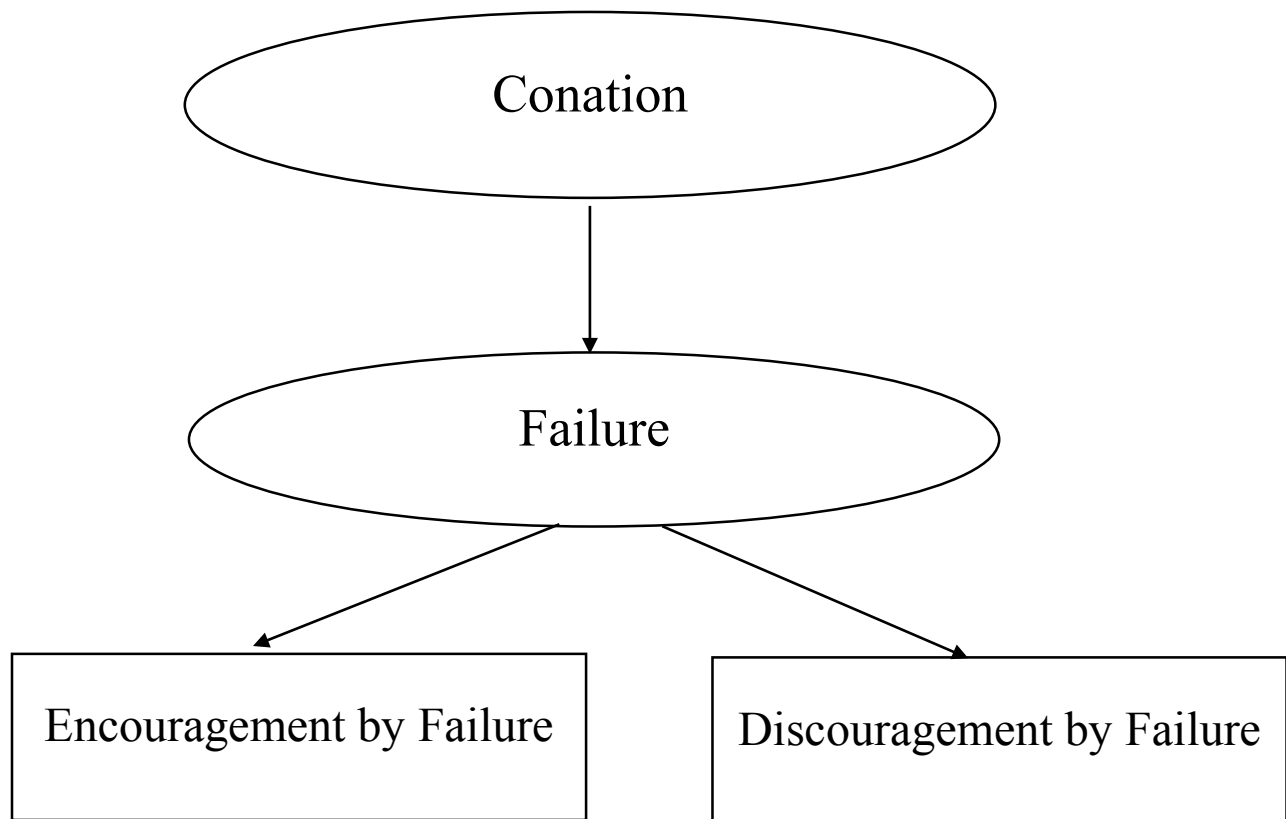
By uncovering at-risks’ conative disposition through their narratives, the stories being shared will allow this study to begin to understand how failure triggers student’s actions, see Fig. 2.1 – Conation Link to Failure. Whether students possess a strong conative disposition or they lack conation as they encounter failure is of great intent. Moreover, the study’s purpose is to contribute to the knowledge base of failure and its effects on at-risk Latina/o students.



**Figure 2.1. Conation Link to Failure**

## Dichotomy of Failure

Imperative to this study will be to gain an understanding of how conation links to at-risk students' disposition of either being encouraged or discouraged by failure, see Fig. 2.2 – Dichotomy of Failure. As this dichotomy is presented, a distinction needs to be emphasized within this study. As the study unfolds within the construct of failure, the two aspects being researched will be noted as students' declare their experiences' with encouragement by failure vs. discouragement by failure. The analysis of the study will try to uncover how each dichotomy is then routed to the two following constructs also being explored.



**Figure 2.2. Dichotomy of Failure**

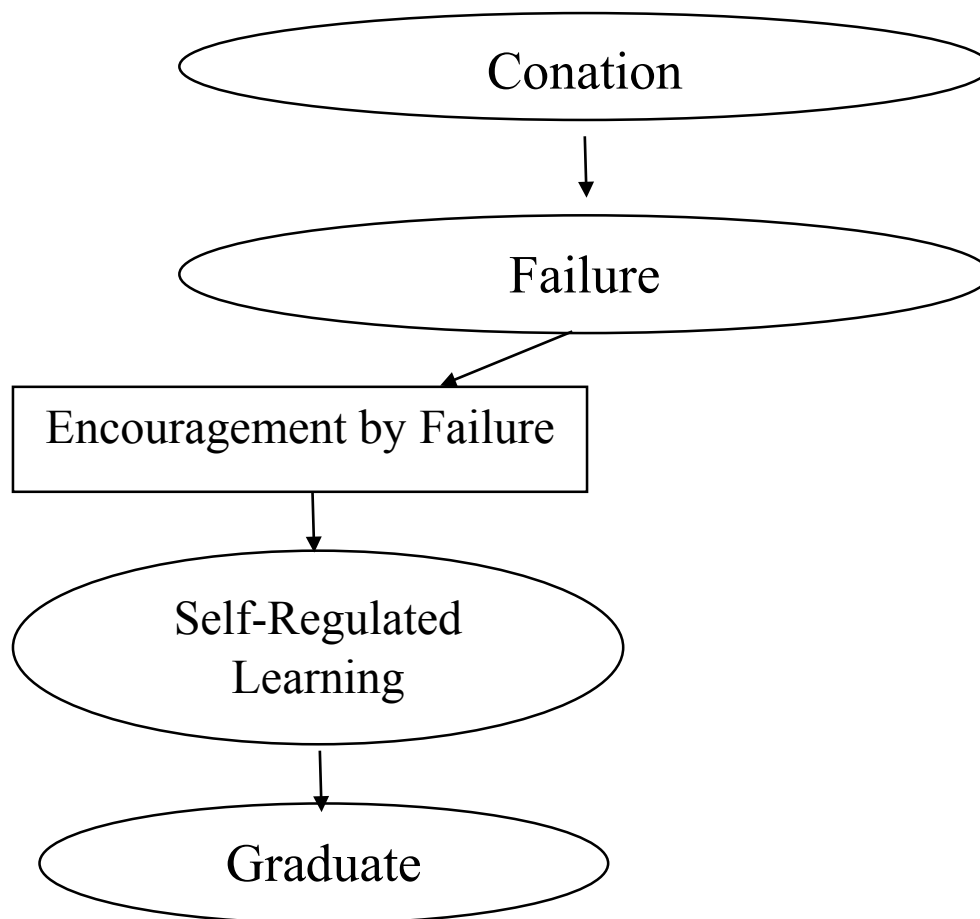
The original premise contributing to the gap in academic achievement stands that a low level of engagement is one of the principal variables responsible for academic failure (Scott, Nelson, & Liaupsin, 2001). As a result of prior experience, at-risk students experience low levels of academic engagement and may be accustomed to expect that their actions will gain them outcomes without much real value. Historically, many continually low achieving students could be at least modest performers if they were convinced that modest performance would be accepted (Kloosterman, 1988).

Primarily, researchers have long understood the deleterious effects of school failure (grade retention and drop out) on adolescent delinquency and adult development (Bersani & Chapple, 2007). At-risk students experiencing academic failure, may see the culmination of a long-term process of academic disengagement (Alexander, Entwistle, & Horsey, 1997) in which experiences with grade retention, school detachment, and poor school performance accumulate and therefore youth opting for other, less restrictive environments. Clearly stated in their study as a strong indicator, (Bersani & Chapple, 2007), school failure is a marked transition in adolescence with the potential of operating as a key turning point in their life course.

Empirical evidence suggests that adolescents' self-narratives, especially those of older youth, are generally adequate indicators of academic and behavioral factors. Still, these disclosures should be analyzed with some important caveats—adolescents tend to inflate their grades and to deflate their estimations of problem behaviors (Dornbusch, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, & Rumberger, 1990). This study will allow the telling of stories and elaboration of meaning as it places a focus on the uniqueness of individuals who “come to understand who they are as part of a life narrative, or story, that brings cohesion and meaningful order to their experiences” (Campbell & Ungar, 2004a).

## Encouragement by Failure

Ones' conation is the first step into unleashing a self-regulatory process to wreak its uniquely counterproductive havoc (Smart & Wegner, 1996). Self-regulated learners approach educational tasks with focus on being successful through their management of acquired skills within their confidence, diligence, and resourcefulness. Daily conative issues for self-regulated learners in spite of their encounter with failure may become structured routines for completing and accomplishing their goals such as graduating from high school, see Fig. 2.3 below.



**Figure 2.3. Encouragement by Failure  $\Rightarrow$  Graduate**

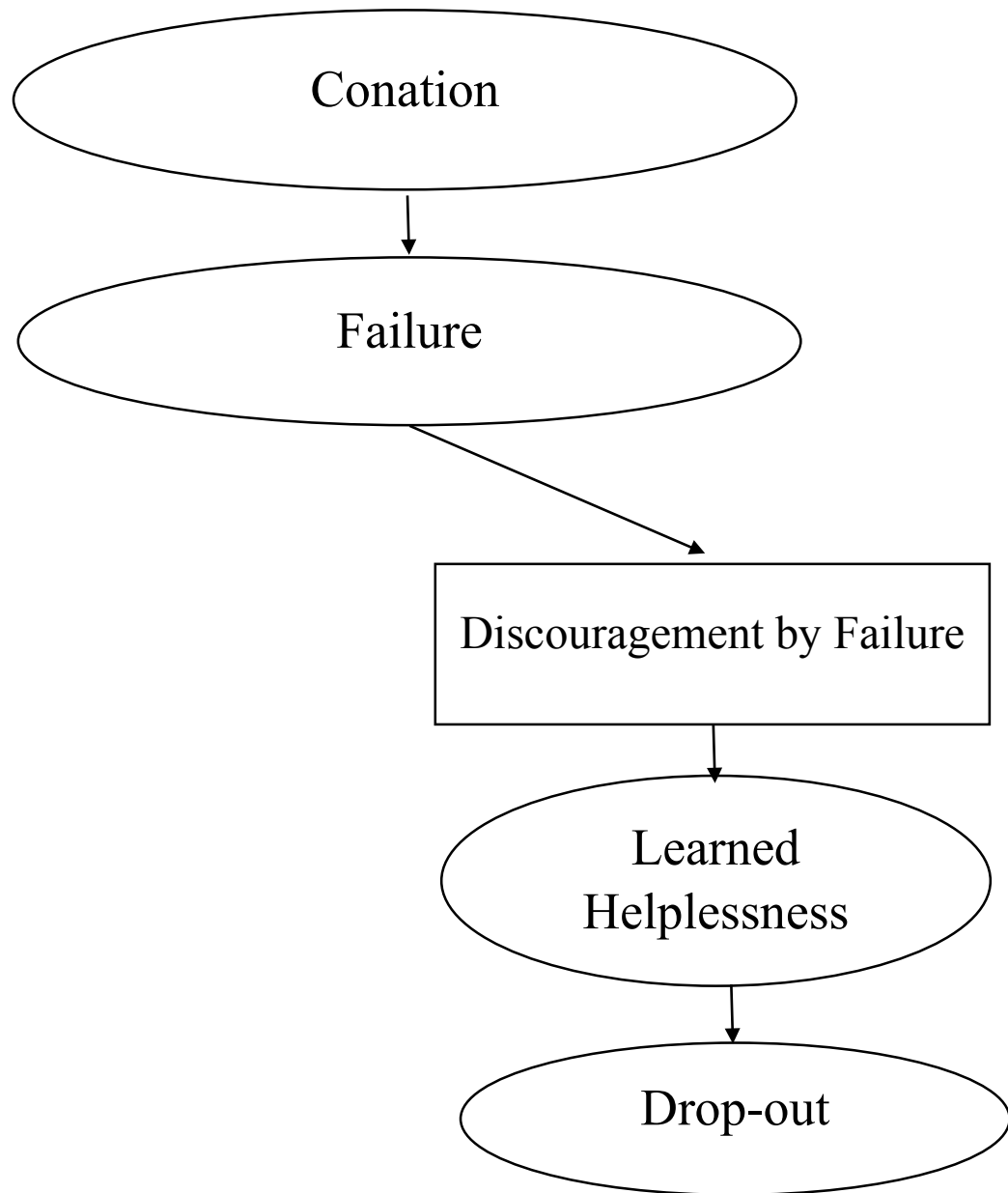
Through their exerted effort, self-regulated learners proactively seek out information or ask for assistance displaying a strong conative disposition. Necessary steps for success may seem as minor obstacles since failure could thus serve a purpose equally valuable for the individual successful regulation. Baumeister and Heatherton use the perspective of failure as a learning tool by which to promote theory development and research on enduring issues of self-regulation (Kanfer, Ackerman, & Heggstad, 1996). For self-regulated learners, failure may be seen as a learning opportunity or as a method of optimizing a challenge. Also, failure may serve the purpose of reframing their self-regulatory skills to ultimately seek acquisition of ensure desired success.

Students who are self-regulated learners believe that opportunities to take on challenging tasks, practice their learning, develop a deep understanding of subject matter, and exert effort will give rise to academic success (Perry, Phillips, & Hutchinson, 2006). Self-regulated learners develop a systematic use of metacognitive strategies which are key in overcoming major obstacles that may abruptly arise. Baumeister and Heatherton also conclude that even during a serious breakdown of self-regulation there is always some degree of control maintained, indicating that such failure is not irresistible and uncontrollable but more a reflection of semi deliberate choice and volitional participation (Polivy & Herman, 2002).

### **Discouragement by failure**

At-risk students displaying a lack of conation, will be more accepting to lower achievement outcomes. With a minimal state of their conative disposition, many at-risk students do not find it hard to imagine that fear of an uncertain future would be a prominent concern associated with failure to meet academic goals (Bartels & Ryan, 2013). Rather than just appearing to be lazy, many at-risk students intentionally fail to perform academically so that

their effort is not measured and therefore blaming their lack of ability for their test scores and poor grades and thus eventually leading to make the decision of dropping out, see Fig. 2. 4 – Discouragement by Failure  $\Rightarrow$  Drop-out.



**Figure 2.4. Discouragement by Failure  $\Rightarrow$  Drop-out**

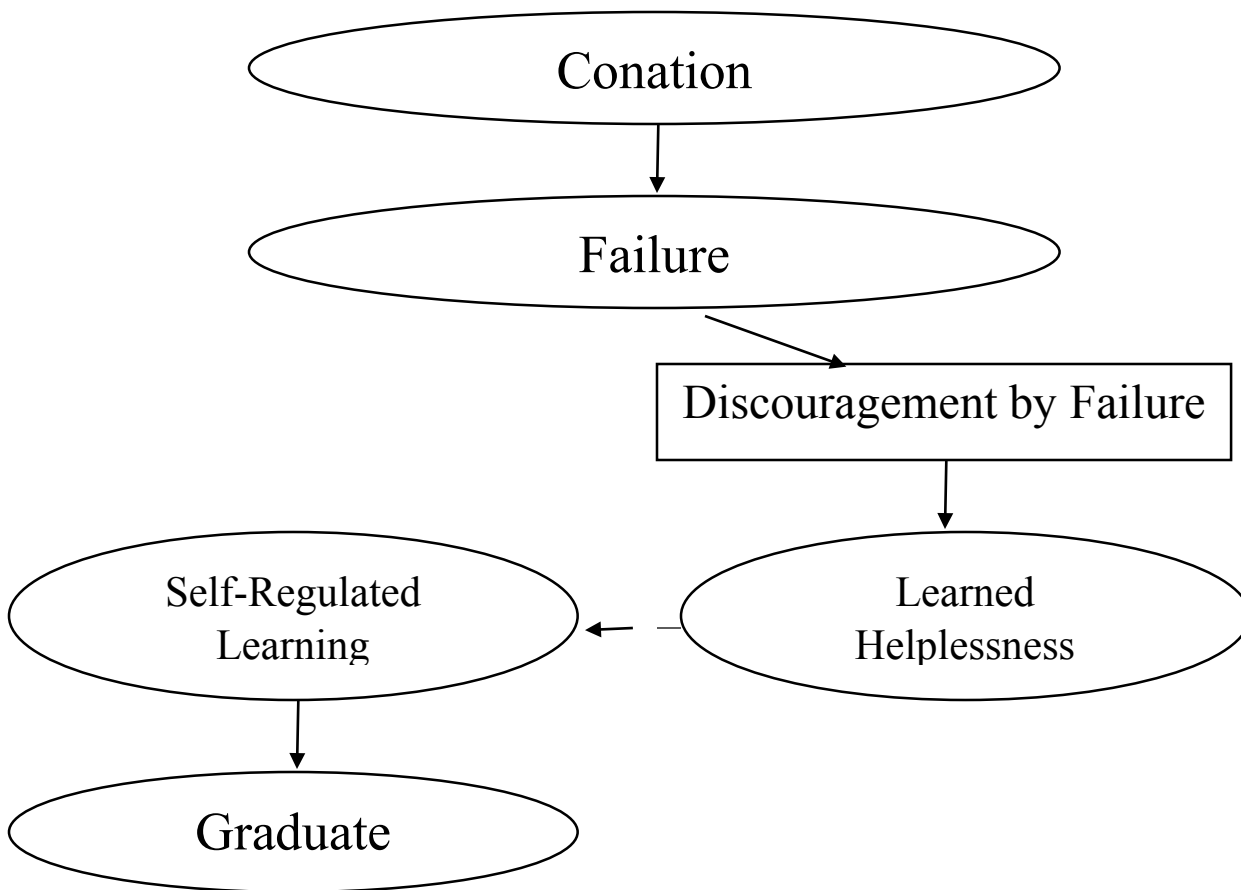


Learned helplessness in schools is much like learned helplessness in Seligman and Maier's electric shock harnessed dogs in that learned helpless students are poorly motivated individuals who have come to expect poor grades regardless of how hard they try and all their effort put forth (Kloosterman, 1988). Through the shared narrative of past at-risk students, this study will focus on acquiring the lost voices within the meaning-making schemas of lack of conation, acceptance of academic failure and espousing a learned helplessness character. Unfortunately, these students experience lack of conation to strive and overcome their academic skills and in turn, question their ability to meet expectations not set by them but rather from family and the school system. Also true is that continuous academic failure is placing these students farther and farther behind in comparison to their peers. Moreover, teachers of learned helplessness students may characterize the pupil as simply being lazy and not taking responsibility of their learning without knowing if other factors are attributing to the student's behavior.

A contributing factor related to showing levels of learned helplessness is related to anxiety level (Dewberry and Richardson, 1990). As these anxiety levels rise, individuals are absorbed into the empirical learned helplessness vortex, failure situations are marked by less and less outreach to their conative domain for accomplishing success and thus may begin to inhibit learning self-regulatory skills. Countless individuals experiencing anxiety levels are also lacking a strong sense of their conation domain and through their acceptance of reoccurring failure will acquire a learned helplessness disposition. As at-risk students learn to accept failure due to their lack of conation, their strategies to remain afloat in the school system may become peculiar defense mechanisms. Covington and Beery (1976) emphasized that students' strategies are in part self-defeating because within their attempts to avoid feelings of failure, they actually

increase their probability of failing due to learned helplessness. The more they encounter failure, the more the likelihood of creating thoughts and actions leading to a self prophecy of not being able to succeed.

As a result of learned helplessness, individuals do not only tend to fail but also may not see the skills that can be used to improve their situation (Odabasi, 2013). Hence, success is the skill of being able to use the necessary skills (self-regulated learning), energy, and time for the given task in the most effective manner to respond and thereby it being a reason why the learned helplessness factor seems to be closely related with success (Aydin, Uzuntirryaki, & Demirdogen, 2011), see Fig. 2.5 Discouragement by Failure  $\Rightarrow$  Graduate.



**Figure 2.5. Discouragement by Failure  $\Rightarrow$  Graduate**

Individuals who have developed a learned helplessness condition have acquired to behave helplessly and failing to respond even though there may be opportunities for it to help itself by avoiding unpleasant circumstances or by gaining positive rewards given multiple situations. Conversely, some individuals may learn from feeling helpless at times and begin to self-regulate through the importance of failure utility by learning that failure can be an option for success.

### **Summary**

The study's conceptual framework will serve to connect the dynamic constructs within the research. From the Constructivist Worldview, this allowed the study to ignite the discovery of meaning within the participants shared experiences due to their encounter with the phenomenon of failure. The conative theory will assist to uncover how at-risk Latina/o students attribute failure to their life changing decision of either graduating or dropping out of high school. Conation will serve as the mindset that collides with failure as students acquire self-regulated learning skills and proceed onto graduation from being encouraged by failure. Or, either allow learned helplessness to creep up and opt to dropout of high school from their despair of being discouraged by failure.

It is hypothesized of this research study that acquiring an understanding through the rich thick descriptions in the narratives of the impact that discouragement by failure attributes to the decision of dropping out of high school for Latina/o students along the border region. The importance of story and meaning making in people's lives remains fundamental to the constructivist worldview since they are viewed as experts of their own lives. Altogether, student stories can contribute to informing educators to more effective mechanisms for defining and intervening prevention efforts thus leading to positive social change. And ultimately, as more

students earn their high school diploma the better chances they have of enhancing post-secondary goals as well as contributing to both economic and social benefits in our society and thus somehow addressing the dropout problem.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

This study will address Latina/o past at-risk student populations and explore factors that may lead to leaving school without earning a high school diploma. The rationale of this study is to consider Latina/o past at-risk student populations' unique predicament and uncover dynamics to better understand dropout episodes due to failure. The purpose is to record and analyze past students' experiences of choosing to stay or dropout of high school along the Southwest border region due to failure. This study encompasses a phenomenological qualitative research design. The study will be conducted using a narrative inquiry approach by seeking to understand the description and meaning of the lived experiences of five participants. This chapter will describe the research rationale and design, followed by the setting, sampling, participants, data sources and procedures as well as data analysis.

#### **Research Rationale**

The characteristics of a Constructive Worldview are claims of knowledge base in understanding, multiple participant meanings, social and historical construction, and theory generation. The worldview that best informs this study will be the Constructivist Worldview by providing the lens of understanding meaning of phenomena being formed through the participants and their subjective views. The primary purpose begins by generalizing a theory and then focusing on qualitative findings based on the analysis of five student experiences opting to choose either to stay or drop out of school due to their experience with failure. As participants provide their understandings, they will speak from meanings shaped by the shared social interaction and from their own personal experiences with the phenomenon. From this form of

inquiry, the research is shaped “from the bottom up” which identifies individual perspectives and thus leads to distinctive patterns and ultimately to broad understandings of the phenomena. Qualitative results will depict the phenomenon in depth and measure the prevalence of its dimensions.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research is designed to reveal a targeted audiences’ behavior since their results are descriptive rather than predictive. The phenomenological research design will allow a description of “lived experiences” within a phenomenon since its aim is to make explicit the processes used to constitute meaning. This phenomenological research design will allow the study to begin with the focus of exploring the phenomenon with past at-risk Latina/o youths opting to either graduate or dropout of high school due to their experience with failure. “When crafting phenomenological research, it is important then to become skeptical of our seeing, but it is equally important to be mindful of phenomenology’s interest in understanding the meaning of lived experience” (Vagle 2014). Phenomenological research is interested in accessing those intentional meanings which are experiences of those who have experienced the phenomenon. Phenomenologists are “actively waiting for the phenomenon, and its meaning(s), to show itself” (Dahlberg, 2006).

Qualitative research allows for theory to be employed in order to defend the complexity and dignity of the multiple truths and paradoxes. Remarkably though, Vagle (2014) emphasizes that “human experience is too complex, too fluid, and too ever-changing to be captured in, or worse yet, constrained by a theory.” And yet Madison (2012) makes the claim of “theory serves, in part, as a hologram out of which we can insert spectrums of light and changing formations that color the shape and motion of what is before us, after us, and what we see in it.”

Qualitative methods used will provide a more in-depth and rich description, which will help to better understand the phenomena of interest from the participant's perspectives. For openness is important because it involves becoming aware of how the phenomenon reveals and conceals itself to the researcher and demands that the researcher pay attention to how she or he influences and is influenced by the phenomenon, (Vagle 2014).

This phenomenological study attempts to seek access to the phenomenon of failure by comprehensively understanding and describing the intentionality's of subjective experience through language. Narrative inquiry will be the research methods of this phenomenological qualitative study and is to include a written anecdote, individual unstructured in-depth interviews, personal narratives or storytelling and researcher's journal. "Storytelling is integral to understanding lives and that all people construct narratives as a process in constructing and reconstructing identity" (Madison, 2012). Qualitative results will depict the phenomenon in depth and measure the prevalence of its dimensions.

The researcher will focus on capturing the shared perceptions, opinions, beliefs, experiences, and attitudes, which have led each participant to either graduate or dropout of high school due to their experience with failure. The intent is to listen closely while processing the participants' narratives and thus identifying significant experiences throughout the study. Participant's voice will be the key element within the study and as narrators, they will create plots from their disordered experience with the phenomenon while giving reality "a unity that neither nature nor the past possesses so clearly. In so doing, we move well beyond nature into the intensely human realm of value" (Cronon, 1992).

The shared experiences of past at-risk students will provide an insight into the root causes as to why Latina/o youth decide to leave school without their high school diploma due to failure.

Since failure is the phenomenon in this study, the researcher's goal is to find meanings inherent with the participant's intentional structure of their verbal and nonverbal lived experiences. van Manen (2003) writes: "phenomenological research consists of reflectively bringing into nearness that which tends to be obscure, that which tends to evade the intelligibility of our natural attitude of everyday life."

As stated by Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nystrom (2008), "remaining open to how the phenomenon calls to be studied means approaching the entire research process in a contemplative, philosophical way." Lifeworld research requires to explicitly situate the phenomenon, the research question, and the data gathering strategies within the context. This means that the context matters—that when description or interpretation of the phenomenon, the description/interpretation will be contextualized. The contextual aspects that surround those living the phenomenon will need to be illuminated and explored through their own shared narratives.

The research questions guiding this study will be:

- Research Question 1: What can we learn from at-risk students' narrative discourses on reasons of failure leading them to graduate or dropout of high school?
- Research Question 2: What are the differences in conative disposition between at-risk students exhibiting encouragement by failure-vs.-discouragement by failure?

Accordingly, the focus is to gain an understanding of past students' experiences by recording their reasons as to how failure attributes to choosing to either graduate or dropout out of high school along the Southwest border region. Qualitative research invites, encourages, and calls forth the full personal involvement and creativity of each researcher, and our analyses reflect each of us as persons doing research as they also illuminate the subject matter (Wertz, Charmaz,



McMullen, Josselson, Anderson, & McSpadden, 2011). Discussing their stories can provide valuable information related to root causes of dropping out according to their experience with failure. This information can be used to develop programs designed to create and increase preventive measures and collectively contribute to the decrease of dropout behaviors. The analysis of the stories gathered will give voice to those who were unable or unwilling to complete high school. In addition, it provides a forum for conceptualizing discouragement by failure and conative theory to develop a dialog for reduction of the national dropout problem.

### **Setting**

The setting is an alternative School of Choice in the Southwest border region of Texas. The term “alternative education” was first used as an umbrella term for a variety of choice schools considered as innovative programs (Bauman, 1998) and has now been expanded to include several types of alternative programs. According to the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N, n.d), “the most common model of alternative school operating today to serve youth in at-risk situations is designed to be part of a school district’s comprehensive dropout prevention program.” According to the Texas Association for Alternative Education (TAAE), there are five distinct programs: charter schools, Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEP), General Educational Development (GED), Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program (JJAEP), and Schools of Choice. The Schools of Choice specifically provide “accelerated instruction” to students at risk of dropping out of school (TAAE, n.d.) and thus being an alternate avenue for achieving high school graduation.

At this particular School of Choice in the Texas Southwest Border Region, all accepted students have gone through a referral process by their comprehensive high school. These students belong to the District in which the School of Choice is the tier or dropout recovery

program since students have been experiencing drawbacks throughout their high school journey and are struggling to accumulate credits or academic progress for their road to graduation. The referral process begins with the high school counselor overseeing the student's audit sheet. An audit sheet allows the counselor the affirmation if the student is on track to graduate. If the student is not accumulating credits either due to excessive absences or academic failure, then the counselor will inform the student and parent to discuss the options to remediate the concern. If the option is to refer the student to the School of Choice, then the referral is completed by attaching all required documents (demographic sheet, audit sheet, transcript, credit redemption contract, state assessment results, and historical discipline), obtain all signatures (student, parent, counselor, and administrator), and finally sending it through the district mail to ensure that it arrives by the next business day.

Once the referral arrives at the School of Choice, the counselor and administrator review each packet to determine if the student is a good candidate for the campus. Being a good candidate simply ensures that the student does have the enough time to graduate with their cohort and does not need specific courses that are not offered at the campus. One hundred percent of all students being referred do meet the at-risk criterion that asserts the reason for the need to attend this School of Choice. Once the referral obtains the approval, the student and parent are advised of when to attend an orientation. The orientation will encompass the School of Choice student policies, the student and parent compact which details rules and regulations as well as the expectations in order to remain as an enrolled student.

This campus is an accelerated school, which means that students will be completing a semester in only nine weeks. This nine-week format allows students to expedite their accumulation of credits but it may also present a problem to many students since majority have

an extensive difficulty with truancy. It is of crucial importance for parents and students to comprehend the commitment of attending School of Choice as well as the benefits that can ensue.

### **Sampling**

“In qualitative research, the researcher purposefully selects individuals and sites that can provide the necessary information” (Creswell and Clark, 2011). Participants will be purposely selected since they have attended the alternative setting and have either graduated or have chosen to drop out due to their experience with failure. Purposeful sampling will also exclude participants by only recruiting those who have experienced the central phenomenon or the key concepts being explored in the study.

Through purposeful sampling, students’ actions, trials and tribulations have been recorded of either graduating or dropping out of school. They will be contacted and asked if they will voluntarily share their special circumstances for making such decisions throughout their high school journey and lived experiences. No assent form will be required since all of these students are adults but a consent form will still be in place. It is the attempt to gather as much information on the five students’ experiences and how failure contributed to making their decision. The purpose is to analyze how students’ experience with failure will encourage or discourage them from continuing with their goals. The narratives will provide an insight of how their ability to overcome obstacles through their strong conative disposition or their lack of conation that has led them to dropout.

### **Participants**

The researcher will first contact the ISD to obtain an Open Records Request for a list of students that have either graduated or are now coded as school dropouts from School of Choice.

From the list obtained, 25 past students will be randomly selected as a letter will be mailed out with general information of study. These past students will be asked to contact the investigator if they are interested in being part of the study. Then, from those past students who have expressed interest, 5 participants will be selected based on the levels of difficulty they had encountered with failure. As the administrator of the campus, the researcher had become familiar with all students attending School of Choice and had witnessed many of their struggles through their high school experience. After the difficulty of deducing to the selected five participants since all of these past at-risk students had a story to tell, it rendered down to the adversities of their journey they had to share.

All five selected participants are of Latin descent, males and females, have lived within the Southwest Border Region of Texas and were at-risk students at School of Choice. Through purposeful sampling, the students will be intentionally selected (or recruited) since these participants have experienced the central phenomenon or the key concepts being explored in the study. This careful identification will take place during the months of August and September as individuals will initially be contacted via telephone to ensure of address accuracy. A letter was mailed out with study information followed by second phone call to confirm initial meeting. Participants will be expected to meet with investigator for a minimum of five times for approximately an hour per session. The initial meeting will consist of a written anecdote of their experience with the phenomenon and answers to any questions that the participant may have, all meetings will be held individually with the consensual understanding of them being recorded and later transcribed.

The five partaking participants will either have graduated or are now coded as dropouts within the education system. As the administrator of the campus, I am familiar with all five

participants and have witnessed many of their struggles and challenges of the time spent at the school. During initial meeting, confidentiality, potential risks, and benefits will be explained to each participant. A list of participants will be finalized and secured as well as obtaining the informed consent form signatures. None of the information will identify participants by name as a chosen pseudo name will maintain anonymity. The pseudonym name will ensure no information identifies or links the participant by name.

The investigator will store all recordings, written anecdotes, and journals securely as all data collection will be manually transcribed and coded by the researcher. No risks are anticipated as participation in the study is always voluntary and will be kept strictly confidential; participants are able to withdraw at any time without penalty. In addition, no direct benefits or compensations are anticipated to the participants.

The following meetings will mainly consist of individual unstructured in-depth interviews and an additional written anecdote that may facilitate the participant to tell their story regarding failure. By students sharing their insights and reflections of how their strong conation or lack of conation led them to accept failure will only enhance an educator's perspective of student learning. Altogether the goal is for students to provide an insight for further research while also offering possible prevention efforts to inform a national conversation on the dropout epidemic in America.

### **Data Sources**

The primary purpose of phenomenology as a research methodology stems from its philosophical roots of studying what it is like as we *find-ourselves-being-in-relation-with-others* and *other things* (Vagle, 2014). Phenomenologists are not primarily interested in what humans decide, but rather in how they experience their decision-making. The interesting and important

question in phenomenology is to open up that which is assumed to be known, or things that are thought of as being settled. By utilizing qualitative methods, past student perceptions of either graduating or dropping out of high school because of failure will be described and analyzed through written anecdotes, individual unstructured in-depth interviews, personal narratives or storytelling and researcher's journal.

### **Written Anecdotes**

Writing can serve as a useful source of gathering phenomenological data since it provides a good access to the phenomenon and the myriad of intentional meanings that circulate through the participants' lifeworld. The initial meeting will consist of collecting a written anecdote, (see Appendix A) of the participants' experiences with failure. Participants will be asked to share their meaning of failure as well as their understanding of an experience with failure. In the participants' own words, they will relate to direct encounters with failure both non-academic and academic. Their shared experience needs to be specific in their moment of the phenomenon. Through disciplined inquiry, one could see the world in ways beyond ordinary experience.

For van Manen (2003), he wants pedagogical quality to remain as the researcher wants and needs to learn as much as possible about the phenomenon, and through the writing, a need to communicate the essential themes in such a way that others learn from the text and hopefully experience phenomenological nods along the way. Consequently, the participant will again be asked to share another written anecdote which its purpose is to describe a specific time when they recognized their experience with failure, (see Appendix B). The writing aspect in phenomenological research gives meaning to text since text is always a meaning to someone, for example, an extract of time might give some readers a shiver of recognition, whereas others might question or wonder how the participant is enabled by the phenomenon.

Following meetings will be unstructured in-depth interviews since their intension is to be the most dialogic, open, and conversational. Making specific and explicit note of intentionality's is extremely important since phenomenon is not assumed to exist in vacuums. Intentionality's run all over the place—in systems, in discourses, and in the ways situations/experiences are expressed. It is important to stress that our responses, contributions to the dialogue, and follow up questions are all important to the ongoing and deepening understanding of the phenomenon, or as Heidegger (Harman, 2013) referred to it as “conversation with the phenomenon”.

### **Individual Unstructured In-depth Interviews**

Consequently, interviews serve as a segway to “understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006). Rather all interviews are treated as exciting opportunities to potentially learn something important about the phenomenon from each particular participant. The participants' role is to share their experience of the phenomenon as lived within their natural attitude as the researcher's role is to take some notes to obtain the openness and immediacy of the experience. In phenomenological interviewing, it is important for the researcher to be confident—to lead the dialogue, to develop a good feel for when to step in and when to hold back.

In qualitative interviews, typically most of the talk is not narrative but question-and-answer exchange, arguments, and other forms of discourse. (Wertz, 2011) The purpose of interviews is to see how respondents impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives. The interviews will assist the researcher to identify trends in perceptions and opinions expressed, which are revealed through careful, systematic analysis (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The researcher keeps focus on extrapolating the meaning that the participants hold on the phenomenon as they “relate experiences using a variety of narrative

genres, different genres persuade differently; they make us care about a situation to varying degrees as they pull us into the teller's point of view" (Riessman, 1991).

### **Personal Narratives or Storytelling**

Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone about one's life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992b). It is then that storytelling becomes the performance of a personal narrative since it is the enactment of action in the narrative by re-presenting events, with all opportunities and constraints that form the details to relate it as one inside the experience. The participant describes the setting, unfolds the plot and stitches the story together to make all events clear. At the same time, it is necessary to recognize that when we aim to understand lived experience more fully, we are crafting written expressions of these experiences. Yet in personal narratives, "it is precisely because of their subjectivity—their rootedness in time, place, and personal experience, in their perspective-ridden character—that we value them" (Personal Narratives Group, 1989b).

Our linguistic ability enables us to descend into the realm of our primary perceptual and emotional experience, to find there a reality susceptible to verbal understanding, and to bring forth a meaningful interpretation of this primary level of our existence...By finding meaning in experience and then expressing this meaning in words, the speaker enables the community to think about experience and not just live it, (cited in Polkinghorne, 1988). As personal narrators of our own meaning, personal experience is then told in exquisite detail—a recapitulation of every nuance of a moment that had special meaning. In that form, "language is viewed as a transparent medium, unambiguously reflecting stable, singular meanings" (Wertz, 2011).

The stories the participants will share will be examined to determine how aspects of life histories, biographies, oral histories, and personal narratives are related to the students' decisions



according to failure. How individuals recount their histories—what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between teller and audience—all shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. These private constructions typically mesh with a community of life stories, “deep structures” about the nature of life itself. Altogether, storytelling allows individuals to explain their personal situation (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

It is important to allow the participant to reach deeper and allow their openness of the phenomenon, to pose follow-up questions that lead to further inquiry of the phenomenon, and redirect participant back to the phenomenon without them going off into a tangent. A thick description enhances the transferability of data through the methods research (Charmaz, 2006; Merriam, 1998). It is through narrative inquiry that the researcher is aiming to explore the cultural phenomena by representing it both verbally and in writing as past at-risk Latina/o student’s unique predicament and determine the two factors of failure; encouragement by failure and discouragement by failure.

### **Researcher’s Journal**

Researcher’s journal entry should be immediate and open as to include what was observed, what thoughts were ravaging through as the participant shared their experience and how to theorize about it. It is not necessary to cover everything, simply locate a few things that are poignant and then bring depth to them. In addition, the researcher’s journal will consequently serve as data for the analysis process; it is important to bring all helpful texts to bear on one’s interpretive understandings of the phenomenon under investigation (Vagle, 2014).

## **Data Analysis**

Merriam (1998) and Marshall and Rossman (1989) contend that data collection and data analysis must be a simultaneous process in qualitative research. This study will show that to be true since the participants' first meeting will consist of a written anecdote and the researcher will immediately begin to analyze the data before the second meeting. Prior to the second meeting, emphasis will take place on the words written by the participant plus special attention to expressions of meanings and contexts. Again very similar to the claim made by Schatzman and Strauss (1973) in which qualitative data analysis primarily entails classifying things, persons, and events and the properties, which characterize them as they are found within the study.

This study will utilize the traditional narrative analysis approach as according to Rossman and Rallis (2003) by focusing on the stories individuals tell to make sense of their lived experiences. Narrative analysis is a way to generate knowledge by reconstructing the meaning of the lived experience of the subjects (Hopkins, 1994). Through narrative analysis, causation coding will then attempt to label the mental models participants use to uncover "what people believe about events and their causes" (Saldana, 2013). This study will allow failure to be the subject of inquiry; the class of phenomena and provide an analytical frame -- an object -- within which the study will be conducted and thus permitting the case to illuminate and explicate developmental factors in relation to the context.

Due to the nature of study; phenomenology of failure, the positionality of the researcher, but most importantly the analysis, the researcher's decision was to transcribe all data collection manually. The researcher's journal also outlined facial expressions that were captivated during the three interviews plus comments that only the researcher had obtained. Rather than utilizing Softwares like QSR – NVivo or PSP, the researcher accounted for every hidden emotion or

omitted hesitation and noted it as part of the data collection that no software would be able to deliver.

### **Narrative Analysis**

Narrative analysis “focuses on how respondents impose order on the flow of experience in their lives and thus make sense of events and actions in which they have participated” (Morrill, Yalda, Adelman, Musheno, & Bejarano, 2000). It will seek to put together the big picture about experiences by focusing on “the story while preserving the integrity of personal biographies or a series of events that cannot adequately be understood in terms of discrete elements” (Riessman, 2002). Narrative “displays the goals and intentions of human actors; it makes individuals, cultures, societies, and historical epochs comprehensible wholes” (Richardson, 1990). Upon building from qualitative data collection, the analysis process demands a heightened awareness of the data, a focused attention to those data, and openness to the subtle, tacit undercurrents of social life. This study’s intent will be to capture the impact of how failure attributes to the major life decision of graduating or dropping out of high school along the Southwest border region.

Phenomenological research uses the analysis of significant statements, the generation of meaning units, and the development of what Moustaka’s (1994) called an essence description as its final interpretive process. (Vagle 2011). From the extrapolation of the essence descriptors, each will then be translated into causation coding which will assist in determining the three aspects to identify causality. Causation’s coding goal is to locate, extract, and/or infer causal belief’s that will assist in gathering answers to the study’s research questions. The study will emulate Franzosi (2010) comparable model that documents “an action also has a reason and an outcome.”

In data analysis, phenomenological researchers begin by being open and sensitive to reading the data within the limits of its context. They continue to be reflexive, honest, and critical in describing their own presence and procedures but remaining completely focused on the participant's intentions and meanings of their experiences. And yet as patterns and insights emerge within the process of discovery, the distinctive and unique presence appear as an inevitable and beneficial spectrum to human science.

### **Significant Statements**

As the analysis process begins, the researcher transcribes the shared information verbatim without developing speculations that may inhibit the study. By remaining open, the researcher will carefully read the data and begin to determine what coding certain words or sentences will receive. Although sometimes a single statement, from one participant, at one moment in time is so powerful that it needs to be amplified (Vagle, 2014). At other times, there might be convergence across multiple data moments and this contextual variation, as Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nystrom (2008) call it, provides deep and rich insights into a particular shape the phenomenon has taken. Researchers will pay close attention to these significant statements as they may need to have special codes within the qualitative codebook; descriptive codes to denote spoken narratives.

### **Meaning Units**

As the researcher continues to read the data, the goal is to ascertain and consistently identify useful quotes or sentences, coding segments of information, and the grouping of codes into broad themes. Either word-by-word, line-by-line, or by paragraphs, concepts and categories are depicted. A concept is a label for a discrete happening, event, or instance; a category is the grouping of related concepts pertinent to a certain aspect with the phenomenon of failure. The

goal of these two is to capture the nuances in narratives. As these broad themes begin to describe patterns in the phenomenon from the perspective of the participant, major ideas may elucidate answers to the researcher's study questions. Altogether these major ideas can begin to form a pattern with several participants that could lead to the identification of meaning units across participant's meaning. These meaning units will then be counted to determine frequency within the phenomenon. The counting approach is vital in pronouncing the frequency of themes, number of times of behaviors, statements, and time sequence of observation or interviews.

### **Essence Description**

The aim in essence description is to discover the underlying and precipitating factors accounting the phenomenon while it eliminates the irrelevant as it expands the scope of inspection to discover the veiled and the hidden (Moustakas, 1994). The challenges arise as the researcher tries to define critical moments, identify similarities across moments in time, and/or depict felt experiences into an aggregate, a summation of the lived experience being shared by the participants. Throughout the process of coding concepts and categorizing, consolidation and elimination of redundant codes will be in place as interpretation begins to take form. As more prominent structural dimensions begin to surface, they will then be compared for the meaning structures of the phenomenon of failure and cluing titles will also begin to take form. As the researcher continues to unravel the phenomenon, the layers of participant meaning begins to unfold as the researcher's interpretation will depict the essence description of the phenomenon of failure.

### **Causation Coding**

Causation coding is appropriate for discerning motives, belief systems, worldviews, processes, interrelationships, and the complexity of influences and effects on human actions and

phenomenon (Saldana, 2013). It is geared to exploring the “why” in many research studies hence it should be used as a heuristic development in considering plausible causes of particular outcomes, and potential outcomes from particular causes which both will ultimately uncover the phenomena.

This interpretation will assist to relate in answering research question 1 as well as acquire a better understanding of the reasons why at-risk Latina/o students decide to drop out or obtain their diploma. Written anecdotes and responses are analyzed to allow if inferences may be obtained. “Phenomenologists leave no stone unturned and like to study the very things that scholars, practitioners, and fields of study writ large think they (we) have figured out (made definite)” (Vagle 2014). Finally, the meta-inferences will relate to whether research question 2 provides a more generalized understanding of the problem of being encouraged or discouraged by failure.

### **Trustworthiness**

In 2009 authors Denzin and Giardina stated that in qualitative studies, “the subjectivity of risk should not be discounted since it serves as an effective reminder that research is never a singular, uniform experience—a necessary reminder for fundamentally challenging the practice of reducing risk to a single, historically limited concept.” As a purpose of this study, the researcher will significantly examine and consider the unique dilemmas our at-risk Latina/o student populations are facing as they decide whether to complete their first academic milestone. Students will only continue to question every step along their high school education and many will not finalize the process due to trials and tribulations. As qualitative researchers it is our endeavor to bring forth the stories and voices of these students in order to take a glimpse of their decision making process. Collectively as researchers, our study provides us an opportunity of

becoming part of the research as our own experience will only suggests risk as part and parcel of the process and method of collection. As we question and continue to challenge the status quo, we will not only learn about ourselves, but extend the theory and its understanding.

According to Marshall and Rossman (2011) the researcher must have, “a full understanding of the stances and strategies for ensuring trustworthiness and the potential ethical issues that might arise will only emerge after the writer of the proposal has made some initial decisions about the conceptual framework, the study’s design, and generative data collection methods.” Within the process of collecting data, bi-weekly meetings with my dissertation chair measured the intense level of questioning as every step taken to assure information is guaranteed of misconduct. Also in accordance and for the purpose of subjectivity and ethical stance within the study, “what constitutes risk is less about what took place in the field than what takes place on the page. How we story the experience. And what we decide to reveal. The risk at this level is about what we disclose to readers about ourselves and others...there are details...left out of many accounts...didn’t want to reveal, disclose...didn’t want to take the risk. Sometimes sins of omission involved keeping things about others quiet, too. Discretion is always the better part...” (Madison, 2011).

Overall, as I listen to the stories my rationale of reflective academic will entail the element of risk being built-in the narrative device designed to keep readers interested. Since it becomes “the mystery, riddle, or question that guides field research, and the storylines that emerge from the field, therefore, must be sufficiently cast with an element of uncertainty—of risk—or else we bore the reader and kill the story,” (Madison, 2011).

## Summary

Phenomenological research is not experimental, comparative, or correlational, but during interpretation, we need to be in-agreement-with whatever has been uttered by our “participant(s)” in the dialogue, so that we do our part in opening up the lived, felt, sensed nature(s) of the phenomenon (Vagle 2014). Identifying salient themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief that link people and settings together is the most intellectually challenging phase of data analysis—one that can integrate the entire endeavor (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). As the study begins, it is important to remember Soyini Madison’s (2011), claims of the researchers’ moral bedrock to fieldwork is always based on the posed question; “Because the researcher employs the question, honestly, to acquire insight and valuable information and less to interrogate or judge other human beings,” (pg. 100). She emphasizes that “the fieldwork question is provocative and ethically responsible, because it has the potential to unsettle the taken-for-granted, to open critical awareness, and to remember what was forgotten.”

The purpose of this study was to analyze the at-risk student population and determine factors that leads students to opting to drop out of school without a high school diploma or taking on the challenges but still managing to graduate from high school. The rationale was to consider past at-risk student populations’ unique predicament and uncover dynamics to better understand dropout episodes. The purpose was to record and analyze students’ experiences of choosing to stay or dropout out of school along the Southwest border region. The phenomenological research design allowed the student’s voice to be heard through the use of a narrative analysis method approach. This will provide a richer and deeper understanding of the lived experiences the five participants voyaged during their high school years.



Overall the study aims to answer the questions that guided the study but also provide a voice to those who were unable or unwilling to complete high school. The information gathered will begin to paint a picture of who overcomes the obstacles of achieving a high school diploma whereas who opts to dropout and therefore choosing to leave school. By students sharing their insights and reflections as to why they become resilient and do complete school in comparison of opting to choose to drop out will enlighten the education system as to what schools can be doing to help the youth and stay in school. Altogether the goal is for students to provide an insight for further research while also offering possible prevention efforts to inform a national conversation on the dropout epidemic in America. Ultimately this study may provide a forum for conceptualizing discouragement by failure and conative disposition to develop a dialog for reduction of the national dropout problem.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Qualitative Analysis**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to analyze past students' experiences of choosing to stay or dropout of high school along the Southwest border region due to failure. This study encompasses a phenomenological qualitative research design in which narrative analysis approach seeks to understand the description and meaning of the lived experiences of five participants. This chapter reports the analysis of data collected through phenomenologically-oriented written anecdotes, individual unstructured in-depth interviews, personal narratives or storytelling and researcher's journal as described in Chapter 3. The in-depth interviews and rich description or storytelling helps to better understand the phenomenon as occurred failure by the five participants as it is narrated through their voice of experience. This chapter will provide an introduction to the participants as they tell their story. It will also describe the data analysis by providing examples of the step by step process of coding which are: meaning units, significant statements, and essence descriptors. The essence descriptors will then be part of a meta-inference of causal coding which will help link the at-risk students' conative disposition of either being encouraged by failure or discouraged by failure as each is found within the written anecdotes and the personal interviews. The summary will then lead to the following chapter of discussion and conclusions of the study.

#### **The Participants**

The participants included two male and three female past Latina/o at-risk students that have been coded as dropouts, graduates or are still continuing their education. Only past at-risk

Latina/o students that attended School of Choice were eligible to participate in the study. Table 4.1 outlines the personal profile of each participant.

**Table 4.1. The Participants**

| <b>At-risk Student</b> | <b>Andrew</b> | <b>Nevaeh</b> | <b>Cassandra</b> | <b>Jorge</b> | <b>Isabel</b> |
|------------------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|--------------|---------------|
| <b>Gender</b>          | Male          | Female        | Female           | Male         | Female        |
| <b>Age</b>             | 22            | 20            | 20               | 23           | 23            |
| <b>Marital Status</b>  | Single        | Single        | Single           | Divorced     | Single        |
| <b>Children</b>        | 0             | 0             | 0                | 1            | 0             |

The average age of these study participants is 21 years. Andrew, now 22 years old had dropout of School of Choice due to not being able to pass one of the state assessments in spite of completing all required credits for graduation. Although he had struggled with some courses throughout his four years of high school, he was not able to surpass the mathematics state test. Nevaeh had dropped out of high school as she had not attended any school for over a year before joining School of Choice. Upon her arrival, she realized she was an older student and in a matter of one year, she had completed all her lost courses. Cassandra being a very bright student had lost focus in passing her state assessment mainly due to the social life she had been accustomed to before attending School of Choice. Jorge and his family had migrated to the Southwest border region and although he effort is seamless, he has encountered language acquisition difficulties and primarily in his academics. Jorge also became a teenage father at the tender age of sixteen and began working full time to sustain his acquired family. Due to his circumstances, he found it extremely problematic to balance school and family responsibilities and thus dropped out of school. Isabel was involved in a relationship that brought turmoil and mistrust, thus her outlook in life began to look quite dismal.

## Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed verbatim and in print form, the analysis of data was to establish common meaning units, depict significant statements, identify essence descriptors and finally code causalities of failure. The steps used to guide the analysis were according to accepted practices for qualitative research as described by Rossman and Rallis (2003), and Marshall and Rossman (2011). The first step was to read the narratives for a general sense of the message. Below are examples of passages from each participant to acquire a general sense of their message regarding an aspect of failure:

Andrew: "Failure to me is when you accomplish a goal and you can't overcome that goal and you don't learn from your mistakes."

Nevaeh: "I know it's just a simple paper but that paper will be like someone getting their freedom. It will be like a ticket for an airplane, we are going to fly but that ticket is going to be for an open door for college, a better life, a better career to get started in life in a certain path or in a different way."

Cassandra: "I guess when you've failed a test, it just makes me upset like I get upset with myself because I know that I could've done something but I just decided not to do it. Like I could've stayed up and studied or had studied for a week before but I just procrastinated."

Jorge: "It was a failure because I guess I was too young, we were high school sweethearts and we ran into economical problems and we just didn't care about our future."

Isabel: "Well because I don't feel that I'm worthy of success because when you fall into failure you kind of just sit there because it's almost like I said a domino effect. So it affects every part of your life, what happened to me you know happened to me but it had an effect on my

family, on my school work, on my concentration, on me wanting to do anything well. I had no happiness. Nothing, nothing made me happy. So you feel unworthy, you kind of stay stuck there.”

### Meaning Units

The second step was to re-read the scriptures and identify meaning units regarding a linkage to failure as it appeared within the written anecdotes and the personal interviews. The goal is to capture the nuances within the narratives as it may enlist a pattern to identify aspects of the phenomena. Each highlighted word captures a sense of the overall contents and the possible description of the essence that may be developed within the phenomena of failure. The marginal notes and small memos on key points throughout the written anecdotes and personal interviews assisted in coding the data according to meaning units as observed or deeply expressed by each participant. From the given passages, highlighted were the meaning units that participants used to describe their encounter with failure.

Andrew: “Failure to me is when you accomplish a **goal** and you can’t **overcome** that goal and you don’t learn from your **mistakes**.”

Nevaeh: “I know it’s just a simple **paper**, but that paper will be like someone getting their **freedom**. It will be like a ticket for an airplane, we are going to fly but that ticket is going to be for an open **door** for **college**, a better **life**, a better **career** to get started in life in a certain path or in a different way.”

Cassandra: “I guess when you’ve failed a test, it just makes me **upset** like I get upset with myself because I know that I **could’ve** done something but I just **decided** not to do it. Like I could’ve stayed up and **studied** or had studied for a week before but I just **procrastinated**.”

Jorge: “It was a failure because I guess I was too **young**, we were high school sweethearts and we ran into economical **problems** and we just didn’t **care** about our future.”

Isabel: “Well because I don’t feel that I’m **worthy** of success because when you fall into failure you kind of just **sit** there because it’s almost like I said a **domino** effect. So it affects every part of your **life**, what **happened** to me you know happened to me but it had an effect on my **family**, on my **school** work, on my **concentration**, on me wanting to **do** anything well. I had no **happiness**. Nothing, **nothing** made me happy. So you feel **unworthy**, you kind of stay **stuck** there.”

### **Significant Statements**

After highlighting the meaning units to denote their encounters with failure, the next read would consist of highlighting significant statements detailing failure as it provides deep and rich insights into the phenomena of failure. Rossman and Rallis (2003), and Marshall and Rossman (2011) recommend as a second step to highlight in different shade to avoid confusion and a better management of coding system. The selected significant statements will now assist in finding meanings inherent with the participant’s intentional structure of their verbal and nonverbal lived experiences by grasping the meaning unit’s basic nuances and or issues in the data by absorbing them as a whole. The intent is to capture the participant’s voice as they narrate and highlight the plots of their disordered experience within their psychological worlds of their conative disposition.

Andrew: “Failure to me is when you **accomplish a goal** and you **can’t overcome** that goal and you **don’t learn from your mistakes**.”

Nevaeh: “I know it’s just a simple paper, but that paper will be like someone getting their freedom. It will be like a ticket for an airplane, we are going to fly but that ticket is going to be for an open door for college, a better life, a better career to get started in life in a certain path or in a different way.”

Cassandra: “I guess when you’ve failed a test, it just makes me upset like I get upset with myself because I know that I could’ve done something but I just decided not to do it. Like I could’ve stayed up and studied or had studied for a week before but I just procrastinated.”

Jorge: “It was a failure because I guess I was too young, we were high school sweethearts and we ran into economical problems and we just didn’t care about our future.”

Isabel: “Well because I don’t feel that I’m worthy of success because when you fall into failure you kind of just sit there because it’s almost like I said a domino effect. So it affects every part of your life, what happened to me you know happened to me but it had an effect on my family, on my school work, on my concentration, on me wanting to do anything well. I had no happiness. Nothing, nothing made me happy. So you feel unworthy, you kind of stay stuck there.”

## **Essence Descriptors**

As a reflection on the phenomenon being studied was revisited and each participant’s unique experience was carefully analyzed for the interconnectedness and synthesized meaning of the identified encounter with failure, initial categories were first broad and then prudently began to consolidate and eliminate redundant codes. Thoroughly each set of datum was subdivided to be more precise and easier to retrieve data sets. Through conceptually organized meaning units and significant statements, each would then begin the process of being compared for the meaning

structure within the phenomenon of failure as prominent structural essence descriptors began to surface. Participants' messages show highlighted significant statements and title of essence descriptor on marginal right hand side.

### Essence Descriptors

Andrew: "Failure to me is when you accomplish a goal and you can't overcome that goal and you don't learn from your mistakes."

Forethought of Failure

Nevaeh: "I know it's just a simple paper, but that paper will be like someone getting their freedom. It will be like a ticket for an airplane, we are going to fly but that ticket is going to be for an open door for college, a better life, a better career to get started in life in a certain path or in a different way."

Reasons Not to Fail

Cassandra: "I guess when you've failed a test, it just makes me upset like I get upset with myself because I know that I could've done something but I just decided not to do it. Like I could've stayed up and studied or had studied for a week before but I just procrastinated."

Excuses to Fail

Jorge: "It was a failure because I guess I was too young, we were high school sweethearts and we ran into economical problems and we just didn't care about our future."

Excuses to Fail

Isabel: "Well because I don't feel that I'm worthy of success because when you fall into failure you kind of just sit there because it's almost like I said a domino effect. So it affects every part of your life."



What happened to me you know happened to me but it had an effect on my family, on my school work, on my concentration, on me wanting to do anything well. I had no happiness. Nothing, nothing made me happy. So you feel unworthy, you kind of stay stuck there.”

Excuses for Contentment

Through this continued process, fourteen essence descriptors uncovered dynamics within the phenomenon of failure to better understand dropout episodes, or similarly to Moustakas, (1994), discover the veiled and the hidden. The fourteen essence descriptors unfolded as participants provided their understandings and voiced meanings shaped by the shared social interaction but mostly from their own personal experiences. Each essence descriptor contains overpowering factors of failure that may have lead a participant to consider the decision of choosing to stay or dropout of high school along the Southwest border region. Each essence descriptor holds a number of messages found throughout the data and in relation to the shared narratives by the at-risk Latina/o participants of this study as they are listed below in Table 4.2, Essence Descriptors.

**Table 4.2. Essence Descriptors**

| <b>Written Anecdote 1 &amp; Personal Interview 1</b> | <b>Written Anecdote 2 &amp; Personal Interview 2</b> | <b>Personal Interview 3</b> |
|--|--|-----------------------------|
| Forethought Of Failure                               | Failure Mindset                                      | Failure Perception          |
| Pre-Actions To Failure                               | Feelings Toward Failure                              | Feelings Toward Failure     |
| Feelings Toward Failure                              | Response To Failure                                  | Reaction To Failure         |
| Post-Actions To Failure                              | Encouragement by Failure                             | Excuses for Contentment     |
| Reasons Not to Fail                                  | Discouragement by Failure                            | Lessons Learned by Failure  |
| Excuses to Fail                                      | Contentment  |                             |

### **Written Anecdotes & Personal Interviews**

As the written anecdotes and personal interviews are continuously read, the convergence between written anecdote 1 and personal interview 1 could not be dismissed and therefore were analyzed as one. The decision was made to ensure the participants would elaborate as much detailed information from the written experiences to their shared narratives. The written text allowed for a most thorough extraction of the phenomenon by then allowing openness and immediacy of the experience through dialogue. Intentionality by the researcher is to directly have a “conversation with the phenomenon” (Heidegger, 2012). The researcher is then always open to questions and to follow a felt-sense of what needs to be springboard to further the narrative. By doing this, a heuristic consideration about plausible causes of particular outcomes, and potential outcomes from particular causes would become more evident. This asserts Miles and Huberman (1994) advise on the particular of participants’ experiences and perspectives since “causality is ultimately local, linked with specific nearby event in time. Similarly, written anecdote 2 and personal interview 2 were analyzed in the same manner as the two shared many plausible causes and outcomes due to connectedness across the two data sets. Personal interview 3 was the last meeting in which participants would be able to divulge their lifeworld meanings through their voice of the thoughts and feelings as they encountered the phenomenon of failure. The final meeting permitted lasting questions in which respondents would further provide verbal understanding of the interpretation brought forth in their expressed level of experience. Meeting five also allowed an overall interconnectedness of each of the participants’ conative disposition as it synthesized meanings of the experienced phenomenon.

By dividing the data sets in this manner, concentration was paid to the essence descriptors that each subset demanded since similarities, differences, and interrelationships had

been noted. Interestingly, several essence descriptors were found throughout the three data sets as each will be further analyzed to assimilate each meaning. Feelings Toward Failure were found in all three data sets and Response to Failure was found in two data sets. Special attention will be noted to these multi-faceted descriptors upon amplifying the causation coding which will finalize the interpretation of the linkage to the conceptual framework diagram and how the essence descriptors assist to understand the participants' conative disposition to failure.

### **Written Anecdote 1 & Personal Interview 1**

Six essence descriptors were found within the first data set, which consisted of five written anecdotes, and five individual unstructured in-depth interviews that entailed narratives and storytelling by the participants. Following is an account of each essence descriptor found within the first analysis of the study.

### **Forethought of Failure**

A forethought phase in Zimmerman's (2000) social cognitive perspective refers to influential processes that precede efforts to acts and set the stage. Therefore, forethought of failure for the five participants is what they foresee as an outcome of their experiences with failure. For at-risk students, careful consideration of what will happen in their future is a thought that is rarely considered due to their many and surrounding circumstances. The title to this subset was given because of how these at-risk students foresee failure in their future but most importantly how it is tied to their conative domain. Surprisingly all of the participants shared a different meaning to the simple word of failure as they tried to express the impact it had brought onto their experience with the phenomenon. Below is a list of their meaning; Table 4.3, Forethought of Failure.

**Table 4.3. Forethought of Failure**

| <b>Andrew</b>                     | <b>Nevaeh</b>        | <b>Cassandra</b>                      | <b>Jorge</b>                         | <b>Isabel</b>             |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Can't overcome                    | Not being successful | Stop putting your full potential      | An attainable goal not being reached | Not succeeding            |
| Don't learn from mistakes         | Everything falls     | Decide to give up                     | Doing something wrong                | Not doing something right |
| Not complying with task           | Still struggling     | Have no more instant drive            |                                      |                           |
| Future is over                    | Being stuck          | Find the easy way out/shortcut        |                                      |                           |
| Bad choices                       |                      | "A lesson learned to better yourself" |                                      |                           |
| Obstacles that you can't overcome |                      | Not reach your goal/dream             |                                      |                           |

Although short meanings were given and elaboration was limited, each participant voiced what failure has defined within their young life but significantly how detrimental it will be for their future. As each participant shared their forethought of failure, all five participants looked down and found difficulty making eye contact as they expressed their meaning. The next essence descriptor found within the narratives was actions to not encounter failure or pre-actions to failure.

### **Pre-Actions to Failure**

The reaction participants had upon being asked of the actions they needed to do to avoid failure was most of a chuckle. All five responded with reassurance of knowing the required actions on their part, but clearly pointed out of their unwillingness to enforce actions onto themselves to avoid failure. The participants shared of their teachers requesting them to stay for tutoring or to make up missing work, but many of them found that being with their friends or having something else to do would take priority. These are some of the pre-actions expressed by

the participants to not encounter failure: study hard, try again, attend school every day, copious notes, listen, ask for help, and dedication and time. Although when asked how often they would perform these actions, they all concurred that it was quite minimal or simply never found the time. Significant amongst the five participants was their understanding of their taken actions and thus eventually leading them to fail but still refraining from changing their behaviors to not encounter failure. This poses a question of the level of their conative disposition and their will to change the much needed behavior to avoid the phenomenon of failure.

### **Feelings Toward Failure**

Consequently, feelings expressed by all five participants as they encountered failure were mostly very personal felt-sense feelings of being depressed, upset, frustrated, and disappointed. Following are significant statements from each participant:

Andrew: “I guess I would just hit rock bottom, just be disappointed the whole time, I mean try to find a way to overcome that disappointment, that frustration, that anger.”

Nevaeh: “Mad, sad, a little bit of depression, feeling like if everything is falling of what you don’t even have, you just don’t see a light. It’s like being in a cave with no hope. You are there all alone.”

Cassandra: “I was very upset and I even went home crying because I had put so much dedication and time.”

Jorge: “Because if I practiced, conditioned, or studied hard and I still couldn’t do it, it would be very disappointing. If I had tried to do my very best and the result wasn’t the one that I wanted, then it was unattainable.”

Isabel: “When I disappoint my parents, I feel depressed. I don’t want to be around anyone who wants to tell me what to do. I sleep a lot, I lock myself in my room and I don’t want to talk to anybody. I feel empty and alone.”

Although feelings toward failure again differed amongst the participants, they all had experienced angst toward failure since many of them had failed assignments, tests, and semester courses. The next descriptor depicts the actions that participants knew or actually did after becoming aware of their failure episode.

### **Post-Actions to Failure**

All participants had a very different manner of reacting to failure, for example, Andrew would have a good or positive mindset on failure. He would approach it in a different manner but most importantly he would begin to surround himself with successful people to acquire a positive outlook and begin changing his behavior. Nevaeh would begin by being proactive and understand of the given opportunity. She would then look at the problem as a puzzle and begin to put the pieces together but at the same time begin to prepared herself physically and emotionally for the upcoming event. Simply stated by Cassandra, she is not negative, she will continue to try again and again, but most importantly by learning and improving. Jorge would analyze the situation, learn from his mistakes, obtain different ideas, and be hopeful. He assured that if he needed to begin by retracting his steps he definitely would do that. Isabel’s post-actions were expressed through bad behavior by arguing with parents, occasional drug use, and becoming involved in sexual activities. She also tends to withdraw from everyone and everything as she prefers to be asleep because that makes her be in “a totally different realm” since nothing makes her happy and believes that she can’t do anything well.

## **Reasons Not to Fail**

Reasons not to fail was the next essence descriptor found within the first data set since all participants spoke of persons or instances that made them see failure differently. For Andrew being able to communicate with his mother was very important. He knew her support was there as well as the educators he spoke to. They always reminded him to keep trying as he felt trust and comfort from them. But what seemed most compelling to Andrew was that of surrounding himself with positive people. Andrew being only 22 years old says he thinks already like a 40 or 50-year-old man because of all the troubles he has endured.

Nevaeh's biggest outlet is her own positivity. She wants to yell out loud, "Ok, she did it!," obtaining the high school diploma is huge in her future, "I struggled but I did it!" Her mother is also an avenue that Nevaeh has as she constantly communicates of her endeavors in trying to obtain the diploma. Cassandra too has a positive perspective when dealing with failure. Being part of a dance team, allowed her to accept that not all the time will you be selected for the performances. Her mother has provided good advice by letting her know that, "It's ok, you fall down but you have to get back up." Teachers have also made Cassandra think and consider all prospects for her future.

Jorge's outlook in life is his son which serves as his guidance, "that is where I set my goals...daily, for their future, for their well-being."

And for Isabel, "My parents don't help me to do everything, but they encourage me to do everything." Isabel shared that her parents have always worked very hard as they do try to motivate her to be successful in school but she just doesn't envision wanting to do anything well plus she doesn't find happiness in anything.

## **Excuses to Fail**

The last essence descriptor found in the first set of data was excuses to fail. The excuses shared by all participants exposed their own perceived reasoning as to why their failure needed to have an excuse. The participants were not trying to diminish their fault of encountering failure, but ultimately the excuses still did not deter them from the inadvertent experience with failure.

Sadly, though, Isabel's outlook and misfortune has given her a negative perspective and thus making it rather easy to find excuses to fail and not want to any goals. She was able to share a wealth of excuses and therefore a need to create her own table is shown in Appendix C. Isabel expressed excuses such as, "Well because I don't feel that I'm worthy of success because when you fall into failure, you just kind of just sit there," which clearly announces her sense of defeat and not wanting to acknowledge her position to move forward. She also expressed, "I don't feel I'll ever get past that wall," thus making a reference of her conation being completely annihilated and therefore remaining stagnant in her state of failure. Isabel's crushed conative disposition questions whether she will remain beaten by failure and continue to live in her own darkness or somehow find the will to lift her conation to move past her own state of failure.

The other four participants also provided excuses for encountering failure, which also demonstrated their low levels of expectation to surpassing the phenomenon. This also leads to better comprehend that their conative disposition was not at par of what they voicing throughout their tribulations. Their forethought was more in line with the already excuse they had embraced for the perceived failure, it could easily be forecasted that they were already expecting to fail and had made the excuses to accept such failure. Below is a Table 4.4, that enlists the other four participants' excuses to fail:



**Table 4.4. Excuses to Fail**

| <b>Andrew</b>                 | <b>Nevaeh</b>    | <b>Cassandra</b>  | <b>Jorge</b>                           |
|-------------------------------|------------------|---|--|
| School was a failure to me    | Slack it         | Going to be ok with not reaching your ultimate goal/dream       | "We just didn't care about our future" |
| Realized school wasn't for me | Other priorities | Had decided not to do it  | "I wanted a B"                         |
| People envy you               | Put it off       | Procrastinate   | Lower bracket                          |
| Don't want to see you succeed | Too hard         | Threatened by failure   | Too young                              |
| Cannot overcome frustration   | Can't learn it   | People that don't want you to do better                         | "I'm going to try my best"             |
|                               |                  | Didn't take the time to absorb information/did not prepare well |  |
|                               |                  | Not take advantage of opportunity                               |  |

After reading all the shared excuses to fail, the nuance of the lives of each participant begins to take form hence the essence of their story also begins to unfold. Each descriptor in the first set of data has allowed each participant to recount their personal narrative in accordance to their experience with failure.

### **Written Anecdote 2 & Personal Interview 2**

The second subset of data was collected from five written anecdotes and five individual unstructured in-depth interviews which again entailed understood meanings, shared feelings and experiences through narratives. Similarly, six essence descriptors were uncovered within the two-datum collection as it is followed by an account of each essence descriptor found within the second analysis of the study.

## **Failure Mindset**

Mindset is defined as the established set of attitudes held by someone according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Carol S. Dweck (2006) identifies mindset as a frame of a running account taking place in people's heads. She argues that the mindset guides the whole interpretation process but can also create focus on change. "I never thought anyone loved failure," Dweck emphasizes of the mindset having a cornerstone of continual attempts through the experience of failure.

Within this subset of data, participants were quite more tranquil as they shared from the onset of how success was an expectation but failure continued to prevail. Some respondents felt that failure was inevitable but for others, they remained positive as their words or statements will show. In the following statement, "I'm going to waste my time," Andrew is not willing to take the advice of his teachers to attend additional tutoring. His mindset was twisted in believing that by him staying for tutoring he would eventually not gain any needed knowledge to assist him on the test and therefore believed he would simply be wasting his time.

Nevaeh and Cassandra both remained positive as each would self-motivate themselves on the upcoming opportunity of the state assessment. Nevaeh would constantly remind herself by saying, "I can do it better, I'm going to study, I'm going to have another chance. We will see, we will see." Whereas Cassandra sounding a bit more doubly by thinking, "Well hopefully third time's the charm and I actually pass it." And Jorge seeing it as "not being able to do what like everybody else." While Isabel simply stating that of, "it's really just a kick in the ass."

For the five participants whether it is positive or negative, their failure mindset had blinded any chance of given opportunities. Unfortunately, failure had become a reoccurring event that had veiled their much-needed change in behavior and action to achieve success. These

at-risk students have encountered failure quite often due to various circumstances that it has led them to immediately direct their thinking in giving up, when in fact they have been uttering the of the importance to obtain their high school diploma. Such statements imply the confusion at-risk students are experiencing at this juncture.

### **Feelings Toward Failure**

This essence descriptor unfolds again within the second subset datum but the shared feelings are different than those found within the first analysis. For most of the participants their expressed feelings proclaimed ownership for their contribution to the outcome of failure. Almost all declared of understanding their role within the phenomenon but announced of an inner struggle, their conative domain, or the lack of much needed guidance to achieve success. All participants stated of having some support system but yet still felt that failure was dooming. Shared feelings are listed in the table below:

**Table 4.5. Feelings Toward Failure**

| <b>Andrew</b>            | <b>Nevaeh</b>               | <b>Cassandra</b>   | <b>Jorge</b>  | <b>Isabel</b>   |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|--|---|---|
| Frustration              | Nervous                     | Nervous, all jittery   | Bad   | Sad   |
| Motivated                | Devastated                  | Devastated   | Incompetent   | Bad   |
| Positive                 | Motivation                  | Insecure   | I was struggling                                      | Guilty  |
| Confident                | I'm going to fail my family | I don't want to pressure myself  | I just went to my room and that was it, call it a day | Didn't care   |
| "Ahhh, I can't do this!" |                             | "Knowing that I have things to look forward to gave me motivation - I'm going to do this." | You don't think about hurting feelings                | Devastating - it's heart wrenching to see all the work and you still fail |

Feelings toward failure will again be discussed in the following data set since it continues to announce itself within the written anecdotes and personal interviews. Feelings are part of the human element in which by sharing may unleash bottled up emotions that may ultimately bring positive change to each participant.

### **Response to Failure**

After depicting the feelings shared by the participants, the next essence descriptor was on how they respond to failure as this will provide a sense of how they view their conative disposition. Response to failure is the immediate reaction to knowing they have failed. It is the immediate thought, uttered word, and immediate action without given reflection. For Andrew it came across as an easy decision since one day he simply decided to “I’m calling it quits.” “I just decided to walk away and leave for a while,” he didn’t have a set plan, but he had his mindset on simply dropping out of school. Neveah continued with having a positive mindset and reminded herself of having a positive attitude toward studying and to attend as much tutoring as possible. Cassandra too after being devastated of not being able to walk with her classmates, she responded by having a mindset of “I have to do something about this, I have to finish this off.” Jorge’s attitude was similar to Cassandra’s in that he had set himself a goal and slowly he had been making strides by passing already three out of the four state assessments. “I need to better myself, I need to train myself on doing things differently,” was a shared statement from Jorge. Now Isabel remained in a very passive mindset, she really didn’t strive for making much of a difference and continued to with her same behaviors by “I kind of just wrapped myself up in a little cocoon and walked myself away just to sort things out.”

## **Encouragement – Discouragement - Contentment**

In the next three data sets, the essence descriptors are presented as all five participants faced encouragement and discouragement throughout their high school endeavor which ultimately lead to their sense of contentment. In other words, their conation had plateaued and therefore their desire was mostly dismissed by being satisfied with the occurrence. Below will be instances from all five participants as to how both encouragement and discouragement led to their contentment.

Andrew's mindset had been discouraged through his failed attempts that in spite of his counselor and teachers encouraging him to keep trying, he was simply set on finding a way of making money and school was not in his plan any longer. Therefore, Andrew's immediate response to the discouragement by failure was to "call it quits," and simply be content with generating money. Below is an instance where Andrew is being encouraged but he is so frustrated that he immediately finds refuge in his contentment of making money.

**Table 4.6. Andrew's Encouragement ⇒ Discouragement ⇒ Contentment**

| <b>Encouragement</b>    | <b>Discouragement</b>  | <b>Contentment</b>  |
|-------------------------|--|---|
| Counselor - keep trying | "You get to a point where you can only do so much and you just get tired." | "All I needed to do at that time and moment was to generate money." |

Although Andrew was quite discouraged through multiple failed attempts, he found that by reaching out to others and having different conversations allowed him to gain another perspective and thus provided a light to his perceived darkness. Below is Andrew's occurrence of discouragement as he communicates with officers about life in law enforcement as he then

becomes encouraged to pursue his GED and possibly continue with his dream of joining law enforcement, which was his initial goal.

**Table 4.7. Andrew's Discouragement ⇒ Encouragement ⇒ Contentment**

| <b>Discouragement</b>  | <b>Encouragement</b>   | <b>Contentment</b>  |
|--|--|---|
| "You don't know what it feels like to fail and fail and fail." | Money earned in oil fields compared to officers salary; took officers advice of getting a GED, "I was prepared for the GED, I was proud, I was excited." | "I guess since my hard work and effort that I put into getting my GED opened another different door that led to the family business." |

A small excerpt of Andrew's excitement after learning he had passed his GED:

"If you can't get the advice you need by somebody then you got to keep looking and keep hearing it from different people. I just thought that I could do whatever I wanted from that point on. I felt like the doors had opened for me. A lot of doors had opened for me and from there on out, I felt like I can do whatever I want to do. Everything I have is I've worked hard for it and decisions that I have made are done through what life has taught me and I just felt that my dream was ok to be let go because what I'm doing now I love and I do it with pride and it comes from family roots."

Nevaeh's mindset although positive still remained hesitant in developing her conative disposition to create a world that would require a lot of dedication and sacrifice in order to achieve success. It becomes evident that her contentment was also foreseeing the level of expectation she was envisioning by her following statements. The effort to pass the state assessment was driving her conation to at least try one more time as her teacher is determined to help her, but Nevaeh's discouragement leads her to a questioning episode that suggests a weak conative disposition.

**Table 4.8. Nevaeh's Encouragement ⇒ Discouragement ⇒ Contentment**

| <b>Encouragement</b>   | <b>Discouragement</b>  | <b>Contentment</b>   |
|--|--|--|
| Teacher - we will try again, this is not over, you did better than the other test. I'm proud, you tried your best this is not done, this is not the end of the world, just study hard and you will pass. | It's like a wrecking ball, like it hit me hard because what's going to happen? | "Get the high school diploma, that's what you need to have success in life. To get a job, to get a career. |

Another instance is Nevaeh's conversation with God which sounds quite dismal but reveals her failure mindset:

"I'm in a spot, I'm in a room with closed doors and they are locked and there is no opening way to go through. Please God give me some hope or give me a signal. Help me, send me a sign or whatever or even like just kill me or get it over."

Nevaeh's positive outlook in knowing that she had made progress in her state examination still becomes discouraged by her mother's words and begins to sound defeated as she considers on simply getting a job. Sadly, though she sees herself as becoming a useless person by not being able to acquire her high school diploma, below is her experience.

**Table 4.9. Nevaeh's Discouragement ⇒ Encouragement ⇒ Contentment**

| <b>Discouragement</b>                                  | <b>Encouragement</b>   | <b>Contentment</b>  |
|--|--|---|
| Mother - "you were slacking it, you didn't study hard" | Ok, you did better! It motivated me to do better than the other person | "I'm going to leave it alone, if I didn't pass ok at least there's works (jobs). It's going to haunt me for the rest of my life but I'm still going to be useless." |

Cassandra's failure mindset was more on point as to what she needed to get done in order to graduate from high school. She understood that she had lost her last opportunity of being able to walk with her class, but she was encouraged enough to attend summer school.

**Table 4.10. Cassandra's Encouragement  $\Rightarrow$  Discouragement  $\Rightarrow$  Contentment**

| <b>Encouragement</b>  | <b>Discouragement</b>   | <b>Contentment</b>   |
|---|---|--|
| Well you are not going to give up, you are going to continue on and don't give up because it's not going to be the last thing in the world. | Talk to my friends but they were already making their plans like a graduation party | Got another opportunity to graduate but in the summer, not with my class but I would still have that achievement even if it wasn't the whole experience. |

Cassandra was given the encouragement from her family that provided her the enough motivation to continue studying and complete high school. Below is her excerpt:

"I had people to support me, I had that support system - 'hey you are going to do it this time so no don't look down, look up' 'If they believe in me, why can't I believe in myself? I'm going to believe in myself too.'"

Although Cassandra had all her family's advice to continue, the thought of contentment did cross her mind as she questioned herself if continued attempts would be sufficient. Her priority still remained in spending time with her friends since they were already enjoying their summer and not having to be preoccupied with further studies.

**Table 4.11. Cassandra's Discouragement  $\Rightarrow$  Encouragement  $\Rightarrow$  Contentment**

| <b>Discouragement</b>  | <b>Encouragement</b>  | <b>Contentment</b>   |
|--|---|--|
| Counselor had the expression of being concerned, worriedness, the 'what's going to happen next?' | "It was a tough failure but I didn't let it get the best of me, I rose above it and I got back on my feet and I improved myself." | "I'm not walking with my class, not graduating in May, do I really need this?" |



Jorge's mindset is rather positive in spite of being teased of his language pronunciation and acquisition, but he instills a positive outlook in life and finds guidance through the direction of his son as his conative disposition allows him to find the strength and will to overcome such encounters with failure.

**Table 4.12. Jorge's Encouragement  $\Rightarrow$  Discouragement  $\Rightarrow$  Contentment**

| <b>Encouragement</b>   | <b>Discouragement</b>  | <b>Contentment</b>   |
|--|--|--|
| The more I struggle the more I push myself the more I motivate myself, it's going to be good, it's going to show off | Little by little, day by day suffering here and there but yeah | Because I already put it in my mind, I already close my mind that that's going to be the benefit of my future. I'm investing in my future and if I don't, if I don't reach this goal, what's the sense what am I going to do with my family? |

In his own recollection, Jorge tells of an embarrassing event due to his pronunciation.

“Mr. Cooper was my seventh grade social studies teacher and I just remember that when it was my turn to read, everybody was making fun of my pronunciation and at lunch I was the talk of the class. They said I was a wetback and that I could not comprehend English. And that is when I started like, I paused myself and I said like ‘I can do this’ but that’s when the other side of the question is like ok, I need to better myself, I need to train myself on doing things different.”

In spite of the harassment that Jorge received due to his broken spoken English, his conative disposition prevails and continues to lead him with the desire to persevere through all the given obstacles. His desire to create a better future for his family allows his conative domain to keep trudging to achieve success. Failure has not forsaken his vision of obtaining the diploma as noted in the table below:

**Table 4.13. Jorge's Discouragement ⇒ Encouragement ⇒ Contentment**

| <b>Discouragement</b>  | <b>Encouragement</b>  | <b>Contentment</b>  |
|--|---|---|
| Everybody was making fun of my pronunciation and at lunch, I was the talk of the class | It's a battle day by day but my goal is to get that diploma | That's going to be for the benefit of my loved ones, so this diploma that I am aiming for it's extremely important cause right now I'm only working part-time but my employer says that I am real good with it so better chances better opportunities, more income. |

Isabel's mindset was full of uncertainty and comes across with quite a negative tone. An eventful experience has left her with feelings of unworthiness and simply not being able to move forward. Although she struggled to elaborate on encouraging instances, she also found herself being short with discouraging ones as well. Below is her listing:

**Table 4.14. Isabel's Encouragement ⇒ Discouragement ⇒ Contentment**

| <b>Encouragement</b>  | <b>Discouragement</b>  | <b>Contentment</b>  |
|---|--|---|
| I felt more determined and more motivated - didn't want to see my dad like that, he really didn't want to be in my company, his silence spoke louder. | "Dad didn't have to say much, but I could see that he was really hurt and that just really hurt me." | I just didn't want to I guess. I couldn't juggle both so I didn't want to lose my friends in order to study. I mean I guess I tried, I told myself I tried and I just really thought like I did but maybe I kind of slacked it and didn't care. |

Isabel is very eloquent in her conversations but tends to not find much to be encouraged about as she contends on her first report card experience in high school.

“Transitioning from middle school to being a freshmen and everything is very different and you know our first six weeks’ report cards came out and I failed two classes. And it was devastating cause you are comparing grades with your friends and its heart wrenching to see

all that work and you still fail. I guess I took it for granted that the teachers would just still treat me like I was in middle school and starting high school is a whole different process and its really a kick in the ass really.”

Isabel’s contentment overpowers any hint of encouragement given to her. She tends to find no happiness in any of her endeavors and thus has become content with accepting failure and not feeling worthy of any success in her life.

**Table 4.15. Isabel’s Discouragement ⇒ Encouragement ⇒ Contentment**

| <b>Discouragement</b>  | <b>Encouragement</b>  | <b>Contentment</b>   |
|--|---|--|
| Mom really upset and yelling, 'what are you doing?, what are you thinking?, what are you going to do?, and you can't fail cause you'll get nowhere!' | Just to do better, strive to do better, make better use of my time, stay with teachers and stay after school. | I really didn't like them (teachers), I just felt like they really wouldn't understand, I felt like they had a 'I really don't care attitude.' |

### **Personal Interview 3**

The last individual unstructured in-depth interview served as a synthesis of all meetings, which would assist to bring a closing to the narratives all participants had shared. It being our last meeting, participants had now become comfortable of sharing experiences with the phenomenon of failure. They found appreciation in someone wanting to know their experience with failure as they were compelled to share some of their idiosyncrasies and at times heartfelt episodes with such an upsetting experience.

The last subset consisted of five essence descriptors that will culminate the findings of this study. Each essence descriptor emphasizes the findings which will add to the summary and discussions since intentionality and purposeful questioning was directed at extracting the inner most thoughts and feelings of experiencing failure. Essential too is the extraction of the

participant's conative disposition throughout their attendance at School of Choice as they are trying to complete and achieve their high school diploma.

### **Failure Perception**

Findings from VanLehn, Siler, Murray, Yamuachi, & Baggett (2003) uncovered that learning depends on students' perception of failure, rather than actual failure. Interestingly, Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines perception as the ability to become aware of something through the senses; a way of understanding or interpreting something; a mental impression. As the participants met for the last time, they shared their meaning of their perception of failure, which completely had taken a different direction from their initial forethought of failure. Participants had for the most part become tolerant of their experiences and were now looking to utilize failure as a tool to face their future through a new set of eyes.

Four of the participants demonstrated a positive persona as they shared their perception of failure, but one still remained with the same outlook of the phenomenon. Andrew expressed his perception of failure as "a new challenge" which places him in a path of wanting to achieve success through his failed attempts. Neveah's comment also puts her on the same path as Andrew by stating, "Failure is going to be in my life, it's nothing that is going to go away but every experience will be a challenge that I still need to figure out." Collectively, Cassandra also arrives to the same conclusion on her announcement of perception of failure by the following claim, "failure reminds you that it didn't go like you expected to happen but it's not over, it's not the end of the world." Jorge's conation has been driven by his son and thus his perception of failure is simply not to accept it. Evidence is found in his statement, "I have to change my ways of doing things because if I keep doing what I've been doing it's just going to get worst and

remember I have a son.” Regrettably, Isabel’s perception of failure remains, “I still see failure the same way, it's depressing.”

Strikingly, the responses given were much positive than those from the first interview, a complete listing is of all perceptions of failure in found in Appendix D. Most of the participants acknowledged their perception of failure had changed mainly due to being able to express their notions and nuanced experiences surrounding failure. It also allowed them to reflect on their feelings and actions toward failure

### **Feelings Toward Failure**

It was no surprise that feelings toward failure would again appear in the final meeting since the level of questioning was aimed at extracting participants’ emotions toward the phenomenon. Amazingly though, most of the participants’ feelings toward failure had also changed to a very positive manner which contradicts their original perspective. The expressions and responses were also more forthcoming as they relayed their sentiments toward experiencing failure, as it had been the revolving topic of the intentional questioning. This being the fifth and final meeting they had been requested to share such experiences they were not hesitant to oblige.

Andrew’s feelings toward failure were one of having a low self-esteem and anger. Nevaeh expressed of now knowing how to handle her immediate frustration by calming down and begin to figure out her next option. Similarly Cassandra expressed of simply being positive towards her feelings of failure since now she knew it would only assist her to arrive at success. Jorge also expressed his persistence in achieving success in spite of encountering failure. Unfortunately Isabel’s feelings toward failure was expressed by her claim, “I don't feel like I'm worthy of having my dreams come true. I feel like they're too unattainable. I feel it's just easier to quit and get a quick fix.”

Upon participants sharing their feelings toward failure one last time, many of them smiled and chuckled as they expressed a new revelation on failure. Their reflection had exposed a new view on failure as they no longer felt failure was against them but rather was there to simply point them in the proper direction.

### **Reaction to Failure**

Another essence descriptor is reaction to failure and not to be confused with response to failure since this will require an actual change in behavior on their part. Reaction to failure is what actually made the participants realize that their failure was heading in a wrong direction and they needed to adjust or change their behavior quite quickly. Participants may relate to this as to what made them realize their failure and snap out of their continued notion of not being able to persevere. It was an action that got them to understand that a change in their behavior was essential if they were indeed serious in being successful.

**Table 4.16. Reaction to Failure**

| <b>Andrew</b>   | <b>Nevaeh</b>  | <b>Cassandra</b>  | <b>Jorge</b>  | <b>Isabel</b>  |
|---|--|---|---|--|
| What got me to get back up my feet after all that anger and being stressed was more of ALIVIANATE - like let's go, keep going, don't stop, get over it. | If failure comes back, I can like fight, now I know what to do.                            | Like now I say 'ok well like this happened I am not going to let it happen again' | I'm going to prove to you that I can do it, that I can be a better person, that I am not that person that you are framing me to be. | Even though I'm still young, I can see doors just closing                  |
| Seeing them leave made me want to leave so I just kept pushing and pushing and pushing.   | I did give up, I said no to every door. Every door I closed because I was done, I gave up. |   | Alcohol became an escape.   | I just know that it's going to take a lot of work; I guess I'll get a job. |

## Excuses for Contentment

The next essence descriptor uncovered excuses for contentment through the interpretation of the analysis. Participants acknowledged that during uncertain times of experiencing failure, they had decided to settle with less than their initial goal but for the most part, many were able to find strength in their conative domain and allowed themselves to persevere and change their perception of failure. The excuses that many of them had created in their mind were not sufficient enough for their conation to reveal that their goals could still be achieved.

A complete listing of all the Excuses for Content are found in Appendix E, Table 4.17 only shows partial statements.

**Table 4.17. Excuses for Contentment**

| <b>Andrew</b>  | <b>Nevaeh</b>  | <b>Cassandra</b>  | <b>Jorge</b>   | <b>Isabel</b>   |
|--|--|---|--|---|
| I didn't have that motivation to do anything at the time, I gave up, I paused and I paused for a long while. | You don't want to see yourself working in a McDonald's or Burger King. | Oh you graduated with your class, you walked with your class so no it wasn't a waste of your time anymore | Very few Hispanics are bright. Very small percentage of us go and get the good jobs. | It was what happened to me that really made me put on my brakes and just feel like I wasn't worthy of having any goals met. |

## Lessons Learned

The last essence descriptor found in the third and final meeting was lessons learned. The data indicates that all participants revealed learned experiences of their trials and tribulations as each had an unsettling encounter with the phenomenon of failure. Even though each participant learned a different lesson from their encounter with failure, all shared their different learning experience since some found that their conative disposition could route them to success, while other still needed guidance and reassurance to achieve success. The lessons learned from

experiencing failure are in retrospect of their immediate actions of encountering the dichotomy of the phenomenon. The participants' state of mind detailed deep secreted sentiments that possibly they wished they had learned prior to their dissatisfaction of some taken actions. Altogether though, the participants now craved for their voice of experience to be heard and to possibly alleviate some hardship to other at-risk students facing a difficult time with failure. They now felt they could contribute back to the at-risk youth by sharing their failed opportunities of achieving success and not understanding that failure does eventually lead to the attainable high school diploma. Table 4.18 details Lessons Learned.

**Table 4.18. Lessons Learned**

| <b>Andrew</b>   | <b>Nevaeh</b>   | <b>Cassandra</b>   | <b>Jorge</b>  | <b>Isabel</b>   |
|---|---|--|---|---|
| I would like to motivate them, I would like for them to thrive for their dream and look, guide them in a path where someone can resemble them, can relate to their story. | My advice is not to stop, not to stop looking for other options, if they get stuck on something to figure it out, ask for help. Try your best to find it and try not to close yourself in four walls. | Don't procrastinate till the last minute, start studying weeks and weeks in advance; it's just more practice for you, reinforcement. | When people don't have faith in you and they don't believe in you, then you must believe in what you can accomplish. Then just do it. | I don't think that they would understand where I was coming from, and I don't think I could come back from THAT disappointment. |

From the fourteen essence descriptors found in the data, each revealed how failure unfolded within the lives of the participants and allowed the distinction to unfold the construct of failure. The essence descriptors provided the category of the concepts being linked to failure disposition and thus rifts to either being encouraged or discouraged by failure. The interpretation of the essence descriptors also assists in relating an answer to research question 1 of better



understanding the reasons why at-risk Latina/o students decide to drop out or obtain their high school diploma.

The final section, causation coding will assist as a meta-inference in providing a generalized understanding of either being encouraged or discouraged by failure in research question 2.

### **Causation Coding**

The purpose of causation coding is an attempt to label mental models and uncover “what people believe about events and their causes” (Saldana, 2013). It’s an analysis of how a person thinks about their relationship between cause and outcome. The three sources needed for this meta-inference will follow the steps according to accepted practices as described by Franzosi (2010). Franzosi asserts that “narrative sequences imply causal sequences” and posits that “an action also has a reason and an outcome.” Most important, causation coding is appropriate for discerning motives or uncovering plausible causes of particular outcomes, and potential outcomes from particular causes. Having this said, this final analysis will assist with understanding the generalization of at-risk Latina/o students being encouraged or discouraged by failure.

From the three sources needed to formulate this analysis the outcome and the reason was a given based on the initial action. This analysis will compare that to a reversed engineering process since fixed outcomes can only be Graduate, Dropout, or Continuing Education. In addition, reason can only be Encouraged or Discouraged by Failure. The remaining source will be the action that is taken from all the collected essence descriptors. A small sample is shown below:

**Table 4.19. Causation Coding**

| <b>ACTION</b>  | <b>REASON</b> | <b>OUTCOME</b>       |
|--|---------------|----------------------|
| Go and get help even if it seems like it's just for losers.  | Encouraged    | Graduate             |
| I couldn't juggle both so I didn't want to lose my friends in order to study.  | Discouraged   | Dropout              |
| "I wanted a B"   | Encouraged    | Continuing Education |
| Hang out with successful people  | Encouraged    | Graduate             |
| I'm persistent, I don't give up.   | Encouraged    | Continuing Education |
| "Well because I don't feel that I'm worthy of success because when you fall into failure, you just kind of just sit there" | Discouraged   | Dropout              |

Altogether 350 actions were taken from all scripted meanings units and significant statements within the essence descriptors and found that for the most part, at-risk Latina/o students are discouraged by failure, although this study showed that as the participants shared their experiences with failure and their perception changed, then most shifted their mental process to then being encouraged by failure.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of past at-risk students' experiences of choosing to stay or dropout of high school along the Southwest border region due to failure. This study consisted of a phenomenological qualitative research design in which narrative analysis sought to understand the description and meaning of the lived experiences of five participants. This chapter reported the analysis of data collected through phenomenologically-oriented written anecdotes, individual unstructured in-depth interviews, personal narratives or storytelling and researcher's journal. The data analysis provided an in-

depth of examples of significant statements, meaning units, and essence description which in turn were formulated into causation codes.

Fourteen essence descriptors were found throughout the data in which each revealed the underlying and precipitating factors accounting the experienced phenomenon of failure. The interpretation of the essences descriptors provided a category of the concepts being linked to failure disposition. As participants shared their stories, the analysis also revealed an understanding of the reasons why at-risk Latina/o students decide to drop out or obtain their high school diploma. And finally, the causation coding also allowed for a meta-inference to provide a generalized understanding of at risk students to initially be discouraged by failure but ultimately with proper guidance and support be encouraged to succeed.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Discussion**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of failure and its effects on at-risk Latina/o students. The rationale of this study was to consider Latina/o past at-risk student populations' unique predicament and uncover dynamics to better understand dropout episodes due to failure. The intent was to study and analyze past at-risk student populations' unique predicament and determine two factors of failure; encouragement by failure and discouragement by failure. Accordingly, the focus is to gain an understanding of past students' experiences by recording their reasons as to how failure attributes to choosing to either graduate or dropout out of high school along the Southwest border region.

Research questions that guided this study were:

- Research Question 1: What can we learn from past at-risk students' narrative discourses on reasons of failure leading them to graduate or dropout of high school?
- Research Question 2: What are the differences in conative disposition between at-risk students exhibiting encouragement by failure-vs.-discouragement by failure?

Five past at-risk Latina/o students were interviewed using phenomenologically-oriented interviewing techniques, as described in Chapter Three. Analysis of the data resulted in fourteen essence descriptors as they unfolded within the construct of failure found in the data interpreted from the shared narratives by the at-risk Latina/o participants of this study. Table 5.1, Essence Descriptors provides the listing of themes found within the three-subset datum collected.

**Table 5.1, Essence Descriptors**

| <b>Written Anecdote 1 &amp; Personal Interview 1</b> | <b>Written Anecdote 2 &amp; Personal Interview 2</b> | <b>Personal Interview 3</b> |
|--|--|-----------------------------|
| Forethought Of Failure                               | Failure Mindset                                      | Failure Perception          |
| Pre-Actions To Failure                               | Feelings Toward Failure                              | Feelings Toward Failure     |
| Feelings Toward Failure                              | Response To Failure                                  | Reaction To Failure         |
| Post-Actions To Failure                              | Encouragement by Failure                             | Excuses for Contentment     |
| Reasons Not to Fail                                  | Discouragement by Failure                            | Lessons Learned by Failure  |
| Excuses to Fail                                      | Contentment  |                             |

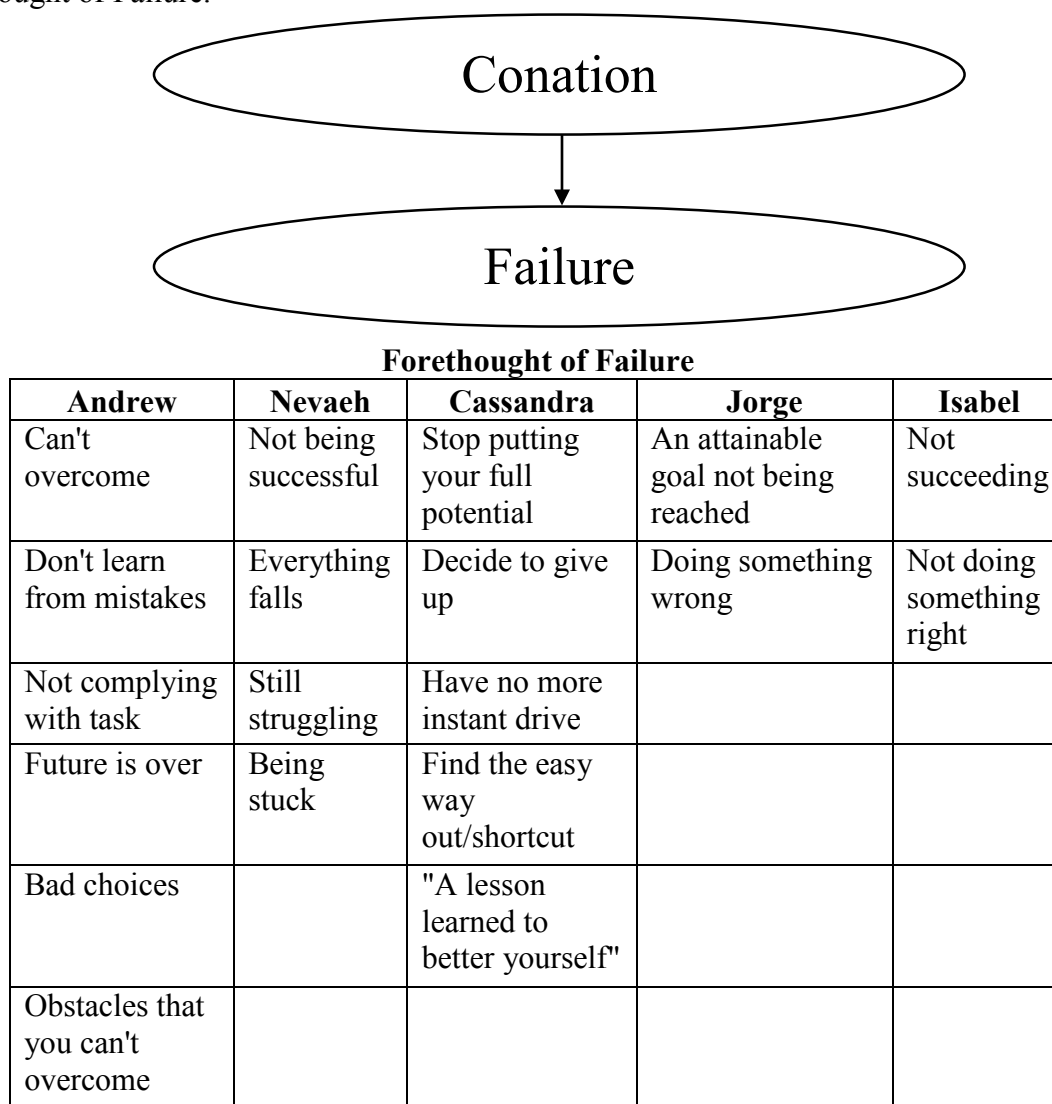
In addition, each essence descriptor was discussed in Chapter Four as samples of meaning units and significant statements were also shared. This final chapter will present the conclusions in the form of a conceptual framework or typology for understanding the interconnectedness of the essence descriptors revealing themselves through the conation framework. The conceptual framework is presented by a step-by-step linkage diagrams that will allow the essence descriptors to present participant narratives within each construct of failure. The chapter concludes with a discussion of post-hoc analysis, implications of conclusions, limitations of this study as well as direction for future research and summary.

### **Conclusions**

The major conclusions of this study can be stated as a conceptual framework that represents shared narratives within the uncovered essence descriptors as they discuss perspectives of failure. The conceptual framework presents each phase as at-risk Latina/o youth encounter failure and how their conative disposition respond within each construct of failure.

## Conation Linkage to Forethought of Failure

Carol Dweck's (2008), is confounded in the premise of the psychological worlds—in which students are afraid of challenges and devastated by setbacks, and one in which students relish challenges and become robust in the face of setbacks—the conative disposition. Within the forethought of failure essence descriptor, students expressed what they would foresee as the outcome of their experiences with failure. Below is the Figure 5.2, Conation Linkage to Forethought of Failure.



**Figure 5.2. Conation Link to Forethought of Failure**

Forethought of failure in at-risk Latina/o youth is rarely considered as a significant factor that may upheaval their future. Most at-risk Latina/o youth have other priorities or surrounding circumstances that eludes any thoughts of academic failure. All participants have encountered failure throughout their school years and thus would not see failure as a detrimental effect on their future.

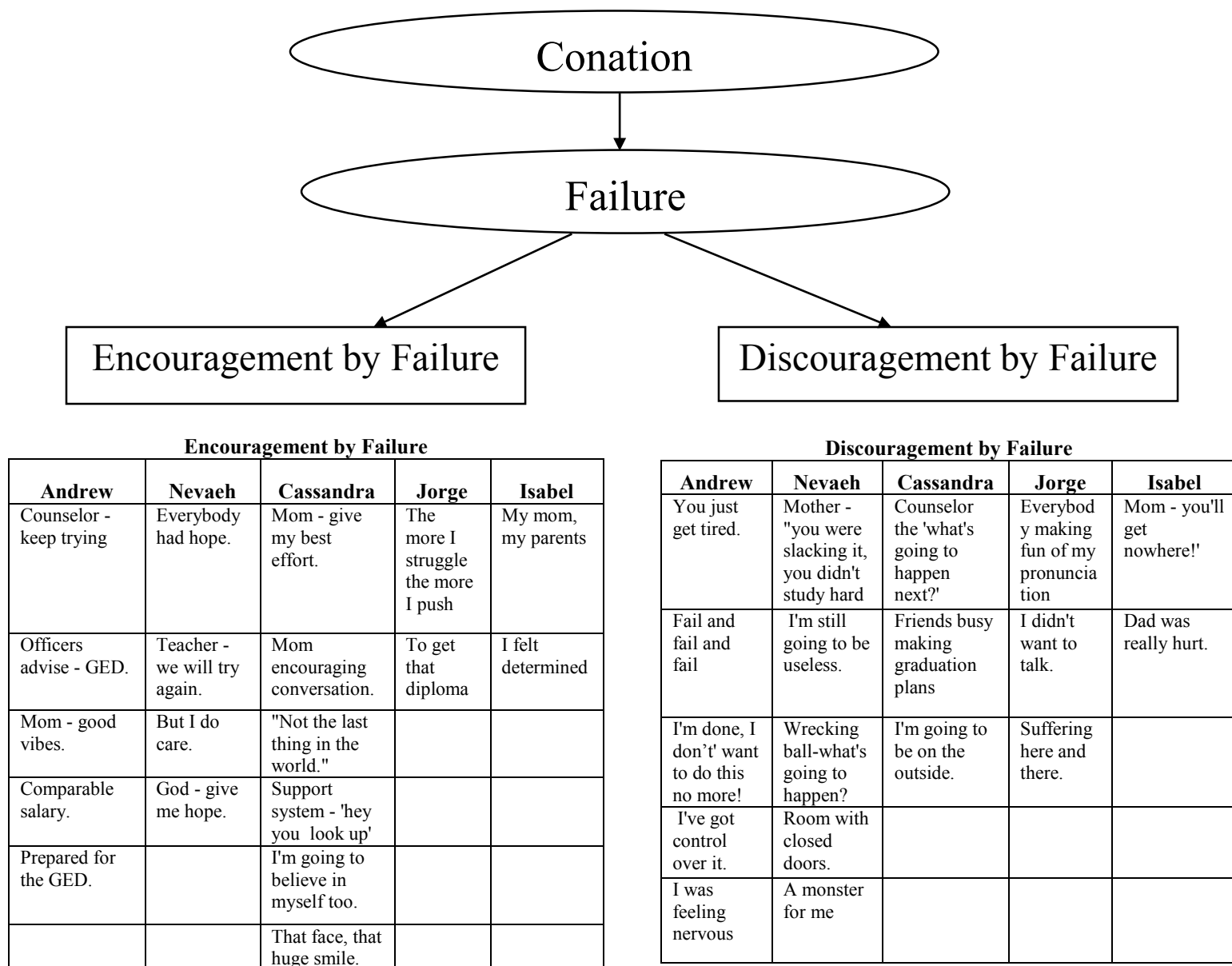
The conation link to forethought of failure will allow for shared narratives to be understood as failure triggers to student actions. Since conation controls intentions and impulses so that the expected action occurs, students must then have a positive forethought of failure. Students must understand that learning is a process that entails multiple times of repeated failed attempts and that failure is simply an event in time of an opportunity at obtaining the correct answer.

### **Dichotomy of Failure – Encouraged-vs-Discouraged**

The dichotomy of failure is linked by conation as students are either encouraged by failure or discouraged by failure. This dichotomy of failure is a very fine line within the mindset of the student as they may question their intellectual capacity and thus their conative disposition becomes a balancing act. As students encounter failure, two mindsets take place, either they will fail forward by being encouraged by failure and promote a challenge seeking oriented mindset to learning. Or, they will fail backward by becoming discouraged by failure as they are afraid to take risks and make mistakes because they don't want others to see them as failures.

“How children think and respond to difficult situations has an impact on how they see themselves as being able to shape their own learning and on how they handle the next problem that comes their way” (Hall & Pearson, 2003).

The distinction of the two dichotomies are presented within the two essence descriptors below in Figure 5.3, Dichotomy of Failure; Encouraged-vs-Discouraged.



**Figure 5.3. Dichotomy of Failure; Encouraged-vs-Discouraged**



## Encouragement

As at-risk Latina/o youth view failure and believe that failure defines them, being encouraged by failure can transform their conative disposition to one that will persevere and not quit in spite of how painful failure can be. Encouragement by failure defines the determination in obtaining or achieving success through learned failed attempts. The conative disposition in the encouragement phase allows students to have a belief, a desired choice to make the effort of attempting incredibly challenging tasks and simply to plow ahead. Encouragement cultivates and nourishes the mindset by improving through countless practice and effort and ultimately reaching skills and abilities to succeed.

Dweck (2010), asserts that “everyone is born a learner,” therefore through encouragement the view success and failure are imperative to the conative disposition in knowing that through failed attempts you continue to learn. Hence the learning process is never ending and thus a cyclical of failed attempts will lead to mastery of embracing challenges despite obstacles and ultimately not fear failure.

A support system could also be encouraging not to quit but to try again and make the desired choice of attempting to succeed. Unfortunately, many Latina/o parents are not perceived as being involved with their child’s education and thus lacking encouraging words to succeed in school and obtain a high school diploma. Cited in *Impact of Parenting Practices on Adolescent Achievement: Authoritative Parenting, School Involvement, and Encouragement to Succeed*, according to Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, and Darling (1992), “Hispanic-American parents were less likely to encourage success than were other parents (whose levels of encouragement were comparable), as were working-class parents and parents of older students.”

## **Discouragement**

Discouragement by failure may be detrimental to any human being, but for at-risk youth it may distort their conative disposition by altering any ambition that could still exist. Dweck (2010) maintains “they become afraid of not being “smart” and develop a negative perspective on failure and thus hinders their ability to want to attempt or simply want to learn challenging tasks.” Consequently, discouragement by failure could lead to apathy and thus not taking or accepting responsibility of their choices but yet always finding blame on something or someone else of the encountered failure. In addition, discouragement by failure may also lead to pessimistic behavior and develop a sense of predetermined defeat that in turn may seem as arrogant and only voice a negative perspective outlook on life.

Similarly, if the support systems do not provide empathy and guidance, at-risk Latina/o youth may find misguidance by joining gangs and abusing drugs. Moreover, at-risk youth will also tend to find solace in individuals that do not focus in trying to improve their lifestyles’ but yet will only echo negative connotations of failure. These types of individuals usually have negative mindsets and perceptions of not being able to partake in winning teams and will also tend to discourage creativity and limit any manner or method of improvement.

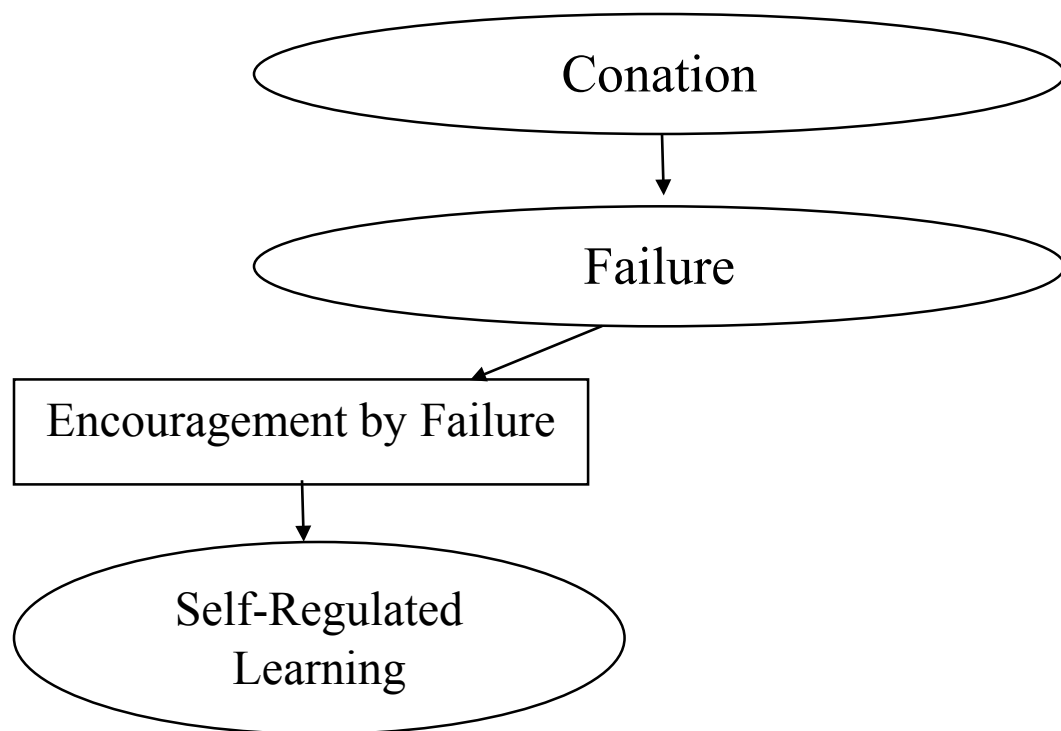
Discouragement will ultimately create an individual that thinks achievement comes effortlessly only to talented people. They may begin to resent individuals who succeed in spite of their failure and thus perpetuate an inferior presence. Discouragement will change the individual’s own perspective as it will limit levels of expectations as well as filling peoples’ minds with interfering thoughts of success. Discouragement may also bring about a sense of disillusioned dreams and goals which may eventually alter any prospects of learning from failed attempts and simply becoming a bitter person.

## **Encouragement – Self-Regulated Learning**

Self-regulated learners are ones that have knowledge of effective learning strategies and know how and when to use them (Bandura, 1991; Winne, 1995). Students who acquire self-regulated skills will tend to ask a lot of questions, inquire about their academic performance, and accept assistance when offered by their teachers. Unfortunately, many at-risk Latina/o students will have heard of effective learning strategies but will not prioritize to place into effect such actions. Due to many circumstances, at-risk Latina/o youth do not have the support system at home that may show them how to become self-regulated learners. For the most part, the limited few will have acquired these skills through their strong conative disposition.

As at-risk Latina/o students face learning efforts and do not receive the expected outcomes, many students will tend to completely dismiss such occurrence, but for the few will extend and reach out for assistance. These students will seek for their teachers to provide guidance as their intention is to cultivate and improve upon their learning through practicing skills and positive effort. Self-regulated learners will acknowledge their mistakes and insist in being given another opportunity to succeed academically. They will also build trust with many of their teachers, form study groups and dismiss friends that give ill advice.

As at-risk Latina/o youth learn to accept failure as golden opportunities to achieve and are continuously encouraged for their efforts, self-regulation will become part of their conative disposition and only lead to successful graduates. Interestingly, Booker (2006) found that the likelihood of students dropping out of school was decreased when students perceived their teachers as being supportive and encouraging of their academic achievement. Below is Figure 5.4, Encouragement  $\Rightarrow$  Self-Regulated Learning  $\Rightarrow$  Post Actions to Failure.



**Post-Actions to Failure**

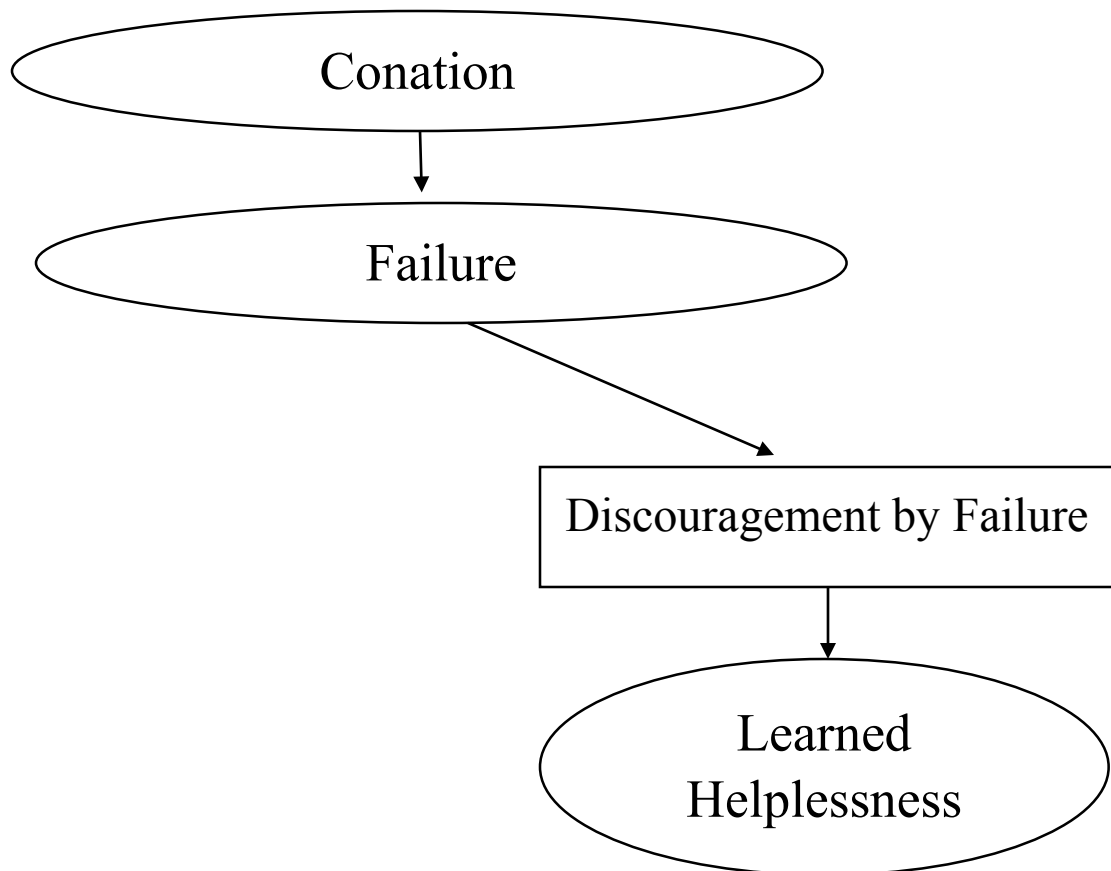
| <b>Andrew</b>                   | <b>Nevaeh</b>                              | <b>Cassandra</b>   | <b>Jorge</b>   | <b>Isabel</b>              |
|---------------------------------|--|--------------------|--|----------------------------|
| Different route                 | Understand the problem                     | Not being negative | Discouragement = suffer the consequences                   | Attend school              |
| Good/positive mindset           | Look at the puzzle and put pieces together | Learn and improve  | Encouraged = confront the problem and solve it immediately | Try to listen              |
| Hang out with successful people | Proactive                                  | Try again          | Learn from mistakes  | Copy everything from board |
|                                 | What next steps need to be taken           |                    | Different ideas  |                            |
|                                 | Prepare physically & emotionally           |                    | Hopeful  |                            |
|                                 | Another option/opportunity                 |                    | Analyze the situation                                      |                            |
|                                 | React in a positive manner                 |                    |  |                            |

**Figure 5.4. Encouragement  $\Rightarrow$  Self-Regulated Learning  $\Rightarrow$  Post Actions to Failure**

## **Discouragement – Learned Helplessness**

Failure is a devastating event in anyone's life in which the conative disposition will unleash the determination of wanting to push forward, but if discouraging comments are given and no support is provided, then feelings of apathy and helplessness can surface. Dweck (2006), explains that for some, after repeated failures, they believe that a situation is hopeless and out of control that their feelings of despair and low self-esteem will only lead to results of passivity or learned helplessness. As students experience learned helplessness, they underestimate their number of successes and overestimate their number of failures. They view their failures to not being smart enough and thus completely begin to lose complete desire in simply attempting to better any outcome. Their feelings of incompetence and insecurity will also lead them to withdraw and beginning to hide as they lose the desire to be around others and not seek advice from anyone.

As students encounter failure and are discouraged through various avenues; family, friends, and teachers, they will find only negative messages in their heads and will consider losing all desire to persevere. Their sense of discouragement due to failure isolates the individual and makes them retrieve to their small hidden world where only feelings of helplessness will endure. This being true with most students, Stipek (2006), cautions that holding students accountable without the support and encouragement is likely to discourage and alienate them rather than motivate them. When students lose their motivation to pursue academic success, a scary road lies in front of them as many will consider dropping out without obtaining their high school diploma. Below is the conceptual framework diagram that depicts messages given by the five participants as they encountered discouragement by failure and thus leading them to learned helplessness, Figure 5.5, Discouragement  $\Rightarrow$  Learned Helplessness.



| Feelings Toward Failure |                          |            |                 |   |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------|-----------------|---|
| Andrew                  | Nevaeh                   | Cassandra  | Jorge           | Isabel  |
| Negative                | Don't see the light/hope | Devastated | Incompetent     | Depressed - "Lock myself in my room"                        |
| Hit rock bottom         | Feeling stuck            | Insecure   | Struggling      | Withdraw- "Don't want to talk to anybody"                   |
| Going down hill         | Doors close              |            | Stayed in room. | Useless   |
| Helpless                | Hopeless                 |            |                 | Stay stagnant   |
| Low self-esteem         | Little cave              |            |                 | Brick wall  |
| Loser.                  | Devastated               |            |                 | "Stay stuck there"  |
| Buried                  |                          |            |                 | Devastated  |
|                         |                          |            |                 | I don't feel like I'm worthy of having my dreams come true. |

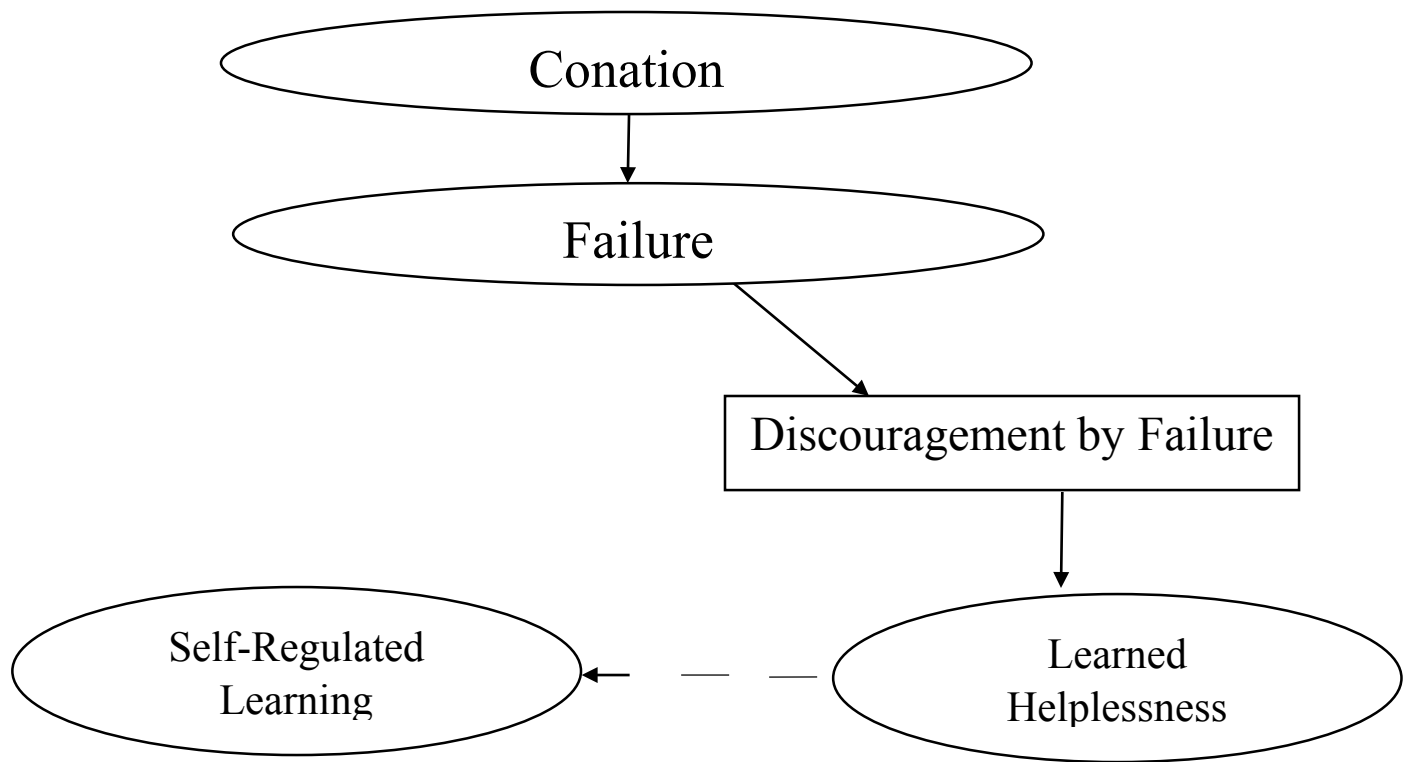
**Figure 5.5. Discouragement ⇒ Learned Helplessness**

### **Discouragement – Learned Helplessness – Self-Regulated Learning**

Failure can bring out various emotions but also an image of how failure has defined an individual. If the individual is then discouraged by their failure, then their conative disposition is in question since they are lacking the effort needed to pursue success. Dweck (2010) emphasizes that as “students become discouraged or defensive in the face of setbacks because they believe that setbacks reflect limitations in their intelligence, they need to develop their minds fully by embracing challenges and avoiding limiting thoughts which might hold them back.”

After numerous continued failed attempts most individuals become so discouraged that their level of contentment reaches a safer zone of lowered expectations that only a 180 shift will be able to redirect them to staying in school and continue to pursue the high school diploma. Therefore, as students face discouragement by failure and then begin to acquire learned helplessness traits by withdrawing or feeling sorry for themselves an extreme event or situation must take place in order for the student to completely shift their behavior and self-regulate their actions. Once students learn to self-regulate their learning behaviors and actions in spite of being discouraged by failure and having feelings of helplessness, their perception of failure has changed.

Locke (2002) claims that success needs constant trying, therefore students that have failed continuously, need to acquire self-regulated learning skills to overcome the stagnant mentality of not being able to succeed. They need to understand that the only way to overcome failure is through continued attempts of learning and improving as they discover weaknesses and develop and maintain success. See Figure 5.6, Discouragement  $\Rightarrow$  Learned Helplessness  $\Rightarrow$  Self-Regulated Learning.



**Reaction to Failure**

| Andrew  | Nevaeh  | Cassandra   | Jorge  | Isabel   |
|---|---|---|--|--|
| ALIVIANATE<br>- like let's go,<br>keep going,<br>don't stop, get<br>over it.                              | If failure<br>comes back,<br>I can like<br>fight, now I<br>know what<br>to do.                                  | Like now I<br>say 'ok well<br>like this<br>happened I<br>am not going<br>to let it<br>happen again' | "I'm going<br>to prove to<br>you that I<br>can do."  | Even<br>though I'm<br>still young,<br>I can see<br>doors just<br>closing                     |
| Seeing them<br>leave made me<br>want to leave<br>so I just kept<br>pushing and<br>pushing and<br>pushing. | I do believe<br>in me,<br>because I<br>know others<br>they do<br>believe in<br>me.                              |   | I need to<br>better<br>myself, I<br>need to train<br>myself on<br>doing things<br>different. | I just know<br>that it's<br>going to<br>take a lot<br>of work; I<br>guess I'll<br>get a job. |
|   | I did give up,<br>I said no to<br>every door.<br>Every door I<br>closed<br>because I<br>was done, I<br>gave up. |   | Not quicker,<br>but to focus<br>better,<br>because of<br>my son, he<br>is my<br>guidance.    |  |

**Figure 5.6. Discouragement  $\Rightarrow$  Learned Helplessness  $\Rightarrow$  Self-Regulated Learning**



### **Implications for Research Question 1**

Research question 1 focused on learning past at-risk students' narrative discourses on reasons of failure leading them to graduate or dropout of high school. The study concluded in fourteen key findings for this question. The fourteen key findings were the essence descriptors found throughout the two written anecdotes and the three unstructured individual in-depth interviews. A total of 350 marked actions were extracted from the ten written anecdotes and fifteen interviews as each was causal coded to uncover the mental models of reasons or causes of failure that lead them to graduate, continue education, or dropout of high school.

The study found that one student graduated from high school, another has obtained the GED (General Education Development), two are still pursuing their high school diploma, whereas one has dropped out of school. This would imply that as students are facing failure and are at the junction of Dichotomy of Failure, only one student was encouraged and four were discouraged. Most telling was the one graduated student followed the conceptual framework of Encouragement – Self-Regulated Learning. Sadly, another student has remained in the Discouragement – Learned Helplessness conceptual framework diagram. And three of the participants acquired self-regulated learning, Discouragement – Learned Helplessness – Self-Regulated Learning.

The experiences and responses from the participants indicated that for the most part at-risk Latina/o students are discouraged by failure. Although this study suggests that as the participants shared of their encounters with failure, their perception ultimately changed. As noted by John Dewey (1939), “we do not learn from our experiences; we learn by reflecting on our experiences.” Altogether most participants' mindsets had shifted their mental process or their conative disposition to that of one being encouraged by failure.

## **Implications for Research Question 2**

Research question 2 focused on differences in conative disposition between at-risk students exhibiting encouragement by failure-vs.-discouragement by failure. The conceptual framework from the onset demonstrated as all at-risk youth arrived to the initial phase of Dichotomy of Failure. Consequently, the framework also shows how all the participants deviated along the construct of failure as each encountered the phenomenon. The deviation became evident as only one student was routed to the encouragement by failure and the other four followed the course of discouragement by failure.

Therefore, the four key findings for this question (chapter four provides the detailed essence descriptors) are depicted below as it also announces the results for each participant:

- Dichotomy of Failure: Encouraged-vs-Discouraged, all five participants encountered the dichotomy.
- Encouragement – Self-Regulated Learning: Post Actions to Failure, one student graduated via this crossing.
- Discouragement – Learned Helplessness: Feelings Toward Failure, one student remains static in this route.
- Discouragement – Learned Helplessness – Self-Regulated Learning: Reaction to Failure, although one student traveled this path that student has obtained a GED, additionally two students are still on this journey in obtaining their diploma.

The conceptual framework serves as a visual guide of how each participant utilized their conative disposition and made the ultimate choice of either graduating, continuing the education, or completely dropping out of school.

### **Post-hoc Analysis**

Through this research study, I was looking for answers to my research questions. What I found as I collected my data and more specifically as I interpreted the data, I found that the participants' attitude toward failure had indeed changed. More specifically, after our second meeting, personal interview 1, I noticed that the students were finding failure as an ally for positive growth. Their reflection and possible openness to the idea of learning from failure allowed them to have a different perspective of their role and failure. I would like to say that becoming aware of their conative disposition allowed them to foresee a brighter side of failure, but maturing through the process of being participants in the study may have assisted with the occurrence.

As a post-hoc analysis, I found that four out of five participants Feelings Toward Failure had evolved as a process of our meetings. Since Feelings Toward Failure was an essence descriptor for all three subset datum's, data detailed how participants' feelings had evolved from first being negative to the last meeting their feelings being very positive. Several participants invited failure back because now they felt that it will only make them better at their next attempt.

Similarly, Mueller & Dweck, (1998) studied the effects of praising students' intelligence as opposed to praising their effort. Their findings uncovered remarkable differences as students encountered difficulty along the study. "Those who are praised for intelligence lose their confidence and motivation, their performance plummets, and they are ashamed of their difficulty. But those who are praised for effort remain undaunted and their performance continues to improve."

### **Limitations**

The researcher limited the participants in the study to at-risk Latina/o youth along a Southwest border region that had all attend an alternative setting, School of Choice. All five participants had been referred to School of Choice for experiencing failure therefore other public schools were not considered. Because of the small size, findings in this study may not be generalized.

Interviews were limited to the perception of the participants. Their perceptions may have been influenced by their biases and experiences. Interview notes were shared with participants for confirmation of accuracy. In addition, an external party not familiar with the participants reviewed the data collected to ensure reliability.

The most compelling limitation to this study is the limited empirical research on the disposition of conation. Most recent studies relate conation to cognition, emotion, and behavior therefore easily intertwined with the study of these other domains and thus making it difficult to separate. In addition, newer studies are referring to the will of effort, conation to the study of the mindset, more specifically; growth mindset.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Failure plays a significant part in the decision of at-risk Latina/o youth opting to dropout of high school. Educators are directly implicated since they will be the deliverers of such failure therefore bringing awareness in knowing how to explicate failure is of utter importance. Understanding that failure is painful and mostly misunderstood by our youth leads to the need of further and future research but most importantly how it is tied to conation.

An emphasis of students' view of failure is critical if the need to improve academia within our youth. As educators, our goal is to enrich our youth with problem solving skills and what a wealthier endeavor it would be to accept failure as simply a stepping-stone to achieving success. Altogether, failure should be seen as a tool to assist the direction within our future citizens of our global economy. Learning and improving through failure are areas of much needed research that will transform the learning process.

### **Summary**

At the heart of this study was a desire to uncover failure contributing to at-risk Latina/o youth opting to dropout of high school. The researcher was particularly interested in at-risk Latina/o youth because of her professional background and the significant number of students, families, and communities impacted by these alarming numbers. This was a qualitative study of at-risk Latina/o youth's perception of their experiences as they encountered failure.

Aside from the key findings related to encouragement by failure and discouragement by failure, an important lesson was learned. All human beings will encounter failure. And how each individual views and reacts to failure remains the question to be answered. The challenges are not just for at-risk Latina/o youth but for all human beings of any age as to how we choose to recognize failure as part of our daily lives.

Failure is not prejudice to age, race, or gender, it comes with many uncertainties and dismisses no one. As students move through our educational system, all will face academic failure at one time or another. Thus, a central task for educators is to prepare students to view failure as a learner opportunity when inevitably failure is facing them. Failure is only detrimental when not seen as a challenge that can be overcome with effort, skills and patience.

Additional research and training is needed on strategies and skills to equip educators on how to disseminate failure as an opportunity to succeed. Understanding reasons and differences of failure attributing to school dropout was the aim for this study, but ultimately awareness of accepting failure as a key to learn and improve resulted as the contribution of this study. Given the challenges facing education, the time has come for thoughtful examination of failure becoming an ally to improve academic scores and simply cultivate a new learning manner of accepting failure to achieve success.

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## Appendix A

### Written Anecdote - Meeting #1

1. What does failure mean to you?
2. When you experience failure, how does that make you feel?
3. Provide some examples of how you respond to failure.
4. To your earliest recollection, when was the first time you experienced failure? How did you feel? Write in detail your experience.

5. Aside from academic failure, what other experiences with failure have you encountered?
6. How different are these experiences from one another? Why do you think that is so?
7. Are you encouraged by failure or discouraged by failure? Provide one academic example and one non-academic example.

## **Appendix B**

### **Written Anecdote – Meeting #3**

van Manen's LED Protocol – Lived Experience Description Activity (Vagle 2014, p. 88)

1. Think about the event chronologically.
2. Describe what you saw, what was said, what you heard, how you felt, what you thought.
3. Try to describe the experience like you are watching it on film.
4. Describe the experience as you lived through it. Try to avoid causal explanations (this happened because ...), generalizations (this typically happens early in the morning), or abstract interpretations (I wonder if ...).
5. Write in a straightforward manner. Try to avoid beautifying your account with fancy phrases or flowery terminology.
6. If you want to use names in your description, please assign each person a pseudonym.
7. Read the example for guidance.

## Appendix C

### Isabel's Excuses to Fail

| Isabel  |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| "Because I was young"   | "You just have to adapt and adjust"   | "It was something that was done to me and it's not what defines me"  |
| "Because what happened to me had an effect, it had a domino effect. So when I was failing at one thing, it just kind of spread. It was like a pebble going into the water. It just creates all the waves and they just get bigger and bigger" |   | "Because I think part of me is still missing. I don't feel whole, I don't feel complete. Uhm, it feels like it is almost easier to fail than it is to succeed"   |
| "It's easy to stay stagnant and feel unworthy, it's easy to stay there"   | "Well because I don't feel that I'm worthy of success because when you fall into failure, you just kind of just sit there" "I don't feel I'll ever get past that wall"  | "But when you lose it sucks, you just feel devastated cause you give 100% not matter what and it just proves to you that somebody else is better than you are. They worked a little harder and were a little faster and maybe they were just better" |
| "Losing my virginity had an impact on everything in my life, because I didn't feel like me. I felt like a third rate version of myself"   | "No, I think losing my virginity was worse, because you can make up a test, you can make up a class, you can study a little harder, but how do you ever get that back?" | "It wasn't all of me, it was maybe few pieces of me. Something was missing, my soul wasn't complete. I felt like empty and alone"  |

## Appendix D

### Failure Perception

| <b>Andrew</b>              | <b>Nevaeh</b>  | <b>Cassandra</b>  | <b>Jorge</b>  | <b>Isabel</b>                                      |
|----------------------------|--|---|---|--|
| Can't thrive.              | Failure is going to be in my life, it's nothing that is going to go away but every experience will be a challenge that I still need to figure out. | Failure reminds you that it didn't go like you expected to happen but it's not over, it's not the end of the world. | I have to change my ways of doing things because if I keep doing what I've been doing it's just going to get worst and remember I have a son. | I still see failure the same way, it's depressing. |
| What options are out there | It's a goal, to get to the finish line.  | Failure is good for people because you learn to encourage yourself to do better.                                    | I can make something of myself.   |  |
| A new challenge            | Failure helped me to see things as a new task, a new project.  |   |   |  |
|                            | And every time that I see someone else getting in that level that they are better than me, I'm like ok if she or he did it, I can do it.           |   |   |  |

## Appendix E

### Excuses for Contentment

| Andrew  | Nevaeh   | Cassandra   | Jorge   | Isabel   |
|---|--|---|---|--|
| Like you failed once, you're going to fail twice but learn from your mistakes.  | To see a way not to fail; not to be perfect, but to try a way to be in the middle of both, failure and perfect.  | I already have that mindset of thinking, 'I'm going to learn from this and I'm going to improve myself'.    | Very few Hispanics are bright. Very small percentage of us go and get the good jobs.  | It was what happened to me that really made me put on my brakes and just feel like I wasn't worthy of having any goals met.  |
| I would just throw everything I've got.   | There's another door. Ok I failed but ok let's flip the page and see what's new, what can I do to change that to make it better.   | 'oh you graduated with your class, you walked with your class so no it wasn't a waste of your time anymore' | I'm doing this for my loved ones and if I don't get my diploma I don't have a future. | I can tell you what I want but it seems so far-fetched that I don't even dare to dream. I just feel like well what's the point. It's just easier to quit, I mean there is no expectation.  |
| I didn't have that motivation to do anything at the time, I gave up, I paused and I paused for a while till something just magically just people started coming my way and I started talking to them and that's where my positive attitude kicked in. | You don't want to see yourself working in a McDonald's or Burger King. You can have a better life or a better opportunity out there because this world is scary. I want to see myself in a certain field working in a good environment having a good paycheck. |   |   | Because it's easy and it doesn't require a lot from me. I'm comfortable there, it doesn't require me to make big life changing choices. I'm comfortable with that. I don't have to think about anything, it's a safe haven. It's contentment there, I don't have to strive; it won't break me. |
| It would just put me in a challenge, it would just push me to know why and whatever I need to do to go in.  | I'm the one who has to be my own cheerleader but at the same time, I'm the player out there because if I don't, then I'm not going to get to that level that I want of succeeding in life.   |   |   | I like control, I like easy and not having to think and right now I think that's what I have, I have control. Even if it's minor, I have control and right now, I'm not failing.   |

## **Vita**

Virginia Martinez earned her Bachelor of Education degree in Interdisciplinary Studies from The University of Texas at El Paso in 2000. In 2006 she received her Master of Education degree in School Counseling from The University of Texas at El Paso. In 2009 she completed the Principal Certification Program from The University of Texas at El Paso. In 2011 she joined the doctoral program of Teaching, Learning & Culture at The University of Texas at El Paso.

While pursuing her degree, Dr. Martinez has worked as an Assistant Principal for the Ysleta Independent School District where she works with at-risk students.

Dr. Martinez presented an accepted journal at the Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education in March of 2012 titled, "Technology Integration in Mathematics: An Excellent Tool for Visualizing."

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